

Ruth Burrows – A reader of the Carmelite tradition – Part 1

INTRODUCTION

‘Two generations ago,’ wrote Bernard McGuinn in the year 2000, ‘during the era of the triumph of Neoscholasticism, it would have seemed as otiose to inquire about the role of the Carmelites in the history of mysticism as it would have been to wonder how significant Thomas Aquinas was in theology.’¹ The structure of *Mystical Contemplation*, written by the Eudist, E. Lamballe, in 1913 captures this pre-conciliar era succinctly: the structural principle of each chapter is the opinion of Saint Thomas Aquinas followed sequentially by that of Saints John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila.² The future Pope Saint John Paul II wrote his doctoral dissertation on faith in John of the Cross in 1948;³ his thesis was supervised by the ‘model Thomist’ Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange.⁴ As late as 1951, Thomas Merton, in a work intended for a popular Catholic readership, was still at pains to link the Angelic and Mystical Doctors, finding *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* safely rooted in the philosophy and theology of Saint Thomas’s *Summa Theologiae*, thereby strengthening his premise that ‘[t]here is no member of the Church who does not owe something to Carmel’.⁵ The strength of this threefold cord of Carmelite ‘mystical theology’ and Thomistic ‘perennial philosophy’ and dogmatic theology can be seen in the Carmelite formation ‘manual’ in use throughout the 1940s and 50s which took the neophyte on a journey from the dogmatic fundamentals of the spiritual life to its fulfilment in mystical experience.⁶ This manualist approach provided an all-inclusive Catholic package which, while reassuring to some, proved stifling to others. As a Jesuit student, Hans Urs von Balthasar found himself ‘living in a state of unbounded indignation’ due to the dullness of Neo-

¹ Bernard McGuinn, ‘The Role of the Carmelites in the History of Western Mysticism’, in Culligan and Jordan (eds.), *Carmel and Contemplation*, (Washington, ICS Publications, 2000), p.44.

² E. Lamballe, *Mystical Contemplation*, (London, R&T Washbourne Ltd, 1913), pp. xv-xvii. The only addition to the Dominican and Carmelite Doctors is Saint Francis de Sales (also a Doctor of the Church since 1877).

³ Pope John Paul II, *Faith According to St. John of the Cross*, (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1981). This was originally presented as the doctoral thesis *Doctrina de fide apud S. Joannem a Cruce*, Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas, Rome, 1948.

⁴ Fergus Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007), p.10.

⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth*, (London, Hollis & Carter, 1951), pp. ix, 95-7.

⁶ Austin Chadwell (ed.), *The Carmelite Directory of the Spiritual Life*, (Chicago, The Carmelite Press, 1951). pp. vii-xvii.

Scholastic theology,⁷ whilst in the Carmel of the 1940s⁸, Ruth Burrows was ‘put off’ by the presentation of mystical prayer which ‘seemed to cheapen God’.⁹

Francis Schüssler Fiorenza notes that except for Hans Küng and Joseph Ratzinger, all of the major theologians at the Second Vatican Council had completed their first works or doctoral dissertations on Thomas but crucially that they all sought ‘to reinterpret Thomas Aquinas independently from the presuppositions and views of Neo-Scholasticism’.¹⁰ As Paul D. Murray suggests, twentieth-century Catholic theology is considerably more complex than ‘a drama in two acts’¹¹ and it is beyond the scope of this essay to chart the waning fortunes of Suárezian Thomism; nevertheless, reinterpretation has clearly taken place. Has a reassessment also occurred in Carmelite mystical theology that parallels that in Thomistic theology? It would seem, on the face of it, it hasn’t: at least until the end of the pontificate of the brown scapular wearing John Paul II, Carmelite prestige seemed to rise inexorably with not only numerous canonizations but the proclamations of two Doctors of the Church: Saints Teresa of Jesus (of Avila) (1970) and Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face (of Lisieux) (1997) and a Co-patroness of Europe Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein) in 1999. Despite this official recognition, the same forces have prompted similar reassessments. Firstly, both dogmatic and mystical theology must operate in a cultural, philosophical and religious pluralism imposed from without.¹² Secondly, not only Thomism but also Carmelite mystical theology has undergone reinterpretation from within.

⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar is quoted in Kerr, *Theologians*, p.122.

⁸ Burrows’s autobiography has her entry to Carmel as September 1st, 1947: Ruth Burrows, *Before the Living God*, (London, Sheed and Ward, 1975), p.41. Burrows is, of course, a pseudonym for Sister Rachel Gregory O.C.D.; Michelle Jones claims to have it from Gregory that the correct date is 1941 and that she deliberately altered her chronology to protect her anonymity. An attempt which failed as Jones’s own book demonstrates. Michelle Jones, *The Gospel Mysticism of Ruth Burrows: Going to God with Empty Hands*, (Washington, ICS Publications 2018), p.2, p.40 n.1.

⁹ Ruth Burrows, *Interior Castle Explored*, (London, Sheed and Ward, 1981), p.37.

¹⁰ Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Systematic Theology: Tasks and Methods' in *Systematic theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, Fiorenza, F.S. and Galvin, J.P. (eds.) 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 2011), pp.27-8.

¹¹ Paul D. Murray, 'Roman Catholic Theology After Vatican II', in *The Modern Theologians*, 3rd edn., D. F. Ford (ed.), (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 267.

¹² Fiorenza, 'Systematic', pp.50-52.

In what follows I will examine Ruth Burrows's attempt to reinterpret the Carmelite tradition from inside. I will begin by exploring how Burrows understands Carmel. We will see that Burrows defines the human condition as helplessness and Carmel as a desert in which this condition is experienced in all its rawness. The juxtaposition between this bleakness and the lush outpourings of mystical writers leads her to conclude there is a problem with the tradition. The second section will examine how Burrows understands mystical theology. In *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer* (1976) she accepts the traditional three stages of the mystical life but makes the crucial move of making them completely distinct relations to God. We may feel we move backwards and forwards between stages, but this is an illusion caused by relying on our emotions. We will then examine how Burrows reinterprets the Carmelite tradition via the three Carmelite doctors of the church. Burrows's view of Teresa of Avila will be examined by focusing on *Interior Castle Explored* (1981) where Burrows reinterprets Teresa's journey through a pre-existing interior castle as the construction of previously non-existent rooms. This evolutionary reinterpretation has unintended consequences, among them are confusion over when human life begins and when it becomes graced. We will also see that Burrows finds most of Teresa's 'favours' to be psychological phenomena but that Burrows creates the dualistic categories of lights on and off to attempt to show Teresa's experiences have a didactic quality for the church. The next section will explore Burrows's view of John of the Cross and show she finds him a safe guide for beginners but with a problematic prose style. The penultimate section will examine Burrows's view of Thérèse of Lisieux. We will see that Burrows concludes that Thérèse effectively abolishes cloistered life as it is unnecessary for the moment-by-moment renunciations she insists upon. Drawing these ideas together, we will offer a view of what a post-Burrows Carmel looks like.

Just as Merton found classic Spanish mysticism rooted in Thomism, we will find a post-Burrows Carmel largely rooted in the theology of Karl Rahner.¹³ This was no arbitrary selection by Burrows of a theologian she finds congenial, rather '[o]f all the significant theologians of the twentieth century, Karl Rahner stands alone in calling for a new mystical theology'; moreover, in addition to this call for a 'new mystical theology'¹⁴ he also makes the attempt to 'peg out the ground' upon which such a theology could be raised.¹⁵ In Burrows's earlier works, the Rahnerian influence is implicit and it is not until *Ascent to Love* (2000) that she explicitly credits the Jesuit theologian. The key convergences with Rahner lie in the fact that God is not restricted to the cloister but can be found everywhere and that the spiritual journey ends in mystery¹⁶. To an extent, her work leaves us with an alternative Carmelite paradigm which fulfils her stated aim of a 'bold break' while nevertheless remaining 'within that tradition':¹⁷ this alternative is Burrows's mystical theology rooted in Rahner's academic theology rather than classical Spanish mysticism rooted directly in Thomism. Yet differences between Burrows and Rahner remain. Of these, the most important is Burrows's stronger apophaticism. For Rahner, it is not possible to experience God with the senses or intellect; Burrows agrees but adds to this an apophaticism of the emotions which Rahner rejects.

BURROWS'S UNDERSTANDING OF CARMEL

Carmelite Origins

¹³ This is not to insist on a juxtaposition or dichotomy between Rahner and Thomas's theologies. As noted above, Rahner, like most other *periti* at Vatican II, sought to re-interpret Thomas. As such he is sometimes described as developing a 'transcendental theology' rooted in Thomas. See Karen Kilby, *Karl Rahner* (London, HarperCollinsReligious, 1997), pp.xiii-xiv.

¹⁴ Harvey D. Egan, S.J., 'Chapter 12: Karl Rahner (1904–84) and His Mystical Theology', in *A Companion to Jesuit Mysticism*, Robert A. Maryks (ed.) (Boston, Brill, 2017), p.310.

¹⁵ Karl Rahner, 'Mystical Experience and Mystical Theology', *Theological Investigations XVII*, (Limerick, The Centre for Culture, Technology and Values, Mary Immaculate College, 2004). pdf ebook, p.90.

¹⁶ Rahner, 'The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology', *Investigations IV*, pp.36-73.

¹⁷ Burrows, *Castle*, p.36.

How did Ruth Burrows initially receive the Carmelite tradition and how did she re-interpret it? To understand what Carmel signifies for Burrows an overview of the order's origin and its split into calced and discalced branches is necessary. Unlike the majority of Catholic religious orders, Carmel has neither a founder nor a date of foundation. Sometime between 1206 and 1214 a group of laymen, hermits living in the Wadi Ain-es-Siah on Mount Carmel, approached the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Albert of Avogadro, and asked for a *formula vitae*. Albert provided them with a short formula of life in the literary form of a letter. Beginning in 1238, when the order was only around thirty years old, the hermits were forced to leave Mount Carmel due to the Saracen reconquest of the area. In 1247, the order's first General Chapter outside the Holy Land was held at Aylesford in England. At this chapter the brothers voted to become mendicant friars. The development of Albert's letter into the final *Regula* is complex but was complete by 1432. Kees Waaijman notes this process has left traces of eremitism, coenobitism and mendicancy in the rule of Carmel;¹⁸ moreover, Carmel cannot appeal to the life of a founder as normative. This unusual and multifaceted origin means defining Carmel juridically is likely to be problematic. Instead, the tradition has generally understood Carmel metaphorically and has often used the three images of desert, mountain and garden to articulate aspects of its self-understanding. The order's origins have also left a tension inherent in the Carmelite tradition between action and contemplation, and to a lesser extent between eremitism and community life.

Discalced Carmel

The tension between action and contemplation in Carmel can be read positively as the order forming 'contemplative communities at the service of God's people in whose midst they live'.¹⁹ It can also be read negatively as a falling away from an original purity of intention. One such reading early in the

¹⁸ Kees Waaijman O.Carm., *The Mystical Space of Carmel*, (Leuven, Peeters, 1999), pp.1-17.

¹⁹ Carmelite Order, 'Our Charism' at *The Website of the Carmelite Order*, <https://ocarm.org/en/content/ocarm/charism>. Accessed [05/12/2020].

order's history is *The Flaming Arrow*, a treatise attributed to Nicholas the Frenchman, Prior General from 1266 to 1271 which castigates the Carmelites for abandoning their eremitical origins and urges a 'return to the spirit of the desert'.²⁰ The tension has meant Carmel has a long history of internal reform movements. Of these, only one has caused a split in the order: the reform started by Teresa of Jesus (of Avila). Like Nicholas, Teresa wanted to get back to what she saw as the original rule. In Teresa's case this desire was given additional urgency as she believed that in so doing Carmel would strengthen the church against what she always called the 'Lutherans'²¹. This second aspect gives a clue to why Teresa's reform resulted in a split: it became caught up in the politically charged atmosphere of Spain during the Counter Reformation.²² On April 1st 1579, the Order of Carmelites Discalced (O.C.D.) was definitively separated from the jurisdiction of the Ancient Observance (O.Carm.).²³ Subsequently, the two branches of the order have often read Carmelite history differently. The Ancient Observance have focused on the order's origins and the Discalced on Teresa and John of the Cross. Mixed with this is the idea that the O.Carms have a more active and the O.C.D.s a more contemplative apostolate.²⁴ Although this is something of a stereotype and the branches now collaborate well,²⁵ the split continues up to the present day.

Most of the post-Reformation Carmelite saints have belonged to the Discalced branch including all three Doctors of the Church. Ruth Burrows is also of the O.C.D. branch. She is an enclosed second order nun. In her reading of Carmel, certain themes recur. Firstly, in terms of the three images used to understand Carmel, she very much sees it as a desert. This is not because she explicitly chooses the desert image rather than that of a mountain or garden, in fact she uses all three images,²⁶ rather

²⁰ Wilfred McGreal O.Carm, *At the Fountain of Elijah*, (London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999), p.33.

²¹ Rowan Williams, *Teresa of Avila*, (London, Continuum, 1991), p.28.

²² Johan Bergström-Allen (ed.), *Climbing the Mountain: the Carmelite Journey*, (Kent, St Albert's Press & Edizioni Carmelitane, 2010), pp.173-179.

²³ E. Allison Peers, 'An Outline of the Life of St Teresa' in, Teresa of Jesus (of Avila), Saint, *Complete Works of St. Teresa*, (E. Allison Peers trans.), (London, Sheed and Ward, 1978), pp.xxxiv.

²⁴ Bergström-Allen, *Mountain*, p.177.

²⁵ See: Pope St. John Paul II, 'I learned with joy', *Message of John Paul II to the Carmelite Family*, (2001).

²⁶ See for example Ruth Burrows, *Ascent to Love*, (London, Sheed and Ward, 2000) p.1 where she introduces Carmel as a mountain and a 'flowering'.

it is conveyed in the lexicon she habitually chooses. Carmel is ‘exposure’,²⁷ a place where prayer is ‘solitary’, ‘nothingness’, ‘emptiness’;²⁸ progress leaves the Carmelite on an island of ‘blinding, searing, cruel light’;²⁹ Carmel demands an ‘all-pervading asceticism’.³⁰ Burrows’s Carmel does not have the exciting dynamism of a mountain climb, neither does it exude the peace and fertility of an *hortus conclusus*, instead it is something of a contemporary Scetis whose inhabitants ‘[s]uffer hunger, thirst, nakedness’ and ‘weep and groan’ in their hearts.³¹ Secondly, Burrows sees Carmel through the lens of the discalced reform. She almost never refers to any Carmelite figure or event prior to Teresa of Avila despite the fact that both the order’s origins and its medieval writings are pertinent to an understanding of the later tradition.³² Furthermore, her only book length studies of individual Carmelites are of the reformers Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. Although there is not the space here to compare interpretations of the Carmelite tradition, it is important to note that other understandings of Carmel are possible; indeed, the length and richness of the tradition coupled with its complex origins inevitably drives multiple interpretations.³³ These ‘other Carmels’ span the order’s history, for example: Jacques de Vitry, Bishop of Acre from 1216 to 1228, saw the original Carmelite hermits as spiritual bees extracting the honey of contemplation³⁴ and latterly, the modern third order ‘rule’ characterizes the Carmelite as ‘a spark of love thrown into the forest of

²⁷ Ruth Burrows ‘Consecrated Life’ in *Essence of Prayer*, (London, Burns & Oates, 2006), p.203.

²⁸ Ruth Burrows, *Letters on Prayer*, (London, Sheed and Ward, 1999), p.44.

²⁹ Burrows, *Guidelines*, p.90.

³⁰ Ruth Burrows, *Carmel: Interpreting a Great Tradition*, (London, Sheed and Ward, 2000), p.121.

³¹ Benedicta Ward S.L.G., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (Kalamazoo, Cistercian Publications Inc., 1984), p.8.

³² In addition to *The Flaming Arrow*, other medieval works such as *The Book of the First Monks* by Filip Ribot O.Carm. (d.1391) note the tension between eremitism and mendicancy. See: Filip Ribot, *The Ten Books on the Way of Life and Great Deeds of The Carmelites* (including *The Book of the First Monks*), (Richard Copsey O.Carm trans.), (Kent, St. Albert’s Press, 2005), p.92. Burrows’s silence on medieval Carmel may simply be that she knew nothing about it. She notes in her autobiography the paucity of books in her Carmel and much of the order’s *ressourcement* happened late in the twentieth century. See *Living God*, p.52.

³³ In 2020, the outgoing Prior General noted: ‘after twelve years of visiting around the order, I can say that I have a global vision of Carmel, in its enormous diversity’. Fernando Millán Romeral O.Carm., ‘God has his own rhythms and times – an interview with the former Prior General Fernando Millán Romeral O.Carm.’, in *Carmel in the World*, Vol. LIX, N.2., Patrick J. Breen O.Carm. (ed.), (Roma, Edizioni Carmelitane, 2020).

³⁴ John Welch O.Carm, *The Carmelite Way: an Ancient Path for Today’s Pilgrim*, (Leominster, Gracewing, 1996), p.7.

life'.³⁵ Even the desert image itself can become an exotic image of Romance; Wilfred McGreal, for example, describes Carmel's desert as a place of 'majesty' and 'mystery'.³⁶

Ruth Burrows's Early Experiences of Carmel

As we have seen, for Burrows Carmel was reformed, discalced and something of an empty desert. Burrow's subjective experience of this Carmel was heightened by her psychological makeup. In her autobiography, Burrows notes her 'tortured sensitivity' and romantic nature.³⁷ The conjunction of these led to her approaching life with a breathless expectancy only to be 'bitterly disappointed' by its reality.³⁸ This pattern of overwhelming expectation followed by bitter disappointment reoccurs when she enters Carmel. As a teenager she had a powerful conversion experience which she describes as the culmination of a brief series of events. Firstly, she is making a nuisance of herself on her school's annual retreat because she resents the nuns forcing their piety on her. Secondly, she is 'seized with a sense of fear such as [she] had never known before'. Thirdly she goes to confession during which the priest hints at a religious vocation. Finally:

This was the moment for the grace which changed my life. At the deepest level of my self I saw that God existed. He filled life. He offered intimacy to man. It was possible for us to be intimate with God! Bewildering realization. That being so life could have no other meaning. I must give myself up to seeking intimacy with God. The self-evident way was to be a nun, a nun in the most absolute way possible, an enclosed, contemplative nun. These successive thoughts were almost instantaneous.³⁹

³⁵The Carmelite Order, *The Rule for the Third Order of Carmel*, (Rome, Edizioni Carmelitane, 2003).

³⁶ McGreal, *Fountain*, p.11.

³⁷ Burrows, *Living God*, p.5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.31.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.33-34.

What are we to make of this experience? Burrows states 'it was not experienced in an overwhelming way, rather it was veiled in obscurity and also by a web of natural movements'.⁴⁰ There is no claim here of any direct experience of God, rather the experience is a dialectic between events and her psychological response, in what Karl Rahner calls the 'natural substratum' of the mystical experience.⁴¹ Yet the experience was enough to cause Burrows to turn down a place at Oxford and enter an enclosed Carmel; in her autobiography she deliberately uses the passive tense to describe herself as being 'turned right round' and claims 'God turned me'.⁴² This initial grace was never repeated and subsequently Burrows's 'path lay in darkness, deep darkness'.⁴³ Although, in her autobiography, Burrows claims a clarity of understanding of this grace as positive and essential, it is not difficult to see a parallel between her great expectations of Carmel and of life and the mundane and disappointing reality of both.

Burrows's Exposure to Spiritual Writing

Burrows's early years in Carmel became an ordeal of unhappiness,⁴⁴ Godless and outcast,⁴⁵ set against 'a background of black depression'.⁴⁶ We can easily read backwards into this a Sanjuanist dark night but at the time the experience is one of feebleness 'the very opposite in fact of what we expect progress to be like'.⁴⁷ Juxtaposed with this existential experience is what she took, at the time, to be the mystical tradition, a lush tradition of 'experience', of intimate 'favours', writers like: Gerson, Lallement, Surin, Courbon, Poulain and, of course, Teresa of Avila. Indicatively, she quotes Lejeune who speaks of the soul having a 'sensation' of God's presence.⁴⁸ Instead she could have

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.34.

⁴¹ Karl Rahner, 'Mystical Experience and Mystical Theology' in *Investigations XVII*, pp. 90-99.

⁴² Burrows, *Living God*, p.34.

⁴³ Ibid., p.35.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.58.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.79.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p.80.

⁴⁷ Burrows, *Guidelines*, P.33.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.11.

quoted many pages from Teresa's works where she speaks of 'favours' from His Majesty with whom she is on intimate terms or from John who appears to feel the sensation of the living flame of love. On a human level, we are left with a picture of an overwrought, sensitive girl who has given up excellent prospects on the basis of her, probably largely emotional,⁴⁹ reaction to a single fugitive mystical experience and has been left to eke out an intellectually and emotionally impoverished existence in a barren and seemingly Godless enclosed Carmel. In the next section we will see how Burrows transforms this unpromising experience into something theologically significant; nevertheless, with a post-Vatican II sensibility, it is difficult not to be scandalised by a Catholic culture which, as late as the 1940s, allowed a young girl with Burrows's disposition and prospects to choose a life so impoverished on the human level.⁵⁰

A Warrant to Re-interpret the Carmelite Tradition

In his book *Teresa of Avila*, Rowan Williams describes the effects of the 1559 Index of Forbidden Books on Teresa; he shows Teresa's sadness that reading material she profited from was no longer available, her brave, exasperated irony, 'at least "they" can't forbid the Lord's Prayer' and above all her solution: to become a 'living book' and create a community that does likewise.⁵¹ Four hundred years later, Ruth Burrows, is faced with a similarly difficult situation. She experiences an almost uninterrupted sense of desolation in an impoverished Carmel juxtaposed with a spiritual tradition which places enormous value on spiritual experience.⁵² This could have easily led to a crushing sense of failure. Instead, the juxtaposition between her own barren experience and the lush outpourings of spiritual writers lead her to the conclusion that there has been a 'big mistake' in mystical literature:

⁴⁹ Rahner states, 'Psychologically mystical experiences differ from normal everyday processes in the mind, only in the natural sphere'. *Investigations XVII*, p.95. An overwrought response to a mystical experience is no different to an overwrought response to anything else.

⁵⁰ *Romans* 8:28 notwithstanding.

⁵¹ Williams, *Teresa*, p.42 and 101.

⁵² Ruth Burrows, 'Carmel: a Stark Encounter with the Human Condition', *Essence*, pp.181-195, (p.184.)

Now the great majority of spiritual authors, St Teresa among them, claim that there are two paths to holiness, the mystical way and the ordinary way. This we cannot accept. The notion of the dual carriage-way derives from a misconception [...] The mystical has been identified with certain experiences [...] Inevitably you get overtones of a high road and a low road.⁵³

Rather than ruminating on her own failure, Burrows sees the problem as located in the tradition: as dualism based in a wrong idea of experience. It is, quite simply, a mistake.

That she was able to do this, no doubt speaks of tenacious strength of character hidden beneath an emotional exterior; however, that it was thinkable also reflects the wider changes in Catholic theology during the period.⁵⁴ Firstly, Burrows's privileging of her own experience over what she came to see as a decadent tradition would not have been possible without the turn to the subject in modern theology.⁵⁵ This turn was an attempt to reconcile Catholic theology with the philosophy of Kant and Descartes. It sought to examine the deposit of faith in the light of human subjectivity. During Burrows's early years in Carmel, this turn was still being resisted by the dominant Roman Catholic paradigm of Neo-Scholasticism: an attempt to create a foundationalist theology rooted in Thomas Aquinas.⁵⁶ Yet much work was being done and almost all the theologians who were later to act as *periti* at Vatican II were engaged in critical engagement with Suárezian Thomism at this time.⁵⁷ Of the many fruits of this project, Karl Rahner's transcendental phenomenology is the most pertinent to understanding Burrows. Whereas scholastic philosophy had used 'transcendental' to refer to

⁵³ Burrows, *Guidelines*, pp.10-11.

⁵⁴ To establish a chronology of causal dependency upon any Catholic theologian, or wider current such as *Nouvelle théologie*, is beyond the scope of this essay, although as we will see later, she does explicitly credit Karl Rahner in *Ascent to Love*. Overall, the reader is left with the impression of convergence with Rahnerian thought as the ideas derived from her experience become informed by her increasingly wider reading in the late twentieth century.

⁵⁵ Fiorenza, 'Systematic', pp.26-31.

⁵⁶ Paul D. Murray, 'Discerning the Dynamics of Doctrinal Development in Post-foundationalist Perspective', in Simon Oliver, Karen Kilby, Tom O'Loughlin (eds.), *Faithful Reading: New Essays in Theology and Philosophy in Honour of Fergus Kerr, O.P.*, (London & New York: T & T Clark, 2012), p.198.

⁵⁷ Fiorenza, 'Systematic', pp.27-8.

things like 'goodness' that could be applied, in some sense, to everything in existence, Kant used it to refer to the conditions necessary for experience. Rahner, building on the work of Joseph Maréchal and others, combined these meanings. He saw the human being as utterly free and completely open to transcendence: as orientated to mystery rather than seeing it as a 'regrettable limit'.⁵⁸ Burrows, we will see, comes to a similar conclusion but at this early stage the important point is the privileging of the human subject over and above an ossified tradition.

Secondly, for Henri de Lubac and others, Neo-Scholasticism was really a 'new theology' lacking convincing connections with the patristic tradition.⁵⁹ Instead, what actually became known as *la Nouvelle Théologie* sought a *ressourcement*, a return to patristic sources prior to Thomism both chronologically and authoritatively. The possibility of re-interpretation of the tradition can be traced back to the nineteenth century and the work of Johann Adam Möhler and John Henry Newman. Möhler saw the church as an organic living reality and 'catholic' as the very definition of 'unity in diversity'.⁶⁰ Newman also used the metaphor of organic growth; in addition, he proposed the possibility of both development and corruption in ideas and in doctrine and provided seven tests to determine authentic development.⁶¹ The Second Vatican Council brings such ideas together and calls for a renewal of religious life.⁶² Against the background of the Council, Burrows is elected prioress for the first time.⁶³ Externally, in the Catholic milieu, as Burrows enters maturity, there is both the turn to the subject and the return to the sources of tradition. These two conditions are necessary but not sufficient for her critique of the Carmelite tradition. The key driving force has already been noted. It is the dichotomy between her experience of mystical prayer and the mystical tradition. This

⁵⁸ Rahner, 'The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology', *Investigations IV*, p.41.

⁵⁹ Kerr, *Theologians*, p.85.

⁶⁰ Johann Adam Möhler, '1.4 Unity in Diversity' & 'Addenda 5. Definition of "Catholic"', *Unity in the Church or the Principle of Catholicism: Presented in the Spirit of the Church Fathers of the First Three Centuries*, trans. by Peter C. Erb, (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), pp. 166-205 & 277-281.

⁶¹ John Henry Newman, 'On the Corruption of an Idea', in *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp.57-93.

⁶² Austin Flannery O.P., 'Decree on the Up-to-date Renewal of Religious Life' in, *Vatican Council II: the Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, (Leominster, Fowler Wright Books Ltd, 1980), pp.611-624.

⁶³ She gives the date as 1962 in *Living God*, p.103. But see note 8 above.

disjunction means the spiritual writings simply don't explain the reality she experiences. Reading Burrows's biography, one is struck by the oppressive nature of her experience in a pre-Vatican II Carmel. Much of her writing is a hermeneutic, an interpretation, a making sense of her experience.⁶⁴ Overall, three strands come together powerfully to underpin her writings: the turn to the subject makes re-interpretation of the tradition thinkable; *ressourcement* shows the way; finally, experience gives permission to proceed.⁶⁵

BURROWS'S UNDERSTANDING OF MYSTICAL THEOLOGY

Aggiornamento Carmelitano

In the first section, we saw that for Burrows, Carmel was raw human exposure to God and that her experience⁶⁶ of this was predominantly bleak and desertlike. The inability of the spiritual writings she was given to explain this lack of 'favours' gave her a warrant to reinterpret the tradition. Her

⁶⁴ In the very different context of base communities in Brazil. Carlos Mesters O.Carm. gives a powerful example of how oppression can lead to re-interpretation/*ressourcement*. His example is the scriptural passage 'God has heard the cries of his people' – a factory worker explains this really does mean 'cries' and not the euphemistic 'prayers' it is often taken to mean. Carlos Mesters, 'The Use of the Bible in Christian Communities of the Common People', in Hennelly, Alfred T. (ed.), *Liberation Theology: a Documentary History*, (New York, Orbis, 1990), pp. 14-29, (p.25).

⁶⁵ Following Newman's illative sense and Rahner's indirect method, Fiorenza uses the term 'retroductive warrant'. A retroductive warrant gives permission to examine the tradition and the permission is 'retroductive to the extent that it offers the most feasible and comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon' seen in practice. Fiorenza also sees liberation theology as an example of such a retroductive warrant. Fiorenza, 'Systematic', p.58. Here Burrows's (non-)experience gives her a warrant to proceed.

⁶⁶ It is impossible to avoid using the word 'experience' when talking of Burrows's experience of Carmel or her experience of prayer. Yet the word is deeply problematic in mystical literature. This is because we use the word in a variety of different ways. Firstly, we apply it to sense experience such as 'an experience of pain'; secondly, we apply it in a wider context such as 'an experienced teacher'; and thirdly, we also say 'a mystical experience' and by this often mean something out of the ordinary. It is all too easy to conflate these different meanings. Burrows says: 'it cannot be emphasised often enough, that mystical contemplation of itself cannot be experience with the ordinary apparatus of experience: senses, conscious mind'. Here she rules out sense experience and intellectual experience. Elsewhere, she also rules out affective experience; instead, we can only know we have had a mystical experience by its effects – such as an improved life – and these effects may only be noticed over a long period of time. *Guidelines*, p.32. This resolute apophatism is more extreme than that found in Rahner who allows a real experience of God accessible to the emotions: '[n]aturally the soul experiences God directly in the ground of its being only as the motive power of ecstatic love which leaves all knowledge behind it', 'The Doctrine of the Spiritual Senses in the Middle Ages', *Investigations XVI*, p.125.

work is the sort of updating (*aggiornamento*) called for at Vatican II.⁶⁷ She states her aim explicitly at the beginning of *Guidelines* which, she notes, can be seen as ‘a re-interpretation’, *Castle* which presents Teresa in ‘modern terms’,⁶⁸ and *Ascent* which puts John ‘in modern dress’.⁶⁹ She also makes the claim that her work is not simply a gloss but a guide that stands in its own right.⁷⁰ This latter claim, made in the context of her updating of Teresa, is significant because it means she is not simply giving a personal perspective on past authors, rather she is claiming the right and the competency to guide people to union with God.⁷¹ This is a big claim. The claim is based on a number of novel insights in her work. These include: a dynamic, evolutionary understanding of what it is to be human; a clear distinction between what is properly of God and what is a psychological reaction and her idea of lights on/off. We will discuss these later when we examine her views on the Carmelite doctors; however, sitting behind all of these ideas is her first key insight, a little alteration to the traditional schema of a three-stage mystical life which has big repercussions.

The Three Stages of the Mystical Life

The ‘time honoured’ way of dividing up the spiritual life is into three stages such as: awakening, purgation and illumination.⁷² Of course, this is only one way of splitting up the spiritual life and it is important not to fall into the trap of forgetting the stages are essentially metaphorical and instead

⁶⁷ ‘Pope Saint John XXII had talked of ‘adaptation [‘aggiornare’] of Church discipline to the needs and conditions of our times’ as early as 29th June 1959 in his first encyclical. Pope Saint John XXIII, *Ad Petri Cathedram*, § 61, quoted in Giovanni Vian, ‘Living the Gospel in History “Aggiornamento” and “Rinnovamento” in John XXIII’, in Giovanni Vian (ed.), *The Papacy in the Contemporary Age*, (Venezia, Edizioni Ca’ Foscari - Digital Publishing, 2018), at <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/154378521.pdf> [Accessed 10/12/2020].

⁶⁸ Burrows, *Castle*, p.4.

⁶⁹ Burrows, *Ascent to Love*, p.2.

⁷⁰ Burrows, *Castle*, p.1.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.1.

⁷² The names of the three stages used here are from Underhill who notes other possibilities such as the sevenfold schema of Teresa of Avila. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*, (London, Methuen & Co, 1948). More recently, Blumenthal has traced the threefold schema as far back as Maimonides. Blumenthal, David R. “MAIMONIDES’ PHILOSOPHIC MYSTICISM.” *Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy & Kabbalah* / דעת: כתב-עת, no. 64/66, 2009, pp. V-XXV. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/24233636. [Accessed 8 Jan. 2021.]

imagining they are in some way real or ontic. Teresa of Avila provides a useful corrective with her alternative division into seven mansions; furthermore, most writers, including Teresa, subdivide their overarching division into an indeterminate number of substages.⁷³ Moreover, there is no inherent reason why 'stages' is a uniquely appropriate way to understand the spiritual life. Richard Rolle speaks instead of a 'fire of love' and John of the Cross of a 'living flame of love' for example.⁷⁴ Nevertheless it is the three-stage schema which is dominant throughout the tradition. Burrows's attitude towards this schema is set out very clearly in *Guidelines* and due to its importance to her thought is worth quoting at length:

We take over the almost unanimous tradition that in the spiritual life there are basically three stages although these can be subdivided: the purgative, illuminative, unitive stages, to use the common terms. We differ from most authors, at least in emphasis, by insisting that these stages are totally distinct from one another, each representing a wholly new relation to God or a wholly new intervention on the part of God. The view that they are not so distinct but merge into one another is based, it seems, on emotional experience. Thus a person may know a period of seeming illumination followed by one of dryness and darkness, and again by an experience of joy and light perhaps greater than the first. Apparently the soul is going back and forth from the illuminative to the purgative. The interpretation does not seem valid to us.⁷⁵

⁷³ Teresa talks of 'many rooms', 'Interior Castle', in Peers, *Complete*, p.201.

⁷⁴ There is, of course, a sense in which the flame or fire causes a progressive burning away of impurities and as such also implies progression of a sort. Richard Rolle, *The Fire of Love*, (London, Penguin, 1972) p.45. John of the Cross, 'The Living Flame of Love', in *The Complete Works* (vol. 3), E. Allison Peers (ed.), (London, Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1947), p.117. It would be interesting to try to map the three main Carmelite metaphors to the mystical schemas in Carmelite and non-Carmelite mystics. The mountain image implies a journey and sits well with the threefold division and with Teresa's seven mansions as she talks of the soul journeying through its mansions. Alternatively, the flame image seems to fit well with the purgatorial burning of the desert. Teresa also provides the third image: the garden, in 'Life', Peers, *Complete*, pp.63-70. See the section on Teresa below for a discussion of static versus dynamic imagery.

⁷⁵ Burrows, *Guidelines*, p.13.

In order to give graphical representation to her ideas Burrows chooses to develop the image of three islands separated from one another by wide expanses of sea. The advantage of this image is that it emphasises the distinctness of the stages.⁷⁶ The Christian is always on one of the islands and the distance between them means there is no moving from one island to another and back again. The thrust of the metaphor is forward movement, as on a pilgrimage, or mountain climb. Burrows does allow for a falling away which could take an individual back to the first island, but this would be a happening of enormous consequence rather than the daily shilly-shallying which emotional experience suggests. It is illuminating to compare Burrows's presentation of the three stages with Rahner's exploration of the subject. In 'Reflections on the Problem of the Gradual Ascent to Christian Perfection', Rahner traces the development of the mystical path from a twofold scheme in scripture and the fathers to the threefold way which begins with the Pseudo-Denis and is refined throughout the middle ages.⁷⁷ He notes that the history of Christian spirituality shows that there 'must be something like a way to Christian perfection' but that none of the actual attempts to describe it have been very convincing. On his description, the traditional view sounds very similar to Burrows's scheme: he notes that traditionally the phases are distinct from one another, that they must be followed in sequence and that a stage cannot be missed out. Rahner delineates a more nuanced schema by separating 'phases of the spiritual life' and 'grades of perfection'. The stages, Rahner rewrites as 'situations' such as growing up, falling in love and growing old. He separates these situations from 'grades of perfection' and this leads him to the conclusion that the perfect do not do different things from the imperfect but rather they do the same things in a more perfect way. He calls this the 'existential deepening of acts'. On the one hand Rahner's analysis supports Burrows's critique of experience because instead of the perfect having categorically different experiences, they are more likely to be able to extract the spiritual fruit from the same seemingly mundane

⁷⁶ Ibid., p.14. Unfortunately Burrows immediately undercuts the image's *raison d'être* by placing a hidden bridge between the first and second islands.

⁷⁷ In Rahner, *Investigations III*, pp.3-23.

experiences that the imperfect have. Yet, on the other hand, Rahner rejects the idea of completely non-experienced grace which underpins much of Burrows's writings.⁷⁸

How should we understand the difference between Burrows's and Rahner's view of whether grace can be experienced and how does this effect our understanding of Burrows's interpretation of the tradition? Before we can begin to answer this question, we need to revisit the historical context. As we have seen the Discalced Carmelite tradition to which Burrows belongs was founded by Teresa of Avila in 1579. The tradition looks to Teresa as foundational and traces its own story primarily from that point forwards. The period in which Teresa founded her reform was a period in which there were important changes to the contemplative tradition. Rowan Williams sees it as a period whereby 'a theology both rooted in and critical of "experience"' was reintroduced to the Christian world by both the Protestant Reformers and the Spanish counter-reformers.⁷⁹ The *critical view* is the 'school of theology' that Rahner rejects, whereby grace cannot be experienced.⁸⁰ The view '*rooted in*' *experience* is the one to which Burrows was exposed in her early years in Carmel.⁸¹ As we have seen, Burrows's early intellectual formation in Carmel was impoverished. Conversely, despite his Neo-Scholastic formation, Rahner had adequate access to the theological resources with which to develop

⁷⁸ 'Religious Enthusiasm and the Experience of Grace', Rahner, *Investigations XVI*, pp.35-50. See especially section one where he makes 'a clear and definite break' with the view that the experience of grace 'takes place outside the realm of consciousness' p.38. Rahner's essay on Bonaventure provides the key to understanding the difference between his view and Burrows's. In it, he finds the classic threefold division, here not of the spiritual life but of the spiritual faculties: the *contuitus simplex*, the *apex-affectus*, and rapture and its post-death counterpart the beatific vision. The *contuitus simplex* is accessible to the intellect and the *apex-affectus*, where 'God dwells exclusively', is accessible to the emotions. Crucial for Rahner is that the *apex-affectus* is the place where the soul meets God in this life and this median faculty is accessible, unlike the extraordinary state of rapture. In this essay, Rahner takes a *via media* between apophaticism and cataphaticism allowing for a real affective experience of God in this life which is available to all people but not one which can be grasped by the intellect or senses. In summary, for Rahner, God can be experienced by the emotions but not the senses or the intellect. For Burrows, God can't be experienced by the senses, the intellect or the emotions. Rahner, *Investigations XVI*, pp.104-134.

⁷⁹ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, (London, Darton Longman and Todd, 1990), p.162.

⁸⁰ Rahner describes it as 'post-Reformation theology, at least since the Baroque period'. He also links the non-experiential view with his own order, calling it 'traditional in the Jesuit school', Rahner, *Investigations XVI*, pp.38-39. The Jesuit order was founded on 15th August 1534. Francisco Suárez SJ (1548-1617), often taken as foundational for Neo-Scholasticism, also overlaps historically with Teresa. A simple division along the lines of the religious orders does not tell the full story, not least because many of the authors Burrows lists as representing the experientialist tradition were Jesuits, among them: Lallement, Surin and Poulain.

⁸¹ See section on 'Burrows's Exposure to Spiritual Writing' above.

his critique of that very formation. It is tempting, therefore, to see Burrows as having been formed in a perspective which effectively only reached back to the 1500s and, moreover, viewed the period since the 1500s through a lens narrowed by the disalced culture and the availability of texts. On this view, she has, through no fault of her own, read the contemplative tradition myopically and in her reaction to the lop-sided presentation of the tradition she received has run too far the other way only to re-present the very Neo-Scholastic position, which Rahner and others critiqued, as a new and innovative perspective.

Before making too strong a claim in this direction, it is important to further situate Burrows by looking at the situation from the time of her writings until the present. In 1976, when *Guidelines* was first published, Burrows's view that our emotional states are essentially irrelevant to our existential relationship with God was not the main view found in the literature. As we saw in the introduction, before Vatican II, Neo-Scholastic Thomism in philosophy and theology were complemented by Carmelite mystical theology as the dominant Catholic paradigm. In popular spiritual writing, even in 1976, this meant Spanish mysticism viewed through the 'experientialist' perspective of Surin and similar writers.⁸² Since 1976, the non-experientialist view has become widely accepted in the literature. Rowan Williams enthusiastically endorses Burrows's presentation of 'our dry and dull inner life' and sees her as one who shows the difference 'between having a "spiritual life" and walking in the way of Jesus'.⁸³ Writing in 2009, Denys Turner, who does not footnote Burrows, nevertheless expresses the change succinctly: '[e]xperientialism is, in short, the "positivism" of

⁸² The experientialist view never wholly dominates. Portier and Talar provide some detail on the situation in the last few hundred years. In particular, the 'two distinguishable tendencies in approaching mysticism' are captured well in their discussion of the controversy between the views of the French priests Poulain and Saudreau in the first decade of the twentieth century. Talar, C.J.T., ed., *Modernists and Mystics* (Washington D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), pp.13-15. Moreover, in the more academic approaches, the non-experientialism of John of the Cross predominates. Karol Józef Wojtyła's doctoral dissertation is a case in point: see John Paul II, *Faith*. This opens the whole question of the relationship between academic theology and spirituality which cannot be addressed here.

⁸³ Rowan Williams 'Forward by the Archbishop of Canterbury', in Burrows, Ruth, *Love Unknown*, (London, Continuum, 2011), p.ix.

Christian spirituality. It abhors the experiential vacuum of the apophatic, rushing to fill it with the plenum of the psychologistic.’⁸⁴

Drawing this section to a close, two possible views of Burrows remain open. Burrows stated aim is to update the Carmelite tradition. On a positive view, her writings do this by a subtle change to the threefold schema found in the traditional mystical literature. By seeing the three stages as different existential relationships to God which are not capable of the sort of daily back-and-forth movement that emotional experience suggests she articulated a retrieval of the apophatic tradition from centuries of experiential encrustation. Conversely, a critical view would see her as reinforcing a Neo-Scholastic view whereby a rich vein of experience found in the tradition from Origen, through Bonaventure to the Spanish mystics was denied.⁸⁵ What seems to be the case on either view is that there was a change in the mystical tradition around the time the Discalced Carmelite order came into being.⁸⁶ Burrows, just as surely as Rahner, and long before Turner, recognises that change. We now turn to her analysis of the three Carmelite Doctors, beginning with Teresa of Avila, who is perhaps the preeminent candidate for Turner’s psychologistic plenum.

⁸⁴ Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009), ebook <https://doi-org.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/10.1017/CBO978051158313119>, p.259.

⁸⁵ For Rahner’s tracing of this vein see ‘The “Spiritual Senses” according to Origen’ and ‘The Doctrine of the “Spiritual Sense” in the Middle Ages’ in *Investigations XVI*, pp. 81-103 and 104-134 respectively.

⁸⁶ Turner sees John of the Cross as giving the last non-experientialist mystical account: ‘Michel de Certeau, as I do, places John of the Cross on the dividing line between the mediaeval and the early-modern, seeing him as pre-dating the full reliance on an ‘experientialist’ mystical epistemology such as is found in Jean-Joseph Surin (1600-1655) and as continuing to owe much to pre-modern epistemologies and cosmologies.’ Turner, *Darkness*, p.226, n.1.



Citation on deposit: Rowe, G. (2022). Ruth Burrows - A reader of the Carmelite tradition - Part 1. Carmel in the World, LXI(1), 23-40

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