

# THE FEMININE SPIRITUALITY OF ST. TERESA OF AVILA: ASCENDING TO GOD BY DESCENDING IN HUMILITY

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## ABSTRACT

Teresa's spirituality helps contemporary readers to discover a transcendental path to God – inwardness is not an end in itself; it leads above and is the path toward God. Her writings inspire contemporary readers to reflect on the danger of self-transcendence spirituality, which emphasizes the self's autonomy and self-sufficiency without dependency on God. Moreover, she helps contemporary Christians to be aware of the peril of self-actualization spirituality, which relies on self-service and self-affirmation rather than on God's love and grace.

Female spirituality is a new research area in Chinese seminaries as well as in most Chinese churches. Recently, discussions on female Christian spiritual formation have become the focus in different occasions and international conferences. One of the research methods of feminine spirituality is to draw insight from spiritual classics and to make them meaningful in contemporary context. Although St. Teresa of Avila lived and wrote almost five centuries ago,<sup>1</sup> her spirituality, as exemplified by her holy life and inspiring writings, remain meaningful, relevant, and influential to many Christians today. In this paper on Teresa's feminine spirituality, a couple of key questions that have continually occupied my mind are: What are the distinctive feminine perspectives in this female mystic's writings? What does Teresa's feminine spirituality mean to contemporary Christians, especially its relevance to their self-transformation?

Teresa has often been described as a talented, outgoing, and affectionate mystic, as well as an enthusiastic, courageous, and energetic reformer. Many of her writings have become spiritual classics. In speaking of Teresa's feminine spirituality, the attention of some scholars has been drawn to the following characteristics: (1) the rhetoric metaphor of a female writer<sup>2</sup>; (2) her female psychological intensity<sup>3</sup>; (3) her unique suffering, in particular, her physical illness and her opposition to reform; and (4) her liberation.<sup>4</sup> For me in particular, the most important characteristic in Teresa's feminine spirituality is her uniqueness as a female theologian in the history of Christian spirituality. What then, as I see it, are the most distinctive feminine perspectives in this female mystic's writings? I will take a two-fold approach in this paper. I will consider

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1. For an introduction to St. Teresa of Avila's life and social background, see Rowan Williams, *Teresa of Avila* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1991), 11–77. The great Spanish mystic and reformer Teresa was born in Avila on 28 March 1515, just two years before the Protestant Reformation, to Alonso Sánchez de Cepeda and his second wife Beatriz de Ahumada. The sixteenth century was “an age of turmoil and reform.” In 1495, Columbus opened up the Western Hemisphere to European colonization. Teresa thus “lived in an age of exploration as well as political, social and religious upheaval” (*Saint of the Day*, edited by Leonard Foley, revised by Patrick McCloskey [Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2013], 281).
  2. Cf. Alison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).
  3. Cf. Francis L. Gross, Jr. and Toni Perior Gross, *The Making of a Mystic: Seasons in the Life of Teresa of Avila* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993).
  4. Cf. Antonio Perez-Romero, *Subversion and Liberation in the Writings of St. Teresa of Avila* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996).

the dynamics in Teresa's spirituality and how they constitute her unique experiences as a female theologian. I will further reflect on Teresa's mystical experience, her articulation of it in the context of patriarchal control and suspicion of mysticism, and her strategies of survival under the Spanish Inquisition.<sup>5</sup>

Gillian T. W. Ahlgren especially appreciates Teresa's unique contribution under the suspicion of Spanish Inquisition:

Teresa's primary importance in this era of Christian spirituality was her ability not only to rewrite her own life but in effect to rewrite charismatic experience so that it would fit within the parameters of Tridentine Catholicism. She responded to the challenge posed by distrust and repression of mystical experience by developing new resources for Catholic spiritual reform. Her mystical works argued quite forcefully that charismatic experience did not have to be viewed as a potential danger to the institutional church, but could instead be an important source of Roman Catholic identity.<sup>6</sup>

Ahlgren is in line with Alison Weber's view which characterized Teresa's humility as something that should be treated as a rhetorical approach. By this approach, Teresa intended to present herself in a nonthreatening way in order to gain social recognition.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, in my paper, Teresa's feminine spirituality is not emphasized by her gender but highlighted by her female approach to articulate spirituality.<sup>8</sup>

Teresa's humility might be a deliberate way to survive in institutional Church, but Teresa's transformation in humility and her expression of humility constitutes the very important dynamic in her spiritual journey. Rowan William

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5. For an understanding of "women and the pursuit of holiness in sixteenth-century Spain," see Gillian T. W. Ahlgren, *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 6–31. Ahlgren attempts "to contextualize the life of Teresa the woman and the meaning of Teresa the saint within the Counter-Reformation agenda by exploring the complex and conflicting notions of female sanctity at work in sixteenth century Spain." She sketches "the evolution of Teresa's spirituality and theology within a patriarchal climate of opposition, analyzing her struggles as exemplary of those of other women in Counter-Reformation Spain" (3).

6. *Ibid.*, 31.

7. *Ibid.*, 67–69.

8. *Ibid.*, 24.

reminds us that Teresa was born in an age and society which underlines reputation, honor, and virtues.<sup>9</sup> “There is the social level: concern about lineage and nobility, and there is the personal level: concern about one’s reputation for virtue or holiness.”<sup>10</sup> Along with the way to the highest virtue, Teresa perceived humility as a self-knowledge to human ontological creatureliness and an acceptance of God’s love for humanity. In Teresa’s writings, the path ascending to God is by the path descending in humility. In my paper, after a brief introduction to Teresa’s identity as a woman growing up, I will analyze humility as interior dynamic in her spirituality – the more ascending to God, the more the soul experiences descending in humility. By asking why Teresa’s spirituality is meaningful to contemporary readers, I will argue that Teresa’s spirituality in humility will shed light on the dangers of contemporary self-transcendence spirituality and self-actualization spirituality.

## Teresa the Woman

### *An Affectionate Girl*

Since her childhood, Teresa loved romance novels and took great pleasure in reading histories of knight-errantry. She began at the same time to curl her hair, use perfumes, love fine clothes, and the like, out of a desire of pleasing others. In addition, she had cousins who visited her frequently. She listened to their discourse on vanities and follies. She was drawn to worldly things through her teenage years, and her behavior became quite rebellious. When she was 15, she was sent for her education to an Augustinian convent in Avila. Teresa began desiring the things of God as she became close to one of the nuns, and in fact decided to one day become a nun herself. However, after eighteen months, she became dangerously sick, and her father took her home. Although suffering from frequent fainting spells and severe heart pains, Teresa kept herself immersed in prayer and in spiritual books.<sup>11</sup>

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9. Williams, *Teresa of Avila*, 18–26.

10. *Ibid.*, 23.

11. Teresa’s uncle Peter Sanchez of Cepeda was a very discreet and pious man. He gave Teresa several books on spiritual life, including a little book *The Third Alphabet* by F. Ossuna, on the prayer of recollection and quiet.

In 1535, Teresa was determined to become a nun and joined the Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation. She spent a number of relatively average years in the convent, punctuated by a severe illness with continual burning fever, frequent fits of fainting and swooning, and a violent pain in her heart. During these years of physical suffering, Teresa began the practice of mental prayer. She endured these sufferings with great conformity to the holy will of God and with much readiness and joy.

### *Female Experiences and Male Religious Superiors*

Teresa later was convinced that God was pleased to visit her often in her devotions with sweet consolation, and to bestow upon her intensive visions, locutions, raptures, and ecstasies.<sup>12</sup> She was indeed very anxious about and even afraid of these manifestations and sought discernment from learned men and male spiritual directors.<sup>13</sup> Ahlgren observes that in Teresa's time,

The symbols chosen to promote conceptions of womanhood, primarily the Virgin Mary and other female saints, emphasized the primacy of humility and obedience . . . . These images of purity, passivity, and social withdrawal appear to reflect "a need for social control, a concern for order that rest squarely on gender prescriptions." Holy women were accused of spiritual arrogance when they spoke of their mystical experiences and what have been revealed to them. Over the course of the sixteenth century, the religious virtue of humility prescribed for women was defined in practice as withdrawal from the public sphere and dissociation from their own experience, authority, and power.<sup>14</sup>

Out of their grave concern to stamp out heresy, the Spanish Inquisition and ecclesiastical authorities had been greatly suspicious of visionary women who

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12. After her "reconversion" in 1544, Teresa was challenged by ecclesiastical superiors and confessors "with questions about self-deception and diabolical deception" (Williams, *Teresa of Avila*, 3).
  13. The discernment of the work of God or that of an evil spirit was reserved to St. Francis Borgia and St. Peter of Alcántara, and later, to a number of Dominicans, Jesuits, and other religious and secular priests.
  14. Ahlgren, *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity*, 23; quoting Mary Elizabeth Perry with approval.

claimed to have supernatural experiences.<sup>15</sup> Although Teresa's experiences had been considered by some male clerics and spiritual directors as temptations from the devil, they later regarded them as indications of her intense relationship with God.

Teresa showed herself all through her reform movement as a female leader of talents, insights, ability, and reforming zeal. She founded the convent of Discalced Carmelite Nuns in 1562, a reform of the Carmelite order so radical and strict that it caused much violent opposition.<sup>16</sup> She established 14 houses in her reform movement between 1567 and her death in 1582. Teresa however would want "to be free of 'debts of honor' to benefactors . . . . Foundation without endowment was, for Teresa, an essential part of her reconceiving of a religious life genuinely at an angle to the systems of secular power."<sup>17</sup> In the pursuit of better spiritual life, Teresa was courageous to follow her vision and actualize it, and encouraged her fellow nuns to seek intimate relationship with God.

Teresa died in 1582 in Alba de Tormes.<sup>18</sup> She is the patron saint of headache sufferers. Her symbol is a heart, an arrow, and a book. Her life and teaching have inspired many women and men till this day. In 1622, she was canonized by Pope Gregory XV. On 27 September 1970, she was named a "Doctor of the Church" by Pope Paul VI, making her the first woman "Doctor of the Church" in history.

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15. Ibid., 6–8, 25–31. The religious superiors believed that the more charismatic a woman was, the more dangerous she would be to the institutional church. Although "the story of Teresa's problems with the Inquisitions can perhaps never be written in its entirety," Ahlgren suggests that "Teresa's interaction with the Inquisition – both direct and indirect – was the most significant influence on her career as a writer" (33).
16. Williams, *Teresa of Avila*, 7. "If the Jesuits were emerging as the post-Tridentine male ideal, [Teresa] offered the Discalced Carmelites as the model for women" (Ahlgren, *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity*, 37).
17. Williams, *Teresa of Avila*, 6. Although "in later foundations, where the possibilities of earning a reasonable income locally were unquestionably slender, she was to be flexible about endowments; but at this first stage it was vital to make a strong stand" (6).
18. Teresa died at some hour either before midnight of 4 October or early in the morning of 15 October 1582 which is now celebrated as her feast day. It was a time when Spain and other Catholic countries were making the switch from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian, which required the removal of 5 to 14 October.

### *Teresa's Writings as Spiritual Classics*

Although Teresa readily acknowledged her limitations as an unlettered woman,<sup>19</sup> she nevertheless valued highly her personal mystical experience and did not hesitate to exercise her charismatic influence in her reform movement. Lacking formal theological training, she made no attempt in her writings to employ technical terms when facing suspicions or criticisms. Teresa deliberately employed rhetorical devices and vivid metaphors in articulating her mystical experiences in union with God. She did not, as male theologians did, in her arguments use scholastic reasoning nor lengthy citations from the scriptures or church authorities.<sup>20</sup> Teresa's writings, however, have been widely read and highly appreciated as spiritual classics.

The *classic*, as David Tracy sees it, names the texts, events, symbols, images, melodies, or persons, and so on, that "bears an excess of permanence of meaning, yet always resists definitive interpretation. It claims authority because of the intensification of meaning and value that occurs in the work."<sup>21</sup> It has survived over time and proven its value. Because of its timeless nature, a classic demands reinterpretation in every generation, through which a tradition is reshaped within the interpreting community:

The classic text's fate is that only its constant reinterpretation by later finite, historical, temporal beings who will risk asking its questions and listening, critically and tactfully, to its responses can actualize the event of understanding beyond its present fixation in a text. Every classic lives as a classic only if it finds readers willing to be provoked by its claim to attention.<sup>22</sup>

A classic surprises, challenges, provokes, and eventually transforms us. It discloses "a compelling truth about our lives that we cannot deny them some kind of normative status . . . . Their actual effects in our lives endure and await

19. Ahlgren, *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity*, 67. "Unlettered" people, to Teresa and her contemporaries, were those unable to read Latin.

20. *Ibid.*, 30, 143.

21. David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 12.

22. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 102.

ever new appropriations, constantly new interpretations.”<sup>23</sup> It is in the same light we learn to appreciate Teresa’s writings as spiritual classics which continue to influence, nourish, and transform their readers today as they did in the past nearly half a millennium.

## Spirituality of Humility in Loving God

### *Stages of Humility in Teresa’s The Book of My Life*<sup>24</sup>

In *Teresa of Avila: The Book of My Life*, Teresa described that her delights in the love of God led her to withdraw from worldly concerns, took away her need for human relationships, worked in her profound spirit of humility, and made her totally surrender to God’s will.<sup>25</sup> Teresa likened the soul’s desire for God’s presence as a garden thirsting for water. We are the gardeners and therefore we must water the garden. There are four ways to water the plants in the garden of our soul, or rather, four stages of the soul’s transformation. With each stage, we do less and less of the work until we reach a place of perfect union with God where God himself becomes the Gardener. The four stages can also be described as four stages of self-efforts, from active labor to receptive rest. The soul at each stage allows herself to be increasingly held by God. The less the soul relies on self-service, the more the soul trusts God’s love and is drawn by it to God<sup>26</sup>; the more the desire of the soul is drawn by God to God himself, the more the soul is bestowed a new depth of humility. Thus, the transcendental dynamic in Teresa’s spiritual life is ascending to God by descending to humility.

The first stage of the soul’s transformation is likened to the gardener drawing water from a well to water the plants because this stage requires the most effort and diligence. To engage the mind in meditation is the practice of carrying, in the soul’s consciousness, God and his kingdom, or Christ and his cross. It requires the most effort in consciously removing the soul from

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23. Ibid., 108–9.

24. Teresa of Avila, *Teresa of Avila: The Book of My Life*, translated by Mirabai Starr (Boston: New Seeds, 2007).

25. Ibid., 5–68. In Part One of this book, Teresa described her childhood, falling dangerously in love, illness, tears of conversion, and so on.

26. Ibid., 71–165. In Part Two, Teresa described the soul’s relationship with God in terms of the four waters from God to the soul.

distractions.<sup>27</sup> The object of meditation is to place oneself in the presence of God, to communicate with God from one's heart. Teresa encouraged people at this stage not to worry about the experience of meditation, but just to trust in God's love and yield to God wholeheartedly.<sup>28</sup> "The love of God is not about tears or tenderness or relief but serving God with humility, fortitude, and righteousness."<sup>29</sup> True humility is to love God joyfully with a humble acknowledgement of one's own insignificance and imperfection.

At the second stage of the soul's transformation, encountering God is not attained through the soul's efforts. Only the soul's loving will to God is engaged; all other faculties are suspended. Here, the desire for worldly things falls away because the attention on God produces contentment and joy. "Be confident! Don't hold back your heart's desires. Believe in the power of God. With his help, we will gradually reach the station that the saints attained. We just need to keep striving."<sup>30</sup> Teresa encourages her fellow nuns to crave for self-denial instead of self-service: "And always be humble, remembering that this strength arises from a power beyond our own."<sup>31</sup> True humility is a divine gift for "the sudden awareness that we are nothing is a gift from God."<sup>32</sup> God alone grants true humility and makes one deeply aware that ascending to God is not through human efforts, but solely by God's initiative and grace.

At the third stage, the soul wants merely to rejoice in God's greatness and grace. It wants only to praise God and have others to share in her rejoicing. True humility is the soul's total reliance on the God who loves. It is grounded upon a new and deeper appreciation of God's love and grace. "It's another blessing to receive God. It's another to understand what kind of grace you receive . . . Then the soul can courageously follow the path of the Lord, trampling worldly attachments underfoot."<sup>33</sup>

At the final stage, the entire soul is drawn into a place of union with God, and all faculties are suspended. Now God himself becomes the Gardener. There

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27. Ibid., 75.

28. Ibid., 76–77.

29. Ibid., 77.

30. Ibid., 84.

31. Ibid., 85.

32. Ibid., 109.

33. Ibid., 118.

is no labor on the part of the soul. It is the Gardener God who provides abundantly all the water for the garden. The soul gains a new depth of humility by realizing that she has no part to contribute in God's uniting her to himself. "Her humility is deeper too, because she sees that she had absolutely nothing to do with the generous and magnificent gift she is being given and that she is equally powerless to hold on to it. Her own unworthiness becomes painfully apparent . . . . She is so far from conceited at this point that she cannot imagine that she ever suffered from false pride."<sup>34</sup>

### *Humility and Loving God in The Way of Perfection*<sup>35</sup>

*The Way of Perfection* was written during the height of controversy, which raged over Teresa's reforms within the Carmelite Order. Her exhortation is grounded on three pillars of love: true fraternal love in friendship, self-detachment from loving worldly things, and true humility in loving God.<sup>36</sup> Ahlgren remarks on Teresa's concern for "balanced" spirituality in humility and love:

Her expanded treatment of these issues reflects her concern that her readers should have a "balanced" spirituality, firmly rooted in the traditional monastic virtues of humility and obedience and yet open to the inner movements of God within the soul. Receptivity to God could be achieved only through the disciplining of personal desires – thus Teresa's insistence that the soul not value the delights God gives it on the way to mystical union – and a discerning self-knowledge that could recognize and reject any internal tendencies that were inconsistent with the fullest expression of the love of God and love of one another.<sup>37</sup>

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34. Ibid., 128.

35. Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, translated and edited by E. Allison Peers (New York: Image Books, 1964).

36. *The Way of Perfection* can be divided thematically into four sections: (1) Chapters 1–3 provide an introduction to Teresa's motivations and goals in undertaking this reform, (2) Chapters 4–15 explain how and why Teresa advocates the Rule of the Carmelite Order, (3) Chapters 16–26 present Teresa's understanding of the different types of prayer, and (4) Chapters 27–42 provide Teresa's word-by-word analysis of and commentary on The Lord's Prayer.

37. Ahlgren, *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity*, 96.

Teresa insists soul's humility in responding the loving God devotionally and passionately could not separate from her love to neighbors sincerely and generously.<sup>38</sup> What follows is a summary of five aspects of Teresa's spirituality of humility in the soul's response to God's love: detachment from self-love and longing to love God, imitation of the Lord's suffering, trust in God's leading, becoming Father's humble children, and dependency on God's protection. Humility and love according to Teresa are the most important virtues in the perfection of life.

a) Humility is a process of detachment from self-love and fervent longing for communion with God. Teresa teaches her fellow nuns "detachment from the things aforementioned is insufficient if we are not detached from our own slaves and that this virtue and humility go together."<sup>39</sup> Self-love includes too much caring for oneself, overemphasis on one's own health, and focusing on one's own pleasure and happiness in worldly things.<sup>40</sup> The more the soul sees God's glory, the more the soul's love for God increases. The virtue of humility comes from the soul's longing for God's glory, which leads one away from self-honor and self-delusion.<sup>41</sup>

b) When one follows the suffering Lord, one will inevitably participate in his suffering. Teresa considers her suffering as insignificant when compared with Lord's.<sup>42</sup> She speaks of "the great advantage which comes from our not excusing ourselves, even though we find we are unjustly condemned,"<sup>43</sup> and urges her sister nuns to pursue higher virtue in humility in imitating the Lord's suffering.<sup>44</sup> She sees suffering as a path leading the soul to great humility. As she puts it, "I think it is very important to accustom oneself to practice this virtue and endeavor to obtain from the Lord the true humility which must result from it."<sup>45</sup>

c) Humility, as Teresa sees it, has to do with prayer. "For, humility is the principle virtue which must be practiced by those who pray, and, as I have said,

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38. Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, 52–59.

39. *Ibid.*, 88.

40. *Ibid.*, 90, 98.

41. *Ibid.*, 97–103.

42. *Ibid.*, 113–14.

43. *Ibid.*, 111.

44. *Ibid.*, 111–15.

45. *Ibid.*, 112.

it is very fitting that you should try to learn how to practice it often.”<sup>46</sup> Not all of course are fitted for contemplation, and some take long to attain it. True humility will surrender to what the Lord wants to do and walk happily along the road the Lord leads.<sup>47</sup> In humbly trusting God, God will lead the way of the soul to himself.

d) God communicates his love by the way of incarnation. He renounced all privileges in heavens and came to identify himself with the suffering humanity in Jesus Christ.<sup>48</sup> Jesus Christ is the mediator between the humanity and the Father in two aspects: Firstly, God in Jesus Christ is our Father and in and through him reveals his will to us.<sup>49</sup> “O my Lord, how Thou dost reveal Thyself as the Father of such a Son, while Thy Son reveals Himself as the Son of such a Father!”<sup>50</sup> Secondly, we become the children of the Father through Jesus Christ, who in his humanity lives out his sonship through utter obedience to God’s will. Jesus Christ leads and guides us to become the children of the Father. Instead of leading a self-centered life, Jesus Christ transforms us to live out of a center in the Father, loving to hallow the Father’s name and seeking for God’s kingdom.<sup>51</sup> “We can do nothing of ourselves, either by working hard or by making plans, nor is it needful that we should. For everything else hinders and prevents us from saying, ‘ . . . May the Lord fulfil his will in me, in every way and manner which Thou, my Lord, desirest.’”<sup>52</sup>

e) Teresa in *The Way of Perfection* emphasizes repeatedly human vulnerability. The soul in her spiritual progress is incapable of defending herself against the devil and all kinds of temptation.<sup>53</sup> True humility is grounded on the humble acknowledgement of human creatureliness and sinfulness, as well as on the grateful appreciation of being loved and protected by God. True humility is utter dependency on the loving God, total rest in God’s love and peace. Teresa thus encourages her followers, “The best way we can do this, daughters, is to use the

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46. Ibid., 123.

47. Ibid., 127.

48. Ibid., 175–77.

49. Ibid., 179–81, 188.

50. Ibid., 179.

51. Ibid., 196–97.

52. Ibid., 215.

53. Ibid., 249–80.

love and fear given by His Majesty. For love will make us quicken our steps, while fear will make us look where we are setting our feet so that we shall not fall on a road where there are so many obstacles . . . [A]nd if we have these two things we shall certainly not be deceived.”<sup>54</sup>

### *Awakening to the Loving God in The Interior Castle*<sup>55</sup>

Teresa uses the metaphor of castle to describe the soul’s interior journey to her union with God. In her writings, *The Interior Castle*, Teresa defines seven stages, in terms of seven mansions, in the soul’s encounter with the loving God. The seven mansions are the seven stages of the soul’s awakening to the love of God. Many scholars have pointed out that Teresa’s castle metaphor is inspired by the Augustinian doctrine of inwardness, an inward turning to find God.<sup>56</sup> One is made more humbled as one travels deeper into the journey of inwardness. The more one has access to the God of love, the deeper the descending in humility.<sup>57</sup> Referring to the meaning of humility in the *Interior Castle*, Williams observes that, “The self-knowledge of humility is a condition in which we know ourselves by looking at God; we see the neediness or wretchedness of our state when we see the abundance and beauty of God.”<sup>58</sup>

At the initial level of the soul’s awakening, her self-knowledge is limited. So is her ability to recognize and love God. The wandering soul in the first two mansions is easily distracted by the temptation of the world. It is often bewildered by self-concern and worldly honor.<sup>59</sup> It however recognizes the voice of God who in love summons the soul to draw closer to him.<sup>60</sup> The soul becomes more resilient against temptation when she humbly searches for wisdom and guidance beyond herself<sup>61</sup>: “Ah, my Lord! It is here that we have need of Thine aid, without which we can do nothing. Of Thy mercy, allow not

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54. Ibid., 261.

55. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, edited and translated by E. Allison Peers (Breinigsville, PA: Bottom of the Hill Publication, 2010).

56. Williams, *Teresa of Avila*, 37.

57. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, 11–13.

58. Williams, *Teresa of Avila*, 115.

59. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, 35–37.

60. Ibid., 39–40.

61. Ibid., 40–41.

this soul to be deluded and led astray when its journey is but begun. Give it light so that it may see how all its welfare consists in this and may flee from evil companionship.”<sup>62</sup>

In the third mansion, the soul is at risk of forgetting God’s initiative of grace by misinterpreting her improvement as her own effort. Teresa reminds us that it is our human nature to seek merit and credit; true humility, however, reminds the soul that every single bit of her progress is but the work of God.<sup>63</sup> The more the soul understands herself as only the recipient of God’s grace, the more peaceful and pleased she will become. “Be sure that, where there is true humility, even if God never grants the soul favors, He will give it peace and resignation to His will, with which, it may be more content than others are with favors.”<sup>64</sup>

In the first three mansions, the soul strives with every effort to get closer to God. From the fourth to seventh mansions, the soul increasingly experiences her progress as the gift of God’s grace. Notwithstanding her active efforts, the soul experiences a spiritual transformation with a humble willingness to be drawn by God closer to God. When the soul is increasingly drawn to God, she relies less on herself and is deeply delighted in his consolation.<sup>65</sup> In the fourth mansion, the soul’s humility comes from her being surprised by God’s incredible gifts. She can now only humbly give thanks in silence to God.<sup>66</sup>

In the fifth mansion, all faculties are now suspended in such a way they seem to be asleep or dead. The soul is drawn by God into his center and is united with God. She has to depend entirely on God for her continuing existence.<sup>67</sup> Teresa uses the analogy of silkworm to describe the soul’s metamorphic transformation. Just as the silkworm must “die” so as to be transformed into a butterfly, the soul should die to her own will and to surrender to Christ wholeheartedly before a new life in union with God emerges.<sup>68</sup>

62. Ibid., 41.

63. Ibid., 48.

64. Ibid., 49.

65. Ibid., 63–67.

66. Ibid., 69.

67. Ibid., 79–81.

68. Ibid., 82–82.

In the sixth mansion, the soul is in a state of great distress and trials. She experiences an unbearable pain of her own imperfection and of her separation from God.<sup>69</sup> The soul will have mystical experience such as rapture, ecstasy, locution, or vision. She in deep humility is amazed at the transcendent glory of God by these experiences.<sup>70</sup> The more the soul experiences the presence of God, the more she wants to love God by serving him and obeying him.<sup>71</sup> In the fifth and sixth mansions, Teresa repeatedly encourages the sisters to meditate Christ's humanity, his passion and his cross in order to enter into union with him by partaking in his suffering.

In the final mansion, the soul reaches Jesus Christ in her interior journey and enjoys transforming union with God.<sup>72</sup> Christ appears in the soul's very center. The soul is transformed into Christ's life "because Christ is now its life" at the core of her being.<sup>73</sup> The soul is so absorbed into the beauty of God that she looks eagerly for ways to serve Him. Teresa urges her readers to serve Christ in following his suffering, service, passion, and love of others. "This, my sisters, I should like us to strive to attain: we should desire and engage in prayer, not for our enjoyment, but for the sake of acquiring this strength which fits us for service."<sup>74</sup> When Christ lives in the soul, to love and to serve Christ humbly become the soul's natural character.

## Why is Teresa' Spirituality Meaningful to Contemporary Readers?

### *Accessible to Modern Reader's Context*

The interpretation of a tradition and text, as Philip Sheldrake sees it, is essentially a quest for understanding. It is an understanding that is associated with "meaning" rather than simply with factual information and data. When approaching a tradition or text, one seeks, for instance, *information* of historical

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69. Ibid., 99–105.

70. Ibid., 119–23.

71. Ibid., 123–24.

72. Ibid., 168–71.

73. Ibid., 170.

74. Ibid., 183.

data, an analysis of texts, an understanding of theological frameworks, or a determination of a specific kind of spiritual wisdom or practice that is being represented.<sup>75</sup> However, the interpretation of a tradition or text is a complex matter. It is not only *informative*, but also *transformative*. It is a quest for the “truth” or wisdom embedded in a tradition or text, which involves *self-judgment* (this makes sense, is important, and of value) and *self-appropriation* (we seek to make this wisdom our own).<sup>76</sup> While the classical approach to “understanding” in the interpretation of a tradition or text draws on “historical, linguistic and literary methods,” the contemporary interdisciplinary approach adds “an engagement with the methods of philosophy, social science and psychology, along with critical questions addressed by feminist, liberationist and cultural theory.”<sup>77</sup>

Sheldrake aptly points out that understanding “is concerned with meanings, but also with purpose and values.” “The questions of *why* we read such texts and what we read them *for* are particularly central” when reading scriptural texts and spiritual wisdom documents, for “how we proceed to read texts is . . . intimately related to why we read them.” *Application* and *appropriation* of Christian traditions and texts, whether scriptural or spiritual, are thus the keys to their interpretation, for “the purpose of interpretation is not merely accurate knowledge but *application*, and the purpose of application is *appropriation*.”<sup>78</sup>

What does Teresa’s feminine spirituality mean to contemporary Christians? Or rather, what is the relevance of Teresa’s feminine spirituality to their self-transformation? The Enlightenment has exerted a great impact on the development of Christian spirituality.<sup>79</sup> In our age, the purists of self-autonomy,

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75. Philip Sheldrake, “Interpretation,” in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Philip Sheldrake (Louisville/Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 13.

76. *Ibid.*, 13.

77. *Ibid.*

78. *Ibid.*, 13–14.

79. Two centuries after the death of Teresa, in Königsberg in Prussia, 30 September 1784, Immanuel Kant in his speech *What is Enlightenment?* argued: “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one’s own understanding without another’s guidance. This nonage is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one’s own mind without another’s guidance. Dare to know! (*Sapere aude.*) ‘Have the courage to use your own understanding,’ is therefore the motto of the enlightenment” (<http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html>; accessed December 1, 2015). Kant pointed out the spirit

self-sufficiency, and self-honor are overwhelming our society and culture. These mindsets result in different forms of self-transcendence spirituality and self-actualization spirituality.

In the remaining part of this paper, I will argue that Teresa's feminine spirituality, which emphasizes humility as the soul's transcendental dynamic, will shed light on self-transformation in two aspects: Firstly, Teresa's spirituality can help contemporary readers to discover the path to transcendental God – inwardness is not an end in itself; it leads above and is the path toward God. Secondly, her spirituality will help contemporary Christians to be aware of the danger of self-actualization spirituality, to uncover their false self which covets self-affirmation and worldly honor. Teresa's spirituality affirms that humanity's true value is found only in God's love and grace.

### *Reflection on Modern Subjectivism to Spirituality*

Charles Taylor, in an article "In Interiore Homine," aptly expounds Augustine's doctrine of inwardness and its profound influence in the development of modern intellectual history.<sup>80</sup> He attributes to Augustine "the first" to take what he calls "a stance of radical reflexivity," "to make the first-person standpoint fundamental to our search for the truth"<sup>81</sup>: reflexive, because the activity of knowing is particularized, looking to the self; radical, because the knowing self becomes aware of its knowing, tries to experience its experiencing, and focuses on the way the world is *for* itself and on itself as the agent of experience and makes this its object.<sup>82</sup>

Although both Plato and Augustine share "the same opposition of spirit/matter, higher/lower, eternal/temporal, immutable/changing," Taylor

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of Enlightenment is "dare to know" and "dare to be an independent thinker." Self-autonomy reveals in such courage: dare to know and rely on the intelligence and the reasoning capacity of the self. Liberation aims to gain independency from oppression in hierarchical power structure. Teresa's reform movement indeed increased her fellow sisters' liberation and her spirituality is surely influenced by her social context in her time.

80. Charles Taylor, "In Interiore Homine," *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 127–42.

81. *Ibid.*, 133. Augustine's proof of God is a proof from the first-person experience of knowing, reasoning, and examination. God is to be found not just in the external world but also, and more importantly, in the intimacy of my self-presence in the soul.

82. *Ibid.*, 130.

observes that the opposition “is described by Augustine, not just occasionally and peripherally, but centrally and essentially in terms of inner/outer.”<sup>83</sup>

[Augustine] distinguishes between the inner and outer man. The outer is the bodily, what we have in common with the beasts, including even our senses, and the memory storage of our images of outer things. The inner is the soul . . . . It is in a sense the most important one for our spiritual purposes, because the road from the lower to the higher, the crucial shift in direction, passes through our attending to ourselves as *inner*.<sup>84</sup>

Taylor further observes that “Augustine is always calling us within”:

Let one very famous line stand for many: “Noli foras ire, in teipsum redi; in interior homine habitat veritas” (Do not go outward; return within yourself. In the inward man dwells truth). Augustine is always calling us within. What we need lies “*intus*,” he tells us again and again.<sup>85</sup>

This inward turn, as Taylors sees it, is an important difference between Augustine and Plato. But “why this striking difference from Plato? The short answer is that inward lies the road to God.”<sup>86</sup>

Epistemologically speaking, Augustine shifts his focus “from the field of objects known to the activity itself of knowing; God is to be found there. This begins to account for his use of the language of inwardness.”<sup>87</sup> This is because “the light of God is not just ‘out there,’ illuminating the order of being, as it is for Plato; it is also an ‘inner’ light.”<sup>88</sup> Although Plato and Augustine both employ the same language of memory as the foundation of self-knowledge, Augustine’s is rather different form Plato’s. Augustine cuts it “from its roots in the theory of prenatal experience.” At its root “is the Master within, the source of the light which lights every man coming into the world, God.” And so at the end

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83. Ibid., 128–29.

84. Ibid., 129.

85. Ibid.

86. Ibid.

87. Ibid., 130.

88. Ibid., 129.

of the soul's long journey of inward turn, "if it goes to the very end, the soul finds God . . . . At the very root of memory, the soul finds God."<sup>89</sup> As such, the soul's true self-knowledge in her inward turn lies in her genuine encounter with her Master. In sum, "we can only understand ourselves if we see ourselves as in contact with a perfection which is beyond us."<sup>90</sup> Quoting Etienne Gilson with approval, Taylor affirms that "Augustine's path is one 'leading from the exterior to the interior and from the interior to the superior,'"<sup>91</sup> Taylor sees in Augustine the "crucial shift in direction" which is "most important . . . for our spiritual purposes": By going inward the soul is drawn upward.<sup>92</sup>

Here again is a striking difference between Plato and Augustine. For Plato's doctrine of reminiscence, the knowledge of the Ideas is related to past experience. The capacity is already there. For Augustine, "the way within leads above . . . . In an important sense, the truth is *not* in me. I see the truth 'in' God. Where the meeting takes place, there is a reversal. Going within memory takes me beyond."<sup>93</sup> Again, "we might say that where for Plato the eye already has the capacity to see, for Augustine it has *lost* this capacity. This must be restored by grace. And what grace does is to open the inward man to God, which makes us able to see that the eyes' vaunted power is really God's."<sup>94</sup>

Taylor thus sees the crucial importance of the Augustinian language of inwardness, one where the route to the higher passes within: "It represents a radically new doctrine of moral resources."<sup>95</sup>

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89. Ibid., 135. In an important sense, self-knowledge is a dialectical process: something inexplicit within becomes explicit under the illumination of the Master within. In other words, the truth is *not* in the soul. She sees the truth "in" God, who is the power directing and sustaining her quest for truth. "Just as in our perverse condition of sin, our desire for the good was so much less than our insight" (139).

90. Ibid., 140.

91. Ibid., 136.

92. Ibid., 134.

93. Ibid., 135, italics in the original.

94. Ibid., 139, italics in the original. On Augustine's view on evil and soul's reflexivity, Taylor writes: "Evil is when this reflexivity is enclosed on itself. Healing comes when it is broken open, not in order to be abandoned, but in order to acknowledge its dependence on God" (139).

95. Ibid.

In a sense those two centuries, the sixteenth and seventeenth, can be seen as an immense flowering of Augustinian spirituality across all confessional differences, one which continued in its own way into the Enlightenment . . . .<sup>96</sup>

The modern epistemological tradition from Descartes, and all that has flowed from it in modern culture, had made this standpoint fundamental – to the point of aberration, one might think. It has gone as far as generating the view that there is a special domain of “inner” objects available only from this standpoint; or the notion that the vantage point of the “I think” is somehow outside the world of thing we experience . . . . This was to make a turn to the self in the first-person dimension crucial to our access to a higher condition – because in fact it is a step on our road back to God – and hence to inaugurate a new line of development in our understanding of moral sources, one which has been formative for our entire Western culture.<sup>97</sup>

Although Descartes in many ways is profoundly Augustinian, Taylor is right to observe that “the internalization wrought by the modern age, of which Descartes’s formulation was one of the most important and influential, is very different from Augustine’s.”<sup>98</sup> Descartes’s was a conception of inwardness of self-sufficiency: what I now meet in my inwardness is myself. Taylor, however, aptly points out that self-transformation does not come from a power that is ours:

Augustine retains the Platonic notion of an order of things in the cosmos which is good. True, this doesn’t suffice for us, because we have to be healed of sin to love this order as we should. And this healing comes to us within. But it does not come from a power which is ours. On the contrary, we turn to the path within only to accede beyond, to God.<sup>99</sup>

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96. Ibid., 141.

97. Ibid., 131–32.

98. Ibid., 143.

99. Ibid., 141.

*Teresa's Spirituality to Contemporary Spirituality*

Teresa's feminine spirituality points to a new way of self-transformation as an ongoing movement in the soul's journey to God. For her, descending in humility and ascending to God are two movements in the one transcendental dynamic in the soul's transformation. True humility stems from loving God instead of self-loving. It deepens when the soul truly rests and rejoices in its being loved by God. The more the soul descends into the depth of true humility, the more she is lifted up on high by God to be nearer to God. The more the soul ascends to God, the more she finds no cause for pride in herself. The sixteenth-century spiritual reform movement in the Spanish institutional Church and patriarchal society comes from a female theologian who advocates a spiritual path to God by way of internal humility, instead of external authority, will, and efforts. The reform spirituality of her internal humility eventually overcomes resistance, suspicion, and distrust from the external.

One may ask, how does Teresa's spirituality of dependency on God help us today reflect on our self-transcendence spirituality today? How does Teresa's spirituality of God's love and grace help us to reflect on our self-actualization spirituality?

**a) Dependency on God versus Self-transcendence.** Self-transcendence spirituality stresses transcendental power which comes from self-will and creative power to decide and help the self. It undermines the transcendental power from others, including God. As such, self-transformation is an active progress to be guided by the self. The pleasure in self-transformation comes from fulfilling self-will and achieving personal happiness in the self's private kingdom. Eventually, self-autonomy becomes the end-all and be-all of self-transcendence spirituality. The false self becomes the god and celebrates its transcendence in a world it creates.

However, Teresa insists true humility as a kind of realization of human creatureliness who cannot transcend themselves by themselves. Self-transformation for Teresa is to be achieved by humbly trusting God and by recognizing that only God can draw the soul to himself. The highest transcendence for human being is the union with God's will. True humility is the soul's response to the transcendent God by relying on God's initiative and transforming power, and receiving God's active grace in our life. The greatest spirituality is, "Not my will, but thine, be done," and "Thy kingdom come."

**b) God's Grace versus Self-actualization.** Self-actualization spirituality emphasizes self-effort, self-service, and self-affirmation. It values most the external achievement and the control of the progress for self-transformation. Therefore, human effort plays the important role. Because the focus is on the actualization of human plan, there is little room for the discernment of God's will and his guidance. Self-service replaces the uncontrollable grace of God in order to have all the resources the self needs under its control. When the self finally achieves its goal, it will celebrate its own efforts and labor instead of God's grace.

Teresa, however, points out that true humanity is a kind of self-realization, to be aware of the self's own contingency in the world, and to understand its fragility in the spiritual battle. Moreover, humanity is an awakening that in the soul's ascending path, its every little progress is but the work of God and is only the gift of God's grace. When the soul identifies her spiritual progress as only a gift from God, she can truly give praise and be truly grateful to the loving God.

## Conclusion

Teresa's spirituality helps contemporary readers to discover a transcendental path to God – inwardness is not an end in itself; it leads above and is the path toward God. Her writings inspire contemporary readers to reflect on the danger of self-transcendence spirituality, which emphasizes the self's autonomy and self-sufficiency without dependency on God. Moreover, she helps contemporary Christians to be aware of the peril of self-actualization spirituality, which relies on self-service and self-affirmation rather than on God's love and grace.

Teresa's feminine spirituality of humility points to a surer path of self-transformation. It is still profoundly relevant to us today and, I believe, will continue to inspire many women and men across time and space in different cultures.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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