Paul Tillich and the “Dark Night of Faith” as mystical experience – A comparison of the concepts of “absolute faith” in Tillich and pura fe in Juan de la Cruz (1542–1591)

There is a consensus that Tillich’s philosophical theology draws upon the tradition of an apologetic intermediating theology (Vermittlungstheologie) which focuses on a religious a priori as its basic assumption, and was developed in different ways by the likes of Schleiermacher, Kähler and Otto. However, his philosophical theology also exhibits strong traits of mystical theology with its fundamentally apophatic notion of experience. This is especially true of Tillich’s theory of faith and its corresponding meta-theistic conception of ultimate reality. Tillich’s apologetic considerations culminate in the possibility of what he coined the experience of „absolute faith“. It seems more than coincidental that about 400 years earlier the great Spanish monk of the Carmelite Order and mystical teacher St. John of the Cross (Juan de la Cruz) expressed his experience of the “Dark Night” (noche oscura) in similar terms and concepts (pura fe / pure faith), making him a very relevant theologian for today’s secular context. In this short paper I will ask how religious experience is conceptualised in the work of Paul Tillich and Juan de la Cruz, comparing the respective concepts of faith both against the backdrop of secularism, and with respect to their potential for interreligious dialogue.

Stefan S. Jäger, MA Dr. theol is Lecturer in New Testament, Practical and Systematic Theology at the Evangelistenschule Johanneum, Wuppertal, having previously worked as a minister in Germany, a missionary in Japan for eight years, and a lecturer at the Evangelische Hochschule Tabor, Marburg. He undertook his doctoral dissertation, Glaube und religiöse Rede bei Tillich und im Shin-Buddhismus: Eine religionshermeneutische Studie (De Gruyter 2011), at the University of Marburg, comparing Paul Tillich’s concept of faith and homiletic theory with analogous concepts in Shin-Buddhism.