

B.K. LEE, *Sacrifice and Delight in the Mystical Theologies of Anna Maria van Schurman and Madame Jeanne Guyon*, University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana 2014, 250 p., ISBN 978-0-268-03391-0, \$ 29.

Bo Karen Lee's monograph is an in-depth comparative study of the spirituality of self-denial in certain writings of Anna Maria van Schurman (1607-78) and Jeanne Marie Guyon (1648-1717). This edition also includes forty pages of translations from van Schurman's *Eukleria* and her letters to Johann Jakob Schütz, fifty pages of endnotes, an extensive bibliography, and index.

The women studied in this book, the Dutch Reformed van Schurman and the French Catholic Guyon, transgressed the entrenched boundaries of their respective traditions and developed theological spiritualities that converged in a number of important aspects. Both women taught that the end of human life is the full fruition of delight in God, and that this enjoyment of God is possible even in this life – provided that one is prepared to sacrifice all else, including one's very self. In their own time as well as today, these themes of "self-denial" (van Schurman) and "self-annihilation" (Guyon) evoke controversy. Both women were strongly marginalized and vilified during their lifetimes, and until recently were rarely taken seriously as theologians.

Anna Maria van Schurman was a child *savant* whose brilliant theological writings were widely admired – until she made a sudden about-face, repudiated her previous intellectual style of learning, and became a follower of an extreme form of pietism. She became convinced that the «pernicious "I"» is «the bubbling spring of all evil» and that only by a radical and consistent practice of self-denial can the pure love of God be freed in one's depths. Van Schurman describes a progression toward union with God: 1) reject the self and all other created things, abandoning and relinquishing all finite goods; 2) adhere to what is perfect and infinite. When this is accomplished, the soul is freed to rest in God alone.

Self-denial, in van Schurman's view, is not a matter of ascetic lifestyle, but rather of trust and surrender to the action of grace. The real goal is not self-denial itself, but to be filled with the perfection, infinity, and delight of God. Lee notes that although van Schurman depicts the self as emerging from this extreme purgation with the capacity for a pure love of created things (including the self), she does not offer terminology to distinguish between pernicious self-love and purified self-love. Thus, self-love fundamentally remains identified with evil.

Madame Jeanne de la Mothe Guyon was a wealthy widow whose mystical teachings stirred great controversy both during and after her lifetime. She describes four levels of annihilation on the path toward union with God: 1) annihilation of self-focus, to radically shift attention from self to God; 2) annihilation of the very act of perceiving, so that one is no longer aware even of one's own focus on God; 3) an «array of crucifixions» that violently slays any attribution of strength, wisdom, or righteousness to oneself instead of to God; 4) a decisive sacrifice of self upon «the painful bed of the cross». After this final «extreme annihilation» the marriage of soul and God can finally be consummated. The paradox of the crucified bride is that she is imbued with fountains of new life. Her perfect love enables her to take up intense apostolic labor without self-interest, and with incredible fruitfulness. Perfect passivity is the prerequisite for ceaseless action; this is an “active-passive state” of complete malleability in God's hands.

Lee finds several aspects of Guyon's spirituality troubling. First, her extreme language is shocking and confusing. For example, she depicts God as a «bloody husband» who desires a «dead bride». Second, like van Schurman, Guyon does not distinguish between the soul's sinfulness and its creatureliness. The necessity of complete annihilation applies equally to both. Third, Guyon depicts the annihilated self as so completely taken over by God that there is really no new or redeemed self at all. In fact, says Lee, the soul now seems to be «arguably more divine than Christ himself», since the person no longer struggles or suffers as the human Christ did in Gethsemane and on the cross (pp. 103-104).

Lee notes that these writers often draw upon mystical traditions for both their language and their themes. Both women were struggling to articulate the same issue that drew the attention of John of the Cross, namely, how to cross from ordinary knowledge of the world to the radically different kind of knowledge experienced in union with God. Although van Schurman and Guyon lived only about a century after John, they appear to have been affected by the emerging cultural shift (often associated with the philosophy of René Descartes, 1596-1650) toward the concept of an autonomous and rational self. Their focus on “self-denial” and “self-annihilation” makes this concept central even while stridently insisting on its deconstruction. Although John may use language of “self-denial” occasionally, his predominant focus remains steadfastly on how the presence of God continually draws the person toward union. For him, what matters is how God functions as an enticing “dark night” to

the soul, firstly in the purgative encounter with our own sin; secondly in the necessity of knowing God through faith (rather than senses or reason); and thirdly in the blinding light of union.

Lee's study spells out some of the weaknesses in the approaches of Van Schurman and Guyon that have contributed to their relative marginalization as theologians and as spiritual writers. On the other hand, it unveils the depth and intellectual seriousness of their work, making them freshly accessible as important voices of early modern spirituality. Future comparative studies that add more nuance to the relationship between their approaches and those of other mystical theologians will be welcome.

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