

Laval théologique et philosophique

HARDY, Richard P., *Search for Nothing : The Life of John of the Cross*

Michael J. Lapierre

Volume 43, Number 1, février 1987

URI: id.erudit.org/iderudit/400290ar
<https://doi.org/10.7202/400290ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval et Faculté de théologie et de sciences religieuses, Université Laval

ISSN 0023-9054 (print)
1703-8804 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Lapierre, M. (1987). HARDY, Richard P., *Search for Nothing : The Life of John of the Cross*. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 43(1), 118–120.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/400290ar>

Tous droits réservés © Laval théologique et philosophique, Université Laval, 1987

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online. [<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>]



This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research. www.erudit.org

Origenes romanus, de prendre la relève de celui qui avait préféré « faire œuvre propre, pour en obtenir plus de gloire, et devenir plutôt le père du discours que son traducteur » (Préface de Rufin à sa traduction, dans « Sources chr. », n° 252, p. 69). Si Jérôme se montra irrémédiablement offusqué par le procédé, c'est sans doute en raison de la nature même de l'œuvre traduite, qui figurait en tête des chefs d'accusation produits au procès que l'on commençait à faire à Origène, en ce dernier quart du IV^e siècle, à l'instigation du féroce Épiphane de Salamine. Comme Jérôme se trouvait à l'époque à Bethléem et qu'il jouissait d'un grand prestige, il ne pouvait supporter qu'on présentât la traduction d'une œuvre désormais jugée hérétique comme la suite d'un « travail qu'il a commencé et qu'il a jugé utile » (Préface de Rufin, *ibid.*). C'est sans doute là, comme le montre bien Lardet (cf. pp. 113*-116*) que réside l'explication de l'acharnement avec lequel Jérôme poursuivra Rufin même par-delà la tombe.

On aurait cependant tort de ne faire de l'*Apolo-gie* que la chronique scandaleuse d'une ferme inimitié entre deux moines-prêtres, dont l'un aura l'honneur des autels. Outre que l'*Apolo-gie* est un monument littéraire du plus haut intérêt, elle vaut d'abord et avant tout pour la masse d'information qu'elle fournit pour l'histoire doctrinale de la seconde moitié du IV^e siècle, marquée par l'apparition de la querelle origéniste. Le conflit de Jérôme et de Rufin, dont Lardet nous restitue l'ensemble et le détail (pp. 1*-75*), est en effet exemplaire dans la mesure où il peint en raccourci les hésitations de la chrétienté face à l'œuvre d'un théologien génial et audacieux qui éveillait les soupçons, et d'un exégète dont l'ampleur des *Commentaires* et des *Homélie*s demeurait une source constante d'inspiration.

La présente édition de Pierre Lardet n'est que la seconde partie d'un large triptyque tout entier consacré à l'*Apolo-gie* contre Rufin. Lardet a en effet publié en 1982, au tome 79 de la *series latina* du *Corpus christianorum*, l'édition critique du *Contra Rufinum*, précédée d'une introduction de 325 pages et suivie de 245 notes critiques. Et il annonce, dans la collection *Philosophia Patrum* de la maison Brill, un commentaire analytique suivi de l'*Apolo-gie*, auquel renvoient déjà 722 notes apparaissant au fil de la traduction que publient les « Sources chrétiennes ». À notre connaissance, ce commentaire, dont la consultation nous a manqué plus d'une fois en lisant l'*Apolo-gie*, n'est pas encore paru. Il permettra sans doute de tirer au clair les allusions historiques et littéraires dont

fourmille le texte de Jérôme. En attendant, les « repères chronologiques » (pp. xv-xix) mis en place par Lardet et l'introduction qu'il a rédigée éviteront au lecteur de se perdre dans le dédale du réquisitoire hiéronymien.

Le livre de Pierre Lardet est à la hauteur de l'œuvre qu'il présente au public. L'introduction est claire et d'une solide information. Quant à la traduction, elle témoigne d'une couleur et d'une vivacité qui conviennent tout à fait au genre du *Contra Rufinum* et qui en rendent la lecture passionnante. Qualités que Jérôme aurait sans aucun doute appréciées chez son traducteur !

Paul-Hubert POIRIER

Richard P. HARDY, *Search for Nothing: The Life of John of the Cross*. New York, Crossroads, 1982, 148 pages.

Search for Nothing is a biography of St. John of the Cross. It contains an introduction, six chapters, an epilogue, selected texts from the works of St. John and suggestions for further reading. Hardy, professor of Spiritual Theology in the University of St. Paul in Ottawa, has published three other related works in French, lectured widely and frequently contributed to periodicals dealing with spirituality.

Search for Nothing is an attempt to give us a true portrait of John of the Cross: a serious, painstaking, carefully researched effort to harmonize the writings with the man. In the author's view previous biographies had not resolved this discord. The performer of rigorous penances, the proclaimer of extreme detachment, the mystic of such profound other-worldliness, and the man of very exquisite human qualities, the admirer of artistic and natural things, the poet of the sensual and passionate virtues, are they one and the same? This dissonance had long been my concern as well. So I picked up the book with great expectations, eagerly and enthusiastically set to read it, in search, not of nothing, but of a solution to this paradox that is John of the Cross.

Hardy portrays for us a man "fallen in love with God in the world," a man who grew to sainthood by searching for and finding God in this world, for whom God "speaks in time, in life, in the world." This world, the world of John's birth in Spain, its people bursting with life, excited by adventure; a nation of great power

and wealth, yet of harsh poverty and pressing destitution.

John's parents were of the conversos, i.e., originally of Jewish descent and now converts to Christianity, a fact buried in history, yet in danger of constant discovery should their actions provoke investigation. His father gave up a secure and comfortable life for an unknown future in a marriage outside his class, while his mother was quite aware that to marry such a man was no guarantee of a life of comfort with high social status. In their predicament they chose the weaver's trade to provide themselves with the basic necessities of family living. The early and unexpected death of John's father left the family in the direst straits. The struggle to eat, to dress and to live became hard, austere and, at times, desperate.

The poverty of John's student years and his work at the hospital in Medina del Campo taught him the meaning of asceticism. His love for others, his concern to alleviate their illnesses and his compassion for their pain grew at the same time. In 1563 he declined the offer to become the chaplain of the hospital to assume the duties of a friar in the newly founded monastery in Medina del Campo. The year of novitiate over, during which his love for silence and solitude deepened as did his practice of the order's austerities, he pronounced his vows of profession 21 May 1564.

His years in the university of Salamanca (1564-1568), at the time a vibrant centre of learning, enlarged and enriched John's love of literature, music, philosophy and theology. Here in 1567 he was ordained a priest at age 25. Success in his studies led to his appointment as prefect of students in the Carmelite Colegio de San Andres. While there he adopted a simple, austere mode of life which isolated him from others less attracted by such rigorous detachment and fidelity to rule. Hardy thinks that this exaggerated, rigid and harsh attitude was simply contrary to John's character, somehow a distasteful part of his spiritual journey. If John had grasped the redemptional aspect of Christ's life and work, he had yet to grasp the meaning of its incarnational aspect, to balance them in a harmonious whole. His emphasis on silence and penance, together with the isolation from his Carmelite confreres which these imposed upon him, led him to contemplate joining the Carthusians of the Monasterio del Paular.

But before making this decision John of the Cross met Teresa of Avila, a fateful event which determined once and for all his life's direction. She found John the ideal friar and begged him earnestly to join her in this endeavour of reformation. John became Teresa's constant defender, but did not hesitate to disagree with her or to moderate her ideas when necessary. At times his independence irritated her and kept her from making him superior of the projected foundation for the friars. The austerities of his student years and his practice of solitude and silence were but an introduction to the reformed way of life in the first foundation for the discalced friars at Duruelo.

In this newly founded monastery, John acted as novice master, as he did later at Mancera and for a time as well at Pastrana. The strictness of his personal life-style is seen in his journey from Mancera to Pastrana. On the way he begged for money and food not for himself but for the poor he met on the journey. He slept in very poor houses or barns, seeing this as a way of breaking down the social barriers standing between the religious and the oppressed poor.

From 1572 to 1577, at the request of Teresa of Avila, John became confessor and guide to the nuns of the Incarnacion, a convent of which she was now the prioress. His labour of direction throughout this time, combined with his strict asceticism, reveals him as incredibly gentle, sensitive, patient and compassionate; he also found time to serve and comfort the poor among whom he lived, and to teach their children. These years in Avila with their routine of apostolic action and contemplative prayer, their work of confessor and director, show the deeply human qualities of John's nature which underlay the severe aspects of his behaviour.

While the tale of his imprisonment and of the chastisements inflicted upon this gentle, delicate, and ailing friar by his calced companions makes us truly shudder at the extent to which even men of virtuous life will go in their rejection of a religious brother, it surely awakens our sympathy and compassion for him in his helpless, stressful condition. Indeed, without his previous years of self-discipline and constant asceticism he might not have borne up under the trial. Even in his darkest hours of doubt and despair he clung to his decision for reform and to his burning love for God. This series of events became for him "the most significant growth experience of his life."

This suffering, which became a model for his description of the dark night of the soul on its way to God, was not something he bore when dealt him by his fellow Carmelites. It was in this prison of Toledo that John wrote the first thirty-one stanzas of the *Spiritual Canticle*, the *Song of the Soul that Rejoices in Knowing God through Faith*, the *Romance Poems on the Gospels* "In Principio Erat Verbum," the *Romance on the Psalm: "By the Waters of Babylon."* If his body was imprisoned, his mind and heart were free, and for such lofty things.

The spiritual life of John of the Cross is clearly summed up in his own words, "Learn to love God as God deserves to be loved and abandon your own way of acting." John always found the greatest delight in creatures, their form, their variety, their beauty. He loved the whole of creation precisely because God loved it. He loved it in and through God. The way of self-denial emphasized throughout his writings serves as a technique to free him to love God and all things in and through God. By this stern self-discipline he grew to learn that the wholeness of our world was to be integrated into the process of learning to love God. The rigidity, the strictness, the harshness, if you will, of his early religious life was for him part of the process.

In much the same way as we place pickets around a young tree and brace it with guide wires to keep it straight until it can properly endure the elements and grow rightly unsupported, so with John of the Cross. The mellowness, the compassion, the sensitivity, the tenderness of his later years grew out of the intense and continuous pruning of his earlier growing and made way for the graciousness that marked his mature life: his ever present love of the sick, his constant concern for the poor and his love of solitude. To be poor and suffering himself mattered little as long as he could alleviate the pain of others. To let all things go which are not God, to search for nothing, may well serve as the motto of his life.

We may find it hard to square this manner of John with what he told his brother on one of his visits to the monastery. It was of a vision in prayer before a picture of the Cross during which he heard an interior voice calling his name. After several repetitions of the call, John finally said, "Here I am," and the voice asked, "What reward would you like to have from me for all you have done and for all you have suffered?" He replied, "To suffer and to be looked down upon." "So

Francesco, if you see me with trials, don't worry, for these are what I have asked for from the Lord. He will help me to live them out and so grow more deeply."

In this, however, he resembles other men and women devoted to Christ and drawn into the deepest union with him; such were Francis of Assisi, Clare of Assisi, Ignatius of Syria, Margaret Mary. The cross of Christ became for them a magnet; to imitate him in the bearing of reproaches, in the accepting of insults, in the enduring of pain, was the fulfilment of their desire. They make Paul's sentiments their own, "God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ; through it the world is crucified to me and I to the world" (Gal 6:4). They realize in themselves that those "who belong to Christ have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires." (Gal 5:24). As the sufferings of Christ form part of that great mystery of God's exceeding love for us, so the sufferings of the saints voluntarily undergone for his sake form part of that great mystery whose full meaning is hidden from our gaze.

In the final analysis, therefore, the persevering self-denial and intense suffering of John of the Cross, coupled with his joy in God's creation and his unbounded love for others, find their harmony in his response to the mystery of God's love for us. His life was a search for No-thing, a search for God in and through his creatures. As he once wrote in his *Sayings of Light and Love*, "In the evening of life you will be examined in love. Learn to love as God desires to be loved and abandon your own ways of acting."

Michael J. LAPIERRE
Regis College, Toronto

Michel GOURGUES, *Le défi de la fidélité*. L'expérience de Jésus. Coll. « Lire la Bible », 70. Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 1985 (18 × 11.5 cm), 148 pages.

Le petit livre de Michel Gourgues intitulé « Le défi de la fidélité » est clair et dense. Ayant défini au départ la fidélité par « une option de continuité à un choix de départ », il montre comment toute l'existence de Jésus est ainsi unifiée. Jésus incarne dans des choix particuliers, imposés par les circonstances, les valeurs pour lesquelles il a opté au