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 Transformative Map to Unia Mystica

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ST. STEPHEN'S COLLEGE

FIVE WOMEN MYSTICS AND THE FIVE-FOLD
TRANSFORMATIVE MAP TO UNIA MYSTICA

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of St. Stephen's College
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To Cynthia Bourgeault

ABSTRACT

Five Women Mystics and the Five-Fold Transformative Map to *Unia Mystica*

This thesis is an exploration of *unia mystica*, the unity of divine and human will, as the final stage in an arduous process of growth in human consciousness, the central purpose of which is to directly apprehend God. Five women mystics, Julian of Norwich, Saint Catherine of Genoa, Saint Teresa of Avila, Edith Stein and Evelyn Underhill, have been selected for investigation both as critical exemplars of this process and for their testimony of self-growth and divine apprehension. Through an analysis of their lives and pertinent writings, this thesis explores the five-stage classical Christian map – *purgation, illumination, dark night of the senses, dark night of the soul* and *unia mystica* – as a highly paradoxical schema for developing human consciousness since it involves the forfeiture of selfhood and the transmutation of the pain of humankind, processes which necessarily involve personal suffering. This thesis also investigates the selected mystics' response to such suffering; according to their testimony, growth in human consciousness is a dialectical process involving both suffering and joy, and to live in the presence of God is never for the benefit of oneself, but to serve humankind.

Three key activities the five mystics' identify as critically necessary to the success of the classical schema is also discussed: (1) purgation to develop a detached state of mind; (2) mortification to develop a virtuous character, and; (3) prayer for help and guidance. As these five mystics attest, the culmination of these practices is a deeply intimate relationship with God, experiencing first-hand, divine love and wisdom, energies so holy they can never be compared or mistaken for their inferior human facsimile. It was precisely this energy these five women brought to the world through their lives and work, their remarkable accomplishments dispelling any view of the mystic as impractical or unrealistic.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE	1
Introduction.....	1
Theological Area of Study.....	2
Key Term	3
Key Research Question.....	4
Author's Personal Interest in the Area of Study	5
Research Methodology	8
Literature Review.....	10
Application of Research Methodology	12
Validation Process	13
Outline of Thesis and Summation of Argument.....	13
CHAPTER TWO	15
Definition of Mysticism.....	15
Classical Five-Fold Transformative Map	16
Great Hierarchy of Being and Knowing.....	18
Honouring the Women Mystics.....	20
CHAPTER THREE	23
Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941).....	23
Literary Legacy.....	23
Biographical Sketch.....	24
Spiritual Life.....	25
Growth of Mystical Life	27
Historical Context.....	28
Primary Sources for a Study of the Transformative Map.....	30
Self-Awakening	31
Purgation.....	32
Illumination.....	39
Dark Night of the Soul.....	39
Unitive State.....	40
Worship and Prayer.....	41
Evelyn Underhill: Contemporary Interpreter of the Transformative Map.....	42
CHAPTER FOUR.....	44
Julian of Norwich (1342-1416).....	44
Literary Legacy.....	45
Biographical Sketch.....	46
Spiritual Life.....	47
Key Mystical Event.....	49
Historical Context.....	51
Primary Sources for a Study of the Transformative Map.....	52
Central Theological Premise: Perfect Divine Love	53
Classical Transformative Map within a Cosmic Context	54
Julian of Norwich: Cosmic Interpreter of the Transformative Map.....	66

CHAPTER FIVE	67
Saint Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510)	67
Literary Legacy	67
Biographical Sketch	69
Final Years	72
Spiritual Life	73
Historical Context	75
Primary Sources for a Study of the Transformative Map	75
Central Theological Premise: Perfect Divine Love	76
Classical Transformative Map and Purgation: Cosmic Human Journey toward God ...	77
The Human Spirit after Death	78
Saint Catherine of Genoa: Timeless Interpreter of the Transformative Map	84
 CHAPTER SIX	 86
Saint Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582)	86
Literary Legacy	86
Biographical Sketch	88
Spiritual Life	90
Historical Context	91
Primary Sources for a Study of the Transformative Map	92
Central Theological Premise: Perfect Divine Love	93
Classical Transformative Map: The Way of Perfection	94
Classical Transformative Map: Archetypal Metaphor of the Castle	97
Saint Teresa of Ávila: Poetic Interpreter of the Transformative Map	113
 CHAPTER SEVEN	 115
Edith Stein (1891-1942)	115
Literary Legacy	116
Biographical Sketch	117
Spiritual Life	120
Historical Context	122
Primary Sources for a Study of the Transformative Map	124
Central Theological Premise: Perfect Divine Love	125
Classical Transformative Map and Expiatory Suffering	126
Edith Stein: Supreme Exemplar of the Transformative Map	131
 CHAPTER EIGHT	 134
Conclusion	134
Classical Transformative Map: A Valid Path Toward Higher Consciousness	134
Classical Transformative Map and Modern Christianity	135
Personal Learning	138
 Selected Bibliography	 140

Chapter One

Introduction

The New Testament sees the genuine human being as emerging from an embryonic state within nature and society into the fully human world of the individual, which is symbolized as a rebirth or second birth, in the phrase that Jesus used to Nicodemus. In a fully mature society the structure of authority becomes a function of the individuals within it, all of them, without distinctions of sex, class, or race, living, loving, thinking and producing with a sense of space around them.

– Northrop Frye, *The Double Vision*

According to traditional Christian teaching, the fundamental purpose of life is to mature and grow through God’s holy love and wisdom that we might be reborn to fulfill our divinely ordained purpose. This simple but profound spiritual truth is the key refrain of the five women mystics selected for this study, insisting God’s unfailing love can draw us, if we permit it, ever closer to the divine source; and in that drawing nearer, we learn to empty ourselves of our own will to embrace the divine will, becoming a clear stream of God’s pure love and wisdom, bringing freedom and liberation to the world.¹ As an enduring spiritual truth, few express it as eloquently as Saint Teresa of Ávila:

Without doubt, if we empty ourselves of all that belongs to creature, depriving ourselves of it for the love of God, that same Lord will fill us with himself.²

You may suppose that such a person is beside herself and that her mind is too inebriated to care for anything else. On the contrary, she is far more

¹ Dana Greene, “Adhering to God: The Message of Evelyn Underhill for Our Times,” *Spirituality Today* 39 (Spring 1987), 22-38, <http://www.spiritualitytoday.org/spir2day/873912greene.html> (accessed February 27, 2010).

² Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle or The Mansions*, ed. Benedict Zimmerman and The Benedictines of Stanbrook (n.p.: Bibliobazaar, 2007), 218.

active than before in all that concerns God's service, and when at leisure she enjoys this blessed companionship.³

Saint Teresa describes the *unia mystica*, the unity of divine and human will through which the creature draws on divine grace to forfeit selfhood and embrace the pain of the human condition to transmute the suffering into pure love and wisdom, bringing divine healing and transformative action to the world. The lives of the five subjects of this study are a testimony to the paradox of human suffering transmuted into perfect love through personal intimacy with God to sustain demanding public service.

Theological Area of Study

The principal theological area to be explored is *unia mystica* as the final phase in the classical five-fold map toward growth in human consciousness, the central purpose of which is to directly commune with God in preparedness for one's divinely ordained mission. As an ancient map for interior growth, it was first laid out by Saint Dionysius (circa 500 CE) and later nuanced by Saint John of the Cross (1542-1591) to become the five-phase process of *purgation*, i.e., detachment and mortification; *dark night of the senses*; *illumination*; *dark night of the soul*; and *unia mystic*. To demonstrate how it has been used down through the centuries, the lives and legacies of five women mystics, Julian of Norwich, Saint Catherine of Genoa, Saint Teresa of Ávila, Evelyn Underhill and Edith Stein will be used to investigate the map. A key aspect to be examined is the paradoxical nature of the process since it

³ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 212.

involves the forfeiture of selfhood and the transmutation of the pain of the human condition, processes which necessarily involve personal suffering; to follow this map is to symbolically carry the cross.⁴ Also to be investigated is the mystics' response to this map; according to their testimony, growth in human consciousness is a dialectical process involving both suffering and joy, the outcome of which is so magnificent it far exceeds the difficulty of the process.

Key Term

Considerable scholarly debate surrounds what the term *unia mystica* precisely refers to, with some commentators suggesting it may mean more than the union of human/divine will, proposing it may be equivalent to what is known in contemporary theology as non-dual or unitive consciousness, terms describing a state in which there is a “radical alteration of the perceptual field,” making any “sense of separation or perception-through-differentiation” increasingly difficult.⁵ Other commentators maintain non-dual consciousness is attained only *after* the mystical union has run its course, with the medieval mystic Marguerite Porete being an example.⁶ In this thesis, *unia mystica* specifically refers to the unity of human/divine will and progression along the unitive path *toward* non-dualism, or unitive perception, as the “stable seat of perception and selfhood.”⁷

⁴ Cynthia Bourgeault, e-mail message to the author, April 6, 2010.

⁵ Bourgeault, e-mail message to the author, April 12, 2010.

⁶ Bourgeault, e-mail message to the author, April 12, 2010.

⁷ Bourgeault, e-mail message to the author, April 12, 2010.

Key Research Question

The central research question of this inquiry is to ascertain the *validity* of the classic five-fold transformative map. According to the five mystics of this study, the map is a proven, effective method for the rebirth of a higher, more mature Self capable of direct communion with the divine. Although modernity has tended to dismiss much of this ancient scheme, regarding prayer either as a tool by which to make impatient demands or a support system for the weak, and purification and mortification as simply “masochistic” and “medieval” in the most pejorative sense of the word, the testimony of the five mystics indicates quite the opposite. All five women insist the five-fold map, with its processes of purification, mortification and the two “dark nights” (underscored by rigorous contemplative prayer) was the “eye-of-the-needle” through which they emerged into their own astonishing authority and personal liberation.⁸ All five women attest this ancient five-fold scheme to be the path they followed to attain *unia mystica* and progression toward *unitive* consciousness, gaining exceptional strength and wisdom for grounded practical work as theologians, administrators and humanitarians.

What makes the testimony of these mystics even more compelling is that this ancient transformative path, while open to both sexes, proved to be especially powerful for these five women, lifting them far above the rigid roles and expectations they were historically assigned. Despite the harsh cultural and societal anti-female bias all five women faced, their transformative path to non-duality ensured them the “paradox of moving in two directions at once – deep into

⁸ Bourgeault, e-mail message to the author, April 6, 2010.

contemplative stillness and strongly into action – as a single integrated motion.”⁹ As all five women demonstrate, passive and active states were beautifully combined for the central purpose of serving humanity since they did not develop their spiritual lives or writings for themselves, but to guide and direct the communities to which they belonged.¹⁰

Author’s Personal Interest in the Area of Study

The five mystics of this study do not in any way fit the contemporary generalization of the mystic as “impractical,” “passive” or “withdrawn.” Rather, the success these five women achieved and the integrated personalities they displayed makes their lives and legacies worthy of consideration by women of all ages and times, and the key reason why the author of this thesis wished to study them. I was passionately drawn to the mystical life after my own, quite unexpected, spiritual awakening which occurred after several years of pursuing a very secular life and a successful corporate career to the exclusion of almost everything else. What I particularly wanted to investigate was (1) the methods the great women mystics used to attain higher consciousness and union with God, and (2) their ability to manage the apparent contradiction between the life of contemplation and prayer and the life of effective action. As Bernard McGinn remarks, mysticism is essentially a process, “an itinerary or journey to God,” and therefore a proper grasp of mysticism requires an investigation of the ways the great mystics had prepared themselves for God’s

⁹ Bourgeault, e-mail message to the author, April 6, 2010.

¹⁰ Eleanor Rae and Bernice Marie-Daly, *Created in Her Image: Models of the Divine Feminine* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1990), 100.

intervention and what effects divine action had on their lives. McGinn observes the great mystics, like the great poets and artists, are examples of extraordinary human achievement capable of inspiring even those who may not share their commitments.¹¹ As women of extraordinary achievement, my interest in the lives and legacies of these five mystics was personal, but also sociological because I ardently wished to know how and by what means they had sustained and balanced their private interior life with the practical life of service they insist is the central purpose of a life centred in the divine.¹²

To discover there was actually a path, processes and practices for achieving non-dual consciousness was an astonishing revelation; as Diana Butler Bass notes, mainline protestant churches, of which I am a member, have primarily emphasized a rationalist approach to God with little teaching of the mystical element.¹³ Fortunately, the recent revival in mysticism and the women mystics has created a reawakening of the Christian contemplative tradition, and it is now possible to find within many protestant churches, including my own, small groups of practitioners of Centering Prayer, psalm chanting, and *lectio divina*. My own contemplative practice has been enriched by just such a group facilitated by the faith leaders of my church community devoted to the contemplative tradition as it is currently taught by Cynthia Bourgeault and Thomas Keating. Bourgeault has deeply informed my own contemplative knowledge and practice, having so intelligently

¹¹ Bernard McGinn, ed., introduction to *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism* (New York: Modern Library, 2006), xiv.

¹² Bourgeault, e-mail message to the author, April 6, 2010.

¹³ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 206-210.

introduced me to the treasures of the mystical tradition. An Episcopal priest, lecturer, writer, adjunct professor, and internationally known spiritual retreat leader, Bourgeault is the author of several books on the contemplative tradition, and despite her demanding schedule has epitomized Christian hospitality by acting as my thesis advisor.

In addition to contemplative practice, my own very moderate ascetic practices have helped to validate the mystics' insistence on purgation and mortification as key phases of the transformative path. In this I have found their testimony to be precisely accurate: a deepening relationship with God can be so healing that cravings, compulsions and desires, as neurotic expressions of inner hunger and psychic pain, are gently assuaged and dissolved, leading naturally or perhaps "supernaturally" to the emergence of moderate ascetic practice, without forceful self-control, and simply the desire to live a virtuous life.

My own experience of contemplative spiritual formation and very moderate asceticism confirms the mystics' testimony regarding growth in consciousness as a step toward union with the divine. To live in a detached, mortified state of mind and body and to practice the virtues of humility and perseverance is to live fully in the present moment, without resentment, bitterness or regret over the past, or in fear, anxiety or anticipation (whether negative or positive) about the future. While developing such a state of mind is important, contemplative spiritual formation does more than this, ultimately becoming the process for the transformation of one's perception. Through contemplative practice, one learns to see the world as unified and whole as opposed to the "either/or" duality of ordinary consciousness. My own

experience with developing consciousness attests to Raimon Panikkar's description of the Christian *advaita* as the inter-abiding *syzygy* of not one, not two, but one and two; as one begins to develop a more unified perception, one becomes aware of both the transcendence and immanence of God, the latter being that inter-abiding presence of the divine who has chosen to limit herself out of love for the human being.¹⁴ Having experienced my own modest growth in consciousness, I earnestly wished to know how the great mystics had achieved their monumental expansion in conscious awareness.

Research Methodology

The primary method of research has been the development of a dialogue with the mystics themselves through a closely intimate reading of their writings. As McGinn observes, women mystics had to face problems and issues most male mystics did not, foremost among them was the issue of authority and recognition for their body of their work.¹⁵ Given that women have historically been denied education and authorial voice, it is remarkable the subjects of this study ever wrote anything; that their ideas and writings have survived to modern times offer irrefutable testimony to their richness and value. To honour such exemplary courage and the endurance of their legacy, the author has chosen to make their texts the foundation of this thesis.

¹⁴ Raimon Panikkar, *Christophany: The Fullness of Man* (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 23-24.

¹⁵ Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, vol. 3 of *The Presence of God: A History of Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1998), 149-50, 154-55.

An important question to resolve was the mystics to be studied; the decision to focus on women mystics only was simply the ardent desire to read and research the lived experience of the feminine mystical voice. More challenging was to select from among the many women Christian mystics worthy of research, five key women, the sampling in number, stature and diversity to be sufficiently representative to adequately address the research question and still remain within the proposed length. After careful deliberation, Evelyn Underhill was selected for her remarkable ability to translate medieval mystical thought into a contemporary perspective; Julian of Norwich for her growing reputation as the cornerstone of women's mysticism in the middle ages; Saint Catherine of Genoa for living a surprisingly modern life in medieval times; Saint Teresa of Ávila for creating so powerful a legacy it has even made its way into modern popular culture; and finally, Edith Stein, for her status as a modern saint and the highest expression of the mystical consciousness.

Modern editions of the writings of the five selected mystics, as the primary sources forming the foundation of this thesis, were carefully selected based on date (with a preference toward newer versions), scholarly reviews, editorship, translation and excellent authorial introductions, all of which were written by respected contemporary scholars including Denise N. Baker, J. M. Cohen, Elisabeth Dutton, Benedict Groeschel, Josephine Koepfel, E. Allison Peers, A.C. Spearing, John Sullivan, Clifton Wolters and Benedict Zimmerman. The hermeneutics developed from reading these primary resources were derived from the author's "lived experience" through rigorous contemplative formation, as previously discussed; personal biography as "lived theology" has deeply informed my close

reading and interpretation of the lives and legacies of the five selected mystics. Also important to the interpretative process were secondary sources relating specifically to the mystics and to relevant disciplines such as mystical and feminist theology and contemplative spiritual formation. Ultimately, this thesis is the cumulative result and the culmination of several years of extensive reading in the field of mystical and contemplative theology.

Literature Review

Fortunately, the renewed interest in the women mystics over the past couple of decades has resulted in the creation of several new excellent translations and editions and considerable scholarly criticism. With respect to Julian of Norwich, the insightful scholarship of Denise Baker, particularly her interpretation of the great saint as being within the trajectory of Irenaean theodicy, has deeply enriched the study of this remarkable medieval figure. Equally illuminating is the work of Joan Nuth and her analysis of Julian's hermeneutic concerning sin, evil and suffering. With respect to Evelyn Underhill, the recent research of Dana Greene and her sensitive interpretation of this early twentieth century mystic clearly proves her to be an excellent scholar in her own right, one whose legacy is more than worthy of respectful consideration, having withstood, as Ken Wilber notes, the test of time.¹⁶ Regarding Saint Catherine of Genoa, the eminent theologian Friedrich von Hügel and his masterful two-volume work is generally acknowledged as the seminal study on the great saint; Von Hügel's analysis of Catherine's vision of hell, purgatory and

¹⁶ Ken Wilber, *Integral Spirituality: A Startling New Role for Religion in the Modern and Postmodern World* (Boston: Integral Books, 2006), 96.

heaven from the perspective of traditional Catholic doctrine is arrestingly informative. The richness of Saint Teresa of Ávila's legacy has resulted in a recent explosion of scholarship, with the criticism of Gillian Ahlgren, Dierdre Green and Beverley Lanzetta shedding new light on the great mystic and her views concerning several theological topics including purgation, prayer and the status of women. Finally, in regards to Edith Stein, the scholarly criticism and editorship of Sarah Borden, Constance FitzGerald, Josephine Koepfel, L. Gelber, Romaeus Leuven, Freda Mary Oben and María Ruiz Scaplerlandia are instrumental to developing a wholistic perspective of the saint's life and theology, particularly Stein's phenomenological interpretation of the mystic as the carrier of the Christ consciousness for the human community.

In addition to these primary and secondary sources relating to specific mystics, a wider context in which to locate the mystical experience requires knowledge of related disciplines. An obvious one is mystical theology with the pivotal texts being Bernard McGinn's five volume series, *The Presence of God: A History of Christian Mysticism* and *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*. McGinn's comprehensive review of both men and women mystics, discussions of such pertinent topics as asceticism and prayer, and exhaustive bibliographies that include translations, histories and handbooks, as well as recent and classic interpretations make these volumes a cornerstone to any study of mystical theology. Other notable recent works include *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, edited by Elizabeth Dreyer; the four volume series devoted exclusively to mysticism published by Oxford University Press under the editorship of Steven Katz;

and Beverley Lanzetta's *The Other Side of Nothingness: Toward a Theology of Radical Openness*.

Also important to establishing the validity of the mystical consciousness is its grounding in an appropriate cosmological perspective (it is almost impossible to adequately study the theology of Julian of Norwich without this context), and in this respect the work of Jim Marion, Huston Smith and Ken Wilber is critically helpful. Equally important is an understanding of contemplative life and practice, and here the scholarship of Bourgeault, Keating and Thomas Merton are invaluable sources, being especially helpful in relating ancient theological concepts to modern categories of processing spiritual experience. Finally, to understand the mystics from a feminist theological perspective, Lanzetta's, *Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology*, Andrea Janelle Dicken's, *The Female Mystic: Great Women Thinkers of the Middle Ages*, and Bernice Marie-Daly and Eleanor Rae's, *Created in Her Image: Models of the Divine Feminine*, are all invaluable resources.

Application of Research Methodology

Having read widely in the field of mystical theology and on each of the women Christian mystics over the past few years, I began application of my critical literary/historical research methodology by selecting five women mystics for the reasons cited previously, as well for their references to the classical five-fold path in order to investigate its use and validity as a transformative tool. By selecting appropriate writings pertinent to this central research question, and scholarly editions of these primary sources, I was able to conduct a close textual reading, grounding this

exegetical process in the truth and wisdom of my own contemplative and ascetic practice. I strove for active, disciplined reading, rigorously examining my developing interpretations to ensure absolute authenticity and to protect against bias. As I rigorously examined the text, I paid particular attention to discussions of purgation and mortification, undertaking a systematic analysis of and correlation with the classical Christian map. Throughout the composition of this thesis, I consulted secondary sources where and when appropriate.

Validation Process

As a critical study based primarily on the writings of the mystics themselves, I validated the credibility of my own hermeneutics of these texts by using modern scholarly editions of primary sources and consulting respected scholars and secondary sources. Validation was also maintained by ensuring each section was reviewed by my thesis advisor who provided insightful analysis throughout the writing of this document.

Outline of Thesis and Summation of Argument

Following a brief overview of some of the key concepts of mysticism, the discussion will turn to the mystics beginning with the contemporary Anglo-Catholic, Evelyn Underhill, and an in-depth analysis of her brilliant interpretation of the classical transformative map. With Underhill as a contemporary guide, an investigation of this classical path as interpreted by the medieval mystic Julian of Norwich will be conducted, followed by Saint Catherine of Genoa and Saint Teresa

of Ávila, descending historically through the ages to end where the discussion began, in the twentieth century, and the mystic Edith Stein. What this analysis reveals is that all five women attest with astonishing consistency to the validity of the ancient five-fold transformative map as a progression toward higher consciousness and union with the divine. Where they differ is in what they emphasize: Underhill in making this ancient theological scheme comprehensible to a modern mindset; Julian of Norwich and Saint Catherine of Genoa in locating it within a cosmological perspective; Saint Teresa of Avila in translating it to the universal, timeless truth of archetypal metaphor; and Stein in explaining, as well as demonstrating in her own life, the complete forfeiture of selfhood and the necessity of genuine suffering as a cosmic Christological journey. The inclusion of biographical and historical sketches provide the critical context in which to assess the entire life, legacy and authenticity of each mystic and the ancient journey they took to human transformation and union with God, each making the classic five-fold map uniquely their own.

Chapter Two

Definition of Mysticism

I set forth an understanding of mysticism as that part, or element, of Christian belief and practice that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the effect of what the mystics themselves have described as a direct and transformative presence of God.

– Bernard McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*

To explore the legacy of the five selected subjects of this study is to encounter the terminology of mystical theology. In this essay, mysticism refers to a belief in the existence of a non-physical, non-spatial, non-temporal reality that is absolute and beyond strictly rational apprehension; central to, but separate from being, this absolute reality has as its key attributes perfect love and wisdom, and is directly accessible by subjective mystical experience although such direct apprehension demands an arduous process of growth in human consciousness.¹⁷ The direct experience of God is fundamental to mysticism, that “sense,” explains Oliver Davies, “within the human person of the immediate presence of a transcendent and divine being or power” is the essence of mystical life.¹⁸

The five great mystics selected for this study have left a time-tested record of their direct apprehension of the divine, the authenticity of which may be verified against their own accounts of growth in consciousness, and although written in mystical theology, can be correspondingly mapped to the advanced levels of

¹⁷ David Scott, “Mysticism,” *Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed., John Bowden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 817-826.

¹⁸ Oliver Davies, *Within God: The Mystical Tradition of Northern Europe* (New York: New City Press, 2006), 1.

consciousness identified by modern psychology. Contemporary research has so far established eight distinct levels: archaic consciousness of infancy; magical consciousness of childhood; mythic consciousness of pre-adolescence, and the five possible levels of adulthood; rational consciousness; vision-logic consciousness; psychic consciousness; subtle consciousness, and; causal/non-dual consciousness.¹⁹ Generally, the accounts of the great Christian mystics begin at least at the psychic level and the moment of *self-awakening* when the mystical consciousness becomes vitally aware of the energies of the astral realm.²⁰ Ultimately, the primary concern of the five selected mystics is the growth of consciousness at the very highest level, being the causal or non-dual consciousness, or in Christian theology, the Christ consciousness.²¹

Classical Five-Fold Transformative Map

The classical map to higher consciousness was formulated around 500 CE by the early Christian saint, Dionysius, (actually a pseudonym for an author whose real identity is unknown) whose initial chart of the process involved a three-phased scheme, *purgation*, *illumination*, and *unia mystica*; that this was the original pattern should not be surprising, as McGinn observes:

Progression in terms of three stages – a beginning, an intermediary, and a concluding one – is perhaps the most natural form of itinerary. Hence it is

¹⁹ Jim Marion, *Putting on the Mind of Christ: The Inner Work of Christian Spirituality* (Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads, 2000), 25-214.

²⁰ Marion, *Putting on the Mind of Christ*, 25-27, 70.

²¹ Marion, *Putting on the Mind of Christ*, 183-216.

not surprising that attempts to describe the path to God adopted a threefold pattern from at least as early as Origen.²²

Several centuries later, Saint John of the Cross refined this three-stage ascension process by the addition of two important phases, *dark night of the senses* and *dark night of the soul*, elucidating in his mystical writings both their challenge and purpose using the symbolism of the cross and night. With the integration of these two phases into the Dionysian scheme, the five-fold transformative map became for Christians down through the centuries the theological guidebook to higher human consciousness and union with God.²³

Pivotal to Saint Dionysius' model is *purgation* or *purification* – i.e., the process of detachment and mortification by which the human personality is purified or stripped of its egoic attachments and negative traits to create interior space for both the human development as well as the divine infusion of the eight virtues of classical Christian thought. The second key component of Saint Dionysius' map, *illumination*, is the state in which the mystical consciousness is finally aligned with the divine will; the third component, *unia mystica*, is the ultimate objective of the mystical consciousness, being absolute unity of human and divine will.²⁴ Regarding the two phases Saint John of the Cross identifies, *dark night of the senses* generally occurs between *purgation* and *illumination*, being the phase in which the human conscious is healed of deeply repressed negative emotions and thoughts.²⁵ *Dark night*

²² McGinn, *Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, 148-49.

²³ McGinn, *Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, 150-51.

²⁴ Marion, *Putting on the Mind of Christ*, 25-26.

²⁵ Marion, *Putting on the Mind of Christ*, 87-104.

of the soul generally occurs between *illumination* and *unia mystica* and is reached by only the most dedicated mystics, being the phase in which the human consciousness develops mastery over all negative emotions and complete responsibility for all psychological projections.²⁶

This arduous five-fold process of growth, which is essentially a life-long journey, is never linear and progressive but tends to operate as a perpetual spiral, with some mystics entirely omitting phases. Although each of the five mystics of this study developed their own unique interpretation of this map, adapting it to their own theological perspective, all five attest it is the quintessential path to perfect love and wisdom.

Great Hierarchy of Being and Knowing

A second key concept generally found in mystical texts relates to a complex understanding of the anthropology of the human being: the four-fold hierarchy of body, mind, soul, spirit, with the term “soul” receiving considerable reference in the writings of all of the mystics of this study. This human anthropological scheme is a key part of an ancient cosmological model Ken Wilber refers to as the *Great Hierarchy of Being and Knowing*.²⁷ Briefly, the model uses the ancient symbol of a three-dimensional cross consisting of a vertical axis, “the great ray of creation,” intersected by two horizontal axes, i.e., space and time, running at right angles to each other. From this axial arrangement radiates at least four planes or

²⁶ Marion, *Putting on the Mind of Christ*, 117-59.

²⁷ Wilber, *Integral Spirituality*, 233.

dimensions of reality (if not an infinite number as mathematics posits): the earthly plane of the human and material world; the intermediate plane of psychic phenomena or the dimension of angels and demons; the celestial plane or the dimension of Plato's perfect forms; and finally the plane of the infinite or pure Spirit.²⁸

Both Wilber and Huston Smith explain how the four dimensions of the micro-order of human anthropology reflect and relate to the macro-order of the cosmos: the body corresponds to the human or material plane; the mind, composed of both the human and transcendent spheres, corresponds to the psychic plane; the soul, the human element that "relates" to God constituting our most permanent self, corresponds to the celestial realm; and spirit, the human element identical with God and from which we derive our *imageo dei*, corresponds to the infinite realm.²⁹ In mystical theology, body, mind, soul and spirit create the complexity of the Self and all are integral to the development of the mystical consciousness.

Wilber and Smith acknowledge there are important experiential truths in this pre-modern human anthropological model; however, it must be reinterpreted to align with contemporary advances in knowledge. From a post-modern perspective, mind, soul and spirit may be considered referents for evolving levels of selfhood and higher states of consciousness, and once evolved are more than interior psychological states, ultimately becoming very real structures existing in the universe (rather than

²⁸ Wilber, *Integral Spirituality*, 213-29; Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth: The Common Vision of the World's Religions* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 34-59.

²⁹ Wilber, *Integral Spirituality*, 213-29; Smith, *Forgotten Truth*, 60-96.

corresponding to pre-existing structures as the ancients proposed).³⁰ As Wilber remarks:

Once a structure has evolved, *it exists independently of any particular human*, and becomes something that all humans must confront (i.e., develop through). At that point, it takes on all the “ontological” status required by any spiritual philosophy.³¹

To revise this human anthropological scheme from a post-modern context not only assures its integrity and fundamental truths, it also helps to validate the mystics’ interior experiences and their accounts of an ineffable reality.³² A particularly useful attribute of the model is its ability to logically present the divine paradox of “radical openness to which all of creation is oriented,” to use the language of Lanzetta, but also divine limitedness by which human transformation occurs.³³ The mystics’ attempt to explain the complete metamorphosis of the human mind through direct encounter with this ineffable cosmic consciousness may reveal new insights in human consciousness when studied through the lens of modern disciplines.

Honouring the Women Mystics

Wilber and others have done much to identify and map the several states of human consciousness as they relate to human biological, cognitive, moral, affective and interpersonal growth, as well as cultural and social stages of advancement. As Wilber observes, the women mystics of this study were primarily

³⁰ Wilber, *Integral Spirituality*, 269-73.

³¹ Wilber, *Integral Spirituality*, 272.

³² Wilber, *Integral Spirituality*, 271.

³³ Beverley Lanzetta, preface to *The Other Side of Nothingness: Toward a Theology of Radical Openness* (New York: SUNY Press, 2001), vii.

concerned with the “phenomenological stages of the spiritual path – i.e., the stages of felt experience and conscious events of the ‘I,’ as apprehended and seen from within, as it unfolds over time.”³⁴ Such an emphasis on the personal, interior life may well result in a highly developed mystical consciousness, although Wilber contends it may be to the exclusion of other vital human dimensions, the consequence of which may be arrested social and cultural attitudes.³⁵ While all five mystics of this study were grounded in the cultural milieu of their times, all lived lives of remarkable authenticity and freedom despite the historic, often harsh, social and cultural repression of women. As Lanzetta remarks, women must face the added burden of healing the deeply repressed inner self-loathing and worthlessness at the core of their being resulting from the unconscious accumulation of centuries-old, anti-female social and cultural attitudes. That this arduous task is even possible is exemplified by the great women mystics (making it for Lanzetta their key legacy), with the five of this study clearly taking the “heroic risk of disturbing the status quo to live life on the edge as the best way to live.”³⁶ All five women left a remarkable artistic legacy of their personal intimacy with God, a union so sustaining they were able to withstand powerful familial and cultural pressures and severe personal deprivation to assert their own independence and leadership, unique theology, and artistic vision. As mystics, they strove for insights and wisdom that have withstood the test of time; as theologians, they developed their own unique interpretations of key Christian

³⁴ Wilber, *Integral Spirituality*, 96.

³⁵ Wilber, *Integral Spirituality*, 97.

³⁶ Beverley Lanzetta, “Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology Study Guide,” <http://beverlylanzetta.net/2008081286/radical-wisdom-study-guide.html> (accessed April 6, 2010).

doctrines; as women, they struggled to speak with their own voice, which Fiorenza interprets as acts of feminist liberation and declaration, their remarkable roles as religious and community leaders and rich artistic heritage (largely unrecognized until quite recently although of the highest critical acclaim) are a testament to their integrity and creative vision.³⁷

³⁷ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Sharing Her Word: Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Context* (Boston: Beacon Hill Press, 1998), 77.

Chapter Three

Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941)

Mysticism is the art of union with Reality.

– Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*

The life of Evelyn Underhill is an inspiring example of a modern woman who appreciated the power and achievement of the modern sciences and technology, yet understood the complexity and disintegration of spiritual and religious meaning that came with the twentieth century. Her friend, T. S. Eliot, hailed her as a writer attuned to the great spiritual hunger of our times; her studies, he said “have the inspiration not primarily of the scholar or the champion of the forgotten genius, but of the consciousness of the grievous need of the contemplative element in the modern world.”³⁸ Underhill’s interpretation of the *unia mystica*, particularly the phase of purgation, brilliantly elucidates the role of suffering in developing the mystical consciousness and the path to pure love and wisdom.

Literary Legacy

Evelyn Underhill was a prolific author and wrote extensively on the subject of mysticism, drawing on the writings of the great mystics to explain her perspective. During her successful authorial career, Underhill wrote thirty-nine books and more than 350 articles and book reviews, including a small volume of satirical poems on the law, *The Bar-Lamb's Ballad Book*. Her masterpiece, *Mysticism: A Study*

³⁸ Helen Gardner, *The Composition of Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), 69-70, quoted in Dana Greene, introduction to *Evelyn Underhill: Artist of the Infinite Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 2.

in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness was released in 1911; other key works include *Practical Mysticism* and *The Mystics of the Church and Worship*. These sources, particularly Underhill's major work, *Mysticism*, are the basis from which this essay explores her interpretation of the mystical path and its role in manifesting pure love and wisdom.³⁹

Biographical Sketch

Evelyn Underhill was the only child of a financially and socially well-placed couple. She was primarily educated at home except for three years during her early adolescence when she attended a private boarding school and later, King's College, London, studying history and botany. At the age of thirty-two, she married her childhood companion, Hubert Stuart Moore, who, like Underhill's father, was a successful lawyer, yachtsman and commentator on the law. Underhill shared her father and husband's passion for yachting, becoming a certified master mariner herself, as well as writing. She also shared her mother's passion for traveling, and throughout her life, she regularly visited continental Europe.⁴⁰ Referring to Italy as "the holy land of Europe," continental travel gave Underhill the opportunity to pursue her passion for art, architecture, Church and monastic history.⁴¹

Devoted to her parents and husband throughout her life, Evelyn Underhill became fully engaged in the life of a barrister's daughter and wife (although

³⁹ Evelyn Underhill Association, "Introduction to Her Work," <http://www.evelynunderhill.org/> (accessed February 27, 2010).

⁴⁰ Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 1-7; Lumsden Barkway, ed., introduction to *An Anthology of the Love of God*, by Evelyn Underhill (New York: David McKay, 1955), 15-23.

⁴¹ Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 12.

never motherhood), performing the expected entertainment and charitable work; nevertheless, she managed to maintain her own rigorous daily regimen of research, writing, worship, prayer and meditation. Well read in the classics and Western spirituality and well informed in the philosophy, theology, psychology and physics of her day, Underhill was not only a respected author but also for a period of time, the religious editor of *The Spectator*.⁴²

Although never formally trained as a theologian, Underhill received an honorary Doctorate of Divinity from Aberdeen University and became a fellow of King's College. She was also the first woman to lecture to Anglican clergy and to conduct spiritual retreats for the Anglican Church, the religious institution in which she ultimately achieved considerable prominence.⁴³ Underhill was also one of the first woman theologians to lecture in English colleges and universities, as well as establish ecumenical links between denominations. She also became an award-winning bookbinder, studying with the most renowned masters of the time. Such a rich and diverse array of endeavours is a testament to a fundamental axiom by which Evelyn Underhill lived – all of life is sacred, being the true meaning of the incarnation.⁴⁴

Spiritual Life

Evelyn Underhill's amazing spiritual journey is not what one might expect. The Underhill household was not particularly pious, and Evelyn herself

⁴² Christopher J. R. Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941): An Introduction to her Life and Writings* (London: Mowbrays, 1975), 256-57.

⁴³ Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 2-3.

⁴⁴ Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 1-35.

claimed that “she was not brought up to religion.”⁴⁵ As a young woman, Underhill considered herself to be agnostic, claiming that she eventually came to God through philosophy, particularly the works of Plotinus and other Neo-Platonists, although judging by her travel notebooks, the art, architecture and landscape of Italy certainly deepened her spiritual yearnings.⁴⁶

During her young adulthood, Underhill surrounded herself with friends who had an intense interest in religion which they expressed in highly diverse ways. Amongst her closest acquaintances was Arthur Waite of the Golden Dawn, with whom she explored aspects of the occult, and the devout Roman Catholic J.A. Herbert, Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Museum, who introduced her to the treasure trove of medieval texts. It was also during this time that Underhill began to explore the writings of the Flemish mystic Ruysbroeck.⁴⁷

In her late twenties, Underhill began to put aside her interest in the occult to seriously explore institutionalized religion, recognizing the need to ground her spiritual journey in the traditions of the sacraments. Although she was deeply drawn to Catholicism, she ultimately did not convert, partly because of the vehement objections of her husband, but also because of the Modernist movement; instead she eventually came to recognize the Anglican Church as her spiritual centre. Neither her husband nor her parents ever shared her intense interest in spiritual matters.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 8.

⁴⁶ Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 12.

⁴⁷ Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 36-39; Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 14-17.

⁴⁸ Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 21-29.

In her late twenties and early thirties, Underhill wrote three highly unconventional, profoundly spiritual novels, *The Grey World* (1904), *The Lost Word* (1907) and *The Column of Dust* (1909). All three novels explore deeply mystical themes, indicating her direct experience with the mystical life and anticipating her great theoretical work on the subject. Taken together, the novels clearly express the idea that the true spiritual seeker must undergo total self-surrender, completely losing the private, selfish, egocentric self to eventually be “reborn” as a full participant in the divine life.⁴⁹ Clearly, Underhill was exploring through the format of the novel the mystical path to pure love, a subject which came to the forefront of her life in the writing of her great theoretical work, *Mysticism*.

Growth of Mystical Life

Underhill’s ultimate response to her need for a spiritual life was to embrace mysticism, believing there to be a natural human tendency to unite with Absolute Reality (a term she frequently used for the divine). For Underhill, mysticism is “not some rare, esoteric phenomenon, but a movement of the heart, open to all,” although the difficulty of the journey and degree of commitment required means it is fully realized by a few; the process and “ultimate consequence of the mystical quest are the same for everyone: to seek, to find, and to be transformed by the love of God.”⁵⁰ As Underhill explains:

⁴⁹ Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 82.

⁵⁰ Greene, “Adhering to God,” <http://www.spiritualitytoday.org/spir2day/873912greene.html> (accessed February 27, 2010).

To be a mystic is simply to participate here and now in that real and eternal life; in the fullest, deepest sense which is possible to man. It is to share as a free and conscious agent – not a servant, but a son – in the joyous travail of the Universe; its mighty onward sweep through pain and glory towards its home in God. This gift of “sonship,” this power of free co-operation in the world-process, is man’s greatest honour.⁵¹

For Underhill, the pure love of God manifested through the mystical union is the imperative inward urge, propelling the mystic forward. Underhill carefully describes divine love, stating it must never be understood as an emotion or sentiment; rather, she draws on Saint Thomas Aquinas, Ruysbroeck and other great mystics to describe divine love as a “holy energy” that fills the universe and is the essential activity of God.⁵²

Historical Context

As a citizen of the first half of the twentieth century, Underhill was informed about and recognized the value of modern science and the social sciences, and the contribution modern psychology was making toward understanding the psycho-dynamic of the mystical consciousness that had traditionally been expressed in theological terms. As her writings demonstrate, she was well aware of the recent developments in human psychology, using its modern schemas to explain the effects it has on the growth of the mystical consciousness. Underhill also recognized that the growth of science resulted in the development of new technologies, both for positive and negative ends, the two World Wars providing terrible testimony to the latter. Her

⁵¹ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (1930; repr., New York: Dover, 2002), 447.

⁵² Evelyn Underhill, “The Life of the Spirit in the Individual,” in *The Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today* (Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger, 1991), 154-59.

dramatic change in attitude toward the Second as compared with the First World War reflects the growth of her own mystical consciousness during the intervening years; having been a supporter of World War I, her position toward World War II was that of an ardent pacifist. During the last years of her life, she wrote several treatises and essays in support of pacifism, a moral/political position which most Britons considered ridiculous, even outrageous.⁵³

Perhaps Underhill's most important contribution to modern religious thought was her ability to redefine religion and what it means to be a religious person. While she recognized the importance of creed, doctrine and institution to a grounded faith, she equally recognized the great mystics and their direct experience of God as pure love and wisdom. Although Underhill was a transitional figure between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, displaying some of the limitations of the earlier age in her life and writings, she clearly understood and had a mystical apprehension of both the transcendence and the immanence of a God who is active in the world. It is the clarity with which she expresses this experience, the authenticity of her voice, the intelligence and knowledge of her psycho-spiritual analysis, and the compelling manner in which she wrote of the spiritual life, recognizing it as a legitimate element of every human being, which makes her work worthy of consideration by the modern age.⁵⁴ As Dana Green comments:

Grounded in the cultural assumptions and theological worldview of an earlier time, Evelyn Underhill is a bridge between her own times and ours. Firmly planted in her own class and station, she reaches over into ours; never one of us she is nonetheless not a stranger to us. The persistence of

⁵³ Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 129-46.

⁵⁴ Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 148.

her vision and the passion and single-mindedness with which she searched for the infinite life speaks across generations. Through her, past and present meet. Yes, Evelyn Underhill was a writer, one whose work was elegant, immediate, powerful, and accessible.⁵⁵

Primary Sources for a Study of the Transformative Map

In her seminal work, *Mysticism*, Underhill rigorously examines the process by which the great mystics prepared themselves for the demands of *unia mystica* and holy love. Her work on the mystical schema, as Wilber observes, has withstood the test of time because it draws on the experience of the world's most highly revered saints and sages, testimony that does not date easily. By giving their accounts considerable authority, Underhill, remarks Lanzetta, drew on the testimony of those who do more than just *know* about this reality, but have actually undergone the arduous struggle toward intimate unity with it.⁵⁶ Wilber also notes Underhill's scheme is quite similar to Daniel P. Brown's more recent survey of the Eastern path.⁵⁷ However, in addition to her rigorous research concerning the testimony of the great mystics, Underhill's work on this ancient scheme is equally strengthened by her formidable knowledge of philosophy, theology and psychology and her own direct experience of living a deeply committed Christian mystical life.⁵⁸

Drawing on the five-fold transformative map and her own mystical experiences and contemplative practices, Underhill beautifully outlined from a modern perspective the classical-five fold transformative map for reaching *unia*

⁵⁵ Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 6.

⁵⁶ Lanzetta, *The Other Side of Nothingness*, 16.

⁵⁷ Wilber, *Integral Spirituality*, 96.

⁵⁸ Bourgeault, e-mail message to author, October 31, 2009.

mystica which she called the *Mystic Way*. Underhill describes the *Mystic Way* as an evolutionary process involving the five classical stages, although progress through these phases is certainly not fixed, unvarying, or linear; as Underhill observes, some mystics experience these states as distinct and mutually exclusive, while others seem to omit stages altogether.⁵⁹ Underhill clearly identifies the *Mystic Way* as a psychological process by which the mystical consciousness usually establishes direct relations with Absolute Reality.⁶⁰

Self-Awakening

The first phase of the *Mystic Way* is the initial self-awakening in which the human consciousness becomes undeniably aware of divine reality. As Underhill remarks, for some mystics higher consciousness emerges gradually unmarked by a specific crisis, while others experience a noticeable disturbance in the equilibrium of the self; Saint Catherine of Genoa, at the moment of her awakening, was seized by a sudden and acute realization of both “divine splendour and divine sorrow” in the world. To self-awaken, explains Underhill, is to experience a new and more active plane of consciousness, a closer relationship with Absolute Reality, and a clearer understanding of the mission the mystic must fulfill.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 176-97.

⁶⁰ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 167.

⁶¹ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 176-78.

Purgation

Although the moment of self-awakening is initially joyful, it is soon followed by a painful descent into the “cell of self-knowledge” (in the words of Saint Catherine of Siena) to discover one’s finiteness, imperfections, and the many repressed illusions and emotional pain residing in the unconscious.⁶² In addition to this psychic debris, the mystic must also acknowledge the innate selfishness of her ego which makes her unworthy for a relationship with the divine, a recognition that contradicts the healthy mindedness of modern psychology; nevertheless such self-honesty is required if the mystic is to progress.⁶³ Rigorous self-honesty and radical humility to put aside the ego and permit the higher consciousness to emerge is required.

The second phase of the *Mystic Way*, i.e., *purgation*, the purification of the self, is a long, arduous but necessary journey of spiritual growth to achieve stable union with God. As McGinn remarks, mystical theology has historically considered purgation to be the necessary interior and exterior “training” of the body, mind and psyche in order to go beyond the effects of sin to create a purified, or in modern terms, a mature, individuated Self through which direct communion with absolute reality is possible.⁶⁴ Through purgative ascetic practice, the mystic learns to relinquish the egoic self, permitting the higher consciousness to emerge and force on the unwilling surface mind recognition of its weaknesses and shortcomings; the

⁶² Underhill, *Mysticism*, 200.

⁶³ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 202.

⁶⁴ McGinn, *Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, 47-48.

mystic's desire for growth in consciousness, union with God and fulfillment of her divinely ordered mission must be strong enough to persevere in this process. Few mystics describe the challenge of purgation and the necessity of perseverance better than Saint Catherine of Genoa.

“No more sins!” was the first cry of St. Catherine of Genoa in that crucial hour in which she saw by the light of love her own self-centered and distorted past. She entered forthwith upon the Purgative Way, in which for four years she suffered under a profound sense of imperfection, endured fasting, solitude and mortification; and imposed upon herself the most repulsive duties in her efforts towards that self-conquest which should make her “comfortable in her own measure” to the dictates of that Pure Love which was the aspect of reality that she had seen.⁶⁵

The interior must be purged of all emotional and psychic debris if the mystic is to be fully open to the divine: the more the mystic is cleansed, the greater the mystic's response to God, the clearer her vision becomes and the closer she is drawn to the divine source. For the great mystics, any and all obstacles become increasingly intolerable, which explains why some undergo the more extreme practices of purgation, as Underhill, quoting the mystic Johannes Tauler, notes:

“The crown must be firmly pressed down that is to bud and blossom in the Eternal Presence of My Heavenly Father. He who desires to be wholly immersed in the fathomless of My Godhead must also be deeply immersed in the deep sea of bitter sorrow.”⁶⁶

Having defined purgation and its overall purpose, Underhill analyzes its two fundamental tasks: (1) purge the personality of its negative traits, both physically and psychologically, through the practice of poverty, chastity and

⁶⁵ Richard Rolle, *The Amending of Life*, trans. Misyn (London: Orchard Books, 1927), cap. i, quoted in Underhill, *Mysticism*, 201.

⁶⁶ Johannes Tauler, “Sermon on St. Paul,” *The Inner Way: Being 36 Sermons for Festivals*, trans., A. W. Hutton (London: Library of Devotion, 1909), 14, quoted in Underhill, *Mysticism*, 222-23.

obedience, or in modern terms, detachment in the widest psychological sense, in order to (2) remake the personality by cultivating the eight classical Christian virtues through the process of mortification – i.e., the deliberate use of painful experiences and difficult tasks to build a virtuous character.⁶⁷ Although the two processes have been separated for discussion, detachment and mortification – i.e., the tearing down of the personality in order to rebuild it – are highly paradoxical and complex, being simultaneously parallel, reciprocal and integrative.

Detachment

Underhill remarks that all of the great mystics agree that the purging of negative character traits requires submission to the three great religious vows. The first of these is poverty or detachment, the silencing of personal desires, ambitions and fantasies to overcome the “thief” that is a part of every human personality; in psychological terms, poverty is to cease the destructive striving for survival and security. The second vow, chastity, is the silencing of the “hunter” in the human personality through cultivating a warm and loving heart purged of covetousness or indifference; in psychological terms, chastity is the refusal to judge others or require their approval or esteem. The third vow, obedience, is to live in humility and with “holy indifference” to the accidents of life, or in psychological terms, to live without the need for power and control.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 204-5.

⁶⁸ A psychological and theological discussion of detachment gathered from three sources: Cynthia Bourgeault, “Introduction to Christian Hermeticism,” (lecture series, Vancouver School of Theology, Vancouver, BC, July 18-22, 2005); Valentin Tomberg, *Introduction to Christian Hermeticism* (Dorset: Element, 1993), 99-123; Underhill, *Mysticism*, 205-16.

Ultimately, the goal of the ancient religious vows is to strip the human consciousness of trying to find God in things which are less than God and do not possess the character of Absolute Reality.⁶⁹ “Holy poverty,” explains Underhill, is to recognize the true value of things and the conscious act of making “selfless use and not selfish abuse” of their loveliness; to develop a detached mental attitude is to open space for the highest attachment, which is God;⁷⁰ attachment to anything else inevitably results in world-weariness, disappointment and cynicism.⁷¹

Determining what one is unhealthily attached to, however, requires rigorous self-examination; material possessions, status, position, education, friends, family, special interests, sensual pleasures, etc.; any and all of these things must be renounced if they create conflicting centres of interest in the mind. Furthermore, the thing to be renounced and the degree of renunciation are different for every mystic; as Underhill remarks, the very thing which for one is an impediment to spiritual growth may be for another a channel of spiritual perception. The key, insists Underhill, is the reaction of the self to the things that are retained, holy poverty being achieved only when one cannot remember if one is owed anything, defined by anything or indebted to anyone.⁷²

Although obviously of great benefit to psycho-spiritual health, detachment is exceedingly difficult to practice as even Underhill attests. During her late forties and early fifties, Underhill experienced a particularly difficult period of

⁶⁹ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 210.

⁷⁰ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 216.

⁷¹ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 210.

⁷² Underhill, *Mysticism*, 215.

inner psychic turmoil and spiritual blackness, involving what she called her “claimfulness and possessiveness of others.”⁷³ As Underhill ardently wrote in her journal:

I am in constant conflict with hateful feelings of claimfulness, bitterness, jealousy, uncharitableness which swamp my soul in spite of desperate struggles. I never knew what temptation really was before. It’s like a devil.⁷⁴

Root trouble is intense possessiveness deeply and suddenly injured and unable to adapt itself. The result is the formation of a severe neurosis having a deep scar right across the soul. Condition is aggravated by chronic overstrain but the Godward life is still active and still strongest treatment; avoid touching or rousing the wound, still to tender to bear it. Leave that, accepting the fact that the bouts of suffering do arise from the above cause.⁷⁵

Despite her intellectually clear and lucid understanding of the problem and her own theological knowledge of the purpose of detachment, Underhill struggled fiercely with this difficult psycho-spiritual neurosis. Fortunately, because of her single-minded commitment to the Christian mystical life, she was always able to continue her spiritual journey. Of giving spiritual direction to others during her periods of spiritual darkness, Underhill made this remarkably insightful comment:

Yes, I think too it is possible to be used as a channel without feeling peace, indeed, while often feeling on the surface in a tornado! Nevertheless, the essential ground of the soul is held in tranquility, even through the uproar and every now and then the soul perceives this. The real question is not Peace = satisfied feeling, but Peace = willed abandonment.⁷⁶

⁷³ Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 106-7.

⁷⁴ Evelyn Underhill, Green Notebook, “Confessional, 1925,” Evelyn Underhill Collection, Archives, King’s College, London, quoted in Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 233-34.

⁷⁵ Evelyn Underhill, Flowered Notebook, “Reginald Somerset Ward Advice: Later, 1933,” Evelyn Underhill Collection, Archives, King’s College, London, quoted in Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 108.

⁷⁶ Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 109.

Mortification

Through detachment, the personality is stripped of its weaknesses, faults and desires, creating open space for an inflow of divine energy, providing the strength to undergo the second great purgatorial task, mortification, the process by which the virtues are cultivated. Essentially, mortification is the remaking of the personality through the spiritual exercises of asceticism and self-denial.

Of all the spiritual processes, mortification is the most difficult for the modern mind to comprehend since it embraces pain as a means of spiritual growth – “no progress without pain’ is the law of the inner life,” explains Underhill.⁷⁷ As “gymnasium” exercises for the mind, mortification strengthens the mystic’s mind and will until she *consciously* realizes that not only through the “warp of beauty” but equally, “the weft of corruption” the tapestry of life is woven.⁷⁸ The mystic comes to realize the darkness and pain of the inner self and the existential angst of the human condition are actually the alchemical dross from which the mystic remakes herself; to *consciously* embrace the most painful experiences and repulsive things yields the highest personal growth and the greatest revelation of the divine.⁷⁹ As Underhill explains, “the deeper and more supernaturally a man crushes himself beneath all things, the more supernaturally will he be drawn far above all things.”⁸⁰ Such a mystical truth led Saint Catherine of Genoa to seek out plague victims, serving them

⁷⁷ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 223.

⁷⁸ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 218, 224.

⁷⁹ Cynthia Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2004), 102-10.

⁸⁰ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 223.

with great love and humility, and Saint Catherine of Siena to fast rigorously, reputedly living only on the bread of communion, yet still retaining good health.⁸¹

The phase of purgation is a crucial human trial since it is where the mystic consciously learns that joy and suffering are equally resolved in God's love. Perhaps the key lesson of the mystical journey, its importance is delightfully expressed in the metaphors the great mystics used to describe the process. Referred to as the "Game of Chess," and the "Game of Love" which God plays with the desirous soul," these metaphorical titles specifically refer to the painful oscillation between the mystic's bitter battles with unworthiness and the acutely felt suffering of the world, and those joyous moments of transcendental *illumination*, all of which is a test toward stable union with God.⁸² As Underhill describes:

"It is the 'game of chess,'" says St. Teresa, "in which *humility* is the Queen without whom none can checkmate the Divine King." Thus, St. Catherine of Siena, that inspired psychologist, was told in ecstasy, "With the souls who have arrived at perfection, I play no more the Game of Love, which consists in leaving and returning again to the soul."⁸³

While the development of humility of the "most far-reaching kind" is the key purpose of mortification, it must be done with the light-heartedness of Saint Teresa, whose attitude attests to the degree of integrity with which the mystic is expected to enter into the journey of *unia mystica*.⁸⁴ Interestingly, humility, a word which the contemporary era neither values nor understands much, is derived from the

⁸¹ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 59.

⁸² Underhill, *Mysticism*, 227.

⁸³ Saint Teresa "Camino de Perfeccion," *Obras de Santa Teresa de Jesús*, editadas y anotadas por P. Silerverio de S. Teresa (Burgos, 1915-1926), cap. xvii; Caterina da Genova, *Dialogo di S. Caterina da Genova* (Milano, 1882), cap. lxxviii, quoted in Underhill, *Mysticism*, 227-28.

⁸⁴ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 221.

Latin root, *humus* or “earth,” and actually means to be “deeply grounded” since only then do we have the strength to face our own weaknesses.⁸⁵ Lanzetta insists that to practice radical humility is the “surest sign of our capacity for grace, and of our ability to bear the unmediated splendour of life.”⁸⁶ Ultimately, humility requires deep honesty about the self to recognize what is debased in us but also what is holy.⁸⁷

Illumination

Eventually, explains Underhill, the trials of purgation, its clearing away of psychic debris and the purification of the human will, finally ends, the result being the release of new energy, vitality and the joys of the *illuminative* state. With its emergence, the mystical consciousness has achieved, though not *unia mystica*, at least a solid certitude about God and a real vision and knowledge of the divine life; as Underhill explains, the mystic has “begun a willing and harmonious revolution” about, but not yet union with the divine.⁸⁸

Dark Night of the Soul

Beyond *illumination* there is a fourth state that Underhill, borrowing the language of Saint John of the Cross, calls the *dark night of the soul* or what other mystics refer to as *aridity*. This state, reached by only the most committed mystics, is

⁸⁵ Esther de Waal, *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 45.

⁸⁶ Lanzetta, *The Other Side of Nothingness*, 131.

⁸⁷ Frances Hare, thesis comment to author, May 15, 2010.

⁸⁸ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 234.

the last step toward complete purification; the suffering, as Lanzetta notes, becomes immense since the soul or higher Self is learning complete detachment in order to concentrate all its passion on the divine presence.⁸⁹ As a difficult trial and test of the mystic's resolve, it is marked by terrible confusion, helplessness, bitter self-contempt, stagnation of the will and a painful sense of the withdrawal of God's presence.

Underhill draws on the experiences of Saint Catherine of Genoa to convey the divine intent:

In order to raise the soul from perfection, said the voice of God to St. Catherine in her Dialogue, "I withdraw Myself from her sentiment, depriving her of former consolations... which I do in order to humiliate her, and cause her to seek Me in truth, and to prove her in the light of faith, so that she comes to prudence."⁹⁰

As difficult and painful as the spiritual state of aridity is, Underhill attests to its importance, its purpose being to eliminate any last vestige of selfhood; the mystic motto, "I am nothing, I have nothing, I desire nothing," must express not only sensory detachment but a complete and utter surrender to God.⁹¹

Unitive State

With perseverance and commitment the trial of the dark night, like purgation, eventually ends and the mystic finally reaches the goal of all her struggles, *unia mystica*. One does not have to read much of the mystics to clearly apprehend the

⁸⁹ Lanzetta, *The Other Side of Nothingness*, 31.

⁹⁰ Caterina da Genova, *Dialogo*, cap. lxiii, quoted in Underhill, *Mysticism*, 398.

⁹¹ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 400.

defining element of this highly integrated state – i.e., the primacy of God’s pure love
– as Underhill herself attests:

The simplest expression of the Unitive Life, the simplest interpretation which we can put on its declarations, is that it is the complete and conscious fulfillment here and now of this Perfect Love.⁹²

Filled completely with the Divine Will and able to transmute all pain and suffering with the help of God’s pure love, the mystic now takes up her destiny, becoming the mediator between humanity and eternity. For to walk the *Mystic Way* is never for the benefit of oneself but only to serve others; this is a fundamental truth all the great women mystics of this study lived. As Lanzetta remarks, any notion of theological or spiritual truth that lacks the ability to heal the human condition and to strengthen rather than divide the human community is bereft of divine generosity, love, wisdom and compassion.⁹³

Worship and Prayer

Central to the mystical life and on which the classical map to higher consciousness depends is prayer, and in her last major, remarkable work, *Worship*, Underhill not only takes up ecumenism long before it became fashionable, she identifies the critical importance of the traditions of institutional worship and prayer, insisting it has the requisite power, if one submits to it, of purifying, enlightening and transforming one’s life, but only if worship does not decline out of human anthropocentric need “from adoration to demand and the supernatural to the ethical.”

⁹² Underhill, *Mysticism*, 427.

⁹³ Lanzetta, introduction to *The Other Side of Nothingness*, viii.

If it is reduced to this petty subjectivism, Underhill contends it cannot grow up enough to fathom the “knowledge of the massive realities of that spiritual universe in which we live and grow.”⁹⁴ Underhill insists the human response to worship and prayer that emphasizes both the transcendence and love of God is *adherence* to the divine will, and finally *cooperation* with God’s work in the healing of a broken society. Only through reciprocity of love between God and us, says Underhill, can we come to love our enemies and to “do good to those who hate you.”⁹⁵

Evelyn Underhill: Contemporary Interpreter of the Transformative Map

As an educated lay woman who understood the twentieth century and the barrenness of the spiritual landscape, Evelyn Underhill speaks with spiritual authority and authenticity to a contemporary audience. In her discussion of the universal, organic process for achieving *unia mystica*, Underhill uses the most developed cases, that of the great mystics; however, she is very clear to explain they are meant to be examples of guidance, courage and inspiration for our own journey. Underhill’s fundamental message is consistent with the great women mystics; to be fully human we must journey the *Mystic Way*, undergoing the trials of purgation, as both an interior and exterior process, and the rigorous practice of mature prayer, that we might ultimately attain mystical union with God and cooperate in his work of saving the world. Her remarkably lucid explanation of the *Mystic Way* and the role of purgation and the “dark nights,” and the critical importance of prayer grounded in the

⁹⁴ Evelyn Underhill, *Worship* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 17.

⁹⁵ Underhill, *Worship*, 17-18.

best of Christian religious tradition begin to make the testimony of the women
medieval mystics comprehensible, with Julian of Norwich the mystical epitome of the
Middle Ages.

Chapter Four

Julian of Norwich (1342-1416)

Of all pains that lead to liberation the worst is to see your loved one suffer.
– Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*

Julian of Norwich, who Evelyn Underhill referred to as a “genius for the infinite” has left us with one of the most remarkable and beautiful of texts in the English Christian tradition, *Revelations of Divine Love*.⁹⁶ A contemplative study of a series of powerful visions Julian experienced when she was about age thirty, *Revelations of Divine Love* spans the most profound mysteries of the Christian faith. Its brilliance and relevance to the modern age was recognized by Thomas Merton who acknowledged Julian’s preeminence as a theologian.⁹⁷ Merton writes:

In Julian of Norwich, we find an admirable synthesis of mystical experience and theological reflection, ranging from “bodily visions” of the passion of Christ to “intellectual visions” of the Trinity...⁹⁸

Although the primary concern of *Revelations* is to present Julian’s “showings” and meditative reflections, the book is its own witness to the mystical experience. Julian’s direct experience of the mystical union led her to interpret it from a cosmic perspective, the *unia mystica* being the means for human salvation and triumph over evil, and that sin and suffering are “behovely,” or beneficial since it is the way we come to know God and ourselves:

⁹⁶ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 467.

⁹⁷ Denise Nowakowski Baker, *Julian of Norwich’s Showings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 165.

⁹⁸ Baker, *Julian of Norwich’s Showings*, 165.

We need to fall and we need to realize this. If we never fell we should never know how weak and wretched we are in ourselves; nor should we fully appreciate the astonishing love of our Maker... By the simple fact that we fell we shall gain a deep a wonderful knowledge of what God's love means.⁹⁹

It is a great thing to know in our heart that God, our Maker, indwells in our soul.¹⁰⁰

Literary Legacy

While Chaucer was writing poetry in London, Julian was composing *Revelations* in Norwich; both were writing in Middle English, reflecting the rise of vernacular languages which occurred during the fourteenth century. *Revelations* is such a uniquely beautiful composition some scholars consider it to be almost a prose poem, making such superior use of several literary devices that it holds its rhythm even when translated into modern English. Julian's use of the vernacular language, avoidance of Latin theological terms, and balanced and rhythmical syntax makes her work surprisingly accessible to a modern sensibility.¹⁰¹ The style and tone of her writing reflects an honest, obedient, integrated person who left an account of her visions simply because she felt compelled to do so, and wished to share her experience with her fellow Christian contemplatives. So genuine is the authorial voice of *Revelations* that most scholars are prepared to accept Julian's description of her illness as a genuine physical sickness, and to support "the claim that this rather

⁹⁹ Julian of Norwich, *Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Clifton Wolters (Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1986), 172.

¹⁰⁰ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 157.

¹⁰¹ Clifton Wolters, trans., introduction to *Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love*, by Julian of Norwich, 17-20.

‘down-to-earth’ and practical woman did receive insight into matters about which it is unlikely that she could have had informed and balanced views.”¹⁰² As Julian explains:

The fact that I have had this revelation does not mean that I am good. I am good only in so far that as I love God the better: if you love God more than do I then you are by that much better than I. I am not trying to tell the wise something they know already; but I am seeking to tell the uninstructed, for their peace and comfort... When I look at myself in particular I am obviously of no account, but by and large I am hopeful, for I am united in love with all my fellow Christians.¹⁰³

Biographical Sketch

Little is known about Julian of Norwich’s life apart from the few facts she herself mentions in *Revelations*, some contemporary references to her in wills (in which she is a beneficiary), and the writings of the pilgrim, Margery Kempe, who visited Julian, finding her to be a “sympathetic, shrewd and learned person, with her feet very much on the ground.”¹⁰⁴ A scribal introduction to one of the few extant copies of *Revelations* offers another clue claiming the document to be “a vision shown by the goodness of God to a devout woman and her name is Julian, who is recluse at Norwich and still alive, AD 1413.”¹⁰⁵

Most scholars agree that Julian of Norwich was an anchoress at the Church of Saint Julian in Norwich, England, devoting her life to liturgical participation, spiritual counsel, and disciplined prayer. Given the high degree of theological sophistication underpinning the *Revelations*, Julian obviously received

¹⁰² Wolters, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 29.

¹⁰³ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 75.

¹⁰⁴ Wolters, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 17.

¹⁰⁵ Baker, *Julian of Norwich's Showings*, 3.

some type of education, although where and how she obtained it is of considerable scholarly debate. Most scholars believe she must have had access to the excellent libraries that were attached to the Church and the nearby friary. Her own protestations of ignorance are certainly ambiguous; she may have simply meant she was not fully literate in Latin, or perhaps she was following in the tradition of piety, stressing love of God over knowledge.¹⁰⁶ Julian obviously had a solid foundation in the Bible since she frequently quotes scripture. The theology of *Revelations* also displays familiarity with other sophisticated sources, particularly the mystical works of Pseudo-Dionysius.¹⁰⁷

Spiritual Life

The fourteenth century, the historical period in which English mysticism flourished, is sometimes referred to as the “Golden Age of the English Recluse.” Considered to be the highest form of Christian life, reclusion was widely practiced; apparently, every town of any consequence tried to provide for at least one recluse, often quite substantially, because of the spiritual good they were seen to provide.¹⁰⁸

Since Julian lived as an anchoress, scholars generally agree that she would have been familiar with the thirteenth century text, the *Ancrene Riwe*,

¹⁰⁶ Elisabeth Dutton, ed., introduction to *Julian of Norwich: A Revelation of Love*, by Julian of Norwich (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 8-11.

¹⁰⁷ Wolters, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 17-20.

¹⁰⁸ Wolters, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 21-25.

governing several anchoritic matters including interaction with the outside world.¹⁰⁹ The anchorhold itself, usually a small suite of rooms, was attached to a church, which meant anchoresses were not secluded like nuns, but were expected to serve as models of extreme sanctity for the parish, providing counsel and prayers on behalf of the community. The *Ancrene Riwe* also provides prescriptions for diet, dress and of course the inner life, outlining a fairly tight schedule of prayers and devotional meditation, including *lectio divina*. These were the anchoress' primary activities and were specifically designed to encourage mystical experiences.¹¹⁰ It appears that extreme ascetic practices were avoided; Julian herself seems to have advocated moderation in all things, remarking it is more important to accept the penance God sends in the ordinary course of one's life since it can be difficult enough to endure with patience. Nevertheless, it can clearly be said, the life of an anchoress was one of self-denial and of being cell-bound until her death.¹¹¹ That Julian had actually embraced this difficult ascetic practice may be seen in her comparison of the body to a "purse" which is "opened and shut by God when he comes down to us in our humblest needs," using her own literal enclosure as a metaphor of intimacy for her relationship with divine.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, vol 3 of *The Presence of God*, 188.

¹¹⁰ Wolters, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 23-24.

¹¹¹ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 199-200.

¹¹² Andrea Janelle Dickens, *The Female Mystic: Great Women Thinkers of the Middle Ages* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 145.

Key Mystical Event

At age thirty-one, Julian underwent the profound mystical experience that forms the basis of *Revelations of Divine Love*. Although she had ardently prayed for this trial, she was surprised when God granted it; apparently, so much time had elapsed between her request and its fulfillment she had quite forgotten her original petition.

The mystical event for which Julian had prayed concerned the gift of three graces: the first was to experience the pain and suffering of the Passion that “I might acquire the more true mind of Christ;” the second was to experience all the pains and suffering of dying, that “I might be purged by the mercy of God, and afterward live more to the worship of God because of that sickness;” and the third was to receive the spiritual “wounds” of true contrition, loving compassion, and of willful longing toward God.¹¹³ While Julian prayed to receive the first two petitions only if they aligned with God’s will, the last she asked for without condition.¹¹⁴

On May 8, 1373, Julian records that she became so gravely ill she “felt dead from the waist downwards,” although she remained conscious the entire time, able to participate in her own last rites; nevertheless, the experience was so real she felt regret at having wished for death at so young an age.¹¹⁵ This near-mortal illness, which came to her “with great urgency,” seems to have acted as an extremely difficult purgatorial trial. Laying on what she thought was her death bed and while gazing at a

¹¹³ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 63-64.

¹¹⁴ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 64.

¹¹⁵ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 64-65.

crucifix which a priest had given her that it “might comfort her,” Julian experienced a series of sixteen powerful visions which, as they are presented in *Revelations*, indicate an advancement of her thought regarding certain key themes: those concerning God as being pure love, the essential meaning of the Trinity, to ultimately triumph over sin; those concerning the perfect love God has for humankind; and those concerning God’s love as the path to heaven.¹¹⁶

In the seventh revelation, Julian recounts her own experience with purgation. Her description of the painful oscillation between the mystic’s battles with unworthiness and depression and those joyous moments of illumination is similar to Saint Teresa’s “‘Game of Chess’ God plays with the desirous soul” to encourage the growth of humility:

[I experienced] a sense of loneliness and depression, and the futility of life; I was so tired of myself that I could scarcely bother to live... Yet soon after this our blessed Lord gave once again that comfort and rest, so pleasant and sure, so delightful and powerful... And then I felt the pain again; then the joy and pleasure; now it was one, and now the other, many times. When I was glad I was ready to say with St Paul, “Nothing shall separate me from the love of Christ,” and when I suffered, I could have said with Peter “Lord, save me; I perish!” I understood this vision to mean that it was for their own good that some souls should have this sort of experience: sometimes to be consoled; sometimes to be bereft and left to themselves.¹¹⁷

Continuing her commentary, Julian explains that to overcome the malaise of loneliness and despair is an arduous but necessary struggle since “we are to leave them at once, and keep ourselves in his everlasting joy.”¹¹⁸ Clearly, any

¹¹⁶ Wolters, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 40-44.

¹¹⁷ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 86.

¹¹⁸ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 87.

unhealthy attachment to the egoistic pleasure/pain principle, to use modern terminology, is to be valiantly fought against.

Obviously, the illness Julian suffered was her own purgatorial *dark night of the soul*, and was extremely real. Lanzetta interprets Julian's purgatorial experience involving her entire body as an attempt to recognize the wholeness of women and to create an embodied mysticism in which the female body is not simply a biological tool for procreation but the site through which women experience the "presence of truth and awe."¹¹⁹ McGinn also acknowledges this unusual relationship between suffering and illness (both physical and psychological) and the mystical states not only of Julian but also of Saint Catherine and Saint Teresa.¹²⁰ Ultimately, Julian fully recovered from her quite devastating illness to be filled with the grace of her final petition, a perennial yearning for God. She went on to live at least another twenty years spending much of it meditating on what she had been "shown," eventually writing a detailed analysis of her revelations.

Historical Context

Julian's spiritual life must have been especially challenging because of the historical age in which she lived. The prolific growth Northern Europe had enjoyed for three centuries prior to 1300 ended at the beginning of the century, after which came a period of social catastrophe and economic collapse. Marked by the great famine of 1315-22 and the devastating pandemic of the bubonic plague, which

¹¹⁹ Lanzetta, "Radical Wisdom Study Guide," <http://beverlylanzetta.net/2008081286/radical-wisdom-study-guide.html> (accessed April 6, 2010).

¹²⁰ McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 301-02.

Central Theological Premise: Perfect Divine Love

Central to Julian's theology and critical to her cosmic understanding of sin and suffering is the unconditional love of God. All other divine attributes simply reinforce her appreciation of God's perfect love, his nature being kind, compassionate, generous and faithful, able to call forth devotion and the creation of an intimate relationship. In a remarkable passage of the fourteenth revelation, Julian explains the mystical union of God and humankind, pointing to the realization of the human capacity for the divine:

How greatly should we rejoice that God indwells in our soul! Even more that our soul dwells in God. Our created soul is to be God's dwelling place: and the soul's dwelling place is to be God, who is uncreated. It is a great thing to know in our heart that God, our Maker, indwell our soul. Even greater is it to know that our soul, our created soul, dwells on the substance of God. Of that substance, God, are we what we are!¹²⁴

For Julian divine love reaching down to dwell within humankind is the means by which we are lifted up. Her famous reflection on the tiny hazelnut, its visionary appearance quite surprising her because of its inconsequentiality, underscores her belief in the glorious magnanimity of God's love:

And [God] showed me more, a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, on the palm of my hand, round like a ball. I looked at it thoughtfully and wondered, 'What is this?' And the answer came, 'It is all that is made.' I marveled that it continued to exist and did not suddenly disintegrate it was so small. And again my mind supplied the answer, 'It exists, both now and for ever, because God loves it;' in short, everything owes its existence to the love of God.¹²⁵

Julian saw in this a paradox: human beings must love all creation since it is made complete and loved and sustained by God, yet at the same time recognize

¹²⁴ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 157.

¹²⁵ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 68.

Because of the light we live; because of the night we suffer and grieve. Through this grief we earn reward and thanks from God! With the help of mercy and grace, we know and trust our light quite deliberately, and with it we go forward intelligently and firmly. When we are done with grief our eyes will be suddenly enlightened, and in the shining brightness of the light we shall see perfectly. For our light is none other than God our Maker.... So did I see and understand that faith is our light in darkness and our light is God, the everlasting Day.¹³³

Julian recognizes evil as the powers of darkness and chaos, which as dialectical forces to light and order, are incorporated into creation where, she insists, they are under divine control, possessing only limited power.¹³⁴ Since darkness and chaos play a vital role in creation, they could plausibly be considered creatures of God, a view Northrop Frye observes is supported by the biblical account of creation:¹³⁵

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.¹³⁶

And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.¹³⁷

Although evil as darkness and chaos are integral to creation, Julian contends these forces derive their power from being nothing – i.e., from non-being – and are to be despised as such.¹³⁸ To understand evil from this perspective may be

¹³³ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 209.

¹³⁴ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 83.

¹³⁵ Northrop Frye and Jay Macpherson, *Biblical and Classical Myths: The Mythological Framework of Western Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 184.

¹³⁶ Genesis 1-2 [The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Revised Standard Version].

¹³⁷ Genesis 3-5 [The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Revised Standard Version].

¹³⁸ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 103-4, 109-11; Joan M. Nuth, *Wisdom's Daughter: The Theology of Julian of Norwich* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 130.

accounted for in the deceptively complex meaning of “nothing” which as Frye notes can mean “not anything” and something called “Nothing,” usually spelled with a capital N. Frye presents Jacob Boehme’s view of what it means for God to exist as co-eternal with Nothing:

Boehme’s vision of the creation anticipates Hegel in speaking of a negating of negation, a transforming of God from nothing to an infinite something, which left the nothingness behind as a kind of vacuum suction drawing everything within its reach into non-being. The abandoned nothingness is the principle of evil, the Lucifer or light-bearer which turns into the adversary of light, or Satan, after the light or word has freed itself.¹³⁹

As the *Parable of the Lord and Servant* demonstrates, Julian was very much concerned with the growth of individual soul, but it was always within the context of God’s cosmic plan into which all of creation is subsumed. Her theology of growth in human maturity is very much rooted in a cosmic perspective, since only then, she says, is it possible for us to accept evil as part of the human condition. Her dialectical interpretation of evil is reflective of a unitive consciousness, able to hold and integrate the tension of all opposites including darkness and light; a unitive perspective of the cosmos reflects Julian’s unitive consciousness or to use her term, “oneing,” or unity with God.¹⁴⁰ Julian’s vision of God as a “single point,” an ancient mystical symbol for the divine, attests to her own purgatorial journey to attain unitive consciousness:

¹³⁹ Northrop Frye, *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature* (Toronto: Penguin, 1992), 289.

¹⁴⁰ Julian of Norwich, *The Showings of Julian of Norwich*, 84.

“scourge” of humankind, it will ultimately be resolved in God’s plan.¹⁴⁵ As Julian remarks,

Synne is behovely but alle shalle be wele, and alle shalle be wele, and all manner of thyng shalle be wele.¹⁴⁶

Baker and Joan Nuth exegetically examine the Middle English word “behovely,” describing it to mean not only “necessary” or “requisite,” but also “useful,” “profitable,” “beneficial,” “good;” after many years of meditation, Julian eventually came to realize that although there is nothing good in sin and evil, God is powerful enough to bring “benefit” out of it.¹⁴⁷ She even contends that God rejoices with compassion over human suffering because of the great benefit it brings:

I could now understand how our Lord rejoiced in the tribulations of his servants, though with pity and compassion. To bring them to bliss, he imposes on each one he loves some particular thing, which while it carries no blame in his sight causes them to be blamed by the world, despised, scorned, mocked and rejected.¹⁴⁸

As Baker observes, Julian’s interpretation of God’s astonishing response to human trials and suffering depends on recognizing the real function and purpose of sin and evil: whether our fault or not, its fundamental role is not punitive as Augustine taught, but pedagogical, its critical purpose being to help us gain self-knowledge and knowledge of God.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 120.

¹⁴⁶ Julian of Norwich, *The Showings of Julian of Norwich*, 39.

¹⁴⁷ Baker, *Julian of Norwich’s Showings*, 70-71; Nuth, *Wisdom’s Daughter*, 129-30.

¹⁴⁸ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 105.

¹⁴⁹ Baker, *Julian of Norwich’s Showings*, 70-71.

Negative Effects of Sin and Suffering

To understand how such a magnificent benefit as knowing God and our selves is derived from sin, Nuth points out that Julian spends considerable time carefully analyzing its very negative effects on the human self, concluding its greatest damage is to the *imageo dei*.¹⁵⁰ After many years meditating on the allegory of the lord and servant, she interpreted the servant's fall as loss of union with God; no longer able to see himself in the likeness of his creator, the servant sustains a devastating blow to his *imageo dei*. It is a point she emphatically emphasizes:

And then I saw the lord look at his servant with rare love and tenderness, and quietly send him to a certain place to fulfill his purpose. Not only does that servant go, but he starts off at once, running with all speed, in his love to do what his master wanted. And without warning he falls headlong into a deep ditch, and injures himself very badly. And though he groans and moans and cries and struggles he is quite unable to get up or help himself in any way. To crown all, he could get no relief of any sort: he could not even turn his head to look at the lord who loved him, and who was close to him.¹⁵¹

Julian continues the meditation by carefully noting how deeply wounded the servant is by his fall into the pit:

His pain was sevenfold. First of all there was the severe bruising which resulted from his fall, and was hurting very much: then there was the sheer weight of his body; thirdly there was the consequent weakness following these two factors; fourthly his mind was shocked, and he could not see the reason for it all – so that he almost forgot the love that has spurred him on; and there was the fifth and further fact that he could not get up; moreover, in the sixth place – and this I found quite extraordinary – he was quite alone: wherever I looked, high and low, far and near, I could see none to help him; and lastly there was the hard rough surface on to which he had fallen.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ Nuth, *Wisdom's Daughter*, 120-24.

¹⁵¹ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 141.

¹⁵² Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 141-42.

What makes the fall into sin and subsequent loss of the *imageo dei* so calamitous for Julian, observes Nuth, is its serious truncation of human growth and ultimately, self-knowledge. Without steadfast reliance on God, the accumulation of a lifetime of “our frailty and our falls, our breakdowns and our ineffectiveness, our hurt pride and our rejection” simply traps us in our own pain, and we lose our “might,” falling into sloth and *acedia*, or in modern terms, passivity and despair.¹⁵³ This rupture between creature and Creator also destroys vital access to divine wisdom, which Julian believes is particularly detrimental, since the chasm between human and divine intelligence and wisdom is vast, God’s light being such that “we can live in profitably and go forward intelligently and firmly.”¹⁵⁴ As Nuth comments, too much pain and too little wisdom inevitably leads to a self-absorbed preoccupation with our own suffering and with evil in the world to hopelessly confuse the human will.¹⁵⁵

Benefits of Suffering: To Reveal and Heal Human Weakness and Pain

Julian contends the only way out of the existentiality of the human condition is through fidelity to and union with God; only his infinite love can help us develop the necessary courage, humility and wisdom to face the difficulties of life and our own unworthiness:

In his merciful way our Lord shows us our sin and weakness by that light, lovely and gracious, which shines from himself. Our sin is so vile and so

¹⁵³ Nuth, *Wisdom's Daughter*, 122; Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 174.

¹⁵⁴ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 210.

¹⁵⁵ Nuth, *Wisdom's Daughter*, 124-26.

Benefits of Suffering: To Restore and Increase the Imago Dei

As Nuth observes, however, Julian insists divine love and mercy does far more than reveal and heal our pain; God's desire for unity with humanity has a far nobler purpose – that of removing the obstructions that prevent our “full flowering,” ensuring not only restoration but the increase of our *imago dei*.¹⁶⁰ This is accomplished through Christ who dwells in our soul:

“We are all enfolded in him and he in us.” And this inclusion is mentioned in the sixteenth revelation where he is spoken of as “seated in our soul.” It is his pleasure and bliss to reign in our intelligence and to sit at ease in our soul, dwelling there eternally, working us all into himself. In this task he wants us to help him, giving him our whole attention, learning his lessons, keeping his laws, wanting all that he does to be achieved and really trusting him. I saw indeed that our essential being is in God!¹⁶¹

Through the conscious realization and activation of the indwelling Christ, our yearning for God and our ability to love ourselves and others is increased, as is our capacity to receive the three-fold knowledge of divine wisdom:

There are three kinds of knowledge as far as we are concerned: (i) that we know our Lord God; (ii) that we know ourselves, what we are by nature and by grace; and (iii) that we know in all humility what our self has become because of our sin and weakness.¹⁶²

Julian brilliantly illuminates the purpose of sin and suffering, clearly interpreting it as the purgatorial process by which we achieve not only psycho-spiritual growth, but unity with God and the full flowering of our *imago dei*. She identifies the extreme paradox of sin and suffering as the purgatorial means through which we can achieve the fullest realization of ourselves, but only if we are able to

¹⁶⁰ Nuth, *Wisdom's Daughter*, 135-36.

¹⁶¹ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 164.

¹⁶² Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 191.

turn completely to God for healing, solace, fortitude, strength – to give our life entirely over to the divine union. As Julian acknowledges, however, this is hard work: like the servant in the parable who begins as Adam but ends as Christ, we must consciously come to realize that we are to be “gardeners” diligently tilling the soil:

[The servant] was off to do work the hardest and most exhausting possible. He was to be a gardener, digging and banking, toiling and sweating, turning and trenching the ground, watering the plants the while. And by keeping at his work he would make sweet streams to flow, fine abundant fruits to grow; he would bring them to his lord, and serve them to his taste.¹⁶³

All the rigorous efforts of tilling the soil are more than rewarded by the earth’s bounty and the lord’s pleasure. While the treasure of the earth has its being in the wonderful depth of God’s eternal love, its worth to God, insists Julian “depends on the servant’s careful preparation of it and his setting it before him, personally.”¹⁶⁴

Prayer

In addition to numerous references scattered throughout the text, *Revelations* devotes three entire chapters to the practice of prayer. For Underhill and for Julian, whose entire life was devoted to the practice, disciplined contemplative prayer conjointly with the purgative path, is the means through which we grow and achieve union with God. When we actually experience the divine presence, both Julian and Underhill attest it causes us to cease our immature intercessions and petitions to simply and silently behold the divine presence.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 147.

¹⁶⁴ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 147.

¹⁶⁵ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 128-29.

Julian of Norwich: Cosmic Interpreter of the Transformative Map

Julian’s fundamental belief that “alle shalle be wele” clearly rests on the idea that human beings are in the process of becoming the perfected creatures God is seeking to create, but it absolutely depends on our ability to recognize the suffering of the human condition, detachment from “trivial things which cannot satisfy,” the mortification of body, mind and psyche, and the practice of rigorous prayer as the processes by which we obtain self-knowledge and knowledge of God, and by which we are transformed from Adam to Christ. Locating growth in human consciousness within a cosmic context, Julian identifies the evil and pain of the human condition as the purgatorial tools of pedagogy by which we are transformed, but to grasp the truth of this extreme paradox depends on our ability to rely on God’s wisdom and guidance; if we can achieve this, we can realize our own Christ consciousness and fulfill our destiny as “tillers” of the earthly garden.¹⁶⁶ For Julian, the central purpose of the transformative path to human growth and God is, as it is for all five mystics, to create a relationship of deep reciprocity between creature and Creator. A profound example of this co-creative relationship may be found in the life of Saint Catherine of Genoa whose path of rigorous spiritual growth led her to integrate a life of private contemplative prayer with demanding public service.

¹⁶⁶ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 160-62.

Historical Context

Catherine was born during the age of Columbus’ exploration and the invention of Gutenberg’s printing press, milestone events marking a profound change in European society. As Von Hügel notes, Europe was already modern in its depths, the old medieval system having begun to break apart, although it had not yet fractured into the internecine religious antagonisms that dominated later centuries. Living just prior to this religious foment, Catherine’s writings express a “restful and bracing pure affirmativeness,” focusing on what for her constituted the ultimate human concern, and in language that is surprisingly modern – that of the false self versus the true Self living only in God’s perfect love.¹⁹²

Primary Sources for a Study of the Transformative Map

Catherine’s seminal spiritual treatise, *Purgation and Purgatory*, is the primary source for the following discussion of purgation as the path to achieve *unia mystica*. A brilliant interweaving of Catherine’s own experiences, insight and theological knowledge, *Purgation and Purgatory* rests on her own rare and intense purgatorial trial. As the beginning of her treatise, Catherine authoritatively states she is able to appear “forthwith” in the divine presence after she quits this life, having been purified by the “fiery love of God” during the years following her profound awakening.¹⁹³ To propose Catherine’s entire life and legacy as a testament to purgation and mortification, in both their interior and exterior forms, as the cardinal

¹⁹² Von Hügel, *The Mystical Element*, I: 94-95.

¹⁹³ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory*, 71.

phases toward attainment of higher consciousness and ultimately cosmic union with God, is not an exaggeration.

Central Theological Premise: Perfect Divine Love

Like Underhill and Julian, the pure love of God is the central tenet of Catherine’s theological principles and doctrine. She describes God as the “Living Fountain of Goodness” and the source of all creation, his pure love, which “he himself is,” reaching out to the human soul striving to undergo purification.¹⁹⁴ Indeed, Catherine insists God’s creation of man was for no other reason than to demonstrate his pure love alone;¹⁹⁵ she explains that what the Creator feels for the creature is of especial significance:

All that I have said is as nothing compared to what I feel within the witnessed correspondence of love between God and the Soul; for when God sees the soul pure as it was in its origins, He tugs at it with a glance, draws it and binds it to Himself with a fiery love that by itself could annihilate the immortal soul.¹⁹⁶

Catherine insists God has placed no doors in front of paradise; whoever wishes to enter can simply do so, “All-merciful God stands there with His arms open, waiting to receive us into His glory.”¹⁹⁷ The impediment to entry – i.e., to God’s love – is the rust of sin, or in more modern terms, egotism and self-centeredness, and the purpose of purgatory is to remove it:

¹⁹⁴ Caterina da Genova, *Vita*, 32c, quoted in Von Hügel, *The Mystical Element*, I: 260.

¹⁹⁵ Von Hügel, *The Mystical Element*, I: 260-63.

¹⁹⁶ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory*, 78-79.

¹⁹⁷ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory*, 78.

God loves irrational creatures and His love provides for them; in the case of mankind, however, His love manifests itself in greater or lesser degree according to the impediments that blocks His love. This impediment is the rust of sin. As it is consumed the soul is more and more open to God's love.¹⁹⁸

Classical Transformative Map and Purgation: Cosmic Human Journey toward God

For Catherine, purgation is the central process by which growth in consciousness is attained and is both an exterior and interior process and a fundamental human quest of cosmic proportions. She identifies its purpose to be the same as it is for Underhill and Julian: (1) to purify or detach the self from all manner of things, family, wealth, friends, etc., and (2) to mortify the self to develop the classical Christian virtues in order to attach oneself to the greatest good, which is God. Like Julian and Underhill, Catherine recognizes that this process causes considerable suffering because of the inevitable conflict between our true Self and our willful or false self and its refusal to resign its ruling position:

Thus our self-will is so subtle and so deeply rooted within our own selves, and defends itself with so many reasons, that, when we cannot manage to carry it out in one way, we carry it out in another. We do our own will under many covers [pretexts] of charity, of necessity, of justice, of perfection.¹⁹⁹

Catherine insists our own will is simply incapable of leading us to manifest our true Self, our highest purpose and to genuine happiness and joy (being fundamentally different from transitory pleasure) but only to weariness, sadness, and a living death of our true selves. She expresses considerable frustration at the

¹⁹⁸ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory*, 73.

¹⁹⁹ Caterina da Genova, *Vita*, 31c, quoted in Von Hügel, *The Mystical Element*, I: 267.

obtuseness of human beings at not recognizing this truth, insisting the difficulty of purification is nothing compared with continuing to live the “spiritual death” of the false self: “O wretched state of man, and all the more so since willful blindness will not recognize it.”²⁰⁰ Catherine insists it is only through resigning our will to God’s will that we learn, “The love of God is our true Self-love, the love characteristic of and directed to our true selves, since these selves of ours are created by and for Love itself.”²⁰¹ For Catherine, overcoming our false self to discover and manifest our true Self is the cosmic human quest, and if not complete during this life will simply continue after death.

The Human Spirit after Death

In her three great spiritual works, Catherine describes with remarkable surety her vision of the afterlife, identifying the pivotal importance of the moment of death to the purgative process, and making comprehensible the traditional Catholic doctrine and symbolism of hell, purgatory, and paradise or heaven. The logic and lucidity of Catherine’s ideas makes her interpretation surprisingly reasonable, refreshing and reassuring. As Von Hügel remarks, in Catherine’s teachings, “It is abundantly clear that this assumption of the essential unity and continuity of the soul’s life here and hereafter, is itself a doctrine and a most important one.”²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory*, 75.

²⁰¹ Caterina da Genova, *Vita*, 76c, quoted in von Hügel, *The Mystical Element*, I: 262.

²⁰² Von Hügel, *The Mystical Element*, I: 281.

Hell

Catherine’s teaching on human souls in hell is, as Von Hügel notes, “incidental and a foil” to her focus on the intermediate state of purgation; nevertheless, her emphasis on the struggle between the true and false self leads her to comment on the state of hell.²⁰³ As to its cause, Catherine clearly places it entirely on the individual who has through extreme self-will chosen this fate:

Hell is evil will, and since God does not manifest His goodness there, the souls in hell remain in a state of desperately evil will. The evil lies clearly in the perverse will that opposes God. Persevering in its evil will, the soul continues in its guilt.²⁰⁴

This, however, is not Catherine’s final word on the souls in hell. With respect to this “terrible and mysterious” subject,” Catherine makes her own beautiful contribution to the traditional doctrine, maintaining that “neither are the sufferings of the lost infinite in amount, nor is their will entirely malign.”²⁰⁵ As Catherine explains,

When we shall have departed from this life in a state of sin, God will withdraw from us His goodness, and will leave us to ourselves, and yet not altogether: since he wills that in every place His goodness shall be found and not His justice alone. And if a creature could be found that did not to some degree, participate in the divine goodness, that creature would be, one might say, as malignant as God is good.²⁰⁶

According to Catherine, God’s judgment is never exercised without his mercy even in this most terrible of states. Such a position is fully consistent with her central theological premise of God as being pure love and wisdom.

²⁰³ Von Hügel, *The Mystical Element*, I: 282.

²⁰⁴ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory*, 74.

²⁰⁵ Von Hügel, *The Mystical Element*, I: 282.

²⁰⁶ Caterina da Genova, *Vita*, 173a-173b-33b, quoted in Von Hügel, *The Mystical Element*, I: 283.

Purgatory

Catherine's doctrine of souls destined for the intermediate state of purgatory is explicit, clearly illuminating what occurs at death. She explains that at the moment of expiry, the human soul receives insight about two conditions: (1) the ideal, perfect state for which it was originally created and is ultimately expected to manifest, and (2) the soul's actual state, at the time of death, and the degree of imperfection that is still to be removed; apparently, any taint of sin or in more modern terms, egoic self-centeredness, makes it impossible for the soul to "attain to its ends, which is God."²⁰⁷ Now keenly aware of the degree of imperfection that still remains, and how it deliberately flouted God's will, the soul loses its ardent desire to appear before the divine presence since it would be the ultimate gesture of disrespect. At this point, the soul's flight toward the divine comes to a dead stop; apparently, its sins and errors act like something hard on its surface, forming an impenetrable barrier between itself and God.²⁰⁸ Entirely separated from the divine presence, the soul is flung into immediate torment; fortunately, explains Catherine, the soul is offered a welcome alternative:

Once separated from the body, the soul, no longer in that original state of purity, aware that the impediment it faces cannot be removed in any other way, hurls itself into purgatory.²⁰⁹

I also see, however, that the divine essence is so pure and light-filled – much more than we can imagine – that the soul that has but the slightest imperfection would rather throw itself into a thousand hells than appear thus before the divine presence."²¹⁰

²⁰⁷ Von Hügel, *The Mystical Element*, I: 284.

²⁰⁸ Von Hügel, *The Mystical Element*, I: 284.

²⁰⁹ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory*, 77.

²¹⁰ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory*, 78.

Even more, Catherine contends,

Should the soul find that the assigned place is not sufficient to remove its impediment then it would experience a hell far worse than purgatory. In that insufficiency the soul would itself cut off from God; and compared with God's love the suffering of purgatory is a small matter.²¹¹

Here is a brilliantly subtle interpretation of the traditional doctrine of purgatory after death and one entirely compatible with a God who is pure love and wisdom. As Von Hügel remarks, for Catherine it is not God who judges us, but we who judge ourselves, making us accountable for our own actions. Compared with the souls in hell who are simply determined to exercise their own wills, Catherine explains souls in purgatory are trying to follow the divine will, fulfilling a fundamental expectation of true Christian seekers – i.e., putting their faith and trust first and foremost in God. Such a state of being creates real joy, as Catherine remarks,

The will of souls in purgatory, by contrast [to those in hell], is in all respects in conformity with that of God. That is why God responds to their goodness with His, thereby cleansing them of actual and original sin.²¹²

As [rust of sin] is consumed by [the purifying of the divine] fire, the soul is more and more open to God's love.²¹³

Souls who have willingly flung themselves into the purgatorial state are unable to turn their egoic regard toward themselves, nor do they repent or reject their condition or dwell on past errors and present pain; instead, they are joyfully focused on seeing themselves in God:

The greatest suffering of the souls in purgatory, it seems to me, is their awareness that something in them displeases God, that they have

²¹¹ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory*, 77.

²¹² Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory*, 75.

²¹³ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory*, 72.

deliberately gone against His great goodness. In a state of grace, these souls fully grasp the meaning of what blocks them on their way to God.²¹⁴

At this point in the soul's development, Catherine's teachings penetrate another paradox of the divine mystery; while souls in purgatory experience the joy of being in harmony with God's will, there is no cessation of suffering; on the contrary it actually increases:

Not that all suffering [of the souls in purgatory] disappears... this harmony with God's will brings about a very great suffering.²¹⁵

Unfortunately, the purgatorial soul and its natural instinct for God is not yet fully manifest; opposition to the divine will is still hidden within its depths, holding it back, blocking the way to God. While the soul in purgatory is at joyful peace, having aligned itself with the divine will, it still suffers since vestiges of sin and self-will remain, heightening the tension between the soul's natural instinct for God and the rebel self-will:

This joy does not do away with one bit of pain in the suffering of the souls in purgatory. As the soul grows in its perfection, so does it suffer more because of what impedes the final consummation, the end for which God made it; so that in purgatory great joy and great suffering do not exclude one another.²¹⁶

As long as this friction remains, the full flowering of the human self and the fulfillment of its real purpose will not be manifested. Until the self is completely purified, Catherine insists purgatorial suffering is of no importance and never to be dwelt on; the only real concern is to overcome any and all resistance to

²¹⁴ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory*, 78.

²¹⁵ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory*, 72.

²¹⁶ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory*, 82.

God.²¹⁷ She employs alchemical imagery to convey both the difficult intensity and the deeply transformative nature of the purgative process:

I see rays of lightning darting from that divine love to the creature so intense and fiery as to annihilate not the body alone but, were it possible, the soul. These rays purify and then annihilate. The soul becomes like gold that becomes purer as it is fired, all dross being cast. This is the effect of fire on material things, but in this purification what is obliterated and cast out is not the soul, one with God, but the lesser self. Having come to the point of twenty-four carats, gold cannot be purified any further; and this is what happens to the soul in the fire of God's love.²¹⁸

Catherine teaches there is no time limit on the process of purification, at least in the human linear sense; rather, the completion of the soul's purification will be in accordance with the divine plan, and release from purgatory will not occur until God has done all that is necessary.²¹⁹ Eventually, however, the human soul, whether in this life or the next, is to be cleansed of its sins to ultimately attain the "actualized" person of modern psychology, or in the theological language of Catherine, the soul's final resting place, being "Heaven" and union with God.

Heaven

For Catherine, to reach spiritual maturity or "Heaven" is to manifest one's highest self and to live entirely in God. It is an idea she beautifully expresses using the alchemical imagery of fire and gold; the soul, through the fiery love of God is purified to a point of twenty-four carats:

²¹⁷ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory*, 81-83.

²¹⁸ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory*, 79-81.

²¹⁹ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory*, 79-80.

Chapter Six

Saint Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582)

The important thing is not to think much but to love much; and so do that which best stirs you to love.

– Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*

Underhill refers to the Spanish Carmelite nun, Saint Teresa of Ávila, as one of the great saints of the counter-Reformation and a brilliant exhibitor of the dual character of the mystic. A profound contemplative capable of long periods of solitary prayer but equally a determined practical organizer and administrator, Teresa undertook as her life's work the restoration and vitality of the Carmelite Order, one of Catholicism's greatest religious establishments.²²³ Despite her many accomplishments, to study the literary legacy of Saint Teresa is to encounter surprisingly honest, often humorous self-critical analysis, and the gradual emergence of spiritual maturity heartening to the spiritual seeker of any historical age.

Literary Legacy

Teresa's legacy includes four great classics all of which display her authorial gifts. Her body of work indicates she wrote quickly and furiously, taking a wordsmith's delight in language. Despite her obvious literary talents, Teresa never wrote anything unless commanded by her superiors, a testament to her continual striving for humility and obedience. Her autobiography, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila by Herself*, is a remarkable account of her entry into the religious life and

²²³ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 468.

considered to be a masterpiece of Spanish literature.²²⁴ Her book, *Foundations*, is a fascinating account of Teresa's difficult trials and tribulations in the founding of the reformed Carmelite order. Besides being a testimony to her remarkable organizational skills and managerial abilities, it is also a testament to her integrity since nowhere does it indicate any hint of malice or vindictiveness toward her many rivals and foes in the founding of her order.²²⁵

Her other two works, *The Way of Perfection* and *The Interior Castle*, are of particular importance to a study of suffering or perfect love. Composed in a lively, surprisingly engaging manner, *The Way of Perfection* was originally intended to be an instruction booklet in the practice of prayer, as well as purgation, for nuns of the Carmelite order. The latter work, *The Interior Castle*, is Teresa's final theological treatise; written just a few years prior to her death, it is a detailed analysis of prayer and its impact on spiritual growth.²²⁶ Although she wrote it at a time when she was in near disgrace over the controversy surrounding her proposed reforms, *The Interior Castle* displays her remarkable powers of concentration, focusing entirely on the subject of contemplative prayer. Despite the complexity of the topic, the book is engagingly written and masterful in its simplicity.²²⁷

²²⁴ J. M. Cohen, trans., introduction to *The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila by Herself*, by Saint Teresa of Ávila (London: Penguin Books, 1957), 11.

²²⁵ Cohen, *Life*, 18-19.

²²⁶ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *Life*, trans. J. M. Cohen, 23-38.

²²⁷ Benedict Zimmerman, trans., introduction to *The Interior Castle or Mansions*, by Saint Teresa of Ávila, 15-16.

Biographical Sketch

Teresa was born on March 28, 1515 in the town of Ávila in Castile, Spain, the third child of Don Alonso and his second wife, Doña Beatriz. At the time of her birth, Teresa's family had entered the higher echelons of Castilian society although they were of Jewish descent, her family being *Judaeo-conversos* with very recent roots in the mercantile class. When Teresa was fourteen years old, her mother died, leaving her young daughter grief stricken; evidently, both parents were tender and pious in raising their children. Shortly after her mother's death, Teresa, who was reputed to be an exceptional beauty, was sent to the Augustinian nuns at Ávila to be educated. Her father's decision to send to her a strict convent school may have been the result of a dalliance which Teresa herself writes could have dishonoured her family. Unfortunately, after only a year and a half at school, she suffered a serious illness, causing her to withdraw, and for some years Teresa remained with her father and occasionally with other relatives. During this period, she carefully considered her vocation, ultimately deciding to become a nun, a decision her father initially opposed. Regardless, at the age of twenty, she presented herself at the Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation in the town of Ávila with a will from her brother, indicating he would provide for Teresa's dowry, bequeathing to her all the gold he conquered as a conquistador in the new world. Given Teresa's determination and her brother's support, her father relented and she took the habit in 1535.²²⁸

Unfortunately, Teresa's first twenty-five years of convent life were not what she had hoped; besides suffering serious illnesses, she seems to have been

²²⁸ Cohen, *Life*, 17-19; Saint Teresa of Ávila, *Life*, 23-38.

severely conflicted between her interest in spirituality and the social life of the convent. Although the original Primitive Rule of the Carmelite Order was ancient and strict, it had been mitigated by the time Teresa joined and she found the relaxed atmosphere not conducive to her own spiritual development. Eventually, the convergence of several influences, i.e., her struggle to give up worldly trivialities, her practice of rigorous contemplative prayer, and her fortuitous reading of Saint Augustine's *Confessions* at age forty in which she felt she saw herself clearly portrayed, led to what her biographers refer to as her second conversion.²²⁹ From this profound spiritual awakening, Teresa came to recognize the central importance of purgation to spiritual development and ultimately to realize her life's work: the restoration of the Carmelite Order to the stricter rule of its beginnings. Despite incredible opposition from the Church hierarchy, Teresa prevailed in this endeavour, enduring ill health and harsh travel throughout Spain to found the Discalced Carmelite Order,²³⁰ ultimately establishing seventeen foundations before she died.²³¹ It is while journeying to one of her convents that Teresa, suffering from many physical afflictions, died on October 4, 1582. Forty years later, she was canonized by Pope Gregory XV, and in 1970, the papal honor of Doctor of the Church was bestowed on her by Pope Paul VI. Teresa is now revered as the Doctor of Prayer.²³²

²²⁹ Cohen, *Life*, 17; Saint Teresa of Ávila, *Life*, 69.

²³⁰ Discalced or "unshod" refers to the sandals Teresa's nuns adopted as part of their ascetic practice.

²³¹ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *Life*, 50-70, 258-76.

²³² The Catholic Encyclopedia OnLine, "St. Catherine of Genoa," <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03446b.htm> (accessed February 27, 2010).

Spiritual Life

Like Catherine, Teresa's entire spiritual life may be considered testimony to the importance of purgation and mortification, and the "dark nights," as the crucial components of the classical transformative map. In her autobiography, Teresa explains that she had become a nun not out of love but out of fear of her own character and where it might lead her if she lived in the world; unfortunately, despite her intended desire to live a life devoted to God, Teresa found the relaxed atmosphere of the Carmelite Order precisely what she had wished to avoid.²³³ Although such trivial activities as witty conversation with occasional guests may seem small transgressions, they are extremely corrosive to an ardent mystical temperament; in the words of her friend Saint John of the Cross, "it makes little difference whether a bird be held by a slender thread or by a rope, the bird is bound, and cannot fly until the cord that holds it be broken."²³⁴

Disappointed with the situation in which she found herself, Teresa became deeply discouraged, and eventually contracted such a serious physical illness that she left the convent to stay with family members in the country. Her vitality quite drained, she became so ill she seems to have lapsed into a coma and almost died; eventually, however, after many months of convalescence she regained her strength although she never again enjoyed robust health. Having achieved what her family and friends considered a miraculous recovery, Teresa returned to the monastery.²³⁵

²³³ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *Life*, 50-60.

²³⁴ St. Saint John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 3rd rev. ed., trans., E. Allison Peers (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1953), 1:X1:4, http://www.ccel.org/ccel/john_cross/ascent.txt (accessed March 15, 2010).

²³⁵ Cohen, *Life*, 17; Saint Teresa of Ávila, *Life*, 33-49.

During her illness, Teresa had launched her contemplative life, having been introduced to mental prayer, a type of spiritual practice developed by a Spanish Franciscan and described in a manual called *The Third Spiritual Alphabet*. On her return to the convent, Teresa found the easy atmosphere and the sublimated eroticism of male visitors even less conducive to her new and rigorous spiritual practice. In such an environment, she could not find satisfaction in trivial worldly pursuits, their inconsequentiality having been magnified by her moments in prayerful relationship with the divine; but nor could she find solace in God, feeling unworthy of his grace. From her practice of mental prayer, Teresa had come to recognize the importance of being “detached from all things,” particularly the admiration and affection of others which she apparently craved in her younger years, in order to find one’s true Self and to rest in God. Having achieved clarity, Teresa began her life’s work, the return of the Carmelite Order to its focus on the complete centrality of God, a task in which she was joined by her colleague, Saint John of the Cross, and which she pursued until the day of her death.²³⁶

Historical Context

Teresa lived during an age when Spain was at the height of its power and wealth. The funding of Columbus’ voyage to the new world by the Spanish king and queen, Ferdinand and Isabella, marked the beginning of Spain’s exploration and conquest of the new world, a venture several of Teresa’s brothers took part in as conquistadors. It was also an age deeply marred by religious repression. In the same

²³⁶ Cohen, *Life*, 17; Saint Teresa of Ávila, *Life*, 233-76.

year Columbus sailed to America, Spain ended nearly eight hundred years of internal conflict with the defeat of the last Moorish stronghold at Granada. With the expulsion of the Moors, Spain declared itself officially and aggressively Christian and Catholic. The Spanish Inquisition, in response to the Protestant Reformation, ruthlessly repressed any ideas they considered heresy, while their policy toward Spain's vibrant Jewish community was to force conversion or face expulsion from the country.²³⁷

Throughout her life, Teresa pursued her spiritual path under the shadow of Church authority. Since her family was *Judaeo-conversos*, they were subject to particular suspicion by the Inquisition; at one point, her father suffered humiliating punishment for practicing Judaism in secret. Despite this repressive religious environment, Teresa's writings exhibit a genuine ardency and extreme devotion to the Catholic Church. In her introduction to *The Way of Perfection*, she says if there "be any good in her book" it is to the "glory and honour of God and to Holy Mother Church," and if her own experiences differed from doctrine, she always deferred to authority.²³⁸ The authorial directness and clarity with which Teresa makes these declarations seem to indicate they were written with genuine authenticity.

Primary Sources for a Study of the Transformative Map

The Way of Perfection and *The Interior Castle* address the classical states of the mystical path through the process of interior prayer, and are the primary sources for the following study of Teresa's theology and the purgative process as the

²³⁷ Cohen, *Life*, 15; Flinders, *Enduring Grace*, 158-61.

²³⁸ Saint Teresa of Ávila, protestation to *The Way of Perfection*, trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Doubleday, 2004), xxxv.

path of suffering to perfect love. *The Way of Perfection* provides a detailed discussion of detachment and mortification, among other topics, and their critical importance to the contemplative life. Building on this discussion, *The Interior Castle* provides a more definitive analysis of prayer and its associated interior states of consciousness, particularly with respect to the latter phases of *illumination*, *dark night of the soul*, and *unia mystica*.

Central Theological Premise: Perfect Divine Love

Like the other women mystics of this study, suffering or “perfect” love, to use Teresa’s preferred terminology, is central to her theology. In *The Way of Perfection* she spends considerable time explaining what she means by “perfect” love, acknowledging that it is rarely to be found and difficult to comprehend; for human beings to learn to love in this way requires great generosity and extreme discontent with the usual form and to recognize it simply seeks its own self-interest to subject and bind others.²³⁹ Her description of this lower form of love is remarkably modern:

If they [generous souls] had such love, they would think they were loving something insubstantial and were conceiving fondness for a shadow; they would feel shame for themselves and would not have the effrontery to tell God that they love Him, without feeling great confusion.²⁴⁰

“Perfect love,” explains Teresa, never requires nor expects any form of recompense or reward; on the contrary, perfect love removes all obligations and expectations to maximize human freedom and create greater and more genuine love

²³⁹ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way of Perfection*, 42-56.

²⁴⁰ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way of Perfection*, 44.

between human beings.²⁴¹ To experience perfect love, explains Teresa, is to directly experience God, since he is the source, and to participate in yet another divine paradox – i.e., to understand perfect love requires an infusion of divine love from which comes the wisdom to understand the pure form:

She [the loving soul] cares nothing for physical death, but she will not suffer herself to be attached to something which a puff of wind may carry away so that she is unable to retain her hold upon it. This, as I have said, is love without any degree whatsoever of self-interest; all that this soul wishes and desires is to see the soul enriched with blessings from Heaven. This, in short, is love which grows ever more like the love which Christ had for us. It deserves the name of love and is quite different from our petty, ill-starred frivolous earthly affections – to say nothing of illicit affections from which may God keep us free.²⁴²

Classical Transformative Map: The Way of Perfection

In her spiritual works, Teresa describes in detail the importance of the purgative processes of detachment and mortification, as well as prayer, as the three equally necessary practices in developing true humility and self-knowledge to ultimately experience God's perfect love. Teresa clearly understood that to live in a detached, mortified state is a practice of both mind and body, a point she makes clear in the following passage, and although addressed to a cloistered community, her wise advice, humorously given, could apply to any institution:

Be very careful about your interior thoughts, especially if they have to do with precedence. May God, by his Passion, keep us from expressing, or dwelling upon, such thoughts as these: “But I am her senior;” “But I am older;” “But I have worked harder;” “But that other sister is being better treated than I am.” If these thoughts come, you must quickly check them;

²⁴¹ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way of Perfection*, 44-45.

²⁴² Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way of Perfection*, 49.

if you allow yourselves to dwell on them, or introduce them into your conversation they will spread like the plague.²⁴³

In *The Way of Perfection*, Teresa spends several chapters warning against certain types of attachments. She particularly cautions against special and intimate friendships since they often lead to the creation of factions and the promotion of favouritism to simply reinforce egocentrism; instead, true friendships are grounded in service to God and completely devoid of sexual and other passions since they are free of human will. Teresa is equally firm about attachments to family, the strength of her pronouncements on the distraction of familial ties echoing Jesus' own quite stringent remarks on the subject.²⁴⁴ Overcoming attachments to family and friends requires the development of considerable humility, but when finally achieved, true seekers have progressed enough to overcome the most difficult attachment, being to ourselves:

[It] remains for us to become detached from our own selves and it is a hard thing to withdraw from ourselves and oppose ourselves, because we are very close to ourselves and love ourselves very dearly.²⁴⁵

It is here that true humility can enter, for this virtue and that of detachment from self, I think, always go together. They are two sisters, who are inseparable.²⁴⁶

Teresa explains a virtue equally important to humility is perseverance since without it there is simply no progress; the “struggle to detach from all things, to simply embrace the Creator alone” requires “waging war” against our own

²⁴³ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way of Perfection*, 77-78.

²⁴⁴ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way of Perfection*, 62-63.

²⁴⁵ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way of Perfection*, 66.

²⁴⁶ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way of Perfection*, 66.

weaknesses and the human condition; fortunately, our need to exercise perseverance and continual vigilance will eventually diminish, explains Teresa, since “our Lord will take our defense in hand” and infuse us with humility and all other virtues.²⁴⁷

For Teresa, the obvious benefits to be gained from the purgative process of detachment and mortification far outweigh all of its trials and difficulties. Teresa’s intimate knowledge of the process attests to her own purgative experience, with Lanzetta maintaining the saint moved through her own “dark night of the feminine” to reconcile Jesus’ universal message of love with the anti-female harshness of church and societal hierarchy.²⁴⁸ For Lanzetta, Teresa’s life exemplifies the mystical process by which a “woman deconstructs society’s anti-female views to gain dignity and power.”²⁴⁹ Teresa herself confirms the inestimable value in which she holds the purgative trials of the transformative path by insisting true seekers after God can advance a long way in the Lord’s service, though they may not be great contemplatives, while those who think they are but are not rigorous practitioners of purgation and humility are “very much mistaken.”²⁵⁰ As Teresa quite joyfully explains:

But how inappropriate it is for a person like myself to begin to praise humility and mortification when these virtues are so highly praised by the King of Glory – a praise exemplified in all the trials he suffered. It is to

²⁴⁷ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way of Perfection*, 57.

²⁴⁸ Lanzetta, “Radical Wisdom Study Guide,” <http://beverlylanzetta.net/2008081286/radical-wisdom-study-guide.html> (accessed April 6, 2010).

²⁴⁹ Lanzetta, “Radical Wisdom Study Guide,” <http://beverlylanzetta.net/2008081286/radical-wisdom-study-guide.html> (accessed April 6, 2010).

²⁵⁰ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way of Perfection*, 25.

possess these virtues, then, my daughters, that you must labour if you would leave the land of Egypt, for, when you have obtained them, you will also obtain the manna; all things will taste well to you and, however much the world may dislike their savour, to you they will be sweet.²⁵¹

To live in a detached state is to be fully aware and in the present moment to cultivate that “peace, both inward and outward, which the Lord so earnestly recommended to us.”²⁵² To achieve such a calm state of mind is never for the benefit of one’s self, however, but to discern our earthly mission, as Teresa observes:

He that possesses them [detachment and humility] can safely go out and fight all the united forces of hell and the whole world and its temptations. Let him fear none, for his is the kingdom of the Heavens.²⁵³

Classical Transformative Map: Archetypal Metaphor of the Castle

While Teresa advocated the practices of detachment and strict (although not harsh) mortification as fundamentally important to the development of spiritual maturity, she clearly understood that to renounce attachments could not be forced; being expressions of inner hunger they could only be assuaged through rest and solace in God developed during periods of prayer.²⁵⁴ In *The Interior Castle*, Teresa applies her formidable powers of analysis to describe in detail the types of prayer and corresponding states of consciousness through which the soul progresses toward union with God. Lanzetta notes Teresa’s understanding of prayer is similar to Julian’s, describing the prayerful state of mind as an enclosed space of a “castle” or

²⁵¹ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way of Perfection*, 67-68.

²⁵² Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way of Perfection*, 26.

²⁵³ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way of Perfection*, 67.

²⁵⁴ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *Life*, 284-85.

“purse” within which God’s longing for our redemption takes root and grows; for Teresa and for Julian, intimate prayer with God is the source and the fruits of virtue, and the attainment of humility, compassion, and ethical concern for the well being of others.²⁵⁵ As Andrea Janelle Dickens notes, Teresa describes prayer as the critical process leading to knowledge both of self and God; since the fallen human knows little of her nature, she knows little of where she came from or where she is going, or what she is and is not capable of, but through the virtue of humility will come to know herself, her abilities and her rightful place in God’s plan.²⁵⁶

Despite the complexity of the topic and the inclusion of ideas from Jewish mysticism, *The Interior Castle’s* engaging style and simplicity of language makes it surprisingly accessible to the modern reader. Equally helpful is the book’s careful structure and apt use of symbols and metaphors, some of which may be described as “ecstatic,” referring specifically to the word’s literary technical meaning. Frye notes those who attempt like the mystics of this study a more direct approach to God generally express their experiences through the literary device of the ecstatic metaphor, with the word “ecstatic” referring to a state in which the real self enters a different, higher order from that of the now dispossessed ego, and the term metaphor referring to that counter-logical literary mode, expressing both “what is and is not,” making it particularly well suited for direct testimony of an ineffable reality.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁵ Beverley Lanzetta, “Contemplative Ethics: Intimacy, Amor Mundi and Dignification in Teresa of Avila and Julian of Norwich,” <http://beverlylanzetta.net/2008071467/contemplative-ethics.html> (accessed April 6, 2010).

²⁵⁶ Dickens, *The Female Mystic*, 186-87.

²⁵⁷ Frye, *Words with Power*, 86.

Throughout *The Interior Castle*, Teresa employs an archetypal metaphor to provide unity to her analysis, referring to the soul as “resembling a castle formed of a single diamond or a very transparent crystal and containing many rooms, just as in heaven there are many mansions.”²⁵⁸ Within the castle are seven mansions – i.e., states of consciousness – through which the soul advances toward the “throne of God,” with purgative trials continuing through nearly all of the mansions, underscoring her insistence on the importance of humility and perseverance. In the earlier mansions, Teresa explains the achievement of spiritual growth is a hard won struggle with numerous “venomous reptiles” or in more modern terms, with our neurotic complexes, shadow side, and simply the pain of the human condition.²⁵⁹ Teresa also explains that these seven mansions (recognizing there are many more) are not arranged in a particular order, but rather “some are above, some below, others at the side; in the centre, in the very midst of them all, is the principal chamber in which God and the soul hold their most secret intercourse.”²⁶⁰

As a model of mystical growth, Teresa’s seven-mansion metaphorical structure correlates quite accurately to the classical five-stage pattern. The first two mansions correspond to the early stages of development and the mystic’s fierce struggles with the *purgative* life; Teresa makes this clear by referring to souls in the first and second mansions as having to “wage war” against their weaknesses and failings. The third and fourth mansions correspond to the phase of *illumination*, with

²⁵⁸ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 35.

²⁵⁹ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 45.

²⁶⁰ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 36.

oscillations between it and the *dark night of the senses*, while the fifth and sixth mansions correspond to the unitive life with oscillations between it and the phase of *the dark night of the soul*; entry into the seventh mansions marks stable union with God and the achievement of *unia mystica*.

According to Teresa, entry into the castle is gained when the human soul has achieved sufficient spiritual growth to embrace the divine will, having finally resigned its own will. At this point in its development, the soul is granted “great dignity,” and is permitted access to the castle where it can wander at will through the rooms of the castle, from the lowest to the highest.²⁶¹ However, Teresa remarks:

Let it not force itself to remain for very long in the same mansion, even that of self-knowledge. Mark well, however, that self-knowledge is indispensable, even for those whom God takes to dwell in the same mansion with Himself. Nothing else, however elevated, perfects the soul which must never seek to forget its own nothingness. Let humility always be at work, like the bee at the honeycomb, or all will be lost. But remember the bee leaves its hive to fly in search of flowers and the soul should sometimes cease thinking of itself to rise in meditation on the grandeur and majesty of its God. It will learn its own baseness better thus than by self-contemplation, and will be freer from the reptiles which enter the first room where self-knowledge is acquired.²⁶²

First Mansions

Teresa begins her discussion of the first mansions with a meditation on the beauty of the human soul whose will is now finally aligned with God’s will, likening it to a tree rooted beside the “River of Life” from which it draws crystal clear water to make beautiful fruit.²⁶³ However, since souls in the first mansions are still

²⁶¹ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 43.

²⁶² Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 43.

²⁶³ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 41.

preoccupied with worldly matters they may spend considerable time here, making progress slow; greater humility must be developed before further advancement is possible. Teresa also mentions the light coming from the “King’s” palace in the centre of the soul, “hardly shines at all in these first mansions, although not as gloomy and black as the soul in mortal sin, yet they are in semi-darkness, and their inhabitants see scarcely anything.”²⁶⁴

Second Mansions

Teresa begins her treatise on the second mansions by explaining that entry is granted to souls who are ready and wish to make further progress. In the second mansions, purgatorial suffering intensifies because of the same conflict Catherine of Genoa identifies in *Purgation and Purgatory*; although souls in the second mansions can now hear the call of God, being no longer as deaf as they were in the first mansions, they are not yet free of their own will:

I say that [souls in the second mansions] suffer a great deal more, for those in an earlier stage are like deaf-mutes...[Souls in the second mansions] hear our Lord calling them, for as they approach nearer to where His Majesty dwells He proves a loving Neighbour, though they may be still be engaged in the amusements and business, the pleasures and vanities of this world.²⁶⁵

Teresa insists that our sole aim must be to endure these trials and to resolutely strive to the utmost of our power to conform our will to God’s will. She again emphasizes the importance of humility in the struggle to grow spiritually and to

²⁶⁴ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 45.

²⁶⁵ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 51.

progress to the third mansions and beyond.²⁶⁶ As Dickens notes, Teresa emphatically stresses the importance of developing perseverance since in these earlier mansions our “newly born virtues have barely the strength to act.”²⁶⁷ While entry and progress through the first two mansions indicates that the mystical consciousness is in alignment with God’s will, considerable purgation (reflecting the purgative life of the classical five-step path) to purify and mortify the human personality must occur before further advancement is possible.

Third Mansions

By the time souls reach the third mansions, they have, says Teresa, undergone sufficient internal and external trials to achieve some detachment, mortification and the development of the virtues. Souls dwelling in the third mansions now strive to avoid the sin of self-indulgence, are willing to undergo penance, committed to the practice of meditation, charity and prompt obedience, and of cultivating more humility and perseverance since without them, progress simply halts. Teresa also says souls in the third mansions employ their time well, do not expect any favours or rewards, and most importantly, are striving to leave all cares in God’s hands. Souls in the third mansions are at a point in their development where they can recognize there is no security in life, and our desire for it simply causes us to live in

²⁶⁶ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 53-54.

²⁶⁷ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 53; Dickens, *The Female Mystic*, 187.

fear and to continually act as if our “foes should enter the fortress by some breach in the walls” which only creates a “wretched existence.”²⁶⁸

With kind but firm admonishment, Teresa reminds her readers that we must continually “exert ourselves at leaving our fears in God’s hands, paying no attention to the weaknesses of our nature which must retard us.”²⁶⁹ Teresa insists that without determined perseverance, we cannot achieve a total self-surrender of our own will and until we do our vision remains limited; our own reason and understanding rather than the higher wisdom of God still governs our prayers and daily life, hindering our visionary ability to “glimpse” into the mansions beyond.

Fourth Mansions

By the time souls have reached the fourth mansions, they have acquired considerable growth through many purgative trials and contemplative prayer; as Dickens notes, for Teresa entry into the fourth mansions is a notable moment in the development of souls since progress can now be achieved not only through their own efforts, but through the intervention of the “supernatural” element and the divine infusion of the graces.²⁷⁰

Teresa spends considerable time discussing the two ways human souls achieve growth, insisting they can be differentiated during prayer by the feelings they create: those arising from “natural” contemplation – i.e., from our own efforts and the

²⁶⁸ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 59-60.

²⁶⁹ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 68.

²⁷⁰ Dickens, *The Female Mystic*, 189.

laborious reasoning of our own mind – produce what Teresa calls “sweetness in devotion;” those arising from the supernatural – i.e., from God – result in “divine” consolations and are much more keenly felt and of greater authenticity. Teresa compares these prayerful states of mind to the filling of water basins by two different methods; she likens “natural” contemplation to the filling of a basin via an aqueduct using water brought from a distance “flowing through many noisy pipes and waterworks;” she likens “supernatural” contemplation to filling a basin built near the source of the spring itself; filling quietly, the basin overflows and water spills into a great, continuously flowing stream.²⁷¹

Expanding her discussion of supernatural contemplation, Teresa says souls in the fourth mansions may undergo “recollection,” an especially powerful experience of God during prayer in which there is:

no occasion to retire nor to shut the eyes, nor does it depend on anything exterior; involuntarily the eyes suddenly close and solitude is found. Without any labour of one’s own, the temple of which I spoke is reared for the soul in which to pray: the senses and exterior surroundings appear to lose their hold, while the spirit gradually regains its lost sovereignty.²⁷²

Dierdre Green notes Teresa is describing that contemplative state in which the mind, memory and human will – considered in medieval theology to be the higher faculties of the soul – and the five exterior senses (hearing, sight, smell, taste, touch) and the two interior senses, namely, fancy and imagination – i.e., the lower faculties of the soul – have all been withdrawn into the inner self to concentrate on

²⁷¹ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 83-84.

²⁷² Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 87.

God.²⁷³ To enter this state demands the resignation of one's will and to remain ever aware of the divine presence, even and especially as one goes about one's daily tasks and occupations.²⁷⁴ As a state of continual prayer, it is first learned like most complex skills through conscious, laborious practice during sustained periods of silent contemplative prayer until its mastery becomes automatic in the way the practice of musical scales and other similar tasks become automatic.

With proficiency in recollection, the contemplative in the fourth mansions is able to enter another state Teresa calls the supernatural "prayer of quiet," although she does not rigidly differentiate between it and recollection. The prayer of quiet, explains Teresa, is identifiable by a heightened state of interior peace, joy, delight and receptivity to God which defies all rational understanding.²⁷⁵

Ultimately, Teresa says souls in the fourth mansions are free from servile fear, have broken many of the bonds of detachment and mortification, and are now able to practice both natural and supernatural contemplation. Souls in the fourth mansions are characterized by their continuous striving to love others, in giving up their own will to the divine will and in rigorously cultivating the virtues, particularly humility.

Despite considerable progress, souls in the fourth mansions have not yet received the highest gifts of the Spirit, and therefore remain open to considerable relapse, even more so than in the previous mansions since the natural is now

²⁷³ Dierdre Green, *Gold in the Crucible: Teresa of Ávila and the Western Mystical Tradition* (Dorset: Element Books, 1989), 39.

²⁷⁴ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 87-90.

²⁷⁵ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 91.

combined with the supernatural. Continued diligence and perseverance must be applied to the exterior and interior practices of detachment, mortification and the cultivation of virtues if souls are to progress to the next mansions.²⁷⁶

Clearly souls who have progressed to the third and fourth mansions have achieved the classical state of *illumination*, enjoying moments of supernatural contemplation, deep insight, divine wisdom and clarity of direction; however, the work of purgation, particularly the phase *dark night of the senses* to purify and gain control of the emotions, must still continue if the mystic is to achieve the highest state, union with God.

Fifth Mansions

In the fifth mansions, souls prepare themselves for higher states through the experience of the “spiritual betrothal” or “prayer of union,” marking a new and very high degree of both natural and supernatural contemplation. Teresa explains that in the fifth mansions, the efforts of detachment and mortification and the cultivation of virtues must be especially diligent, comparing the souls’ efforts to that of the silkworm spinning its cocoon:

Forward then, my daughters! hasten over your work and build the little cocoon. Let us renounce self-love and self-will, care for nothing earthly, do penance, pray, mortify ourselves, be obedient and perform all the other good works of which you know. Act up to your light; you have been taught your duties. Die! die as the silkworm does when it has fulfilled the office of its creation, and you will see God and be immersed in His greatness, as the little silkworm is enveloped in its cocoon.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁶ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 75, 93-94.

²⁷⁷ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 108.

Eventually, after much effort the human soul will emerge as a “butterfly,” strong, courageous and willing to forsake even friends in its desire for union with God. At this point in its development, the soul has clearly recognized that no true rest can be found in fellow human creatures since so they offer so little compared with divine solace. This, says Teresa, is a critically important lesson, unfortunately, it generally produces considerable confusion and frustration since the soul, although it has undergone profound change, must accomplish further growth before it is able to clearly identify and joyously take up its life’s work.²⁷⁸ It is a truth of which the soul must be forever mindful:

It cannot return from whence it came, for as I told you, that is not the soul’s power, do what it will, but depends upon God’s pleasure. Alas, what fresh trials begin to afflict the mind! Who would expect this after such a sublime grace? In fact, in one way or another we must carry the cross all our lives.²⁷⁹

Fully awake yet not fully actualized, Teresa says a soul in the fifth mansions is tormented by failings and weaknesses, and may be so discontent with itself and the human condition that it wishes to “quit it” through death.²⁸⁰ To overcome such despair, Teresa recommends the medieval practice of meditating on Christ’s passion and his perfect obedience as a method for discovering the inherent joy in suffering that is necessarily a key part of following God’s will.²⁸¹

Teresa equally stresses yet another way by which souls in the fifth mansions achieve growth, and it is not through the infusion of the supernatural

²⁷⁸ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 109.

²⁷⁹ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 109.

²⁸⁰ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 109-10.

²⁸¹ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 111-12.

element, but simply through the joyful human practice of learning to love others unselfishly. To achieve this, says Teresa, is to clearly demonstrate the surrendering of one's will to God's will:

We cannot know whether we love God although there may be strong reasons for thinking so, but there can be no doubt about whether we love our neighbour or no. Be sure that in proportion as you advance in fraternal charity, you are increasing your love of God, for His Majesty bears so tender an affection for us that I cannot doubt He will repay our love for others by augmenting, in a thousand different ways, that which we bear for Him.²⁸²

Completely selfless love without egoic sentimentality, emotion or expectation leads to quite a different understanding of what it means to love one's neighbour as oneself. Such love comes with increased wisdom and responsibility, leading to greater self-awareness and knowledge and resulting in relationships of freedom and growth.

Sixth Mansions

Teresa maintains souls reaching the sixth mansions enjoy a considerable increase in spiritual favours and gifts in preparation for their “spiritual marriage” with the divine; as Dickens notes, it is in the sixth mansions that Teresa's nuptial theology begins to emerge, with Christ now referred to as the bridegroom.²⁸³ One of the most notable favours souls receive in these mansions is the “wound of love,” a spiritual gift Teresa defines as the moment when we are made acutely aware of our failings that keep us apart from God, in the way Catherine of Genoa became

²⁸² Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 116.

²⁸³ Dickens, *The Female Mystic*, 189.

aware of her weaknesses. To clarify her interpretation of the “wound of love,” Teresa compares this experience of God to a “burning furnace” out of which a spark flies and into the human soul, and although it feels the heat, the soul is not consumed by it, the “wound of love” being an “inner fire” purifying and refining the human self.²⁸⁴ From this and similar spiritual favours, the mystic is made acutely aware that no person or earthly thing can ever match the quality of divine love; unfortunately, it is a discovery that generally causes bitter disappointment with the human condition and intense loneliness and desolation.²⁸⁵

According to Teresa, the wound of love is only one of various ways God relates to human souls residing in the sixth mansions. She describes “the flight of the spirit” as yet another way of receiving the gift of perfect love. To explain the rapturous power of this spiritual gift, Teresa returns to her favourite simile for spiritual matters, being water:

It seems that the cistern of water of which I spoke in the fourth mansion, was formerly filled gently and quietly, without any movement; but now this great God Who restrains the springs and the waters and will not permit the ocean to transgress its bounds, let loose the streams, which with a powerful rush flow into the cistern and a mighty wave rises, strong enough to uplift on high the little vessel of our soul. Neither the ship herself nor her pilot and sailors can at their choice control the fury of the sea and stop it carrying the boat where it will: far less can the interior of the soul now stay where it chooses or force its senses or faculties to act more than He Who holds them in His dominion decrees.²⁸⁶

Also of paramount importance to Teresa in her discussion of the sixth mansions is her warning to exercise vigilance when judging the authenticity of all

²⁸⁴ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 136-37.

²⁸⁵ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 166-69.

²⁸⁶ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 161.

spiritual favours and gifts. Accurate discernment between genuine visionary experiences and those arising from flights of fancy, their source being the imagination and not God, is imperative. Better, says Teresa, to ignore all such experiences if there is any doubt regarding their authenticity since visions and similar extraordinary experiences are not necessary to a devout spiritual life. She is emphatic about the importance of truthfulness and humility in all spiritual matters, maintaining God is the supreme truth and the virtue of humility is the human manifestation of the supreme truth since any goodness or wisdom we enjoy comes from God, a belief shared by Underhill, Julian of Norwich and Catherine of Genoa.²⁸⁷

Along with spiritual gifts and favours, Teresa says souls in the sixth mansions experience an equally corresponding increase in spiritual afflictions. Experiences of authentic spiritual favours such as the “wound of love” and the “flight of the spirit” have a tendency to create deep despair over the human condition, discontent with the world, and an inability to find any solace in companions. Like the other mystics of this study, Teresa insists spiritual progress demands profound purgatorial suffering to develop the deepest of humility and the other classic Christian virtues. However, she contends, like Catherine of Genoa, that these trials and tribulations are nothing compared with their recompense:

Alas, O lord, to what a state dost Thou bring those who love Thee! Yet these sufferings are as nothing compared with the reward Thou wilt give for them. It is right that great riches should be dearly bought. Moreover, her pains purify her soul so that it may enter the seventh mansion, as purgatory cleanses spirits which are to enter heaven; then indeed these trials will appear like a drop of water compared to the sea.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁷ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 198.

²⁸⁸ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 202.

With respect to the classical five-fold transformative map, souls who have progressed to the fifth and sixth mansions experience moments of the unitive life, oscillating between intense experiences of the *dark night of the soul*. An immensely difficult phase reached by only the most committed mystics, *dark night of the soul* is the state in which the soul is thoroughly cleansed of its “ignorance and imperfections, habitual, natural and spiritual,” a process which causes intense suffering since the divine wisdom, says Saint John of the Cross, so magnifies the soul’s meanness and impurity.²⁸⁹ Teresa describes the dark night as a condition of “bitter suffering,” accompanied by trials and difficulties that might last for months or even years before the new state of consciousness unifies itself and a new centre is formed.²⁹⁰

Seventh Mansions

Teresa begins her discussion of the seventh mansions by remarking that she has written so much of the spiritual journey, one might think “nothing more need be said, but this would be false, God’s immensity having no limits.”²⁹¹ Although in the other mansions “tumults and wild beasts rage with great uproar, nothing of this enters the seventh mansions;” by the time the soul reaches the seventh mansions, the passions have been so subdued “they would not dare to enter where they would only

²⁸⁹ Saint John of the Cross, *Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, ed., Bernard McGinn, 386.

²⁹⁰ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 200.

²⁹¹ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 209.

suffer defeat.”²⁹² Having achieved sufficient purification and humility the “spiritual betrothal” ends and the soul is granted access to the seventh mansions and the “special chamber,” the inner most dwelling place of the human soul to be united forever in “holy matrimony” with God.²⁹³ Teresa refers to Paul’s statement, “He who is joined to the Lord in one spirit,” as being precisely representative of the experience of souls in the seventh mansions.²⁹⁴

Returning to her analogy of the “butterfly,” Teresa says souls dwelling in the seventh mansions have now found rest, having finally achieved their full flowering, being nothing less than their *imageo dei*, the divine model by which the human being was originally created and which it is intended to manifest. She refers to Paul’s statement “to live is Christ and to die is gain” as analogous to her own soul, having as a butterfly finally found rest now that Christ lives fully within her.²⁹⁵ Like Catherine of Genoa, Teresa laments our inability to recognize the true value of the soul as being made in the image of God.²⁹⁶ She insists a soul that has fully manifested its *imageo dei* has achieved such complete access to God’s perfect love and wisdom that it embraces suffering, and is so deeply peaceful it bears no grudge against her enemies nor wishes them ill; even more, a soul dwelling in the seventh mansions has such a “special love for her enemies that she is deeply grieved at seeing them in

²⁹² Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 219.

²⁹³ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 210-11.

²⁹⁴ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 217.

²⁹⁵ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 217, 221.

²⁹⁶ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 200.

trouble, and does all she can to relieve them, earnestly interceding with God on their behalf.”²⁹⁷

Souls who reach the seventh mansions have reached *unia mystica*, stable union with God, the last stage of the classical five-fold transformative path. A state characterized by deep peace, “complete absorption in the interests of the Infinite,” “a complete sense of freedom” and the “establishment of the self as a centre of energy,” the mystic is now ready to undertake a mission beneficial to humankind.²⁹⁸ Rather astonishingly however, this is not the end of the journey.

According to Teresa:

each mansion contains many more rooms, above, below, and around it, with fair gardens, fountains and labyrinths besides other things so delightful that you will wish to consume yourself in praising in return the great God Who has created the soul to His own image and likeness.²⁹⁹

Saint Teresa of Ávila: Poetic Interpreter of the Transformative Map

As handbooks Teresa wrote for the nuns in her care, *The Way of Perfection* and *The Interior Castle* expound in detail the hard-won struggle with detachment, mortification and the growth of mature prayer as the critical elements in the transformative path to *unia mystica* and higher consciousness. In Teresa’s own life, this ancient path to growth took her far beyond the roles traditionally assigned to the female gender, ultimately leading her to create a remarkable spiritual and institutional legacy. Although she was initially reluctant to take up roles of leadership

²⁹⁷ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 222.

²⁹⁸ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 416.

²⁹⁹ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 237-38.

and responsibility, when she finally did so, she performed her duties in holy relation with the divine, gaining a reputation for being a sound organizer, shrewd negotiator and a good business woman, discrediting any notion that the mystical consciousness is ungrounded or impractical. At one point during her struggle to found her order, she wrote from her institution at Seville:

One of the things that makes me happy is that there is no suggestion of that nonsense about my supposed sanctity. That allows me to live and go about without fear that the ridiculous tower of their imagination will come tumbling down on top of me.³⁰⁰

Despite Teresa’s protestations, to read her legacy is to encounter a poetic voice of rare directness, honesty and humility. It is this same natural humility which has led those who have followed and studied her to note there was “something so fundamentally authentic, her affections so deeply rooted, her life so firmly centred, her heart so firmly fixed,” even those who spoke ill of her realized she was a saint.³⁰¹ So powerful was Teresa’s life and legacy that it led the brilliant twentieth century philosopher, Edith Stein, to leave her ancestral Judaism and convert to Christianity to ultimately become a Discalced Carmelite nun.

³⁰⁰ Cohen, *Life*, 19.

³⁰¹ Allison Peers, *Mother of Carmel: A Portrait of St Teresa of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1945), quoted in Green, *Gold in the Crucible*, 35.

Chapter Seven

Edith Stein (1891-1942)

Nothing is accidental, that my entire life, even in the most minute of details, was pre-designed in the plans of divine providence and is thus for the all-seeing eye of God a perfect coherence in meaning.

– John Sullivan, *Edith Stein: Essential Writings*

During one of the darkest periods in history in which humankind was deeply estranged from God, the brilliant scholar, philosopher, educator and writer, Edith Stein, chose to fully unite herself to God, becoming a Carmelite contemplative nun; on October 14, 1933, the eve of the feast of Saint Teresa, Stein entered the Discalced Carmelite Order, taking the name of its founder to become Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. As a Catholic nun whose formative years were steeped in the Jewish tradition, Stein was a gifted, multi-faceted woman of remarkable integrity, and an inspiration and testimony to all who accept the suffering path of the Cross as the path to perfect love, ultimately giving her life in the gas chambers of Auschwitz on behalf of her own Jewish people; as she herself wrote, the “desire to possess Christ can never be sought without the Cross.”³⁰² Stein’s courage is modern testimony of a soul in perfect detachment and mortification, living simply and silently in union with God.

³⁰² Edith Stein, *The Science of the Cross*, vol. 6 of *The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, trans., Josephine Koepfel (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2002), 282.

Literary Legacy

Stein was a brilliant scholar and the author of several treatises, essays, and books, as well as poetry and humorous verses covering a wide range of philosophical and religious matters. As a professional philosopher, Stein completed her doctorate under the eminent Edmund Husserl, graduating with a mark of distinction. After her conversion to Catholicism, however, all of her writing and lecturing pertained to religious matters, with the “right picture of the workings of the human soul” being of primary concern.³⁰³ Most of Stein’s spiritual texts were written for her Carmelite sisters to mark special occasions or provide religious instruction, among these being a significant study of the central theological concepts of Thomas Aquinas, which she later revised to become one of her central treatises, *Finite and Eternal Being*. Her mystical work, approximately a thousand pages all written in the seven years just prior to her death, some while waiting impending arrest by the Nazis, are attempts to translate classical Christian doctrines into more modern language.³⁰⁴ Included in this body of writings is *The Mystery of Christmas*, an insightful essay on the meaning of love, differentiating the infinite strength and freedom of supernatural love from the limitations of human love, and an important essay, “Ways to Know God,” which is an exploration of Saint Dionysius and his transformative threefold way.³⁰⁵ Also of considerable significance is *The Science of the Cross*, a commentary

³⁰³ Sarah Borden, *Edith Stein* (London: Continuum, 2003), 118.

³⁰⁴ Borden, introduction to *Stein*, vii-viii.

³⁰⁵ Borden, *Stein*, 118.

on Saint John of the Cross Stein hurriedly composed in the early 1940's just prior to her arrest by the Nazis.³⁰⁶

Biographical Sketch

Edith Stein was born on October 12, 1891, a date which her pious Jewish mother considered particularly auspicious since it coincided with *Yom Kippur*, in the beautiful medieval city of Breslau, Germany, later ceded to Poland at the end of the Second World War. When Edith was not yet two years old, her father died, leaving his widow with seven children and a debt-ridden business; remarkably, against the advice of her own family, Frau Stein assumed management of her husband's lumber company, a career few women enter even now. Immersing herself in the lumber trade, Frau Stein learned the technical aspects and the special calculations required, and to everyone's surprise the business prospered; not only did she succeed in more than adequately providing for her children, including solid educations, she also discharged all her husband's debts.³⁰⁷

During her formative years, Edith Stein proved herself to be a brilliant, diligent student who was always willing to help others. A gifted linguist, she was an exceptional Latin scholar, admiring the language long before she used it for prayer or understood it as the voice of the Church. She also loved music particularly the precision and complex elegance of Bach, her favourite composer.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁶ Constance FitzGerald, "Passion in the Carmelite Tradition: Edith Stein," in *Carmelite Prayer: A Tradition for the 21st Century*, ed. Keith Egan (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), 176.

³⁰⁷ María Ruiz Scaperlandia, *Edith Stein: St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2001), 30.

³⁰⁸ Scaperlandia, *Stein*, 27-38.

In 1911, Stein was admitted to the University of Breslau only three years after women were first permitted to attain an academic education in Prussia. While at Breslau, Stein was introduced to the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, who was also of Jewish descent although he had become a Lutheran. Stein found his ideas so intriguing that she became his student and later his assistant, the great philosopher having come to so appreciate her brilliant mind. When the First World War began, Stein interrupted her university education to serve with the Red Cross as an assistant nurse despite considerable opposition from her family. After the war, she resumed her doctoral studies at the University of Gottingen under Husserl, ultimately graduating *summa cum laude*. Despite impressive academic credentials, Stein was unable to attain a university faculty position for reasons of ethnicity and sex; even Husserl refused to provide a proper recommendation on grounds of gender. As a result, Stein devoted herself to giving private lessons in phenomenology and to her writing.³⁰⁹

In addition to her studies and attempts to establish an academic career, Stein had been conducting an ardent search for spiritual truth. At the universities she attended, she was surrounded by intellectuals, many of whom professed a devout spiritual life. From these relationships, Stein became acquainted with Roman Catholicism, and at least two encounters had a particularly profound impact on her spiritual quest; one was to witness the power of the faith in providing solace to the widow of a mutual friend who had died during the First World War,³¹⁰ the other was to read Saint Teresa's autobiography. The dramatic outcome of this spiritual quest

³⁰⁹ Scaperlandia, *Stein*, 78.

³¹⁰ Scaperlandia, *Stein*, 74-75.

was a swift conversion to Roman Catholicism, and despite the severe objections of her mother, Stein was baptized on New Years Day, 1922, at the age of thirty-one.³¹¹

For several years following her conversion, Stein worked as an author, educator, translator and lecturer, achieving acclaim as a philosopher and writer; however, her great longing was for the solitude and contemplation of the Carmelite order. It was not until 1933, however, that Stein finally entered the Carmelite convent at Cologne, Germany, taking the religious name of Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. She remained at Cologne until 1938 when she was transferred to the Carmelite convent in Echt, Holland in a desperate attempt to flee Nazi persecution; however it proved to be futile. Shortly after Hitler's 1942 order to arrest all non-Aryan Roman Catholics living in Holland, Stein, along with her sister Rosa who was also a convert were ultimately sent to their death at Auschwitz. At the inevitable moment of seizure and arrest, Stein's response was voluntary and deliberate, meeting the Nazi salute with her usual *Gelobt sei Jesus Christus*, "praised be Jesus Christ," signaling her desire to stand in the "face of communal violence for unbreakable love and solidarity;" reports of interments at the camp indicate Stein and other members of religious orders continued to pray regularly, holding mass and singing the *Confiteor* daily, despite the jeers of the SS. Stein was also said to have spent her time comforting and assisting mothers and children.³¹² More than fifty years later, on October 11, 1998, Pope John Paul II canonized Stein, declaring her to be "this

³¹¹ Scaperlandia, *Stein*, 80-85.

³¹² Borden, *Stein*, 12, 115; FitzGerald, "Passion in the Carmelite Tradition," *Carmelite Prayer*, 195.

eminent daughter of Israel and faithful daughter of the Church and saint to the whole world.”³¹³

Spiritual Life

Although her mother was a pious Jew observing the many rituals and the high holy days of her faith, it seems that during her formative years Stein did not receive the same excellent instruction in Judaism as she did in her secular educational subjects. For such a gifted mind as Stein’s, the consequence was to rely on modern rational philosophies for her world view, and as a young student, she declared herself an atheist and refused to pray. However, Stein, who even as a child was well known for her insistence on absolute honesty and freedom, admitted that during the years she attended university, she felt called to seek spiritual truth.³¹⁴ Surrounded by intellectuals who professed different and devout spiritual faiths, Stein began to examine religion, reasoning it must be worthy of consideration since so many of the minds she admired took it seriously. Furthermore, rigorous and demanding study of phenomenology had freed her from any narrow religious preconceptions, leading her to a state of impartiality, opening her to the voice of God.³¹⁵ All of these influences seemed to have converged during a summer vacation when Stein read the

³¹³ Pope John Paul II, “Canonization of Edith Stein and Homily,” <http://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/JP2STEIN.HTM> (accessed March 22, 2010).

³¹⁴ Josephine Koepffel, *Edith Stein: Philosopher and Mystic* (Chicago, IL: University of Scranton Press, 2007), 19.

³¹⁵ Scaperlandia, *Stein*, 64-71.

autobiography of Saint Teresa of Ávila, apparently exclaiming when she finished it, “here is the truth!”³¹⁶

Reading Saint Teresa’s autobiography was obviously a pivotal moment in Stein’s life; accounts left by colleagues and others indicate the day after she finished the book she purchased a missal and a copy of the Catholic catechism.³¹⁷ Stein herself left nothing to explain her swift and determined decision to become a Catholic at the age of thirty-one; indeed, whenever the subject arose she would simply say in Latin, *secretum meum mihi*, “the secret belongs to me.”³¹⁸ What is notable about Stein’s conversion is that it exhibits interesting similarities to Saint Augustine and Saint Teresa; as Carmelite Sister Waltraud Herbstrith observes, each had to learn detachment; Augustine from sensuality, Teresa from worldly contacts, and Stein from the particularly modern attachment to a rationalist world view.³¹⁹ All that is necessary for conversion to occur, notes Herbstrith, is the honesty to recognize one’s central attachment and how it deprives one of the freedom to fully offer oneself to God.³²⁰

Following her Catholic baptism, Stein resided with the Dominican Sisters in Speyer, Germany, and for ten years lived like an enclosed nun, taking the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, dedicating herself to training women

³¹⁶ Maria Amata Neyer, *Edith Stein: Her Life in Photos and Documents* (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1998), 34, quoted in Scaperlandia, *Stein*, 80.

³¹⁷ Scaperlandia, *Stein*, 80.

³¹⁸ Susanne Batzdorff, *Aunt Edith: The Jewish Heritage of a Catholic Saint* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1998), 116-17, quoted in Scaperlandia, *Stein*, 80-81.

³¹⁹ Scaperlandia, *Stein*, 81-82.

³²⁰ Scaperlandia, *Stein*, 82.

teachers and to a life of contemplative prayer. A decade later, Stein was finally accepted into the Carmelite order, entering fully into the deeply contemplative life of a Carmelite nun. She was so devoted to her new vocation that recognition as a scholar by her superiors was for her a penance since research and writing took her away from prayer; when Sundays came Stein is reported to have said, “Thank God, I don’t have to write today. Today I can pray.”³²¹

Stein’s decision to enter the Discalced Carmelite Order was undoubtedly influenced by its founder, being Saint Teresa, as well as its history, being intimately connected to Israel and the prophets, particularly Elijah. Throughout her life, Stein demonstrated a deep respect for her Jewish heritage; despite her conversion and entry into a Catholic foundation, Stein’s Jewish identity remained vitally important to her and was always entirely comfortable with owning her ethnicity, making it a practice of informing others if the topic arose in conversation;³²² in fact, her writings indicate her conversion to Catholicism simply served to strengthen her Jewish identity.³²³

Historical Context

Stein’s canonization in 1998 and pronouncement as co-patroness of Europe in 1999, as well as subsequent discussions regarding her candidacy as a Doctor of the Church, have caused considerable controversy within the Catholic-

³²¹ Herbstrith, Waltraud, *Edith Stein: A Biography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 134, quoted in Scaperlandia, *Stein*, 121.

³²² Koepffel, *Stein*, 21.

³²³ Borden, *Stein*, 139.

Jewish dialogue. Because Stein was declared a martyr on behalf of the Catholic Church, the process for canonization was significantly expedited; from the perspective of the Church, Stein's arrest (along with many other Jewish Catholics) was the direct result of Nazi retaliation against the Dutch Catholic bishops and their public condemnation of National Socialists in July 1942; prior to the bishops' statement, Jewish converts living in Holland had been exempt from deportation. However, from a Jewish perspective, Stein was persecuted for her heritage and bloodlines and was arrested and murdered by the Nazis for her ethnicity. Many Jews consider Stein's fate to be representative of how little the Roman Catholic Church did to protect European Jewry, especially those who should have been safe because they were under direct protection of church authorities. Furthermore, the history of the Roman Catholic Church and its response to anti-Semitism has been inexcusable since its implicit and at times explicit attitude of tolerance helped to prepare the ground for the Holocaust. By declaring Stein a Catholic martyr, the Jewish community fears Christianity's quite extraordinary ability to assimilate even the most untenable of situations by appropriating for itself the "sanctum of the Shoah."³²⁴ For all of these reasons, Stein, from the Jewish perspective, is a martyr to Judaism because of Catholic inaction.

With respect to Stein herself and her Jewish heritage, it is clear she loved her family and cherished her faith; while her family may have understood her conversion and entry into the Carmelite Order as a separation and rejection of Judaism, she did not. In a letter dated October 31, 1938, Stein wrote:

³²⁴ Borden, *Stein*, 135-42.

I trust that, from eternity, Mother will take care of them [her family]. And in the Lord's having accepted my life for all of them. I keep having to think of Queen Esther who was taken from among her people precisely so that she might represent them before the king. I am a very poor and powerless little Esther, but the King who chose me is infinitely great and merciful.³²⁵

For Stein it seems there was “no root incompatibility” between being Christian and her esteem for Judaism; on the contrary, Stein is reported to have said to her mother that as a Catholic she had developed a new and deep appreciation for the grace-bearing elements Judaism offered.³²⁶ Given Stein's impeccable integrity and her own liberal ecumenical position, perhaps the best response is to simply accept her wish to keep her religious faith her *secretum*, and to hold the opposing and paradoxical tensions of her canonization within the unity of God's love.

Primary Sources for a Study of the Transformative Map

To study the life and work of Edith Stein is to encounter an exceptionally high and rare level of consciousness, and to witness first hand the manifestation of the Christ consciousness through her own remarkable act of voluntary expiatory suffering. For Stein, the paradox of suffering transmuted by and into perfect love is centrally expressed in the symbolism of the Cross which she made her own through her Carmelite christening as Saint Teresa Benedicta *of the Cross*. Stein wrote extensively on expiatory suffering as the highest form of purgation and the greatest manifestation of the Christ consciousness, and as the central question of this thesis, her treatise, *The Science of the Cross*, will be the primary text

³²⁵ Borden, *Stein*, 139.

³²⁶ John Sullivan, *Edith Stein: Essential Writings* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 28.

(supplemented by selections from her other writings) by which to explore a topic so pivotal to her own theology.

Central Theological Premise: Perfect Divine Love

The contemporary Carmelite scholar and prioress, Constance FitzGerald, describes Carmelite prayer as a process of maturing “passion,” defined firstly as suffering and secondly as ardent love and desire for God. Such a process toward the development of a mature passionate love for God, as understood in the Carmelite sense, clearly underscores Stein’s own life and spiritual journey.³²⁷ Stein learned well the purgative tradition of purification and contemplation through her spiritual teachers, Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Ávila, as well as during her decade at Speyer in residence with the Dominican Sisters, living as an enclosed nun, immersing herself in Christ through daily Eucharist, the Liturgy of the Hours, theological study and silent prayer to ultimately learn “how to go about living at the Lord’s hand.”³²⁸ Of prayer, Stein writes:

God leads each of us on an individual way. We can do little ourselves, compared to what is done to us. But that little bit we must do. Primarily this consists... of persevering in prayer to find the right way.³²⁹

Like all of the mystics of this study, Stein attests to the perfect love of God for humankind as central to her theology. The source of pure love and wisdom,

³²⁷ FitzGerald, “Passion in the Carmelite Tradition,” *Carmelite Prayer*, 174.

³²⁸ Stein to Sr Adelgundis Jaegerschmid, April 28, 1931, *Self-Portrait in Letters: 1916-1942*, trans Josephine Koeppl (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1993), no. 89, quoted in FitzGerald, “Passion in the Carmelite Tradition,” *Carmelite Prayer*, 183.

³²⁹ Stein to Anneliese Lichtenberger, August 7, 1931, *Self-Portrait in Letters*, no 102, quoted in FitzGerald, “Passion in the Carmelite Tradition,” *Carmelite Prayer*, 183.

Stein insists the invitation to participate in God’s love is open to all; through willing asceticism and meaningful prayer, we are to grow and mature that we might come to experience the constancy of God and the fearlessness of our own heart. It is a fundamental teaching of Stein’s and one that she supremely and magnanimously exemplified in her own life. In *The Science of the Cross*, Stein draws on the teachings of Paul to validate her own description of living with and through God at the highest state of human consciousness:

In this new life of union [i.e., the human soul with God] all the appetites and faculties of the soul, all her inclinations and activities are changed and become divine. The soul lives “the life of God. Thus her death [of natural self after total mortification of all vices and virtues] has been changed to life, her animal life to spiritual life.” Her intellect becomes divine, her will, her memory, and her natural desires are all divinized... Consequently, the soul has the right to say, “I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20). She is now always, inwardly and outwardly, in a festive mood and from her mouth of her spirit a *Song* of great jubilation frequently streams toward God, a *Song* always new, enfolded in gladness and love....³³⁰

Classical Transformative Map and Expiatory Suffering

Central to Stein’s theology and the Carmelite tradition is the idea of expiatory suffering. Stein’s particular interpretation of this difficult Christian theological concept depends on her own mystical experiences, her study of her great Carmelite predecessors, and her work as a phenomenologist. Fundamentally, Stein believed that at the sensate level the human being is built to act as an “energy exchanger,” contributing and receiving energy to and from the human community, and the larger societal structures (social and political) by and from which they are

³³⁰ Stein, *Science of the Cross*, VI, 202.

created and maintained.³³¹ This exchange of communal power and energy offers human beings the opportunity to accomplish much more than they could ever achieve alone. For Stein, human beings are not isolated individuals, but “radically and constitutively connected” by a vast network through which we send energy, negative as well as positive, to create the mental health and conscious state of all humanity, ultimately making us all responsible for the healing and evolution, or devolution, of human consciousness.³³² Similar ideas may be found in Jewish kabbalism; as the contemporary scholar and kabbalist Adin Steinsaltz explains, Jewish mysticism maintains that all thoughts, deeds and actions have powerful ramifications in the energetic fields of the material realm.³³³ Stein believed that to contribute positive energy to worthy human endeavors was to “bind one closer to Christ, as every community that works together on one task becomes more and more closely knit and as the limbs of a body, working together organically, continually become more strongly one.”³³⁴

Stein’s theories concerning the deep interconnectedness of the human community points to the degree of integrity and responsibility by which God expects all human beings to live. Furthermore, Stein believed some human beings are called by God to help guide the spiritual learning of others, but to act as such a guide requires many tests and trials involving intense spiritual suffering; essentially, the

³³¹ Marianne Sawicki, “Edith Stein: Sr. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross,” <http://faculty.juniata.edu/sawicki/setinstuff.html> (accessed February 15, 2008).

³³² FitzGerald, “Passion in the Carmelite Tradition,” *Carmelite Prayer*, 190-91.

³³³ Adin Steinsaltz, *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, trans., Yehuda Hanegbi (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 10.

³³⁴ Sullivan, *Stein: Essential Writings*, 130.

guide must walk the transformative path of the *dark night of the soul*. Eventually, after completing her own interior battle with neurotic states and complexes, and confronting the pain of the human condition to ultimately embrace it, Stein wrote:

Those who attain the freedom of these heights and expansive views have outgrown what is usually called “happiness” and “unhappiness.”... And because streams of living water flow from all those who live in God’s hand, they exert a mysterious magnetic appeal on thirsty souls. Without aspiring to it, they must become guides of other persons striving to the light; they must practice spiritual maternity, begetting and drawing sons and daughters nearer to the kingdom of God.³³⁵

Even more, Stein believed some guides must act, during those darker periods in history when society succumbs to mass psychoses, as exemplars of the Christ consciousness willing, even, to undergo expiatory suffering. An extremely difficult concept for the modern sensibility to comprehend, expiatory suffering is best understood if it is considered within the context of the developing human consciousness. Referring to Marion’s eight-level scheme, it is only at the highest states of consciousness that the human being develops the maturity to manage all emotions and most importantly, take responsibility for all psychological projections and shadows. As history attests, humankind has repeatedly used the primitive mechanism of the “scapegoat,” or in modern psychological terms, “projection,” as a way of delivering itself from its deeply repressed shadows and complexes, including the primitive hatred of God and each other, and its desire to kill. In her spiritual writings, Stein, who was born on *Yom Kippur*, the Jewish holy day marking the high priest’s offering of an animal sacrifice for the sins of the community, repeatedly refers to the significance of this ritual and its role as an expiatory offering. (*Yom*

³³⁵ Sullivan, *Stein: Essential Writings*, 76-77.

Kippur was so important to Stein that throughout her life she celebrated it with a day-long fast, further testimony to her expansive ecumenism.)³³⁶ Stein believed projections, being deeply negative transmissions through the network of energy connecting all human beings, could, if consciously and freely borne by those on whom the negative energy is projected, ultimately free others from their hatred and destructive desires.³³⁷ Until all human beings have achieved advanced levels of consciousness, the primitive psychological process of projection and its highly advanced counterforce, expiatory suffering, seem to be the mechanisms by which equilibrium is restored to human communities.

To understand expiation from Stein’s perspective is to recognize it is never required by God (as is so often misinterpreted), but is required by humankind who needs the visible manifestation of God’s perfect love and wisdom in the form of an exemplary, highly conscious human guide to experience, without resentment, the freely given love of God. For Stein, those who have undergone the *dark night of the soul*, who have been cleansed and purified by the intense and perfect love of God, are to act as spiritual guides, expressing radical love and service to others.³³⁸ Without having trodden the mystical path of purgation and the most extreme *dark night of the soul*, all acts of suffering are simply masochistic and completely impotent to heal others.

³³⁶ FitzGerald, “Passion in the Carmelite Tradition,” *Carmelite Prayer*, 188.

³³⁷ FitzGerald, “Passion in the Carmelite Tradition,” *Carmelite Prayer*, 186-94.

³³⁸ FitzGerald, “Passion in the Carmelite Tradition,” *Carmelite Prayer*, 188-91.

That Stein experienced her own *dark night of the soul* is evident from several of her writings. Having formally and precisely studied the quality of empathy, the topic of her doctoral dissertation, and through intense periods of meditation on the suffering of Jesus, an ancient Roman Catholic spiritual practice, Stein apparently experienced a “transcendent source of energy, of motivation” beyond herself in the passion and death of Jesus.³³⁹ In her comments on this experience and the power of its energy, Stein writes:

If anyone wishes to be [Christ’s] disciple let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. For whoever “would save his life, will lose it but whoever loses it for my sake, will save it” [Mk 8:34f] Oh, who can make this counsel of our Savior on self-denial understandable, practicable and attractive!... Annihilation of all sweetness in God... dryness, distaste, and trial... the pure spiritual cross and the nakedness of Christ’s poverty of spirit... A genuine spirit seeks rather the distasteful in God than the delectable, leans more toward suffering than toward consolation, more toward going without everything for God than toward possession... The renunciation according to the will of the Savior “must be the dying off and annihilation of all that the will holds in high esteem, whether temporal, natural or spiritual.”³⁴⁰

Having undergone her own intense *dark night of the soul*, Stein ultimately came to recognize that she was being prepared for her own role as an expiatory guide, the evidence for which may be found in an essay she wrote in the spring of 1933 entitled “The Road to Carmel.” Describing an hour of prayer on the First Friday of April at the Cologne Carmel, Stein writes:

I spoke to our Savior and told Him that I knew that it was His cross which was now being laid on the Jewish people. Most of them did not understand

³³⁹ FitzGerald, “Passion in the Carmelite Tradition,” *Carmelite Prayer*, 184.

³⁴⁰ Stein, *Science of the Cross*, 32.

it; but those who did understand must accept it willingly in the name of all.³⁴¹

Stein's reply to the horrific scapegoat of the Holocaust by interpreting her death in Auschwitz as an act of expiatory suffering, freely borne in order to free others from their fear and hatred, speaks of the transcendence of her own consciousness and of her great wisdom, love and courage. That such radical love and service to others is the root of the Carmelite tradition and the teachings of Edith Stein are made poignantly clear in her last letter written just prior to her death in the gas chamber:

“So far I have been able to pray gloriously. [The carriers of the mystical stream] can do nothing but radiate the divine love that fills them and so participate in the perfection of all into unity of God which was and is Jesus' great desire.”³⁴²

Edith Stein: Supreme Exemplar of the Transformative Map

The life of Edith Stein exemplifies the highest of human consciousness, possessing that special sensitivity to recognize when there is “complete societal failure and receptivity to a true vision of values,” that the authentic spiritual guides of humanity must not be concerned with themselves, but to give perfectly, turning outward to embrace the community, ensuring the richness of their inner life is radiantly visible.³⁴³ As Stein attests, only the complete forfeit of selfhood

³⁴¹ Erich Przywara, *In und Gegen* (Nürnberg: Glock and Lutz, 1955), 118, quoted in Freda Mary Oben, “Edith Stein: Holiness in the Twentieth Century,” *Spirituality Today* 35 (Summer 1983), 141-54, <http://www.spiritualitytoday.org/spir2day/833524oben.html> (accessed March 10, 2010).

³⁴² Edith Stein, “The Prayer of the Church,” *The Hidden Life: Hagiographic Essays, Meditations, Spiritual Texts*, trans., Waltraut Stein (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1992), 110-11, quoted in FitzGerald, “Passion in the Carmelite Tradition,” *Carmelite Prayer*, 196.

³⁴³ FitzGerald, “Passion in the Carmelite Tradition,” *Carmelite Prayer*, 194.

achieved through rigorous purgation and mortification, and complete trust in and union with God provides the necessary courage and strength to undertake such a daunting task. Although Stein wrote the following passage as part of her study of Saint John of the Cross, its beauty and authenticity clearly speaks of her own interior experiences and the high degree of consciousness she had attained:

[Her] soul [having attained a state of high state of attachment and mortification] experiences in [God] as much gentleness and love as she does power and dominion and grandeur... The king of heaven shows himself to her as her equal and brother. He steps down from his throne, bends down to her and embraces her. He clothes her with royal garments: with the wonderful virtues of God, surrounds her with the golden glow of love... *The less a soul is encumbered by her own appetites and inclinations, the more [God] is alone and has his own home in her, and the more alone, the more concealed does he remain there. In a soul that is free of all desires, disrobed of all forms, images and creaturely inclinations, he lingers totally concealed and in the most intimate embrace. But for the soul herself, on this step of perfection, nothing remains secret, for "within herself she has the experience of this intimate embrace."*³⁴⁴

Having radically given up any and all claims to selfhood through her own intense purgative process which she learned well as a Carmelite nun and from her fellow predecessors, Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Ávila, Stein took human life to a frontier far beyond the familiar.³⁴⁵ "What was not included in my plan lay in God's plan" is the summation and epitaph of her life, having gone to death with complete trust in divine providence.³⁴⁶ As both scientist and mystic, Stein knew God as the greatest reality, and in her holy life and writings, brought him closer to us through the highest and most absolute manifestation of faith. To embrace the

³⁴⁴ Stein, *Science of the Cross*, 215-16.

³⁴⁵ FitzGerald, "Passion in the Carmelite Tradition," *Carmelite Prayer*, 196.

³⁴⁶ Sullivan, *Stein: Essential Writings*, 20.

purgatorial suffering of humankind as one's own when circumstances dictate it to be the highest human response, demonstrating it to be the ultimate route to God and the manifestation of perfect love and wisdom, and the greatest growth of oneself and ultimately humankind, is to witness in the life of Stein a modern example of the Christ consciousness in action.

Chapter Eight

Conclusion

One thing that stands out in the accounts of all the Christian mystics is that their encounter with God transforms their minds and lives. God changes the mystics and invites, even compels, them to encourage others by their teaching to open themselves to a similar process of transformation.

– Bernard McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*

Classical Transformative Map: A Valid Path Toward Higher Consciousness

As the five subjects of this study attest, the validity of the mystic's entire life and legacy depends on the validity of the classic five-fold transformative map. This ancient schema for transformation, with its challenging processes of purification to develop a detached state of mind, mortification to build a virtuous character, and rigorous prayer for strength and guidance, was deeply embraced by the five women mystics of this study, transforming and lifting them far beyond the historical roles assigned to women. An assessment of their entire lives and legacies and the remarkable success they achieved is proof of this ancient, time-tested model to self-growth, self-giving and union with God: with respect to their vocations, all five journeyed the arduous pilgrimage of the classical transformative map to emerge as highly competent, dedicated servants to God and humanity, functioning as successful counselors, teachers, and leaders of worthy institutions; with respect to their characters, all five displayed the virtues of the purified, mortified, prayerful Self: impeccable integrity and unity of purpose; the ability to remain resolute, focusing their formidable powers of concentration to achieve remarkable goals despite fierce opposition and the direst of circumstances; a genius for humorous, self-critical

analysis; a deep and fundamental humility; and a radical concern for humanity coupled with a complete lack of self-interest.

The culmination of purgation, mortification and a continuously prayerful state of mind is, as these five mystics attest, a deeply intimate relationship with God, and to experience, first-hand, divine love and wisdom, an energy so holy it can never be compared or mistaken for its inferior human facsimile. It was precisely this energy these women brought to the world through their lives and work, their remarkable accomplishments dispelling any view of the mystic as impractical or unrealistic. Even more, for the mystical consciousness to journey as far as Stein did, radically forfeiting all selfhood through radical detachment and mortification of both mind and body to achieve such astounding strength and virtue that she ultimately embraced the most terrible of suffering, inevitably recognizing it to be the most genuine response to the most terrible evil, transmuting it into the highest personal growth and the greatest revelation of perfect love and wisdom, is to witness the five-fold transformative map at its pinnacle. Having achieved highly integrated personalities operating at the highest levels of consciousness, all five women stand as testimonials to the validity of the classic five-fold scheme as the journey toward wholeness, the highest of human consciousness, and union with God.

Classical Transformative Map and Modern Christianity

That the spiritual pilgrimage marked out by the ancient transformative map is open to all who wish to make it is a fundamental truth to which the five subjects of this study attest, insisting the magnificence of the outcome far outweighs

the arduousness of the climb. As McGinn and Underhill both observe, the accounts the great mystics left of their own journeys are meant to serve as invaluable guides, giving all those who embark on their own pilgrimage a sense of what lies ahead and what outcomes to expect. That this is their intent is more than clear in the accounts these five women left of their quests.

Fortunately, modern theologians and religious commentators have begun revising the ancient five-fold map, making it more accessible to a modern audience. Bourgeault and Keating's recent updates to the pivotal phases of purification and mortification, reframing them to be as much, if not more about internal psychological change rather than external ascetic practice has helped to make these challenging processes comprehensible to a modern sensibility. Equally important has been their recovery and revision of the Christian contemplative tradition and its practices of Centering prayer, *lectio divina* and psalm chanting. As the expression of an intimate and loving relationship with God and the "foundation, fruit and fulfillment" of mystical life, contemplative prayer in all its forms is fundamental to growth in human consciousness and the key to the transformative path.³⁴⁷ Finally, an expansion of Christianity to include the Christophanic perspective as described by Panikkar would help to more clearly express the mystical element since it recognizes both the transcendence of a purely rational approach and the incorporation of the Divine Feminine.³⁴⁸

³⁴⁷ De Waal, *Seeking God*, 145.

³⁴⁸ Panikkar, *Christophany*, 11.

To hear the feminine voice of the women mystics and their expression of the Divine Feminine in ways meaningful to the female gender is for many women an immensely liberating and empowering experience. For Lanzetta, the key legacy of the women mystics is their proof of a path through the daunting “dark night of the feminine” to heal the self-loathing at the core of female being, the cumulative effect of centuries-old anti-female attitudes; both healing and empowering, the feminine mystical voice offers women new perspectives about themselves, their place in the world, and their relationship to God derived not only from what the women mystics said but from the way they said it, the astonishing literary quality of their legacy providing, as good literature does, a “technique of meditation in the widest and most flexible sense.”³⁴⁹ Unitive theology, which is what the five women of this study express, “is more like poetry than systematic theology,” notes Bourgeault, relying as it does on the participation of the unconscious freed through meditation.³⁵⁰

As a valid path to interior human growth, the classic five-fold map provides a theological description of the modern psychological process of individuation and the complex intersection between the human psychological, spiritual and transcendent dimensions. Over the centuries, this ancient scheme to ascension has been a key component of Christian mysticism, Christianity’s authentic spiritual psychology, an aspect of religion found in all the great wisdom traditions. Buddhism, the Tao of Confucianism, the Sufi tradition of Islam, the Kabbalah of Judaism – these great compendiums of wisdom are less about abstract theologies and

³⁴⁹ Frye, *Words With Power*, 96.

³⁵⁰ Cynthia Bourgeault, *Mystical Hope: Trusting in the Mercy of God* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 2001), 60.

doctrines and more about paths and practices for overcoming egocentricity and conventionality to ultimately attain union with God.

Personal Learning

When I first began to explore these five women, I was surprised to discover facets of their lives resonant with my own. Like Underhill and Stein, I grew up with little religious training, my family having no interest in spiritual or religious matters; however, because of their example I have found affirmation for my own spiritual life and the resolve to continue my journey despite familial disinterest and often serious objection. As a corporate professional, I also found myself identifying with the difficulties of Catherine in her role as director of one of the largest hospitals in Europe until modern times, managing to provide financial stability and inspiring leadership to caregivers overwhelmed by pandemic. Having led various corporate “change initiatives,” I could also identify with Teresa’s challenge as the revisionist of a major institution, persevering in the teeth of the most formidable resistance from a male hierarchy. I was equally energized by the courage of Julian who was able to write a composition of immense beauty, stressing God’s love over fear and damnation during an age when human society was desolated by famine and disease. Of all five, however, I found Stein to be the most inspiring; that she displayed such impeccable integrity as to boldly chart her own astonishing course, leaving her ancestral faith despite the severe objections of her family, felt no obligation to explain any of her startling decisions, nor expressed any regret or bitterness at being denied an academic career despite superior credentials, and then; to ultimately give up her life in an act of

perfect surrender to perfect love and wisdom is to witness a rare manifestation of the Divine Feminine.

What these five women strove for, to live a life in co-creation with and under divine direction, to live with deep meaning and intent, to insist on being taken seriously, to pursue worthy and meaningful work in non-traditional feminine spheres without seeking permission or approval, explanation or justification, is what inspired me to study them. Their ability to maintain a balance between their interior, prayerful state and the challenges of external activism in order to perform difficult professional roles with holy dignity has given me an entirely new perspective on the importance of my own solitary prayer and meditation, the public work I am called to do, and of being and relating to others. I have found these five mystics to be such immense sources of inspiration this study is simply the first of many more on these remarkable women.

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