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# DISCERNING THE MYSTICAL WISDOM OF THE *BHAGAVAD GITA* AND JOHN OF THE CROSS

## ABSTRACT

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is characterised by a global spirituality. Presently, and more than ever, access to the great religious traditions has enabled many to tap into the wisdom of other cultures. While the respective epistemological foundations of diverse traditions may differ, mutual understanding and respectful dialogue nevertheless facilitate respect for the other and offer opportunities for mutual enrichment. This leads to the recognition that there are multiple dimensions and expressions of the sacred. From within this interspiritual approach, an analysis of the mystical wisdom of the *Bhagavad Gita* and John of the Cross clearly points to the central theme of discerning the real from the unreal. This leads to detachment from/lack of desire for and, finally, surrender to the Divine.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

How can we compare the wisdom of an ancient Hindu text, the *Bhagavad Gita* (the *Song of the Lord*; the *Song Celestial*; the *Song of the Beloved One*),<sup>1</sup> and the mystical writings given mainly to cloistered religious sisters of the 16<sup>th</sup> century by John of the Cross (1542-1591) – the latter comprising poems, letters, sayings and commentaries of a completely different genre to the *Bhagavad Gita*? However, in spite of their differences, the “eclectic imagination” of the authors is capable of engendering “new possibilities for living a committed religious life ...” (Barnes 2006:94).<sup>2</sup> Coming, as they do, from vastly different sociocultural settings, and illustrating different

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1 For an analysis of the *Bhagavad Gita* within the wider setting of the *Mahabharata*, see the article by Alex Kurian in the present volume; Scheur (2006); and O’Leary (2006).

2 Ganeri (2012:234-236) illustrates this point in his essay, particularly the relationship between Vedanta and Thomism.

interpretations of reality, nonetheless, a comparison of the concept of *discernment* in these writings yields insights that can be of value to both traditions.

The *Bhagavad Gita* has been described as “undoubtedly the single most popular Hindu text, a semi-canonical scripture which nourishes the faith of millions” (Barnes 2006:93). Several studies have noted its similarities with the Christian gospels: its belief in a personal God; God incarnated in a human form; selfless action; loving devotion, and so on.<sup>3</sup> However, despite such similarities, which endeared the *Gita* to many Christian missionaries, it is essentially a Hindu text, “whilst not officially part of the revealed or ‘heard’ canon of the Hindu tradition (*sruti*), it has come to define Hinduism as much as it is defined by it” (Cornville 2006:2). It constitutes a major renewal of Hinduism, incorporating, as it does, various elements of Indian religions, including Buddhism (D’Souza 2002:18). This short text, consisting of 18 chapters (700 verses), comprises the essence of Hindu thought and practice, in particular the importance of knowledge (*jnana*), action (*karma*), and loving devotion to God (*bhakti*).<sup>4</sup> It is not within the ambit of this article to discuss, among others, the provenance, as well as the stylistic and literary considerations of the text; this has admirably been done elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> The spiritual richness and semantic complexity of the *Bhagavad Gita* lends itself to a variety of different interpretations, some of which are both contradictory and controversial.<sup>6</sup>

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3 See the volume edited by Cornville (2006) for several instances of comparative studies; also Keepen (2011).

4 The understanding of the *Gita* as advocating the *trimarga* – *jnana*, *karma* and *bhakti* – has been strongly disputed, and described as “anachronistic and inappropriate” (Barnes 2006: 95) and “facile” (Hardy 1994: 352). Barnes suggests that a more accurate distinction is between *samkyha*, the discipline of knowledge, and the discipline of action or meditation – *karmayoga* or *dhyanyoga*. He maintains that the “intense and highly emotional spirit of loving devotion that is found later in the Bhagavata Purana and the medieval Saiva and Vaishnava saints” is not reflected in the *Bhagavad Gita* (2006:95).

5 See Cornville (2006:1-4).

6 See Cornville (2006:3) for analysis of diverse and in some cases contradictory religious, political and philosophical interpretations. Gandhi (2003:8) states, “Even in 1888-89, when I first became acquainted with the *Gita*, I felt that it was not a historical work, but that, under the guise of physical warfare, it described the duel that perpetually went on in the hearts of mankind and that physical warfare was brought in merely to make the description of the internal duel more alluring”.

John of the Cross (1542-1591)<sup>7</sup> is primarily a poet, considered to be one of Spain's greatest. His three major poems are entitled *The spiritual canticle*; *The dark night*, and *The living flame of love*, upon which his commentaries of the same names are based.<sup>8</sup> The treatise, *The ascent of Mount Carmel*, is also based on the poem, *The dark night*. John's works illustrate his deep insights into theology, psychology, spiritual direction, and mysticism. Although John drew from many sources,<sup>9</sup> the Bible was his

... living and unending wellspring. Its waters pervade the entire being of this mystical thinker, poet and writer. The bible was his hymnal, his meditation book, a book for travel, for contemplation, and for writing (Kavanaugh & Rodriguez 1991:35).<sup>10</sup>

His reliance on the Spirit as the sure guide, who enlightens the reader, bringing to light the deeper meaning of scripture, is evident on almost every page of his work. His love of the Bible, which often took him into solitude and into nature, away from people, also instilled in John a great confidence in providence, even in the midst of persecution (Kavanaugh & Rodriguez 1991:28).

Despite the different spiritual, religious and cultural contexts of the *Bhagavad Gita* and John of the Cross, there are many areas of similarity. As mentioned earlier, the aim of this article is to examine the theme of *discernment* in the *Bhagavad Gita* and John of the Cross. Without exaggerating, it can be stated that discernment is a major hermeneutical key by means of which the *Gita* and John may be understood. Both speak powerfully about the need for *discriminative wisdom* in the spiritual life; in both, discernment leads to *detachment/lack of desire*, and eventually to the apex of the mystical journey, namely *surrender to the Divine*, or *ascent*

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7 Entering the Carmelite order at the age of 21, in 1563, John proved himself a fine academic, but felt called to a stricter religious way of life with the Carthusians. His meeting with Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) in 1567 changed this proposed course of action, and John was instrumental in helping Teresa with the Reform of the Carmelite Order. For a comprehensive account of John's life, see Hardy, R 2004. *John of the Cross. Man and Mystic*. Boston: Pauline books and Media.

8 The following abbreviations will be used in this article: DN (Dark Night); Ascent (Ascent of Mount Carmel); SC (Spiritual Canticle); and LF (Living Flame of Love).

9 Among others, Aquinas, Augustine, Neoplatonism, German, Rhineland and Spanish mystics (Kavanaugh & Rodriguez 1991:35).

10 John utilized 3 main hermeneutical keys for reading the Bible: "First the Bible offered him an excellent expression of his own spiritual experience. Second, he found in the Bible a confirmation of his theological argument. Finally, he enjoyed and followed the contemporary practice of using scriptural passages in an accommodated sense" (Kavanaugh & Rodriguez 1991:35).

to the Godhead – the mystical marriage. This final state or *telos* effects liberation (*moksha*) and results in selfless service to humanity.

Since we are engaging in an interspiritual reading of mystical texts, a few preliminary points with respect to the phenomenon of *interspirituality/intermysticism* will be helpful.

## 2. INTERSPIRITUALITY

A major insight arising from the study of spirituality is the fact that we live in an *interspiritual/intermystical age*. Postmodern spirituality exhibits an openness to the deep treasures of the wisdom traditions of the world, bringing with it respect for the other, without abandoning concern for individual and communal diversity. Waaijman (2000:122) points to the necessity of a “global spirituality”; this is all the more important, given the fact that the structural matrix for any given spiritual way has the potential to become primary, and heuristic distinctions between traditions may harden into mutually exclusive descriptive categories, thus prohibiting true dialogue (Kourie 2008:610). Ongoing dialogue, renewal and reform are, therefore, necessary, since

... access to the Source-experience [can] become blocked by over-organisation ... [then] the most pressing need then becomes resourcement (Waaijman 2000:122).

Furthermore, interspirituality involves a willingness to take risks; often there is a movement towards the unknown, and towards that which is not understood at first glance.

The desire for truth may lead ... to uncertain ground ... crossing the borders between our own tradition and another ... We may seem to have gone too far by those whose desire for truth has never pushed them very far at all (Clooney 2011:230).

There is a

... more general shift from a static self-referential approach to the Christian life to a more dynamic or open-ended concept of the spiritual journey

where the “other” is no longer perceived as a threat that must be avoided, but rather to be welcomed “as an invitation into a deeper faith” (Barnes 2005:33). This leads to genuine dialogue where open communication allows the partners to “respect diversity, recognize unity and celebrate the presence of the Spirit in all religions” (Chakkalal 2011:775). Clearly,

the differences between diverse religions relate to particular theological, cultural, religious and sociological parameters, affecting not only cognitive articulation of the tradition, but also the very experiences undergone by the adherents. Each is something *sui generis* – and this particularity is not to be underestimated. It is recognised that there are multiple dimensions and expressions of the sacred. However, whilst respective epistemological foundations may differ, mutual understanding and respectful dialogue nevertheless facilitate respect for the autonomy of diverse traditions and enhance mutual enrichment. The global consciousness that is a feature of contemporary spirituality enables a shift from divergence to convergence, and elicits a “remarkable richness of spiritual wisdom, of spiritual energies, and of religious cultural forms” (Cousins 1985:15). In his discussion of contemporary interest in world religions and the need for interreligious harmony and understanding, Vineeth (2008:538-539) points to the work done by the World Council of Churches in this regard, in particular the importance of attitude of “brotherly love, mutual understanding and respectful approach” to the other. Diverse religious beliefs and experiences may well have some aspects of their respective mystical content in common, even if this is at a tangential level. Clearly, there is a move away from merely self-referential approaches to religious traditions, and a greater realisation of the value of the *other*.

As a result of the interspiritual encounter, attitudes of domination, triumphalism and colonialism with respect to the other can be replaced with reciprocal understanding, mutual respect and constructive dialogue. Such an enterprise cannot be lightly entered into; one has to be honest and willing to be vulnerable, as

engagement with the other through some sort of shared religious experience demands a willingness to keep moving back and forth from the familiar to the unfamiliar, [where] God is to be found precisely in the crossing, where the borders are riskily transgressed (Barnes 2005:36).

Teasdale (2001:26-28) is a proponent *par excellence* of interspirituality. He strongly emphasises the fact that the sharing of ultimate experiences across traditions is the *religion of the third millennium*, and will lead to a deep sense of community and friendship that cuts across all religious persuasions. This does not negate the rich diversity found in the religious and wisdom traditions worldwide, and is not an attempt to impose a uniform spirituality. Rather, it aims to promote awareness of the manifold spiritual forms and paths of humanity, and to encourage this ongoing inner search. The realisation that Christianity does not have “a monopoly on wisdom as it relates to the nature of the Divine” (Teasdale 1999:92) enables a sincere,

open and respectful dialogue between equal partners. Appreciation of the value of the “other” effects greater psychological, spiritual and physical benefits, for example, such elements in Hinduism which enrich Christianity:

The intuition of an ultimate reality underlying and pervading phenomenal multiplicity; alternative understandings of divine inconceivability and differently refined uses of apophatic language; the discovery of more effective disciplines toward appropriating the inner self; yoga as helpful physical practice and a way of life with great psychological and spiritual benefits; spiritual direction as practical guidance along the mystical path founded in a teacher-disciple relationship; an appreciation of the sacrality of nature and a more inclusive respect for all living beings and the environment; non-violence as a viable alternative to warfare and as deeper personal wisdom; vegetarianism as salutary for health but also as an expression of the solidarity of all living beings; the celebration of pluralism and the embrace of diverse conceptions of the divine. (Clooney 2005:337).

Not all scholars of religion accept the concept and practice of interspirituality unequivocally, including those involved in inter-faith dialogue. Interspirituality has been criticised for “liberal assumptions that are unsettling for more committed religious persons [e.g. conservative evangelicals]”<sup>11</sup> (Cheetham 2007:29). There is a fear that interspiritual exchange bypasses “propositional presentations of faith” and concentrates rather on “commonalities that exist at the more non-cognitive levels” (Cheetham 2007:30). However, the position of Cheetham and others fails to grasp that the encounter of diverse traditions in no way detracts from, but rather enhances an appreciation of the wide variety of cognitive claims and belief structures, while acknowledging the spiritual interdependence of religious traditions. Knitter (1996:168-183) acknowledges that many Christians are troubled by the possibility that different religions may, in fact, offer universally relevant teaching. However, he maintains that such an attitude is not only liberating, but also essential for Christian growth,

To know the God of Jesus is to have the security and the courage to follow the Spirit wherever she might lead – even when she leads us to truth other than what we have found in Jesus ... In other words, the more we know Christ, the more we are able and eager to learn from others (Knitter 1996:174).

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11 The term “more committed” is rather loaded, and already sets the tone for Cheetham’s argument. See also Ruben Mendoza, Religious Pluralism and Turn to the Spirit, *Journal of Dharma* 35, 1 (Jan-Mar 2010), 23-28.

Therefore, there is a real need to be attentive to the “resonances and echoes” that interspiritual dialogue brings to the surface, allowing a greater appreciation, not only with regard to the spirituality of the “other”, but also regarding one’s own spiritual tradition (Barnes 2006:93). Open dialogue with a text other than one’s own can, therefore, contribute to growth and understanding, without the presupposition of hermeneutical privilege. For the Christian, such openness will facilitate a greater understanding of Jesus, who is the “body language” of God, the great unknowable (Waaajman 2008:221).

Thus, when approaching texts from other traditions, it is important to avoid colonial hermeneutics, which promotes the superiority of one tradition over another. Therefore, it is possible to engage in a “corrective” reading, namely an approach that will clarify themes and traditions in the reader’s *own* text, rather than imposing one’s own theological, religious and spiritual constructs onto the text under consideration (Flood 2006:11). Within our pluralist society, the door has certainly been opened to *interspiritual hermeneutics*, in which the sacred text of one spiritual tradition may be understood from within a completely different philosophical and religious framework. Furthermore, we can no longer be held hostage to the philosophical constructs of a particular age, but must be open to the changing climate in the history of ideas, one which is characterised by tolerance and appreciation. Bearing the foregoing in mind, we now turn to the theme of *discernment* in the *Bhagavad Gita* and John of the Cross.

### 3. DISCERNMENT IN THE *BHAGAVAD GITA* AND JOHN OF THE CROSS

#### 3.1 Finding “eternal reality”

Discernment entails “... critical reflection on human and specifically religious experience, either of individuals or ... community” so as to effect right choice and action, given the “fundamental ambiguities inherent in human moral and religious experience” (Lonsdale 2005:247). The human condition is such that we are faced with diverse choices, of greater or lesser importance, on a daily basis. Consequently, clear judgement, prudence and wisdom are necessary, particularly given the fact that there are so many possible options in any given circumstance. Drawing on the well-known Ignatian tradition, Derkse (2008:456-457) illustrates the importance of the *social* dimension of discernment, namely the need to take seriously into account the effects of our choices and actions on others. Furthermore, the *affective* aspect of discernment has to be seriously considered, namely

how we are affected “by things, situations and others” so as to discern what is the best way forward. According to Waaijman (2002:484),

[d]iscernment is the process of assembling and sorting out knowledge with respect to the way toward God. It tests the end and the means and creates a critical center. With a contemplative eye it looks at a person’s life journey and envisions its perfection.

Operative, in this instance, are the phrases “*with respect to the way toward God*” and “*with a contemplative eye*”. Both these elements are critical in the *Bhagavad Gita* and John of the Cross.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, and indeed in Hinduism in general, discernment, *viveka*, is paramount. It is the ability to discriminate between the *real* and the unreal:

Of the non-existent there is no coming to be; of the existent there is no ceasing to be. The conclusion about these two has been perceived by the seers of truth (BG 2:16; Radhakrishnan 1971:106).<sup>12</sup>

*Viveka* is the discernment of the *eternal reality* within the whole complex of nature and life, and effects freedom. In this instance, a process of discriminative wisdom operates: the unreal is *asat* and the real is *sat*. The former relates to the passing circumstances of life and the world; it veils the latter, namely the unchanging, indestructible reality (Radhakrishnan 1971:106):

We are living in a world in which the real and the unreal are always intermixed. Discrimination is when we reach the point where we discern eternal reality distinct from, and yet immanent in the changing reality of everyday experience (Griffiths 1995:10).

By first discovering the eternal reality within ourselves, we are enabled to deal with the changing appearances of things. This is the process of “assembling and sorting out knowledge” referred to by Waaijman earlier.

This is the basic message of the *Gita*. Arjuna’s grief, poignantly expressed in Chapter one, is a result of his inability to discern the right course of action, whether to retreat (*nivrtti*) or advance (*pravrtti*). The dialogue (*samvada*) between Arjuna and Krishna on the battlefield of *Kurukshetra* in these 18 chapters of the *Gita* serve to teach Arjuna mystical

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12 “*The unreal never is: the Real never is not. This truth indeed has been seen by those who can see the true*” (Griffiths 1995:15, quoting from Mascaro J 1962. *Love, Light and Life. The Eighteen Chapters of the Bhagavad Gita*. London: Penguin Classics). This translation will be used interchangeably with that of Radakrishnan (1971) in the present work.



wisdom, so that he can develop a *contemplative mind* – *yogasastra* – and obtain freedom – *sreyas*. Arjuna's search for the right path involves discerning the depths of his being and making moral decisions based on correct judgement. The entire *Gita* is a treatise on discernment as Krishna leads Arjuna from despair to an understanding of the true nature of the self and, consequently, to the correct path of action. This is not a simple matter, as exemplified in Aristotle's consideration of ethics, not as a science, but as a higher art than the sciences. As Derkse (2008:454) states:

In the sciences well-tested rules of procedure and problem-solving techniques can lead us from fundamental principles to conclusions and applications .... In the domain of moral quality and deliberation there is often a plurality of roads that may be chosen, many of them not straight and simple at all.

In the *Gita*, and in everyday life, the choices made necessitate a process of "identifying and disentangling opposing internal and external influences" so that we can be aware of the manner in which these elements affect us. Derkse (2008:456-457) re-iterates Waaijman's sentiments, when he asks which aspects in our life enable us to move towards God, and which lead us away from God. Referring to Ignatius' image of a pair of scales, he asks:

What tips the outcome and decides? We must be ready to follow whatever is judged as most contributing to God's glory and praise and ... our ... salvation (Derkse 2008:456-457).

Such discrimination or discernment is central to Upanishadic teaching, as also apparent in the *Vivekacudamani* (*The crest jewel of discrimination*).<sup>13</sup> *The crest jewel* posits four stages in this process: (1) *initial crisis* – dissatisfaction with my self as I experience it now, and a sorely felt need to know some more lasting truth; (2) a *realisation of who I am not*; (3) a *realisation*, first in theory and then in practice, of *who I truly am*, and (4) the realisation of this self-knowledge in a *radically changed way of life* (Clooney 1998:20). This is markedly similar to the path described by John of the Cross; this will be taken up shortly. In this identity crisis, the student's cry for help is poignant:

O Master ... you are an ocean of mercy, I bow to you ... save me from death, afflicted as I am by ... unquenchable suffering and shaken violently ... terrified and so seeking refuge in you ... How can I cross this ocean of becoming? What is to be my fate? which means should I adopt? (Clooney 1998:21).

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13 A short classic, of 580 verses, compiled by Shankara (686-718 CE).

In this complexity, confusion and misery, the remedy, as indicated in the title of this text, is *discrimination* – the ability to distinguish the true path.

The *Crest Jewel* is committed to the value of right knowledge, the accurate, discriminating process of discernment which clarifies our reality and makes us free (Clooney 1998:22).

By subtle, discerning knowledge, the student can identify the distortions in his/her version of reality, and become detached from them. Discrimination is the means to obliterate such confusion. It is an analytic process in the *Crest Jewel*, distinguishing the real from the unreal, in this case an analysis of the nature of the *self*. The false self, its many manifestations, mental impressions, ideas, dreams, fancies are *impermanent*. Such manifestations are not the true self, which is free, unhindered, and blissful.

To realize all this is the fruit of discrimination; layers of non-self are peeled away, each revealed to be empty, nothing inside but another empty formulation of identity (Clooney 1998:23).

Since this non-self has its roots in the mind, the *Crest Jewel* recommends that the student

... integrate mind in the supreme self, which is your inmost essence. Through total integration, the wise one realises in the heart the infinite Brahman, which is of the nature of eternal knowledge and absolute bliss ... (Clooney 1998:27).

As a result of this discriminative enquiry, *transformation* occurs and the student is no longer held in the grip of confusion. No longer is s/he ignorant, thinking that the temporal, spatial phenomena are the ultimate reality. On the contrary, s/he has obtained wisdom and realises that the One Reality is present in everyone and everything, in every moment, in every situation (Griffiths 1995:306). The final section of the *Crest Jewel* celebrates this new freedom.

*My mind is gone, and all its activity has melted away, because I have realised the identity of self and Brahman. I know neither this nor that, nor what or how much is this infinite bliss!* (Clooney 1998: 27).

Lest one construe that this means the end of all activity and fruitful action in the world, the *Crest Jewel*, in similar vein to the *Gita*, speaks of *inner release*, while still contributing to the good of society, in whatever way that service is rendered.

Thus lives the wise one ... Though without riches, he is ever content; though helpless, he is very powerful ... Though doing things, he is inactive ... though limited, he is everywhere (Clooney 1988:29).

Such discriminative endeavours are *sattvic*, namely pure and disinterested, in the true sense of the word. They are performed without any desire for reward:

But he who does holy work, Arjuna, because it ought to be done and surrenders selfishness and thought of reward, his work is pure, and is peace ... For there is no man on earth who can fully renounce living work, but he who renounces the reward of his work is in truth a man of renunciation (*Bhagavad Gita* 18:9, 11; Griffiths 1995:303).

The one who renounces reward is the true renunciate (*sannyasi/sannyasini*). This brings freedom; whatever work is done is no longer binding:

*When work is done for a reward, the work brings pleasure or pain, or both, in its time; but when a man does work in Eternity, then Eternity is his reward (Bhagavad Gita 18:12; Griffiths 1995:304).*

The *Crest Jewel* ends on a similar note to the *Gita* as student and teacher bid farewell:

The disciple prostrates before him out of reverence; and then, with his guru's permission, he goes on his way, freed from bondage (Clooney 1988:29);

compare Arjuna's joyous cry:

*Destroyed is my delusion and recognition has been gained ... I stand firm with my doubts dispelled. I shall act according to Thy word (Bhagavad Gita 18:73; Radhakrishnan 1971:381).*

Throughout the writings of John of the Cross, discernment is paramount. For example, with respect to undue rejoicing in spiritual gifts, John tells us that

... discernment of the true gifts from the false and knowledge of how and at what time they may be exercised demands much counsel and much light from God, both of which are exceedingly hindered by esteeming and rejoicing in these works (Ascent 3:31; Kavanaugh & Rodriguez 1991:325).

John is particularly concerned for the adherent as s/he transitions from one state of being to another. For example, in the early stages of *spiritual awakening*, there may well be an existential state of psychological

disequilibrium. John delineates the various characteristics associated with such a state, namely: the weakening and darkening effect of unruly appetites; the lack of integration due to competing drives and emotions, and the clouding of the mind, due to inordinate appetites. The awakening of the transcendental consciousness has been described by Underhill ([1911]/1961:176-177) as,

... a disturbance of the equilibrium of the self, which results in the shifting of the field of consciousness from lower to higher levels (in which the self) ... slides ... from the old universe to the new.

The process can be fraught with difficulties, and the aspirant has to be vigilant.

And because of the darkening of the intellect, the will becomes weak and the memory dull and disordered in its proper operation ... The ignorance of some is extremely lamentable; they burden themselves with extraordinary penances ... thinking that these are sufficient to attain union with divine Wisdom. But such practices are insufficient if these souls do not diligently strive to deny their appetites. If they would attempt to devote only half of that energy to the renunciation of their desires, they would profit more in a month than in years with all these other exercises (Ascent 1:8; 1991:135-136).

Kurian (2000:206) elaborates on this theme:

There is an inescapable tendency in all those who seek to follow the spiritual path to place much faith in their good works, asceticism, practice of virtues and other devotions because such accomplishments make them appear worthy in their own eyes.

The realisation of one's own nothingness and futility of our efforts is actually a grace that brings humility.

As in the case of the devotee described in the *Crest Jewel* earlier, so too, discernment is crucial, according to John, so that the work of the Spirit may be gleaned in this disruptive state. John's delineation of the stages<sup>14</sup> of the mystical path are well known; suffice it, in this instance, to illustrate its significance with respect to discerning the true from the false, the real from the unreal.<sup>15</sup> The *Via purgativa*, which includes both

14 It is important to note that these stages should not be understood as occurring in a strict rectilinear succession. The process is more cyclical and dialectical than linear, and therefore there is a certain level of interaction and intermingling between the various stages.

15 It is important to note that for the most part John was writing to followers of the monastic life, as he points out in the prologue to the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*.

the active and passive nights of the *senses*, helps reverse certain habitual patterns of affection and behaviour, and eliminate sensual attachments to the transitory and ephemeral. Not only pacification of the body, but also purification of the mind is crucial. Such abnegation is difficult for the aspirant, particularly at the beginning of the spiritual journey. Underhill ([1911]/1961:99) succinctly summarises this process:

This strange art of contemplation ... demands of the self ... the same hard dull work, the same slow training of the will, which lies behind all supreme achievement, and is the price of true liberty.

Thus, tenacity, perseverance and the ability to transcend the disturbing activities of the imagination and intellect are prerequisites during the purgative way, and lead to the "... established ascendancy of the 'interior man' (*sic*), the transcendental consciousness ..." [Underhill 1911]/1961:226).

Profound discernment is necessary when the adherent no longer finds neither comfort in discursive meditation nor joy in spiritual practices. John offers this advice:

Because these aridities may not proceed from the sensory night and purgation, but from sin and imperfection, or weakness and lukewarmness, or some bad humour or bodily indisposition, I will give some signs here for discerning whether the dryness is the result of this purgation of one of these other defects (DN 1:9; Kavanaugh & Rodriguez 1991:377).

John (DN 1:9; 1991:277-380) offers three signs for discerning the nature of this state of aridity: first, no consolation is found in the things either of God, or from creatures. There is "no sweetness or delight in anything"; secondly, although there is no desire for the things of God, the person is nevertheless "solicitous, concerned, and pained about not serving God" and, thirdly, the inability, "the powerlessness, in spite of one's efforts, to meditate and make use of the imagination, the interior sense, as was one's previous custom". This is a crucial phase of the mystical path, by means of which a more contemplative mode of prayer, unfettered by discursive concepts and symbols, is being introduced. The bewildering and distressing aspects of this state can lead to pusillanimity of spirit, although there is still a powerful love of God and an overriding desire for union with Godself. At such times as these, John mentions that it is

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However, this does not detract from the relevance of John's teaching for lay people. Worthy of note is the fact that John's most sublime commentary, the *Living Flame of Love*, was written for a lay-woman, Ana de Penalosa.

important to seek advice from a mature confessor or discreet and wise person. The importance of consulting a Spiritual Director is emphasised in his letter to Dona Juana de Pedraza:

In what concerns the soul, it is safest not to lean on anything or desire anything. A soul should find its support wholly and entirely in its director. And when one director is sufficient and suitable, all the others are useless or a hindrance (Kavanaugh & Rodriguez 1991:745).

In like manner, John quotes Matthew 18:20 to re-iterate the need for counsel:

Where two or three are gathered to consider what is for the greater honor and glory of my name, there I am in the midst of them - that is clarifying and confirming divine truths in their hearts (Mt 18:20). It is noteworthy that He did not say: 'where there is one alone there I am'; rather He said 'where there are at least two' (Ascent II. 22, 11; 1991:234).

Therefore, spiritual guidance will help clarify and confirm the way ahead, discern divine truths and facilitate the right action.<sup>16</sup> The *Via illuminativa*, which also comprises the active and passive nights of the *spirit*,<sup>17</sup> is generally characterised by relative peace, albeit not without periods of aridity and darkness. This kenotic stage facilitates a higher level of consciousness, and now

the proficient becomes more attuned to a whole realm of experience previously impeded by his preoccupation with the sources of sensory pleasure (Payne 1982:150).

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- 16 Interestingly, today there is a strong movement back to spiritual direction, spiritual accompaniment, spiritual friendship, having a soul-friend, *anamcara*. This, in spite of the fact that the 21st century is characterised by "haste, external experiences, immediateness and self-determinism" which militate against the practice of "patient, silent meditative introspection, taking a distance from immediate reactions, guidance by examples and experienced masters" (Derkse 2008:456). There is certainly a desire for discernment, wise judgement and counsel. In contemporary society spiritual/psychological coaches often take on this task.
- 17 Perrin (1996:142) states that John's conception of the active and passive nights of the senses and spirit, "... safeguards the gratuitousness of God's grace in our lives, but also leaves an active role for the individual to play in the spiritual journey. This approach has often been viewed as Juan's most significant contribution to the western mystical tradition".

The *Via unitiva*, in John's journey, effects "spiritual marriage",<sup>18</sup> and is the "highest estate" of the mystical path in the present life (SC 12:8; Kavanaugh & Rodriguez 1991:518). It is a total

transformation in the Beloved, wherein on either side there is made surrender by total possession of the one to the other ... wherein the soul is made divine and becomes God by participation, in so far as may be in this life (SC 22:3; 1991:560-561).

Just as the disciple in the *Crest Jewel* is freed from his previous doubts and goes on his way in confidence, so too John's mystical path effects a new way of living; forgetting what has gone before, the adherent now dances to a new tune and follows an alternative way, modelled on that of Christ (Kurian 2000:120). Once *ego/essness* replaces the former stronghold and stranglehold of the self, the individual is able to love in a divine manner, by reason of the inpouring of the Spirit.

The continuity of our human identity is no longer grounded in the memory of a life that is realized within the boundedness of the created self, but in the memory of God's eternal love ... (Blommestijn, Huls & Waaijman 2000:100).

This leads to the realisation of God at one's deepest centre,

the Reality of all reality ... the reality which escapes every form of being mixed with 'self-hood' ... by going out of ourselves, we discover the full reality on the other side and open ourselves up to it (Blommestijn, Huls & Waaijman 2000:101).

For John, the deepest centre of the person is the location of the divine; it is here where God is loved and enjoyed.

The soul's center is God. When it has reached God with all the capacity of its being and the strength of its operation and inclination, it will have attained its final and deepest center in God (LF 1:12; Kavanaugh & Rodriguez 1991:645).

Since it is love that unites the person with God, the greater the degree of love that s/he has, the greater and more profound is the depth of this center, "The more degrees of love it has, the more deeply it enters into God

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18 Underhill ([1911]1961:416) points out that mystics characterised by a transcendent/metaphysical approach speak of *deification*, whereas those following a more intimate/personal approach speak of *spiritual marriage*. For an interesting discussion of antecedent types of spiritual marriage, particularly in Hellenistic Judaism, see Horsely, R 1979. *Spiritual Marriage with Sophia, Vigiliae Christianae* 33 (1) 31-54.

and centers itself in him” (SC 1:12; 1991:645). Dispossession of exteriority in the deep inner recesses of the human being is a key factor in the mystical life. Mystics throughout the ages have used various descriptions for this meeting place with the divine, for example, *ground* of the soul (Eckhart, Tauler), *interior cell* (Catherine of Siena), *abyss* (Angela of Foligno). This ground of being involves a denuding of the mind and abolition of selfhood, whereby the ego-self is no longer the centre of consciousness. Henceforth, the adherent has an “attitude of perennial dynamism” whereby all that one does is directed towards the divine (D’Souza 1996:30). The various descriptions given to this deep centre are merely attempts to delineate the integral spiritual “faculty” in the deepest stratum of the psyche. Clearly, they do not refer to an actual “location”, but rather an *actuality*, a link with Reality, whereby the adherent is penetrated by the divine life and love. This inner journey leads to an integration of one’s desires, and one’s energy is directed to God. This spiritual growth effects moral and psychological growth (Payne 1982:119).

By way of summary, discernment is “liberating”. It is the art of reading “... the circumstances of everyday life through the lens of God’s word ... and to act upon the word” (Lonsdale 1993:15). Choices always have to be made; some are more crucial than others, and as Lonsdale (1993:51) tells us, it is necessary to follow “the lead of the Spirit”, distinguishing the music of the Spirit from all other melodies (and noises) which can be heard in our spiritual ear. While we must “dance and sing ourselves”, this must be done in harmony with the Spirit and

with the souls of those who as a guide or friend are joining us part of the road. Wisdom, *sapientia*, is a necessary correlate with discernment (Derkse 2008:455).<sup>19</sup>

One of the *fruits* of discernment in both the *Bhagavad Gita* and John is their teaching on *detachment*.

## 4. DETACHMENT

### 4.1 Freedom from desire

Both the *Gita* and John of the Cross speak about the absolute necessity of detachment. Their respective processes of discernment ultimately lead

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19 Lonsdale (2005: 247, 245) also discusses discernment as a *group* practice; in addition the discernment process has brought to light many areas that are in need of reform, for example, feminist critique of patriarchy; suspicion of authority; religious pluralism versus religious fundamentalism, etc.



to self-negation, namely divesting the self of all that is not compatible with divinity. Detachment is a *sine qua non* for the devotee, and the realisation that all works cause bondage should lead to the elimination of desire.

When a man puts away all the desires of his mind, ... and when his spirit is content in itself, then he is called stable in intelligence (BG 2:55; Radakrishnan 1971:123).

Following Upanishadic teaching, the *Gita* emphasises the need to be detached from the *fruits* of one's work. Total detachment, *karmaphalatyaga*, is the result of inner adherence to the Divine, effecting freedom, and the realisation that "He who sees inaction in action, and action in inaction, is wise among men" (BG 4:18; Radakrishnan 1971:163.). Detachment is not indifference, but rather "freedom from illusions about what the universe is and attachment to a reality that is not the universe itself" (Bingemer 2006:80). The psychological and spiritual crises described in Chapters one and two of the *Gita* lead to the realisation that detachment is the way to attain enlightenment and communion with God (Bingemer 2006:72).<sup>20</sup> As a result of this insight, the devotee is firmly rooted in wisdom, *sthita-prajna*, and no longer depends on external things for his/her happiness; the mind is henceforth freed from clinging to the outcome of action/s.

This corresponds to the Chinese concept of *wu wei* – non-action, or inactive activity:

Act by not acting; do by not doing/ when you arrive at non-action, nothing will be left undone/ For those who practise not-doing, everything will fall into place (Tao Te Ching:63, 48, 3).

In mastering the ego or "self", the Master is freed from the need to act out of personal desire or self-interest and thus becomes an empty vehicle for the Tao. In this liberated state of "being" rather than "doing", the Master enjoys that ultimate freedom – the freedom of "no-choice", because he does nothing; it is the Tao which accomplishes things through him.<sup>21</sup>

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20 Bingemer's article relates the significance of the *Gita* for Simone Weil, who was so impressed by this scripture that she began to learn Sanskrit. Reading the *Gita* for the first time, Simone Weil states: "In the Spring of 1949 I read the *Bhagavad Gita*. Strange to say it was in reading those marvelous words, words with such a Christian sound, put into the mouth of the incarnation of God, that I came to feel strongly that we owe an allegiance to religious truth which is quite different from the admiration we accord to a beautiful poem; it something far more categorical" (quoted from *Waiting for God*, trans, E Craufurd. NY: Putnam's Sons, 1951:70 in Bingemer 2006:71).

21 It is not within the scope of the present discussion to engage with the diverse religious, philosophical and cultural differences between Taoism, Hinduism

## The final outcome is entrance into

... a higher, more subtle level of consciousness ... into the Godhead itself, the Ultimate, and there all is gathered together in the One ... which is pure being, pure knowledge and pure bliss, *saccidananda* (Griffiths 1992:56).<sup>22</sup>

For the devotee of the Gita it is never-ending joy in God through nirvana, mukti, or moksha. The Gita devotees in fact enter Krishna the never-changing dwelling place. The devotee thus reaches an eternal changeless state in entering the being of Krishna. '*By love-and-loyalty he comes to know Me as I really am, how great I am and who; and once he knows Me as I am, he enters [Me] forthwith*' (BG 18:55) (D'Souza 2002:95).

John of the Cross is perhaps best known for his teaching on detachment and renunciation. With Christ as the *raison d'être* for total renunciation or surrender, John gives his famous passage on detachment and *nada*:

In order to arrive at having pleasure in everything,  
 desire to have pleasure in nothing.  
 In order to arrive at possessing everything,  
 desire to possess nothing.  
 In order to arrive at being everything,  
 desire to be nothing.  
 In order to arrive at that wherein you have no pleasure,  
 You must go by a way wherein you have no pleasure.  
 In order to arrive at that which you know not,  
 You must go by a way which you know not.  
 In order to arrive at that which you possess not,  
 You must go by a way which you possess not.  
 In order to arrive that which you are not,  
 You must go through that which you are not.  
 (Ascent 1:13; Allison-Peers Vol 1 1974:59)

John's admonitions are particularly striking in the modern world, characterised by a desire for self-fulfilment and self-gratification. At face

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and Christianity. No attempt at syncretism is proposed here. Rather, the intent is to analyse the concept of detachment and "letting-go" in these traditions.

22 See Keepen (2011:300-315) for his incisive analysis of the supreme secret, *sarvaguhyatamam*, revealed to Arjuna by Krishna (BG 18:34.35) and some corresponding parallels in the New Testament, (cf Clooney 2006:203-207).

value, John's emphasis on dispossession, emptiness and formlessness paints a grim, harsh picture, quite unattractive to the modern mind. However, on closer scrutiny, it is evident that John is not offering a joyless, loveless spirituality. He is advocating detachment which, as a result of its disinterestedness, results in even greater joy and comfort in created realities. This results in evenness of mind which, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, is *samatva*, equanimity. There is a resultant inner balance and harmony of mind, since there is no longer attachment to the fruit of one's work. There is freedom from both "attraction and aversion". It is not the presence or absence *per se* of possessions, whether material or spiritual, but rather the absence of *desire*. As long as there is *craving*, there is no inner emptiness. Inordinate desires and appetites weary and distract the mind, leading to a state of agitation and dissatisfaction. As a result, one is blinded to what is truly real and of value. In a real sense, the *Gita* and John agree as to the nature of the human mind, and the necessary remedies for the disordered state of consciousness. As noted earlier, the *Gita's* emphasis on equanimity is also paralleled in John:

True love, receives all things from the beloved - prosperity, adversity, even chastisement - with the same evenness of soul, since they are his will. And they afford her joy and delight because as St John says: 'Perfect charity casts out all fear' [1 Jn. 4:18] (SC 11:10; Kavanaugh & Rodriguez 1991:513).

Detachment even from the gifts of God is crucial, as these can become a spiritual addiction. John's teaching on detachment forms part of a holistic picture of the mystical way. As noted earlier, in John's thought, a person is originally in a state of psychological, moral, and spiritual disequilibrium. By means of certain practices, discursive prayer, and detachment, s/he becomes aware of a new, contemplative mode of awareness, which will blossom into the experience of enjoying and possessing God. While, at first sight, John's teaching may appear daunting, on closer examination it becomes clear that, in this corpus of writing, the higher levels of transcendent possibility and realised human development are described with great perspicacity. John leads his reader to the realisation that detachment leads to transformation. The person, whilst still acutely aware of inherent human imperfection, nevertheless identifies with God's will, wisdom and universal love, and thus loses him-/herself in the divine embrace (Feldmeyer 2006:68). Thus, for John, the dynamic propelling the aspirant is love of God, and imitation of Christ. John's path has to be considered in its totality: detachment leads to deification. Therefore, the process of "annihilation" has a positive aim, namely renewal of the whole person, rather than destruction (Howells 2002:3).

## 5. CONCLUSION

Our brief foray into the *Bhagavad Gita* and John of the Cross has shown that discernment is, in fact, one of the most important characteristics of being human. First, discernment is a *process* – it is not always easy; it may necessitate deep soul-searching, and often painful evaluation, particularly in the case where a profound change of life may be asked for. Secondly, discernment leads to *detachment* and lack of *desire*, effecting self-surrender, openness and humility in the devotee/adherent. After much perplexity, and having been comforted by the assurance of Krishna (BG 18:66: “Do not grieve”), Arjuna reaches a point where he can exclaim:

Destroyed is the confusion; and through your grace I have regained a proper way of thinking: with doubts dispelled I stand ready to do your bidding (Scheuer 2006:129).

Free from internal turmoil, peace is restored to Arjuna. In similar vein, John of the Cross, as wise guide and teacher, re-iterates the fact that detachment is not a negative, nihilistic state, not abstract speculation, but rather a vital, dynamic and joyful state of consciousness. Confidence in divine guidance, and delectation in the presence of God is experienced

... in the substance of the soul ... [where] this festival of the Holy Spirit takes place; ... God is the artisan of it all, and the soul needs to do nothing on her own (LF 1:9; Appelbaum 2007:9).

In both the *Gita* and John, discernment has led to a position whereby there is a willingness to let go of preconceived notions, and follow a new path. Thirdly, this exercise of interspiritual reading has illustrated the possibility of putting aside one’s presuppositions and entering into a new frame of reference, from which mutual insights may be gleaned. As a result, the integrity of diverse spiritualities is acknowledged, and no attempt is made to argue for equivalence. However, it is suggested that an open dialogue will enable different mystical traditions to acknowledge their complementarity and articulate their plurality. This can contribute to greater insights into the many-faceted splendor of the Ultimate.

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