

St. Teresa of Avila and Oriental Mysticism

The whole Christian world is already celebrating or preparing to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the death of the great saint and mystic, Teresa of Avila, who was born on March 28, 1515, and died on October 15, 1582. This event is of great importance for the whole Christian world, but there is one aspect of her life which makes it more important in this end of the XXth century, her mystical experience.

This is the question I am asking myself before you today. What is the meaning of her mystical way, for the so called Oriental World? Hence the title *St. Teresa of Avila and Oriental Mysticism*.

I do not intend to make an exhaustive presentation of the problem, because it would require too much study and too much time to present the result of it. I will point out to a few points I am more familiar with. This should not and cannot be exhaustive. But it is important that it opens perspectives for reflection and ways for thought, and I hope it will do so.

For this study, I need to choose a point of departure more fitting with my own experience. This point of departure will not be an analysis of Teresa's experience, but it will be the Oriental mystical experience. From this Oriental experience I will

select a few points and try to see what does correspond to them in the mystical experience of St. Teresa. Thus I will see myself living in an Oriental milieu, already familiar with the religious experience of Buddhists, Taoists, Confucians, Hindus and others. Living in this world and being sufficiently familiar with it I will look at Teresa of Avila, and more specifically to her main work *The Interior Castle*.

1. *The Asian sensibility and Teresa's feminine sensitivity.*

The greatest appeal of the so called oriental ways of prayer to the West, comes from the fact that they open the contemplatives to an experience which develops in them an inner sensitivity. In a world which turns people toward activity and concrete realization, the East reminds us that there is in every human being, an inner world which has been too much neglected in the West. The development of scientific techniques and rational thinking after the Renaissance in Europe, had very bad consequences for the Western man, and in particular for Christians. They came to forget that the Kingdom of God is inside us, and not outside.

The great vision of Teresa of Avila in which she saw her soul as a great globe of crystal has been for her and is for us of primordial importance. Without knowing it, she was opening a way of inner experience which was very familiar to the mystics in the East. Of course the doctrine of the interior senses, of God within us, has been familiar to the great Fathers of the Church in past times and to the great mystics. But the teaching of the Church, for very practical reasons tended to exteriorize the whole of Christian life.

Sensitive as she was, being a woman, Teresa developed a way of inner life now taught by so many gurus and masters from the East, Teresa's experience appears in a new light. She becomes more precious to the whole Christian world. It is true that she had no competence to analyse in a scientific way her inner experiences, but this was not necessary. She developed an inner way, along which her feminine sensibility shines with great power. She does not appear to us only as the "Madre" taken into ecstasy and lifted up . . . she is also the saint taken into the ultimate depth of her own being, and finding God there.

After having been shown God present at the center of herself she used all her imaginative and sensitive faculties to explore and describe her Inner experience in terms which can delight the Oriental Mystics who may be rebuked by another kind of Western mysticism presenting God sitting on high above everything. This latter vision of the universe is not totally foreign to Oriental thought, since we find it in Confucianism with the notion of Heaven dominating the whole of creation and overlooking on every creature, but Confucianism did not develop as a mystical experience. On the contrary, we may say that Oriental mysticism, in India and in China developed along the inner ways, searching for the source of life, and for original nature at the very center of our human being. In these inner perspectives, Teresa of Avila appears very close to most of the great Oriental mystics. (Cf. Y. Raguin, S.J. *The Asian Religious Sensibility and Christian Spirituality*, in *God Alone Suffices. An Anthology on Carmelite Spirituality for Modern Readers*. Carmel of St. Teresa of the Child Jesus. Gilmore Ave., Quezon City, Philippines 1977. pp. 15-30).

2. *Turning toward the center*

The return to the center is familiar to Eastern mystics, Hindus as well as Chinese. If most of the statues represent Buddha sitting under a tree and looking downward and not upward it is because he is absorbed into his own experience at the center of himself. He suddenly had the intuition of his "original nature". People who practice Zen meditation are, on the same way, turned toward the center of their being. The Taoist, during his contemplation, will most likely turn himself toward his inner center called the "field of cinnabar" in order to become aware of the powerful stream of life which flows through this inner gate of his being. The whole tradition of advaita doctrine in Hinduism is that the innermost center of the human soul, this point without any dimension is one with the Absolute Brahman. The Yoga techniques, when they are pursued to their ultimate goal, tend to break into pieces the "mind", in order to liberate the deeper Self, center of the human being and place where oneness with the Absolute can be achieved. The doctrine of the return to the center is very familiar to Christian mystics in In-

dia now. We could multiply the examples, but these ones will suffice to introduce the great vision of Teresa which is in many ways consonant to these ways leading to the center.

Fray Diego de Yepes, a Hieronymite, and old friend of Teresa relates the way Teresa had that famous vision which gave her the scheme of the Interior Earth. "This holy Mother," he writes, "had been desirous of obtaining some insight into the beauty of a soul in grace. Just at that time she was commanded to write a treatise on prayer, about which she knew a great deal from experience. On the eve of the festival of the Most Holy Trinity she was thinking what subject she should choose for this treatise, when God who disposes all things in due form and order, granted this desire of hers, and gave her a subject. He showed her a most beautiful crystal globe, made in the shape of a castle, and containing seven mansions, in the seventh and innermost of which was the King of Glory, in the greatest splendor, illuminating and beautifying them all. The nearer one got to the centre, the stronger was the light; outside the palace limits everything was foul, dark and infested with toads, vipers and other venomous creatures." (*Interior Castle*. St. Teresa of Avila. Translated and edited by Allison Peers. Image Books 1961. Introduction, p. 8).

Teresa herself does not mention this vision in her book but says simply: "I began to think of the soul as if it were a castle made of a very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms, just as in Heaven there are many mansions." (*Interior Castle*, First Mansions, chap. 1. Op. cit. p. 28). But the vision was a fundamental experience for her. It was decisive for her describing the presence of God in herself and not on the high, beyond all the stars and everything created.

This vision happened to Teresa on the eve of the feast of the Most Holy Trinity, in the year 1577. (See *Three Images*, by Fr. Horacio de la Costa S.J. in *God Alone Suffices*. An Anthology on Carmelite Spirituality for Modern Readers. Carmel of St. Therese of the Child Jesus, Gilmore Ave. Quezon City, Philippines, p. 9). But it was not the first of that kind she had. The first occurred at Avila, on May 29, 1571, the Tuesday after the Ascension, on the occasion of an arid communion. "Suddenly, writes Teresa, my soul began to be inflamed and I believe I had

an intellectual vision of the Trinity within me . . . my soul learned how God is Three and One. And thus, it seemed to me, all Three Persons were speaking and were distinctly present within my soul . . . " (*Spiritual Relations*, Allison Peers translation, p. 361. Quoted by Peter Blanchard, St. Teresa of Avila and the Eucharist, in *God Alone Suffices*, p. 113).

Teresa explains that she saw how the Three were One. But what is important for us here, is the fact that this vision is described as an inner experience, and not the result of any effort of thinking. This grace and another one she received on the 28th of August on the feast of St. Augustine, are instant illuminations. This is why she says of these graces: "Because of our weakness we seem incapable of grasping anything of these sublime mysteries; however, one instant is sufficient for the soul to draw, without knowing her, much more profit than if she had meditated for many days." (*Spiritual Relations*. Allison Peers translation, p. 359. Quoted by Peter Blanchard, article quoted, p. 114). This was an instant, sudden, or abrupt enlightenment to use a terminology familiar to Zen contemplation.

3. *The way to the center*

Very often, God gives us intuitions of our inner being in a flashing light. But the soul has to struggle in order to get there again. This is the promised land which will be really given, only after years of search and struggle. If we look at the experience of Teresa through the eyes of Zen masters we are struck by the fact that her Christian experience corresponds to the Zen experience of enlightenment defined as "seeing one's nature". In the Zen experience the contemplative has a sudden awareness of his own human nature, and sees that "nature" as identical to Buddha's nature.

Teresa made a Christian experience. She perceived in an extraordinary light her ultimate depth seen as a center, and at the same time she realized that at this very center God was present . . . She would even say that at the very center of her soul was God himself . . . We see clearly how Teresa's experience differs from the Buddhist experience of identity of the most inner self with the ground of everything. Teresa does not experience identity, but she speaks of presence. This means that her experience of the im-

manence of God in her soul, is also an experience of his transcendence.

For Teresa, the experience of the Self, no matter how deep it is, is not the ultimate self. Her experience does not lead her to an ordinary experience of interiority. God shows himself to her, in a way that she could not imagine before. For Teresa this experience is not identity, but spiritual marriage, which is a much more complete experience than the one of simple unity and oneness, because "marriage" implies the harmony of the two and the one. In the Buddhist enlightenment of Zen there is no relation with God. It is simply absolute self awareness of the deep self by itself. There is also at the same time an awareness of oneness with the whole of existing things, but there is no relation of love between the soul and God. On the contrary, for Teresa the ultimate awareness of the Self opens to the awareness of God's presence, a loving God with whom the soul enters into deep relation of love. The Buddhist experience will be described in terms of knowledge; Teresa's experience is expressed in terms of knowledge and love.

The return to the center, according to the Taoist ways of meditation, may be said to be a return to the source of life, which is the original breath which comes from the absolute Tao. Teresa of Avila also feels that the life of the Trinity is communicated to her in a more intense way than in Taoism. This source of life, finally is love. This experience of love is really characteristic of Christian mystical experience.

What the sages of China have been dreaming for, the "Union of Heaven and Man", is realized in Teresa's experience in a way which, in my humble judgment, is impossible to the Buddhist or Taoist contemplative. Their experience, it seems to me, is shorter than Teresa's experience, because in their experience love is lacking. In this respect Teresa's experience is of very great value. She first follows the inner way so familiar to the mystics of East Asia, but, when she comes to the realization of her human depth, God is there who takes her into His own extraordinary mystery and unites her to him in spiritual marriage, a favour which is typically Christian, since it is possible only if we believe God is "personal", a God who is a living God, not only able to love but who, according to John, is himself "love".

4. *The center itself*

Modern psychology is very familiar with the notion of "centre". People are looking for their own center which is themselves. The access to the centre is for many people the object of a long and painful search. In fact man cannot reach his own center by the mere effort of his ordinary power. In the Yoga doctrine, this is a very important point. The center of our being, the ultimate deep self is, in our ordinary way of life, like a prisoner of the body and of the mind. In order to liberate the "Self" the mind has to be put into pieces . . . But the mind itself cannot do it. All we can do is to dispose ourselves in such a way that the Self will be able to liberate itself. This liberation is beyond the power of any of my little selves. Thus we may say, that in Yoga, the ultimate step to the center of the Self is an action of the Self itself. In a way this can be said to be a passive experience, analogous to Teresa's experience of entering into the Seventh Mansion of the Inner Castle. This entering into the Seventh Mansion is not seen by her as a gift of deep Self, but a gift of God himself. Here again appears the distinctive character of Christian experience, because God is a personal God.

It will be very interesting to look more attentively to the way Teresa describes her experience of entering into this last Mansion, which is the innermost one, where the soul and God come into the most sublime union in spiritual marriage.

When she comes to explaining what she means by the Seventh Mansion she has a sentence which does not fool anyone: "I am so much afraid it will be thought that my knowledge of it comes from experience, and this makes me very much ashamed; for, knowing myself as I do for what I am, such a thought is terrible. On the other hand, whatever your judgement about it may be, it has seemed to me that this shame is due to temptation and weakness. Let the whole world cry out upon me, so long as God is praised and understood a little better." (*The Interior Castle*. Seventh Mansions, Chapter I. Op. cit. p. 207). Anyhow, we know that Teresa could not have written about the Seventh Mansion if she had not had experience of it . . . and we are very glad she dared to write about it.

For Teresa this Seventh Mansion is the "centre" of her soul, but it is at the same time the abiding-place of God. "For He must needs have an abiding-place in the soul, just as He has one in Heaven, where His Majesty alone dwells: so let us call this a second Heaven." (*Interior Castle*. Seventh Mansions. Chap. I. op. cit. p. 207). While reading the wonderful descriptions made by Teresa of Avila of God's glory manifested into her soul. In Mahayana Buddhism there are ways of prayer which make great use of the imagination. For example there is a method which consists in "visualizing the Buddha" in heaven. The contemplative may visualize first things like the petals of the lotus flower on which Buddha is sitting, then he will visualize the Buddha himself, his face and his inner being. I just mention this practice so that you would not think that every Buddhist is practicing the silent way of meditation of Zen, putting aside all words and all images. In Buddhism, we find many ways of meditation and contemplation similar to the one we use in Christianity.

Although Teresa describes the presence of the King of Glory sitting at the centre of herself, she says very clearly that this is not imaginative representation but as she calls it "an intellectual vision." (*Interior Castle*, op. cit. p. 209) Before going into the presentation of this vision, Teresa makes a few remarks about the inner-most part of the soul. "It is important, sisters, that we should not think of the soul as of something dark. It must seem dark to most of us, as we cannot see it, for we forget that there is not only a light which we can see, but also an interior light, and so we think that within our soul there is some kind of darkness." (*Interior Castle*. Seventh Mansions. Cap. 1. op. cit. p. 207).

According to Teresa, this darkness is the result of the intensity of light projected by God himself. This darkness is thus the proof that the soul has not entered the last mansion yet. On this all the mystics agree. Before we come to total enlightenment, a term very familiar to Buddhists, as well as to Taoists, the contemplative has to go through a stage which can be called "emptiness" or "nothingness" or "darkness". As a famous text of Lao-tzu, the great Taoist philosopher, says, "we have to use

the ordinary light to enter into oneself and come to the inner light of the ultimate enlightenment." (*Tao-te Ching*. Chap. 52).

In the former mansions, explains Teresa, as in the "Prayer of Union" the "soul does not feel called to enter into its own centre, as here in this Mansion"... "Whatever it does, the Lord unites it with Himself, but He makes it blind and dumb, as He made Saint Paul at his conversion, and so prevents it from having any sense of how or in what way that favour comes which it is enjoying; the great delight of which the soul is then conscious is the realization of its nearness to God. But when He unites it with Him, it understands nothing; the faculties are lost." (*Interior Castle*. Seventh mansions. Chap. I, op. cit. p. 209)

All the ways of mystical experience in Asia would feel very much at ease with this description made by Teresa of Avila. In the intermediary stages, in Zen for example, the contemplative puts himself in the attitude of not thinking, not grasping, not relying on anything. According to the great Zen master Hui-neng (638-713), human nature is so pure, so clear, so devoid of anything visible that we have to face it in the attitude of no-thought. This is to express in another way the fact that the light of man's original nature puts man into a state of blindness until the time of enlightenment. I know there is a great difference between the experience of this great Zen master facing his original nature, and the experience of Teresa facing God, but in both cases we have the blinding effects of the light, inner light of pure nature, or the light of God.

5. *Non-Christian and Christian enlightenment*

What makes the study of Teresa's experience so fascinating for oriental contemplatives is the fact that her ultimate experience belongs really to the type of inner enlightenment so familiar to oriental mystics. This enlightenment is described as coming not from outside, but from inside. It is not by climbing above everything that Teresa is enlightened. She is totally enlightened when she reaches her own "centre" as she calls it. In this seventh mansion when the soul is "called to enter into its own centre" (Op. cit. p. 209), it has gone already beyond all the zones of doubt and darkness.

"But in this Mansion everything is different. Our good God now desires to remove the scales from the eyes of the soul, so that it may see and understand something of the favour which He is granting it, although He is doing this in a strange manner. It is brought into this Mansion by means of an intellectual vision, in which, by a representation of the truth in a particular way, the Most Holy Trinity reveals Itself, in all Three Persons. First of all the spirit becomes enkindled and is illumined, as it were, by a cloud of the greatest brightness. It sees these three Persons, individually, and yet, by a wonderful kind of knowledge, which is given to it, the soul realizes that most certainly and truly all these three Persons are one substance and one Power and one Knowledge and one God alone; so that what we hold by faith the soul may be said here to grasp by sight, although nothing is seen by the eyes, either of the body or of the soul, for it is no imaginary vision." (*Interior Castle*. op. cit. p. 209).

This experience is in the line of the one described by the great Taoist Master Lao-tzu, already quoted above. The text says "He who having used the outer-light can return to the inner-light, is thereby preserved from all harm. This is called resorting to the always-so". (*Tao-te Ching*. Chap. 52). For Lao-tzu the ultimate enlightenment is to be familiar with the "always-so", the Absolute Tao. In another text, we find the same notion of enlightenment. "To know the always-so is to be illumined", or enlightened. (*Tao-te Ching*. Chap. 16) This notion of enlightenment, expressed by a Chinese character made of the sun and the moon put together means the ultimate experience of man, in Buddhism and Taoism.

If we compare the two kinds of experience, the Christian one, as expressed in Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle* and the other ones mentioned here, we find similarities and great differences.

They are similar, because in both cases they refer to inner ways of contemplation. They are in both cases a reversion toward the inner being, pointing more and more objectively toward the center of the soul, or the depth of the Self. According to Teresa as according to the oriental masters, the ordinary states of prayer are said to happen in the upper part of the soul. But the ultimate experience, the encounter with the original nature,

the centre of the soul, or with God takes place in the deepest part of the heart or of the soul.

The bishops of Asia met in Calcutta in November 1978 to exchange views on the topic of *Prayer - The Life of the Church of Asia*. In their final statement they say: "Asia has much to give to authentic Christian spirituality: a richly developed prayer of the whole person in unity of body-psyche-spirit; prayer of deep interiority and immanence." [FABC (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences). *Second Plenary Assembly. Prayer — The Life of the Church of Asia. Statement and Recommendations*. FABC, Manila, 1979. p. 73. Also FABC Papers, Hong Kong].

I think that according to this statement, Teresa of Avila deserves to be recognized as an oriental spiritual master. She certainly practised a prayer of the whole person, in unity of body-psyche-spirit. It is interesting to notice that Teresa discovered this difference between psyche and spirit in reflecting on her own experience, as she writes: "As I was saying, it is possible to make observations concerning interior matters and in this way we know that there is some kind of difference, and a very definite one, between the soul and the spirit, although they are both one." (*Interior Castle. Seventh Mansions*. Chap. 1. Op. cit. p. 211)

If we consider the whole of her spiritual experience, we see definitely that it is prayer-life of the whole person, with a great richness of thoughts, feelings and graces involving her whole being. The clarity of her observations makes her a master of spiritual discernment. Some psychologists may complain that all this is rather disorderly, but we should not complain about this because in her it is a real gift. We have to thank the Lord that she was able to describe her experiences without trying to systematize them. She is a witness and not a theoretician. To Eastern spiritual masters who claim to rely on experience alone she can be an inspiration.

Teresa is not a philosopher, not a theologian, but she is able to describe her experience. She is not bound by any system. She tries to describe and explain what she has experienced. I am sure that she would agree that the power which unites the body

and the soul (or psyche) is the very centre of the soul, which she calls the spirit. At that level only can be realized the full integration of body-psyche-spirit.

6. *The ultimate depth of Teresa's mystical experience*

The last point I would like to mention, and a very important one, is the quality of her mystical experience, as compared to the mystical experience of the Oriental masters. There is certainly a depth in the awareness of the original nature as experienced in Zen Buddhism, or in the union with this Unchanging Tao, in Taoism. But it seems to me that Teresa's experience goes much deeper. I recognize what the Calcutta's statement says of the "prayer of deep interiority and immanence" found in Oriental religions, but Teresa's experience goes farther, because God leads her into the ultimate depth of her soul, at the very centre of it, and finally calls her to a deeper experience into his own mystery.

If we compare the mystical experience of those who do not believe in a personal God and the experience of those who believe in one, it seems really that the non-Christian enters into the depths of his own nature and of his own self, but seems to enter into the very heart of the Absolute. In the case of the Christian mystic, the whole process of mystical experience reaches its ultimate step in spiritual marriage. God takes the contemplative into Himself, and unites him to His very essence. But this is only possible if the contemplative believes in a personal God. Often people ask: "But what do you mean by a personal God?" The best way to answer is certainly not to begin arguing about the nature of the person. But it could be to compare the description made by Teresa of her own experience of spiritual marriage with what we find in Buddhism or Taoism as the ultimate stage of mystical experience. Immediately will appear the uniqueness of what we mean by personal union with God in spiritual marriage.

I am very aware that oriental mystics contend that this personal relation with a personal God is an inferior stage of mystical experience. But this would have to be proved. Anyhow, it seems to me that Teresa of Avila in her own experience went through all the stages of the so-called oriental mystical experience, but

was taken further by her God, the Absolute Being of all religions. In her experience, she went through a real loss of herself by total absorption in God, to personal union in mystical marriage. In this respect I still believe that her experience is deeper and richer. This does not depreciate the value of mystical union in other religions, but points out to the fact that while travelling for a great part of the way, along with other mystics, she was finally called by a grace of her God to a deeper union in knowledge and love, which the others could not reach.

Here again and again we have to ask ourselves why we consider that Christian mysticism can go deeper than the mysticism of those who do not believe in a personal God. The answer will be always the same: love, God is love, and the Christian is united to him in love. No matter how we try to answer, we come to this conclusion, union in love is deeper than any other union or knowledge.

This union takes place at the very centre of the soul, but in fact it is God who takes the soul, or rather man's spirit, into Himself... Teresa says of that ultimate stage "as far as one can understand, the soul (I mean the spirit of the soul) is made one with God... For He has been pleased to unite Himself with His creature in such a way that they have become like two who cannot be separated from one another." (*Interior Castle*. Seventh Mansions. Chap. II. op. cit. p. 214)

Thus we may conclude that Teresa of Avila in her mystical experience was taken along a way which can be understood by Oriental mysticism, but I believe also that she would be able to lead them to a deeper experience to which they may be also called, as she was, a Loving God.

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