

Die visionären Erfahrungen von Adrienne von Speyr und deren Einfluss auf Hans Urs von Balthasar: ein zu vertiefendes Forschungsthema

The visionary experiences of Adrienne von Speyr and their influence on Hans Urs von Balthasar: a research topic to be explored in greater depth

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Die theologischen Verdienste Hans Urs von Balthasars

Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988) gehört zweifellos zu den wichtigsten Theologen der Gegenwart und übt bis heute einen beachtlichen Einfluss aus. Für eine kurze Zusammenschau seiner Verdienste sei exemplarisch auf die Trauerhomilie Joseph Kardinal Ratzingers verwiesen, die er in der Hofkirche zu Luzern am 1. Juli 1988 gehalten hat¹. Dabei verwies der Kardinal unter anderem auf eine Aussage Henri de Lubacs, der seinen Schweizer Freund den „vielleicht gebildetsten Menschen unserer Zeit“ nannte². Kardinal Ratzinger war zur Trauerfeier von Papst Johannes Paul II. gesandt worden, der zu diesem Anlass schrieb: „Mit Betroffenheit trauern alle, die den Priester von Balthasar gekannt haben, um den Verlust eines großen Sohnes der

¹ Joseph Kardinal Ratzinger, Ein Mann der Kirche in der Welt, in: Karl Lehmann – Walter Kasper (Hrsg.), Hans Urs von Balthasar. Gestalt und Werk, Köln 1989, 349–354; die Homilie findet sich bereits in: Internationale katholische Zeitschrift „Communio“ 17 (5/1988) 472–476. Vgl. auch Benedikt XVI., Botschaft an die Teilnehmer der Internationalen Tagung in Rom (Lateran-Universität) anlässlich des 100. Geburtstages des Schweizer Theologen Hans Urs von Balthasar, in: Peter Henrici (Hrsg.), Hans Urs von Balthasar – ein großer Churer Diözesan, Fribourg 2006, 131–133. Zur Balthasar-Rezeption Ratzingers vgl. Rudolf Voderholzer, „Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe“ – „Deus caritas est“. Hans Urs von Balthasar als Inspirator der Theologie Joseph Ratzingers / Benedikts XVI., in: https://www.balthasar-stiftung.org/images/1_JG_07_Voderholzer_20070607.pdf (Vortrag 2007 in Basel) (Zugang 25.03.2025).

² Ratzinger, Ein Mann der Kirche in der Welt, 349, mit Hinweis auf Henri de Lubac, Ein Zeuge Christi in der Kirche: Hans Urs von Balthasar, in: Internationale katholische Zeitschrift „Communio“ 4 (1975) 390–409 (392).

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Kirche, eines hervorragenden Mannes der Theologie und der Geisteswissenschaften, dem im kirchlichen und kulturellen Leben der Gegenwart ein besonderer Ehrenplatz gebührt“³.

Zu den Themen, die auch von den neueren Vertretern des päpstlichen Lehramtes rezipiert wurden (Johannes Paul II., Benedikt XVI., Franziskus, Leo XIV.) gehört die wichtige Verhältnisbestimmung zwischen dem Apostolisch-Petrinischen und dem Marianischen in der Kirche⁴. Auch Kardinal Ratzinger in seiner Trauerhomilie weist darauf hin⁵. Der Verfasser dieser Zeilen weiß sich persönlich mit Dankbarkeit Hans Urs von Balthasar verpflichtet, der gegenüber P. Joseph Fessio SJ (dem Gründer und Leiter des amerikanischen Verlages „Ignatius Press“) die englische Übersetzung meiner Doktorarbeit empfahl mit einem Lobeswort, das der Verlag auf dem Umschlag des Werkes abdruckte⁶.

³ Johannes Paul II., Beileidschreiben zum Tode von Hans Urs von Balthasar, in: Internationale katholische Zeitschrift „Communio“ 17 (5/1988) 473.

⁴ Vgl. u.a. Johannes Paul II., Apostolisches Schreiben *Mulieris dignitatem* (1988), Nr. 27, Anm. 55; Antonio Baldini, Principio petrino e principio mariano ne „Il complesso antiromano“ di Hans Urs von Balthasar (Collana di Mariologia 4), Pregassona 2003, 183–191; Franziskus, Vi racconto il primo anno del mio papato, in: Corriere della Sera, 14. März 2014: „Es stimmt, die Frau kann und muss in den Orten der Entscheidung mehr anwesend sein. Aber das würde ich eine bloß funktionale Promotion nennen. So kommt man nicht weit. Man muss bedenken, dass die Kirche weiblichen Geschlechts ist – ‚die‘: sie ist weiblich seit ihren Ursprüngen. Der große Theologe Hans Urs von Balthasar arbeitete viel an diesem Thema: das marianische Prinzip leitet die Kirche neben dem petrinischen. Die Jungfrau Maria ist wichtiger als jeder Bischof oder jeder Apostel“; Franziskus, Interview mit der Zeitschrift „America“, 22. November 2022 (<https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/11/28/pope-francis-interview-america-244225>) (Zugang 25.03.2025); Franziskus, Ansprache an die Mitglieder der Internationalen Theologischen Kommission, 30. November 2023: „Mir hat das Denken von Hans Urs von Balthasar viel Licht geschenkt: petrinisches und marianisches Prinzip. Man kann darüber diskutieren, aber die beiden Prinzipien gibt es. Das marianische ist wichtiger als das petrinische, weil darin die Kirche als Braut liegt, die Kirche als Frau, ohne sich zu vernünftlichen“ (<https://www.vatican.va>) (Zugang 25.03.2025); Franziskus, Prefazione, in: Lucia Vantini u.a., „Smaschilizzare la Chiesa“? Confronto critico sui „principi“ di H.U. von Balthasar, Milano 2024, 3–4 (4); Leo XIV., Predigt zum Gedenktag „Maria, ‚Mutter der Kirche‘“, Petersbasilika, 9. Juni 2025.

⁵ Ratzinger, Ein Mann der Kirche in der Welt, 352f.

⁶ Manfred Hauke, Women in the Priesthood? A Systematic Analysis in the Light of the Order of Creation and Redemption, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1988, rückwärtiger Umschlag: „Undoubtedly the definitive work available on this important topic“ (deutsches Original: Die Problematik um das Frauenpriestertum vor dem Hintergrund der Schöpfungs- und Erlösungsordnung, Paderborn 1982; ²1986; ³1991; ⁴1995; die deutsche Ausgabe ist vergriffen). In einem Brief an mich vom 4. September 1989 antwortete P. Fessio auf meine Frage zur Herkunft dieser Aussage: „Two or three years ago I spent the night at Fr. von Balthasar’s house in Basel, and I had with me the German edition of your book ... I asked if he would glance through it, and he took it with him to his room at about 9:00 in the evening. Early the next morning, he told me he had read the entire book and was most impressed. It was then that he told me that the International Theological Commission was considered making women’s ordination a topic for one of its future meetings, but now that he knew of the existence of your book he felt that such an investigation was not necessary“. Am 2. Mai 1994 sandte ich eine Kopie dieses Schreibens an Frau Cornelia Capol (1917–2014), der damaligen Leiterin des Balthasar-Archivs in Basel, zusammen mit einem Hinweis des Dominikanerpaters Basil Cole, der in der Zeitschrift „Angelicum“ (66, 1989, 352–355) die englische Übersetzung meiner Doktorarbeit rezensiert hatte und dabei bemerkte: „It has been said by Louis Bouyer that Hans Urs von Balthasar was on the verge of writing a book on this question but when he read Hauke’s book, he felt that he did not need to write one“ (355).

Die Verbindung Balthasars zu Adrienne von Speyr als Forschungsthema

Die Hochschätzung der Persönlichkeit Balthasars und seines theologischen Werkes schließt freilich nicht aus, auch die Grenzen und Probleme seines Schaffens zu benennen. Kritische Fragen gibt es nicht zuletzt in Verbindung mit den visionären Erfahrungen Adrienne von Speyrs (1902–1967), die Balthasar als Seelenführer betreute. Er trat sogar aus dem Jesuitenorden aus, um diese intensive Betreuung fortsetzen zu können⁷. Balthasar hat sich selbst ausführlich zur Biographie Adrienne von Speyrs geäußert⁸. Es gibt aber noch viel Spielraum für eine weitere Forschung. „Ein dringendes Desiderat ist eine aus den Quellen erarbeitete Biographie der Adrienne von Speyr, in der auch die umfangreiche Korrespondenz mit Balthasar ausgewertet werden muss“⁹. Der einschlägige Briefwechsel ist für die universitäre Forschung bislang nicht zugänglich¹⁰. Eine weitere Schwierigkeit für eine gründliche Erforschung ist der gewaltige Umfang der Schriften von Speyrs, die nach einem Brief Balthasars aus dem Jahre 1967 (kurz nach dem Tod der Autorin) 35 veröffentlichte und 25 unveröffentlichte Bücher umfasste¹¹. „Ihr Gesamtwerk ... ist im Johannesverlag in Einsiedeln erschienen, den von Balthasar gegründet hat. Von Balthasar betonte emphatisch von Speyrs Bedeutung für sein eigenes Werk“¹². Das Werk Adrienne von Speyrs umfasst nach der Bibliographie des Johannes-Verlages (2024) 64 Bücher, 12 Anthologien (Textauswahlen), 18 Aufsätze und eine Übersetzung¹³. Viele der erwähnten Schriften waren nur für kurze Zeit, im Blick auf das römische Adrienne-Symposium (27.–29. September 1985)¹⁴, im Buchhandel erhältlich und sind darum schwer für die wissenschaftliche Forschung greifbar¹⁵. Der Grund für diese Zurückhaltung von Seiten des Verlages liegt zweifellos in manchen Inhalten, die nicht wenige kritische Fragen aufwerfen. Schon im Jahre 2000 konnte Gisbert Greshake in seinem kurzen

⁷ Zur Biographie Balthasars, mit zahlreichen unveröffentlichten Quellen, siehe besonders das Standardwerk von Manfred Lochbrunner, Hans Urs von Balthasar 1905–1988. Die Biographie eines Jahrhunderttheologen, Würzburg 2020.

⁸ H.U. von Balthasar, Erster Blick auf Adrienne von Speyr, Einsiedeln 1968; Einsiedeln – Trier ⁴1989; Ders., Unser Auftrag. Bericht und Entwurf, Einsiedeln 1984; Neuausgabe: Unser Auftrag. Bericht und Weisung, Einsiedeln – Freiburg [i.Br.] 2004; Adrienne von Speyr, Aus meinem Leben. Fragmente und Selbstbiographie, herausgegeben und eingeleitet von Hans Urs von Balthasar, Einsiedeln 1968; ²1984. Vgl. die Übersichten bei Elio Guerriero, Hans Urs von Balthasar. Eine Monographie, Einsiedeln – Freiburg [i.Br.] 1993, 129–152; Gisbert Greshake, Speyr, Adrienne von, in: LThK 9 (2000) 836f; Michael Schulz, Hans Urs von Balthasar begegnen, Augsburg 2002, 48–54; Lochbrunner, Hans Urs von Balthasar 1905–1988, 219f.

⁹ Lochbrunner, Hans Urs von Balthasar 1905–1988, 219, Anm. 31.

¹⁰ Vgl. die Hinweise bei Antoine Birot, La mistica dell'Amore con Adrienne von Speyr e Hans Urs von Balthasar, I, Bologna 2024, 34.

¹¹ Vgl. Lochbrunner, Hans Urs von Balthasar 1905–1988, 403. Eine gegenwärtige Übersicht findet sich in <https://balthasarspeyr.org/de/werk/speyr> (Zugang 25.03.2025).

¹² Victor Conzemius, Adrienne von Speyr, in: Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz (07.06.2024), <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/010024/2024-06-07/> (Zugang 25.03.2025).

¹³ Vgl. https://johannes-verlag.de/jh_avs_bibliographie.pdf (Zugang 4.4.2025). Eine etwas andere Aufstellung unternimmt Birot I (2024) 33–36: er listet auf 67 Bände, 15 Aufsätze und eine Übersetzung.

¹⁴ H.U. von Balthasar u.a. (Hrsg.), Adrienne von Speyr und ihre kirchliche Sendung, Einsiedeln 1986.

¹⁵ Vgl. Birot I (2024) 41–43.

Lexikonartikel schreiben: „Eine größere theologische Auseinandersetzung damit [mit dem Gesamtwerk Adriennes] steht noch aus“¹⁶.

Das ist umso verwunderlicher, als Balthasar betont, ihr Werk und das seine seien voneinander nicht zu trennen und „zwei Hälften eines Ganzen, das als Mitte eine einzige Gründung hat“¹⁷. Der Schweizer Theologe hat sogar behauptet, das Werk Adriennes sei wichtiger als das seine: „Heute nach ihrem Tode erscheint mir ihr Werk weit wichtiger als das meine, und die Herausgabe ihrer ‚Nachlasswerke‘ geht allen eigenen Arbeiten vor“¹⁸. Diese Einschätzung entspricht freilich in keiner Weise der Rezeption der Werke von Balthasar und von Speyrs, wo in aller Regel die Schriften Adriennes nur eine Nebenrolle spielen¹⁹.

Ein kennzeichnendes Beispiel für die Einschätzung einer eher geringen Rolle für die Prägung der theologischen Ideen Balthasars durch von Speyr ist die bereits 1992 erschienene Dissertation Karl Josef Wallners über die trinitarische Dramatik, also ein Thema, bei dem Balthasar sich (vor allem in den späteren Bänden seiner theologischen Trilogie) sehr gerne auf Adrienne beruft.

„In der Beurteilung und Bewertung des Verhältnisses von balthasarscher Theologie und der ‚inspirativen Mystik‘ Adriennes zeichnen sich in der gegenwärtigen Balthasarrezeption (bzw. in ihrer Verweigerung) zwei Grundpositionen ab. Die erste weist Adrienne einen genialen inspirativen Einfluss zu, was dann entweder als notwendige spirituelle Ergänzung zur akademischen Theologie gutgeheißen oder, was eher der Fall scheint, als Vorwand genommen werden kann, um der systematischen Auseinandersetzung mit Balthasar auszuweichen und sein Schaffen mit einem gewissen abschätzigen Unterton im Bereich der experimentalen Spiritualität oder Mystik anzusiedeln. Die zweite Weise der Auffassung des Verhältnisses geht dahin, eine Priorität oder Auktorität Balthasars über Adrienne gelten zu lassen, wonach Adrienne in ihren mystischen Visionen nichts wesentlich anderes geschaut hat, als sie im täglichen Umgang mit ihrem Beichtvater und Seelenführer Balthasar sich bewusst oder unbewusst anzueignen vermochte. Die eigene Einschätzung Balthasars ... leistet zwar mit Bestimmtheit der ersteren Auffassung Vorschub. Jedoch ist zu bedenken,

¹⁶ Greshake, Speyr, 837. Vgl. Birot I (2024) 19f.

¹⁷ H.U. von Balthasar, *Zu seinem Werk*, Freiburg [i.Br.] 2000, 76. Vgl. J.G. Roten, Die beiden Hälften des Mondes. Marianisch-anthropologische Dimensionen in der gemeinsamen Sendung von Hans Urs von Balthasar und Adrienne von Speyr, in: Lehmann – Kasper (1989) 104–132; Rodrigo Polanco, „Zwei Hälften eines Ganzen“. Die theologische Beziehung zwischen Hans Urs von Balthasar und Adrienne von Speyr, in: *Rivista Teologica di Lugano* 27 (3/2022) 485–516.

¹⁸ Balthasar, *Erster Blick*, 11. Eine Übersicht über die „Nachlasswerke“, die ca. 5000 Seiten umfassen, und deren Zugänglichkeit bietet Birot I (2024) 37–45.

¹⁹ Eine Ausnahme dazu ist das dreibändige Werk von Antoine Birot, *La mystique de l’amour dans Hans Urs von Balthasar en écho à Adrienne von Speyr*, 3 Bde., Paris 2020–2021; italienische Übersetzung: *La mistica dell’amore di Adrienne von Speyr e Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 3 Bde., Bologna 2024. Vgl. die Rezensionen durch Paschal Ide, Rezension von: Antoine Birot, *La mystique de l’amour dans Hans Urs von Balthasar en écho à Adrienne von Speyr*, Bd. 1–2, Paris 2020–2021, in: *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 143 (3/2021) 510–511 (<https://www.nrt.be/it/recensioni/la-mystique-de-l-amour-selon-hans-urs-von-balthasar-en-echo-a-adrienne-von-speyr-1-l-amour-absolu-devenant-mission-pref-mgr-a-leonard-14272>) (Zugang 25.03.2025); Mario Imperatori, in: *Rassegna di Teologia* 62 (2/2021) 332–335 (Bd. 1–2); Jacques Servais, in: *Gregorianum* 102 (2021) 675–679 (Bd. 1–2); 103 (2022) 434–345 (Bd. 3); Manfred Lochbrunner, in: *Theologische Revue* 118 (2022) 67–72.

dass die Prägung der Denkform Balthasars durch seine Beschäftigung mit der Patristik und allem voran mit den prägenden Denkgestalten des Idealismus und anderer philosophischer Strömungen bereits lange vor der Bekanntschaft mit Adrienne lag. Aus diesem Grund vertreten wir die zweite Auffassung und halten den Einfluss der Mystikerin auf die originären Grundstrukturen der Theologie Balthasars für gering. Was aber ohne Zweifel als vermittelnder Beitrag Adriennes angesehen werden kann, ist die Tendenz zur ‚Veranschaulichung‘, wie sie sich beispielsweise in der plastischen Schilderung trinitarisch-göttlicher Vorgänge unter Beiziehung einer personologischen Terminologie auf auffälligsten (und anstößigsten) zeigt“²⁰.

Ein konkretes Beispiel für den Einfluss der Gedankenwelt Balthasars, insofern sie bereits vor der Begegnung mit der Visionärin ausgebildet war, bietet Balthasar selbst auf dem von ihm erbetenen römischen Symposion über Adrienne von Speyr: Adrienne schaut die Hölle als eine riesige Kloake, wobei in deren stinkenden Strom immer neue Sünden abgeladen werden. Jesus Christus weist diese Kloake aus der Welt hinaus. Balthasar erinnert daran, das Wort „Kloake“ für die Hölle stamme von Origenes²¹. Hat hier Adrienne geschaut, was dem Origenes-Freund Balthasar wohl-tat?²² Hans Urs von Balthasar betonte jedenfalls im Jahre 1986, seine Theologie über die „Hoffnung für alle“ sei schon vor seiner Bekanntschaft mit Adrienne von Speyr abgeschlossen gewesen²³.

Am 25.–26. Mai 2000 fand in Lugano eine theologische Tagung statt, an deren Vorbereitung ich mitwirken durfte und die sich mit dem Thema befasste „Mystische Erfahrung und Theologie. Epistemologische Forschung über die Vorschläge Hans Urs von Balthasars“²⁴. Von den zwölf Vorträgen waren fast alle auf Italienisch, einer auf Spanisch und zwei auf Deutsch. Wegen der entlegenen Publikation südlich der Alpen im italienischen Sprachraum ist diese Tagung in deutschen Ländern leider kaum rezipiert. Mit dem Einfluss Adrienne von Speyrs befasste sich vor allem der Vortrag

²⁰ K.J. Wallner, Gott als Eschaton. Trinitarische Dramatik als Voraussetzung göttlicher Universalität bei Hans Urs von Balthasar, Heiligenkreuz 1992, 25f.

²¹ Vgl. H.U. von Balthasar, Theologik II, Einsiedeln 1985, 315f. 320; Ders., Theologie des Abstiegs zur Hölle, in: Ders. u. a. (Hrsg.), Adrienne von Speyr und ihre kirchliche Sendung, Einsiedeln 1986, 138–146 (144).

²² Vgl. hierzu bereits Manfred Hauke, Auf den Spuren des Origenes: Größe und Grenzen Hans Urs von Balthasars, in: Theologisches 35 (2006) 554–562.

²³ H.U. von Balthasar, Zur Frage: „Hoffnung für alle“. Eine Antwort auf den Artikel von Pfr. Karl Besler, in: Theologisches Nr. 199, November 1986, 7363–7366 (7363): „Entgegen dem, was Sie glauben lassen, war meine diesbezügliche Theologie vor meiner Begegnung mit Adrienne von Speyr (1940) durchaus abgeschlossen. Ich habe ... meine beiden wichtigsten Lehrer zitiert, Erich Przywara und Henri Kardinal de Lubac, der mir den geistigen Zugang zu den griechischen Vätern eröffnete. Ich nenne davon Origenes (...), Gregor von Nyssa, der sie offen und ungeschützt vertritt, und Maximus Confessor, bei dem ich sie nachweisen zu können glaube“. Eine kritische Darstellung dieser Theologie findet sich bei C.J. Kruijen, *Peut-on espérer un salut universel? Étude critique d'une opinion théologique contemporaine concernant la damnation*, Paris 2014, 65–158 (zu Adrienne: 70–71). Balthasar antwortet in seinem Beitrag auf den vorausgegangenen Artikel von Karl Besler, Die Hölle leer hoffen? Erwägungen zu Hans Urs von Balthasars Thesen vom universalen Heil, in: Theologisches Nr. 197, September 1986, 7255–7264 (zugänglich in www.theologisches.net, Archiv).

²⁴ *Rivista Teologica di Lugano* 6 (1/2001), 264 S. Eine abschließende Zusammenfassung erstellten Manfred Hauke – A.M. Jerumanis, *Esperienza mistica e teologia. Una sintesi*, in: *Rivista Teologica di Lugano* 6 (1/2001) 247–264.

des belgischen Jesuiten Jacques Servais²⁵. Servais lehnt zwei seiner Meinung nach unzureichende Deutungen ab: Balthasar ohne Adrienne, die er als „Mystikerin“ bezeichnet, und „Adrienne, mystische Inspiratorin von Balthasar“²⁶. Es handele sich um ein prophetisches Charisma²⁷. In anderen Vorträgen auf der gleichen Tagung wurde freilich deutlich, dass sich bei der Annahme eines übernatürlichen prophetischen Charismas Adrienne von Speyrs manche Probleme ergeben²⁸.

Der Forschungsbeitrag von Lyra Pitstick und Richard Gallagher

Im vorliegenden Heft drucken wir ausnahmsweise einen Aufsatz in englischer Sprache, weil er für eine angemessene Rezeption des theologischen Werkes von Balthasar und Speyr auch im deutschen Sprachraum äußerst wichtig ist. Gestellt wird hier die Frage nach dem Ursprung der außergewöhnlichen visionären Erfahrungen Adrienne von Speyrs. Handelt es sich wirklich um „Mystik“, also um ein übernatürliches Charisma, das dem Bereich der Prophetie angehört? Oder geht es um ein pathologisches Phänomen psychischen Ursprungs? Oder ist die Einwirkung von Geistwesen anzunehmen, die einen übernatürlichen Ursprung vortäuschen?²⁹ Ist der Ursprung also übernatürlich, pathologisch oder außernatürlich (präternatural)?

Der Doppelaufsatz hat zwei Verfasser, Lyra Pitstick und Richard Gallagher, wobei freilich für den ersten Teil hauptsächlich Lyra Pitstick verantwortlich ist und für den zweiten Teil vor allem Richard Gallagher. Der Inhalt ist miteinander abgestimmt und wird von beiden Autoren gemeinsam verantwortet. Pitstick hat ihre Doktorarbeit, betreut von Charles Morerod OP (dem jetzigen Bischof von Fribourg und Genf), geschrieben über Balthasars Theologie und die katholische Lehre zum „Descensus ad inferos“³⁰. Unsere Zeitschrift hat die sorgfältig erarbeiteten Ergeb-

²⁵ Jacques Servais, *Per una valutazione dell'influsso di Adrienne von Speyr su Hans Urs von Balthasar*, in: *Rivista Teologica di Lugano* 6 (1/2001) 67–89. Siehe auch Ders., *Una mistica imperniata sulla Rivelazione giovannea*, in: *Humanitas* 63 (4/2008) 582–597; Ders., Vorwort zu: Marcello Paradiso, *Adrienne von Speyr. Una donna nella Chiesa*, Assisi 2016, 5–8; Ders., Vorwort zu: Cristiana Dobner, *Nella via mistica di Adrienne von Speyr. Un tentativo di fenomenologia teologica*, Cantalupa (Torino) 2019, 7–12; Ders. (Hrsg.), *Adrienne von Speyr. Una donna nel cuore del ventesimo secolo* (Collana Balthasariana 4), Lugano – Siena 2020.

²⁶ Servais, *Per una valutazione*, 68–74.

²⁷ Servais, *Per una valutazione*, 75–83.

²⁸ Kritische Fragen stellten unter anderem Manfred Lochbrunner, *Das Ineinander von Schau und Theologie in der Lehre vom Karsamstag bei Hans Urs von Balthasar*, in: *Rivista Teologica di Lugano* 6 (1/2001) 171–193; Manfred Hauke, „Sperare per tutti“? Il ricorso all'esperienza dei santi nell'ultima grande controversia di Hans Urs von Balthasar, in: *Rivista Teologica di Lugano* 6 (1/2001) 195–220.

²⁹ Vgl. dazu u.a. Egon von Petersdorff, *Dämonologie II: Dämonen am Werk*, Stein am Rhein ²1982 (Neuaufgabe: Bad Schmiedeberg ⁵2025), 216–246 („Die Dämonen als falsche Mystiker“).

³⁰ A.L. Pitstick, *Light in Darkness. Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell*, Grand Rapids, Michigan – Cambridge, U.K. 2007. Für diese Arbeit erhielt die Autorin im Jahre 2009 den „John Templeton Award for Theological Promise“, eine herausragende Auszeichnung für theologische Nachwuchstalente: vgl. <https://hope.edu/news/2009/01/19/lyra-pitstick-of-religion-faculty-receives-international-award.html> (Zugang 30.03.2025). Siehe auch Lyra Pitstick, *Christ's Descent into Hell*. John Paul II, Joseph Ratzinger and Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Theology of Holy Saturday, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2016.

nisse ausführlich dokumentiert³¹. Richard Gallagher hingegen ist Professor für Psychiatrie. Darüber hinaus hat er eine jahrzehntelange Erfahrung mit Fällen von dämonischer Belästigung und von Besessenheit³².

Im ersten Teil des Doppelaufsatzes stellen die Autoren drei wenig bekannte Texte vor und kommentieren sie. Der erste Text betrifft den Umgang Balthasars mit den „Nachlasswerken“ Adrienne von Speys, die nur einem begrenzten Kreis von Sympathisanten zugänglich gemacht werden sollten. Im zweiten Text, aus einem der beiden Nachlassbände über „Kreuz und Hölle“, geht es um die Lehre von der Hölle im Verständnis Balthasars und Speys. Der dritte Text ist eine sensationelle Neuentdeckung: in dem 1952 erschienenen Werk des französischen Psychiaters Jean Lhermitte über echte und falsche Mystiker findet sich eine Fallstudie, die allem Anschein nach von den außergewöhnlichen Erfahrungen Adrienne von Speys und von der Rolle Balthasars handelt³³. Lhermitte stellte die Diagnose der Hysterie. Hierbei ergibt sich freilich die Frage, wann diese Diagnose gestellt wurde und inwieweit er über die Fülle der paranormalen Phänomene im Leben Adriennes orientiert war³⁴. Auch in seinem Werk über wahre und falsche Besessenheit konzentriert er sich auf eine Erklärung der vorgestellten Fälle als psychiatrische Phänomene³⁵.

An dieser Stelle setzt der zweite Teil der Studie ein, die nach einem übernatürlichen oder außernatürlichen Ursprung der außergewöhnlichen Phänomene fragt. Danach handelt es sich bei den „mystischen“ Erfahrungen Adriennes nicht um eine psychische Krankheit, auch nicht um Besessenheit oder ein bewusstes Paktieren mit bösen Mächten, sondern um eine Täuschung durch Dämonen (präternaturaler Einfluss). Das ist zweifellos eine provokative These, aber das vorgelegte Material ist auf jeden Fall bedenkenswert und könnte die Diskussion um die problematischen Aspekte des Beitrages Adrienne von Speys beleben, vor allem bezüglich der „Theologie des Karsamstags“, die verwoben ist mit der Hoffnung auf die leere Hölle und eine dementsprechend konstruierte Trinitätslehre.

Hans Urs von Balthasar selbst hebt die von der Kirche anerkannte Mystik der beiden Kirchenlehrer Theresa von Avila und Johannes vom Kreuz kritisch von der Adriennes ab. Er wendet sich gegen die Haltung der Kirche seit der Väterzeit, vor allem gegen die seiner Meinung nach „unerbittliche Lehre Johannes‘ vom Kreuz“,

³¹ Manfred Hauke, Die katholische Lehre vom Descensus ad inferos und Hans Urs von Balthasar, in: Forum Katholische Theologie 24 (2008) 29–42.

³² Vgl. insbesondere Richard Gallagher, *Demonic Foes: My Twenty-Five Years as a Psychiatrist Investigating Possessions, Diabolic Attacks, and the Paranormal*, New York 2020; San Francisco 2022.

³³ Jean Lhermitte, *Mystiques et faux mystiques*, Paris 1952, 222–224. Es gibt auch eine deutsche Übersetzung von Oskar von Nostitz, die 1953 in der Schweiz erschien: Jean Lhermitte, *Echte und falsche Mystiker*, Luzern 1953, 223–224.

³⁴ Die angeblichen mystischen Erfahrungen Adriennes während ihrer Betreuung durch Balthasar beginnen im November 1940 und zeigen sich ab Mai 1944 in den sogenannten „großen Diktaten“, die Balthasar aufschrieb, während Speyr ihre visionären Erlebnisse hatte: vgl. Birot I (2024) 201–205.

³⁵ Jean Lhermitte, *Les pseudo-possessions diaboliques. Les psychoses démonopathiques*, in: *Satan. Études Carmélitaines* 1948, 472–491; Ders., *Vrais et faux possédés*, Paris 1956. Vgl. dazu Emmanuel Drouin u.a., *Possession diabolique par Jean Lhermitte*, in: *L'Encéphale* (2017), 5 Seiten, www.sciencedirect.com; Emmanuel Drouin – Patrick Hautecoeur, *Sur un cas de possession démoniaque par Jean Lhermitte*, in: *Annales médico-psychologiques, revue psychiatrique* 181 (5/2023) 471–473; Gallagher, *Demonic Foes* (2020) 22f.

„die alles Sinnen- und Phantasiehafte in den mystischen Erfahrungen mit einem grundsätzlichen großen Fragezeichen versieht“³⁶. Der Artikel von Lyra Pitstick und Richard Gallagher zeigt, wie berechtigt dieses große Fragezeichen ist.

³⁶ H.U. von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit I*, Einsiedeln – Trier 1961 (³1988) 396. Eine kritische Abhandlung zur negativen Einschätzung der hl. Theresa von Avila durch Balthasar findet sich bei Jennifer Martin Newsome, *Balthasar avec Kristeva: On the Recovery of a Baroque Teresa of Avila*, in: *Modern Theology* 37 (1/2021) 23–43 (24–26). Zur Frage nach den außerordentlichen Begleiterscheinungen der Mystik (und den Täuschungen darüber) vgl. auch Joseph Schumacher, *Die Mystik im Christentum und in den nichtchristlichen Religionen*, Heimbach/Eifel 2016, 315ff.

A Deeper Look at the Balthasar-Speyr Collaboration

Part I: Three Little-Known Texts and Their Preliminary Assessment

Ein tieferer Blick auf die Zusammenarbeit Balthasar-Speyr.

Teil I: Drei wenig bekannte Texte und deren vorläufige Beurteilung.

LYRA PITSTICK* – RICHARD GALLAGHER**

Zusammenfassung: Im katholischen Kontext erfordert echte Mystik einen übernatürlichen Ursprung. Die Richtlinien der Kirche verlangen jedoch eine vorsichtige Haltung gegenüber einer Annahme von direkten göttlichen Ursachen, solange keine vernünftige Bestätigung vorliegt. Da materielle und menschliche Ursachen uns besser bekannt sind und häufiger vorkommen, müssen sie zuerst in Betracht gezogen und ausgeschlossen werden, und dann eine dämonische Herkunft, bevor auf verlässliche Weise eine übernatürliche Ursache angenommen werden kann. Der zweiteilige Artikel folgt diesem Verfahren, um die Zusammenarbeit zwischen dem Theologen Hans Urs von Balthasar und der angeblichen Mystikerin Adrienne von Speyr näher zu beleuchten. ►

Abstract: In the Catholic context, true mysticism requires supernatural origin. But the Church's guidelines require a skeptical stance about direct divine causation unless reasonable confirmation is obtained. As material causes and human ones are both more knowable to us and more common, they must be considered and ruled out first, and then demonic sources, before a conclusion of supernatural causation can be reliable. This two-part article follows this procedure to take a deeper look at the collaboration between the theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and the alleged mystic, Adrienne von Speyr.

In Part I, we thus introduce, translate, and examine three little-known texts that shed light on the pair's psychology and outlook ►

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In Teil I werden daher drei wenig bekannte Texte vorgestellt, übersetzt und untersucht, die Aufschluss über die Psychologie des Paares und die Sichtweise auf ihr gemeinsames Werk geben. Der erste Text, der nie zuvor außerhalb von Balthasars privater Verbreitung veröffentlicht wurde, zeugt von seiner absichtlich verzögerten Freigabe von Material, das für die Auswertung von Speyrs Erfahrungen und der davon abhängigen Theologie notwendig ist. Der zweite Text, ein Auszug aus diesem zurückgehaltenen Material, der zuerst von Manfred Lochbrunner hervorgehoben und hier mit einem Kommentar ins Englische übersetzt wurde, zeigt, dass sowohl Speyr als auch Balthasar wussten, dass ihre Theologie der Hölle eine theologische Neuheit war, aber beabsichtigten, sie als bereits katholische Lehre zu präsentieren. Schließlich wird eine anonymisierte Fallstudie des bekannten katholischen Neuropsychiaters Jean Lhermitte als auf das Paar anwendbar identifiziert und ebenfalls ins Englische übersetzt. Ein Zeugnis von Balthasar liefert ergänzende Beweise. Obwohl Lhermittes Einschätzung aufschlussreich ist und berücksichtigt werden muss, stellen wir fest, dass die Angemessenheit seiner Diagnose eines psychologischen Ursprungs für Speyrs Behauptungen durch das Fehlen wichtiger relevanter Daten eingeschränkt ist. Folglich werden wir in Teil II die Frage stellen, ob die verschiedenen ungewöhnlichen Phänomene, von denen Speyr (hauptsächlich durch die Vermittlung von Balthasars) berichtet, wie Visionen, Lokutionen, Stigmata, Levitationen, Heilungen usw., notwendigerweise einen übernatürlichen Ursprung haben.

on their joint work. Never published outside Balthasar's private distribution before, the first text gives evidence of his intentionally delayed release of material necessary for the evaluation of Speyr's experiences and the theology dependent upon them. The second, an excerpt from that curated material first highlighted by Manfred Lochbrunner and here translated into English with commentary, shows that both Speyr and Balthasar knew their theology of hell was a theological novelty but intended to present it as already Catholic teaching. Finally, an anonymized case study by the prominent Catholic neuropsychiatrist Jean Lhermitte is identified as applicable to the pair, and also translated into English. Testimony from Balthasar provides complementary evidence. While Lhermitte's assessment is illuminating and must be taken into consideration, we note that the adequacy of his diagnosis of a psychological origin for Speyr's claims is limited by his lack of important relevant data.

Consequently, in Part II, we will ask whether the various unusual phenomena reported of Speyr (primarily by Balthasar), such as visions, locutions, stigmata, levitations, healings, etc., necessarily have supernatural origin?

1. Much of the ongoing theological evaluation of the works of Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988) and of Adrienne von Speyr (1902–1967) has tended to focus on one or the other, and almost due to necessity. Balthasar's bibliography includes 113 books published in his lifetime, several more posthumously, not to mention hun-

dreds of articles. Speyr's count comes to 62 books from the time of her conversion in 1940 until Balthasar's death in 1988, almost all of which were published by his press, Johannes Verlag. (Because the books published under her name were compiled and edited by Balthasar from his notes of conversations with her, the date of his death is the more relevant one.) Then there's the ever-growing secondary literature: work on Balthasar outstripped that on Speyr by 15 to 30 times in a database comparison conducted a decade ago, a lead difficult to narrow since research on Speyr frequently alludes to her collaboration with Balthasar, but the reverse is not often the case.¹

2. This neglect is all the more striking given Balthasar's insistence that his work not be separated from hers. For example, he wrote *Unser Auftrag* (*Our Task*) with "one chief aim: to prevent any attempt being made to separate my work from that of Adrienne von Speyr."² Despite such explicit assertions, the division often happens, and not only for practical reasons. In extreme cases we have witnessed, the lack of attention to Speyr was active disparagement. Balthasar was held up as the innovative, robust, and cultured theologian, while anything questionably orthodox or "bizarre" was attributed to Speyr, without any implied fault to Balthasar's integration of her ideas into his work or his formation of his spiritual directee.

3. In this context, in Part I, we translate and examine three little-known texts essential to assessing the Balthasar-Speyr collaboration. The first, by Balthasar, we believe never to have been published outside his private distribution. The second relates a significant exchange between the two first highlighted by the notable Balthasar scholar, Manfred Lochbrunner, and previously unavailable in translation. Identified as relevant to our topic and published in English, both for the first time, the third is a case study by Dr. Jean Lhermitte, a major neurologist/neuropsychiatrist contemporary with Balthasar and Speyr. Part II shall build upon our discussion here by considering further evidence from the pair's works and what all this material reveals about the origin, supernatural or otherwise, of Speyr's experiences.

1. Balthasar's Note accompanying Distribution of Speyr's *Nachlasswerke*

4. The following note was found in a volume of one of the Speyrrian works collectively called the *Nachlasswerke* ("the posthumous works"):

To the Reader:

This volume of the posthumous works of Adrienne von Speyr is a private print of the Johannes Verlag that is not on the market and cannot be ordered through bookshops. For the time being, it will be sent by the publisher's leadership only to particular individuals, to inform them of things that could be of significance for the Church. The publisher asks for a like

¹ One substantial secondary engagement is A. Birot's three-part *La mystique de L'Amour selon Hans Urs von Balthasar en écho à Adrienne von Speyr*, Paris 2020, 2021.

² H. U. von Balthasar, *Our Task*, San Francisco 1994, 13.

discreet use, that it be passed on only to such persons who possess sufficient ecclesiastical discernment. Any indiscreet publicity should be avoided, but the publisher is grateful for well-grounded critical expressions of opinion.

The cost for a single volume amounts to an average of DM/CHF 20.--. If the addressee is able and willing to pay this amount or a part of it, the publisher will be grateful to him; but if not, the book needs not be returned. Payments can be made to Postcheck Johannesverlag 80–22 660 Zurich.

For Johannes Verlag
Hans Urs von Balthasar
Münsterplatz 4, Basel³

5. Intriguingly, this note shows that Balthasar himself is at least partly responsible for the slow engagement of scholars with Speyr. Among Speyr's works, the *Nachlasswerke* are the most important for assessing her spiritual experiences and her theology as based upon them, for there they are presented in their most explicit and detailed published form. Yet Balthasar 1) printed only a private run, 2) distributed texts only to personally selected individuals, and 3) then only with the added caution of explicit instructions that they not be shared with just anyone. This unusual approach has several significant implications.

6. Balthasar suggests that discretion is his primary motive for so tightly controlling the text's distribution. If the book should be passed on only to those with "sufficient ecclesiastical discernment," the initial recipients must have been judged likewise to possess this characteristic. This requirement implies that Balthasar expected a general readership to find something difficult or disturbing about the material: either the subtlety or technicality of its expression would easily result in misunderstanding, or the content would not have been recognized, immediately or upon reflection, as compatible with orthodox doctrine and practice. Of these two, since Speyr's German is relatively easy and Balthasar's criterion is "ecclesiastical discernment" rather than, say, erudition or rhetorical sophistication, the concern about reception of the content appears the more likely.

³ Translation by Lyra Pitstick of original note:
An die Leser

Dieser Band der Nachlaßwerke Adriennes von Speyr ist ein Privatdruck des Johannesverlages, er ist nicht im Handel und kann nicht durch Buchhandlungen bestellt werden. Er wird einstweilen von der Verlagsleitung lediglich an einzelne Persönlichkeiten gesandt, um sie von Dingen in Kenntnis zu setzen, die für die Kirche von Bedeutung sein können. Der Verlag bittet um eine diskrete sinngemäße Verwendung, um Weitergabe nur an solche Personen, die hinreichend kirchliche Unterscheidungsgabe besitzen. Jede indiskrete Publizität möge unterbleiben, dagegen ist der Verlag für fundierte kritische Meinungsäußerung dankbar.

Die Selbstkosten für den einzelnen Band belaufen sich pro Band auf durchschnittlich DM/Fr.20.--. Falls der Adressat diese Summe oder einen Teil davon zu vergüten imstande und gewillt ist, wird der Verlag ihm dankbar sein; das Buch braucht aber andernfalls nicht zurückgesendet zu werden. Einzah-
lungen können erfolgen auf Postscheck Johannesverlag 80–22 660 Zürich.

Für den Johannes Verlag
Hans Urs von Balthasar
Münsterplatz 4, Basel

7. In fact, Balthasar made this worry explicit about one audience in particular in a letter of the time to Erich Przywara, writing, “And now I am forced to produce the really decisive writings of Adrienne von Speyr in private prints and to distribute them free of charge, *the only way to avoid mutilation by censors*”⁴ Balthasar’s desire to avoid needing to change Speyr’s text in response to critiques by Church censors, with attendant delays in publication, reflects his first attempt to publish a work of hers, namely, her commentary on the Gospel of John, which occurred under a male pseudonym (“Jean-Marie Lacroix”). Though initial reviews by Jesuits in 1945 were positive or cautious, the diocesan censor’s was so negative that Balthasar’s provincial appealed on his behalf to the Generalate in Rome for a third review. It came back decisively negative.⁵ As did yet a fourth review. It would take another four years before Balthasar could revise the text to a form acceptable to still other censors.

8. Balthasar’s other motivation for managing who received a copy reveals an additional possible reason for discretion, namely, the desire to avoid widespread publicity. The note was inside *Geheimnis der Jugend* (*The Mystery of Youth*), which relates how — as put in the summary made by the Johannes Community founded by Balthasar and Speyr — “[i]n obedience to her confessor and spiritual Father, Hans Urs von Balthasar, [Speyr] revisits the early stages of her life and inhabits the state of consciousness proper to each one.”⁶ It is a sort of personal history leading up to her work with Balthasar. Living in an age that has seen on an entirely new scale the devastating effects broadcast publication of personal information can have on those involved, we might be sympathetically inclined to think a concern to protect Speyr’s privacy is what drives Balthasar’s desire for discretion.

9. However, that seems not to fit all the facts. Although the publication year for *Geheimnis* is given as 1966, the front matter identifies it as one of the “posthumous works” — but Speyr does not pass away until 1967. Was the work in final form in 1966, then, but only printed after her death? Or was it (and the two other *Nachlasswerke* dated 1966) actually printed and distributed before she passed? Neither shows much reticence about sharing details of her personal life in comparison, say, to the 30-year moratorium on the publication of personal papers once not uncommon. In fact, although *Geheimnis* is the third of the *Nachlasswerke* printed, it is identified as volume VII. So it appears Balthasar had planned the series structure and completed substantial work on it (three volumes) well before Speyr died.

⁴ H. U. von Balthasar to E. Przywara, Aug. 19, 1965, Przywara Estate, Archive of the Province of German Jesuits, quoted in M. Lochbrunner, s.v. Speyr, Adrienne von, *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon* (2023), accessed Jun. 19, 2024, <https://www.bbkl.de/index.php/frontend/lexicon/S/Sp-Sq/speyr-adrienne-von-84083>, emphasis added.

⁵ In short, “clumsy, imprecise, ambiguous, false statements are scattered through the entire work [T]he book cannot be published in the form as it stands.” [„*Solcherlei plumpe, ungenaue, zweideutige, falsche Aussagen sind über das ganze Werk verstreut, und es ist nicht Aufgabe des Revisors, diese alle einzeln aufzuzählen. Das Werk, so wie es vorliegt, kann nicht verbessert werden, wenn es nicht im Ganzen erneuert wird. Deshalb bleibt kein anderes Urteil, als dass das Buch in der Form, wie es vorliegt, nicht herausgegeben werden kann.*“] Iudicium, Dossier Hans Urs von Balthasar: Censors’ Reports IV/10, Zurich Provincial Archive, quoted in German translation in Lochbrunner, s.v. Speyr.

⁶ <https://balthasarspeyr.org/work/books/das-geheimnis-der-jugend>, accessed Mar. 27, 2024.

10. More significantly, other *Nachlasswerke* volumes contain material even more dramatic than *Geheimnis. Kreuz und Hölle* (*Cross and Hell*), e.g., relates her alleged experiences of hell and Christ's Passion, and one volume of it is likewise dated 1966; nonetheless, this work is also attributed to her without hesitation. Now, if Balthasar managed the distribution of *Geheimnis* so carefully, it seems *a fortiori* likely he took similar care with the other *Nachlasswerke*, but since he openly named her as their author, it is again more likely that his primary motivation was not protection of her identity. Put another way, if the more extreme *Kreuz und Hölle* was published under her name even while she was living, then privacy was not the main concern.

11. In further support of this conclusion, Balthasar's note reveals he does not mind the word spreading to a broader, *like-minded* group; he only wants to avoid "any indiscreet publicity." In fact, insofar as the book's contents "could be of significance for the Church," he believes a very wide dissemination may indeed be deserved, but for now he is testing the water. Thus, he asks for "well-grounded, critical expressions of opinion" from a select group he thinks has the necessary "discernment."

12. While we whole-heartedly support prudent assessment by qualified experts before the circulation of claimed mystical occurrences, lest people are deceived by phenomena of non-divine origin, what is striking in this case is that (setting aside events before she met Balthasar) Speyr's unusual experiences had been taking place since the Holy Week after Balthasar received her into the Catholic Church in late 1940 ... and he's seeking broader counsel about their content only 26 years later, when she is nearing death, and then only from a hand-picked group under restricted conditions.

13. To be clear, we are not asserting 1966 was the first time he sought "well-grounded critical ... opinions." Balthasar's Jesuit superiors knew something of his work with Speyr and initiated a formal internal attempt to assess the authenticity of her experiences not later than 1946—it would ultimately end without the investigator taking a stand one way or the other—but as the time for his final vows approached, they would offer no guarantees that his future assignments would accommodate his work with her. To Balthasar, this meant an ultimatum: to continue with Speyr as closely as he had been, he would have to leave the Jesuits. His bishop also knew something of what was going on and urged Balthasar not to leave the Society.⁷ And our final text will present a third professional's critical opinion from well before 1966.

14. There are two striking things about Balthasar's late date. First, during those 26 years before the limited release of the first volume of Speyr's most essential material, Johannes Verlag published over 30 other works of Speyr's, and Balthasar saw well over 100 of his own published by various presses. That is, their reputations were given substantial exposure and space to grow for decades on the basis of works Balthasar judged more readily palatable to the theological public (and censors!). During that time readers were unable to assess those works in the context of the most telling material. In fact, until the notes Balthasar took during Speyr's experiences are themselves published in unredacted form or made openly accessible, one cannot even say whether the *Nachlasswerke* tell the full story. Indeed, if

⁷ Mysteriously, the bishop's letter "went missing" from the diocesan archives in Solothurn sometime before mid-2009, but its general conclusion is known from multiple other documents that refer to it.

the causes for Balthasar's and Speyr's beatifications were to advance without such examination, they must founder as incomplete inquiries.

15. Second, Balthasar's delayed and cautious release of this essential testimony of Speyr's contrasts dramatically with the approach taken by, say, St. Thérèse of Lisieux's Carmelite sisters regarding her own autobiographical material. The nuns were so convinced of its spiritual fruitfulness for the Church and so eager to "get it out there" that they conceded certain changes in non-essentials (e.g., the name of the prioress to whom it was addressed) that were imposed by their superior as conditions for publication. In contrast, Balthasar hesitated setting Speyr's testimony openly before the *sensus fidelium* or even before non-handpicked theologians.

16. This choice was not due to doubt in his mind about Speyr's importance. While he claimed only demurely in the published note that Speyr's experiences "*could be* of significance for the Church," this is rhetorical modesty. Balthasar's actions expressed his adamant belief: In *Theo-Logik*, one of his last works, he revealed he wrote his earlier *Mysterium Paschale* in "an attempt to prepare the way for the bolder teaching of Adrienne von Speyr."⁸ He continued to try to build a bridge between Speyr's ideas and Catholic Tradition in other works, especially his *magnum opus*, *Herrlichkeit* (*The Glory of the Lord*), which, long before it ends, essentially becomes a catena of quotations from her. He went so far, in fact, as to leave the Jesuits, a community in which he'd vowed obedience, to continue what he viewed as his joint vocation with Speyr. Indeed, Balthasar was convinced not only of her value to the Church, but even of her necessity. It is on the basis of her experiences, teachings, and direction that he concluded the Church's doctrine of Christ's descent into hell, and that of hell in general, both of which have implications across the subfields of theology, needed to be corrected. This leads us to our second text for an example.

2. Balthasar and Speyr's Conversation about Rethinking the Doctrine of Hell

17. As observed by Manfred Lochbrunner, who has written several highly detailed biographical works on Balthasar, although the *Nachlasswerke* were originally distributed privately, they were briefly available through bookstores from 1985, the year of the "Roman Symposium on Adrienne von Speyr and Her Ecclesiastical Mission," until Johannes Verlag pulled them from their catalogue after Balthasar's death in 1988 for some reason. In the same place, Lochbrunner gives extracts from a pivotal conversation between Balthasar and Speyr related in the second volume of *Kreuz und Hölle* (1972) in a section titled, *Eine neue Lehre?* (A New Teaching?). Lochbrunner dates the episode itself to 1946. Since this book, among the rarest of the *Nachlasswerke*, is less accessible to most readers than Lochbrunner's article, itself only available in German, we here provide a translation of the exchange as it is in Lochbrunner

⁸ H. U. von Balthasar, *Wahrheit Gottes*, vol. II, *Theo-Logik*, Einsiedeln 1985, 315, fn. 1: „den Versuch darstellt, der kühneren Lehre Adriennes von Speyr einen Weg zu bahnen.“

before making our observations.⁹ Note that the prose summary, comments, and ellipses are all his, while the quotations are from her book; only text in brackets is supplied by the English translator. As Lochbrunner summarizes six pages in four paragraphs, with quotations from across three of them, we leave as an open question the significance of the other parts of their conversation.

Adrienne prompts Balthasar to ask three questions. He asks the first: “Doesn’t hell belong to the narrow way, where nothing can be adjusted [*regeln*]?” Her answer: “Yes, that’s right ... However, hell has acquired a frightfully medieval character; it has been allowed to sink to something like a threat, but without one knowing any longer if it objectively exists. But precisely that [it exists] one must know, because one first then really grasps the love of the Lord. You know, the Church can renounce nothing that belongs to the reality of the Redemption. She can erase nothing from the existence of the Lord. You should try to justify hell anew [*neubegründen*, or “re-establish {it},” *neubegründen*].” Thus Adrienne encourages Balthasar to carry out a theological reconsideration of hell.

This leads to his second question: “Can it be published then?” She replies: “It would naturally be difficult. One would have to prepare [*vorbereiten*] it. But it would be no new teaching, but rather Catholic teaching. For the earlier understanding was a narrowing, a bending [or “distortion,” *Verbiegung*].”

Balthasar’s objection, that one will hardly be able to proclaim the [“re-established”] teaching, is followed by his third question: “Is it not an esoteric doctrine?” Now follows an instructive dialogue. Adrienne: “Why?” Balthasar: “Because the Church will not release it.” Adrienne: “That’s not my concern.” She goes out for a moment. When she returns, Balthasar asks: “Can one prepare [*vorbereiten*] something?” Adrienne: “Yes, for example, write a series of essays about the three days of the Lord in hell that opens up perspectives everywhere. One could throw out the question once, whether the Father had given the Son only a part of his trust? Whether his love had not been great enough for the way through hell?” Balthasar: “People just take it as if the Lord damns sinners himself.” Adrienne: “There still remain concessions. It was already a concession that God became man; it is also a concession that the Son is not finished with hell.¹⁰ So that we could understand anything at all and be saved, he lowered himself to become man and to speak as a man. Eternal hell is a concession to sinners like that.”⁴⁴

I’ll [Lochbrunner] summarize the important points: Adrienne reproaches the traditional ecclesiastical doctrine about hell as a narrowing, indeed a distortion. She explicitly urges Balthasar to a re-establishment of the theology of hell. While he points out the esoteric character of the teaching, which “the Church will not release,” Adrienne says decidedly: “It will be no new teaching, but rather Catholic teaching.” From these few key points results a constellation full of tension, which beyond doubt one can expect to have paradoxical traits. So the question imposes itself, how Balthasar transposed the mystical exhibition of the visionary into

⁹ M. Lochbrunner, *Das Ineinander von Schau und Theologie in der Lehre vom Karsamstag bei Hans Urs von Balthasar*, in *Rivista Teologica di Lugano* 6 (2001) 171–193 (183), translated here by Lyra Pitstick. The translation is intentionally as literal as possible.

¹⁰ “That the Son is not finished with hell” [„dass der Sohn mit der Hölle nicht fertig wird“] could also be translated “that the Son cannot cope with hell.” Both possibilities have resonances in Balthasar’s theology of Christ’s descent into hell.

theology. However, already in asking this question, a methodological question of theology is implied, which we will leave alone for the time being: the principal question, namely, whether and to what extent mysticism can serve as a *locus theologicus* [font for theology].

⁴⁴ A. von SPEYR, *Kreuz und Hölle*, II, 455–461 (*Eine neue Lehre?*); the citations are p. 458–460.

18. Readers familiar with Balthasar's theology of Holy Saturday will easily recognize the kinship between his *Mysterium Paschale* and the series of essays Speyr suggested, as well as his fundamental arguments across his corpus that anything less than the Son's suffering eternal abandonment by the Father after His death would imply limits to His love or to the Father's "revelation" to the Son of the "depths of creation." They will also recognize the strategies of using rhetorical questions ("One could throw out the question ...") and of attempting to disarm objections simply by questioning them ("A new teaching?"). Although we concur with Lochbrunner on the foundational question of methodology, we agree also this is not the place to address it. The Church has long-standing minimal requirements for such cases.

19. Here we wish rather to call the reader's attention, first of all, to the fact that Speyr is indeed proposing there be a "new doctrine" of hell. Of course, from her rhetorical standpoint, it is not *said* to be new—that cannot be admitted and would not be accepted—but rather "Catholic teaching," because what is now taught as Catholic doctrine is, she alleges, a deviation from what it should be. As such, the implication would be that some "original doctrine" (sought in different areas of theology since the Gnostics) has been "narrowed" or "bent," that is, abridged or twisted so its truth is obscured. And yet she does not say there must be a return to the sources to recover the original, but rather says "the earlier understanding" itself is the problematic distortion, as if the doctrine taught as part of the Catholic Faith had always been deformed, until now. For, in either case, what is clear is that the Catholic Church has got it wrong and Speyr's guidance is going to set it right.

20. Seeking some other allegedly *more* original doctrine would, in any case, be an approach difficult to sustain in the face of the documentary evidence, since those familiar with the history of the doctrine testify to the ancient appearance and historical consistency of "the earlier understanding."¹¹ One might think claiming some-

¹¹ For example, in his thorough "Descensus ad inferos": *Eine religionsphilosophische Untersuchung der Motive und Interpretationen mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der monographischen Literatur seit dem 16. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurter Theologische Studien 53, Frankfurt 1997, M. Herzog comments that, in the Catholic sphere, "through the centuries, one was too sure about the meaning and explanation of the Descent article for it to come to considerable controversy," and that "A real change in the Roman Catholic doctrine has approached under the influence of Hans Urs von Balthasar's 'Theology of Holy Saturday'" [„Durch die Jahrhunderte war man sich über Sinn und Bedeutung des Descensusartikels zu sicher, als daß es zu erheblichen Kontroversen hätte kommen können," 243, and „Zu einer wirklichen Veränderung in der römisch-katholischen Lehre ist es unter dem Einfluß von Hans Urs von Balthasars 'Theologie des Karsamstags' gekommen," 244, emphasis added]. For an introduction to the rich (and consistent) expression of the Catholic doctrine, and also the Holy Saturday theology Balthasar built on Speyr, see A. L. Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell*, Grand Rapids 2007.

thing to be Catholic doctrine that is not, would be still more difficult. However, that only requires relative unfamiliarity on the part of an audience and repeated assertion by someone promoted as an authority through publications and other means. If we consider the lack of faith even in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist that has developed since the mid-20th century among Catholics, it is not hard to see how many could easily accept “a new doctrine” about “the three days of the Lord in hell,” for the latter has received dramatically less catechetical attention than the Eucharist since the time of the Protestant Reformation.

21. The second thing that calls for the reader’s attention in the text is that the end goal Speyr sees, is *different enough from what the Church holds* that she recognizes it’s going — “naturally,” even — to be difficult to publish. (At the time, theology books still clearly required vetting by a Church censor for permission to be published, and the pair were in the midst of their struggle to get *John* approved.) Thus, for readers to accept what Speyr proposes, will require “prepar[ing]” them. Note that the first step in doing so is to present Speyr’s substitute as *already* “Catholic teaching” (“It would be no new teaching, but rather Catholic teaching.”) Speyr then suggests some additional tactical approaches.

22. This project is not Speyr’s alone, however: Balthasar had been wondering if the doctrine of hell couldn’t be “adjusted.” At Speyr’s initial suggestion, he hesitates a moment over concerns that the Church would not release publication of what he himself describes as an “esoteric teaching.” Note that by calling it such, Balthasar implicitly acknowledges both that the Church has a normative teaching on hell, one *not* esoteric and thus generally held, and that Speyr’s proposal is different from it. What to do? Balthasar resolves his dilemma in favor of asking Speyr for suggestions, suggestions he later more than fulfills in the “bridge-building” he does throughout his corpus.

23. Balthasar thus gives his answer to Lochbrunner’s question about the role of mysticism in theology, at least as it concerns the pair’s own case: the mystic is the standard for the Church, not the Church for the mystic. It bears recalling that Balthasar was Speyr’s spiritual director. The episode above suggests he took some direction, as well. Not that directors can’t learn from their directees, but we must ask, from what foundation was Balthasar *directing* Speyr if he was not using Church doctrine to assess her revelations? As the one from whom she took instruction to become Catholic, as her confessor, as her spiritual director, Balthasar accepted a tremendous responsibility regarding her spiritual life. Thus, contrary to those who make Speyr the scapegoat for anything problematic in Balthasar’s corpus, we see here an instance — and a very seminal one — in which Balthasar consciously makes her project very much his own ... and in which his direction of her appears less than model. Either way, Balthasar’s words about the inseparability of their work are vindicated.

24. As for how Speyr might answer Lochbrunner’s methodological question, a comment she made on private revelations is suggestive:

The Church’s rule of thumb, that one should give only a “human” faith, not “divine” faith, to “private revelations,” may have grown out of many disappointing experiences, but formulated in this way is too summary. Something lies in it like self-insurance for the Church, which

nonetheless has great fear that one day someone might, on behalf of God, knock on her walls from outside.¹²

Again, that the Church has a doctrine about these matters is acknowledged; again, it is said to fall short; again, someone like Speyr (coming “from outside”?) is to provide the corrective “opening of perspectives.” Any perspective of the Holy Spirit guiding the Church with authority and certainty from within to those clear rules of discernment, is absent from this view.

3. A Psychological-Spiritual Assessment of Speyr

A. The Necessarily Indirect Confirmation of Supernatural Causes

25. Balthasar and the superiors he informed would have been obliged to assess what was going on with his spiritual directee according to those time-tested protocols of the Church. In the Catholic context, true mysticism by definition requires supernatural origin; all other cases are false, or pseudo-, mysticism — not that the persons involved didn’t perceive or experience something, even something with significant meaning to them, but simply that the origin of those experiences was not God, despite any such claims. (Although *supernatural* elsewhere sometimes includes the angelic sphere, we use it in this article only to refer to things pertaining to God. Similarly, although *alleged* can imply falsity, we apply it throughout in its neutral sense of *claimed*, that is, for assertions that need to be investigated.)

26. Above all, the Church’s guidelines do not assume the divine origin of unusual phenomena; they presume a stance of skepticism unless reasonable confirmation is attained. For Christ Himself said that “false Christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect” (Mt 24:25).¹³ Besides situations of human fraud, the fallen members of the preternatural order of angels act to deceive us and, being naturally more intelligent than us, are well equipped to do so.

27. Moreover, as God’s nature infinitely exceeds ours, human beings are not able by nature to judge whether something comes directly from Him. While Revelation (as Scripture and Tradition interpreted by the Magisterium) and infused knowledge can help us know things beyond our natural capabilities, we can erroneously believe our own desires are insights of grace. So it would be presumptuous to forego a preliminary inquiry based in human reason and science. After all, we sometimes make mistakes even when assessing material causes, which are the most knowable to us.

28. Consequently, in assessing alleged miracles and mystical phenomena, the first task is to eliminate causes from within the created order (material, human, and demonic) by applying both revealed principles of discernment and those discerned by

¹² A. von Speyr, *Das Allerheiligenbuch*, 2. Teil, *Mit Nachträgen zu den Nachlaßbänden*, vol. I/2 *Die Nachlasswerke*, Einsiedeln 1977, 230–31.

¹³ Note that He identifies two types that arise: one who, as prophet, points to the other, a messianic figure.

human reason and tested over time. Material causes (e.g., condensation that appears as tears or blood, rare remissions of physical disease) and human ones (e.g., misperceptions, natural psychological disturbances, fraud), being more knowable and common than preternatural ones, are considered first. Demonic sources must similarly be ruled out before a conclusion of supernatural causation can be reliable.

B. The Discovered Assessment and Its Probable Application

29. In a case such as Speyr's, it thus would be normal and expected that Balthasar's ecclesiastical superiors would early on have directed him to have her psychologically evaluated. Such examination would not have been a pejorative pre-judgement, but rather indication that they took his reports seriously enough to investigate. The same would be true of Balthasar, if he proposed such an evaluation to Speyr as her spiritual director.

30. This brings us to our text from Jean Lhermitte, M.D. (1877–1959). An eminent neurologist of his time, Lhermitte made multiple contributions to his field that are still studied in medical schools. He was also known to have an active interest in mysticism and to be a well-informed, practicing Catholic. The combination of these qualifications led the Carmelite Order to ask him for guidelines to help them discern psychological and psychiatric cases from those of spiritual origin, and he also did consultations on such questions. He wrote two major books in this area, his 1952 *Mystiques et faux mystiques* (*True and False Mystics*) and his better-known, 1956 *Vrais et faux possédés* (*True and False [Demonically] Possessed*). Among the numerous case studies from his book on mystics is the following passage:

A lady, aged 40, whose especially fervent piety and conduct can give no grounds for any criticism, presents herself with phenomena appearing of a rather singular sort: suddenly she enters into a trance, losing consciousness of herself and the exterior world. In her "ecstasies" and "raptures" because that is how they are so called, she professes to be in communication with God. Yes, she cannot doubt it. God even speaks to her, makes known to her his instructions and his wishes, and indicates to her the behavior she must follow. Seduced by the apparent sincerity of this woman, a much distinguished and very erudite teacher takes it upon himself to collect piously the "reveries" and the subject's imaginary stories [*récits imaginaires*]. In his presence the trances multiply and make themselves more complete. She professes to be sure of her vocation and that it is quite wrong to put a stop to this path; indeed she is certain of possessing the absolute truth. "Someone tore apart my life," she adds, "when he ceased to believe in my vocation and suspected me of malice." In her trances this patient wishes it known that she relives the Passion of Jesus, whose sufferings, by the way, she imitates in a rather crude manner and delivers herself to the excessive contortions of hysteria.

It is useless to mention the content of her revelations which prove of no interest at all, but which the credulous director, completely bewitched [*envoûté*], applies himself to recording in the most minute detail and with a fervent admiration.

We assisted at one of these theatrical demonstrations: its insincerity was glaring and the diagnosis of hysteria imposed itself.

Taken aside, she showed herself affected, simpering, reticent, and suspicious, always on her guard, avoiding engaging too much with any sharing of confidences.

Nevertheless, it was evident that this lady had a strong bond, both spiritual and emotional, with the director who advised her and collected her thoughts, her feelings, as well as the evidence of the agonies she professed to undergo. These expressed themselves through pains in her palms, on her side, and on her forehead.¹⁴ These, she said, were the marks of the crown of thorns of Our Lord and the nails with which his hands had been pierced.

What stood out at the same time during her examination was the forthright certainty with which this person claimed to be in direct communication with God. Without doubt, what had been carried out was a sort of inquiry into her subconscious, because she affirmed, without any prompting in this respect, that all this was known to her from her unconscious: “let no one ever doubt that God speaks to me, it’s the absolute truth.”

Evidently cases of this sort are rather common. If we have referred to this example, it is to demonstrate living evidence of the danger of giving credence to reveries that awkwardly mimic some mystical phenomena of the second order or of letting oneself be overwhelmed by a false authority where one but finds signs of a paranoid character.¹⁵

31. Setting aside for the moment Lhermitte’s assessment, which we will later critique, the facts he relates bear uncanny resemblance to the Balthasar-Speyr collaboration: the highly educated man assiduously and devotedly taking massive notes, the woman claiming in trances to hear God’s voice and to experience the Passion, his impact upon the degree of detail in what she relates, their unwavering conviction, vocational outlook, and tight emotional and spiritual bond. It would be difficult to believe that there were two such cases in Lhermitte’s lifetime and that, despite so many similarities, a putative second case in Europe would remain unknown to Balthasar (who understandably took an interest in mystics) and to the increasing number of people who came to know of their work. At the same time, it is easy to believe that, as perhaps the most qualified and well-known contemporary expert, Lhermitte would have been sought out for the evaluation of Speyr’s case.

32. Far from disproving this possibility, the compatibility of the timing strengthens its credibility. Since Speyr turned 40 on Sept. 20, 1942, the exam (if it is indeed hers) could have taken place between that date in 1942 and in 1943 (with some time on either side to allow for rounding). In other words, if, after her first alleged experience of Christ’s descent into hell in Holy Week, 1941 — she comes downstairs to tell Balthasar that she thinks she smells like a corpse (contrary to Christ’s body in the tomb, we note, according to Acts 2:25–32) — and Balthasar or his superiors waited to see if her experiences continued in 1942, she would have had at least two, and possibly three, before the examination, not counting other alleged mystical phenomena. Repetition of such events would definitely merit examination. If Lhermitte was contacted after her second experience, it may even be that he examined her during Holy Week, 1943. However, the reported age of the woman may be an approximation

¹⁴ To be clear, Lhermitte does not observe wounds on her hands, side, or head, but the woman says she feels pain there and she identifies the cause as stigmata like Christ’s (though not also on her feet).

¹⁵ J. Lhermitte, *Mystiques et faux mystiques*, Paris 1952, 222–224, translated here by Richard Gallagher.

to help anonymize the case, so a date in 1942–43 can only be taken as a possibility. Nonetheless, Speyr would have been in her forties the entire decade before the publication of *Mystiques et faux mystiques*, and thus an exam of her roughly at the age mentioned could easily have been included in the book reporting this case study. Finally, it seems likely from the write-up that both the man and the woman were still alive in 1952 — as indeed were Balthasar and Speyr — since Lhermitte anonymizes the case study completely and even describes it as “*living evidence*.”

33. Given both the compatibility of relevant details and the unlikelihood of a sufficiently identical contemporary case, we believe the preponderance of probability is strongly in favor of the case being Speyr and Balthasar’s. The discovery of the original report in an archive would be conclusive, its absence only inconclusive, since it could have been lost. In the meantime, there are sufficient grounds to have high confidence in referring to the case as theirs below.

34. In the case study, Lhermitte acknowledges admirable qualities in both subjects: she is fervent, pious, and impeccable in her conduct; he is “distinguished and very erudite.” But Lhermitte’s appreciation of these characteristics does not prevent him from seeing also those that suggest problems. She manifests no self-doubt whatsoever about her exceptional intimacy with God and His alleged instructions; her self-image seems excessively identified with the response of others to her assertions about her vocation; and when not under the eyes of her director, she is “affected,” “simpering,” not forthright, and even “paranoid.” In her trance state, her behavior is “theatrical” and given to “excessive contortions.” For the man’s part, despite his formation, which one might have expected to equip him with sophisticated tools of discernment, he is “credulous,” “seduced,” “completely bewitched,” even “overwhelmed,” to the point that he records everything, even the most banal so-called “revelations,” with equal admiration. It is striking that all four descriptions of him suggest the dormition or overpowering of critical thinking.

35. A few clarifications about Lhermitte’s terminology are in order. First, from his medical perspective, “trance” was a more neutral word than the “ecstasy” typically used by the subjects. The former would have implied in the doctor’s mind a dissociative state, presumably not one extreme enough to be delusional or psychotic (i.e., “out of touch with reality”), but certainly one indicating a psychological disorder. Second, although Lhermitte uses the French *imaginaire* (“imaginary”) at one point to characterize what the woman relates, his diagnosis of hysteria implied unconscious confusion rather than the active voluntary use of one’s imagination or any conscious manipulation by the patient. His judgment thus implicitly excludes fraud, a possibility proven in enough historical cases to require consideration. Finally, despite the common erotic connotations of *séduire* (Fr., “to seduce”), it is important to note that Lhermitte, while clearly observing even in his short encounter the pair’s “strong bond, both spiritual and emotional,” does not imply any sexual component to their relationship. The seduction is in the intellectual order and prompted by Speyr’s “apparent sincerity” leading Balthasar not to question her experiences in the telling way that Lhermitte thinks he should have.

36. Lhermitte’s assessment is not flattering. Of course, it was not meant to flatter; it was meant to be a spiritually and scientifically informed and discerning profession-

al judgement, and Lhermitte does not hesitate to state his conclusion, for he did not consider the case a difficult or subtle one: the “insincerity [of what he witnessed] was glaring and the diagnosis of hysteria imposed itself.” That Lhermitte included this case in *Mystiques et faux mystiques* indicates he still stood by his judgement up to ten years later and thought that the case served as an instructive example of false mysticism. Earlier in his book he had already quoted, among other experts’, St. John of the Cross’s guidelines concerning those claiming visions or locutions. Lhermitte evidently did not believe Speyr met those time-tested rules of discernment for authenticity. Among other features, she notably exhibited overconfidence and over-investment in crediting her experiences as supernatural, a tendency against which the Spanish Doctor of the Church had especially warned.

37. Note that this assured but negative expert judgement did not dissuade Balthasar from continued reliance on Speyr’s “reveries.” A 1942–43 date would put the assessment just a few years before the 1946 episode Lochbrunner reports. A year after that, Balthasar founds Johannes Verlag to disseminate her works—albeit carefully controlling their rollout (Text 1) in order to “prepare” readers (Text 2) ultimately to accept a still “bolder teaching” (*Theo-logik*), a preparation he assists through his own publications. And within a decade of his acquaintance with her, in 1950 he leaves the Society of Jesus to dedicate his life as fully as possible to their common work.

C. Historical Contextualization of Lhermitte’s Diagnosis

38. Not that Lhermitte’s diagnosis of hysteria can’t be critiqued. However, we first need to clarify what the term would have meant for a physician of his era, since it is no longer formally used in medicine due to the increasingly pejorative and sexist connotations it acquired. Its continued use in casual speech might also misdirect readers. Moreover, even as a diagnosis, it had been used in both narrower and broader senses. Consequently, its contextualization within the range of psychologically based interpretations of alleged mystical phenomena would be helpful.

39. Most theories that explain allegedly mystical phenomena as due to natural causes can be labelled “psychopathological” or, more neutrally, “medical” or “organic.” For simplicity’s sake, whether or not an individual physician also accepts the possibility of true mysticism, we will refer to all such theories as “psychological” in what follows.

40. *Exclusively* psychological theories of mysticism basically view these phenomena as the result either of *physical* (i.e., structurally or chemically brain-based) abnormalities or of mental characteristics (i.e., *cognitive* abnormalities due to personality defects or “disorders”), or some combination of the two. Those who have historically favored such extreme impairments as explaining spiritual phenomena of *all* sorts have mostly been secularists or strict materialists who dismiss any potential causes beyond the natural.

41. Before we continue, note that the principles of these non-theist physicians rule out *by definition* any direct, personal, and signifying action by God in human history, and likewise any preternatural intervention, such as are of particular concern

in the Catholic evaluation of alleged mystical phenomena. They may consequently incline practitioners toward what might be called, “dismissal by diagnosis,” an approach all too common today, especially in the modern West, in which a claim of unusual phenomena is regarded as sufficient evidence that the person experiencing them is not in touch with reality. A negative diagnosis follows, often in disparaging form. At the very least, such principles will hinder recognition of distinctions between natural symptoms and the possible effects of preternatural and supernatural causes. It can also happen that examiners without the limits imposed by such commitments may simply lack specialized formation in the psychological or theological fields, most notably in the features that distinguish the involvement of the preternatural.¹⁶ In consequence, the judgement of persons with some, but not all, the relevant training is, at best, provisional.

42. To resume: Those who take this first, exclusively psychological approach generally posit the causes of alleged mystical phenomena to be more or less straightforward but *severe* mental impairments, ranging from brain disorders to psychoses to sometimes ill-defined “abnormalities” caused by high stress or another strong psychological factor upon normal perception. Examples of these kinds of theories include those by prominent materialist commentators like Carl Sagan and Bertrand Russell, who claimed mystical states were likely aberrant brain distortions of a confused sensory nature, with extreme stress, isolation, sensory deprivation, fasting, and the like often stimulating hallucinations.¹⁷ Similar charges have routinely been made about eminent mystics like St. Theresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. Even some religious commentators adopt this view: one Jesuit psychiatrist opined that St. Ignatius of Loyola’s visions were schizophrenic hallucinations!¹⁸

43. It may be readily granted that some phenomena claimed to be mystical visions or locutions may in some cases indeed have merely a psychological origin or be sensory misperceptions. However, the descriptions of Speyr’s visions (and likewise the Carmelites’ and St. Ignatius’, we note) are not at all similar to the disorganized and often incoherent experiences typical of severe states. Her locutions, too, appear strikingly sophisticated in most ways. In addition, although Speyr practiced some extreme penances, seeing intermittent sensory or psychic distortions as a cause of her states of “ecstasy” would have to discount her extremely high functioning outside her experiences. That is, if her “ecstasies” were simply psychological side effects of her penances, one would expect them to continue beyond the times of her dictation, impairing her other activities, but the reports do not indicate that occurred.

44. Seemingly mystical phenomena that actually originate in the human person (wholly or partly involuntarily in some cases), however, need not have the severe psychological roots hypothesized in the approach just mentioned. A second train of theory posits more nuanced and, in most cases, more attenuated mental causation. Although different terms have been used in this regard over the centuries, traditional

¹⁶ R. Gallagher, *Demonic Foes: My Twenty-Five Years as a Psychiatrist Investigating Possessions, Diabolic Attacks, and the Paranormal*, San Francisco 2020, is a useful expert overview.

¹⁷ See, for instance, C. Sagan’s arguments in *The Demon-Haunted World*, New York 1996, especially 105–111, 137–138, 148–149.

¹⁸ W.W. Meissner, *Ignatius of Loyola*, New Haven 1994, *passim*.

spiritual theology itself recognizes that some individuals might claim unusual experiences of the divine without being credible due, e.g., to their evident desire for attention, poor education, or overactive imagination.

45. A more medical version of this line of theorizing, seen as part of relatively modern scientific theory, became dominant with the Enlightenment. This thinking assumed a degree of psychological vulnerability and emotional sensitivity in claimants, and the diagnostic term most commonly applied in this narrower respect was *hysteria*. While in the ancient world this diagnosis postulated something physically wrong with a woman's uterus (Grk., *hysteron*) to be the cause of certain states of emotional distress, the understanding of the root of histrionic behaviors—whether seen in women or men—slowly shifted in more recent centuries toward the brain and eventually toward what would be called “personality” or “character” traits in contemporary psychiatric terms. During that shift, when referred to the brain, the term was usually understood to identify a sort of neurosis (another older term, meaning more moderate psychological issues in some sense related to “nerves”), in contrast to, say, the psychoses (i.e., massive distortions of reality) or the severe brain disorders favored under the first psychological approach discussed.

46. While the diagnosis of hysteria commonly was applied in a narrow sense to the personality type, physicians for many centuries had *also* come to use the term in a broader sense to include almost any poorly understood *accompanying* symptom or syndrome that could not be ascribed to known medical disorders. That is, while *hysteria* could designate the personality features alone, it also came to serve as a catch-all for a variety of phenomena thought pathological and difficult or impossible to explain by then-known natural or organic causes.

47. In consequence, hysteria almost inevitably became the standard way that the Enlightenment tradition onward attempted to “diagnosis away” nearly all phenomena (stigmata, locutions, supposed levitations, trances, etc.) that were previously thought to be supernatural or demonic. This broad understanding of the term was especially popular among critics of Catholicism and its hagiography, most commonly in France in large part due to the influence of the secularist and anti-clerical neurologist, Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–1893). Such use of the term and its underlying theory may be seen, for example, in the work of one of Charcot's students, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), who interpreted the suspected possession of the German painter Christophe Haizmann (1651/52–1700) as “hysterical” in nature, calling the case a “demonological neurosis.”¹⁹

48. Charcot's fame was widespread especially due to the dramatic public demonstrations he gave in his medical theater in Paris of the effects of hypnosis on certain patients, generally women. These patients' physical contortions, emotional outbursts, non-circadian sleep, or other inappropriate or unusual behavior frequently started or stopped under Charcot's hypnosis. He used this response as one of the diagnostic criteria for hysteria, among other reasons, to show that the patients were not possessed, but rather psychologically disturbed. While it remains good practice to at-

¹⁹ S. Freud, *A Neurosis of Demoniocal Possession in the Seventeenth Century*, in: *Freud*, standard edition, vol. 19, London 1923, 17–105.

tempt, as he did, to determine if alleged mystical or demonic phenomena have, in fact, natural or human causes, the details of Dr. Charcot's work (beyond our scope here) show he clearly fell into the category of physicians whose philosophical, theological, and, in his case, also scientific commitments prove a decided hindrance to an unbiased examination, whether of contemporary or historical cases.

49. Toward the end of his career, and especially after his death, Charcot's results were criticized as the product of preselection of patients and of suggestion. Charcot's assistants chose patients with certain observed behavioral tendencies for the demonstrations and his hypnosis invited them to act in particular ways that aroused the audience's acclaim. The fulfillment of Charcot's suggestions brought these vulnerable individuals special attention from the famous physician, other medical personnel, and the attendees, thus — it eventually came to be recognized — reinforcing their behaviors and willingness to comply with his direction.

50. As the student of a student of Charcot's, and later a holder of clinical leadership at the same hospital where Charcot had been prominent, Lhermitte was certainly familiar with his neurological and psychiatric views. However, Lhermitte would also have known that Charcot's more biological theory had given way to this emphasis on suggestibility as the key factor in the etiology of hysteria. In addition, Lhermitte's books on mysticism and possessions, in contrast to Charcot's work, show a more nuanced range of diagnoses and judgements in their acknowledgement of the potential for authentic supernatural and preternatural cases.

51. Thus it is significant that Lhermitte, open to such possibilities and well-acquainted with the criteria for their discernment, nowhere implies preternatural causes in Speyr's case and dismisses a supernatural cause by including her as an example of false mysticism. For Lhermitte, his diagnosis of hysteria regarding the woman in question represents his judgement that her case is a scientific, not a spiritual one; that it has natural, psychological causes, not a supernatural or preternatural one. *Hysteria* was the appropriate scientific word at his time for the cluster of symptoms and behaviors he noticed in this woman. It indicated a conclusion that she was emotionally disturbed, but not brain-damaged, demonically influenced, or divinely ecstatic.

52. Moreover, in diagnosing Speyr with hysteria, referring to her "excessive contortions," noting the intense attention she received as a result, and calling his session with her and Balthasar "a theatrical demonstration," Lhermitte clearly signals that he thought Speyr and Balthasar's case paralleled those of Charcot's patients acting under the doctor's suggestions in which *both* were unaware of this mechanism of effect. Lhermitte observed, "In [Balthasar's] presence the trances multiply and make themselves more complete." The warnings of theologians of the mystical states, including ones like Charcot's and Lhermitte's rough contemporary, Augustin Poulain (1836–1919), likely also provided supplemental confirmation with which Lhermitte, from his work with the Carmelites, would have been familiar:

[The director] will have to be on guard ... [He should] *not* display *admiration* for the visions ... and must exhibit a proportionately stronger mistrust if it is a question of a matter

having consequences of a greater magnitude Let the director be on guard against the idea of entering into partnership [with the visionary, or] of allowing oneself to be dominated²⁰

D. Supplementary Evidence and the Key Weakness of Lhermitte's Diagnosis

53. Not surprisingly, Balthasar later openly complained that psychology was inadequate to understand Speyr, criticizing “[those] who will attempt to ‘illuminate’ her by the methods of ‘depth psychology’ and so make [the entire matter] supposedly understandable.”²¹ Extremely protective of Speyr, defensive of their project together, hostile to challenges to the nature of her experiences and giftedness, Balthasar’s loyalty to her was thorough-going. Although Balthasar’s full confidence in Speyr’s authenticity is everywhere apparent,²² he must also have realized that questions, psychological or otherwise, about her credibility as a mystic would have implications about the contents of her alleged revelations and their effect upon his own thinking. Opposed to responding in detail to criticism of his active part in eliciting her messages, Balthasar instead disparaged those who challenged his portrayal of Speyr and the soundness of her experiences. Contrary to the task of a more objective scholarly debate, too often he showed himself sarcastic or polemical to their critics. Unfortunately, a similar tendency of dismissing critics as poorly informed or theologically outdated continues among some of their most ardent devotees.

54. But ironically, given their tight working methods, Balthasar himself is the leading source of the evidence raising questions about her psychological health. Though Balthasar gave little weight to concerns about her credibility, he documented on a number of occasions her frequent and self-acknowledged psychological fragility, emotional vulnerability, and neediness. He himself thus indirectly demonstrated why a psychological evaluation was perfectly appropriate, even if one accepted her spiritual giftedness, as he did.

55. For example, he records that Speyr openly admitted (and displayed to him, as well), “I *often* have a rage.”²³ Anecdotally she is described as having a “sharp tongue,”²⁴ instances of which are also reported in Lhermitte’s case study and by Balthasar himself. To St. Ignatius (perhaps the saint they most esteemed), she herself attributed an allegedly revealed comment that she “needs trust and love, she hasn’t received much during her life.”²⁵ (Her mother is described as insensitive and giving “daily scoldings.”²⁶)

²⁰ A. Poulain, *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, New York 2016, 346, 345, 352, emphases in original. These cautions are from chapter XXIII on “Revelations and Visions: Rules of Conduct.” Poulain’s original *Des Graces d’Oraison* was published in 1901.

²¹ H. U. von Balthasar, *First Glimpse at Adrienne von Speyr*, San Francisco 1994, 13. He may well have had Lhermitte specifically in mind here, since Lhermitte stood in the depth psychology tradition, as illustrated by his references to Speyr’s unconscious.

²² See, e.g., Balthasar, *First Glimpse*, 15.

²³ *Ibid.*, 173, emphasis added.

²⁴ P. Henrici, *Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Sketch of His Life*, in D. Schindler (ed.), *Hans Urs von Balthasar, His Life and Work*, San Francisco 1991, 7–83 (19).

²⁵ Balthasar, *Erde und Himmel*, II, 1643.

²⁶ Balthasar, *First Glimpse*, 20, 21, 26.

56. In addition, despite often being sickly as a child,²⁷ later in life Speyr seems to have downplayed significant health issues, including her growing obesity, the development of adult onset diabetes, and probably concomitant severe heart problems.²⁸ She apparently would refuse hospitalizations at times, as well as pain medications, even while experiencing extreme headaches and “other severe pains.”²⁹ Balthasar frequently noted his need to temper her hyper-asceticism (“which could hardly be kept within reasonable bounds”³⁰), an appropriate caution for a spiritual director, especially regarding a person frail as a youth and essentially an invalid later in life.³¹

57. Still more relevantly, Balthasar mentions at least two episodes of serious suicidality, and he had to forbid her praying for her own death, which she felt would prevent his leaving the Jesuits.³² At one point Speyr is also said to have tried to resuscitate a 12-year-old boy, in prayer offering in exchange for his life her own two children! Shortly thereafter, the boy died.³³ Sadly, her own miscarriages have credibly been ascribed to neglecting legitimate health concerns.³⁴ Despite the personality strengths she manifested in her dedication as a compassionate physician and in other areas of her life, all this supplementary evidence hardly shows the picture of a paragon of well-being, whether physical or emotional.

58. The theologian’s dismissal of any expert psychiatric understanding of her has a counterpart in his feeling sure enough of his own judgement to engage, at her invitation, in what was essentially age regression of Speyr during some of her trance states. In these sessions, she manifested purported speech patterns and recounted events of her various younger “selves.” Such psychological practices are highly questionable, especially when attempted by a non-professional. They were generally frowned upon in sensible quarters at the time and are even more so today. At the very least, there is a strong likelihood of inaccuracies in so-called “recovered memories,” particularly when produced by a subject in an altered or dissociated state.

59. Nonetheless, we actually agree with Balthasar that Lhermitte’s judgement does not do full justice to Speyr’s situation, although for very different reasons than Balthasar’s. Lhermitte’s reflections upon Speyr’s personality seem reasonable enough based upon his limited opportunity for observation, and especially given the additional support they have from other data Balthasar recorded. However, for any conclusions beyond them, it must be noted that Lhermitte did not know Speyr’s full story. Although he may have had some communication with Balthasar leading up to the interview and afterward, it is possible most preliminary information Lhermitte received, and the report he rendered, went through a superior of Balthasar’s, who likely would not have known all the facts, either. Beyond that, based on the case study,

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 23, 128.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 37. Cf. Henrici, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 26.

²⁹ Balthasar, *Our Task*, 34.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

³² *Ibid.*, 31.

³³ *Ibid.*, 84.

³⁴ <https://arras.catholique.fr/dictionnaire-amoureux-hans-urs-von-balthasar-adrienne-von-speyr.html>, accessed Jun. 26, 2024.

it seems Lhermitte met with the pair only once, spending time with them together and then with Speyr alone. Even then, Lhermitte found her “reticent” and “suspicious” enough that he certainly did not hear a comprehensive account from her. In short, far less data were available to him than is now accessible from her full *oeuvre*, Balthasar’s retrospectives, the *Nachlasswerke*, the secondary biographical and theological studies, etc.

60. This information would certainly have impacted his overall assessment. For most significantly, as distinct from the various theories that would reduce Speyr’s alleged mysticism to the product of a brain aberration or a psychotic level disorder, Lhermitte’s view exemplifies a more moderate, but still strictly psychological assessment. However, the key objection to any exclusively psychological position, whether radical or moderate, whether open or not in theory to the possibility of the supernatural and preternatural, remains that natural causes cannot account for the full spectrum of the phenomena Speyr exhibited. No psychological explanation by itself comes close to covering all of them, so its fuller explanation must lie elsewhere. The additional items to be discussed in Part II as relevant in this respect were doubtless unknown to Lhermitte, either having never been disclosed to him or coming after his exam in Speyr’s history.

A Deeper Look at the Balthasar-Speyr Collaboration

Part II: The Supernatural vs. Preternatural Hypotheses

Ein tieferer Blick auf die Zusammenarbeit Balthasar-Speyr.

Teil II: Die übernatürliche oder präternaturale Hypothese.

RICHARD GALLAGHER* – LYRA PITSTICK**

Zusammenfassung: Im katholischen Kontext müssen zunächst materielle und menschliche, dann präternaturale (d.h. dämonische) Ursachen ausgeschlossen werden, bevor man auf eine übernatürliche Verursachung angeblicher mystischer Phänomene schließen kann. Der zweiteilige Artikel folgt diesem Verfahren, um die Zusammenarbeit zwischen dem Theologen Hans Urs von Balthasar und der angeblichen Mystikerin Adrienne von Speyr näher zu beleuchten. In Teil I haben wir drei wenig bekannte Texte vorgestellt, übersetzt und untersucht, die Aufschluss über die Psychologie des Paares und ihre Einstellung zu ihrer gemeinsamen Arbeit geben, einschließlich eines anonymisierten Fallbeispiels, das auf sie zutrifft. Während die Bedeutung dieser Texte nicht zu übersehen ist, haben wir festgestellt, dass die Angemessenheit der psycho-spirituellen Bewertung des Arztes durch das Fehlen wichtiger relevanter Daten eingeschränkt wurde.

In Teil II fragen wir daher, ob die verschie- ►

Abstract: In the Catholic context, material causes and human ones, and then preternatural (i.e., demonic) sources, must be ruled out before a conclusion of supernatural causation of alleged mystical phenomena can be reliable. This two-part article follows this procedure to take a deeper look at the collaboration between the theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and the alleged mystic, Adrienne von Speyr. In Part I, we thus introduced, translated, and examined three little-known texts that shed light on the pair's psychology and outlook on their joint work, including an anonymized case study identified as applicable to them. While the significance of these texts cannot be overlooked, we noted that the adequacy of the doctor's psycho-spiritual evaluation was limited by his lack of important relevant data.

Consequently, in Part II, we ask whether the various unusual phenomena reported of Speyr (primarily by Balthasar), such ►

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denen ungewöhnlichen Phänomene, die von Speyr (vor allem durch die Vermittlung von Balthasar) berichtet werden, wie Visionen, Lokutionen, Stigmata, Levitationen, Heilungen usw., notwendigerweise einen übernatürlichen Ursprung haben. Sowohl die Theologie als auch die historischen Daten der wahren und falschen Mystik zeigen jedoch, dass solche Phänomene auch mit Fällen von präternaturaler, d.h. dämonischer Verursachung verbunden sein können. Der post-auflärerische Versuch, sie sogenannten paranormalen Fähigkeiten zuzuschreiben, ist wissenschaftlich misslungen. Deshalb ist der Hinweis auf andere Beobachtungen im Speyr-Balthasar-Korpus notwendig, um den Ursprung dieser Phänomene zu bestimmen.

Die Parallelen zwischen ihren Arbeitsmethoden und denen der Spiritisten erfordern besondere Aufmerksamkeit. Zusammen mit anderen beunruhigenden, aber unwiderlegbaren Beweisen für einen präternaturalen Einfluss sind diese so zahlreich, dass wir widerwillig, aber zuversichtlich zu dem Schluss kommen, dass das Paar unwissentlich Gegenstand einer spirituellen Illusion und Täuschung war. Das psychologische Material in Teil I liefert eine glaubwürdige Skizze der Einstellungen, die sie dazu veranlassten, ihre Offenbarungen allzu bereitwillig als übernatürlich anzusehen.

Indem wir andere, positive Eigenschaften der beiden anerkennen, verfolgen wir eine nicht-polemische, wenn auch anspruchsvolle Absicht. Die Schwere ihrer Behauptungen und der weit verbreitete Einfluss ihrer Arbeit erfordert, mehr noch als in den meisten anderen Fällen, eine sorgfältige Bewertung im Lichte der bewährten Vorsichtsmaßnahmen und Verfahren der Kirche zur Unterscheidung der Geister, ein Prozess, der durch die bewussten Entscheidungen von Balthasar und Speyr verzögert wurde, wie aus den Texten in Teil I hervorgeht. Kurz gesagt, wir erweisen Balthasar und Speyr den Respekt, sie beim Wort zu nehmen, sowohl was die Untrennbarkeit ihrer Arbeit als auch ihre Entscheidungen zu deren Förderung betrifft.

as visions, locutions, stigmata, levitations, healings, etc., necessarily have supernatural origin? Both the theology and historical data of true and false mysticism, however, show such phenomena may also be associated with cases of preternatural, i.e., demonic causation. Because the post-Enlightenment attempt to ascribe them to so-called paranormal abilities is scientifically bankrupt, recourse to other evidence in the Speyr-Balthasar corpus is necessary to determine the origin of these phenomena.

The parallels between their working methods and those of spiritualists require particularly close attention. Together with other disturbing but irrefutable evidence of preternatural intrusion, these are so numerous that we reluctantly but confidently conclude the pair unwittingly were subjects of spiritual illusion and deception. The psychological material in Part I provides a credible sketch of the attitudes that inclined them to be too ready to take her revelations as supernatural.

Acknowledging other, positive traits about them, our intent is non-polemical, though challenging. The gravity of their claims and the widespread influence of their work requires, even more than most cases, careful assessment in light of the Church's time-tested caution and processes for the discernment of spirits, a process delayed by Balthasar and Speyr's deliberate choices, as seen from the texts in Part I. In short, we offer Balthasar and Speyr the respect of taking them at their word, both about the inseparability of their work and their choices in furthering it.

1. In Part I, we introduced readers to three little-known texts that shed light upon the complex collaboration between the theologian, Hans von Balthasar, and the alleged mystic and visionary, Adrienne von Speyr. The first was evidence of Balthasar's carefully controlled and delayed release of material essential for the evaluation of Speyr's experiences and any consequent acceptance of theology dependent upon them. The second, an excerpt from that material presented by Manfred Lochbrunner, showed that both Speyr and Balthasar were aware their theology of hell was a theological novelty but intended to present it as already Catholic teaching. The final text, an anonymized psychiatric evaluation it appears Speyr underwent with the prominent Catholic doctor, Jean Lhermitte, was identified as associated with her and also translated into English for the first time. His findings represent valuable historical material of a direct expert psychiatric appraisal of her, even if limited by its early date and the subject's reported lack of transparency. Information from Balthasar himself, despite his protectiveness toward his advisee, also provided indication that Speyr's psychological vulnerabilities were genuine.

2. However, a more adequate assessment of the complex phenomenology Speyr displayed for many years must take better account, in our view, of data that point beyond natural causes. As explained in Part I, both natural and preternatural causes must be ruled out before a conclusion of divine origin can be asserted with reasonable confidence. Consequently, we here introduce into the discussion material that shows the inadequacy of any purely natural explanation of Speyr's experience, such as represented by Dr. Lhermitte's conclusion, and evaluate whether the data point more surely to preternatural or divine causation.

E. The Preternatural Possibility: Are visions, stigmata, and similar phenomena necessarily signs of the supernatural?

3. According to Balthasar's and Speyr's works, she experienced visions, locutions, stigmata, levitations, bilocation, presence in distant places, the gift to heal, and vaguely reported "other things of that kind."³⁵ Do these necessarily have a supernatural origin?

4. The answer, which may surprise some readers, is no — although from the straightforward, unexamined way they are reported, Balthasar conveys the strong assumption that such phenomena gave indisputable evidence of Speyr's authenticity and holiness. He repeatedly professes "never having the least doubt"³⁶ about his basic interpretive framework of her life story. And he does not consider alternatives seriously, disparages those who suggest them, and appears to think that his confidence should suffice to convince others, going so far in defensive polemic as to caricature those raising questions as critics who "want to burn the witch."³⁷ For her part, Speyr's own confidence doubtless reflects not only the personal impact of her experiences

³⁵ H. U. von Balthasar, *Our Task*, San Francisco 1994, 72.

³⁶ H. U. von Balthasar, *First Glance at Adrienne von Speyr*, San Francisco 1984, 15.

³⁷ H. U. von Balthasar, *A Short Discourse on Hell*, San Francisco 1988, 168.

(generally overwhelmingly convincing to such subjects), but also a natural reliance upon the opinion of her presumed expert spiritual director, a highly educated priest whom she had sought out, admired greatly, and for the most part came to find so supportive.

5. The Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith recently reaffirmed the long-standing teaching of the Church that all such alleged spiritual gifts, including apparitions, must be approached with great caution and that in any case no one is obliged to credit reports of even multiple such items as authentic proof of a supernatural source. Indeed, the evaluation of unusual phenomena such as those reported of Speyr has a long and venerable history of rigorous examination and reflection in the Catholic tradition of discernment of spirits. As noted in Part I, Lhermitte had been invited to contribute his own psychiatric expertise to just such a tradition. Written around the same time, *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism* by Herbert Thurston, S.J. (1856–1939) is also considered a classic modern treatment that provides massive evidence of cases with preternatural or exclusively psychological origins rather than supernatural ones.³⁸ Since Balthasar cites Thurston on several instances (though always disparagingly, dismissing his works as “very inadequate”³⁹), he could not have been unaware that such “gifts” are by no means sure signs of God’s work.

6. Visions, for example, when not hallucinations as the product of illness or psychological disturbances, are traditionally acknowledged as frequently (though not always, of course) being *illusions* in the spiritual sense, namely, products of the individual’s imagination or preternatural trickery of different sorts. The latter includes diverse, if highly disguised, diabolic suggestions, locutions, or appearances in misleading visible form, such as that of a dead soul, a feigned saintly visitor, or a false “angel of light.” Augustin Poulain, Adolphe Tanquerey, and Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, among others, all theologians more expert than Balthasar in this area, each discussed multiple cases as having just such manifestations. St. John of the Cross and St. Theresa of Avila, both Doctors of the Church well noted for their contributions in spiritual discernment, are earlier and still more authoritative sources who make the same point repeatedly.

7. As for false (i.e., non-supernatural) stigmata, Thurston recounts literally scores of such examples. The first-named author of this Part II has consulted on at least twelve such cases, all with attendant unambiguous demonic phenomena. In discussing Speyr’s stigmata — invisible, as not unusually the case, though Balthasar claimed once to see its exterior manifestation — he apparently overlooked its frequent preternatural origin, being preoccupied in dismissing any idea it might be psychogenic.⁴⁰

8. Levitation, too, is not confined to the spiritually gifted. In fact, it is historically most often found in possessed victims, and most commonly during exorcisms. Particularly famous and well-documented episodes in the last few centuries occurred to the European spiritualist and medium, Daniel Dunglas Home, whose “flights” are even better documented than those of St. Theresa of Avila and St. Joseph of Cupertino.

³⁸ H. Thurston, *Physical Phenomena of Mysticism*, London 1951.

³⁹ Balthasar, *First Glance*, 70.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

no, which are also unquestionable. Besides Thurston's long discussion of this subject, again with numerous examples, about forty individuals have credibly reported to the same first-named author that they witnessed or experienced levitations; all the victims showed obvious signs of being demonically afflicted.

9. In bilocation in a strict and verified sense, independent witnesses in different locations claim simultaneous sightings of the same person. Though sometimes involving saintly souls, like St. Pio of Pietrelcina, genuine cases of bilocation hardly always have a divine origin either; in fact, the opposite is true. St. Augustine in *The City of God* offers an unmistakable example of a credible account of an individual seen in two places at once; an experienced exorcist, he confidently credited the case to a diabolic source. Unquestionably, these have been predominantly found in non-Christian sources, such as noted of Pythagoras by Plutarch. What is alternatively also often termed "simultaneous appearances" involve individuals said by others or *self*-reporting themselves to have been in different places at once. The most frequent references come from historical shamanic reports or persons in frankly occult circles. In some still largely pagan Asian areas, such events are often reported to this day. Again, since Balthasar gave little attention to proper distinctions and suitable authentication, it is not entirely clear whether Speyr's experiences are not better interpreted as "out-of-body-experiences," a much more common set of phenomena with more diverse causes than classic bilocations. Tellingly, Balthasar notes that "she herself was not usually perceived,"⁴¹ a point that argues for most of her experiences being OBE's. He also uses the non-specific descriptors that Speyr "traveled"⁴² or was "transported,"⁴³ again terms used in esoteric circles. She is said to have journeyed spiritually, most prominently, of course, to Heaven and Hell. Further, among other locales to which Speyr was credited by Balthasar to have gone to give assistance, are some penitents' confessionals, though apparently without prior permission from the penitent and priest, a practice that would seem to violate the sacrament's privacy.⁴⁴ Whichever the term or mechanism, Speyr's diverse "trips" appear to have been preternaturally induced. OBE's are in fact relatively frequent among spiritualists and other practitioners of the "dark" arts as well as in near-death experiences. Understanding the more customary occult sources of such phenomena puts the whole basis of a great deal of her alleged experiences (and the theology that flowed from the pair's over-credulity) in a totally different light.

10. Healings (albeit often short-lived and reversible) are also frequently noted in esoteric and spiritualist sources. Though poorly documenting it, Balthasar mentions this supposed charism of Speyr's several times.⁴⁵ But active mediums, like the famed American "Sleeping Prophet," Edgar Cayce, have been widely known as prolific healers. Likewise so have various thaumaturgists, shamans, so-called demonic healers, witch doctors, sorcerers, and psychic healers such as the notorious John of God, an extremely popular twentieth century Brazilian occultist whose many "cures" were real enough, though transient, as typical.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁵ Balthasar, *Our Task*, 84; *First Glance*, 34.

11. Another claimed “miracle” emphasized by Balthasar in several accounts is the exceptional “restoration of [Speyr’s] virginity.”⁴⁶ In support of this unusual claim, Balthasar says Speyr supposedly knew that “a bodily mystery [i.e., a restored hymen] was intended for her, one that remained yet veiled but for which she knew herself reserved.”⁴⁷ Balthasar adds that she never consummated her second marriage and that in her first one, “the marriage bed lay heavy on her.”⁴⁸ Leaving aside the inappropriateness of Balthasar’s publicly commenting on her marriages in this way, while such a restoration of physical virginity would not be beyond the power of God, it would seem to contradict the Church’s fundamental teaching on the created goodness of the marital union. The sensible question, indelicate as it may be, must also be raised: Did Balthasar have her examined by a physician as is normal protocol for assessment of purported miracles? It appears he did not, and that he merely forged ahead, here as elsewhere, without important independent verification.

12. In short, neither the variety nor the multitude of Speyr’s reported charisms, despite the personal and theological significance Speyr and Balthasar saw in them, prove what they thought they did. In fact, the very multiplicity of what Balthasar labels her “many mystical phenomena”⁴⁹ could be interpreted as the opposite, for such remarkable and varied display is common in cases of pseudo-mysticism. Given how religious and spiritual history is replete with false or deluded seers and wonder-workers, it is surprising how assertively and frequently both Balthasar and Speyr (and many of their enthusiasts) simply maintain that her revelations and other alleged gifts came from God and the saints. These over-confident assertions are all the odder since, as noted, preternatural phenomena prove much more common than the supernatural variety. Balthasar failed to provide the level of documentation normally required by the Church to support such affirmations officially. He ultimately maintains that “it goes without saying that we will ... not attempt to provide evidence that Adrienne von Speyr’s mysticism is genuine.”⁵⁰ But should it have gone “without saying,” and why would one think so?

F. The Preternatural Possibility: What about “the paranormal”?

13. Just as we ask where is Balthasar’s support for claims of the supernatural origin of Speyr’s alleged gifts — too exclusively associated with saints — we must also ask if there is support for their origin rather being what some commentators, even a few contemporary Christian thinkers, have described as “parapsychological”?

14. Since we have referenced Thurston, the objection might be raised that there is such a third possibility: aren’t some people gifted with “paranormal” abilities greater than the average human being, but certainly not necessarily of demonic or

⁴⁶ Balthasar, *Our Task*, 67, 31.

⁴⁷ H. U. von Balthasar, *General Introduction to the Posthumous Works*, in A. von Speyr, *The Book of All Saints*, San Francisco 2008, 6.

⁴⁸ Balthasar, *First Glance*, 29–31, *Our Task*, 29–31, 67; cf. *General Introduction*, 6.

⁴⁹ Balthasar, *Our Task*, 72.

⁵⁰ Balthasar, *General Introduction*, 2.

supernatural origin? Thurston himself held open the possibility of such realities (what he termed the “psycho-physical”), and some commentators have suggested rare “parapsychological” powers on her part might be the explanation for her gifts.

15. At Thurston’s time, in the first half of the 20th century, there was a wave of serious interest and attempts to test theories of the so-called paranormal as the Enlightenment trend that attempted to substitute material causes for spiritual realities continued to play out its influence. When phenomena traditionally associated with the divine or the demonic were not adequately explained by outright sensory misperceptions, psychiatric pathology, fraud, hoaxes, or other straightforward causes, recourse was made to postulated “paranormal” powers. Those who accepted so-called “parapsychological” phenomena as a legitimate realm separate from the supernatural and the preternatural attracted considerable cultural attention for decades and became enormously popular subjects to the wider public, even among some more exploratory theologians.

16. As no claims of parapsychological human powers have ever been validated by any replicable criteria, the concept of such human abilities and experiences is now near universally regarded as thoroughly pseudo-scientific by informed individuals, having been debunked by sound contemporary investigation and experiments. And so, almost without exception nowadays, experts in the Church again hold firmly that “paranormal” phenomena, certainly in their classical spiritual forms, are but misnomers for what is properly regarded as either supernatural or preternatural, even if the continued wish for a word that does not point to spiritual realities persists among the wider public or at the fringes.⁵¹

G. The Preternatural Likelihood: Close Parallels to Spiritualists and to Known Demonically Influenced Catholic Historical Figures

17. Having established that Speyr’s experiences do not necessarily have a supernatural origin and that parapsychological hypotheses constitute but a misleading neologism, we will inquire now in greater detail what parallels exist for her overall phenomenology. These unmistakably appear to confirm their preternatural origin.

18. In particular, the most obvious candidate for extensive comparison, despite Balthasar’s characteristically quick and inadequate dismissal, remains the perennial (and long condemned within orthodox traditions) field of *spiritualism*. A close look at both the nature of spiritualism and the evidence found in Balthasar and Speyr’s works demonstrates the parallels are in fact so strong that an unrecognized spiritualist-like summoning of spirits *precisely* explains a large part of what was going on.

19. Some phenomenological and historical background is again important. The characteristic terms (italicized, *infra*) used in the “field” are critical to understand and compare to their practices.

20. Spiritualists essentially hold that some rare gifted humans can be in touch with spirits of diverse sorts, usually believed to be deceased souls, through these fa-

⁵¹ F. Bamonte, *Diabolic Possession and the Ministry of Exorcism*, Milan 2014, 63.

vored individuals' alleged *abilities* intentionally to discern and to commune with those who have passed to *the other side*. People thought adept in this way, called *mediums*, are often credited with other spiritual gifts, as well. Their main activity as mediums, however, involves deliberately *summoning* what is believed to be such a spirit, with the medium or a third party *channeling* the communication. The subject enters a trance state, with a *guide* or interlocutor often prompting the medium and taking down dictation, because the *seer* (or *auditor*) frequently does not remember the messages upon coming out of the trance. The revelations, however strange at times, may continue for months and years, as long as the listener is able and willing – and credulous!

21. The conclusion of the orthodox Christian tradition is that it is not deceased souls that respond to mediums, but skillful demons impersonating them to gain the trust of the medium and any listener(s). Well-known in earlier ages as *necromancy*, this interaction with evil spirits is strikingly evidenced throughout all of human spiritual history. The effects of a peak in the Western world of viewing such spirit communications as credible and even “scientific” in many respectable quarters was still widespread during the early part of Balthasar and Speyr’s own era, and especially in their contemporaneous Switzerland. Literally millions of Americans and Europeans believed in Spiritualism as a near quasi-religion around the turn to the twentieth century. Orthodox Christian belief was ebbing among the general population and hence likewise was the recognition of the true nature of this stylized and fashionable modern spiritualism as anti-religious occultism.

22. Examples of leading spiritualist figures taken seriously by many to this day include Madame Blavatsky (1831–1891); Allan Kardec (1804–1869), a well-educated Frenchman whose “scientific Spiritism” remains immensely popular in Brazil; Edgar Cayce (1877–1945), important to the development of what is now called “New Age” beliefs; and even Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), the Swiss analyst and a poorly recognized but undeniable occultist. The medical historian Henri Ellenberger commented, “I don’t know any place where one breathes the atmosphere of a theosophical sect more stifling than at the Jung institute in Zurich ... with disciples devoting themselves to ... occultism and divination.”⁵² The Russian theologian, Vladimir Solovyov (1853–1900), in whom Balthasar had a keen interest, also participated in séances, claimed communication with spirits, and had visions leading him to universalist conclusions. Despite different topics of inquiry, Balthasar and Speyr were performing activities essentially similar to all these figures, the key common element being their supposed access to dead souls. Further corroboration of our hypothesis comes from many technical features of classic spiritualism that parallel what they both were routinely doing:

23. First, it is remarkably striking that Balthasar’s accounts of their at times daily working practices, most prominently described in *The Book of All Saints*, are incontrovertibly similar to how most mediums and their interlocutors describe their own procedures. He speaks frankly and in detail about their modus in preliminary remarks in that text:

⁵² H. Ellenberger, as quoted by S. Sandasami, *Cult Fiction: C.G. Jung and the Founding of Analytic Psychology*, London 1998, 45.

As her confessor, I was given the instruction and authority to “transpose” her into the spirit of many saints and other believers of the past, in order that she might understand from the inside how they prayed The fact that the saints in heaven give their consent, in a sort of public confession before the entire church, to lay bare their deficiencies and failures is an ultimate confirmation of the Ignatian-Johannine teaching about the attitude of confession and self-revealing obedience Adrienne was each time able to reproduce their disposition when we recorded the dictation, and the words they spoke Once the dictation was over, she would most often completely forget what she had seen and heard ... [T]he choice of the saints that were to be described was increasingly left to me. At first I would jot down names for myself on a scrap of paper, and it might happen that, when I placed the paper before Adrienne, she would immediately say, “I can do this one” Later, I was able to request from her whatever saint or special personality I wished: a brief prayer would transpose her to the “place” of vision, she would close her eyes, look for a moment ... on what was shown her with intensity and inner excitement, and then the description would begin⁵³

24. The similarities to spiritualist practice in this description are so astonishingly multiple as to need no enumeration and raise questions why they are not remarked upon by Balthasar’s enthusiasts. Balthasar effusively once asked, “What private revelations in the course of the Church’s history can be compared to [Speyr’s]?”⁵⁴ He was obviously expecting the answer, “None” — which is correct of Catholic mystics later accepted as authentic. He did at one point briefly disparage a comparison with spiritualism by contrasting their own practices as “nothing like the turgid or magic element that tends to give ‘channeling’ experiences a foul smell.”⁵⁵ But his criticism was too quickly dismissive and already anachronistic in his own day. Most mid-twentieth century mediums and those since have not at all resembled the caricature of séance table-rappers. Nowadays practitioners often monetize their trade and practice openly with an agreeable persona, all the better for their aim of widespread publicity and remuneration.

25. A second concern about the similarities to spiritualism involves Balthasar’s numerous comments about the importance of Speyr’s acting “under obedience.”⁵⁶ It is disquieting to learn how she would, “under obedience,” go into a trance, as if subject to a medium guide or hypnotist. Balthasar largely selected the subjects and was allowed to ask questions, an invitation of which he made highly directive use, e.g., “How did he pray? ... Did she have visions? ... Was there ecstasy? ... How does he develop?”⁵⁷ Speyr was still in a trance (though “ecstasy” remains his own word) at these times, and afterward she forgot what she had just enunciated, again commonly like a traditional medium.

26. In questioning her like this, Balthasar violated the standard admonition of sensible spiritual theologians not to engage in dialogues with the “spirit world” out

⁵³ Balthasar, *General Introduction*, 11–12, and H.U. von Balthasar, *The Particular Introduction to the Present Volume*, in A. von Speyr, *The Book of All Saints*, 20–24 (20–21).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 10–11.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 5: “Once again obedience has to be mentioned first It is the central notion, on the basis of which A. interprets the revelation”; cf. *First Glance*, 66–68.

⁵⁷ Speyr, *The Book of All Saints*, 222, 236, 240, 262, *passim*.

of curiosity, a temptation found mostly in the inexperienced. In addition, Poulain warned against spiritual direction drifting into collaboration: “Let the director be on guard against the idea of entering into partnership [with the visionary] ...”⁵⁸

27. A third related oddity of their collaboration was Speyr’s need to be appraised afterward of what she disclosed despite its alleged great import and source. Though typical of spiritualist mediums, such need is also not found among past authentic Catholic mystics, nor does it make much sense. If God chooses to reveal something significant or give the visionary some special insight or message, the recipient becomes His witness to this event and its truth. What good, or how fair to the subject, is a witness who does not know what she heard or saw?

28. A fourth telling reservation about Speyr’s alleged communications with literally hundreds of supposed saintly figures arises from the fact that, almost without exception, her “revelations” of their spiritual lives align with what are generally acknowledged as Balthasar’s own predilections. Near adulatory descriptions are given of patristic favorites of his, including the universalists or quasi-universalists he cites in his eschatological speculations. For example, St. Gregory of Nyssa’s “faith is strong ... he receives illumination ... he enriches the Church by the foreign treasures he brings her ...”⁵⁹ Showing up similarly extravagantly praised is the influential theologian Origen, who was especially admired by Balthasar and his friend Karl Barth long before Balthasar met Speyr.⁶⁰

29. In contrast, apparently disfavored others, including conventional ecclesiastical figures like Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, St. Pius X, and Désiré Cardinal Mercier garner more disparaging comments,⁶¹ as do a number of saints renowned in popular piety, such as St. Margaret-Mary Alacoque.⁶² Other historically prominent saints receive similarly surprisingly poor descriptions. St. Dominic is tarred with “intransigence ... abruptness ... harshness.”⁶³ Even worse is what is said of St. Thomas Aquinas: Speyr reports that “he does not let God speak ... God is a concept for him ... Love is not there.”⁶⁴ St. Joseph even comes in for significant disparagement. His support of Mary is characterized as “very modest,” and he himself is said to be “pious ... simple ... without curiosity ... and [his prayer life] does not grow in insight.”⁶⁵

30. Take a step back: Are we truly supposed to believe that such offensive comments about the devoted saintly foster father of Our Lord Himself are authentically being divinely revealed two thousand years later for a modern audience’s curious inquiry? Balthasar and Speyr maintained, of course, that the alleged supernatural sources were communicating to or through her, i.e., she is not taken to be speaking her own opinions and they were just learning of their subjects’ prayer lives in service of showing models of saintly humility, supposedly through these holy figures’ “pub-

⁵⁸ Poulain, *The Graces of Interior Prayer* (tr. *Des Graces d’Oraison*, Paris 1901) 2008, 352.

⁵⁹ Speyr, *The Book of All Saints*, 37–39.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 325–330.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 150–152, 180–182, 191–192.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 155–156.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 360–362.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 21, 240–241, 301, 363–366.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 27–28.

lic confession.” But is it really believable that derogatory reflections of such a nature would spring from authentic supernatural sources in a commentary unique in the two millennia of Christian history?

31. The theory that Speyr in some manner may have been “tapping into” Balthasar’s own strong opinions — for example, his decidedly negative attitude towards Neo-Scholasticism — is also an inadequate one, because she was in a trance and afterward didn’t even remember the messages. On the other hand, preternatural sources would be well aware of his pre-existing theological opinions and emphases.

32. Indeed, a fifth telling point of comparison to spiritualist practices, one to be expected in this context, involves precisely the frequent and otherwise uncanny accuracy of many of Speyr’s “revelations” of historical details that she could not have known naturally. Speyr knew little or nothing at all about the vast majority of those she supposedly encountered. This fact is certainly a major reason her experiences and visions have impressed so many readers, including Balthasar himself. It further discredits the suggestion that Speyr was unconsciously aiming to please Balthasar in his preferences. Similarly, that Balthasar said he learned things he didn’t know from her revelations overthrows the even more implausible explanation, that Speyr was able, through paranormal powers, to read the theologian’s mind.

33. The same impression of remarkable knowledge of past details is conveyed in nearly all successful spiritualist messages, even as they also contain inaccurate details, even phantasmagorical ones, as well. That is, of course, why humans become intrigued by such figures in the first place. Knowledge of accurate details about Aunt Susie or Grandpa Jimmy (let alone putative ancestors like Cleopatra or Julius Caesar!) *do* tend to fool people.

34. In sum, what could possibly explain such extraordinary awareness on Speyr’s part other than supernatural revelations, as they both believed? The more obvious alternate sources are the preternatural ones we are positing, i.e., evil entities existing before humanity, immortal, highly intelligent, and observant throughout all world history. Catholic tradition confidently teaches that evil spirits would know all such facts. And they, given their sadism if nothing else, would have considerable motivation to “play with” a mutually unwitting, but willing pair, especially if they could work out some “agenda,” that is, convey some desired false information mixed with true details to individuals who might come to have considerable influence in religious circles. After all, “a half-truth is more dangerous than a lie.”

35. A related phenomenon endemic to the everyday practice of spiritualism that was also reported of Speyr, is the claimed gift of spiritual foreknowledge, in Speyr’s case of the deaths of both her father and first husband. Such predictions of the future are indeed the very bread-and-butter of mediums, including as promoted by history’s ubiquitous fortune tellers. As recognized by more knowledgeable Church experts, such predictions are merely due to heightened awareness by demons of likely or “inevitable” (in their superior cognizance of) pending human events.

36. While the pair’s theological and devotional intentions may readily be taken for granted, “good intentions” do not change the nature of the activity in which they were engaged, which should have been identified as prototypically spiritualist from all the identifying marks above. Recognition by “the other team,” so to speak, pro-

vides supplemental confirmation. The prominent head of a society of active spiritualist mediums noted, “Of course, Dr. Gallagher, Adrienne von Speyr was a medium, and I believe Balthasar was unaware of what he was inadvertently doing The problem was his poor discernment; they were unquestionably soliciting spirits, but he seemed completely unable to ascertain the real identity of the spirits he was summoning.”⁶⁶

37. Leaving aside these clear parallels to spiritualist practices, what might be labelled Speyr’s “non-spiritualist-like” alleged visionary or revelatory experiences deserve comment as well. Speyr experienced visions well before meeting Balthasar.⁶⁷ For example, one of Mary is described as “pictorial ... like a picture ... in a kind of wordless prayer.”⁶⁸ It remains uncertain how many of her later non-spiritualist-like visions were also independent of their collaboration. The documentation is too unclear for a complete accounting of this matter over her lifespan and, given Balthasar’s monopoly of familiarity with her experiences, it is impossible now to reconstruct the precise nature of some of these diverse phenomena, including how many occurred during trances or not. By Balthasar’s report, Speyr seemed to have remembered clearly her experiences of her Passiontide sufferings.⁶⁹ By contrast, her “missions to Hell” [*Auftragshöllen*] involved again a “transport ... [of which] she usually recalled nothing ... [such that Balthasar had] to restore these memories to her under obedience”; in these instances, Balthasar reverts to spiritualist-like descriptors: Speyr was a “mere vehicle,” was in a trance, and was “no longer a loving woman ... and she no longer recognized”⁷⁰ Balthasar. His further account is downright alarming in reflecting a communication of a nasty preternatural-spiritualist nature:

I was merely someone who was present to learn something and who understood nothing to begin with, which often caused her to make sarcastic remarks (for so much stupidity in divine matters). Finally, she would give some sort of signal that the lesson was over; then she was to return to her normal state of consciousness.⁷¹

38. Balthasar and Speyr claimed the frequent messages from Mary or St. Ignatius involved direct communications received outside of any trance and therefore were clearly recalled. These communications were thought so important that they actually guided their activities, including the founding of their lay institute, the Community of St. John, by their admonitions and/or approving comments. Speyr often referred to this latter project as the birthing of their “Child,” knowingly crediting St. Ignatius as using that very language himself to her. Along with odd sexual and marital analogies for Balthasar and Speyr’s general collaboration, predictions of the Community’s

⁶⁶ J. Brocad, President of *The Spiritualist Medium Society*, personal communication with Richard Gallagher, Apr. 2, 2022.

⁶⁷ Balthasar, *Our Task*, 23, 25.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶⁹ Balthasar, *First Glance*, 35.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 64–65.

growth employed references suggestive of a growing pregnancy.⁷² Although Speyr is said to have “prophesied” a great future for the group, most informed observers today speak of its decline since her demise.

39. Balthasar waited to reveal these and many other unusual messages only after Speyr died. Despite Balthasar’s ahistorical claims in “General Introduction to the Posthumous Works,” her revelatory abilities did not constitute an “utterly unique gift”⁷³ and “an incomprehensible charism.”⁷⁴ Spiritualist messages, today the experiential heart of so-called New Age-ism (which is hardly new at all), have been ubiquitous in recorded history. And the overall diversity of the rest of her supposed private revelatory experiences actually, in its very breadth, resembles precisely the great variety of such experiences by many seers in *all* religious traditions, not just within Christianity. It may be that this complexity was expressly intended to mislead the pair and also perplex later commentators, i.e., it was another example of a preternatural wish to *confuse*.

40. Such extreme diversity should prompt great pause before any observers credit a supernatural origin. Once again this truism is specifically worth heeding since preternatural cases far outnumber supernatural ones.

41. Indeed, the very *combination* of claimed visionary revelations accompanying Speyr’s plethora of other alleged spiritual gifts does nothing to allay concerns about their non-supernatural nature, Balthasar’s impression to the contrary notwithstanding. Comparison to historical individuals who were shown to be diabolically influenced but likewise experienced combined multiple phenomena further illustrates just how faulty was Balthasar’s near-automatic assumption of her special status.

42. Among the trickier cases originally mistaken as authentically supernatural, there have appeared notorious Catholic ones that created confusion for a time in Church circles before better discernment showed their preternatural origins. A small sampling must suffice.

43. One woman of recent decades was causing much consternation to multiple pastors who were asked to allow her to speak in their churches. A pleasant and sane lady, as devout as Speyr, was evaluated after likewise reporting putative messages from Our Blessed Mother which confused her colleagues no end. If less voluminous than Speyr’s messages, her lengthy collection of alleged revelations was, she stated, literally dictated by Mary. This woman also exhibited quite a number of supposed spiritual charisms obvious to all of us who assessed her, including a secular psychologist. One of these was the “odor of sanctity,” a sweet flowery smell evident to everyone except the woman herself and a phenomenon frequently found in non-saintly cases, too, as well-documented by Thurston. The Church further formally investigated her thoroughly verified case of *inedia*, i.e., living on the Eucharist alone for years on end, a phenomenon also shown by Thurston’s research to be in no way proof of sanctity or any genuine promise of divine sourcing. Yet her transcribed messages

⁷² A. von Speyr, *Erde und Himmel*, Teil II, Einsiedeln 1985, 1655. Cf. Balthasar, *Our Task*, 78–79.

⁷³ Balthasar, *General Introduction*, 10.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

smacked of a strong “New Age-y” feel, here in a sort of mockery of Marian piety, a common diabolic strategy.⁷⁵

44. Similarly traditional intimations of sanctity accompanied a medieval monk noted for his own odor of sanctity. The monk fooled multiple individuals for years as he preached lengthy theologically capable and moving sermons that were, nevertheless, interspersed with peculiar and unorthodox ideas until proper discernment revealed the true source. Suspicious of him, a Dominican adviser, Jordan of Saxony, O.P., noted that these “gifts” immediately disappeared as soon as their demonic origin was addressed.

45. A perhaps even more telling parallel to Speyr was a thirteenth-century woman discussed by the Cistercian prior, Caesarius of Heisterbach, in his *Dialogus Miraculum*. A Catholic woman of the German countryside claimed to receive messages about recently deceased townsfolk from angels nightly for years. The supposed revelations from heaven about their lives and posthumous states included remarkably precise information previously unknown to her. Caesarius accurately discerned that the pious lady for a long time was fooled by evil spirits. He concluded that the problem was that she had had no sensible adviser to correct her, as Jordan of Saxony had also realized of the monk.

46. These and many other rough historical parallels to Speyr’s case shared a grave need for proper spiritual discernment. This necessity for a sober expert adviser raises serious questions about Balthasar’s credentials in this regard. He failed to attend to traditional prudence and the standard advice that the adviser (a) should not in any way encourage the seer to focus overly on her experiences, and (b) that, in particular, the visionary and her adviser should show great caution in welcoming novel theological ideas. Insofar as Balthasar saw their vocation as a joint one, the two required a neutral adviser of them *as a pair*. Half of the team, Balthasar was too close a participant of events — both of Speyr’s experiences and of their significance for his own theological work and religious life — to be an objective guide.

G. The Preternatural Hypothesis: Additional evidence

47. A few other, but highly significant, documented features further point powerfully to the real existence of periodic preternatural influence upon our two subjects. These involved episodes and joint practices on their part in some ways still more disturbing to objective analysis.

48. In addition to the caustic comments Balthasar reported in recounting her *Auftragshöllen*, Balthasar describes a prolonged trance experience with “dream-like ravings” over two days during which Speyr rebuked him and challenged his loyalty and good will. Upon his questioning of her attitude, Balthasar reports a devastating response from her coming “with an ice-cold severity. It is not her voice. Someone else is speaking out of her ... A terrifying indictment continues for almost an hour.”⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Personal interview by Richard Gallagher and an anonymous Ph.D. psychologist, May 17, 2014.

⁷⁶ Balthasar, *Our Task*, 77–79.

49. Balthasar's observation here ought to have been enough to stop them in these activities, consider a less savory source for her experiences, and at a minimum immediately seek out expert spiritual consultation. As he chose instead to continue, it seems he dismissed this early concern. He publicly reports the episode around 1984, with the publication of *Unser Auftrag (Our Task)*, which means four years before his death, he had an opportunity to reconsider their project. Instead he continued to affirm it. Note that this disclosure happens after *nearly 45 years* of promoting a theology based on Speyr's experiences. Again information essential to readers for making an informed decision about their own reliance upon those experiences and the theology built upon them was withheld while Balthasar's and Speyr's reputations grew.

50. A still additional strange incident of a foreign voice emerging from Speyr occurred during her reception into the Catholic Church, what Balthasar called her 'Catholic baptism.'"⁷⁷ Balthasar recalls how, during her profession of the formula of faith, "she stumbled as she came to the words about the Catholic Church '*extra quam est nulla salus*' ["outside of which, there is no salvation"] and left them out." He notes further, "Her husband who was there said he heard the words quite distinctly but as if spoken by a strange voice." Both the omission (in Balthasar's perception) and the unrecognized voice (in her husband's) again raise the likelihood of demonic intrusion. That need not involve possession, of course; rather, it is not unusual for such interjections to happen in individuals vulnerable to such influence, such as spiritualists and those undergoing what is termed by exorcists, *demonic oppression*. This form of diabolic appearance often seems motivated by a particular agenda, and certainly preternatural entities have considerable interest in distorting doctrine, perhaps especially those most closely related to salvation.⁷⁸

51. Balthasar's seeming preoccupation with arcane texts, practices, and various occult historical figures is disquieting in retrospect, too. It is known that, even while a Jesuit, he took horoscopes seriously.⁷⁹ Some of his critics express concern that his strong interest in items like Kabbalist practices and esoteric Tarot and in occultists such as Eliphas Levi may have led him down paths of scholarly inquiry more dangerous than he was willing or able to acknowledge. His fascination with Solovyov's thinking itself may well have extended not only to the Russian's eschatological and other theological conclusions, but also to his spiritualist pursuits, as mentioned, and to that writer's further interests in trance states and automatic writing.

52. One final area of concern we will mention that is suggestive of preternatural influence in Balthasar and Speyr's acceptance of "spiritual messaging" concerns another of the pair's long-standing mutual preoccupations: namely, their unsettling

⁷⁷ Balthasar, *Our Task*, 58. The actual creedal phrase is "*veram Catholicam Fidem, extra quam nemo salvus esse potest.*"

⁷⁸ A. L. Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell*, Grand Rapids 2007, examines much of what is at stake doctrinally for Christology, soteriology, and Trinitarian theology in the Balthasarian-Speyrian proposed innovations.

⁷⁹ M. Lochbrunner, *Hans Urs von Balthasar 1905–1988: Die Biographie eines Jahrhunderttheologen*, Würzburg 2020, 203, fn. 68, quotes from an undated letter to Pierre Ganne shortly before Balthasar's tertianship: "I've been thinking for a good few years that, if my horoscope was correct, [my great introduction to theology] would be completed in 1945. No kidding, I was really struck hard by what this science was able to reveal to me — of the past as of the future."

involvement in numerology. Knowledgeable students hardly regard such practices as benign frivolities; they are known to be unequivocally occultic. The practice of numerology bears no relation to the traditional typological interpretations of numbers practiced by numerous Fathers of the Church in their biblical commentaries. The patristic and later medieval interpretations carry no boast of any privately revealed origin. By contrast, both Balthasar and Speyr claimed their views regarding particular numbers were specially revealed to her in trances, extending even to their numerical *rankings* of the saints, the key text being *Das Fischernetz* (*The Fisherman's Net*) from among the *Nachlasswerke* ("posthumous works").⁸⁰ What Balthasar oddly labeled their "number mysticism," as if another automatic sign of supernatural approbation, is strongly associated rather with the arcane genre of numerology found in texts of dubious pedigree like the Kabbala.

53. Their alleged suppositions included that this mutual curious endeavor reflected "a glimpse of the infinite mathematics of the heavenly Jerusalem"⁸¹! They employed a complex arithmetical formula as interpretively significant, based upon the number 153, the total of the fish caught in Peter's net in John's Gospel. The results of this system represented an elaborate "grading" system of holy figures in salvation history, not unlike a key premise of their *Book of All Saints*. Balthasar writes:

In connection with the book of Revelation and then later independently, Adrienne began to speak of certain numbers ... each number represented a particular saint ... at each step complemented by addition or multiplication with other numbers until it reached the total sum of sanctity, 153.⁸²

54. Balthasar's comment that this peculiar aspect of their work together would be a "hard nut to crack for psychoanalysts and their like"⁸³ was characteristically dismissive – and unfortunately hardly a sign of Balthasar's good judgement or even common sense in this instance. For it's not a hard nut at all to crack for many.

H. Psychological Susceptibilities and Their Effects

55. Let us return now to Part I's discussion of Speyr's human vulnerabilities for an assessment of their import to our overall argument.

56. Though Speyr had her experiences unwittingly, and they were unfortunately too readily validated by her adviser, as neither was able to recognize their actual source, it would be mistaken to dismiss Lhermitte's observations and conclusions about unconscious motives and personality limitations. What we have argued about Speyr's visions, putative revelations, and alleged spiritual gifts does not discount his professional assessment of Speyr's emotional features nor, for that matter, Balthasar's

⁸⁰ A. von Speyr, *Das Fischernetz*, Einsiedeln, 1969, *passim*, and Balthasar, *First Glance*, 77–80; *Our Task*, 68–69; *General Introduction*, 12–13.

⁸¹ Balthasar, *First Glance*, 79.

⁸² Balthasar, *General Introduction*, 12–13.

⁸³ Balthasar, *First Glance*, 78.

own accounts of her severe, periodic troubled episodes. Her psychological state of mind rather becomes directly relevant: As often recognized by astute spiritual directors, emotional vulnerabilities undoubtedly contribute greater susceptibility to spiritual illusions and overall suggestibility, while such a subject's strong tendency is often to yearn too readily to credit such experiences to the supernatural out of desire for personal affirmation.

57. Speyr conveyed to Lhermitte a serious fragility "if one didn't believe her ... of being devastated," in fact. So we can hardly exclude the role of psychological or characterological factors on the depth of her emotional need to assume, and the wish for others to accept, her experiences as authentically from God. The personality limitations Lhermitte observed in Speyr are directly relevant in this context, as making her more open to preternaturally-supplied illusions that fed her desire to feel exceptional. This openness in turn may well have contributed to some of the episodes Balthasar reports that were inconsistent with her own normal human personality. This admission is not intended in any way to disparage, nor does it dismiss Speyr's sincerity and long-suffering commitment to what she saw as her unusual vocation. It simply acknowledges that her vulnerabilities opened her up to influences she was unable to fully comprehend. The import of her significant influence upon controversial speculations offered by a world-famous theologian needs dispassionate scholarly review, even at the risk of seeming to highlight personality variables one would otherwise prefer to pass over.

58. Her surety about her experiences (one wonders if from their beginning in her childhood) is quite typical for pseudo-mystics. As noted earlier, most such individuals sincerely and quickly become overly convinced that their revelations are authentic due to the intense power of being messaged or shown visions. After all, preternatural entities *aim* to mislead *effectively*. And overconfidence was another dominant feature Lhermitte noted, an observation that seems relevant throughout her whole lifespan. He would hardly have been surprised to have learned how Speyr responded to Balthasar when asked about "the great mysteries ... of her childhood and youth ... that it was made clear time and again that I was being set apart, held in reserve for something,"⁸⁴ and that she had had a childhood feeling that "something is going to happen."⁸⁵ Not surprisingly, perhaps, "something" *did* happen: Her visionary journeys probably appeared to her merely what was destined to occur. In some ways, experiences out of the ordinary were desired and then too incautiously welcomed when they came.

59. Such strong feelings — likely compensatory in arising from earlier painful life experiences as a brilliant, if sensitive and vulnerable, child who was "unloved" by her mother according to Balthasar's description of Speyr's account to him⁸⁶ — cannot serve as sensible signposts of one's future, of course, nor sure measures of reality. This principle is still another reason it is so important to use objective standards like the teachings of the Church to assess the fruitfulness, or not, of alleged mystical experiences.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 20, 26.

60. On Balthasar's part, as well, it would be hard not to see some level of a similar grandiosity in his own too ready acceptance of his role as well as in his at times aggressively dismissive stance toward critics. Despite Speyr's periodic condemnations of Balthasar, their mutual conviction of a joint vocation appears to have reinforced each other's individual exaggerated surety.

61. Their belief in alleged direct guidance by the Mother of God and other saints also contributed to their self-assurance and likely prompted them to overlook or dismiss evidence that should have given them pause. Here we have only touched upon the great number of Speyr's visionary claims of this type, which should be as appropriately and similarly questioned as all the others.

62. A common theme emerges in *Erde und Himmel* (*Earth and Heaven*) and elsewhere of how, in their view, both Mary and Ignatius periodically conferred extraordinary commendation upon their mission. Unless one accepts uncritically this alleged approval as supernatural, it is hard not to think that such extravagant approbation appealed to both their psychological dispositions, as Lhermitte had suspected. Grandiose self-conceptions could not help but be the result. For example, at one point, Speyr describes Balthasar as standing in the place of Christ and herself in that of the Church, "the companion God the Father gave to the Son that he might have a sign on earth of the Father's accompaniment"⁸⁷ No wonder Balthasar followed her revelatory lead.

63. Though he might have been presumed to be equipped by his training in both dogmatic and spiritual theology and in his own readings in esoteric phenomena to recognize the many warning signs, Balthasar appears to have been taken in. He handicapped himself further by setting aside his critical observations and hesitations, and by not submitting their joint vocation formally to an external director. Whatever concerns he might have had earlier about her credibility or other matters needed further objective investigation in addition to Lhermitte's. And Balthasar apparently dismissed the physician's assessment, perhaps because the pair did not initiate it or were required to see him; Speyr, at least, was reluctant, as recounted in Lhermitte's confident description. Other opinions Balthasar may have received about her appeared to his mind to have been non-determinative,⁸⁸ throwing the issue back to his own overly self-assured resources. Balthasar's ability to self-publish and his lack of a more formal academic position also removed his judgment and their published works from another common source of informed third-party critique.

Summary and Conclusions

64. Let us here underscore the main items indicative of preternatural influence in the work of Balthasar and Speyr based upon the pseudo-mystical phenomena surrounding her for many years:

⁸⁷ Speyr, *Erde und Himmel*, Teil II, 1729.

⁸⁸ P. Henrici, *Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Sketch of His Life*, in D. Schindler, *Hans Urs von Balthasar, His Life and Work*, San Francisco 1991, 20–21.

1. The close parallels of Speyr's visionary "journeys" and locutions, let alone out-of-body experiences, to channeling and historic spiritualism.
2. The multiple (though not independently verified) special gifts credited by Balthasar to Speyr that also are common in historical reports of false mystics and assorted other individuals of non-saintly disposition.
3. The periodic intrusion of strange utterances, either filling a telling "gap" in her communication or outright malevolent-sounding.
4. Their engagement in unwittingly occult-like activities, such as their self-styled "number mysticism" and her likewise trance-induced speculative "interpretations" of the Book of Revelation, both historical red flags of false revelations.
5. Speyr's multiple "non-spiritualist-like" visionary experiences and locutions from a young age, which also statistically arise more frequently from preternatural sources than from supernatural ones.

65. Prudent spiritual assessments of potential supernatural or preternatural involvement tend not to focus upon any single item of someone's history. To re-emphasize, that Speyr was reported to have levitated or had visions, *etc.*, in itself proves nothing, as no such phenomenon in isolation can verify or invalidate a hypothesis about their origin. Rather, it is normally a clearheaded judgement of the totality of the evidence for or against a suspected origin that results in a confident conclusion, and here the cumulative evidence is quite massive.⁸⁹

66. If diabolic entities, the "great confusers," were operative here, as we aver, one must conclude that they had a desire to achieve special goals with this influential pair. The prodigious extent of the evil spirits' confounding trickery, exercised through their decidedly varied manifestations, undoubtedly supports the view that they had a powerful intent indeed to fool them both.

67. As the famed eighteenth century "*Promotor Fidei*" (more colloquially, *Devil's Advocate*), Ludovicus de Valentibus, stated, "These alleged charismata and spiritual favors are found in good and bad alike."⁹⁰ Or, as the careful modern student of the diabolic realm, Adolf Rodewyk, S.J., more pointedly maintained, "The devil is capable of using the extraordinary in order to mislead." Rodewyk further states what is obvious to anyone familiar with demonic machinations to any degree, that evil spirits generally go to extraordinary lengths to disguise themselves.⁹¹ Poulain's classic tome of spiritual discernment expounds at length upon all the larger relevant issues of concern, including that "[t]he devil can cause false revelations and visions He can even counterfeit ecstasy"⁹² Importantly, "[such visions and] private revelations ... are not to be used as *deciding questions* ... of theology which are matters of

⁸⁹ R. Gallagher, *Demonic Foes*, San Francisco 2019, *passim*, esp. 85: "To repeat for emphasis: in the final analysis, as with all scientific conclusions about complex subjects, it is the sum of the hard evidence, either for or against such a conclusion, that should be the deciding factor."

⁹⁰ L. De Valentibus, *Animadversiones Promotoris Fidei*, in the cause of the Ven. Suor Domenica dal Paradiso, Rome, 1755, 5–6.

⁹¹ A. Rodewyk, *Possessed by Satan*, Garden City, New York 1975, 90, 106.

⁹² Poulain, *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, 313.

controversy ...” (his emphasis).⁹³ We remind readers again that evil spirits hide their activity even to otherwise knowledgeable and fervent souls, often their most favored target, as St. Theresa of Avila repeatedly emphasized.

68. In more precise spiritual terms, what is being argued here is that Speyr and Balthasar both were *deceived*. That is exactly what happens in the realm of pseudo-mystics and of false visionaries. Demonic entities bestow purported charisms and illusory experiences as supposed favors or gifts in return for some level of cooperation, even if unwitting in nature and by otherwise well-meaning people. In the long experience of the Church, such deception is often unquestionably the case, and false revelations frequently the result.

69. This deduction in no way implies “dark conclusions” with respect to the overall personalities of Balthasar and Speyr. Speyr was not chronically demonically afflicted nor was Balthasar in any manner intentionally inviting demonic involvement. But it needs sober acknowledgement that presumably some level of gullibility and other relevant vulnerabilities on both their parts did open them up to being manipulated. Many subjects of false visions throughout history have been similarly misled, even if commendable and worthy individuals in other respects. St. Ignatius himself was fooled for a time by a series of visions he initially thought were from the Holy Spirit, but eventually recognized as a diabolic trick.⁹⁴ As another sort of comparison, Fénélon and Madame de Guyon come to mind: Both figures were supposedly “contacted” under Balthasar’s direction, with the entranced Speyr commenting that blame for leaving Guyon unsupported during her wider reception lay firmly upon her erudite adviser!⁹⁵ It’s hard to miss the demonic strategy of stirring the pot in both situations by playing upon the adviser’s guilt in the face of the visionary’s anger.

70. In general, our need to call attention to any personal or characterological limitations of Balthasar and Speyr has been an unpleasant task and hardly our focus, other than to provide the plausible context in which to understand the soil in which their unusual experiences grew to be taken so seriously by both. For a fuller picture of their personalities, Lhermitte’s concerns about their respective attitudes that inclined them to assume her revelations must be supernatural in origin should be supplemented by the biographical commentators who have emphasized their considerable force of character, warmth, and human charm.⁹⁶

71. Nonetheless, the purpose of this article is not a biographical sketch of their persons, but an evaluation of their larger project with time-tested principles of spiritual theology. Withal, we simply assert that an overall assessment of their work together requires acknowledgement of telling historical and psychological background material as well as recognition of preternatural entities as sources of the most singular features of their collaboration. We’ve suggested reasons these factors escaped their awareness, and that fact in itself, too, is hardly unprecedented. Even in the case of a hypothetical mixture here (improbable in our opinion) of supernatural and pre-

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁹⁴ A. Graham, *Compendium of the Miraculous*, Charlotte, NC 2013, 22.

⁹⁵ Speyr, *The Book of All Saints*, 152, 156–158 [Fénélon]; 158–161 [Madame de Guyon].

⁹⁶ To cite two appreciations: P. Henrici, *Hans Urs von Balthasar, His Life and Work*; and A. Birot’s *La mystique de L’Amour selon Hans Urs von Balthasar en écho à Adrienne von Speyr*, Paris 2020, 2021.

ternatural phenomena, the Church never allows any of these elements or alleged private revelations to confirm either someone's sanctity or the credibility of ideas drawn from the supposed messages, despite popular impression to the contrary. At a minimum, Speyr's suspicious experiences and the pair's over-assured and novel doctrines, as always, need careful Church discernment, a need unfortunately inadequately met during their lifetimes. Furthermore, we have provided strong evidence, that such a full assessment was hindered, or at a minimum, delayed and made more difficult, by Balthasar's deliberately slow and curated release of relevant historiographic and biographical data.

72. The largely unknown texts made more widely available here for the first time offer strong evidence for raising serious concerns about what lay behind Balthasar and Speyr's major theological novelties. As part of her legacy, these were innovations in defense of which Balthasar left the Jesuits, regarding his common work with her as his chief mission in life. By his own testimony, he "strove to bring [his] way of looking at Christian revelation into conformity with hers"⁹⁷ and he aimed "to prevent any attempt being made to separate [his] work from that of Adrienne von Speyr"⁹⁸ While Cardinal Ratzinger commented — charitably to Balthasar, it seems, albeit at her expense — that "he got all that stuff from Adrienne von Speyr,"⁹⁹ we rather offer Balthasar the respect of taking him at his word and of acknowledging his full ownership of his significant role in their partnership.

73. Though our conclusions might be misconstrued as provocative or even excessively negative, our intent is non-polemical in spirit, however bold or challenging. Our aim has been to present simply a dispassionate close look at the precise nature of some key components of the decades-long collaboration between two complex individuals whose impact on the modern theological community remains significant enough to warrant such continued and, by our lights, constructive scrutiny.

74. To do justice to Balthasar's and Speyr's historical record, the ongoing examination of their claims, of which this article is a part, requires frank cognizance of the discovered texts and the lesser known biographical details we've discussed. At the same time, this task of discernment warrants "mutual respect ... among those who have been enraptured by Balthasar's achievement *and* those who find his theology deficient but share in his fundamental faith commitments,"¹⁰⁰ as appropriately called for in the irenic spirit of Balthasar scholars like Matthew Levering.

75. We re-stress that the serious reservations we have raised about the collaborative aspect of their work do not aim at personal disparagement of either. In particular, nothing in our conclusions or our needfully frank biographical reflections should in any way be interpreted as diminishing respect for their personal strengths, even as their speculative views require the ongoing theological assessments we believe they finally are receiving in a number of quarters. Balthasar's lifelong interest in increasing appreciation of patristic sources; his early critical engagement with a number of

⁹⁷ Balthasar, *First Glance*, 15.

⁹⁸ Balthasar, *Our Task*, 13.

⁹⁹ As quoted by Fr. J. Komonchak in *Commonweal*, Sept. 3, 2013.

¹⁰⁰ M. Levering, *The Achievement of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, Washington, DC 2019, 229, emphasis in original.

influential modern thinkers like Kant and Hegel; his defense of the papacy and aspects of traditional Catholic spirituality in the face of often ideological attacks; the renewed impetus their work gave to reflecting upon beauty, truth, and goodness; and the general stimulus of some of their corpus to other Christian thinkers are all aspects of their work that have understandably garnered the admiration of their followers. Speyr herself was an extremely dedicated, selfless, and competent physician. She was a highly intelligent Christian of generosity and courage amid quite considerable sufferings.