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Search for Nothing: The Life of St. John of the Cross by Richard P. Hardy

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REVIEWS

Search for Nothing: The Life of St. John of the Cross, by Richard P. Hardy. New York: Crossroad, 1982. 148 pp. \$11.95.

Some thirty-five years ago, A. Poulain suggested in his classic summary of the Christian spiritual tradition, *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, that after the enormous contributions made by Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross to the science of mystical life virtually nothing of essential import had been added. Father William McNamara has said that he "know(s) of no one who, following Christ, has paved the Way into the center more effectively and surely than St. John of the Cross." Jacques Maritain has offered this blunt assessment: "The doctrine of St. John of the Cross is the pure Catholic doctrine of the mystical life." If this were not already enough to clinch the case for John of the Cross' undiminished importance for contemporary students of contemplative traditions, this reviewer would add his own opinion (though hardly his alone) that for Christians the works of John of the Cross open the widest avenue of dialogue with Buddhist contemplative theory and practice.

A new biography of such a seminal figure could hardly be anything but welcome. Yet I can only recommend Hardy's book with reservations. Though written lovingly by a professor of spirituality who seems to share John of the Cross' contemplative sensibilities, and who, moreover, has done his homework, the book remains curiously one-dimensional. In a word, it lacks depth.

In his introduction, Hardy accurately identifies the weaknesses of most of the biographical literature on San Juan. It is often irritat-

ingly hagiographic, and though it adoringly portrays a great saint, it simultaneously presents a morbid, world-negating, inhumanly ascetical man. Hardy's research allows him to authoritatively correct this portrait, but unfortunately the book seems to become an exercise in that and little else. The six chapters narrate six periods in John's life in flat, unremarkable prose (exception: the Toledo-prison story), taking every available opportunity to note that the incident just reported shows Juan de la Cruz to be a man of feeling, compassion, kindness, warmth, humour, gentleness, practicality, sincerity, approachability. . .

If the merit of Hardy's work lies in its re-imagining of John's personality, it also ends there. His Introduction tells us that his freshly researched knowledge of John's life and personality has helped him to penetrate the meaning of the saint's great works, the *Spiritual Canticle*, *Living Flame of Love*, *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *Dark Night of the Soul*. We took this to mean that he would share some of his insight into these classics. Alas, this expectation was not satisfied. For in the matter of John's literary works, the reader gets little more than brief chronological notations usually of the form "at this time he wrote such and such." If John of the Cross ranks among those figures in history whose inner life and ideas are immeasurably more important than the events of his outer life, then an account of the latter seems inchoate if not used to illumine the former. Hardy neglects to imagine John's inner life or how that inner life found its way onto the page in the form of unprecedentedly precise accounts of contemplative psychology and beautiful poetry. For someone whose thoughts earned him the title of *the Catholic Doctor of the mystical life* and whose poetry, in literary critic Gerald Brenan's opinion, makes him one of the great lyrical poets of his or any century, this seems a serious lacuna.

There is a chance that this criticism is unjust insofar as it asks Hardy to do what he never set out to do. In fairness, then, I quote Hardy's own words regarding the intention of his book: "I have written it for anyone who is interested in coming to know him as a human being who became through and in his life a man of God, a saint. I have written it to help those who would like to read his writings and understand them more clearly." If it is understood that the task implied in the latter sentence is solely the reader's and that Hardy's work is propaedeutic only, then we can say he has made good on his intention. ❧

Review by Philip Novak