

Ruth Burrows – A reader of the Carmelite tradition – Part 2

BURROWS'S VIEW OF TERESA OF AVILA

Burrows has a complex relationship with Teresa. In her early years in Carmel, Teresa was presented as the 'seraphic mother' of O.C.D. Carmelites, to be emulated and admired from a distance and wholly above criticism. Yet Burrows was to find her writings inconsistent and some of her ideas mistaken.¹ This is a particular example of the pattern described above of the disconnect between the mystical tradition as presented to Burrows and her reading of it in the light of experience.

Burrows solves her difficulty by analogy with her reading of the gospels. She finds Jesus historically conditioned and mistaken about the imminent end of the world and so applies the text '[t]he servant is not greater than the master' to Teresa.² Three key elements of Burrow's reinterpretation of Teresa will be explored below: her transposition of Teresa into an evolutionary key, her analysis of what is supernatural and what is a psychological response in Teresa and her idea of lights on/off.

Burrows focusses her reinterpretation of Teresa on her mature work *The Interior Castle*.³ Teresa's work is a meditation on the extended metaphor of the soul as 'a castle made of a single diamond or of very clear crystal,⁴ in which there are many rooms'.⁵ In Teresa's work the person is initially outside their own castle and by degrees enters and moves towards the centre where the king dwells.

Burrows turns this image on its head.

In [Teresa's] understanding, the castle is *already there*, our souls are, so to speak, *ready made* we have only got to get to know them by entering in. There is a problem but she avoids it by not seeing it! But to say we are not yet in our castle, at least not in any but

¹ Burrows, *Castle*, p.2.

² *Ibid.*, p.3.

³ See Williams, *Teresa*, pp.139-140.

⁴ Williams has a fascinating discussion of the parallel with a journey through a palace of crystal to the King's inner chamber found in the Zohar, implying Teresa, directly or indirectly imported cabbalistic imagery into the Spanish Carmel. Williams, *Teresa*, pp.47-48.

⁵ Peers has the footnote, '*Aposentos* – a rather more pretentious word than the English "room": dwelling place, abode, apartment.' Peers, *Complete*, p.201.

the outer-most court, is really saying the mansions are *not there yet*, they come into existence.⁶

Burrows reinterprets the static image of the castle in a dynamic sense. In the 1970s, *On the Origin of Species* had just passed its centenary of publication and an evolutionary *Weltanschauung* had long since seeped into the public consciousness. By the late 1950s the 'grandeur in this view of life'⁷ claimed by Darwin had finally found Christian expression in the works of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin SJ in whose 'vision man [*sic*] is seen not as a static centre of the world... but as the axis and leading shoot of evolution, which is something much finer.'⁸ It is a short, but significant step, that Burrows takes in applying this evolutionary understanding to the mystical journey.⁹

Burrows had already taken this step in *Guidelines*; but in this earlier work the evolutionary viewpoint is not foregrounded. Burrows makes the same point about the rooms in the castle not yet being there but does not develop the implications of this view; instead, she moves onto her main theme: the problems with the experientialist viewpoint of Surin and others.¹⁰ But at the beginning of *Castle* it is the evolutionary dynamic which is central, and this causes problems. The worst of these problems is the potential to cause confusion in the reader as to what constitutes a human being. Burrows wants to make the perfectly orthodox point that God gives as much of himself as we are ready to receive because humans are orientated to God – or have a 'supernatural existential' as Rahner puts it;¹¹ moreover, paralleling Rahner's 'anonymous Christianity'¹² she says this applies not

⁶ Burrows, *Castle*, pp.6-7. Burrows is not simply positing a view of human development but is proposing a truly evolutionary view of humanity. The human is 'made up of the same stuff as the world and thrown up by its evolution', *Castle*, p.7. She quotes a poem by Nikos Kazantzakis which she states 'wonderfully expresses what I believe'; in the poem Kazantzakis traces a grand sweep of evolution from plants, through worms and animals to humans. *Castle*, pp.9-10.

⁷ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, (1st edition) (Project Gutenberg Ebook, 1998), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1228/1228-h/1228-h.htm>, Ch.14.

⁸ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, (London, Collins, 1955), p.36.

⁹ The dynamic view of the soul's becoming is perhaps more of a *ressourcement* than a new theology. St. Thomas noted, '[T]he soul, considered in itself, is as something existing in potentiality: for it becomes knowing actually, from being potentially knowing; and actually virtuous, from being potentially virtuous.' Thomas Aquinas, (St.) *Summa Theologiæ* at [https://isidore.co/aquinas/. ST I-II, q2, a7](https://isidore.co/aquinas/.ST-I-II,q2,a7). [Accessed 08-01-2021].

¹⁰ Burrows, *Guidelines*, pp.9-11.

¹¹ Rahner, 'Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace', *Investigations I*, pp. 297-318.

¹² Rahner, 'Anonymous Christians', *Investigations VI*, pp.390-398.

just to Christians but all people, and not only all people but the grass, the flowers and the worm.¹³ Burrows begins with what appears to be the firm ground of scripture. 'The idea that we are not there yet, that we have to become – shall we say, I have to become *me* and my *me* has to become God finds firm basis in scripture in its talk of being born anew'.¹⁴ The Pauline opposition between 'flesh' and 'spirit' is invoked to distinguish between the spiritual life and the pre-spiritual life. On the surface this all seems fine, yet the confusion has already begun. Burrows elides the biblical idea of spiritual rebirth with the non-biblical idea that 'I have to become *me*'. This elision begs the question, what was 'I' before I became 'me'? Burrows answers in some rather unfortunate hyperbolic language: 'a shrivelled parody of humanness, like an aborted embryo'.¹⁵ She finds support for this view in Jesus' answer to Nicodemus which she paraphrases as '[y]ou have yet to be born!'¹⁶ The confusion arises because of the transposition of New Testament imagery into an evolutionary key.¹⁷ On the one hand, Burrows does not intend to deviate from the catechism's teaching that human life begins at conception¹⁸ because she finds that God's 'love still embraces the aborted embryo, humbly offering itself, but the poor thing hasn't the capacity to realize it, let alone respond.'¹⁹ Yet, on the other hand, she seems somehow to also claim that what is conceived is pre-human: not yet a 'me'. This has the potential to cause the reader to infer that it is neither at conception nor physical birth that human life begins, rather it is at the moment of spiritual rebirth. Given that in *Guidelines*, Burrows states that the mass of humanity is on the first island – and consequently at this pre-rebirth stage²⁰ – we can read into this overtones of the *massa damnata*, or, at the very least, of a dualism between the spiritual and non-spiritual person which she is anxious elsewhere to avoid. This passage is one of the most troubling in all of Burrows's writings. She seems, simultaneously to

¹³ Burrows, *Castle*, p.9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.8.

¹⁷ 'Earlier generations conceived of the world and man as static', Burrows, *Guidelines*, p.9. (See also note 92 above.)

¹⁸ Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (London, Geoffrey Chapman, 2000), §.2270, p.489.

¹⁹ Burrows, *Castle*, p.9.

²⁰ Burrows, *Guidelines*, p.15.

generously extend grace from humanity outwards throughout creation yet at the same time to ungenerously narrow the definition of what is truly human. The unintended consequences of such a move could be disastrous.²¹

If Darwin throws a long shadow across Burrow's reinterpretation of Teresa's static metaphor for the human soul, it is, perhaps, his mid-Victorian contemporary, Freud, who does the same for her reinterpretation of Teresa's psyche. For as Burrows says, '[w]hat would have happened if Teresa and John of the Cross had had our knowledge of the unconscious?'²² In *Castle*, Burrows confronts the question of what is properly supernatural in Teresa and what is an overflow from the psyche. Given the way Teresa had been presented to Burrows as a 'seraphic mother', this critical reassessment of Teresa's psyche is, perhaps, the defining moment when Burrows comes of age. Again, the core idea is already to be found in the earlier *Guidelines*:

I want to make a careful distinction between what is happening and what is thought to be known of this happening. "Thought to be" – the reservation is deliberate, for the mystical happening, normally, cannot be known.²³

This careful prising apart of the natural and supernatural had been prepared for in the reinterpretation of the threefold way in *Guidelines* and its embodiment in the metaphor of three distinct islands. What we get in *Castle* is essentially a case-study of what the life of prayer looks like when we fail to distinguish between the natural and the supernatural. For Teresa, the action of God results in a human reaction in a causal and unproblematic way, much as the call of a human voice

²¹ 'The ability to hear the call and to answer it, is what makes man man [sic].' Burrows, *Castle*, p.9. Does this mean that someone with a severe learning disability and who consequently lacks capacity is not human? Do such people have human rights? For an exploration of the extension of the possibility of effective communication beyond that envisaged by Burrows, see Gareth Rowe and Helen Nevin, 'Bringing "patient voice" into psychological formulations of in-patients with intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorder and severe challenging behaviours: report of a service improvement pilot', *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, September 2014, Vol.42(3), pp.177-184. DOI: 10.1111/bld.12026. Presumably, God articulates his 'call' in a way appropriate to an individual's capacity to 'answer it'. If Burrows holds a more nuanced view it is not evident from her text.

²² Burrows, *Guidelines*, p.11.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.11.

would awaken a sleeper: 'often when a person is quite unprepared for such a thing, and is not even thinking of God, he is awakened by His Majesty, as though by a rushing comet or a thunderclap. Although no sound is heard, the soul is very aware that it has been called by God'.²⁴ The causal sequence here is: God speaks, the person hears, the person is conscious of the 'voice' and of their own awakening. Burrows problematises this sequence. Firstly, she puts a chasm between the speaker and the listener and allows no directly observable datum to pass across;²⁵ she allows only the indirect evidence of an improvement in life.²⁶ Secondly, she is insistent that what had appeared to be the direct effects of God's touch can be produced by other stimuli such as drugs or yogic training.²⁷ Thirdly, and most importantly, she turns Teresa's sequence on its head. When God is near his presence blinds us; when he recedes, we feel relief and it is then that we have 'experiences'.²⁸ Arising out of this is a highly psychologised reading of Teresa. Burrows finds that Teresa has a 'highly sensitised psyche' and consequently is often 'unconsciously dramatizing the inner grace'.²⁹ Burrows claims that 'most of [Teresa's] illnesses were of psychosomatic origin'.³⁰ On Burrows's reading, Teresa is 'extremely lonely' and wracked with 'maternal longing' to possess the 'lovely youth' Gratian. Burrows claims *Foundations* and *Letters* show Teresa to be gullible and a terrible judge of character;³¹ moreover, she says, Teresa's locutions themselves can be self-evidently false: God tells her things which then fail to happen.³² In summary, 'nature has its own in-built mechanism of compensation. "Worldly" pleasures and interests were more than supplied for in the

²⁴ Teresa, 'Interior Castle', Peers, *Complete*, p.276.

²⁵ Burrows's language can sound rather Barthian: '[b]etween [God] and us there is an unbridgeable gulf that we ourselves, of ourselves cannot cross.' Ruth Burrows, *Our Father: Meditations on the Lord's Prayer* (London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1986), p.30.

²⁶ Burrows, *Guidelines*, p.2.

²⁷ Burrows, *Guidelines*, pp.11-12. Burrows, *Castle*, p.47. Equally, Rahner argues that religious or moral training can operate as 'auto-conditioning' which whilst potentially useful can also be harmful if it reduces spontaneous spiritual reactions to 'sub-personal instinctive reaction[s]'. 'Gradual Ascent', *Investigations III*, p.17.

²⁸ Burrows takes this idea from John of the Cross, 'Canticle 1', quoted in *Ascent*, p.54. She sees John as offering a deliberate corrective to Teresa.

²⁹ Burrows, *Castle*, p.99.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.98.

³¹ Burrows, *Guidelines*, p.97.

³² *Ibid.*, p.98.

spiritual life itself: visions, locutions, conscious awareness of God's loving caresses, raptures, swoons and so forth.³³ On the face of it, Burrow's judgement of Teresa seems clear. Lacking the tools with which to distinguish between the supernatural and the natural, and being highly sensitive, lonely and lacking in natural stimuli she confuses God and her psyche and mistakes compensation for reality. Actually, Burrows's view of Teresa is more complicated than this and the complication crystallises in Burrows's concept of lights on/off.

Lights On/Off

Burrows's concept of lights on/off is introduced in *Guidelines*, not well received by her readers,³⁴ defended and developed in *Castle* and then quietly dropped. In summary, lights off is the normal mode of experiencing God. It is non-experiential darkness and can only be known by its effects – such as an improvement in life. But, says Burrows, God can choose to switch on a light and by this light one can observe one's own spiritual experiences. This mode of experiencing God is extraordinary. It happens 'once or twice in an era' and it 'has a prophetic character';³⁵ moreover, this prophetic role is for the benefit of the whole church.³⁶ Burrows seems unable to determine criteria for lights on/off:³⁷ consequently, in *Guidelines* she states that Teresa and John experience God 'lights on' but in *Castle* it is only 'possible' that John experienced 'lights on'.³⁸ She also struggles to explain exactly what the lights on experience is. For example, she thinks the experience is 'fundamentally different than ours' and a 'very rare gift'; she notes it is very different to 'favours', adding that this point was missed by readers of *Guidelines*, but then doesn't explain with any conviction what the difference is.³⁹ She says it leads directly to Teresa's 'great confidence' and

³³ Burrows, *Ascent*, p.95.

³⁴ Burrows, *Castle*, p.49.

³⁵ Burrows, *Guidelines*, pp.45-46.

³⁶ Burrows, *Castle*, p.49.

³⁷ This is Jones's main objection to the idea. Jones, *Gospel Mysticism*, p.157.

³⁸ Burrows, *Guidelines*, p.46. *Castle*, p.49.

³⁹ Burrows, *Castle*, p.49.

‘sense of superiority... over the famous prelates and theologians’,⁴⁰ yet despite Teresa’s confidence and prophetic role in the church, Burrows finds she is credulous and makes ‘big mistakes’ when trying to use her lights on knowledge.⁴¹ Burrows further complicates the matter by making a distinction between ‘sensitives’ and ‘non-sensitives’, the former being ‘liable to all sorts of psychic experiences’ and the latter not.⁴² Thus we have two axes: lights on/off and sensitive/non-sensitive.⁴³ Teresa is categorised as sensitive and lights on. This, in Burrows’s view, leads to her ‘continually confusing three things, the mystical grace, her ‘lights on’ experience of it, the psychic response’ and this often leads to absurdity’.⁴⁴

What are we to make of all this? It seems that in Teresa we have someone with the clarity to see God’s working in her own soul yet is unable to distinguish between natural and supernatural. We have someone with a prophetic gift for the whole church but who can’t distinguish between a saint and a fraud. Even a commentator as well-disposed as Michelle Jones finds lights on/off problematic and, as Burrows herself notes, the idea has not been well received.⁴⁵ Burrows’s own introduction to Teresa suggests a psychological reading of what is happening. Teresa was originally presented to Burrows as saintly and beyond criticism. Burrows finds her confused, psychologically hypersensitive, a poor judge of character and often mistaken. By creating a new category of ‘lights on’, Burrows is able to both offer trenchant criticism of Teresa whilst simultaneously keeping her on a pedestal. Teresa is often mistaken on a human level, yet spiritually she remains in a class apart.⁴⁶ Prescinding, from further psychologising, what is the theological effect of Burrows’s dualistic reading of Teresa?

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp.48-49.

⁴¹ Ibid., p.67

⁴² Ibid, p.121.

⁴³ Burrows provides a helpful table as an appendix to *Castle*, pp. 119-122.

⁴⁴ Burrows, *Castle*, p.50.

⁴⁵ Reception theory in theology, like reader response theory in literature, sees the audience for a theory as important. In strong versions of these theories, the audience co-creates meaning, in weaker versions, the audience validates meaning. Either way, reception of an idea would be seen as a key indicator of the truth of its claims and non-reception should make us cautious. For a model of reception hermeneutics see Ormond Rush, ‘Reception Hermeneutics and the “Development” of Doctrine: An Alternative Model’, *Pacifica: Australasian Theological Studies*, 6 (1993), 125–40.

⁴⁶ It is beyond the competency of this essay to develop a psychological analysis yet the temptation to do so is entirely consistent with Burrows’s own approach.

My own view is that it reintroduces, ‘by the backdoor’, the problematic notion that there are two classes of Christian. This is unfortunate, not least, because as we saw above, the notion of a high and low road is one which Burrows is particularly keen to quash; yet, in the confusion over when truly ‘human’ life begins, there is already the possibility of dualism. The danger of the dualistic approach can be seen in Michelle Jones’s enthusiastic response to a suggestion she finds in *Guidelines* that the ‘lights on’ mystic has a special role in sharing in Jesus’ suffering, a role denied to the ordinary Christian; being able to ‘see’ God’s activity and juxtaposing this with his rejection by the mass of humanity supposedly results in a special experience of suffering not shared by the ordinary Christian.⁴⁷

In summary, Burrows’s writing on Teresa of Avila is some of the most problematic in her oeuvre. Her transposition of Teresa into an evolutionary key does update Teresa for the modern reader but also introduces confusions, of which the most significant is when truly human life begins. Her analysis of what is supernatural and what is a psychological response in Teresa is a helpful distinction but when combined with her idea of lights on/off becomes more confusing.⁴⁸ Despite Burrows’s antipathy towards ‘dual carriage-way’ Christianity, in her writings on Teresa we are left with multiple sets of dualisms: spiritual/pre-spiritual, human/pre-human parody, lights on/off Christian, ordinary/extraordinary Christian, ordinary/extraordinary saint. Because I have followed Burrows chronologically, it is possible to trace how her thought develops. In *Guidelines* (1976) she sets out her key insight that the three stages of the mystical way are distinct relations to God and that experience is not a category of mystical prayer, merely a by-product. In *Castle* (1981) she attempts

⁴⁷ Jones, *Mysticism*, p.194, n.69. This tendency to see a special suffering in certain saints is particularly marked in some readings of Thérèse of Lisieux. See for example Frolich’s reading of Garrigou-Lagrange via Fredrick Miller whereby Thérèse, not needing to suffer for her own sins, can suffer vicariously for the sins of others instead. She apparently has ‘a special charism of participating in Christ’s redemptive work’ a ‘reparatory night of the spirit’ that is rare indeed. Mary Frohlich, ‘Desolation and Doctrine in Thérèse of Lisieux’, *Theological Studies*. 2000, (Volume 61. Issue 2.). <https://doi-org.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/10.1177/004056390006100203>, pp.261-279.

⁴⁸ If one were to apply Occam’s Razor to the two pairings: supernatural/psychological and lights on/off, I am not sure the second pair would be needed in order to adequately describe the observable data found in Teresa’s writings.

to apply her insights to the tradition but is not always successful. It is significant that the problematic claims such as lights on/off are dropped after this book. Instead, In *Ascent to Love* (1987), the Rahnerian parallels, which we have traced throughout her writings, become more dominant and for the first time she explicitly credits Rahner's influence on her own work.

BURROWS'S VIEW OF JOHN OF THE CROSS

Ascent to Love is Burrows's last book length treatment of a single writer and was written, reluctantly, at the urging of those who wanted her to update John as she had Teresa.⁴⁹ She begins the introduction with the statement: 'I acknowledge my debt to the great Karl Rahner. Those who are familiar with his writings will recognise his influence.'⁵⁰ This is certainly true for *Ascent*, as I will show, but I have also taken it as a warrant to bring in Rahner's thought when discussing her earlier work, not in an attempt to demonstrate a causal influence, which is beyond the scope of this essay, but merely to note the convergences which she later makes explicit in *Ascent*. There are two elements of Burrows's thought in *Ascent* that I will explore here. The first is her specific views on John of the Cross which act as something of a corrective to some of the problematic elements of *Castle*. The second is her Rahnerian reading of John's writings.

As a guide to the writings of John of the Cross, Burrows is a helpful companion. She does not shy away from the difficulties which many modern readers have with John's works and it is helpful to those who are approaching John for the first time to understand the reasons for their difficulties. Firstly, she notes that John's works would have benefitted from the attention of a good editor who would have removed the 'redundancies, repetitions' and other faults which remain in unedited works.⁵¹ More fundamentally, she notes that John writes against the background of a scholastic

⁴⁹ Burrows, *Ascent*, p.2.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.vii.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.9.

framework very different to our mode of thought.⁵² In addition, she finds John habitually uses hyperbolic language; he says, for example, we should speak of ourselves ‘disparagingly and ‘contemptuously’; Burrows suggests we update these terms, here with ‘thinking little’ of ourselves.⁵³ Coupled with these intellectual and stylistic issues is the fact that John was writing for enclosed nuns, which she notes is an unusual vocation, rather than for people out in the world which is the normal human experience. Finally, John himself was unusually spiritually mature from an early age – which she says rather annoyed Teresa!⁵⁴ Not all of the harshness we sometimes perceive in John is incidental however. Burrows explains that he was writing against a milieu which was full of ‘false notions’; he was very ‘black and white’ because the danger for his readers was always pulling in the same direction: towards a baroque, overblown spiritual culture with a ‘craving for the sensational, sensual indulgence in the name of divine love’.⁵⁵ Because it is a pull and a danger very different from the sort of spiritual dangers we face today, his whole approach can strike us as odd, misplaced and at worst inhuman. Burrows’s clarifications situate John helpfully for the modern reader and give us an indication of the adjustments we must make if our reading of him is to be fruitful.

There is a noticeable contrast between the strenuous efforts Burrows makes to update Teresa and her more restrained writing on John. She does not attempt an evolutionary updating of John, she explicitly states there is no need of a psychological updating: John is already ‘an utterly safe guide for the beginner’, and her lights on/off distinction is never mentioned.⁵⁶ Instead of a static metaphor like the interior castle, John has a dynamic understanding of the relationship between nature and grace. In addition, John is resolutely apophatic and ascribes little value to the experiential. Indeed,

⁵² Ibid., p.10. Howells finds that John borrowed freely from a range of scholastic sources creating an original configuration. Edward Howells, *John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila: Mystical Knowing and Selfhood*, (New York, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), p.17.

⁵³ Burrows, *Ascent*, p.38.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp.14-15.

⁵⁵ Burrows, *Ascent*, p.16. John Paul II notes that John of the Cross’s teaching was an ‘authentic pedagogy [autentica pedagogia]’ steering between atheism and the ‘excessive credulity [eccessiva credulità]’ of those who trusted in visions. Pope St. John Paul II, *Lettera Apostolica Maestro Della Fede Del Santo Padre Giovanni Paolo II*. At https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/apost_letters/1990/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19901214_juan-de-la-cruz.html. [Accessed 31/01/2021].

⁵⁶ Burrows, *Ascent*, pp.3-4.

Burrows finds John deliberately correcting the excesses ascribed to Teresa.⁵⁷ Finally, the metaphysical apparatus of her lights on/off distinction would seem inappropriate in any discussion of John. This is because John's writing is itself a prophylactic against such unnecessary notions.

Nature and Grace

In keeping with John's metaphor of the ascent of Mount Carmel, Burrows's reading of John presents a linear view of the mystical life. The frontispiece of Burrows's *Ascent to Love* is John's drawing of Mount Carmel usually printed in copies of *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. In Burrows's book, John's freehand drawing has been set in type and the lines straightened. Burrows's version is more of a map than a sketch. This has the effect of drawing attention to the utterly straight line of the only path that leads all the way up the mountain upon which are the words: "nothing, nothing, even on the mountain nothing". This graphically⁵⁸ illustrates the low value John places on the experiential and the inapplicability of ascribing lights-on to John and leaves little to be said on either subject. The linearity of John's view of nature and grace as described by Burrows needs a little more unpacking.

The 'popular view' of the relationship between nature and supernatural grace is described by Rahner as 'extrinsic'. On this view nature and grace are wholly separate. Grace may well perfect nature, but grace only begins where nature ends.⁵⁹ Prescinding for the moment from the question of whether John or Burrows actually hold this view, this 'popular view' is useful because it effectively separates what we can do and what God does and on Burrows's reading, John is very clear on both. Firstly, on what we need to do (with the help of ordinary grace): without a rigorous asceticism, we can't even start the climb up the mountain.⁶⁰ This is why John uses the language of self-denial and self-

⁵⁷ Burrows, *Castle*, pp.52-53. Burrows will only have John correcting 'mistaken interpretations of Teresa', not Teresa herself.

⁵⁸ In all senses of the word.

⁵⁹ Rahner, 'Nature and Grace', *Investigations IV*, p.167.

⁶⁰ Burrows, *Ascent*, p.24.

annihilation.⁶¹ This might strike us as extreme, but it is entirely orthodox: it is the way of the cross. In Jesus, Burrows tells us, ‘we learn what man is’: an ‘emptiness for receiving the father’ and it is this self-emptying we must do for ourselves.⁶² John’s is an economical approach to the spiritual life. He doesn’t want his readers to waste time and energy on what is superfluous. His is the straight way of the cross, hence the name in religion he chose. It is this aspect of John that people find austere and frightening and from which we are likely to turn away in dismay. Yet, in this austerity John is really trying to keep his readers safe from their besetting temptation of ‘spiritual gluttony’. John defines this as ‘seek[ing] self in God’ and states that it is diametrically opposed to the way of love.⁶³

We have ‘a capacity’ that God is able to fill but we need to create the space. This truly is a *via negativa* a negative way of self-emptying which is ‘not prayer techniques, not introspection, not straining after “experiences”’;⁶⁴ all of these things are a self-fulfilling. Here, we reach the core of Carmel, as Burrows sees it: human existence as a desert, as an emptiness waiting for God to fill.⁶⁵ God does the rest and this is the strictly supernatural. Here Burrows urges caution because John is eloquent in his discussion of the ‘vast yearning caverns’ of the heart but, she says, in reality the strictly supernatural is a ‘secret knowledge’ meaning we are ‘left savourless on earth’.⁶⁶ Comparing this presentation of grace with what we saw in Teresa, we have an extremely straight and simple road. Prayer and asceticism enable a making space for God – *vacare Deo* – which is then filled supernaturally. There seems to be little of substance for Burrows to update, merely the linguistic, stylistic and cultural caveats noted above.

Burrows and John retain the traditional notion that there is a point at which ‘a new form of knowledge is introduced that does not come through the normal channels of cognition’⁶⁷ but reject

⁶¹ Ibid., p.8.

⁶² Ibid., p.7.

⁶³ John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, bk 2:7, quoted in Burrows, *Ascent*, p.80.

⁶⁴ Burrows, *Ascent*, p.91.

⁶⁵ As Rahner puts it: ‘of itself nature has only a *‘potentia obedientialis’* to such an end, and this capacity is thought of as negatively as possible’. Rahner, *Investigations IV*, p.167.

⁶⁶ Burrows, *Ascent*, pp.109-110.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.54,

the ‘popular view’ of this as an either/or grace or nature dichotomy.⁶⁸ Firstly, this is because sensual non-experience is common to all stages of the journey so experientially, there is no difference between what is normally thought of as the natural and supernatural stages. God is not apprehendable with the ordinary apparatus of the senses therefore we must ‘endure the absence of pleasure’.⁶⁹ Secondly, nothing is spiritually neutral, on the contrary, every moment is a yes or a no to God.⁷⁰

Yet there is a moment when all changes. In the early stages of the spiritual life, we begin to feel we are competent – we are good at praying, asceticism and works of charity: we are doing well; we are in control. We acquire spiritual knowledge; we are spiritually rich; however, infused knowledge is something of a pin that bursts our ego bubble. We realise our God is an ego projection, an idol: our God is in fact ourself. Infused knowledge leaves us with nothing we can possess. God gives himself freely, generously but he does so moment by moment: we can’t hold him as a possession. We are left as beggars with nothing we can call our own – a ‘hand to mouth’ existence we find difficult and more so if we have experienced spiritual self-sufficiency. The biblical basis for this view is clear.⁷¹ It also resonates with Teresa’s observation that many get stuck in the third mansion.⁷² This is what makes John so austere: the spiritually successful are in the greatest danger.⁷³ In summary, Burrows finds in John an always graced nature which is the continuing existential moment of our choice for or against God but also a particular moment when infused contemplation begins, when God pricks the bubble of our complacency. The view of nature and grace which Burrows presents in her reading of John has Rahnerian parallels: we have a capacity for God and our nature is always graced. Yet the difference in their views of experience remains. In the next section we see where their theologies

⁶⁸ Burrows and John seem to simultaneously hold an intrinsic and extrinsic view of Grace – at least on Burrows’s reading – and this can be confusing at times.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.46.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.26-27.

⁷¹ For example the ‘broken cisterns’ of *Jeremiah* 2:13 or Paul’s contrast of his spiritual poverty with the Corinthians’ riches *1 Corinthians* 4 8-13.

⁷² Teresa, ‘Interior Castle’, Peers, *Complete*, pp.224-226.

⁷³ Turner illustrates this nicely using Aristotle’s Feeble, Shameless and Prig. The successful ascetic retains features of all three, see *Darkness*, P.242.

converge and find that the importance of their differing views of experience recedes when we come to discuss the beatific vision.

Convergences with the Theology of Karl Rahner

Burrows updates John, not by radical changes, but by drawing out the implications of what she finds in his writings and it is in these implications that her theology converges with Rahner's. The first implication is to break down the wall that separates the world and the cloister. Burrows notes that living for God is the heart of the Carmelite vocation but to do so through the solitary withdrawn life is an unusual vocation.⁷⁴ Because the normal vocation is to live 'in the world' 'contemplative graces' are to be found there. To say otherwise, she maintains, is to accuse God of 'denying his own ordinances'.⁷⁵ Moreover, this is not merely throwing open the windows of the cloister, it is truly stepping outside and valuing the secular: '[s]cience, materialism, atheism do not banish God; they clear the atmosphere for true faith.'⁷⁶ The world is where God is, not in a spiritual 'ghetto' of our making.⁷⁷ The resonances with *Gaudium et Spes*⁷⁸ and Rahner's everyday mysticism are clear: the path to God leads through everyday life and to attempt another route is to leave the self behind.⁷⁹ God is present in everyday life because he is not 'the supreme object among many objects'⁸⁰ rather in loving other people and other things we are loving God and this is the case because beneath our individual experiences there is the 'capacity for non-conceptual knowledge' and an 'experience of our very existence'.⁸¹ The resonances with Rahner's supernatural existential and *Vorgriff* are clear here: we are orientated to love of God and in reaching for the individual object we go beyond it

⁷⁴ Burrows, *Ascent*, p.11-12.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.15. The word 'ordinances' is perhaps slightly odd. Burrows seems to mean that ordinary life in the world – marrying and having children – is how God has 'ordered' creation, cf. Genesis 5:2, Matthew 19:4, Mark 10:6.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.100.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.31 and p.101.

⁷⁸ In Flannery, *Council*, pp.903-1014. E.g. §.44.

⁷⁹ Karl Rahner, *Encounters with Silence* (Indiana, St. Augustine's Press, 1999), p.48.

⁸⁰ Burrows, *Ascent*, p.27.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.71.

towards the range of all possible objects.⁸² Burrows sees John's dark nights as being part of ordinary human experience. She lists '[b]ereavement, disappointment, failure, old age' and even the background 'threat of atomic destruction' as experiences of night.⁸³ She asserts that the human response should be to 'accept our human vocation whether we know the shape of that vocation or not'.⁸⁴ Again the convergences with Rahner are clear, the experiences he sees as bringing us closer to God are often negative experiences and self-acceptance is the way of the anonymous Christian.⁸⁵ Finally, it is in the concept of mystery where Burrows's writing seems most convergent with Rahner's. Burrows sees the summit of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* as 'infinite mystery'. The mystery is 'outside the range of [...] senses and rational mind'.⁸⁶ In one of the very few direct quotations in her writings, Burrows quotes Rahner on mystery as an 'unchartered, unending adventure' and follows this by John speaking of a journey to the 'incomprehensible and inaccessible'.⁸⁷ The concept of mystery for both Burrows and Rahner culminates in the beatific vision. John talks of the purification of memory in *Ascent of Mount Carmel* book three. For Burrows memory is the 'faculty of possession' and it is this possessiveness which must be purified because, and here she references Rahner again, 'even the face-to-face vision of God in heaven is not held as a possession'.⁸⁸ In *Ascent*, Burrows works very differently to *Castle*: in *Castle* she had grasped Teresa's mystical theology directly and tried to wrestle it into her 'modern' ideas. In *Ascent* she lets John's theology sing out but provides her own descant on it in a Rahnerian key. The latter approach is, to

⁸² For the *Vorgriff* see: Karl Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, (trans. Joseph Donceel), (New York, Continuum, 1994), p.47. For the supernatural existential see: Rahner, 'Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace', *Investigations I*, pp. 297-318.

⁸³ Burrows, *Ascent*, p.57.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.57. Burrows gives no further details on what not knowing the shape of our vocation might mean in practice.

⁸⁵ Rahner, 'Anonymous Christians', *Investigations VI*, pp.390-398, especially p.394.

⁸⁶ Burrows, *Ascent*, p.6. It is interesting that Burrows refers specifically to senses and intellect here but not emotions. The difference between Rahner and Burrows regarding the accessibility of God to the emotions dissolves when they discuss the beatific vision because the vision is the post-death counterpart of rapture which they agree is inaccessible to the emotions as well as the senses and intellect. *Investigations XVI*, pp.104-134. (See note 78).

⁸⁷ Burrows, *Ascent*, p.73. She references 'The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology', *Investigations IV* and *Living Flame* st.3.

⁸⁸ Burrows, *Ascent*, p.87. Cf. 'the supreme act of knowledge is not the abolition or diminution of the mystery but its final assertion', Rahner, 'Mystery', *Investigations IV*, p.41.

my mind at least, more satisfactory. It is unfortunate that Burrows never produced a full-length treatment of Thérèse of Lisieux, the last of the three Carmelite Doctors. She did, however, record her views in a number of essays and in comments scattered through her other writings. It is to these we now turn as, despite their brevity, they represent something of a terminus in Burrows's efforts to update the Carmelite tradition.

BURROWS'S VIEW OF THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX

Burrows's writing on Thérèse represents something of a conclusion to her oeuvre. We do not get a re-writing of Thérèse or substantially new ideas in these brief discussions, rather, Burrows portrays Thérèse as the tradition's exemplar of the ideas she has already developed. She makes two key, and related, points: firstly Thérèse 'abolished the "spiritual life" understood as it was (and, alas, still is) as a sort of specialised area of human life' and secondly, that 'Thérèse returned us to the Gospel with its wonderful but daunting simplicity'.⁸⁹ Firstly, in Thérèse, Burrows sees someone who has used the circumstances of her life to the full. Burrows does not shy away from the fact that many moderns will be repulsed by the bourgeois atmosphere in which Thérèse was immersed. She mentions the 'maudlin holy pictures' Thérèse loved and her own 'sugary-sweet paintings'; Burrows suggests '[t]he whole atmosphere seems stuffy to us and redolent of antimacassars and old lace.'⁹⁰ Thomas Merton refers to it as an atmosphere calculated to create prigs rather than saints.⁹¹ But, at least in the case of Thérèse, it did produce a saint and for Burrows, this shows that 'each one of us has in his or her life everything necessary for real sainthood'.⁹² There is 'no "mystical" realm' but only 'the preciousness of the ordinary'.⁹³ This is Rahner's everyday God and the throwing open of the windows of the church by John XXIII long before it happened. Burrows goes as far as to suggest

⁸⁹ Ruth Burrows, 'Thoughts of the Doctorate of St Thérèse' in *Essence*, p. 120.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.125.

⁹¹ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Story Mountain*, (London, Harcourt Brace, 1976), p.394.

⁹² Burrows, *Essence*, p.125.

⁹³ Ruth Burrows, 'St Thérèse of Lisieux', in *Essence*, pp.108-118, (pp.113-114).

that 'this insight was given to her for our sake'⁹⁴ but, at least in the stand-alone essays on Thérèse, does not discuss the possibility that this gives her a lights-on understanding. If this breaking down of the wall of the cloister shows that holiness is possible for all, the second key point is that, in Burrows's view, Thérèse shows the way.

Thérèse, Burrows maintains, returns us to the simplicity of the gospel by diverting our attention from our own interesting and fulfilling spiritual lives and back to the figure of Jesus.⁹⁵ For Burrows, Thérèse's 'little way' is really the Carmelite way, the way of raw desert exposure. It is the moment-by-moment death of self without glory and without Romance. This is what we find so difficult, this is why 'Thérèse is very very challenging when understood correctly. Her sheer simplicity can dismay.'⁹⁶ The key themes we have traced in Burrows's updating of the Carmelite tradition, she sees in a simple concentrated form in Thérèse and this allows her to throw out a final challenge to those of us interested in spirituality or theology. When writing about Teresa and John, there is a wealth of secondary material to choose from. Luminaries such as Karol Wojtyła and modern theologians like Rowan Williams, Denys Turner and Edward Howells have written extensively on the Spanish mystics. Yet apart from Hans Urs von Balthasar, few theologians of note have written on Thérèse. For Burrows, this is not unexpected and follows from our dismay at her simplicity. There is much more of a hunger for writings on Teresa and John, and so much more to say – the waters, the mansions, the dark nights. It is fascinating to juxtapose their works with our own spiritual journey and ask which mansion we are in, have we experienced the dark night of the spirit or just the senses? We get none of this from Thérèse. Perhaps this is why views of Thérèse are so polarised, suggests Burrows, 'she is marvellous, good news to humble folk; but it can be off-putting and annoying to those who are really using God to boost their own image of themselves.'⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Ibid., p.115.

⁹⁵ Burrows, *Essence*, p.117.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p.121.

⁹⁷ Burrows, *Essence*, p.121. Merton and von Balthasar provide a good example of this polarisation. For Merton she is the church's greatest saint for three hundred years and greater than John and Teresa. For

A POST-BURROWS CARMEL

In summary, what does a post-Burrows Carmel look like? Firstly, the distinction between the cloister and the world is not important to the pursuit of holiness. God is to be found everywhere. All human beings are orientated to God and any circumstances, no matter how unpromising, can bring the individual to God. Secondly, Carmel is human life at its most pared-down. It is raw desert-like exposure to God. This desert-experience is just as open to laity 'in the world' as religious in the cloister because it simply means moment-by-moment renunciation: a lifelong string of choices for God rather than self. Thirdly, Carmel is non-experience: God remains a mystery and cannot be experienced by the senses, by the intellect, or by the emotions. Fourthly, because the emotions are irrelevant to our existential state, we do not daily move forward and backwards in our spiritual journey. We exist in a series of more or less long-term existential relationships to God.⁹⁸ This reading of Carmel has a number of convergences with the theology of Karl Rahner. Rahner insists on the orientation of all human beings to God which he calls the 'supernatural existential'. Because God is not one object among many objects, in our reaching out towards any object we, in fact, reach beyond the individual objects towards the range of all possible objects – towards what we have traditionally called God. Rahner is clear that in this life we cannot experience God with our senses or with our intellect and that in the next, the beatific vision remains a vision of mystery. In the writings of Ruth Burrows we have seen a sustained effort to update the Carmelite tradition in the light of Vatican II and modern theology. These efforts have not always been successful. Her updating of Teresa, in particular, introduced problematic claims such as when human life begins and whether saints like Teresa have a different 'lights-on' experience of God to the ordinary Christian. In her writings on John and Thérèse, these problematic claims are quietly dropped and Burrows updates,

Balthasar she is stuck in the first night and never makes it as far as the night of the cross [spirit]! Merton, *Seven*, p.396. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit*, (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1992), p.356.

⁹⁸ Symbolised by Burrows's islands.

or at least interprets, the tradition in a Rahnerian key. To an extent, her work leaves us with an alternative Carmelite paradigm: Burrows's mystical theology rooted in Rahner's academic theology rather than classical Spanish mysticism rooted directly⁹⁹ in Thomism. Yet differences between Burrows and Rahner remain. Of these, the most important is that Rahner would have God accessible to the emotions; this throws into question the separate existential relationships with God that Burrows captures in the metaphor of the three islands. A promising line of enquiry for further research into Burrows could, therefore, probe her understanding of the precise function of the emotional faculty in the spiritual life and compare it, not only to the understanding of Karl Rahner, but also to the that of the mystical tradition from Origen to its reception and development in the Carmelite Order.

⁹⁹ See note 13.

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