

Adrienne von Speyr and Hans Urs von Balthasar

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Hans Urs von Balthasar was very clear that he owed his most distinctive theological insights to Adrienne von Speyr. 'On the whole I received far more from her, theologically, than she from me, though, of course, the exact proportion can never be calculated'; she often gave him suggestions for sermons 'but only rarely ... did she read my books'; 'following her advice' he took the extremely painful decision to leave the Society of Jesus; he 'strove to bring [his] way of looking at Christian revelation into conformity with hers'; and although she has no part in the writing, without her 'the basic perspective of *Herrlichkeit* would never have existed' (*First Glance at Adrienne von Speyr*, 1981, page 13). 'Today, after her death, her work appears far more important to me than mine, and the publication of her still-unpublished writings takes precedence over all personal work of my own'. He predicted, scornfully, that theologians would try to disentangle his insights from hers. Those who read the volumes of *Herrlichkeit* as they came out in 1961-67 (I was impelled towards them by the enthusiasm of Cornelius Ernst and Donald MacKinnon), of course, knew little or nothing about his indebtedness to von Speyr. Indisputably, some of his most characteristic themes draw heavily on her mystical experiences; other motifs, however, that are central and of great interest, seem independent of his meeting her.

There is as yet no proper biography. Born in 1902, in the Swiss Jura, in a comfortably-off family of doctors, clergymen and merchants, settled in Basel for centuries, Adrienne von Speyr was brought up as a Protestant. She was the second of four children. She was close to her father and grandmother but never got on well with her mother. From primary school days she had difficulties with religion. Against her mother's wishes, her father allowed her to go to secondary school in Basel. Even at that age she debated with the pastor the question of celibacy, the only way of life she allowed for those who dedicate themselves to God and the Church; she liked attending Salvation Army meetings, with their confession of sins but regarded their doing so in public as a mistake (*First Glance* 22). Her mother got her out of school after two years, claiming that she was seeing too much of boys and that a medical career was inappropriate for a woman anyway. In the year that she spent in 'an advanced girls' school' she was taught by Heinrich Barth, Karl Barth's younger brother. Her father allowed her back to the *Gymnasium*, where she was welcomed, the only girl in the class. Her father died in 1918 (*My Early Years* 1995, pp. 167-81); her mother's disapproval continued. She financed her medical training by tutoring less advanced fellow students; she was one of the first women doctors in Switzerland. In 1927 she married Emil Dürr, a professor of history, a widower, with two young sons. Initially, von Balthasar tells us (one might think indiscreetly), 'the physical aspects of marriage were distressing and somehow strange to her' but she 'came to love' her husband and was distraught when he died in 1934, as the result of an accident. They often talked of becoming Catholics; they went to Mass together

on vacation in Italy (*First Glance*, pp. 29–39). In 1936 she married his assistant and successor Werner Kaegi, the expert on the Renaissance historian Jakob Burkhardt. He gave her Karl Adam's *The Spirit of Catholicism* to read; she went regularly to Mass; she even went to communion when Noldi and then Niggi were confirmed (her stepsons, presumably), the second time, in 1938, thinking afterwards she did the wrong thing (*First Glance*, pp. 164–5). In 1940, when she was 38, she met Hans Urs von Balthasar, three years younger. He was a guest at dinner; she did not take to him; but when she found the rosary that he had left behind she concluded that he was the one to instruct her in the Catholic faith. She was received into the Church on All Saints 1940.

From 1940 until 1944, von Speyr had frequent visions, ecstasies, and mystical experiences, including bilocation and stigmatization. But she had always had unusual experiences. On Christmas day 1908, when she was six, she met a small oldish man with a limp who took her hand and asked her to come with him; she said no, he let go and looked a bit sad; years later, she realized it was Ignatius of Loyola from the many visions she was having of him (*First Glance* pp. 116–8). When she was nine she gave a lecture to her class about the Jesuits and mental reservation; she knew nothing of Catholics, she lived in a very anti-Catholic environment, she got her information from an angel (page 21). In Holy Week 1911 she had a vision of the crucified Christ; in November 1917 she had a vision of the Mother of God; and much else. All this, when she told him years later, von Balthasar found completely believable.

Mary often intervened in her life; once when she was bandaging her hand she found Mary holding the roll of bandage; she gave the bandage to von Balthasar and he carried it for the rest of his life in a little holder Adrienne knitted for the purpose. On two occasions Adrienne placed von Balthasar's hand in the hand of Our Lady; when he was hearing her confession on one occasion Our Lady appeared beside him with her hand on his shoulder. She was transported during the night, von B. says, visiting concentration camps during the War, visiting convents where the divine office was being said badly, visiting confessionals where priests were not up to snuff, visiting seminaries and also Rome and the Vatican, wherever people were not praying with much fervour, to jolly them up. She writes of going to confession to the Curé d'Arns (*First Glance* 171), who died in 1859. Much else, in the same vein, convinced von Balthasar of Adrienne's authentic mystical experience.

From 1944 until 1948 von Balthasar spent a great deal of time taking down her 'great dictations', which fill many volumes (*First Glance* pp 101–111). From the early 1950s, however, she developed a whole series of illnesses, diabetes, severe arthritis, increasing blindness and eventually the intestinal cancer which killed her, slowly and very painfully, in 1967. Her husband died in 1979.

There was another side to Adrienne's life. She read a huge amount: modern French literature, Colette especially; books about the sea, she and von Balthasar spent three vacations in Brittany when she lay for hours in a deckchair looking at the sea; she liked Rachel Carson; she read detective stories as well as biographies and memoirs, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Camus, and so on (*First Glance* pp 38–9). In photographs, even in 1965, she looks a very friendly, humorous, comfortable sort of person. In the winter of 1948–49 she accompanied Barth and von Balthasar to Einsiedeln, where they listened for hours to records of Mozart, and Barth was deeply moved during the Mass celebrated by von Balthasar (Eberhard Busch.

Karl Barth, page 362). In June 1956 all three went to Paris to attend the defence of the thesis on Barth by Henri Bouillard SJ; they had a celebration dinner in a Chinese restaurant (page 421).

From 1940 until 1965, then, the lives of von Speyr and von Balthasar were interwoven. From 1952 until her death he lived with the Kaegis in Basel. He wrote a great part of *Herrlichkeit* in his study, next door to her sickroom. As he said, 'her work and mine cannot be separated from one another either psychologically or theologically. They are two halves of one whole, with a single foundation at the centre'. Their founding the secular institute which brought about his leaving the Jesuits, their mutual dependence in prayer and suffering, his belief in her mystical experience and inspired dictations, and so on, are incontestable. For all that, however, his theology owes as much to others as to her, and it is not always clear that her influence was always for the best — that, at least, is my thesis.

In his very good summary of von Balthasar's work (*Paradoxe et mystère de l'Eglise*, 1967), Henri de Lubac SJ makes no reference to the influence of Adrienne. Peter Henrici SJ, von Balthasar's cousin, now assistant bishop of Chur, recalling the three 'mentors' — 'perhaps the only ones he had' — lists Rudolf Allers (1883-1963), the Viennese psychologist, Erich Przywara SJ (1889-1972), and de Lubac (1896-1991). It would be interesting, Henrici says, to analyze the work published before von Balthasar met Adrienne — this 'could reveal to us what is most purely "Balthasarian" in his later writings which were conceived under the influence of Adrienne' — which would 'not be a negligible amount' — 'indeed, I would say *in nuce* almost everything' (*Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work* edited by David L. Schindler, 1991). Medard Kehl SJ, in his valuable introduction to *The Von Balthasar Reader* (1982), lists four friendships that determined the course of his theology: Przywara, de Lubac, Karl Barth, and Adrienne.

It is hard to believe that von Speyr contributed much during the decade 1940 to 1950 when von Balthasar was studying Barth in the light of the furious inner-Catholic controversy about nature and grace. Peter Henrici suggests that von Balthasar's theology is motivated by an attempt to rework de Lubac's theology of creation to deal with the argument over *analogia entis* between Barth and Przywara. John Thompson brings out the deeply 'Barthian' aspects of von Balthasar's theology (in *The Beauty of Christ* edited by Bede McGregor OP and Thomas Norris, 1994). For that matter, in the introduction to *Herrlichkeit* itself (*The Glory of the Lord* I, 1982, 52-56), von Balthasar comes close to saying that the whole idea of contemplating the divine glory comes from *Church Dogmatics* III/I (1940). At the conclusion of his treatment of the doctrine of the divine perfections, in von Balthasar's favourite volume of the *Dogmatics*, Barth deliberately refers back to Augustine and Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, insists on great caution in taking on board this 'hardly veiled Platonism', but finally decides that 'biblical truth itself' does not 'permit us to stop at this point because of the danger' — we have to say that 'God is beautiful'. Here too, von Balthasar thinks, Barth's *Dogmatics* represent a 'decisive breakthrough'. Barth has moved, within the *Dogmatics*, from the 'uncompromising rhetoric of Luther and the Reformation', with an emphasis on the scandal of the Gospel and plenty of polemics against Catholicism, to a 'second stage', laying claim to 'pre-Reformation theology', in a 'tranquil, attentive contemplation of revelation'.

Luther's theology, though rooted in Scripture, was 'basically anti-contemplative'. Modern Protestant theology is immune to this 'contemplative' (quasi-Catholic!) Barth, von Balthasar thinks — it remains subservient to the Bultmannian dualism of Form Criticism and *sola fide* existentialism. In short, it would not be absurd to argue that von Balthasar's magnificent attempt, in the seven volumes of *Herrlichkeit*, to expound a theology centred on the glory of God, is an extended footnote to §31 of *Church Dogmatics III/1* — as arguable, anyway, as the claim that the basic perspective owes anything of decisive importance to von Speyr. In the introduction to the final volume of *Herrlichkeit*, dealing with the New Testament, von Balthasar reverts to *Dogmatics III/1* again, at some length, saying that Barth's theology of glory 'agrees with our own overall plan' — and that outlining it offers 'an overview that we ourselves can approach only slowly' (page 23).

Given the importance of the motif of glory in the Fourth Gospel one might expect Adrienne's extensive exposition to be particularly relevant (4 volumes, over 1500 pages, Ignatius Press, 1987-94). Containing no philological, exegetical or academic information, as von Balthasar pre-emptively notes, it is a 'book of meditation', which 'would probably look merely colourless and longwinded, disappointing and wearying' to those unable to use it properly. It assumes that 'each verse ... contains latent within itself the fullness of the eternal life, the mysteries of heaven, the ocean of trinitarian truth and love'. The 'primary aim' in the volume on John 6-12, for example, 'in keeping with the discourses themselves', is 'to present the moment in which the limited, egocentric standpoint of the Jews, based on reason, must let itself be burst open into the unlimited, loving standpoint of the Lord, based on faith'.

These remarks invite discussion. At the risk of being found among those who cannot read the book properly, however, it is more to our purpose here to quote from von Speyr herself, very summarily but perhaps symptomatically.

'A numerous crowd followed him, because they saw the wonders he performed on those who were sick' (John 6:2) — this verse yields a page contending that they followed 'in curiosity', not in 'egoism', since Jesus 'never makes use of our sin in order to redeem us from our sin', but he makes use of 'the weakness of the curiosity'. While that is the kind of development that one might expect in a homily, and is certainly not academic exegesis, it hardly seems the product of any kind of inspiration. There are hundreds of such homiletic *divertissements* in von Speyr's dictations on John.

Sometimes, the meditations betray what look like cultural preconceptions and even personal obsessions. On 19:19, the placing of the title on the cross, we are told that Pilate has 'the typical attitudes of the catholicizing outsider' — 'he is ready to recognize the truth of the Church, but he does not have the strength to accept the consequences' — he is like those who 'resemble those women who, as long as they are in their fruitful years, never commit themselves to marriage' (volume 4, page 108). On 19:37 ('They shall look upon him whom they have pierced'), we are told that John, as 'representative of ... all priests and monastics and all who are virginal' has 'gained special insight into the origin of baptism and the eucharist' — as 'the custodian of the mystery of love' with respect to our Lady it is now possible for her to be 'open and transparent to him' — 'This complete openness of the Mother is a mystery of her purity. In young girls, it is often a sign of the most unspoilt purity when they quite unabashedly mention or

recount many things about which women otherwise modestly avoid speaking' (page 147). On 20:8 we hear that the Holy Spirit is omnipresent in the Church — 'in the office, in love and in the Mother' — in ecclesiastical ministry, in self-sacrificing love of neighbour, and in Mary herself. 'Not only do Peter and John, on the one hand, and John and the Mother, on the other, form a unity, but the office, too, is unthinkable apart from the Mother. For, in the Church, the Mother herself has a function for the Church, an office, and in fact a primary one: God had required her in order to found the new Church. And when the Bridegroom appears, the Bride must also have a Mother: he gives her his own bodily Mother, in the Holy Spirit, to be her Mother. Thus the Mother stands both between and above Peter and John: she has an office and she has love; her love is her office' (page 174). We are told, also, that office 'never has any interest in a rush of events' — 'It has the attribute of inertia', which explains why Peter is slow to make sense of the empty tomb (page 174). (That sounds like Adrienne's wry humour.)

It is always a pleasure to consult commentators on 21:7 — Peter's putting on his clothes to swim towards the Lord: this 'indicates the dignity of his office' — 'Only as clothed can he appear before the Lord. Regarding souls, one can always say: the more nakedly they stand before God, the better. But when office appears physically before the Lord, the reverse applies: the more dignifiedly, the better. ... Because the Church is official, she needs ceremonies ... He goes to the Lord, attired in the dignity of office ... he acts alone, he detaches himself, as the bearer of office, from the congregation by springing in and going to the Lord' (pages 311-2).

'Holy Saturday is a mystery of the passage of the incarnated Son into the darkness of the Ever-Greater Father. During the occurrence of this passage, the Son's attitude is a fully trusting one. So it must be when children are introduced into the mystery of the parents. Often, after such an introduction, an initial period of estrangement follows, for instance, of a girl from her father, who now appears distant and incomprehensible to her ... For a husband and wife, there is, on the wedding night, a darkness before the full self-surrender', etc. (page 156).

'Inspired' or not, these remarks, and hundreds more like them, reveal a good deal about von Speyr's private concerns and cultural baggage.

Perhaps her exposition of the Fourth Gospel was not the right place to start. The dictation on the Apocalypse (done in 1946) might have been better: in the third volume of *Theo-Dramatik*, the fourth volume of the English version, *The Action*, in effect von Balthasar's theology of the atonement, the whole discussion is introduced by a study of the Book of Revelation, with frequent citations from von Speyr. According to the rule of the specifically theodramatic rhythm, the more God intervenes the more opposition to himself he elicits — the Apocalypse offers a paradigm of the paroxysm of violence that the atonement is — and here von Balthasar is fighting off the temptation to make of the atonement a tragic mythology, on the one hand, or an 'undramatic philosophism' on the other (he means Karl Rahner's Christology). There is no doubt that von Speyr's mystical experiences contributed to von Balthasar's theology of the paschal mystery.

Perhaps one should look at the dictation on Genesis or on the Song of Songs, though I wonder, whatever he says, whether von Balthasar's understanding of the complementarity of man and woman might owe just as much to other sources. Medard Kehl, for instance, suggests that von Balthasar's distinctively Marian

ecclesiology was inspired by de Lubac's *Catholicisme* (1938).

Certainly, in *L'Éternel Féminin* (1968), de Lubac's book about Pierre Teilhard de Chardin SJ, the Church is very much in a position of bridal-bodily-maternal receptivity over against her bridegroom, head and lord.

Several themes come together. First of all there is the consent of the Virgin Mary to the invitation from God as Trinity, allowing herself to be overshadowed by the Holy Spirit so as to receive into her womb the seed of the Word, all at the behest of the Father, in order to fulfil the divine plan of saving the world. In Mary, creation responds to the Lord God's initiative — 'let it be done to me according to your word'. Mary, in her *fiat*, anticipates the Church, both as mother and as bride of Christ. The Church whom Christ loves (Ephesians 5) is the mystery of marital being-in-one-flesh — which illuminates what the sacrament of marriage is about but also picks up the medieval motif of the soul as *sponsa Christi*, and thus our all being, as creatures, receptive and feminine over against our Lord. (Man is essentially feminine, on this story.) In turn, this picks up the biblical theme of the covenant relationship between the people and the Lord God, the people imaged as daughter, bride, unfaithful wife — *casta meretrix*, holy whore, as von Balthasar says in a famous essay — and so on. Behind that again, von Balthasar's doctrine of creation is envisaged in terms of a nuptial relationship between the created and the divine. The goal of the entire dispensation of salvation is the wedding of God with the world.

Thus, the individual soul, the Church, and creation itself, are all envisaged as feminine vis-à-vis God. In effect, where Barth sets his theology of creation in terms of Christology, and invites von Balthasar's famous accusation of 'Christocentric narrowing' (not so bad as it sounds, though, as he says: *Engführung* in music means the highlighting of an instrument in a symphony), von Balthasar sees sanctification, ecclesiology, and nature as always focused on the Virgin Mary. It would not be hard to show how much this owes to von Speyr. On the other hand, the increasingly Marian focus in his work is arguably motivated by his insistence that, in the modern technocratic world, we need to break with our desire to be like Prometheus, the rebellious arrogant domineering lord and master treading all under foot — we need to recover the sense of what it is to be empty, watching and waiting, waiting on God. His first published book, on the theological presuppositions of German idealism (1937), which is essentially a version of his Zürich doctoral dissertation (1929), was retitled *Prometheus* when republished in 1947. Even here, then, arguably, the deepest motivation of his theology may be traced in what he wrote even before he joined the Society of Jesus, long before he met von Speyr.

John Roten (in Schindler, 1991) lists twelve themes, apart from the Marian ones, that seem to him to 'reflect Adrienne von Speyr's direct influence on von Balthasar's opus'. Her Johannine notion of truth, her views on the states of life, her conception of mission, her radical Christocentric theology of history, her notion of universal salvation, the unity of theology and sanctity, his well-known *Prayer* (1955; ET 1961), the Johannine notion of glory, her sense of the tension between divine and human freedom, her ideas about the Petrine ministry, and her Ignatian insistence on obedience — these eleven 'convergences', at any rate, that exemplify the 'symbiosis' in their work. The twelfth, which Roten puts first, is the effect on von Balthasar's theology of von Speyr's paschal experiences. From *The Heart of the World* (1945, ET 1979) to the concluding volume of

Theodramatik (1983, in course of translation), there is no doubt that her supernatural state of anguish on Holy Saturday, for years on end, determines his theology of the redemption.

From 1941 until 1965, von Speyr relived the Passion during Holy Week. On the afternoon of Good Friday she would fall into a trance until early Easter morning. In this state she would experience the descent into hell with Jesus.

Christ's descent into hell is, of course, an article of the Apostles' Creed — the New Testament evidence being such passages as Matthew 27:52 f., Luke 23:43 and especially 1 Peter 3:18-20. On this view, Christ 'was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey'. The *kerygma* of the resurrected Christ, then, is envisaged there, and in much patristic literature and traditional iconography, as a further extension of his saving work. Whether the 'spirits' are the vast throngs of sinners who spurned previous calls to repentance or perhaps the fallen angels, including Satan, Christ is envisaged here as herald of salvation even where the effects of sin are most dramatically evident. Whatever the diversity in detail, the 'harrowing of hell', a favourite motif of art and drama in the Middle Ages, is the defeat of the power of death by the victorious and risen Lord.

For von Balthasar, however, drawing on von Speyr's mystical experience, Christ's descent into hell is not a call to liberation issued by the risen Lord — on the contrary, it is the dead Jesus' ultimate identification and solidarity with the most powerless and humiliated souls of all — the dead. Hell was where God was totally absent. In a state of total passivity and solitude, psychologically cut off from others and from God, Jesus actually assumed even the 'deadness' of the dead. The trajectory of the self-emptying of the Son of God goes deeper and farther than dying on Calvary — it carries the dead Jesus even into the Godlessness of utter dereliction and abandonment. This experience of the total absence of God is what it means to assume the sin of the world. The one raised from the dead at Easter, then, is not just the one who was crucified but the one whose 'corpse-like obedience' permitted him to take to himself the condition of the dead. 'The Lord does not rise from the Cross', as Adrienne insisted, 'but from the Hell of Holy Saturday'.

In his introduction to von Speyr's *Kreuz und Hölle* (1966, untranslated), von Balthasar allows that 'in addition to all the traditional elements, one cannot fail to recognize the newness of her central assertions'. In *Mysterium Paschale* (ET 1990), especially, he gathers biblical, patristic and medieval texts, weaving them together to produce a 'synthesis of what had hitherto been fragments' — 'into a living, highly fruitful whole'. But these fragments come from texts that take the traditional 'harrowing of hell' for granted. It is one thing to regret that traditional theology has not understood the 'full significance of Holy Saturday' (p. 83). In his fine book *The Mysteries of March: Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Incarnation and Easter* (1990) John Saward contends that Adrienne's vision of Christ's descent into hell is reconcilable with the traditional harrowing of hell 'when we recall that it is precisely as passively dead that Christ actively preaches' (page 123). Perhaps so, and much more needs to be said. But on the face of it this is one familiar theological and iconographical topos that von Balthasar radically revises, principally on the strength of von Speyr's private revelations. It is not a very traditional way in which to develop Catholic doctrine.