

Review of Peter Tyler, *Teresa of Avila: Doctor of the Soul*, London:
Bloomsbury, 2013. 223 pages

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Preview

Peter Tyler had two main purposes, which he lays out in the Introduction to his book, in undertaking to write on the life, context, and work of the 16th century Spanish Carmelite nun, monastic reformer, mystic, saint, Doctor of the Church, and, as he calls her in the book's subtitle, doctor of the soul, Teresa of Avila: first, to place her, especially by the style of her writing, within the medieval tradition of 'mystical theology'; second, to bring her into conversation with the post-modern world, in particular in light of a certain trend today of revisiting, in the face of the crisis of the 'death of modernity', the riches of the pre-modern era. The first of these purposes is accomplished in Parts One and Two of the book's three Parts, while the second purpose is approached in Part Three.

ISSN 1918-7351

Volume 7 (2015)

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Part One^{3/4}The Context^{3/4}lays out Teresa's precarious situation as a female mystic and would-be reformer of her Order against the backdrop of late 15th – early 16th century political oppression of Jews in Spain (her family was of Jewish *converso* heritage), Protestant Reformations across Europe, ongoing heresies within Spain and the Inquisition, as well as tensions within existing monastic Orders in Spain, especially the Carmelite Order with its close ties to (and consequently concessions to) the Spanish nobility. Part Two^{3/4}The Writings^{3/4}then takes a close look at the saint's four major works: *The Book of the Life*, *The Book of Foundations*, *The Way of Perfection*, and *The Interior Castle*. Tyler's analysis of these works unfolds with an eye to Teresa's inheritance of the tradition of 'mystical theology', especially its teaching on 'mental prayer' (or 'mindfulness', as Tyler prefers to translate Teresa's *oración mental*), which came to her primarily through the writings of Francisco de Osuna. This is by far, in this reader's opinion, the most gripping section of the book. Tyler's attention to the subtleties of meaning in Teresa's style and use of words^{3/4}her sensitivities to her socio-political context, the alteration in her vocabulary over the span of many years and in close connection with her outer activities, and above all her struggle to articulate her experiences of spiritual intimacy and union with God^{3/4}is exceptional. Especially remarkable is his consideration of the difficulties of translation of Teresa's texts. For many key passages he compares the range

of English translations, and on many occasions provides his own translations, endeavouring above all to preserve (especially in *The Book of the Life*) the deeply embodied nature of her expression and the ambiguity present between the libidinal and the spiritual dimensions of her experience; indeed, Tyler's contention is that many of Teresa's previous translators and commentators have been uncomfortable with precisely this ambiguity and "would rather spiritualize her ambiguity to a rarefied transcendence, or reduce her spiritual aspirations to simple physical, or indeed neurotic, struggles" (p. 90). On the contrary, Tyler purports, the ambiguity should be preserved, and this for the reason that the experiences which Teresa struggles so hard to articulate do belong properly, Tyler is willing to allow, to the realm of 'mystical theology' (as opposed to 'speculative theology') which traditionally has been a practice or undertaking of the heart and not of the discursive intellect, a practice in which much is left unsaid, or in which words are at times as much an 'unsaying' as they are a 'saying', as Tyler frequently points out. In terms of the alteration of her vocabulary, Tyler emphasizes that in her two middle works, *The Book of Foundations* and *The Way of Perfection*, Teresa is far less focused than in *The Book of the Life* on prayer and the experience of spiritual delights than on the importance of good works and progress in the virtues^{3/4}the writing of these works, of course, coinciding with the period of her life in which she was undertaking her reform. Her final work, *The Interior Castle*, very much considered to be a masterpiece of spiritual writing, brings together all of these themes.

In the third and final Part of Tyler's book^{3/4}'The Interpretation'^{3/4}he brings Teresa into conversation with two key trends in the post-modern context: Jungian psychology and mindfulness meditation practices inspired by Buddhism. Tyler's choice of Jungian psychology seems mainly to be based in, first, a rejection of a certain scholarly reductionist tendency to explain away 'mystical experience' as "simple physical, or indeed neurotic, struggles" (p. 90); and second, an appreciation of "the contributions of Jung and his later school to the ongoing debate about the expression of the psycho-spiritual in a transpersonal context" (p. 161), especially given the deeply symbolic nature of Jung's work. Tyler points out distinct parallels between some of Jung's archetypes and Teresa's own symbolic imagery (such as her discussion of the 'four waters' of prayer, which Tyler covers in Part Two). In terms of Buddhism, Tyler is interested in the way in which traditional mindfulness practices have made their way into "contemporary healthcare, psychological and educational settings" (p. 185). As stated earlier, Tyler considers 'mindfulness' to be a more faithful (in intention) translation for Teresa's *oración mental*, usually rendered more literally as 'mental prayer' by her translators. He is especially interested in the role of mindfulness in the

experience of the ‘decentered self’, or ‘non-self’, a key focus in Buddhism (and, in fact, not only in Buddhism, but also in a whole strand of late 20th century phenomenology and ethics which Tyler does not mention at all in his book) . This ‘decentering’ of the self Tyler ties back to Teresa’s experience of union with God, and especially the good works (undertaken for God’s and not for one’s own sake) which flow naturally from such a union. Teresa’s own “mystical theological understanding” of these experiences, as well as of the difficulties of the spiritual path, made her quite an apt psychologist in her own right^{3/4}and thus the book’s subtitle describing her as a “doctor of the soul”.

Overall, the book is a good read, with Part Two being by far the most satisfying (Part Three feels just a little bit arbitrary, despite the above discussed rationale for focusing on Jung and Buddhism, and in the end somewhat breaks the flow of the book as a whole). As for writing style, the book is inviting and easy to enjoy. However, comma use (i.e., lack thereof and misuse) is very inconsistent and at times annoying; the book could use a good edit in that regard.

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