

But these are only minor points. King is to be congratulated for writing a well-constructed and tightly-woven work. He is even thoughtful enough to include a short, concise summary of chapters after the Table of Contents. He wants the reader of his book to know where he or she has been and is going. One then finds oneself enchanted with this profound, timely human journey and able to wrestle with the enchantment. One sees the power of an objective ethic, the need for a personal spirituality, and the possibility of responding to the problems (mysteries) of the moment with a personal creativity born of the Spirit of love.

MERTON: SPARKED BY THE MEISTER

Review of

Terry Tastard

THE SPARK IN THE SOUL: SPIRITUALITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Foreword by Michael Hollings

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Reviewed by **Erlinda G. Paguio**

Confronted by critical problems such as acid rain, nuclear fall out, enormous debts owed by third world countries to northern hemisphere bankers, underfunding of social services, poverty, etc., Terry Tastard raises the question of the role of spirituality in our task of making this world a better place in which to live. Although he believes that Christians should be active in social concern, he argues against a commitment that is compelled by guilt. He recommends an involvement that arises freely from within. He uses the analogy of the tiny spark in a car's engine to illustrate his point. Just as this tiny spark gives more power and efficiency than ten people pushing the car, a prayerful, loving knowledge of God and His love for the world is a better and more effective motivation in the struggle for social change than guilt is.

The author, a former journalist in South Africa and now a member of the Anglican Society of Saint Francis, works with social justice groups. He also teaches spirituality at the Institute of Christian Studies and other centers in London. In his attempt to integrate spirituality with social action, he draws from the life and teachings of four great mystics: St. Francis of Assisi (ca. 1181-1226), Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260-1327), Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941), and Thomas Merton (1915-1968). Each of them in their own unique way expressed a genuine spirituality which Tastard calls "kairologically present." Their love for God and their union with Him also embraced a love for the people and the world around them. Their love empowered them to be present to the

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crises before them. Filled with a deep compassion for the suffering, they worked to alleviate their condition and to challenge the accepted norms of their society for an ideal that was more in harmony with their Christian faith.

Tastard borrows from Meister Eckhart the metaphor of “the spark in the soul” to describe the examples of the four mystics he studied. He acknowledges that it is “a loosely defined element,” but he, nevertheless, gives it his own personal and practical interpretation. It is for him the combination of the love of God and being present to our times. It is our heart’s response to God’s love for us moving to enter more deeply into the interrelatedness of life on earth. This “spark” unifies our personal experience of God’s love with our awareness of the sufferings and difficult conditions of the world. The deeper our union with God becomes, the more conscious we become of God’s love for us and for the world as well. Consequently we discover that to be a Christian means to be open for change in our life, and to be agents of change, too, in our world where everything has its being in God. Tastard believes that this “spark” is necessary to strengthen and sustain every Christian including those engaged in social justice and peace movements.

Meister Eckhart uses the symbolism of “light” to designate the Word of God. The eternal Word as present in our inmost being is “the spark of the soul.” C. F. Kelley, an authority on Eckhart writes that Meister Eckhart draws the analogy from nature.¹ “When fire ignites the wood, the spark has the nature of the fire and is one with pure fire . . . the spark of the fire lights and kindles the wood . . . It is the light that comprehends God without a medium, and that which has more unity with God than it has with any power of the soul. It has never touched either time or place . . . and it wants nothing but its naked God as He is in Himself.”² Theologians have interpreted this “spark” as a superior rational faculty of the soul. Meister Eckhart resorts to other images to refer to this faculty: “a castle,” “a noble power,” “a watching guard,” “the crown of the tree.” He also says that “it is neither this nor that” to indicate its sublime reality.

To avoid confusing his readers, Tastard refrains from using his personal interpretation of “the spark” in chapter three where he presents a simplified explanation of Meister Eckhart’s thought. When he discusses the writings of Evelyn Underhill and Thomas Merton, however, his interpretation is more Eckhartian since both of these mystics learned much from the Meister. The “spark of the soul” is interpreted as the deepest center of our being, the ground where divine life imparts something of itself to each person and where each person finds himself loved by God and loving, too, the world which God loves. Both Merton and Eckhart stress the importance of discovering our inner self in God. Both believe that our true identity is hidden in God. Both teach that we can discover our true self through prayer, solitude, silence, and detachment from images and illusions we may have of who we are and who God is. Both direct us to a life that is fully centered in God and free of unnecessary preoccupations.

Tastard links Eckhart’s theme of detachment with modern person’s compulsive consumption. Detachment offers a difficult but satisfying alternative to a lifestyle dominated by acquisition of material goods. It provides space for God to dwell in us, and for the Son of God to be born in us. God’s presence allows us to be present to others and for God to be present in them, too.

Tastard focuses on three dominant themes in Merton’s contemplative, anti-war, and anti-racist writings: the need to develop an authentic identity; the importance of silence and solitude and contemplative consciousness. Persons committed to activist movements are in

1. C. F. Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), pp. 135-136.

2. *Meister Eckhart*; trans. by Edmund Colledge & Bernard McGinn (New York, 1981), p. 180 & p. 198. See also Frank Tobin, *Meister Eckhart: Thought and Language* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1986), p. 129.

danger of losing their peaceful identity if they become so wound up in their activism and dissipate their energies in advancing one cause after the other. Merton teaches that any action that is not anchored in a deep prayer life and is not balanced by seeking space for silence and solitude is bound to totter. Silence and solitude, according to Tastard, enable us to discern distortions in our society and to resist them.

Although separated by several centuries, St. Francis of Assisi and Evelyn Underhill are as relevant to us today as they were during their lifetimes. After his conversion, St. Francis devoted his life to serving and teaching the poor, discovering in their image the image of Christ. St. Francis realized that God speaks to us through the powerless, the hungry, the homeless, the elderly and the sick. Tastard packages for us from St. Francis' life some creative and practical lessons: grow in your understanding of issues (such as apartheid, unemployment, capital punishment, etc.); take the media seriously and use it as a medium of prayer; pray for the people and issues you read or hear about, realizing that to pray for them is a fundamental form of action and that prayer disposes you for other actions; make nonviolence your way of life; make a vow of it for a period with a group or alone; become a peacemaker like St. Francis of Assisi by cultivating inner peace within yourself.

Underhill, a committed pacifist contributed significantly to religious scholarship through her writings on mysticism, prayer, pacifism, and her publication of critical editions of the works and biographies of mystical writers like Ruysbroeck, Walter Hilton, and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. According to T. S. Eliot, her studies manifest "an awareness of the grievous need of the contemplative element in the world." Her role in the Church of England was exceptional when one considers that women's ministry then was limited to the work of nuns and deaconesses. She was the first woman in her church to work as a retreat leader and a spiritual director.

Tastard covers a great deal of information and reflection in synthesizing the legacy of these mystics. The book abounds with realistic and useful insights on social justice issues. His interpretation of St. Francis is interesting but he finds more contrasts than similarities between him and Meister Eckhart. He mentions nothing of Merton's studies in Eastern religions and Marxism which contributed greatly to our understanding of other religious traditions and of communism. By including Underhill's influence, he underscores the importance of a woman's and a lay person's role in the church. Like Merton and the other mystics, he believes that contemplation is possible in a world of action, that it is unnecessary to isolate one from the other. A spirituality for social change, according to Tastard, must be based on the recognition of God's prior and unconditional love for us. He sees the urgency of finding God in the present time and of being found by Him.

Michael Hollings, who wrote the Preface, reminds us that "the spark of the soul" is a seed implanted in each one of us. It takes a long time for God to work in us, but one day this seed will emerge as a fire of love for justice and peace — something similar to what Christ tell us: "I have come to bring fire, and how I wish it was blazing already."



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