

Teresa of Avila

Mystical theology and spirituality
in the Carmelite tradition

Edited by
Peter Tyler and Edward Howells



Teresa of Avila

Even in the celebration of her 500th anniversary, there still remains the danger of belittling the great Teresa, of explaining her in terms of existing stereotypes of 'female mysticism'. This book goes to some lengths to undo that false presumption, and so releases the real Teresa from her 'admirers'. What emerges is an edgy prophetic figure of real intellectual genius, someone still to be reckoned with politically as well as spiritually. The editors are to be congratulated on their astute choice of commentators.

—Sarah Coakley, Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity
at Cambridge University

This innovative book offers an original insight into the context and times of St Teresa of Avila (1515–82) as well as exploring her contemporary relevance from the perspective of some of the foremost thinkers and scholars in the Teresian field today including Professors Julia Kristeva, Rowan Williams and Bernard McGinn. As well as these academic approaches there will be chapters by friars and nuns of the Carmelite order living out the Carmelite charism in today's world. The book addresses both theory and practice, and crosses traditional disciplinary and denominational boundaries – including medieval studies, philosophy, psychology, pastoral and systematic theology – thus demonstrating her continuing relevance in a variety of contemporary multi-disciplinary areas.

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A note on Teresian sources

‘Even Spaniards familiar with her books’, wrote the great British Hispanist, Edgar Allison Peers, ‘are continually baffled when asked the precise meaning of phrases which at first sight may seem perfectly simple’ (Allison Peers CW 1: xviii). While Fr Kieran Kavanaugh OCD, her most recent Carmelite translator, stated in the preface to his translation in 1976 that working on her text was like ‘working on puzzles’, even he could never be sure that some of these puzzles had been solved (Kavanaugh and Rodriguez CW 1: 48). Teresa’s texts continue to defy easy translation and though referencing the work of Allison Peers and Kavanaugh/Rodriguez most of our contributors have opted to make their own translations into English. Where possible we have referred to the closest edition to Teresa’s original, that edited by Efrén de la Madre de Dios and Otger Steggink in the *Obras Completas de Santa Teresa de Jesús* in the series *Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos* (BAC, Madrid 1997). As the first full English translations of her work by Kavanaugh/Rodriguez and Allison Peers rely heavily on the older critical edition by P. Silverio de Santa Teresa, we have also turned to this edition for certain passages as published in *Santa Teresa Obras Completas* edited by Tomás Alvarez in the edition of *Monte Carmelo* (BMC, Burgos, 1998). Some of the work has necessitated returning to facsimiles of the original autographs of Teresa’s works and here we have turned to the facsimile editions produced by Tomás Alvarez for BMC and the venerable first photostatic edition of the original manuscript of *The Interior Castle* produced by Archbishop Cardinal Lluçh in 1882. For abbreviations for all Teresian texts used please see the bibliography.

Having completed our task we are aware more than ever that anything achieved in this work is due entirely to five hundred years of painstaking and loving Teresian scholarship conducted by generations of wise interpreters. Only by standing on the shoulders of such giants can we hope to peer into the future. Our hope for this book would be that it will pass on that tradition to a new generation of scholars and readers.

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Introduction

Prof. Peter Tyler and Dr Edward Howells

There is no denying that five hundred years after her death Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada—St Teresa of Jesus, ‘the wild woman of Avila’—continues to exert a fascination over contemporary minds. The occasion of the anniversary of her death in 2015 enabled a new generation of scholars, spiritual seekers, religious and interested laypeople to reflect once again on the legacy of this remarkable woman for a new generation in the ‘post-Christian’ world of the troubled twenty-first century. Indeed, as we spent the year studying her texts once again it became clear that there was something in Teresa’s language, style and approach that seems peculiarly right for our own times. This was evidenced in the participants at the academic colloquium that took place at St Mary’s University, Twickenham during the summer of 2015 whose chapters form the basis of this book. As well as medieval and Teresian experts such as Professors Bernard McGinn and Gillian Ahlgren from the United States we were joined by the notable Anglican scholars Professors Rowan Williams and Sarah Coakley as well as the famed French feminist scholar Professor Julian Kristeva. However, this was not just a purely academic gathering. For the first time at an academic conference in the United Kingdom we were joined by cloistered sisters of the Carmelite Order that Teresa had founded—given special permission to be with us for the week to share their unique insights into their beloved ‘*madre*’. The culmination of the week was a mass celebrated by the Carmelite Provincial, Tony Lester OCarm, using the music of Teresa’s contemporary Avilan, Tomás Luis de Victoria and graciously attended by the Spanish Ambassador to the Court of St James, H.E. Frederico Trillo-Figueroa y Martínez-Conde.

Teresa has always been held in special esteem by the British. Some of the first translations of her works were made into English and she very quickly found a place in the heart of British Catholics and many others, as for instance in Richard Crashaw’s famous poem. After the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in the 19th century, and the re-translation of her works, she once again found an appreciative audience beyond the Catholic community, most famously when George Eliot referred to her in the Preface to *Middlemarch*. Since then other writers (especially women), ranging from Vita Sackville-West to Julia Kristeva, have admired and

written commentaries on her works. So what is it about this woman who has inspired Christians and non-Christians alike for half a millennium? Well, first there is the woman herself. From her own memorable accounts of her life and reform of the Carmelite order in *The Book of the Life* and *The Book of the Foundations* to the written testimonies of friends, foes and co-workers, the picture that emerges of Teresa is of a witty, engaging, infuriating and indomitable force of nature. Born and bred on the wild windswept Castilian mountains she grew up to take on kings and prelates alike in the pursuit of her one abiding aim—to provide space (her ‘little dove-cotes’) within which her sisters could seek God in contemplation while the storms and upheavals of the Reformation swept over Europe. Indeed, she is one of those rare religious figures who seem to transcend the categories of their time and space and become semi-mythical—a universal figure for all peoples and times. A recent survey suggested that half the memorable sayings attributed to her (including the one beloved by the British: ‘I have no hands and feet now only yours’) are in fact apocryphal.

Teresa’s witty and warm personality may sometimes, however, obscure the fact that she was a writer of rare originality and subtlety. She is in fact a theologian of the highest rank prompting Pope Paul VI to declare her one of the first women Doctors of the Church in 1970. Her writings, at times disparaged as incoherent ramblings, have recently begun to receive the academic and critical attention they deserve, not least from a new generation of eminent feminist scholars. What has emerged in the past few decades has been a style of doing theology not only appropriate to Teresa’s own ‘world in flames’ but reflecting once again the concerns and anxieties of the restless wanderings of the postmodern soul in our own times. As a woman writing on prayer in an ecclesial climate that was suspicious both of educated women and those who sought to over-emphasise the intimate aspects of the relationship with God, Teresa was forced in her writings to steer a middle course between the Scylla of rigid theological conformity and the Charybdis of unfettered personal expression. This she managed with skill and aplomb—not least in her masterful appropriation of the medieval tradition of ‘mystical theology’ which she had studied and loved from an early age. With her highly original language and her appreciation of the embodied nature of prayer, her voice once again offers a clear guide to the twenty-first century spiritual seeker.

Teresa has always had a following as an ‘ecclesiastical rebel’ and as Pope Francis sits on the Throne of St Peter it is time again to listen to the voice of someone who appreciated that reform is about tradition and not the throwing away of tradition. As Pablo Picasso famously said, tradition is about having a baby, not wearing your grandfather’s hat. Teresa’s personality and spirituality come across, then, as a breath of fresh air amongst so many ‘plaster cast’ saints (‘God preserve us from miserable nuns’, she once famously said). Imbued with the Renaissance humanism of 16th-century Europe, while she remains a ‘loyal daughter of the church’ she understands

that that same church must constantly reform if it is to be truthful to the values of its founder. For once we get beyond the stereotypes we realise that Teresa speaks many languages. As a woman speaking to women she articulates the nature of feminine desire and its transformation through the encounter with Christ. As a daughter of Carmel she appreciates the salty blend of hermit, community and mendicant life that produces the Carmelite charism and as a child of the Renaissance she is open to reform for the church she loves.

As well as a woman and contemplative Teresa had another aspect to her identity that makes her voice relevant to our concerns today. The Spain she was born into had just emerged from centuries of internecine religious war between Christian and Muslim statelets. Fundamentalism on one side had bred counter-fundamentalism from the other with intolerance and bloody acts of revenge rife throughout the Peninsular. Teresa and her family struggled with the ethnic identity of a Jewish heritage on her father's side in an anxiously Christian society: both members of her parents' and grandparents' generation had been subjected to the attention of the Inquisition for charges of lapsing into Jewish practices after their conversion to Christianity. As we watch fundamentalisms once again achieving power in the world, Teresa's gentle vision offers us a way forward from the conflicting 'isms' of varying religions to a spirituality that seeks to restore all to the humanity that is our birthright. Her God was a God who embraced all regardless of class, caste or religious temperament, and her deeply committed Christian faith led her to a visceral aversion to intolerance and the dire consequences of ethnic and racial prejudice rather than the reverse.

In the essays that follow we shall explore all these aspects of Teresa's life, personality and legacy. Professor Bernard McGinn begins the volume by sketching out Teresa's debt to Augustine and the previous Western tradition of mystical theology, concentrating on the use of the trope of *confession* as a central aspect of spiritual growth in the mystical anthropologies of both authors. Fr Wilfrid McGreal OCarm follows by exploring the roots of Teresa's reform in the values of silence and solitude dating from the earliest days of the hermits on Mount Carmel. The Carmelite Rule was given in 1247 and is in essence the way of life given by Albert, Patriarch of Jerusalem, to the hermits of the Holy Mountain of Carmel around 1208. The values later prized by Teresa are found in the *Fiery Arrow* written by Nicholas the Frenchman c. 1270 and in the *Institute of the First Monks* by Philip Ribot. All of these sources would have been known by Teresa and influenced the shaping of her project.

Professor Peter Tyler's chapter explores Teresa's antecedents in the medieval tradition of *theologia mystica*. Reviewing the understanding of 'mystical theology' in the works of Teresa of Avila and Jean Gerson he argues that Teresa is working firmly in the Dionysian tradition, but a tradition adapted by Gerson and mediated to Teresa by 'her master' Francisco de Osuna. As a critical response to this chapter, Dr Edward Howells presents

the view that Teresa of Avila, while showing some of the characteristics of negative theology in her writing, is in central respects not a negative theologian, lacking important features of and influence from negative theology. Her approach is contrasted with notions and examples of negative theology in the previous tradition, and especially with her contemporary John of the Cross. She is found to be better characterised as possessing a positive Augustinian anthropology.

Having looked at the context and influences on Teresa, the Second Part of the book considers her later impact on Christian faith and praxis and begins with Professor Rowan Williams suggesting that Teresa's interpretation of the Eucharistic theology gives us a unique insight into her role as a practical and pastoral theologian. Fr Matt Blake OCD continues by arguing that Teresa's primary concern as a founder is not with regard to buildings, structures, rules, systems or any other visible goals or achievements but rather her priority is the 'interior castle'—the presence of God in the person and in the Church, and the life of prayer. His chapter explores her role as a founder suggesting that her foundations are at the service of the life of prayer and the fruit of lives of prayer. Fr Iain Matthew OCD concludes this Second Part by concentrating on Teresa's experience of prayer, and her determination to hold open in the Church the space for personal prayer, allowing Christians to do that most characteristically Christian thing: to be witnesses to the Resurrection. This chapter explores how that witness realises itself in practice through an exploration of Teresa's understanding of Carmelite prayer.

The book concludes with some final reflections on Teresa's importance for the twenty-first century. Professor Julia Kristeva recounts in her chapter how for some ten years she read Teresa of Avila's books, lived with this Carmelite from another era, loved her and questioned her—even arguing with her. She describes how her resulting work on Teresa distinguishes itself from the current strains of 'auto fiction' and aligns itself with the metaphysical and philosophically ambitious novels of the French Encyclopaedists of the 18th century such as Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau. She describes her own passion for Teresa as a woman of the twenty-first century, and how this relates to her culture as a Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalyst. Professor Gillian Ahlgren suggests that Teresa asks us to measure our spiritual progress by noticing the expansion of our capacity to love. In doing so, Teresa offers a holistic vision that integrates spirituality, theology, ethics and wise action in a world of suffering and injustice. The chapter mines Teresa's understanding of the transformation of the human person in the mystical life for insights for living today. The final chapter initiates a mutually beneficial conversation between those who study Teresa within the academic context and those who live the practical charism she mapped out for her communities. In particular, arguing that the Carmelite noviciate offers an especially stark interface between Teresian spirituality and contemporary culture, and drawing on the practical experience of forming

novices in the tradition today, the chapter develops recent suggestions that Teresa offers a valuable contribution to the postmodern era.

Such a book would not have been possible without the collaboration of a large and dedicated group of scholars, co-workers and editors. We are particularly indebted to David Shervington of Ashgate who initially invited us to submit the book and to Andrew Weckenmann, Joshua Wells, Jack Boothroyd and their team at Routledge for bringing the project so successfully to fruition. The logistics and organisation of the original conference were largely undertaken by Stephanie Modak, without whom this volume would not have appeared. Special mention must be made of the work of Roderick Campbell-Guion in helping with the liaison with Professor Kristeva's office and the translation of her chapter. As well as the Carmelite family at the conference we were indebted for support not only from the Carmelite Provincials, Fr Tony Lester OCarm and Fr Michael McGoldrick OCD but all the UK Teresa 500 Steering Committee, with particular thanks to Fr John McGowan OCD, Fr Liam Finnerty OCD, Sr Jo Robson OCD, Johan Bergström-Allen TOC, Sheila Grimwood TOC, Fr Bob Davies OCD, Annette Goulden OCDS, Fr Kevin Alban OCarm, Jane Nicholson OCDS, Barbara Smethurst OCDS, Fr Wilfrid McGreal OCarm and John Berry TOC. We are grateful to all the staff and students of St Mary's University who made the original conference so successful. In particular we thank Dr Francis Campbell and Dr Maureen Glackin for giving us the space and time for the conference and the preparation of the manuscript afterwards. Finally, our thanks are extended to all the Carmelite family worldwide, especially the Teresian sisters, to whom this book is dedicated.

Peter Tyler and Edward Howells
London, June 2016

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Part I

Teresa in her context

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