

## TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

### ‘Our Conversation is in Heaven’: An Introduction to the Spirituality of Fray Luis de León

UNLESS YOU have had the good fortune to study Spanish literature at some stage in your life to date, it is unlikely that you will have heard of the sixteenth-century Augustinian Fray Luis de León. At best you will have seen him mentioned in passing, as in the comprehensive book entitled *The study of spirituality*, where the chapter on John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila is followed by a short section headed ‘Other Spanish spiritual writers’.<sup>1</sup> Whilst not wishing to make exaggerated claims for Fray Luis by placing him alongside these well-known Spanish spiritual ‘greats’, I feel sure that there is nevertheless a good deal to be gained from reading and reflecting on his life and work. I offer the following pages by way of introduction, in the hope that some insights may arise from my observations which will lead to further acquaintance with the work of this rather neglected spiritual guide.

The one anecdote which just about every Spaniard knows about Fray Luis is probably merely a popular fabrication. I say ‘merely’, and yet the very fact that a legend should grow up around someone suggests that his life has some enduring significance. To this day Spaniards will report how, after a four year imprisonment by the Inquisition, Fray Luis returned to the lecture theatre in the University of Salamanca and restarted his lecture series with the customary words *Dicebamus hesternae die* . . . ‘As we were saying yesterday . . .’ Such understated defiance of the powers that be obviously has considerable appeal and encapsulates something of the tenor of the life of this unusually gifted man. In 1541, at the age of about fourteen, Luis de León began his studies in Salamanca and his association with the Augustinians. He was formally admitted to the order in 1544 and by 1561 he had been elected to the Chair of St Thomas Aquinas at the University of Salamanca.

At a time when Latin was the only acceptable language of theological study and the Vulgate the ‘official’ translation of the bible, Fray Luis increasingly found himself in conflict with the authorities, both as a Hebrew scholar critical of the Vulgate, in defiance of the edict of the Council of Trent, and as a spiritual teacher committed to the accessibility of scripture and theology in the vernacular. It is important to remember throughout the coming pages that this underlies the whole of Fray Luis’s spirituality. In him we find an inspiring example of courageous critical

dialogue with tradition arising from his commitment to the whole people of God. We might perhaps find modern parallels for such a concern in, for example, the work of some liberation theologians or Christian feminists.

Among other things Fray Luis had written a commentary on his own Spanish translation of the Song of Songs for his cousin Isabel Osorio, a nun. It seems to have been intended only for her private reading but a copy fell into the wrong hands and was to be used in evidence against him by the Inquisition. He had anyway been known to be openly critical of the Vulgate and he was not without enemies on account of his outspokenness and intellectual integrity. It was, therefore, not so very surprising that he should be denounced to the Inquisition and arrested. This was in 1572, and it was not until 1576 that he was finally pronounced innocent. Although sick and frail on his release he nevertheless returned to active intellectual debate and to his committed involvement in both secular and religious affairs. It is well worth keeping in mind all the indications of Luis de León's active secular life as we come later to look at his emphasis on retreat and withdrawal. It is clear from the biographical detail that we have about him that in his own life the two were not mutually exclusive but went hand in hand. His contemporaries obviously held him in very high regard and he was awarded the Chair of Moral Philosophy in 1578 and that of Biblical Studies in 1579. Just nine days before his death in 1591 he heard that he had been elected Provincial of the Augustinian order in Castile.

Nowadays Luis de León is best known as a poet and his small corpus of works is frequently studied. This was not the case during his lifetime. His poems were published posthumously in 1631 by Francisco de Quevedo as an example of the classical virtues of poetry that is restrained and concise. Quevedo hoped that they would prove to be something of a corrective to the affected style fashionable in poetry of the time. Among his contemporaries Fray Luis was renowned primarily as a scholastic theologian. The main focus for attention in these pages will be his vernacular treatise *De los nombres de Cristo* (*The names of Christ*) which is often cited as a landmark in the development of Spanish prose.<sup>2</sup> In it one can detect not only the hand of the poet and that of the trained academic theologian but also the depth of a man of prayer committed to assisting others to follow a spiritually enriching path. Besides being central to Fray Luis's thinking and teaching this work has the added advantage that it is readily accessible in an English translation. In the coming pages I propose to consider how this treatise is presented as well as what it is saying. It will be seen that to some extent the two are inseparable in that the very nature of the presentation of the material constitutes a tangible expression of beliefs. Underlying both of these areas of concern will the question of why the work might be of significance as we examine traditions of spiritual guidance today.

The language of scholarly debate and theological reflection in sixteenth-century Spain was Latin and it is a mark of Fray Luis's breadth of understanding and commitment that he undertook to compose more than one substantial treatise in the vernacular. His expressed aim in the dedication which heads *The names of Christ* is 'to write something for the people of Christ'.<sup>3</sup> The result is a stimulating fusion of theological and spiritual exploration and teaching in which the insights of academic study rub shoulders with those of prayerful devotion, both bearing equal weight and emphasis. Luis de León's prose is rich and elegant, his thought complex and profound, and yet the work is exemplary in its accessibility and lack of pretension. Many a modern writer on spirituality could learn much from this alone!

The book takes the form of a relaxed conversation between three friends who have chosen to spend some time away together at the Augustinian retreat of La Flecha in the countryside a little way from Salamanca. The beauty of the surroundings provides a natural setting for the group's reflections on the nature of God as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. A clear structure is given to these insights by the systematic exploration of each of a list of names attributed to Christ in the bible. The written list, held by Sabino, one of the friends, acts as a prompt to discussion. It includes names derived typologically from Old Testament references as well as those used directly in the New Testament. It is not clear how far the group of friends is fictitious and how far it is based on real individuals. Sabino is the sensitive poet who is easily moved by the sights and sounds around him. Julianio has an enquiring mind, and is never afraid to interrupt the flow of conversation in order to clarify a point or to ask a searching question. Marcelo is the experienced academic theologian and teacher who leads the others in their reflections and acts as a knowledgeable resource during their deliberations. Many see this last as the character most likely to represent the author himself.

It is clear then that the style of this 'retreat' is slightly different from the sort of thing we might be used to. Fray Luis often suggests that we can best approach God through the natural world, in solitude, by withdrawing from the demands of the daily round. His most famous poem, *La vida retirada*, is a meditation on this very theme based on Horace's ode *Beatus ille*.<sup>4</sup> On numerous occasions city life is characterized as noisy and distracting and life in the countryside is presented as a welcome contrast. This is most noticeable in the section of *The names of Christ* where the name 'shepherd' is under discussion:

In the first place, pastoral life is a tranquil one, which flows far from the noises, vices, and pleasures of the city. We find in this tranquil life a great innocence, similarly in its labor and the activity to which it is attached. It has its pleasures, born from

things simpler, purer, and more natural: from the view of the open sky, from the purity of the air, from the forms of the countryside, from the green of the grass, from the beauty of the roses and the flowers.<sup>5</sup>

It may seem a little idealized, but what Fray Luis is suggesting is that it is in natural surroundings that we can find conditions conducive to responding to the peace offered to us by God. I found an echo of such a sentiment, though without the explicitly Christian content, in the introduction to a book of walks which I used whilst visiting the Lake District earlier this year:

In the natural beauty of the countryside one can find an oasis of reassurance in the confusing desert of changing modern values . . . All we have to do is to awaken our senses and willingly accept nature's messages in sight, scent and sound.<sup>6</sup>

The quotation could almost have come from Fray Luis; the sentiments expressed are so close to his own thinking. This is an area where insights certainly seem as relevant to twentieth-century England as they were to sixteenth-century Spain. It is also important to remember that in his case such convictions were coupled with his day-to-day life of challenging engagement.

The section of the treatise entitled 'Prince of Peace' is one of the most beautiful in the book and those who are interested may like to note that it provides something of a commentary on one of Fray Luis's most accomplished poems, *Noche serena*. In the following passage we see how Marcelo makes use of his surroundings to help his friends to understand a point he wishes to make:

'Let us define this peace, this grace, and its effect upon us,' Marcelo said, and while he was speaking he was gazing at the flowing current of the river, pure and shining, a mirror to all the heavenly stars, and then, pointing out toward the river with his hand, said, 'This flowing river, this dark water reflecting the stars which seems like a second starry sky, can help us understand the meaning of God's grace. The same way that the sky is reflected in the water, which acts as a mirror, and turns the river into something very similar to the sky, in the same fashion divine grace coming down to our souls and taking over our minds turns us into an image of God . . .'<sup>7</sup>

Such insights are normally found in solitary contemplation and Fray Luis writes frequently about the importance of solitude. His understanding of

the nature of solitude is broad. For example, one does not normally expect to find solitude by going away with a group of friends. And yet Fray Luis presents the group's experience as one of solitude, as they find themselves so united in a common purpose. Extroverts like myself, who find themselves nourished and energized by interaction with others, will doubtless join me in welcoming the fact that what we have here is tantamount to an articulation of a sort of 'group work' spirituality. Nor is it even as contrived as that suggests. It is simply that the pleasant company of good friends is seen as a valid place of withdrawal and a stimulating environment for profound spiritual and theological reflection. The friends share not only thoughts and feelings, quotations from scripture and passages from the Church Fathers, they also read and comment on poetry, tease one another and laugh together. And these timeless activities take place on a sunny June day in the shade of trees by a river or in the cool of the evening as the first stars appear in the sky.

It is beneficial to be reminded of the enormously positive results which can be achieved when a group of friends are given time and space to reflect together in this way. For a number of years now I have taken a group of students out of Cambridge for a day in June after they have finished their exams. We go to the community at Little Gidding and the day has no fixed agenda. I feel sure that these groups of students would be able to say that their experience on these occasions reflects to some extent that of the friends at La Flecha. Perhaps one year I should try suggesting to them that they look at the names of Christ together in a group?

The conversation between friends which we have in *The names of Christ* is derived from the classical dialogue form. It has been placed in a distinctive setting and is used in the service of Christian reflection. The eclectic mind of the Renaissance humanist draws on a wealth of knowledge from a wide range of sources. These include not only the classical and the Christian but also, some scholars suggest, the Kabbalah and Sufi mystic tradition. Fray Luis writes not just as an academic but also as a member of a religious order and as a poet of considerable talent. His way of presenting his work demonstrates that all of these aspects are gifts from God which can be placed in the service of others. With this particular combination of interests Fray Luis was not slow to recognize the merits of a near contemporary writer. He offered us a considerable service by preparing a posthumous edition of some of the work of Teresa of Avila which he published in 1588. He never actually met her but it is clear that he had a great admiration for the woman and her work.

Like Teresa one of the things which Fray Luis endorses in his work is the free use of imagery in response to spiritual truths. This is partly a product of his poetic imagination and partly an indication of his affirmation of the validity of an individual's spiritual freedom before God.

He is consistently and repeatedly clear about the inadequacy of any of our language about God. We shall only be able to know and name God when we finally stand in God's presence. One of the reasons for looking at the names attributed to Christ is that they provide a means of exploring some of the facets of God's self-revelation to us. In the following passage Marcelo concludes his introduction to the topic under discussion:

Let us approach the subject proper of our undertaking . . . and see why Christ is given so many names. This is so because of his limitless greatness and the treasury of his very rich perfections and with them the host of functions and other benefits that are born in Him and spread over us. Just as they cannot be embraced by the soul's vision, so much less can a single word name them. *It is like someone pouring water into a glass with a long narrow neck, who adds it drop by drop; so also the Holy Spirit, who knows the narrowness and poverty of our understanding, does not give us that greatness all at once but offers it to us in drops, telling us, at times, something under one name, and some other thing, at other times, under another name.*<sup>8</sup>

To acknowledge our inadequacy in naming is not to offer an excuse for complacency in seeking to know God. Fray Luis presents us with a gracious and gradual self-revelation of God through the Spirit offered in a way that is tailored to each individual. The passage is beautifully written, giving us a commonplace, concrete image for faith seeking understanding by the grace of God.

One of the indications of the clarity of the imagery used by Luis de León is the fact that it stands the test of translation. He communicates with ease the nature of the truths he is seeking to expound. In the section of the book in which the friends examine the significance of Christ calling himself 'the way' we find the following image used by Marcelo:

Have *you* not seen some mothers, Sabino, who holding with their two hands the two hands of their children, make them put their feet upon theirs and *so carry them forwards and embrace them*, and are thus their ground and their guide? Oh, what goodness is God's! In the same way You act, Lord, toward our weakness as children.<sup>9</sup>

This portrayal of Christ as our ground and our guide is attractive and inspiring both through its content: a God who is tender and gentle with us; and through the manner in which it is presented to us: in the homely image of a mother playing with her child. I write at a time when feminists have awakened us to the great wealth of the often ignored stores of

feminine images for God and Christ in the works of the great spiritual writers through the ages. It is a pleasure to be able to add another refreshing example of this to the sometimes overworked group of well-known examples (such as that of Julian of Norwich), especially since I feel that it is a more satisfying and complete image than many of those already available to us.

I hope that it is not difficult to see why I feel that the writings of Fray Luis have an enduring spiritual appeal. The relationship with God which he describes is one of open childlike trust. The God he portrays is understanding and multi-faceted, accessible to us in the person of Christ and in the many names by which he is known. Our capacity for comprehension of God is limited but we are to take heart as a result of the ways in which we can increase and develop our understanding by knowledge of Christ, by acquaintance with the scriptures, by enjoyment of the world which God has created and through sharing with friends.

By way of conclusion I should like to look briefly at the title I have chosen for this short introduction to the spirituality of Fray Luis de León. It is a literal rendering of the Vulgate translation of a verse from Philippians: *Nostra autem conversatio in caelis est . . .* (3,20). It is significant that when Fray Luis quotes it he does not question this version but translates it literally. He was enough of a biblical scholar to challenge it if he chose. And we have seen that he was not afraid to be critical of the Vulgate if he thought it necessary. In this particular instance this rather idiosyncratic rendering of what is normally translated as 'commonwealth' or 'citizenship' suits his purposes rather well. 'Conversation' stands as an image for social interaction comparable with 'commonwealth' or 'citizenship'. Throughout *The names of Christ* we are witnessing a conversation between friends. In turn these friends, by the nature of their subject, are in conversation with the Word of God. Finally, as readers and as Christians, we ourselves are also engaged in a process of interaction with the text and with God. The main focus of the book, the crucial tenet underlying the spirituality of Fray Luis de León, is the importance of communication. His presentation of a three-way conversation, his subject matter and his vivid use of imagery all illustrate this. He is concerned to show the ways in which God communicates with us, the ways in which we seek to communicate with God, and the essential God-given unity which we will find when we truly communicate with one another.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *The study of spirituality*, ed Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright & Edward Yarnold (London: SPCK, 1986), p 377. The present study is by nature only introductory. Anyone

interested in further reading should consult Aubrey F. G. Bell's *Luis de León* (Oxford: OUP, 1925) and the forthcoming study by Colin P. Thompson, *The strife of tongues: Fray Luis de León and the Golden Age of Spain* (Cambridge: CUP, forthcoming, autumn 1988?) which promises to be both authoritative and interesting.

<sup>2</sup> Fray Luis de León, *De los nombres de Cristo*, ed Federico de Onís, Clásicos Castellanos, vols 28, 33 & 41 (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1966-69). For an English translation see: Luis de León, *The names of Christ*, trans by Manuel Durán and William Kluback, (The Classics of Western Spirituality, London: SPCK, 1984). Quotations from the text are taken from this translation. Whilst not the best of translations it is adequate. Phrases in italics are those which I have felt it necessary to alter for ease of comprehension.

<sup>3</sup> *The names of Christ*, p 39.

<sup>4</sup> For the poetry see: *The unknown light: the poems of Fray Luis de León*, trans by Willis Barnstone (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> *The names of Christ*, p 88.

<sup>6</sup> Parker, John: *Walk the Lakes*, Bartholomew Map and Guide (Edinburgh: Bartholomew, 1983), p 5.

<sup>7</sup> *The names of Christ*, p 224.

<sup>8</sup> *The names of Christ*, pp 52-53.

<sup>9</sup> *The names of Christ*, p 81.