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# Teresa of Avila

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## Teresa of Avila

“In the Cornaro Chapel of the Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome is a masterpiece of baroque theater. Inside an altar niche, on a billowy white marble cloud, is the figure of a nun who looks as if she has just fainted, or is about to. To eyes are lidded, her mouth half open in pain—or ecstasy. Her body is limp....She has one recognizable feature, the delicate foot that dangles beneath her disheveled robe....”<sup>1</sup>

For hundreds of years, this was the image of Teresa of Avila, one of the most well-known and beloved of all Catholic saints and mystics of the Counter-Reformation. Although Teresa had been the object of examination by the Inquisition and a controversial figure during her lifetime, she was canonized only 35 years after her death, the first and only Spanish woman to receive that honor. Following canonization, she came to be viewed as a swooning, ecstatic mystic, a miraculous healer, and a humble proponent of absolute orthodoxy and absolute obedience.<sup>2</sup> However, in recent years this stereotype has been challenged. She has become the focus of intense religious and historical criticism by scholars such as Jodi Bilinkoff, Gillian Ahlgren, Cathleen Medwick, Alison Weber, J. Mary Luti, and Antonio Perez-Romero, who have attempted to establish that Teresa of Avila was actually an independent, free-thinking, strong woman. Facing criticism and disapproval from both clergy and laypeople, Teresa created the Discalced Carmelites in hopes of returning the nuns of Europe to a purer form of Christianity. As the only female theologian to be published in sixteenth century Spain, Teresa defended the mystical experiences of herself and other women. Because of her charismatic personality and her ability to reform the church while acting within the

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political constraints of the clerical and patriarchal hierarchy, Teresa was able to keep from crossing the fine line between “saint” and “heretic.” While in the past, scholars have chosen to write about her mysticism and her Carmelite reform efforts, these authors have written about her from a feminist angle, hoping to

dispense once and for all with the prototype of the hysterical, emotional women writhing in a frenzy of morbid devotion at the foot of the Crucifix and replace her with the sane, vigorous, intelligent, humorous Spaniard who had a lot in common with the independent women of the mid-twentieth century”

Medwick, xv

Throughout the book The Avila of St. Teresa: Religious Reform in a Sixteenth Century City, author Jodi Bilinkoff attempts to examine the life of Teresa of Jesus in the political, economic and social context in which she lived. From Avila’s rise in religious and political influence to its ultimate ruin by plague, drought and economic hardship, Bilinkoff thoroughly and comprehensively analyzes the history of the city and the circumstances which allowed Teresa to be successful as a monastic reformer. She also provides evidence that even before Teresa, women had power in Avila, and that women, even in a small city like Avila, played an important role in the Catholic Reformation.

Using references and sources such as biographies, legal documents, genealogical evidence, church archives, monastic charters, and city council records, Bilinkoff reveals a Saint Teresa virtually unknown until now. It is only recently that Teresa’s personal life, for example her Jewish heritage, has been acknowledged and studied. Additionally, Bilinkoff explains, historians previously “downplayed her [Teresa’s] insistence upon monastic poverty and autonomy and mental prayer, her struggles with inquisitors and censors and the odds against which she had to fight to establish her vision of the religious

life.”<sup>3</sup> While also addressing these personal struggles, Bilinkoff discusses the importance of women’s involvement in Avila’s religious reform even before Teresa and the increasing influence of “new men” who were non-noble merchants and professionals. They supported new convents, like Teresa’s Discalced Carmelites, that challenged the old social hierarchy that the “new men” wanted to dismantle.

Given that so much has been written about Teresa, it is admirable that Bilinkoff was able to write a book so concise, readable and interesting. She successfully argues her thesis in a clear, precise manner and supports it with many sources. While most other books have been biographies that emphasized Teresa’s final years and her reform of the Carmelite order, Bilinkoff’s work offers a unique narrative based on Teresa’s reform in the context of the religious and social changes that took place in that century. Whether one is a layperson studying European history, religious history or women’s history or a scholar studying the life of this remarkable woman, Jodi Bilinkoff’s The Avila of Saint Teresa will be appealing and educational. In the incomparable way that this book looks at the religious context of the period in this sixteenth century city, one can get a better understanding of the Catholic Reformation.

In a refreshing modern biography, St. Teresa of Avila: Progress of a Soul, Cathleen Medwick aims to portray Teresa just as she was: “a soul in progress toward God.” Medwick describes Teresa as both a sensuous, sexual woman and a spiritual leader, arguing that Teresa is a “feminist icon, not only because she came to represent the missing link between female sexuality and spirituality, but also because of her ability to function within a male dominated hierarchy.”<sup>4</sup>

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Medwick chooses to concentrate on the politics of Teresa's reform movements rather than on the orthodoxy of her faith. Using references and sources such as Teresa's writings and numerous other biographies of Teresa including the ones written by Weber, Bilinkoff, and Ahlgren, this work presents information about Teresa's battles with corrupt church officials, the competition between the Calced and Discalced Carmelites, the tensions between nuns and church officials, problems with the male branch of the order, and troubling negotiations with church authorities to establish new and reformed convents.

Although this book at times can read more like a historical novel than a scholarly work, it is interesting and gives a good introduction to Teresa's life. It is less than 300 pages long, including endnotes and an index, but does an excellent job of giving a foundation on which to build one's study of this popular saint. One of the strengths of the book is that it contains at least a dozen pictures of Teresa which aids readers in understanding Teresa's life. Medwick also includes in the appendix a copy of "The Flaming Heart," a poem written about Teresa in 1640 by Richard Crashaw to further emphasize the different perceptions historians and scholars have had about Teresa over the centuries. Historians interested in a more scholarly account of Saint Teresa should look elsewhere, but for the average reader interested in learning more about this incredible and controversial saint, this book is ideal.

In her book Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity, Alison Weber attempts to answer the question "How can we account for her survival, let alone her transformation in such a short period of time, from a controversial figure of questionable

orthodoxy into a candidate for national sainthood?”<sup>5</sup> Throughout the book, by analyzing Teresa’s writing, Weber argues that it was not the orthodoxy of Teresa’s ideas but the force of her personality and her influence among powerful nobles and church officials that allowed her not only to survive, but to reform and improve the church. Like Bilinkoff, Weber analyzes Teresa’s life in light of sixteenth century expectations, but does not do so as thoroughly or as in as much depth as Bilinkoff.

Using archival evidence, books about the inquisition, and books on sex, gender and language in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Weber considers the elements of Teresa’s style and asserts that Teresa manipulated her readers with a “rhetoric of femininity.” Weber chooses to focus on the historical circumstances that made it necessary for Teresa to partially conform to society’s expectations in order to affirm her membership in the social group of “little women” and to emphasize the rhetoric of humility and obedience. By examining Teresa’s rhetoric, “we can better understand not only the story Teresa wanted to communicate but the story her texts conceal. Her rhetoric of femininity was self-conscious, alternatively defensive and affiliative, and above all, submissive.”<sup>6</sup>

Following in the critical footsteps of predecessors Alison Weber and Jodi Bilinkoff, who focused on Teresa’s political and written strategies as an early modern woman in a position of religious authority, Gillian Ahlgren contributes an excellent study that builds on these ideas. In her book, Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity, she builds on Weber’s “rhetoric of femininity” ideology by examining how Teresa used “textual survival strategies” to institute her reforms while at the same time being

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investigated by the church for heresy.<sup>7</sup> She attempts to “contextualize the life of Teresa the woman and the meaning of Teresa the saint within the Counter-Reformation agenda by exploring the complex and conflicting notions of female sanctity at work in sixteenth century Spain.”<sup>8</sup>

Using references and sources such as Teresa’s own writings, Inquisition records, canonization proceedings, and others biographies of Teresa, Ahlgren constructs a detailed account of Saint Teresa’s life and how she managed to be both a feminist reformer at a time when the church was openly persecuting any activity that was non-hierarchical or at all heretical and a “daughter of the church.”<sup>9</sup> She argues three main points: that the most significant factor reason Teresa decided to write and reform was her disagreement with the church’s desire to control religious experiences and theological writing; that this disagreement resulted in encounters with the Inquisition and forced her to develop survival strategies to deal with the patriarchal hierarchy and skepticism of mysticism of the time; and that her idea of sanctity, that one did not have to be a man to be a religious leader, had enormous popular appeal even though she was questioned numerous times by the Inquisition.

Ahlgren focuses on the different ways in which men and women experienced the reform of the religious orders, the Council of Trent, the censorship of religious texts, and the Spanish Inquisition; Teresa’s struggle for theological authority and the rhetorical strategies she developed; the elements of her mystical doctrine and the various arguments for and against it; and how Teresa’s survival strategies were misinterpreted by the Church to help to further prove her theory about the concepts of sanctity at this time in European

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history. Ahlgren demonstrates in the ground-breaking section about Teresa's canonization that her accomplishments were misconstrued by the Church so that she "became a role model for Catholic women acceptable to Counter-Reformation church officials."<sup>10</sup> She makes a case that the canonization of Teresa created a shift in the cultural acceptance of this woman who "became the instrument by which the Roman hierarchy propagated its own gender ideology."<sup>11</sup>

Ahlgren presents several new ideas about Teresa of Avila's role during this period. She asserts that Teresa took on a strategy of subordination by surrendering her teachings and writings to her confessors and other theologians in order to establish her humility and obedience. Her central thesis is that there is no such thing as complete holiness—especially when it comes to a woman such as Teresa who was as controversial during her lifetime as afterward. This author redefines Teresa's submissive behavior in terms of a strategy—a conscious and intentional means of accomplishing her goals. Ahlgren further asserts that Teresa's rhetorical style and theological messages were a direct response to the Inquisition that was taking place at the time.

By framing her within the social and political context of the time, Gillian Ahlgren presents alternative understandings of Teresa and her work mystic, reformer, and writer. She successfully argues most of her theories in a clear, precise manner and she supports them by citing many credible sources. After evaluating the evidence, it is difficult not to agree with most her conclusions. However, one of her weaknesses is that sometimes the feminist viewpoint from which she looks is too narrow. Perhaps by looking at Teresa completely through this feminist lens, we are continuing to not see her as a person, but

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simply as a symbol of what women are capable of accomplishing even in male-dominated societies. Also, although Teresa was unique in many aspects, she was not the only woman of this time to institute important and enduring reforms in the church. What Ahlgren does prove is that “she furthered the goals of the Catholic Reformation by reviving the spiritual values of her order.”<sup>12</sup>

Whether one is just beginning his or her research on the subject, or is a scholar interested in learning more about the political, social, and religious context of 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain, Gillian Ahlgren’s St. Teresa and the Politics of Sanctity will be educational and thought-provoking.

Antonio Perez-Romero continues this hypothesis in his work Subversion and Liberation in the Writings of St. Teresa of Avila. He writes that in the past scholars have examined her life and writings from the perspective of traditional conservative ideology, ignoring Teresa’s subversive and revolutionary messages. Perez-Romero examines her writings from this new perspective. He says that “although the sixteenth century Spanish nun was using a social construct—language that had been molded to convey the ideas, concepts, and interests of the dominant classes—she turned it around, exploited it, used its malleable properties to serve her own ideas and desires.”<sup>13</sup>

Using many of Teresa’s writings including *The Life*, *The Way of Perfection*, *Meditations on the Song of Songs*, *The Mansions*, and *The Foundations*, and countless Spanish biographies of Teresa as sources, Perez-Romero reviews the castizo (traditional) ideology and contrasts that with the new feminist ideology. The major theme of the work

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is “the feminine subversion of the established religious and social order.”<sup>14</sup> He chooses to focus on the religious and ideological environment of Teresa’s time, the major works of Teresian scholarship, Teresa’s threat to the established order, Teresa’s prayer and mysticism that she had defend against the Inquisition, and an analysis of some of Teresa’s sixteenth century rivals and critics. In his work, Perez-Romero demonstrates well “how this sixteenth century master of networking anticipated the traps of the Inquisition, cultivated useful connections among the powerful elite, invited the orthodox to examine and correct her, and audaciously co-opted God as the source of her inspirations and aspirations.”<sup>15</sup>

This book, due to its clear, well-written style and approach, will appeal to a broad array of readers, both scholarly and non scholarly. However, the clear, simplified way of writing is one of the book’s weaknesses as well as strengths. By writing it so simply, Perez-Romero risks over-simplifying and leaving out critical pieces of information. For example, all complicated terminology is replaced with more easily understood words, and all passages are given in English versus in their original Spanish. But overall, this book provides a basic groundwork for understanding Teresa and the liberation and subversion in her writings.

In Teresa of Avila’s Way, author Mary J. Luti’s goal is “to serve as an introduction to her inner life, her encounters with God, her growth in grace, her gradual transformation into a holy one, a saint of the Christian community.”<sup>16</sup> Using mostly

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Teresa's writings as sources, Luti attempts to show that Teresa was "capable both of transcending and challenging her culture and, at times, of being hoodwinked by it."<sup>17</sup>

While parts of this book simply tell the story of Teresa's life, Luti also focuses on analyzing Teresa's determination to reform no matter what the consequences, her life of prayer, the dynamics of her relationships, "the contemplative enlargement of vision that engaged Teresa in divine perspectives and concerns," and her mysticism.<sup>18</sup>

Whether one is a scholar or someone just beginning their studies of Saint Teresa, J. Mary Luti's Teresa of Avila's Way will be worth reading. Especially those just beginning their work on Teresa will appreciate the eleven pages that Luti devotes to describing various terms and abbreviations used throughout the book, and the "Teresian Chronology Chart" that documents Teresa's life and influence, beginning with her grandfather and ending with her being declared a Doctor of the Church in 1970.

It is clear from the well-researched and well-documented works of Jodi Bilinkoff, Cathleen Medwick, Alison Weber, Gillian Ahlgren, Antonio Perez-Romero, and J. Mary Luti, that Teresa of Avila should be looked at in a dramatically different way than she was a few centuries ago. No longer do we see her as Bernini's marble Saint Teresa, always ecstatic, virtuous, and taking direction from God. Recent scholars can now know her as the spirited and ambitious nun who worked hard and traveled far to negotiate deals to establish more "pure" convents, who used her controversial writings to reform the church, and who (although a woman) moved through the world with the assurance of a man. By analyzing Saint Teresa using this feminist analysis, she seems "surprisingly

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modern, a rational woman living life on her own terms...familiar and accessible, as she has in every country and century that has cast a critical eye on her.<sup>19</sup>

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## Notes

1. Cathleen Medwick, Teresa of Avila: The Progress of a Soul (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 1 and 6.
2. Jodi Bilinkoff, The Avila of Saint Teresa: Religious Reform in a Sixteenth Century City (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), 200.
3. Medwick, xvi.
4. Bilinkoff, 200.
5. Alison Weber, Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 4.
6. Weber, 16.
7. Gillian T.W. Ahlgren, Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity. (London: Cornell University Press, 1996), 79.
8. Ahlgren, 3.
9. Ahlgren, 1.
10. Ahlgren, 148.
11. Ahlgren, 166.
12. Medwick, xi.
13. Antonio Perez-Romero, Subversion and Liberation in the Writings of Saint Teresa of Avila (Atlanta: Rodophi, 1996), 2.
14. Perez-Romero, 3.
15. Perez-Romero, 208.
16. J. Mary Luti, Teresa of Avila's Way. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 9.
17. Luti, 11.
18. Luti, 15
19. Medwick, xvi.

