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EDITH STEIN: A STUDY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY MYSTICISM

A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree

of Master of Philosophy

in Religious Studies at

Massey University

Ann Michele Nolan

1993

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For Fiona Wylie McAlpine
no ordinary lover of the Truth

"Only God makes saints. Still, it is up to us to tell their stories. That, in the end, is the only rationale for the process of 'making saints.' What sort of story befits a saint? Not tragedy, certainly. Comedy comes closer to capturing the playfulness of genuine holiness and the supreme logic of a life lived in and through God. An element of suspense is also required: until the story is over, one can never be certain of the outcome. True saints are the last people on earth to presume their own salvation - in this life or in the next.

My own hunch is that the story of a saint is always a love story. It is a story of a God who loves, and of the beloved who learns how to reciprocate and share that 'harsh and dreadful love.' It is a story that includes misunderstanding, deception, betrayal, concealment, reversal, and revelation of character. It is, if the saints are to be trusted, our story. But to be a saint is not to be a solitary lover. It is to enter into deeper communion with everyone and everything that exists."

Kenneth L. Woodward

ABSTRACT

Edith Stein 1891-1942, born Jewish, converted to Catholicism and ten years after her conversion became a Carmelite nun. Nine years later she was killed in the concentration camp at Auschwitz. The intentions of the Nazis at Auschwitz were clear: Edith Stein died because she was born Jewish.

For the Catholic church however, the manner of her death has qualified Edith Stein for beatification as a martyr. Catholic tradition gives the name martyr to those who have died expressly for the sake of their faith, and their love of Christ. The church's inclusion of Edith Stein among the ranks of the martyrs has placed her in an extremely controversial position: to whom is she a martyr? Did she die because she was Jewish or because she was a Catholic?

This thesis examines the development of Edith Stein's spirituality towards mystical prayer and union with God and claims that she is demonstrably a mystic. It further discusses why she is an atypical mystic in the Catholic tradition. Nonetheless, it will be shown that mystic is a more complete and authentic description of her than controversial and questionable martyr.

The thesis has three parts, and eight chapters. The first part of three chapters discusses Edith Stein's search for the truth up until the time of her conversion to Catholicism. Chapter one draws largely on her autobiography for instances of her reflections on God and spirituality. The second chapter analyses the influences on her in her academic life, of others who were or became Christians, and her own experiences of God, which culminated in reading the *Life of Teresa of Avila*, resulting in her conversion to Catholicism. An indepth analysis of the ongoing influence of Teresa of Avila on Edith Stein is presented in chapter three.

The second part of the thesis which comprises chapters four and five contains a comprehensive and critical analysis of Edith Stein's growth in Catholicism and mystical prayer. Chapter five focuses on her major

philosophical and theological works in which her understanding of the ascent to the meaning of being and mystical theology as related to her own life, is demonstrated.

The final part discusses the place of mysticism in the Catholic church. Six classic Catholic mystics are described in chapter six and in chapter seven they are compared and contrasted to Edith Stein. Chapter seven argues that on three essential points Edith Stein is a mystic, if an atypical one. These are, her conversion, her understanding and definition of mysticism itself and her controversial status of being perceived to be a martyr. Chapter eight presents an argument to show that Edith Stein is demonstrably a mystic but that the political reasons surrounding her sainthood status serve to distort a full focus on her mysticism in favour of presenting her definitively as a martyr.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to express my sincere gratitude to those people without whom I could never have written this thesis. In particular I am specially grateful to my supervisor, Associate-Professor Peter Donovan of Massey University, Palmerston North, whose patience, expertise and clarity of thought stimulated and helped shape many of my ideas and insights.

Without the initial encouragement of my mentor, Father James McCaffrey OCD, I would never have undertaken this work. To him I owe a great debt of thanks for his Steinian empathy, which has sustained me throughout the research and writing of the thesis.

To the many Carmelite Monasteries who have graciously received me, I wish to express my deep gratitude for their invaluable assistance with archival and written material, and their belief in me. Special mention must be made of Sister Amata Neyer OCD archivist, and Sister Christine OCD interpreter, of the Edith Stein Archive in the Carmelite Monastery of Cologne, Germany for their willingness to share their love and knowledge of Edith Stein, the provision of yet unpublished and other material, and their patience in answering my endless questions; also of Sister Magdalene OCD, prioress of the Carmelite Monastery of Golders Green, London, Sister Margaret OCD of the Carmelite Monastery of Darlington, Durham, and Sister Paula OCD of Langham, Norwich, for sharing with me their insights and understanding of the Teresian Carmelite spirit and how they linked this to Edith Stein. Their trust in allowing me to conduct seminars with them and spend time with individual sisters, is both a tribute to their desire for ongoing authenticity in their spiritual lives, and for the enrichment of mine.

I am also indebted to Sister Lucia Wiederhoven OCD (formerly of Germany) of the Carmelite Monastery in Darlington for many translations of as-yet unpublished material by or about Edith Stein, as well as for her knowledge of and appreciation of the debate that surrounds Edith Stein.

From the seminars I have been invited to give at the Carmelite Monastery in Varroville, N.S.W., Australia, I have also learned much about Carmelite spirituality. Many of my insights have been tested and refined through discussions with members of this community. My special thanks to the current prioress, Sister Jennifer OCD, and former prioress, Sister Elias OCD, for allowing me, an outsider nonetheless, to lead a Carmelite life on two separate occasions. This experience has remained with me.

The community of the Carmelite Monastery in Auckland, New Zealand, have provided me with much material from their library and archives which I could not have otherwise obtained. I am very grateful to all of them for their unstinting help and support.

My grateful thanks also go to my main translators, languages historian Ineke Krezee and her colleagues of the Translation Centre of the University of Heidelberg, Germany.

To Margaret Grigg of the Eugene O'Sullivan Memorial Library at the University of Auckland and the staff of the library of St. John's Theological College, Meadowbank, I extend my thanks.

In addition I also want to thank Sister Mary Stephanie OCD of the Carmelite Monastery, Launceston, Tasmania, and Rebecca Scanlan SMSM, of Auckland for their suggestions and criticisms.

To my good friends Mary and Denis Mullane and Cecily Sheehy OP for their genuine interest and sense of celebration which accompanied me throughout the tedious bits of this work, my love and gratitude.

To my friends of Le Béguinage - you know who you are - my grateful thanks for being with me.

To my colleagues, the social work team of Eden-Roskill Community Health Services: Wendy Greener, Denise Berridge, Marjorie Cox (now of North Shore Hospital) and Marion Shadforth, I extend my thanks for their generosity of time. While they never said so, I know they

uncomplainingly undertook extra burdens to allow me time to complete the work involved in this thesis.

Finally, but most specially, I extend my gratitude to Fiona McAlpine, who read and commented on the text, and who was always there with her challenging suggestions and analytical skills, which gave precision to the ordering of my ideas and concepts. Thank God for pedants! Edith Stein would understand that.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | | <u>PAGE</u> |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------|
| <i>Abstract</i> | | iii |
| <i>Acknowledgements</i> | | v |
| <u>CHAPTER NUMBER</u> | <u>TITLE</u> | |
| | INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| 1 | SEARCH FOR THE TRUTH | 8 |
| 2 | INFLUENCE OF PHILOSOPHERS | 31 |
| 3 | CONVERSION TO CATHOLICISM | 47 |
| 4 | GROWTH IN MYSTICAL PRAYER | 58 |
| 5 | ASCENT TO THE MEANING OF BEING | 76 |
| 6 | MODELS OF MYSTICISM | 92 |
| 7 | EDITH STEIN: ATYPICAL MYSTIC | 123 |
| 8 | CONTROVERSIAL MARTYR | 133 |
| | <i>APPENDIX</i> | 151 |
| | <i>BIBLIOGRAPHY</i> | 170 |

INTRODUCTION.

Born into a Jewish family, Edith Stein (1891-1942) became a Catholic in 1922, entering the rigid and centralised Catholic world which had arisen in the aftermath of the first Vatican Council. In her native Germany, National Socialism and Nazi ideology were seriously threatening the Jewish community and causing alarm and division in the Christian church. Within philosophy, of which she became a student in 1913, the accepted canons of philosophical discourse, whether idealist or rationalist, were being challenged by the ideas of Edmund Husserl. Edith Stein's intellectual and religious development reflect these and many other complex pressures in her social and personal environment.

Philosophical phenomenology attracted Edith Stein because of its apparent promise to help further her search for truth and objective reality. Studying under Edmund Husserl, she gained a reputation as a philosopher in her own right through the articles on phenomenology she contributed to Husserl's *Jahrbuch*, and for organising and editing Husserl's work as his assistant from 1916 to 1918. Edith Stein's own works first began to be published in 1917. They have seldom, however, been recognised as philosophical milestones. The best known of them is her doctoral study *On the Problem of Empathy*, completed in 1916 and published a year later. It was last reprinted in 1964. Her reputation as a philosopher is based more on her important historical connections than on any of her own actual writings, but nonetheless these early philosophical works have gained her a limited place in the development of phenomenology in its German beginnings.¹ s After her conversion to Catholicism Edith Stein applied the phenomenological method to the study of Catholic spirituality, writing several works on the relationship between phenomenology and Thomist philosophy.

"Substantive as these philosophical and cultural contributions are, the importance of Edith Stein for the expression and development of modern Catholic spirituality lies in her work on Carmelite mystics written

¹ Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff. 2nd edn. 1969. Vol. I. p.223.

after she entered the Carmelite order and adopted the name Sister Benedicta."²

However, the works from this second wave of Edith Stein's philosophical endeavours were not published or widely circulated because of the anti-Semitic policies of the Nazi government, which had already in 1933 excluded Edith Stein from occupying any academic post, on the grounds of her race.³ Because of her death at Auschwitz as a victim of Nazi ideology, and because she is in the process of being canonised by the Catholic church, most of the writers on Edith Stein know about and focus more on her death than on her life or her writings. Only after she was proclaimed a martyr, on 25 January 1987, has her doctoral thesis re-emerged into public prominence, along with others of her philosophical and theological works.

On the simplest interpretation, Edith Stein was gassed at Auschwitz because she was Jewish. Initially her cause for sainthood, opened in 1962, was based on proving her heroic virtue because it was assumed she was killed because of her race. Yet the circumstances of her arrest and extermination have also been considered by the Catholic church to have been a direct retaliatory action against it. It is on these grounds that the church began the process of proclaiming her a martyr.⁴

Since 1987, the year of her beatification,⁵ there has been a growing interest in Edith Stein the person: the Jewess who converted to

² Louis Dupré and Don E. Saliers (eds), *Christian Spirituality*. New York: Crossroad. 1989. p 158.

³ Civil Service Law 4th April 1933. This law "barred Jews from public service positions, including railways, courts, schools and universities. Jewish teachers and professors were likewise ousted from their posts." Frederick L. Schuman, *The Nazi Dictatorship*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1936. pp.319 - 321.

⁴ Kenneth L. Woodward, *Making Saints*, New York: Simon & Schuster. 1990. p. 137.

⁵ Beatification is the preliminary stage towards full canonisation. A beatified person receives the title "Blessed" (Latin *beatus*), as opposed to the full title "Saint". In 1983, during the course of Edith Stein's beatification process, the rules changed, which had implications for her process, as will be shown in Chapter Eight. Before beatification, what is known as the candidate's "cause" used to be put before the Congregation of Rites by its advocate, the Postulator. The cause is based on the candidate's posthumous "fame of sanctity" or "fame of martyrdom". Once the cause had been accepted by the Congregation and its "introduction" deemed opportune by the Pope, the Apostolic Process began. Somewhat like a legal case, the Apostolic Process investigated the evidence and called witnesses to testify to either "heroic practice of virtues" or martyrdom. The surest kind of evidence, the

Catholicism, and chose to become a Carmelite nun, and the author of significant scholarly, philosophical and religious works. Most of the writers on Edith Stein since her beatification, however, are eulogising rather than academic. Among these are members of her own family and members of the Carmelite Order. Such writers and commentators on Edith Stein are concerned to present her as an outstanding convert and practitioner of the Catholic faith. She is claimed to have been an "outstanding philosopher and famous lecturer" by Sister Teresia Renata Posselt, the first to write her biography.⁶ Many subsequent writers relying on the statements made in this work reiterate that Edith Stein was a brilliant and renowned philosopher and phenomenologist. However, most display little knowledge of the intellectual climate in which her thinking developed, or of the actual extent of her philosophical and phenomenological scholarship.

I shall suggest that such claims made by enthusiastic and sympathetic writers amount to attempts to maximise Edith Stein's attributes and abilities in order to add to her greatness as a holy woman worthy of canonisation. To do this, I suggest, actually clouds our appreciation of the spiritual aspirations and integrity that make her outstanding as a person of faith. Edith Stein's philosophical achievements remain secondary, and at best a vehicle in her search for truth. Her continuing search for truth was conducted through philosophy because she chose to use the phenomenological method after her conversion and in the monastery. Spiegelberg rightly claims that, important though her phenomenological legacy was, especially in her magnum opus, *Finite and Eternal Being*, her strictly phenomenological work must be kept apart from her later interest in Thomas Aquinas and the subsequent transfer of her philosophical allegiance to Thomistic

"unequivocal proof of the approval given by God to the life of the future *beatus* or *saint*", is a properly-attested miracle. Only then was the way ready for beatification, and once more at this stage the Pope had to give his approval to the decision of the Congregation of Rites. Once the candidate had been beatified, further miracles were required before full canonisation. (Summarised from *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967. Vol. I pp.55-59.) The current process is simpler and is no longer based on the courtroom model; rather, it is in the hands of a *relator* whose job is to produce a well-documented critical biography. See Woodward, *op.cit.*, pp.90-91.

⁶ Quoted in Josephine Koeppel OCD, *Edith Stein: The Intellectual Mystic*, Wilmington: Michael Glazier. 1990. p.27.

philosophy. Phenomenology now came to occupy a mainly supplementary role as handmaiden to Thomism.⁷ As Edith Stein stated:

"This is a time which is no longer content with methodical considerations. People have lost their moorings and are in search of something to hold on to. They want concrete, material truth which proves itself in actual living. They want a 'philosophy of life.' This is what they find in Thomas."⁸

The distinction outlined by Spiegelberg is an important one as it shows the secondary status of philosophy in Edith Stein's search for ongoing truth through the eyes of her faith.

From her baptism on 1st January 1922, Edith Stein's interior longing for God was directed towards contemplation. She wanted to become a Carmelite nun. From 1922 to 1933 however, she followed a career as a teacher and lecturer on Christian womanhood and Christian vocation, as the result of a decision made with her priestly spiritual directors to put her intellectual talents at the service of the church.

On 14th October 1933 she did finally enter the Carmelite order, a religious order committed to a life of contemplation and penance in an atmosphere of silence. While there she continued to write articles on mystical theology and to comment on doctrine within a philosophical and theological framework, until her death in Auschwitz on 9th August 1942.

Among the many attributes that have been claimed for Edith Stein - philosopher, feminist, atheist, teacher, Carmelite, writer, martyr, saint - she is rarely referred to as a mystic. And yet it is her search for truth and eternal values which she proclaimed in both word and deed that makes her outstanding in life, and a candidate for being considered as a mystic rather than as a martyr. This thesis is concerned with analysing Edith Stein's journey to truth and sees her mysticism as more true of her than her martyrdom.

The traditional Catholic description of mysticism historically has included experiences of visions, stigmata, ecstasies and miracles coming

⁷ Spiegelberg, op.cit, p.224.

⁸ Spiegelberg, op.cit, p.224.

from God, accompanying lives of deep prayer focused on Christ. I will maintain that while Edith Stein's mysticism is not typical of traditional Catholicism, yet, by her own definition and descriptions of mysticism, she is a mystic, and it is this concept of mysticism which I wish to explore in this thesis. .

It will be argued that Edith Stein is a mystic in a twentieth-century sense of the words mystic and mystical journey, in that she focuses, as many commentators of this century do, on the essential hidden life of deep prayer. She accepted that the saints in the mystical tradition described their transcendental knowledge of God and Christ from within their particular cultures and the interpretation of doctrine of their times. So too she described her path to faith out of her experience and knowledge of God and the place of religion in her times. Edith Stein was an ordinary person, but her extraordinary demonstration of her commitment to union with God through the spiritual life she led distinguishes her as a mystic.

The beatification of Edith Stein under the category of martyr has clouded her essential mysticism. Mystics are much more often categorised as Religious or Holy Men and Women; these categories of saint emphasise what is called "heroic virtue" as the test of sanctity. This emphasis would fit much more the heroic virtue and spiritual integrity which make up Edith Stein's mysticism. The Vatican appears to have chosen to make her a Catholic saint for political reasons.⁹ This move has placed her at the centre of a controversy as to whether she was killed because she was a Jew or because she was a Catholic. The momentum this controversy has gained and continues to gain serves to detract from her being perceived and appreciated as a mystic.

As far as is possible, I will use Edith Stein's own writings, reflections, letters and philosophical works to substantiate my claim. There have been difficulties in getting access to these resources. Because of copyright difficulties between the Archive in Cologne and the Archive in Belgium, where most of Edith Stein's philosophical works and unpublished correspondence are housed, it has not always been possible to obtain complete texts. So few of her published works - five out of

⁹ Woodward, *op.cit*, pp.129 - 151.

sixteen volumes - have been translated from German into English. For translations of the available works in German not yet translated into English, I have had to rely on private translations from a languages historian and translator from the university of Heidelberg, and other competent speakers of German.

As well, many of Edith Stein's letters have not yet been published or translated. I consulted the originals when I visited the archive in the Carmelite Monastery in Cologne, Germany, where I also interviewed the archivist, Sister Amata Neyer OCD. This interview was conducted in the German language with the assistance of an interpreter. I am relying on translators, not only for material written by or concerning Edith Stein, but also for the philosophical works by others that I shall be citing. This means I also have to live with the translators' sometimes gender-exclusive language. It does a disservice to Edith Stein's feminism to translate "Mensch" as "man" rather than as "human"; but only in some private translations have I and my translators been able to be sensitive to the nuances of the German language as we would translate it into English today. Notwithstanding these difficulties, I will draw as much as possible from Edith Stein's own works to illustrate her spiritual development.

Because the later writers Hilda Graef and Waltraud Herbstrith quote from Edith Stein's own works as much as possible, I prefer to use Graef and Herbstrith as secondary sources, rather than using her earliest biographer, the unabashed hagiographic Sister Teresia Renata Posselt, OCD. Sister Teresia Renata (who had been Mistress of Novices during the novitiate of Edith Stein at Cologne) published her biography in 1952 and dedicated it

"to the memory of a woman who radiated the light of truth in an age which loved darkness more than light."¹⁰

Posselt's writings will be more than once demonstrated in the coming pages to fall short of modern scientific or academic canons of the truth; they are dictated more by what Sister Teresia Renata doubtless saw as the common position that she and Edith Stein would occupy in the areas

¹⁰ Sister Teresia Renata de Spiritu Sancto Posselt OCD, *Edith Stein*, London: Sheed and Ward. 1952. p.vii.

of the Catholic faith and the Carmelite vocation. Viewed from today's standpoint, Sister Teresia Renata's book is a meditation, devotional reading for those who know that truth is not dependent on footnotes. Hence it is that Sister Teresia Renata will often couch things in the language of pious Carmelitism, notwithstanding the ways in which Edith Stein upheld her own persona within the monastery. Everything Edith Stein wrote was to be published as "by Edith Stein", not the more usual "by a Carmelite nun" or under her name in religion.¹¹ Throughout this biography however Sister Teresia Renata uses Edith Stein's name in religion - Sister Teresia Benedicta of the Cross - rather than referring to her as Edith Stein, a holy woman in her own right. I follow my subject, therefore, in referring to her as "Edith Stein". It was Sister Teresia Renata who in 1958 drafted an official study of Sister Teresia Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein) at the request of the Archbishop of Cologne for the opening of a Cause for Beatification and Canonisation of Sister Teresia Benedicta of the Cross.¹²

However, even Graef and Herbstrith rely heavily on Sister Teresia Renata for certain interpretations or formulations of biographical data, and it is for this reason that it is so important that all assertions be verified, so far as is possible, from Edith Stein's own writings. In many cases I may have to extrapolate backwards in order to do this but at least I will be able to show in such cases that what Sister Teresia Renata, Graef and Herbstrith claim as Edith Stein's state of mind at a given point is not inconsistent with her own later reflections on the subject. To make a case for Edith Stein as a mystic rather than as a martyr will require the most meticulous documentation of what she herself said, did, and thought.

¹¹ Edith Stein's name in religion was Sister Teresia Benedicta of the Cross OCD (Order of Discalced Carmelites).

¹² "Texts for the Beatification of Edith Stein" in *Carmelite Studies* IV(1987): p.311.