MUSLIMS AND MONKS:
THE ROLE OF SAN JUAN DE LA CRUZ WITHIN THE SPANISH MYSTIC TRADITION

A Report of a Senior Study

by

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Abstract

This paper suggests that the social and cultural exchange between the three Abrahamic faiths, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, in Islamic Spain did not completely disappear with the Reconquista. Though by the thirteenth century the Spanish monarchy had rejected any religion other than Catholicism, much of the Muslim Sufi tradition survived within the Catholic monasteries and universities, which had turned to ascetic and mystic traditions in order to combat religious crises, specifically the Protestant Reformation and corruption within Catholic monastic orders. Reformers such as Santa Teresa de Ávila and San Juan de la Cruz especially championed the mystic tradition through their literature. San Juan in particular followed the mystic literary tradition more accurately than any of his Christian intermediary predecessors, producing the truest mystic poetry since before the Reconquista, as evidenced through his unrestricted use of language to express the inexpresable concept of God and his extensive knowledge of mystic symbolism and themes. San Juan’s accurate following of the mystic literary tradition proves that the impact of Muslim rule in Spain from 711 to 1492 A.D. was not totally expelled from Spain with its creators, but in fact was alive and accessible to Spaniards well after the reconquest.
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INTRODUCTION

In 711 a small number of Muslim Arab commanders and a large support force of recently-converted Berbers invaded the Iberian Peninsula, or modern Spain, from North Africa. The region very quickly fell under the control of these Arab Muslims and the subsequent rule of the Umayyad caliphs from Damascus. At first, this Muslim Arab elite tried to preserve itself as a separate ruling class, however, most of them quickly began to intermarry with local populations, beginning a gradual process of acculturation. An intense and widespread coexistence between Muslims and Christians gave rise to hybrid groups such as the mudéjares (Muslims living among Christians) and the mozárabes (Islamized Christians) (López Baralt, Islam 25). The Arab settlers soon began to adopt and develop uniquely Islamic versions of the local administration, art, architecture, and theological practices (Coope 49). However, most scholars agree that initially this conquest sought political and not religious conversion gain. Islamic law allowed most conquered peoples to retain their religions and self-govern to a certain extent. Through their close physical and economic proximity, the Christians, Jews, and Muslims in Andalusia were able to live together quite peacefully in what is known as the period of convivencia. According to D. Fairchild Ruggles of Duke University, convivencia is the “loose term that suggests that by virtue of living in close proximity the people of the
Iberian peninsula enjoyed cultural diversity and a corresponding richness of artistic forms and styles between the arrival of Islam in 711 and the expulsions in 1492” (65).

Because of the complete rejection of the ideals and practices of *convivencia* during the Catholic *Reconquista*, the majority of the scholars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries considered Iberia’s Islamic period as a sort of foreign occupation with no lasting cultural or demographic effects on the Hispanic tradition. However, upon close study of post-*Reconquista* Spanish culture, it becomes evident that the Spanish Islamic caliphate did in fact have a lingering and significant impact on the Hispanic tradition.

A close examination of the Muslim tradition of Sufi mysticism in Spain can prove this lasting impact. This tradition within Islam remained a prevalent force in Spanish culture centuries after its Muslim creators left the Iberian peninsula, or what is now Spain. It was such a lasting force that, not only was it easily available for study in Spain, but it also was even adopted by members of the Catholic clergy. Sufi mysticism, particularly its literary tradition, found resonance within the Catholic reform movement of the sixteenth century, especially for the Carmelite monk, San Juan de la Cruz.

Today San Juan de la Cruz is known as the champion of the Golden Age of Spanish mysticism, and his poetry demonstrates a clear connection with the original Sufi mystic tradition. San Juan fully embraces the themes, symbols, and structures of mystic poetry, giving his works a stronger association with the original Sufi mystics than with any of his Christian predecessors or contemporaries.
This paper will examine the period of *convivencia* in Islamic-ruled Iberia and the Spanish mystic movement and how and why it was adopted by members of the Spanish Catholic clergy, such as San Juan. The paper will go on to analyze three poems by San Juan de la Cruz: “En una noche escura”, “¡Que bien sé yo la fonte que mana y corre”, and “¡O llama de amor viva”. The analysis of these poems will identify symbols, use of language, and themes employed by San Juan that specifically reflect the Sufi tradition. The poems will further be contrasted with other Renaissance literary styles of San Juan’s time, to prove that he could not have accessed the mystic tradition in any way other than directly from the remainders of a powerful and lasting Sufi culture.

San Juan’s total acceptance and development of the Sufi mystic tradition proves that the impact of the Islamic caliphate was not totally expelled from Spain with its creators, but in fact was alive and accessible centuries afterwards, even to Christians. Such links reflect the easy communication and cooperation between scholars of the three Abrahamic faiths during the period of *convivencia*. 
CHAPTER I

ISLAM AND MYSTICISM IN SPAIN

The Arrival of Islam in Iberia

After the death of Muhammed, the founder and prophet of Islam, the Islamic Empire expanded rapidly for two centuries. The expansive success of Muslim armies under the first caliphs in the Arab peninsula, much of Central Asia, and Northern Africa led to the emergence of local dynasties, the most important of which were the Abbasids, who ruled from Baghdad (750-1258), the Fatimids in Egypt (909-1171), and the Umayyads in Spain (756-1031) (Hewer 60). Thus Islam came to incorporate a vast range of different lands and peoples, all of which affected and were affected by Islam in equally varied ways. The empire stretched at it’s height from India, as its easternmost point, to Spain, as its westernmost point, where Islam adapted to the existing society in a unique and culturally profitable way.

From Iberia’s earliest times, conquest was a major part of its history. The peninsula was overrun countless times by North African and central European tribes until it was finally conquered by Rome in 201 BCE (Haynes 36). Rome ruled for the following six centuries, imposing its Latin language, governing institutions, and even
name: *Hispania*. By the beginning of the fifth century CE though, Germanic barbarian tribes began to invade the peninsula due to a decline in Roman military power. At the end of the century, one of the invading groups, the Visigoths, had gained control over most of the area. The Visigoths continued a relatively Roman culture and Christianity became the kingdom’s official religion. However, the internal divisions among the Visigoths, caused by struggles over kingship, were advantageous to the approaching Muslim armies.

By the early eighth century Muslim armies had completely dominated the northern coast of Africa, including Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. From Morocco, the armies were not sure which way to proceed. In 711 African Berbers in Morocco under the leadership of Syrian Arabs made up a Muslim force that crossed what we now call the Straits of Gibraltar and landed in Spain. The governor of northern Morocco at the time, a general called Tariq, led the effort and gave his name to the mountain on which they landed, *Jabal-i-Tariq*, which was Westernized into Gibraltar. Tariq’s army marched north and forcefully defeated the last Gothic king, Roderic, at Toledo, until by 756 almost all of the Iberian Peninsula was under Islamic rule (Fletcher 1).

At the same time a young man named Abd al-Rahman was forced to flee his home in Damascus after the slaughter of his family, the ruling Umayyads, by the rival Abassids. Abd al-Rahman, the sole survivor of his family, fled to the farthest western edge of the Islamic empire and arrived in Iberia, or al-Andalus in Arabic, in 755 (Menocal 6). With Abd al-Rahman’s arrival, the fate of the Umayyad caliphate became a subject of local
political turmoil. Not only was he the grandson of the caliph, the successor to the
Prophet and the supreme temporal and spiritual leader of the Islamic world, but he was
also half Berber on his mother’s side, which allowed him to claim the loyalty of the
soldier and settler majority of this new land. The worried emir of al-Andalus tried to buy
him off by offering his daughter’s hand in marriage, but Abd al-Rahman refused and in
May of 756 defeated the emir in a battle just outside of the capital, Córdoba. Abd al-
Rahman then became the new governor of al-Andalus.

Technically Abd al-Rahman was only the governor of a minor outpost of the
caliphate, which was now ruled by the Abassids. However, the Abassids had moved the
capital of the Islamic empire farther east to Baghdad since destroying the Umayyad rule
in Damascus. When the Umayyad heir came to power, the Abassids undoubtedly felt
surprised, but not worried, and certainly not threatened by someone so far away from
them. Abd al-Rahman however, was not about to spend the rest of his life in quiet exile.
He soon transformed al-Andalus into the new and legitimate home of the Umayyads, and
eventually the seat of the caliphate (Menocal 9). He and his descendants ruled al-
Andalus first as emirs, and then as caliphs until 1031 CE (Coope 52).

Social Implications of Islam in al-Andalus

It is important to see Islamic conquest as the expansion of an empire, and not
necessarily of the faith of Islam. The majority of the people being conquered by Islamic
rule were Christian or Jewish, who the Muslims called dhimmis, or protected People of
the Book, referring to their belief in the Old Testament. In principle, Muslim rulers were
required by Qu’ranic teachings to protect and tolerate the dhimmis living among them.
These religious groups enjoyed freedom of religious practice as long as it did not disrespect Islam. Each religious community was generally allowed to retain its structure of authority, cultural practices and languages (Coope 48). Al-Andalus especially saw the Jews emerge from a period of dismal persecution under the Christian Visigoths.

However, while the *dhimmis* were allowed certain religious freedoms, their social status was clearly subordinate. At first, the Muslim Arab elite tried to preserve itself as a separate ruling class and rule the native population by keeping them as distant as possible. People of the Book were allowed to continue using their existing places of worship but were not allowed to build new ones, and were not allowed to seek converts from other faiths. They were not allowed to disrespect Islam and under certain rulers were required to wear particular clothing so that they could be distinguished (Hewer 62). They were exempted from military service, but instead had to pay a special tribute called the *jizya*. The Muslim armies would then protect them as any other citizen, but they were not allowed to participate at all in the governance of the empire.

The Arabs intended on ruling as a warrior elite, supported by tributes of a population that essentially had been left be. However, most of them quickly began to intermarry with local populations, beginning a gradual process of acculturation. The coexistence of the Muslims and the Christians was intense and widespread and gave rise to hybrid groups such as the *mudéjares* (Muslims living among Christians) and the *mozárabes* (Islamized Christians) (López Baralt, *Islam* 25). The Arab settlers soon began to adopt and develop uniquely Islamic versions of the local administration, art, architecture, and theological practices (Coope 49). Christians in Córdoba converted to
Islam at an alarming rate, and even Christians that chose not to convert increasingly acculturated Islamic culture and lifestyle.

Though the Arab invaders did not enter Spain to gain converts to Islam, a significant amount of Iberians did convert to Islam during the Spanish caliphate. Members of other religions were generally allowed to keep practicing their own faiths, but because they were treated as politically inferior, they often converted in order to secure better political and business positions. The Islamic court in Córdoba offered civil service positions and a rich cultural life to all who played by its rules. Not only Muslims, but also sometimes talented and educated Jews and Christians who were willing to adopt a certain amount of Islamic culture were allowed to share in these opportunities, but only to a certain extent. Any non-Muslims who hoped for serious advancement within the Islamic court were expected to uphold a significant amount of Shari’a law and Muslim customs. Speaking and writing Arabic was widely respected and could assure swift political advancement. These practical incentives led to an increased number of conversions to Islam particularly in Córdoba. Many of these conversions were simply surface level, and many converts continued to secretly practice their previous religions in private. Nevertheless, through these converts, Byzantine and Middle Eastern culture reached the public and everyday Andalusian life.

The main non-Muslim groups, primarily Christians and Jews, were allowed by the Muslims to remain in fairly self-enclosed communities with their own structures of authority and distinct cultural practices. They generally married within their own communities and sometimes even spoke separate languages. However, most Christians
seemed to accept a certain degree of cultural accommodation as tolerable. Many Christians believed that Islam and Christianity were fundamentally similar in that they both worshipped the same God and His laws. There was a small minority of Christians who opposed cultural blending between the two religions, but the majority of Christians, especially in Córdoba, were prepared to accept the more obscure parts of negotiating Christian beliefs in an Islamic kingdom (Coope 59).

A different, but not necessarily opposed theory of social assimilation revolved around the intermarrying of the Arab Islamic men and Iberian Christian women. Islamic law during this time allowed Muslim men, unlike Islamic women, to marry Christians. Additionally, the Islamic rulers took many slave concubines, and these slaves were usually Iberian, Christian, blonde, and fair-skinned. The children born to both wives and concubines were held completely equal under law, and they inherited property and received legal status equally, without regard to their mother’s status. Furthermore, while the children of these interfaith relationships were required to be raised Muslim, the Christian mothers were not required to convert to Islam. This resulted both in Islamic leaders being raised by Christian mothers and the production of an increasingly ethnically Iberian Muslim population. These mothers controlled the early lives of their sons, and if the son later became amir or caliph, the mother gained significant social status and political power (58).

Though the Muslim invaders, who were already an ethnic mix of part Arab and mostly Berber, initially made up only one percent of the overall population of al-Andalus, within a few generations a rapid rate of conversion to Islam from among the many older
Iberian ethnic groups and from pagan and Christian populations made the Andalusian Muslim community both significantly larger and thoroughly ethnically and culturally intermixed (Menocal 28). At first, these ethnic and cultural differences had created resistance and division among the Muslim leadership. The Abbasids had also periodically engaged in covert operations to start revolts against the government in Córdoba, so as to weaken the power of the Umayyads (Coope 53). However, under Abd al-Rahman II (822-52), cultural and ethnic distinctions became increasingly blurred in the Andalusian Muslim population. At the same time the Abassids began to face troubles at home that prevented their disturbances in Spain, and so the Andalusian Muslim population therefore became increasingly united, reaching such a height of power by 1031 that it declared Córdoba the ruling Islamic caliphate. This period was known as the Golden Age of Islamic Spain, and resulted in significant cultural and scholarly advancement for Europe and the rest of the Islamic world.

The Cultural and Scholarly Impact of Islam in al-Andalus

Al-Andalus prospered economically due to its fertile landscape, advanced agricultural techniques, and advantageous role as the arbitrator between the gold merchants of Sub-Saharan Africa and European buyers. The Spanish Caliphate used this economic success to spread its Byzantine roots by being extremely culturally productive. At its peak during the tenth and eleventh centuries, Córdoba, the capital of the Spanish caliphate, was home to a half-million people and contained three hundred public baths, seven hundred mosques, and seventy libraries (López Baralt, Islam 13). Córdoba had paved streets and lamps at street corners and entrances to important houses seven
hundred years before London got its first public streetlamp. As Middle Eastern art forms began entering Córdoba, evidence of cultural adaptation began appearing in the everyday art and architecture of the region. One of the most obvious examples of this is the Great Mosque of Córdoba. The Great Mosque of Córdoba shared pronounced similarities with the Great Mosque of Damascus, which had been the seat of Umayyad power. The two buildings shared many distinctive features such as prayer halls with unusually high ceilings that were held up by arched tiers on columns and brilliant mosaics that were not common in Spain. These similarities suggest a desire to link Córdoba’s mosque with the former Umayyad government and the great mosque in Syria (Ruggles 79).

Not only was the mosque influenced by Middle Eastern architecture, but by Spanish Christian architecture as well. For example the red and white striped arches of the mosque interior were also featured in the Roman aqueducts in Mérida. The columns and capitals that supported these arches were seen in most Visigothic and Roman buildings around Córdoba.

Some features of the Great Mosque of Córdoba reflect genuine assimilation where a Byzantine technique was imported into al-Andalus, mastered by Andalusian artisans, and significantly domesticated. Such was the case with a particular type of marble column capitals and bases, which were distinctive for their light and dark contrasts. These capitals and bases adorned reception halls, residential quarters, and mosques throughout Córdoba. Other forms of Byzantine art, such as manuscripts, textiles, hairstyles, musical instruments, and enamel portraits were adopted by Andalusian artists, and were adjusted to reflect local culture.
Along with the great number of conversions within Iberian society, especially the superficial ones, came exposure to Arabic Muslim culture. Under the rule of Abd al-Rahman II (822-852), the Islamic court in Córdoba experienced a strong movement to imitate the cultural sophistication of the Middle Eastern capitols. Poets, musicians, and philosophers frequently visited the court, and jewelry, spices, and other luxury items were imported from the Middle East. New tastes and styles of dress were introduced to the Arab and non-Arab members of the court. Adoption and familiarization with these Arabic influences was an advancement technique for Muslims and non-Muslims within society and so became a significant part of daily life. Islamic influences on Spanish life and attitudes also significantly impacted Spanish dialect. Muslim attitudes of spiritual apathy and hospitality gave rise to typical Spanish phrases such as “God willing” (si Dios quiere), “it was the will of God” (estaba de Dios que iba a pasar), and “this is your house” (ésta es su casa), which is a literal translation of the Arabic al-beyt beytak (López Baralt, Islam 25).

Islamic Iberia also quickly became renowned for its scholarly advancement throughout Europe. Al-Andalus became the seat of European learning for members of all Abrahamic faiths, and scholars from all over Europe flocked to Córdoba to study. Under the rule of the caliphs, philosophy, jurisprudence, mysticism, agriculture, medicine, and education flowered in Spain. There were twenty-seven schools in Córdoba, including a university, whose library contained hundreds of thousands of books from Alexandria, Damascus, and Baghdad. Muslim scholars achieved great medical advancements, such as the discovery of pulmonary circulation of blood, anesthetics, and the rudimentary
camera and binoculars. In mathematics, the concept of zero, algebra, and trigonometry were all developed by Muslims. The first celestial observatories were developed in Andalusia, and led to the creation of maps of the night sky. These successes were due to one of the most important scientific inventions to come out of Islamic Iberia, the astrolabe, a mechanical instrument that enabled astronomers to accurately plot the positions of stars. This allowed for reasonably accurate sea navigation out of sight of land, which had a huge impact on the history of Europe and the discovery of the New World.

These scholars also played a major role in reintroducing Greek teachings from Aristotle and Plato into medieval European culture. Damascus, the Umayyad capital from 661 to 750 had been an administrative center of the Byzantine Empire, whose administrators had been Christians who knew Greek, Syriac, and Arabic. It was in Damascus that the first encounters between Islam and Greek took place. The Muslims then translated the teachings of the great philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Euclid, Pythagoras, Galen, Ptolemy, and others into Arabic and brought their teachings to Europe, either through Sicily or through Islamic Iberia.

Throughout all of this, Muslim, Jewish, and Christian scholars worked side by side, with Arabic as the language of scholarship. Therefore, it is understandable that this considerable cultural proliferation reflects the influences of the Christians, Jews, and Muslims living in Iberia at this time. For example, Gerbert of Aurillac, the future Pope Sylvester II studied for years in Córdoba, and after doing so imported some of the Aristotelean logic and mathematics he had learned there into the Christian scholarly
world. Because Arabic was the single language of study, and the scholars were working within the common Aristotelian and Neoplatonic philosophical systems, scholars from the three religions were able to engage in discussions without misunderstandings of the terms they used (Hewer 68). This did not necessarily mean that they agreed with one another theologically, but it did mean that they understood one another perfectly for one of the first times in history. In this way theologians of different religions were able to debate and question each other’s religion as well as their own.

On the other hand, academic work in European languages also saw advancements because of Islamic scholarship. During the Islamic caliphate Christian monasteries continued to enjoy their traditional roles, and became centers of learning and education. One monastery in Toledo became a very important translation bureau. At this monastery Christian, Jewish, and Muslim scholars that knew Arabic worked with Latin-speaking Christians to translate the great documents and teachings of all major faiths to Latin so that they could be distributed through the monasteries and new universities of Northern Europe. This is where the Qur’an was first translated into a European language under the guidance of the abbot Peter the Venerable. This was no less than the first systematic Christian effort to study Islam. Translations and studies such as these into latin began the Christian scholarly revival that is now associated with figures such as Thomas Aquinas and the Dominican Order, which founded the first universities in Christian Europe. These new Christian scholars shared the Muslim concept of ‘Peoples of the Book,’ and therefore understood Muslims and Jews to be eventually open to receiving Christ’s grace.
Members of all faiths in this community in Toledo shared a scriptural and historical kinship as followers of Abraham.

La Reconquista

Despite the social and religious unity within some important parts of the peninsula, most notably Córdoba and Toledo, there did remain strong divisions in the caliphate. The entire Muslim world was torn by extreme political and religious divisions over who ruled the empire, and many thought the Umayyads were too eager to keep power in the hands of kings. In Spain Muslims were divided between the Arab Umayyads and the North African Berber Almoravids, who were recent converts and were radically more devout than their converters. By the mid-1200s, the caliphate of Córdoba had broken up into several smaller states, or *taifas*, that were at constant war with each other. These conflicts allowed the small Christian kingdoms that had arisen in the north of the country to persist, strengthen, and eventually form an offense against the Muslims.

La Reconquista began not as a religious crusade, but as an effort by the Christian kings and nobles to regain their land and power from the Muslim rulers. Victorious Christians treated their new Muslim subjects firmly, but were quite ready to allow them freedom to practice their own religion (Harvey 64). Feudal loyalties were usually more important than religious loyalties.

The Umayyads tried to slow the Christian advance by joining with the Almoravids, but the Christian victory over the Almoravid army in the Andalusian town of Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212 marked a turning point in la Reconquista against the Muslims. When Ferdinand III captured Córdoba in 1236 and Sevilla in 1248 he gained
control of the Guadalquivir river and therefore communication with the sea. By the time of Ferdinand’s death in 1252, the only Muslim town that remained was Granada, which, because of its strategic geographic location, did not fall to the Christians until 1492.

La Reconquista did not become a war of religious conquest and persecution until the extremist Catholic rule of Ferdinand and Isabella. Until the end of the thirteenth century the Christian kingdoms remained relatively tolerant. However, relations among Jews, Christians, and Muslims were so relaxed that the Church began to protest. The clergy began anti-Semitic efforts to create popular resentment of the Jews, especially their economic activities and tax collecting until eventually the crown adopted repressive legislation. Many Jews were forced to convert but still held noticeably better statuses and occupations than the majority. The resentment and envy they aroused finally led Ferdinand and Isabella to establish the Inquisition and expel the Jews from their kingdom. This was the first step towards the ending of the Spain of the three monotheistic religions that had existed under Islamic rule (Harvey 324). With the expulsion of the Jews and the surrender of Granada, la Reconquista left Spain scholarly timid and afraid. Free thought and scientific inquisition were stifled at a time when the rest of Europe was in the full swing of the Renaissance. The society’s most vital merchants and artisans were all Jewish or Muslim, and the effect of their flight on the economy was disastrous. Spain was nowhere near the rest of Europe as it entered the Industrial Revolution.

Because of this complete rejection of the philosophies and practices of Islam and *convivencia* during la Reconquista, the degree of lasting cultural impact has been debated
by scholars. While most recent scholars believe that the Islamic caliphate did indeed have a lasting and significant cultural impact on Spain’s history, the majority of the scholars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries considered Spain’s Islamic period as a sort of foreign occupation with no lasting cultural or demographic effects on Hispanic tradition (Boone 60). Due to the above demonstrated cultural and scholarly productivity and the continuance of Islamic tradition throughout Spain’s history though, more and more historians are taking Islam’s influence on Spain more seriously.

Mysticism

As was mentioned earlier in the section on the cultural impact of Islam on Spain, during the Spanish caliphate there was much communication and newfound understanding between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. All three religions are what are known as Abrahamic faiths because of their origins from Abraham and his God. In the biblical book of Genesis, Abraham is called by God to travel to a new land (modern day Iraq) where God would make a covenant with him and his descendants. However, when Abraham and his wife Sarah had grown old and still remained childless, Sarah suggested that Abraham take her Egyptian slave Hagar as a second wife and have children with her. Hagar bore Abraham a son named Isma’il. Afterwards Sarah received a message that she too would have a child, and gave birth to a son named Isaac. At this point Sarah began suggesting that Hagar and Isma’il be sent away. Abraham was reluctant to do this, but he received a message from God saying that they would be protected and would raise up a great nation. After this point, the Bible stops recording the stories of Hagar and Ismael. The Talmud, the central text of mainstream Judaism, adds only that Abraham kept contact
with Hagar and Isma’il and periodically visited them. Islamic teaching, on the other hand, continues recording the journey of Isma’il and Hagar to Makka (or Mecca), where they settled and later built the Ka’ba, the cube-shaped building the still stands today in the center of Makka. Muslims claim that this was the first building ever built to be dedicated to the worship of God (Qur’an 3:96).

In both the Bible and the Qur’an, Abraham was tested by God to see if he would sacrifice absolutely everything for the divine will by giving up his son. As opposed to the Christian account, where Abraham was commanded by God to kill Isaac, the Islamic tradition alleges that he instead was directed to kill Isma’il. This is an important difference between the Islamic and Christian traditions. While the Qur’an does not explicitly state that Isma’il was the son to be killed, it is obviously implied. Muslims believe that since the Qur’an was expressed to Muhammed directly from God, that it is the true history, and that the Bible has been corrupted at some point in time.

However, because of the common history up to the point of Abraham’s sons Isaac and Isma’il, the three Abrahamic faiths were able to relate somewhat. All of the faiths worship the same God, though they might quarrel over specifics of that God. They all believe in the Prophetic tradition, with Jews and Muslims thinking of Jesus as a prophet, while Christians see him as the son of God, and Muslims believing that Muhammed was the most important of all the prophets. Furthermore, all three of the religions have some concept of an afterlife, all participate in communal worship, and all respect a Sabbath day. Additionally, both religions believe in the idea of the Logos, a being that interceded between God and creation. For Christians Jesus assumed this role as the fully human and
fully divine son of God. In Islam, a similar role was attributed to Muhammed, who, while never claiming kinship to God, was seen as the perfect man and ultimate example. While many of the teachings and practices between the religions could differ extremely, the identity, importance, and nature of God within the religions all remained generally similar.

While Islam is often seen and described as a strict religion, with its main focus on outward observance of the law, there is another dimension that focuses on a purely inward quest of faith. This quest takes worshippers in search of an inner power that could lead to meaning and understanding beyond the limits of this world through a direct, personal relationship with God. The worshipper seeks to completely abandon his will for the sake of God’s will. His life is then to be merged with God’s, and his consciousness lost in the intensity of God. This mystical focus of Islam is known as *tasawwuf*, or more commonly as Sufism, and concentrates on the journey into and the true discernment of the human heart and also the elevation of the human heart to connect with God (Hewer 157). The Sufi follower focuses on the idea of God as not only indescribably magnificent and beyond our comprehension, but also unfathomably close to us. The Qur’an says that “We [God] are nearer to him [human] than his jugular vein” (Qur’an 50:16). Sufism attempts to realize this closeness and enter further into the remembrance of God until one is constantly living in the knowledge that one is in the presence of God. This is described as God pulling the believer into a cultural embrace. The knowledge of being in God’s presence is purifying to the receiver because it is constantly drawing them closer to the source of all knowledge. The knowledge being sought by the Sufi is not scholarly
knowledge, but emotional and sensational knowledge. This is a knowledge without a trace of doubt, attained as a full-body, intuitive sense and not through reason or logic (Qur’an 94:1). The complete awareness of the presence of God is known in Arabic as *taqwa*, which can be translated as “God-consciousness.” This cannot occur naturally or randomly, but must be gradually earned through living a life according to God’s guidance. In this way the spiritual quest of the Sufi Muslim is a separation from worldly practice and presence towards that of the divine.

Medieval Sufi mystics sought to underscore this separation between the divine and the physical world by living lives of deprivation. The most extreme Sufis often denied themselves worldly pleasures or desires in order to break their attachments to the physical world, which they believed blocked their souls’ true connection with God. They believed that in its natural state, the soul was the moth to God’s flame, constantly seeking connection. However, the values and practices of the physical world, they reasoned, would only weigh them down on their quest for ascendance. The soul had to be stripped of all of its worldly desires, affections, and interests, so that it would stop willing for itself and become an object of the Divine Will.

This belief that divine understanding has nothing to do with the worldly values of reason or logic is evidenced in the way God is described in Islamic literature. Whenever God is described, it is in the language of analogy. Like in other faiths, Muslims believe that while our language is the best tool we have as humans to speak of God, it can never fully penetrate the reality of God. The Qur’an demonstrates the most appropriate ways and philosophical concepts to refer to God. God is absolute perfection. He is omniscient
and omnipotent (Qur’an 6:59, 34:22). God is exceeding all space and time, and there was never a time that God didn’t exist (Qur’an 7:7). God is unequaled or totally other than anything in existence, and no one can say that God is or is not somewhere (Qur’an 2:115). God is beyond all human means of description. However, though God is so indefinable, Islam does not believe that this proves God’s distance from humans, as evidenced by the Sufi quest to find Him within each believer.

This is perhaps why, despite the innate difficulties of describing God and a spiritual connection with Him, Sufis contributed so much to Islamic literature, especially poetry. Their mystic poetry contained the ultimate paradox: trying to describe in words Him, who can never be truly described in words. However, writing poetry was the closest they could come to direct communication between the soul and God. The subject of the poetry most often dealt with the connection of the soul with God: a sensational, innate experience of emotions, places, and insights that could not be described in real terms. The poets often used language that was very sensual or romantic when describing God, not to be blasphemous, but because it was often the strongest emotion they could imagine that might compare with the emotions felt when achieving unity with God. The poetry used images and symbols from this world to describe spiritual journeys. Mystic poets believed that the beauty of this world was only a representation of that which was inside.

Because Sufism focused primarily on the identity, importance, and nature of God, and one’s personal connection with Him, and less on the specific laws and practices of Islam, perhaps it was more easily understandable to Jews and Christians. The Iberian
Peninsula during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was an important center for the Jewish mystical tradition. It was the distinctly inner and personal emphasis of Sufism, as opposed to the strict emphasis of outward compliance with custom and law in other branches of Islam, that attracted Westerners who were more accustomed to a focus on the individual in the Christian and Jewish religions. There was at least one Sufi order in Iberia that even included Christians and Jews in its membership. To Sufis, the specific path by which one achieved spiritual connection with God was not as important as possessing the desire for transcendence and divine enlightenment.

The golden age of Spanish mysticism occurred during the sixteenth century, though it started much before la Reconquista. Soon after Muslims began to occupy Andalusia in the eighth century, significant numbers of Sufi mystics appeared on the peninsula. It was not until the eleventh century, however, that Sufis, as such, were recognized within the Andalusian community. Immediately following the Iberian conquest, the conservative Berbers were suspicious of mystics from other parts of the Islamic world, but eventually Sufi schools and communities appeared in Al Meria, Seville, and Córdoba. One of the most influential figures of this Sufi emergence was Ibn al-Arabi. Al-Arabi, of Murcia, became famous for his mystic writings, both poetry and prose, in the Sufi schools of Seville. After extensive travel throughout the Middle East, al-Arabi composed over two-hundred works on nearly every subject from a mystical standpoint. His writings were heavily influenced by both Jewish mystic writings, such as the Kaballah, and Christian ascetic writings that he encountered in Andalusia (Frazee 232). He even wrote about a group of Sufis who focused on ascetic and mystic practices
based on the life of Jesus and were called by His name. Al-Arabi’s writings opened the
door for mysticism to proliferate in Iberia.

In the thirteenth century Ramond Lull became the primary leader of the mystical
movement in Christian Iberia. Lull, a Christian born in Majorca, traveled throughout the
Islamic world, including parts of Africa. Upon returning to Andalusia, he urged his
fellow Christians to study Arabic and send missionaries to Muslims. Before he was
stoned to death for heresy, he wrote two important books: *Libre de contemplacio* and
*Libre d’Amic e Amat*. In them he uses symbolic language to discuss the intimacy of his
soul with God, paving the way for Christian mystical writers of later centuries.

The great proliferation of Spanish Christian mysticism that took place in the
sixteenth century happened very suddenly. This movement began at a time when Spain
was enjoying the vast successes of their conquests in the New World and when the
Protestant Reformation was transforming Northern Europe. While the Reformation had
little impact on the aggressive Catholicism in Spain, the humanist ideals of Erasmus that
accompanied the Reformation did, especially in the universities. The mystic movement
also came at a time the rebirth of Platonic philosophy through the Renaissance. Greek
philosophy was reemerging in scholarship, and elements of this philosophy were seen in
the writings of the Spanish mystics (Green 97). Christian societies known as *Alumbrados*
began appearing in Spain’s cities that shared many beliefs and practices with Sufi
mystics. The *Alumbrados* believed that the soul could achieve perfection and complete
unity with God, and then be able to fully comprehend the mystery of the Trinity.
However, the group was soon quieted and eventually dissipated by the Inquisition. As a
result Spanish mysticism moved into the monasteries and convents of Spain’s religious orders, where it reached its peak in the poetry of Santa Teresa de Ávila and San Juan de La Cruz.

In the monasteries, the Spanish mystic movement manifested itself as a campaign against Protestantism and the Reformation, and corruption within the religious orders themselves. Its ascetic elements engaged the militant character of the Carmelites, a Catholic monastic order focusing on contemplative prayer, against the deviances of Protestantism. Spanish mystics considered the faults and shortcomings of both those within and outside the Catholic faith as evidence of their insufficient inner spiritual lives and understanding. Spanish mysticism can therefore be seen as a reform movement, combatting the religious atrophy in Spain and the rest of Europe, and defending the institutions which were incorporated in that religious life.

While Christian mysticism did believe and practice many of the same fundamental elements as Sufi mysticism, important differences existed. Both contained a path for the worshipper who sought union with God that starts with an ascetic lifestyle until one achieved the mystical lifestyle and the direct experience of God. The Christian mystic’s path was similar to that of the Sufi. As the soul approached God, it lost worldly consciousness until eventually perfect union was achieved with God and the soul was able to behold Him completely. However, this union was different than the Sufi union in that the Christian approach did not consider God to be pantheistic and impersonal, encompassing all of Creation, as did the Sufis. On the contrary, the Christian union was a personal one, between two distinct personalities. Also, as opposed to the Sufi, Christians
believed that the Church played a significant role in one’s ascent towards God, and that its practices provided a conducive environment for the union to take place. For the sixteenth century Spanish mystic, the role of orthodoxy was very evident, while the Sufi had often been in opposition or indifference to the official religious institutions of Islam (Frazee 240). Furthermore, the Christian mystic was always bound to the calls of charity and was not allowed to seek mysticism for its own sake. If the necessities of justice and charity were to call upon the worshipper, he had to provide for them before he could pursue the journey of his own soul.

The great evidence for the existence and profundity of these Christian Spanish mystics was the substantial and innovative literature they produced. Their literature, usually poetry, was much like that of the Sufi mystics in that it sought to describe the indescribable, the holy union of a soul with God. This basic paradox, the impossibility of expression was not only a certain doom to failure, but also one of the greatest powers of mystical poetry. The power generated by this paradox said something words could not, and leaves readers in awe and wonder. Like Sufi writers, Christian mystics tried to counter this paradox by describing what led up to the indescribable experience and what followed it, in an attempt to prove its ineffability. They did this by using physical descriptions of journeys as analogies to their spiritual journeys.

One distinctive feature of Spanish Christian mystical poetry was that its was often used to encourage reform within religious orders. During the sixteenth century, many religious orders within the Catholic Church, especially the Carmelites, were vulnerable to a weakening in moral standards, sometimes including intense corruption and scandal.
Both leaders of the Spanish mystic movement, Santa Teresa de Ávila and San Juan de La Cruz, were members of the Carmelite Order and worked vigorously to reform it. Both felt the order was too relaxed and took too much pleasure in worldly values. Both their efforts to reform these problems and their mystical poetry led them to be considered the masters of Spanish mysticism.

Santa Teresa de Ávila was born in 1515 to a noble family. Upon turning nineteen years old, Santa Teresa took her vows and joined the Carmelite Order of Ávila as a nun. However, she felt the order lacked discipline and set out to start her own order, the Discalced Carmelites. Though she suffered much persecution for this, she continued, with the help of San Juan, to found over thirty convents and monasteries, even some in the New World. Though her reforms within the Catholic Church were significant, Santa Teresa is most celebrated for her writings. She published several works, including autobiographies, instructional essays, and her most famous works, her poems. Her poems, in true mystic form, chronicle her personal spiritual experiences and inner faith. They express the natural desire of the soul to unite with God and know Him completely. In her most famous work, Las Moradas O Castillo Interior, she transforms her soul into an allegorical castle of diamonds, whose twelve rooms all lead to God. All of her poems maintain that the true path to salvation is through a deep personal faith, in which personal connection is established with God.

Santa Teresa was canonized in 1622, forty years after her death. She had found enormous favor with Pope Pious IV and King Phillip II as a major player in the Counterreformation, the movement against Protestantism. She remained so popular in
Spain, even after her death, that in 1627 she was proposed to be the co-patron Saint of Spain alongside Santiago de Compostela, the famous “Moor-slayer.” Santa Teresa was never granted this post, most likely because of the sexism in the Church at the time (Maclean 890), but the fact that she was nominated for the position and supported by the then current king, Phillip IV, suggests that she was perceived as a successful mystic, reformer, saint and intercessor, and that she could represent the Spanish religious identity. Her writings were seen as a path towards God and a defense against the entrapments of the devil. They were considered to provide a foundation for moral reform and spiritual rebirth within and outside of the Catholic church.

The Spanish mystic movement began in earnest in the eleventh century, but did not reach its culmination until the sixteenth century. While it started with Muslim students and their travels throughout the Middle East, its climax occurred within the convents and monasteries of Catholic Spain. The poetry that came out of this movement was an effort to combat the perceived heresies of Protestantism and corruption within the Catholic Church. With the backing of these popular causes and the shelter of the Catholic orthodoxy, mystic poetry proliferated in Spain in the sixteenth century, most famously through the writing of Santa Teresa and San Juan de la Cruz.
CHAPTER II

THE LIFE AND IMPACT OF SAN JUAN DE LA CRUZ

The Golden Age of Spanish Mysticism

Spanish mystic literature reached its peak during the sixteenth century, primarily through the writings of Santa Teresa de Ávila and San Juan de la Cruz. San Juan is commonly considered one of the most renowned Spanish authors and poets, but also one of the most mysterious. Spanish literature scholar Luce López Baralt argues that this mystery is due to the failure of past analyses to consider the semitic influences on San Juan’s writings (López Baralt, San Juan 9). While San Juan’s writings are undoubtedly, and have always been considered, influenced by Christian traditions such as the Bible, sung poetry, oral traditions, the classics, and the “a lo divino” cult, San Juan also, like none of his contemporaries, corresponds unquestionably with the Sufi Muslim mystic tradition of the Middle Ages, begun by figures such as Ibn al-Arabi of Murcia. Both San Juan and the Muslim authors shared a perception of language as totally available to suit their needs, where words could have unlimited and various meanings in the effort to describe the indescribable, God. San Juan also demonstrates a nearly complete knowledge of Muslim mystic symbolism, and in some cases uses spiritual metaphors that
are specifically attributed to Muslim Sufis (López Baralt, *San Juan* 12). The poetry of
San Juan appears to be directly descended from that of the Sufi mystics, and shares the
same preoccupation with the inability of language to describe illuminated divinity (397).
Because of this, San Juan de la Cruz is realized today as the quintessential Spanish mystic
poet.

So how was it possible for San Juan to carry on so successfully the Muslim
mystic literary tradition of the eleventh and twelfth centuries? It could not have been
solely through his intermediary Christian predecessors, for, while they may have
influenced him somewhat, they had never been able to master the tradition as completely
as San Juan. Ásin Palacios (1871-1944) was one of the first scholars to attempt to answer
this question. Palacios argued that San Juan and other Catholic mystics were influenced
by Moriscos, Spanish Muslims who had recently be converted to Christianity. These
Moriscos, Palacios held, had direct contact with Shadhilite communities in North Africa,
and shared this influence with their contemporary Spanish Christians, especially Saint
Thomas Aquinas and San Juan himself (Vanderjagt 163). However, Palacios lacked the
literary proof to authenticate his theories, and while San Juan could have had contact with
Moriscos of his day, it is culturally unlikely that they would have ever conversed about
their spiritual philosophies (López Baralt, *San Juan* 400).

López Baralt agrees with Palacios that San Juan was greatly influenced by Islam,
but chooses to prove it in a different way. López Baralt instead argues that Islamic and
mystic teaching was very common and accessible in European scholarship and religion
during the Renaissance, and was therefore quite accessible to San Juan as a scholar and
priest. After the religious Crusades in the Holy Land in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, European spirituality turned towards intense study of Islamic doctrine. Instead of conquering Muslims by force, as they had attempted to do throughout the Crusades, Christians throughout Europe changed their tactics with a “nuevo intento de conquistar el Islam a base de conocerlo”, as Muñoz Sendido put it (qtd. in López Baralt, San Juan 13). To launch their new evangelical mission against Islam, the clergy began to study not only the Arabic language, but also Muslim doctrine, and this academic movement progressed into schools and universities. European universities continued to study Islam and Arabic throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as evidenced through the abundant volumes on the topics that still remain in European libraries today (341). Examples of these studies were the well-known and influential lectures on Islam given at the time by authorities such as San Bernardo, San Buenaventura, and Raimundo Lulio. Additionally, during the Renaissance of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, there was a considerable rebirth of Platonic philosophy, which had been initially been brought to Western Europe through Arab Muslims (Green 97). It is very likely that San Juan had contact with some, if not all of these scholarly endeavors about Islam and mysticism throughout his educational and religious life.

A Call for Asceticism

As chapter one and Luce López Baralt have proven, the Islamic mystic tradition was certainly still alive and accessible during the mid-sixteenth century, particularly in the universities, convents, and monasteries of the Catholic Church. It should not be
surprising, therefore, that San Juan was familiar with the styles and symbols of Islamic mystic poetry. But why would he have chosen this tradition as a model for his own writings? What caused him to identify so deeply with the mystic ascetic lifestyle? Like Santa Teresa, San Juan was most likely turned towards mysticism through his participation in combatting the religious crises of his time. Not only was he, along with the rest of the Catholic Church, battling against what they perceived as the heresy of Protestantism, but he also strove to reform his own Carmelite Order from its own excesses. While San Juan never sought literary success, never having any of his works published during his lifetime, he is now considered “the guide of great poets in his language and abroad and, at the same time, one of the founders and organizers of a religious Order which has been a major force in the Catholic Church” (Gicovante 11). Like Santa Teresa, he is the product of the religious schism that made religion in Europe the most dividing dilemma of the sixteenth century. San Juan’s great success in the mystic field can only be explained through the mystical literary history of Spain, which has been discussed in chapter one, and San Juan’s own experiences in the perpetual religious conflicts that had ruled Spain since the Reconquest.

Many of the Catholic religious at that time had turned to the ascetic practices typical of mystics in order to combat the excesses and corruption of their own modern religious institutions and the radical arguments of the Protestant Reformation. Priests, nuns, and others maintained a strict mystical focus on meditation and a higher connection between the soul and God Himself, and endorsed stricter regulation and practice by the Catholic Church to facilitate this focus. One of the biggest of such movements was the
reformation of the Carmelite Order, led by Santa Teresa de Ávila and San Juan de la Cruz. The two became champions of the Spanish mystic movement, relying on its austere and meditative practices to oppose internal and external threats to the Catholic Church. Throughout their reform and personal faith journeys they were able to produce what are now considered the leading works of Spanish mystic literature.

In the midst of the crises affronting the Spanish Church, a wave of mysticism swept through the historically stoic Spanish Catholics. Asceticism had often emerged during Spain’s religious troubles since the Reconquest, for example in the reorganization of the Spanish Church under Ferdinand and Isabella, the humanistic reform efforts, and the increased importance of theology through humanism. At the rise of the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic monks and nuns likewise turned to asceticism and mysticism. Dominican theologian and writer Luis de Granada attributed “todos los males que hay en el mundo” to a “falta de consideración,” especially to a shortfall in the spiritual inner life of individuals (Green 100-101). Santa Teresa likewise referred to the Catholic Church and its strict practices as those that could bring about spiritual welfare, saying in Las moradas “le pueden hacer gran daño con llevar otras consigo, y hacer gran provecho, podría ser, en la Iglesia de Dios” (101). She saw asceticism as something the Church could use to protect itself.

San Juan and Santa Teresa championed the ascetic practices associated with Islam to reform their own monastic Order and set a strict standard for the rest of the Catholic Church. San Juan’s experiences within this reform must have led him to truly empathize with the Muslim mystic literary tradition, and inspired him to imitate it. Through looking
in depth at his experiences within the reform, it is possible to better understand his personal mystic journeys, and likewise his writings.

The Life of San Juan

Juan de Yepes was born in 1542 in the small town of Fontiveros, Ávila in Old Castile. His father, Gonzalo de Yepes, had been born into the small, local nobility, but was disowned when he married Juan’s mother, a peasant girl named Catalina Alvarez. Juan was the youngest of the poor couple’s three children. When Juan was six, his father died, leaving the family in still greater poverty. His mother was forced to travel with the family, stopping where she and her oldest son could find work. After the oldest son died, the family finally settled down in Medina del Campo when Juan was around eleven or twelve years old. There Juan began to apprentice in carpentry, but not being very adept, his mother instead sent him to the free Jesuit school for children of the poor. There he excelled in reading, writing, and Latin, so much so that his teachers then recommended him to Alvarez de Toledo, a wealthy merchant whose philanthropic efforts had created the Hospital de las Bubas. Juan worked at the hospital for six years, and in exchange for his work he was allowed to attend Latin lessons part-time at the town’s Jesuit school.

At age twenty-one, Juan decided to join the priesthood. He was offered the chaplain position at his old hospital, but instead chose to join the Carmelite Order of monks and study at the University of Salamanca. At the University, Juan committed himself to study in order to attain higher orders in the Carmel, which he did in 1567.

The Order of the Carmel was one of the oldest Orders in the Catholic Church, originating in the thirteenth century. Originally, the Order was a strict group of eremitical
priests, but by the time Juan joined it with the name of Juan de Santo Matia, it had let its rules relax considerably.

Originally the rules the Order of the Carmel followed were strict and simple. They elected a prior, to whom they swore obedience. They were required to spend all of their time in work or meditation, with allotted times for Mass and prayer. The monks were not allowed to own any individual property, and all personal belongings became common property of the Order. The brethren were not allowed to eat meat unless it was required by their health, and they fasted at specified times. They also determined days to meet amongst themselves to be chastised for any breaking of the rules. Though the Order was simple and rigorous, over time it grew into a prosperous and powerful group. By the sixteenth century, the affluence of the Order seemed to be destroying the very foundations it was created upon. Few of the friars were volunteering for missionary work in the New World or enthusiastic about meditation and solitude. While the rest of Catholic Europe seemed to be torn and impassioned over the religious issues dividing the continent, and many priests were rising to oppose the Protestant reformation with new vigor, the friars and nuns of the Carmelite Order appeared to be satisfied enjoying their quiet prosperity.

This moral relaxation within the Order prompted a reform movement within the Order’s own members to revert back to their older, stricter practices. This movement was lead by Santa Teresa de Ávila, a Carmelite nun and another icon of Spanish mysticism. She aimed to restore the old discipline of the original Order, but her ideas were met with much resistance from within the Order and the Catholic population at large. However,
with the support of King Phillip II, who also approved of a change in the Order, she was able to found a few convents for those nuns who did desire a life of stricter devotion. She then began to look for priests from the Carmelite Order who likewise desired a return to the old, rigorous practices.

When Santa Teresa met San Juan, he too was looking for a more disciplined faith life. He was contemplating leaving the Carmel Order and joining the Carthusian Order, which required a complete withdrawal, a vow of silence, and the constant and absolute focus on the inner search for connection and perfect knowledge of God. San Juan was already undergoing excess penance and trying to lead a religious life more strict and severe than the Carmelite Order required. Though Juan was almost set on a life of complete withdrawal and deprivation, Santa Teresa managed to talk him into joining her reform effort, a less private and secluded service, but one which would serve his own Orders. Upon the promise from Santa Teresa that there would be a reformed monastery for men within a year, Juan agreed to participate and returned to his theological studies at Salamanca.

San Juan began the first reformed Carmelite monastery in 1568, under the leadership of the priest Antonio de Heredia. Juan converted an old storehouse into a chapel and dormitory for himself, Father Antonio de Heredia, and one other priest. The monastery was austere and comfortless, providing only the necessities for the priests, who spent their time in either work or meditation and prayer. They traveled throughout many places in their district, preaching and establishing close relationships with the
villagers. The friars gathered many converts over the next two years, and Juan was in charge of instructing them in obedience and meditation.

The priests deprived themselves in many ways, as the original Carmelites would have done, fasting regularly and using stones for pillows. However, in this way the friars were able to free their minds and hearts completely for meditation and prayer. One biographer of San Juan, Bernard Gicovante, noted that “There was a quiet joy in the mortification of the flesh that made the tiny community different from the large communities” (52). He continues to say, “John of the Cross, as well as Saint Theresa, believed in the possibility of faith and good works without gloom” (53). To the truly ascetic worshipper, deprivation was a step towards enlightenment, not a punishment.

In 1570 Santa Teresa sent Juan to Alcalá de Henares as the director of the first school of Discalced Carmelites, as the reformed Orders were then calling themselves. Santa Teresa felt that the state of religion in Spain called for enthusiasm and scholarship. The simple devotion of peasant life was no longer enough for the new Carmelites. At the school, Juan continued his exposure to the theological and philosophical teachings of the Church.

In 1572 Juan was called to take charge of the spiritual direction of the nuns of the Convent of the Incarnation in Ávila, Santa Teresa’s first convent. He remained at the convent for five years, until the Carmelites of the Observance, suspicious of their new reformed brethren, captured him and imprisoned him in their monastery in Toledo for nine months. There, Juan was held in a six by ten foot cell, without any windows save a small skylight. He was allowed out of his cell only once a day, accompanied by his
guard. At least once a week, Juan was offered freedom, and even his own monastery, if
he renounced his rebellious reform movement, which he always refused. It was during
his imprisonment that Juan began to write, or at least memorize, his first poetry, poetry he
would spend the rest of his life completing, annotating, and commenting upon.

After nine months Juan escaped the monastery at Toledo and sought refuge in the
closest Convent of the Discalced Carmelites. There he shared with the nuns his first
poems, and continued thereafter the explanation of these revelations. Still worried about
his Carmelite enemies, Juan then moved to the Hospital of the Holy Cross, where he was
given protection and asylum. He waited there until a major meeting was held by the
reform that placed him in the Monastery of El Calvario, in northern Andalusia. There,
nervous that his verse would be incomprehensible to the masses, Juan decided to
accompany each poem with a careful explanation and declaration of intent. “In this way,
the writings of Saint John became two distinct bodies- one in verse, one in prose-
intimately related, but independently valid in the history of literature and the evolution of
religious thought” (Gicovate 65). Juan found that his explanations of a verse led him to
considerations of the Catholic doctrine, and his treatises became the interpretations of his
thought and a guide to the mystic way of contemplation rather than a piece by piece
commentary and clarification of his words.

In 1580 the Carmelites were finally forced to accept the Discalced branch as a
separate sector of the Order, as decreed by the pope. San Juan was elected Rector of the
Carmelite College of Baeza for the next two years, where he continued his scholastic
exposure and writing. Over time though, San Juan gladly gave up his official posts and
duties within the Order and replaced them with enhanced focus on his writings and personal faith reflection. By the time of his death on December 14th, 1591, San Juan was once again merely a humble friar with no office or power. He had, however, produced an immense volume of work that emphasized the direct communication between the human soul and God through faith, the central mystic belief. These poems advocated deep personal reflection and rejection of the physical world in order to help the soul achieve complete unity with and knowledge of God. His poetry reflects the great contradictions that accompanied the counterreformation within the Carmelite Order: the coexistence of the sick and weak man and the indomitable leader, the quiet and reserved monk and the bold reformer (Friedman 178). His sacrifice of physical pleasures throughout his entire religious life, especially during his time in prison allowed him to focus much more clearly on his spiritual life and make the soul’s journey towards God that was sought by the Sufi mystic.

Through San Juan’s life of deep inner faith and ascetic deprivation, whether by choice or force during his imprisonment, San Juan was able to relate deeply to the traditions of Sufi Muslim mysticism. Furthermore, as a result of his lengthy involvement with Catholic education and scholarship, San Juan was undoubtedly exposed to extensive study on the mystic tradition, and able to follow the tradition like no one before him had be able to. As a result, he became a champion of both Catholic doctrine and Spanish mysticism, and is today considered one of the most influential Spanish writers and mystics.
CHAPTER III

MYSTIC EVIDENCE IN THE POETRY OF SAN JUAN DE LA CRUZ

The Works and Style of San Juan

San Juan de la Cruz began writing his first religious poetry while imprisoned in the Carmelite monastery in Toledo and continued writing until his death in 1591 in a quiet monastery in the Sierra Morena. He wrote mostly poetry, but accompanied his verses with long and thorough explanations as clarifications for his readers. San Juan’s poems passionately describe the experience of spiritual conversion and the soul’s striving for perfect unity with God. The poems completely describes the process of the soul’s enlightened unification with God and “treat affectivity in all the various divisions within the individual and during the every phase of spiritual advancement” (Luévano 9). This constant theme of the quest for unity with God through renunciation of affections is complimented by his use of classic Sufi symbolism to achieve works that are today considered truly mystic.

San Juan’s use of traditionally Sufi symbolism followed the original mystic poetic tradition more closely than any of his intermediary predecessors’. According to the
Mystic scholar Luce López Baralt, the symbols San Juan employed reflected traditional Muslim significances:

La manera particular que tiene San Juan de pormenorizar dichas imágenes coincide estrechamente con la de los sufíes. Como era de esperar, hay variantes entre San Juan y los musulmanes, pero hemos podido documentar más de treinta de estas equivalencias fijas o símbolos compartidos. (San Juan 231)

Three of the most obvious examples of such symbolisms are the image of the dark night in “En una noche escura”, the fountain in “¡Que bien sé yo la fonte”, and the flame that burns the soul into perfection in “¡O llama de amore viva” (Luévano 29).

San Juan uses these symbols and others as part of the larger metaphorical stories within his poems. His poetry uses natural or common experiences and situations to relate experiences of the ineffable. Because the experience of uniting with God is completely indescribable, mystic poets used everyday scenarios to describe metaphorically their encounters or experiences with God. Often they described erotic or painful scenarios so as to incur the strongest emotions possible by their readers, hoping that it would at least hint at the magnitude of knowing God Himself.

Overall, San Juan created poetry that very obviously portrays its Sufí Muslim roots. The use of Sufí mystic themes, symbology, and story lines more accurately than any of his Christian predecessors evidences his direct connection to the Sufí Muslim tradition. Evidence of San Juan’s strong connection with Sufism can be seen through a close examination of his poetry.
Poetic Analysis

“En una noche escura”

“En una noche escura” is one of San Juan’s more well known poems, and superbly employs a traditional mystic theme, mystic symbolism, and a very typical mystic plot. On the surface this poem is a tale of a physical journey of a lover in search of her partner, but it is easily understood to represent much more. There is another layer that symbolizes the spiritual journey of the writer’s soul towards its most desired God, and yet another layer that refers to the journey of the human soul in general (Nelson 329). In the true mystic tradition, San Juan is using a natural or imaginable situation to lead readers directly into the ineffable experience of encountering God (330).

Furthermore, the symbol that San Juan chose to use to describe this ineffable experience, the “dark night”, is very typical of Sufi mystic literature. Because of its deep metaphorical power in describing the spiritual journey of the soul, the image of the “dark night” has been often celebrated and used by celebrated Sufi poets such as Rumi and Abu al-Mawahib (López Baralt, San Juan 240). In Sufi literature, the night is often described in anxious terms, as a strenuous and extensive stage, but still a necessary one. San Juan identifies with this Sufi tradition by relying heavily on the symbol of the “dark night” in “En una noche escura” to describe the process of uniting the soul with God.

The night in this poem, refers not to physical darkness, but to spiritual darkness, for three specific reasons. First, San Juan tells us in his explanation of the poem, the “dark night” alludes to the mortification of physical appetite. The deprivation of the body from earthly pleasures, San Juan says, is like the night of the soul and leaves it in
darkness and in a void (Crisógono de Jesús 171-172). Second, the “dark night” refers to the means by which a soul connects with God (Luévano 31). With the physical body in darkness and deprivation, logical reason is impossible. This leaves the mind lost, having to rely only on faith as its guide. As the senses and mind are in darkness and led only by faith, God grants an encounter to the soul that is completely unique and can only be understood by those who have experienced it. They are enlightened to an obscure new knowledge of God that is both enigmatic and paradoxical (32). This, and the third reason, is because the arrival point of this spiritual journey is God Himself, who to San Juan is a dark god, and who is and will be constantly veiled in mystery and obscurity, beyond comprehension.

The experience of the night in this poem is broken into two complementary phases which correspond broadly to the division of the soul into its lower sensual part and its higher spiritual part (Luévano 32-33). The first phase, the lower sensual part of the soul concerns the renunciation of all misleading sense gratification. This elimination of earthly distractions can be achieved through asceticism and active states of prayer, and is therefore referred to as the “active night of the senses” (33). In stanza five of the poem the night seems to change into its second phase, that which identifies with the higher spiritual part of the soul. This phase involves the activity not of the soul, but of God upon the soul, and is thus known as the “passive night of the senses” (33). In this phase the soul reaches complete renunciation of sense gratification and achieves complete purity and focuses all of its will on God. God at that time unites with the soul, bringing it into a dark, yet perfect knowledge.
In contrasting these two phases of the soul, San Juan also employs another signature Sufi poetic tradition: the conception of language as being totally available, in which words can have unlimited and arbitrary meanings, because those words are trying to qualify for the supreme translation, the impossible translation, of God (López Baralt, *San Juan* 11). Like the Sufis, San Juan uses his vocabulary and grammar to his full advantage in describing the delicate subjects that he does. In “En una noche escura” he uses the two different past verb tenses in Spanish, the imperfect and the preterit, to distinguish between the “active night of the senses” and the “passive night of the souls”. When referring to the active night, where the believer is actively rejecting sense gratification and is doing such in a continuos state, San Juan uses the imperfect tense. For example, in stanza four San Juan describes in the imperfect tense the nighttime, which is when the literal lover waits for her partner:

Aquésta me guiava
más cierto que la luz de mediodía
adonde me esperava
quien yo bien me savía
en parte donde nadie parecía (16-20)

This symbolizes the active night of the senses, and by using the imperfect tense, he maintains that the soul must be in a pure and lasting state of meditation and asceticism before it can move on to the passive night. In the very next stanza, however, the verb tense changes to preterit:
O noche, que guiaste!
¡O noche amable más que la alborada!
¡O noche que juntaste,
amado con amada,
amada en el amado transformada! (21-25)

Here San Juan is apostrophizing the specific night of the lovers’ union, and is more deeply speaking of the passive night of the senses, the exact time when the soul unites with God. San Juan uses the symbol of the “dark night” and the verbs conjugations when describing it without limitation in order to relate the complex and ineffable process of divine illumination.

“¡Que bien sé yo la fonte que mana y corre”

The principal symbol of “¡Que bien sé yo la fonte que mana y corre”, the fountain, has been interpreted in many different ways by scholars over the years due to the obvious universality of water as a spiritual symbol. In the Christian tradition, the symbol of water or the fountain usually represents spiritual cleansing or eternal life, but the fountain in San Juan’s poetry seems to correspond much more with the traditional Sufi use of the symbol. Since the nineth century, Sufi literature has focused on the didactic principles of water, beginning with Nuri of Baghdad, who focused large portions of his *Maqamat al-qulub* on describing the mystic water of the soul, saying that it flowed through the heart of the believer and gave the believer a knowledge of the eternal God, and certainty of that knowledge (López Baralt, *San Juan* 264).
In San Juan’s poem, the fountain is knowledge. The verb saber is used ten times, often with an implied certainty: “que bien sé yo.” It is both the absolute and truth and the knowledge of illumination: “Su claridad nunca es escurecida, / y sé que toda luz de ella es venida” (15-16). This fountain of knowledge is full (18), available to all (30), and will provide believers with true life (34).

As we know from San Juan’s other poetry, God is the source of such true spiritual knowledge, and understanding can only be achieved through the soul’s active unification with God. Like in “En una noche escura,” San Juan once again references the enlightenment of the soul within the setting of “the dark night.” The estribillo “aunque es de noche” at the end of each stanza repeatedly acknowledges the necessity of renouncing sense gratification in order to remove any possible distractions between the soul and God. The night symbolizes the lack of that of the physical world, and because of the believer’s renunciation of physical desires, he is therefore left in darkness. The fountain of knowledge in the poem, however, provides more than enough to fulfill the believer’s life, even within this sensual darkness. He asserts in the first stanza that he needs nothing from the physical world, that he can be in the middle of “the night”, and still know this fountain of knowledge with certainty. Finally, in stanza ten, the believer declares that the reason the fountain is available to all is because they are in “the night,” stating that this sensual darkness is necessary to be able to achieve divine enlightenment and knowledge.

Also in this poem, San Juan again employs the fluid use of language that is signature of the Sufi tradition. Unlike his Golden Age european contemporaries, San Juan did not conform to the strict literary rules of the Renaissance. As Italian
Renaissance verse forms, poetic techniques, and themes were introduced in Spain by Garcilaso de la Vega in the early 16th century, San Juan’s poems would have appeared erratic and radical for their time. San Juan destroyed the poetic structure and limitations of his contemporaries in Spain in his effort to widen his language to the vast degree required to relate the ineffable experience of divine enlightenment.

However, this incoherence of language was not unfamiliar, but standard to the Sufi tradition that was trying to describe the same experience as San Juan. Many famous Sufi poets, including Ibn al-Arabi of Murcia (thirteenth century), Catalina de Siena (fourteenth century), and Blaise Pascal (seventeenth century), defended the use of obscure and random mystic verses or exclamations (López Baralt, San Juan 22). San Juan is not unique in this manner among mystics, only within his time and the context of his european Christian contemporary poets.

In “¡Que bien sé yo la fonte que mana y corre” the description of the fountain is as obscure and random as any Sufi would have liked. While San Juan is describing the soul’s eternal knowledge of God, he never once mentions God’s name or the soul. Events are suggested rather than stated, and his lines rarely follow the eleven-syllabus standard established by Garcilasco. His verses follow no identifiable sequence of events, except through small stanzas, and there is no ordered progression in time, place, or argument. It appears overall as several beautiful parts thrown together to make a point. In this aspect, the poem was completely unique from the predominant classical and Renaissance ideas about poetry.
“¡O llama de amor viva,!”

In “¡O llama de amor viva”, San Juan goes into greater detail about the necessity of the renunciation of sense gratification. In this poem, the soul is directed completely away from self-interest and united with God completely in his holy love (Luévano 177). In the poem, the soul itself declares the importance of renouncing anything that could separate or distract it from God, urging, “matando muerte en vida la as trocado” (12). The death of the soul becomes the life of God. By renouncing ordinary and natural operations, the soul can then act in divine operations (Luévano 179).

Like San Juan’s other poems, “¡O llama de amor viva” likewise uses a traditional Sufi symbol to attempt relating the experience of God Himself. In this poem San Juan uses the flame to symbolize and describe the soul’s highest degree of perfection, unity with God. San Juan describes this union as a love that, while unable to be surpassed, can continue to grow and enhance with time and practice. The stanzas describe this flame of love consuming the soul and enveloping it. The soul, San Juan explains in his commentary, should be viewed as a log (qtd. in Crisógono de Jesús 772). The fire therefore penetrates the wood and changes it. It is united with it; yet as the fire continues to burn, the log becomes more inflamed and glowing, eventually growing hot enough to create its own sparks and become flames itself. Furthermore, that same love which is eventually united with the soul, at first burns and purges the soul of its iniquities. As flame drives off the moisture and sap from a log, so too does this love cleanse and transform the soul until it is pure enough to transform into the flame itself.
More than the actual flame, San Juan uses the symbols of light and illumination to express the deeper spiritual understanding that emerges when the soul unites with God. Human intellect, which before the transformation of the soul would be considered for its own natural light, is surpassed in this poem by a greater supernatural light, the intellect of God. With the union of the human soul with God, however, the lights become one, and the intellect of the human becomes divine (Luévano 178). The way of understanding then becomes through faith and knowledge of God.

This enlightenment and focus on divine illumination that may sound like common Christian rhetoric today was not so during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Spain. Before joining the Christian vocabulary, the theme of light and illumination was considered a typically Muslim theme, especially prominent within Sufism. Many noted Sufi mystics used the symbols within their literature, including Ibn al-Arabi, Baruzi, and many others across countries and centuries, which perhaps originated from the Qur’an (López Baralt, *Simbología* 44). The Qur’an says:

God is the Light of the Heavens and the earth:

The likeness of This Light is as a niche

wherein a lamp

(the lamp in a glass,

the glass as it were a glittering star)

kindled from a Blessed Tree

an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West

whose oil wellnigh shine, even if no fire touched it;
Light upon Light:

(God guides to His Light whom He will) (Qur’an 24:35)

Because the symbols of divine light and illumination were so closely associated with Islam, they were not only uncommon, but possibly dangerous to use in Christian literature in Spain after the Reconquest. Those Christians that did identify with light and illumination, los Alumbrados, were persecuted and expelled from Spain in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Therefore it is extremely unlikely that San Juan was influenced in this respect by his Christian predecessors. This poem therefore further evidences the probability that San Juan was directly influenced by the Sufi Muslim tradition.

Mysticism in the Poems

All of San Juan’s poetry, specifically the three examples within this chapter, contain traditionally Sufi mystic themes. While none directly state that they are about the soul or God, the poems all speak on a deeper level of the soul’s journey to unite with God in perfect enlightenment. To achieve this journey the soul must actively deprive itself of physical pleasures, living in a continual ascetic state, which is also widely discussed within the three poems. The goal and result in the poems of such a union between the soul and God is complete knowledge and understanding, a knowledge led by faith and not by reason, and indescribable in its wisdom to anyone who has not achieved it personally.

San Juan explains all of these themes through specifically Sufi symbols. Within “En una noche escura”, “¡Que bien sé yo la fonte”, and “¡O llama de amor viva” San Juan relies on the symbols of the dark night, the fountain, and the flame to describe the
complicated and unworldly experience of unifying the soul with God. While these symbols sometimes carry various significances across faiths, San Juan turns to the significances associated with Sufism, more even than those associated with Catholicism. In the case of the flame and illumination, his interpretation of the symbol could not possibly have come from Catholic tradition, as the Catholic Church at the time was persecuting and expelling those associated with light, los Alumbrados, in Spain.

This heavy reliance on symbolism and describing one relatable concept in order to portray a larger ineffable one was part of the arbitrary use of language in the Sufi tradition. Sufi literature, and that of San Juan as well, used grammatical tricks, random exclamations, symbols, and a free use of vocabulary in an effort to widen language to the vast degree required to relate such ineffable experiences. This manner was completely contrary to the strict and ordered poetry of the Renaissance that was prominent in Spain at the time.

A close study of San Juan’s poetry reveals that the saint’s influences may have been much more related to Sufism than Catholicism. While San Juan was an ardent protector of the Catholic faith, he uses themes, symbols, and writing techniques in his poetry that are distinctly Sufi mystic. These mystic poems differ significantly from his contemporary European Christian poets, suggesting that San Juan was influenced directly by preceding Sufi mystics more than by any Christian intermediary forerunner.
CONCLUSION

San Juan de la Cruz’s poetry demonstrates the considerable impact that Muslim rule had on Spain and its culture. His total mastery of the traditional themes, symbols, and grammatical and language structure of the mystic tradition allows his work to be more closely identified with the original Sufi mystics than with any of his Christian mystic predecessors or contemporaries. Such a connection proves that large amounts of Muslim literature and scholarship were still available and influential in Spanish learning institutions of the sixteenth century.

The connection between San Juan and Islam also proves the existence of a shared history between the Catholic-Christian and Muslim faiths. Spain at the time, and even in modern times to a certain extent, tried to deny this history. From the *reconquista* onward, most of Spain has worked very hard to cover up its Islamic past. Today less than two percent of Spaniards are Islamic. Festivals such as “*Día de la Toma*” and “*Moros y Cristianos*” celebrate the expulsion of Muslims from Spain with such events as the explosion of a giant, turban-wearing puppet known as *Mahoma* (Muhammed) and reenactments of battles between the Christian kings and Moors. The Great Mosque of Córdoba was transformed into a Catholic cathedral, and Muslims are now banned from praying in it.
This anti-Islamic sentiment is a reflection of several factors, both current and historical. Currently, Spanish Christians are facing growing Muslim immigration from the Middle East and North Africa. Many fear a retaking of Spain for Islam quite like the invasion of 711. Also, Islamist extremist actions have scared many Christians, such as the 2004 Madrid commuter train bombing. The group responsible referred to themselves as the “Al-Andalus Brigade” and declared their intent to take Andalusia back for Islam. Historically, the collective memory of the past Moorish empire in Andalusia creates uncertainty regarding which group was actually the outsiders during the reconquista: the Muslims, many of whom were local Iberian converts, or the peoples under rule of the Christians kings, who arrived from the North. In any case, many Spaniards fear that too much toleration of Islam will lead to an uninvited re-invasion of the peninsula (Rogozen-Soltar 881).

Non-immigrant, Spanish converts to Islam, however, wish for no such thing as a “retaking of Spain.” These Muslims seek religious and cultural legacy in al-Andalus that reflects a nostalgia and longing for the return of Islam, not through terrorism or fundamentalism, but through conversion. For them, al-Andalus represents the ideal of allegiance to Islam and not to Arab ethnicity. These Spanish Muslims value tolerance, and long to return to the period of convivencia during which Jews, Muslims, and Christians co-existed peacefully in order to grow in culture, politics, and science (Rogozen-Soltar 875). They hope that Andalusia returns to its true Islamic roots as the Persian poet Hafiz describes it:
Before me appeared the palaces and their Denizens, exalted, in lofty abodes.

As if I had reached a house of knowledge Filled with every branch of human wisdom;

Sacred in the land, east and west:

Pilgrimage site of all, Muslim jurists, and Christian priests.

(qtd. in Noorani 243)

Perhaps all who are seeking a renewed *convivencia* in Spain and elsewhere would benefit from the study of mystics such as San Juan de la Cruz. San Juan proved through his poetry that ideas from both Islam and Christianity could be shared and incorporated to create something that is not only beautiful and creative, but faith-provoking and spiritual as well. San Juan himself was able to take traditionally Muslim ideas and practices and use them to strengthen his own faith in God and the Catholic Church. At a time when most are worried about what separates the religions and peoples of the world, maybe a remembrance of what unites them could allow for personal and cultural growth, such as Islamic Spain experienced so long ago.
Poems

“En una noche escura”

En una noche escura
con ansias en amores inflamada
¡o dichosa ventura!
salí sin ser notada
estando ya mi casa sosegada.

ascuras y segura
por la secreta escala, disfraçada,
¡o dichosa ventura!
a escuras y en celada
estando ya mi casa sosegada.

En la noche dichosa
en secreto que naide me veya
ni yo mirava cosa
sin otra luz y guía
sino la que en el corazón ardía.

Aquésta me guiava
más cierto que la luz de mediodía
adonde me esperava
quien yo bien me savía
en parte donde nadie parecía.

¡O noche, que guiaste!
¡O noche amable más que la alborada!
¡O noche que juntaste,
amado con amada,
amada en el amado transformada!

En mi pecho florido,
que entero para él solo se guardaba
allí quedó dormido
y yo le regalaba
y el ventalle de cedros ayre daba.

El ayre del almena
quando yo sus cavellos esparcía
con su mano serena
en mi cuello hería
y todos mis sentidos suspendía.

Quedéme y olbidéme
el rostro recliné sobre el amado;
cessó todo, y dexéme
dexando mi cuydado
entre las açucenas olbidado.

(San Juan de la Cruz  261-262)

“¡Que bien sé yo la fonte que mana y corre”

¡Que bien sé yo la fonte que mana y corre,
aunque es de noche!

Aquella eterna fonte está ascondida.
¡Que bien sé yo do tiene su manida
aunque es de noche!

Su origen no lo sé yo pues no le tiene
mas sé que todo origen della viene
aunque es de noche.

Sé que no puede ser cosa tan bella,
y que cielos y tierra beben della
aunque es de noche.

Bien sé que suelo en ella no se halla
y que ninguno puede vadealla
aunque es de noche.

Su claridad nunca es escurecida
y sé que toda luz de ella es venida
aunque es de noche.

Sée ser tan caudalosos sus corrientes,
que infiernos cielos riegan y a las gentes
aunque es de noche.

El corriente que nace desta fuente
bien sé que es tan capaz y omnipotente
aunque es de noche.

El corriente que de estas dos procede
sé que ninguna de ellas le precede
aunque es de noche.

Aquesta eterna fonte está escondida
en este vivo pan por darnos vida
aunque es de noche.

Aquí se está llamando a las criaturas
y de esta agua se hartan, aunque a escuras
porque es de noche.

Aquesta viva fuente que deseo
en este pan de vida yo la veo
aunque es de noche.

(San Juan de la Cruz 277-279)

“¡O llama de amor viva,“

¡O llama de amor viva,
que tiernamente hyeres
de mi alma en el más profundo centro!
pues ya no eres esquiva,
acava ya si quieres;
rompe la tela de este dulce encuentro.

¡O cauterio suave!
¡O regalada llaga!
¡O mano blanda! ¡O toque delicado,
que a vida eterna save
y toda deuda paga!,
matando muerte en vida la as trocado.

¡O lámparas de fuego
en cuyos resplandores
las profundas cabernas del sentido
que estava obscuro y ciego
con estraños primores
calor y luz dan junto a su querido!
¡Quán manso y amoroso
recuerdas en mi seno
donde secretamente solo moras
y en tu aspirar sabroso
de bien y gloria lleno
quán delicadamente me enamoras!

(San Juan de la Cruz 263)
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