

Introduction

“Let’s understand Divinity as a very clear diamond, much greater than the entire world, or mirror [...] everything we do, is seen in that diamond, so that it still contains all in itself because there is nothing that comes out of this greatness [...] Here, daughters, must we see love not at the corners, but in the midst of occasions [...]” (St. Teresa of Avila)¹

2015 marks the 500th anniversary of the Spanish mystic St. Teresa of Avila. This volume of the Journal of the ESWTR is therefore dedicated to issues of mysticism and gender.

Throughout history, Teresa and many other female mystics searched for their own way to describe the experience and vision of divinity. Teresa can easily be portrayed as 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. Teresa’s mysticism is deeply rooted in the historical reality of her time, but it is also a prophetic mysticism, because it acts within a patriarchal society according to an anti-patriarchal logic: the logic of communion, empowerment, and relationship. Teresa is thus a prime example for the resources that mysticism offers to a gender-sensitive theology on various levels.

Mysticism is often described as *cognitio Dei experimentalis*.² This means an awareness of God that is not gained through books or the authority of religious teachings, nor through the so-called priestly office, but through the life experiences of human beings. It is an experience of God, an experience of being one with God, an experience that God bestows on people. However, for many centuries this definition of mysticism has been interpreted restrictively, as a spiritual state of a few select persons, especially contemplative monks and nuns, characterized by silence, enclosure, distance from the world, raptures, ecstasy, asceticism, renunciation, perfection... Over against these nouns that

¹ Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila by Herself*. Translated by J.M. Cohen (Penguin: London 1957), 40, 10.

² On the so-called *cognitio Dei experimentalis* see for example: Ulrich Köpf, “Art. Erfahrung III/1,” in: Horst Robert Balz et al. (ed.): *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (De Gruyter: Berlin 1977), 10: 113.

attempt to objectify a spiritual reality making it an object of individual consumption, there appear verbs that express the dynamic and open reality of God's activity: "evoke, empower, liberate, support, build, awaken, listen, nourish, summon, suffer, experience, participate, rejoice, and stand within."³ These verbs express divine activity not in an objectivist and hierarchical way, but in a way that is open to the future and absolutely free of domination. They connote semantic fields that open us up for an understanding of the relationship with God that is very different from a patriarchal and androcentric one: not a relationship set in the framework of obedience, fear, consumption, but in the framework of fellowship, co-creation, responsibility...

The mystical experience is a radical confrontation with oneself, where one recognizes one's boundaries and is at the same time called to transgress them; it is a mystical transformation of the self that then will be able to transform unjust structures. Can mysticism today still unfold these capacities of transformation of self and societies, given the questions of peace, justice, ecology, violence, racism, and discrimination we are faced with?

The articles collected in the "Theme" section of this volume explore the issue of "mysticism and gender" from a variety of perspectives, using gender as a category of critical analysis: What does the phrase "experience of God" mean? What do we mean by "mysticism" today? How have women mystics contributed to the field of mysticism? What is the relationship between mysticism and gender? Between mysticism and religion/s? Between mysticism and theology? Between mysticism and politics? Between mysticism and violence? Between mysticism and power? Between mysticism and empowerment?

The volume remembers Teresa's anniversary with *Rosario Ramos's* article "Impacto liberador de la experiencia mística desde una perspectiva de género: Claves desde la Doctora Teresa de Jesús". Drawing on Teresa's works read from a gender perspective, this article immerses its readers into the essence of the mystical experience which generates a liberating impact in the human being. Ramos moves from anthropological-mystical reflection to experience, from evidence to impact, from concept to human depth, showing how communion can be achieved through desire, eros, transformation, growth, and provocation.

In the second contribution, "Gendered Mysticism as a Disruptive Performance of the Incarnation", *Jane M. Grovijahn* searches for languages of female embodiment that might illuminate their encounters with the divine. She explores

³ Dorothee Soelle, *Essential Writings*. Selected with an Introduction by Dianne L. Oliver (Orbis Books: Maryknoll 2006), Modern Spiritual Masters Series, 38.

how the mystical affirmation of the female body speaks to the contemporary reality of gender-based violence known as “femicide”. According to the author, feminist reparative readings of the mystical tradition point to new receptions of incarnation, bridging the actual way many women today experience their embodiment of harm towards a transgressive presence of the divine.

Larissza Hrotkó’s article “Zur semiotisch-kulturellen Betrachtung mystischer Texte aus gender-sensibler Perspektive” argues that mystical poetry can open new horizons for the interpretation of biblical texts. Using the semi-otic-cultural method, the author examines this idea drawing on the passionate texts of the Russian poet Marina Zwetjewa. Furthermore, she discusses the judge Deborah as a passionate mystic who is exemplary for the fight for justice and the equality of women in the Jewish network Bet-Deborah.

If Hrotkó has led us into a discussion about mystical poetry, *Stefanie Knauss* offers us a guided tour into the world of films in “Lovers, Leaders, Fighters: Issues of Gender in Films about Female Mystics”. Her article discusses three films about female mystics, *Thérèse*, *The Messenger – The Story of Joan of Arc*, and *Vision – Aus dem Leben der Hildegard von Bingen*, with a particular interest in how these films refer to issues of gender in their representations of female mystics, and how their treatment of these issues relates to recent research on gender and mysticism.

Adelaide Baracco’s article “Un Dios que salva: Necesidad de un cambio de paradigma en la reflexión sobre el pecado” argues that the classical Christian theological reflection on the issue of salvation represents an anti-ecological and anti-theo-logical paradigm because it is individualistic, legalistic, and speaks about an angry and punishing God. A new, different paradigm is offered by the insights of women mystics, such as those of Julian of Norwich on whom the author draws. This is a new perspective in an ecological-mystical key, it is inter-relational and founded in experience, with the central category of unconditional, deeply liberating God-Love.

In the last contribution of the “Theme” section, “Wenn aus Visionen gewaltfreier Widerstand wächst...: Sozialethik im Gravitationsfeld von Mystik und Politik am Beispiel von Maria Skobtsova”, *Petra Steinmair-Pösel* argues that social ethics could profit from the connection with mysticism in several ways: because it offers social acuity and alternative visions for the institutional-structural formation of social coexistence. It also provides an existential motivation and the necessary grounding in the theology of grace. The author uses Maria Skobtsova’s life and work as a case study for how mystical experiences lead to models of life that pose resistance and motivate socio-political commitment.

Both Baracco's and Steinmair-Pösel's articles, as well as the three articles collected in the "Forum" section were presented at the ESWTR conference in Dresden in 2013 and offer their own unique vision and partial answer to the issues of resistance and visions discussed at the conference. The "Forum" opens with "Alles inszeniert? Widerstand und Vision in der frühchristlichen Märtyrerliteratur – dargestellt am Beispiel der Perpetua" by *Anneliese Felber* and *Hildegard König*. The authors investigate the topic of resistance and vision in the *Passio Perpetuae* and argue that although the compiler's intention and strategies of reader direction in the prologue and closing report on the martyrs' death aim at integration into the traditional gender order, there is an impulse towards resistance, especially for female readers, and gender orders are challenged.

Spyridoula Athanasopoulou-Kypriou's article "The Gender Perspectives of the Economic Crisis in Greece and the Greek-Orthodox Church's Witness in Troubled Times: Charity Meals or a Quest for Justice?" looks at issues of resistance and vision in a very different context. The author begins by explaining in what sense women are more vulnerable than men to the economic shocks in Greece. Then she examines the role of the Orthodox Church in overcoming the crisis and argues that the Church fails to deal with the causes of the crisis in a politically relevant and gender-sensitive manner. Finally, she makes some suggestions regarding the relevance of theological discourse in troubled times.

The volume concludes with *Irene Tokarski*'s article "Visiones de la cosmovisión andina para Vivir Bien". The author suggests that the possibility for *Suma Qamaña* (to live, and to live well together) can be achieved through the four principles of the Andean worldview: the relatedness of everything in a cosmic network; harmony and balance as organizational principles of this relatedness; complementariness, not contradictoriness through the inclusion of the opposite; and finally, reciprocity that goes beyond solidarity in Christian social ethics, because it embraces all the cosmos. These axiological principles involve an illumination of life, a creative and reproductive force transmitted from one generation to the next in order to find a natural balance, the social and spiritual harmony of humankind, society and the cosmos, because we all are part of the family of the cosmos. This perspective can offer impulses and visions for a theology and practice that are really able to decolonize our contexts.

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