Book Reviews

Jason Fout

Fully Alive: The Glory of God and the Human Creature in Karl Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Theological Exegesis of Scripture. New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015. Pp. 224. Hb, \$120.

D. Stephen Long

Saving Karl Barth: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Preoccupation. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014. Pp. 272. Pb, \$49.

Mark McInroy

Balthasar on the Spiritual Senses: Perceiving Splendour. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 240. Hb, \$99.

Paul Silas Peterson

The Early Hans Urs von Balthasar: Historical Contexts and Intellectual Formation. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015. Pp. 468. Hb, \$140.

Michele M. Schumacher

A Trinitarian Anthropology: Adrienne von Speyr and Hans Urs von Balthasar in Dialogue with Thomas Aquinas. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2014. Pp. 472. Pb, \$79.95.

Hans Urs von Balthasar once observed that he found it remarkable that anyone should be writing doctoral dissertations about his thought. After all, he held no academic position, and had never pursued doctoral work in theology. At the time, his remark seemed to be that of a great man “playing coy.” But reading five professional academics on von Balthasar points to something much deeper in his meaning, for our authors largely remind one of the Indian fable of the blind man and the elephant, each calling the part they can grasp the “elephant.” But the essence of “elephant” eludes the academics’ grasp.

In some cases, this actually works. Von Balthasar was indeed learned in the fathers of the church and schooled in the discernment of spirits, and so a study of *Balthasar on the Spiritual Senses* speaks to one part of the elephant that comes very close to its heart. Karl Barth did figure prominently in von Balthasar's theological universe, and so the two studies that are primarily concerned with Barth are able to touch that part of von Balthasar that was heavily engaged with his Reformed compatriot. However, because of Barth's prominence in the theological world, and in the Protestant world in particular, it is easy to make too much of this encounter, or to misread it, as we shall see.

This particular elephant did not wander the forest alone, and so any serious study of von Balthasar must, if it is to be fair to him, advert to Adrienne von Speyr as well. And so we have a study which takes this spiritual relation most seriously, and generously—and ambitiously—attempts to bring them into dialogue with St. Thomas Aquinas.

Essential to his own life's project—and what kept him out of the academy—was von Balthasar's insistence that it was above all in giving the Spiritual Exercises that one encountered the fullness of Christian life. That is, in the living experience of contemplative prayer, where one guides another into the life of the disciple, in full obedience to “our holy Mother, the hierarchical Church.” And so, in his programmatic essay “Theology and Sanctity” (*Explorations in Theology*, volume 1 [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989]), von Balthasar famously insisted that the split between dogmatic theology and spiritual theology was the worst tragedy ever to have befallen Christendom. Two of our five authors, Schumacher and McInroy, would be sensitive to this challenge. McInroy is graciously sympathetic, while Schumacher is the only author explicitly identified with Catholic theology. The other authors move along strictly cerebral lines. But without the contemplative dimension, which is always present in von Balthasar, there is no way to really understand him, for he was always a man of the *Exercises*, always open to a *pistis* (faith) far beyond mere *gnosis* (knowledge) alone. When he first encountered (neo-Scholastic) theology he once wrote of his despair in the face of “what men had done to the glory of God.” Let us take a look at what the professors have done to the glory in von Balthasar.

In *Saving Karl Barth: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Preoccupation*, D. Stephen Long, a professor of systematic theology at Marquette University, calls attention to the nuance and context he argues has been missing from previous studies of this unique ecumenical relationship. Reading von Balthasar and watching his relation with Karl Barth, this Jesuit at least has always suspected that bringing Barth into the Catholic fold was something of a desire for the young “Seelsorger” (von Balthasar during his time at the university in Basel). Not that

he would have been a “great catch”: such thinking is simply silly and offensive. No; something vastly deeper was going on.

For centuries, Protestants and Catholics in Switzerland tended to live in two separate universes. Von Balthasar—remarkably—attended the Protestant University of Zurich as a Catholic layman, an alumnus of Benedictine and Jesuit high schools, a scion of a noble Catholic line in the proudly Catholic city of Lucerne. Von Balthasar attended Barth’s lectures, and then, famously, lectured on Barth himself, as well as wrote a book on him. Barth was amazed and amused at von Balthasar’s perceptive understanding of him. They became friends—playing four-handed Mozart piano pieces together—and came to deeply respect, and so, to influence one another. To say that Barth brought von Balthasar to scripture would be to say too much, but Barth’s focus on the word certainly was transferred to von Balthasar.

Von Balthasar was able to get Barth to lessen his total opposition to the principle of analogy in theology, and much of the book focuses on this. “The analogy of being is the invention of the Antichrist” and “the best reason for not becoming a Catholic” was much softened. So much so that Barth was suspiciously seen attending Mass at the local Catholic church, and his own family became concerned lest he convert to Catholicism. He did not.

In his own study of Barth—which Long graciously calls “a profound act of theological humility” (247), von Balthasar understood and “brought home” to the Catholic mind the very heart of the Barth whom Pope Pius XII had remarkably called “the greatest theologian since Thomas Aquinas” (267). In doing so, von Balthasar brought together the deepest concerns of the greatest living intellectual representative of the Reformation. In that sense, he was attempting to “save” the splintering spirit of Protestantism by showing how the concerns of the Reformation could be brought back into Catholic unity.

That unity was not to be. Von Balthasar had written that ecumenical dialogue was possible—unless and until the other partner slammed the door and walked away. No doors were slammed, but unity has not been achieved, though a fine friendship did occur—and Long suggests that friendship is “the ecumenical way” (286). Yet here lies the irony of this book. It is certainly well written, well researched and thought out, informative, fair, and really quite charming. And yet, for a Catholic reader it ends on a sad note, for the Catholic instinct is for unity, and the author feels compelled to smile and say “sorry, but not that.” And so the good ship Christian Europe continues sinking, some still clinging to its divided hull. As von Balthasar elsewhere noted, “we will not have this man over us.” In the end, one must choose either one’s own judgment or that of another. A fine book, with a wistful end.

Von Balthasar's insistence that prayer and mystical theology are in fact data for the theological enterprise makes itself felt, by its absence, in Fout's study. Jason A. Fout is a professor of Anglican theology at Bexley-Seabury. His *Fully Alive: The Glory of God and the Human Creature in Karl Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Theological Exegesis of Scripture* is a puzzling book, for there is a basic commitment that is never pointedly articulated, but which dominates it. That is, that there is only one source for theology: sacred scripture ("sola scriptura"). Certainly, that was one of the watchwords of the Reformation, and key to classical Protestant theology. But one would hope that in an ecumenical age, in a book dealing in part with a pronouncedly Catholic author, some advertence to a different sense of theological sources would be more in evidence.

The book's thesis is very simple, and oft repeated. One is known by one's enemies, it is said. The enemy of this book is "straight-line obedience" (173)—that is, what the author assures us Paul Ricoeur would make of an "unquestioning," "heteronomous," obedience. This is important because, well, what are we talking about when we are talking about the glory of God, so important for both von Balthasar and Barth?

For Barth, according to Fout, the glory of God is certainly real, certainly prominent—but is it a "something"? Freedom. But how do we see freedom? For von Balthasar, it translates into beauty. Common knowledge. And yet, in the very first volume of *The Glory of the Lord* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), von Balthasar is at great pains to articulate that glory is ultimately Christ and Christ crucified, an utterly transformed and transforming sense for beauty. For von Balthasar "glory" has been—is—a luminous splendor. That is what gives von Balthasar's book its very power. It is as if he had asked: "What has ever become of glory?" He recalls "The glory of the Lord" leaving the temple, and "The Glory of the Lord shone around them." Surely this meant something. For von Balthasar, indeed, something did happen—and that something was seen, experienced, felt. It was the beauty and power emanating from God, an in-breaking of the supernatural into the world that has left traces throughout scripture, reminding us of the reality, the existence of God—and then, gathered up in the glory of Bethlehem, reaching its peak at the glory of the triduum. But always in a Johannine sense, where the cross and the resurrection, the hour, are mysteriously interchangeable: "When I am lifted up [...]." But "when" is that?

For Fout, glory is an idea and so for Barth that idea is freedom, for von Balthasar, beauty. Fout himself believes that glory is really about honor. But what is this honor? Fout spends many pages describing cultural archeology, exegetical studies, and ancient Mediterranean patterns of honor. In this, there is a sort of exegetical study that von Balthasar practiced himself—witness his

two volumes on the testaments, *inter alia*—and yet which in the case of this book serve to replace what Catholics call “tradition.” That is, Fout explicitly says he is going to approach this question by scripture alone, and that translates to scriptural scholarship. But what can that really tell us of the glory of the Lord that we would profit to hear? Surely, there are some points that are helpful and interesting, but they are only interesting steps on the way somewhere: not satisfying for long in themselves.

Most problematic is the way in which the book dismisses von Balthasar’s notions of obedience, which are profoundly Ignatian and Marian. That is to say, von Balthasar surely was a believer in “straight-line” obedience. In this he was simply following St. Ignatius’s “Rules for Thinking with the Church.” Von Balthasar writes time and again about Mary’s *Jawort*, her spousal “yes” that is the fully giving of herself over to God.

For Fout, this sort of obedience is dehumanizing, for to be fully human, we have to be questioning (“faithful questioning,” 187), in dialogue, engaged. In short, we have to be good children of the modern liberal West. Behind this is a defective notion of freedom, in which our surrender of freedom in the face of God actually means our loss of freedom—rather than our being taken up into a freedom so much greater than our own that our use of the word is only analogous. More—to be a *doulos*, a “servant”—or, indeed, slave—is the classical stance of faith: God then lifts one up to much more. Fout says that Mary began by questioning—“how shall this be?”—and yet the tradition would indicate that this was simply a marveling at the apparent impossibility of her virginal conception, hardly a negotiating. Moreover, Ignatius was fully formed by the *Imitatio Christi*, in which the “self” with which this book is much concerned is to be treated with contempt, and seen as the great stumbling block to spiritual progress.

The contemporary reader is certainly prone to a great sympathy for Fout’s concerns lest the dignity of the human creature be reduced to a mere implement in the hands of God. And yet there is a defective sense of freedom here, for the submission to a freedom of an entirely different order is not the loss of freedom but the discovery of the true self: “He who loses himself will find himself.” Put differently, as von Balthasar observes, when Jesus called Simon, had Simon dickered and haggled, it would have been perhaps an interesting study in the psychology of fishermen with vocations. But he had to be brought to his knees, to an acknowledgement of his own worthlessness, so that he could be given the mission—and the new name—in which his very person was created, but the Lord who, yes, was his friend, but also, and always, his master.

Fout’s concerns for the dignity of the human are appealing, and yet there is a tone of triumphant debate which mars the book. Fine as his thought may be, it is hard to read Barth and von Balthasar as being surpassed by Fout—rather

than his saying, with somewhat more humility, “it may be that these aspects are underplayed.” It is true that von Balthasar had no interest in subjective mysticism, in subjective experience, in that “self” with which our world is so full. He was concerned with God and the things of God, but that was because it was only there that the fullness of the human could be found: only in that death to the self modeled by our Lord, and his Mother, at Calvary.

Michelle Schumacher’s *A Trinitarian Anthropology: Adrienne von Speyr and Hans Urs von Balthasar in Dialogue with Thomas Aquinas* must surely be one of the most ambitious books one could attempt. It is said that von Balthasar wrote more in his life than most people ever read. The same could surely be said of Adrienne von Speyr (whose books were at least dictated to von Balthasar). And then, to top it all off, St. Thomas Aquinas. As if the sources were not enough, we have the Trinity itself and the—simplest of all—anthropology.

This book is a noble venture, noble because it sees that thirty years after the beginning of the church’s awakening to the thought of von Speyr and von Balthasar, it is necessary to bring them into dialogue with Aquinas. This is a daunting task. It was of course easy enough for von Balthasar, steeped in neo-Scholasticism, to move to the truly deep font of St. Thomas, which he did, and on which he insisted until his very death. There is a tremendous need in the church today to see the profound congruence of truth in these great lights of the church. And it is Schumacher’s generous project to seriously entertain criticism of von Speyr and von Balthasar, while engaging with Aquinas.

As regards von Balthasar and Aquinas, we are looking at two very different minds, separated by seven centuries. Von Balthasar has been described as a “Church Father in the land of Wilhelm Tell.” It has never been said he reminded someone of a Scholastic in Switzerland: no doubt that accolade can be given to one of our Dominican brethren. The task is not to make a Scholastic out of von Balthasar, but to show how his thought is not incompatible with the model teacher of Catholic theology. To do this, of course, one must make the tremendous transition in times, in mentalities. To pursue the thought of Adrienne von Speyr is certainly a remarkable way of taking up this challenge, for if the thought of von Balthasar is intuitive and circular, von Speyr’s often strikes theological minds as utterly elusive, however respectful one may be of the inspiration that lies behind it. Schumacher herself describes von Speyr’s work as “painfully unsystematic” (4), but this does not keep her from very competently appropriating and presenting von Speyr’s mystical teaching: indeed, one of the chief strengths of the book is the serious presentation of the “intuitive gyre” that is von Speyr’s writing. Schumacher plainly sees that von Speyr exhibits the unity of theology and sanctity on which von Balthasar insisted. And it is this need for a spiritual approach on which von Speyr insisted that

makes the book so profoundly refreshing. It is true that the book is attempting to do so much, on so many fronts, that it is very much a challenge to read. One is tempted to impatience when von Balthasar is critiqued by feminist authors: here is a theologian who authored around one hundred books, and then took the dictation of Adrienne von Speyr to produce another score of publications, who nevertheless insisted that von Speyr's work was more important than his own. Adrienne, by the way, was the first woman in Switzerland to receive a doctorate. However great the temptation to impatience in the face of feminist critiques, Schumacher resists. On another front, Schumacher handily but carefully deals with the polemics of Elyssa Pitstick. Given both Schumacher's theological competence and the profundity of her penetration of the mysteries involved, this makes for light work.

This broad, deep theological effort is a noble one, yet perhaps too much for a single book. I believe this is best viewed as a remarkable resource to be selectively explored. To attempt to read it steadily brings together so many rich yet disparate elements that one easily loses treasures that are best savored individually. This is a book to be read and enjoyed slowly.

Paul Silas Peterson's *The Early Hans Urs von Balthasar: Historical Contexts and Intellectual Formation* offers a long and detailed study of von Balthasar's literary influences. It is basically a sustained polemic, most obviously against von Balthasar and (only slightly less obviously) against the Catholic Church. At its worst it is simply a work of character assassination. If our first two books came from a Protestant perspective that limited them to something like *sola scriptura*, this volume is really not concerned with God or the things of God at all, even under the relatively low ceiling of exegesis. It is concerned with ideology.

If there is a single "enemy" in this book, it is "anti-Semitism." The phenomenon is never described for us—we simply are not told what it means, except that it is totally unacceptable and that to be called such is utterly damning. The point of the book is then to show, in the words of our author, that von Balthasar was anti-Semitic and perhaps a fascist in his youth.

Now the early von Balthasar certainly lived through some interesting times. For example, the manner of giving the Spiritual Exercises was going through significant—dramatic—changes. But the spiritual life, indeed, his entire Jesuit spiritual formation, is of no interest to our author—something remarkable, as this book takes us well into his priestly life, and von Balthasar saw himself as passionately and totally Ignatian. His conversion occurred in these years: we hear nothing of it. A remarkable lacuna.

Von Balthasar did not identify either as a theologian or a philosopher. Instead, he was a "Germanist." That is awkward in English, but the sense is that

of a student of German language, literature, and culture. Culturally, the nineteenth century was arguably the great German century. Von Balthasar was a gifted musician, in a century defined by German music. He was interested in philosophy, and a glance at any college catalogue will tell one what nation was producing the philosophy of that century. There were other currents less known to us, in literature above all. By the early twentieth century, though Britannia might have ruled the waves (something of apparently endless chagrin to the Prussians) Germany dominated the continent, a pulsing powerhouse in every field of endeavor: it stood at a peak, and rightly saw itself standing there.

Von Balthasar studied in Vienna after WWI. His teacher was a noted Germanist, who apparently later became a Nazi. Indeed, many Germanists became involved with the National Socialist regime. Though our author treats this as somehow scandalous, it seems quite obviously a natural phenomenon—more natural than, say zoologists or physicists joining a German nationalist movement. Understandable, if hardly admirable, given subsequent events. But von Balthasar most certainly did not join any such movement. He would of course know many people who were engaged with the Reich rising out of the ruins of the German empire. But he himself simply never became a member of any political party and never advocated anything like violence against any community. In his writings on the Jewish religion and Jewish culture, he shared both a profound appreciation and the profound critique that goes back to the writings of the New Testament—and is found within the Jewish community itself. There is a mystery here, to be treated respectfully, gently. This book does the very opposite.

This book amasses a great deal of information on a technical level—who was reading and influencing whom—and so has some interest to a cultural historian. But it is a classic case of what may be a plague of the modern academy: massive accumulation of seemingly impressive data, with little desire or ability to read it in a sympathetic, nuanced manner. Despite our author's insinuations, it is what von Balthasar in his essay on Dionysius the Areopagite famously called the “Panzer divisions of German theology” (*Studies in Theological Styles: The Glory of the Lord; A Theological Aesthetics* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984]). He was, after all, Swiss, and proudly so.

For no apparent reason, Peterson begins the book with a “historical table” that indicates that from 1944 there was a “forced migration of ca. 12 million German speaking people from eastern and central Europe” (xvi). There is no mention of the Poles and others forced out of their homes further east. If Peterson must raise so painful a subject, he should in fairness remind us that the war was intentionally a genocidal war, waged explicitly against the Slavs and aimed at their enslavement and elimination; that in the non-Catholic border

areas next to Poland the German vote was well over fifty-five percent for Hitler (totally unlike any Catholic province in Germany). As the East German publisher Countess Marion von Doenitz, herself one of the “Vertriebenen” (exiled), famously reminded her resentful countrymen, “If you had not eagerly started this war, you would still be in your homes.” To acknowledge the Jewish genocide is obviously essential; to deny it simply stupid, let alone criminal. To fail completely to mention the planned and partly executed Slavic genocide, further realized by Slavic expulsion and German settlement (e.g., “Warthegau”) is similarly outrageous. That the doomed fifty million Slavs were not destroyed in the same manner was simply a matter of lack of time (see Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012]). As it was, many, many millions were exterminated, for reasons of race. Finally, one reels as Dr. Peterson breezily declares, “It was not dangerous to be Catholic in 1944” (274). Really? Maximilian Kolbe? The priests in Dachau? The Polish nation? This is disgraceful ignorance.

One typical note: the word “Neger” used at that time would be translated “Negro,” the word used in our country until very recently (e.g. “the United Negro College Fund”). To use the word “nigger” as our author does—and to impute that that was what von Balthasar meant in writing of people who at that time were calling themselves Negroes—is demeaning and profoundly offensive. That change in socially acceptable usage came about around 1970 in Germany, about the same time as “black” replaced “Negro” here.

Let it finally be noted that this is a bilingual book. Extensive citations in German are generally imported, untranslated, into the English text. I am eager to conclude. As I reeled through this book, the words “nasty” and “character assassination” came to the fore. The tactic is to smear (see, for example, page 142). The agenda is simple: to prove that von Balthasar was an “anti-Semitic Fascist,” akin to Alfred Rosenberg (161). One imagines our sage of Luzern, who had the works of Mozart memorized, standing up in a Bavarian beer-hall in Lederhosen and brown shirt, raising his *Masskrug* and singing: “Tomorrow belongs to me.” And behind von Balthasar (no surprise) stands an authoritarian, conservative Catholic Church. But why all this animus? One giveaway clue is that, as we learn on page xxx, Hans Küng—who is partly behind this book—was offended by von Balthasar, as was apparently Tübingen itself when von Balthasar did not accept a professorship there. This would seem to point to a large, hostile agenda. *Malicia monachorum* is clearly outpaced by *odium theologicum*, though this book is all about power and politics in a “theological” world which seems to know nothing of theology. *Caveat lector*.

So we come to the last of our books, a bit like tasting porridge—“this one’s too hot, this one’s too cold.” This last book is “just right.” Mark McInroy’s

Balthasar and the Spiritual Senses simply gets it right: the author penetrates von Balthasar's study of the spiritual senses, exploring this essential dimension of von Balthasar's work. This teaching—thoroughly ignored in our modern world—is essential to von Balthasar. If, as we noted, the contemplative dimension is essential to any true knowing, and above all to any true theological knowing, the very existence of “spiritual senses” guarantees that there is a source of knowledge other than mere cerebral knowing (“computer mind?”)—to which our academic authors, whose sources are confined to scriptural exegesis, are limited. That is, there is a tendency to “Gnosticism”—to a knowing—but a knowing of mere ideas about God, about Christ, about spiritual realities. In the Catholic tradition of which this book breathes, one actually *knows* God and the things of God. But how is one to know them? The mystical tradition has taught that it is through the “spiritual senses.”

Hence von Balthasar's great love for the catechetical school of Alexandria, and, of course, his concern for a sense-based epistemology which is rooted in the fact that “*Verbum caro factum est*.” “*Nihil est in mente quod non erat prius in sensu*”: this Scholastic maxim gives us the key. Our senses must be transformed. And yet von Balthasar by no means stops with his ancient and medieval teachers, for he goes on to insist that “the interpersonal encounter with the neighbour functions as the paradigmatic arena within which one receives his or her spiritual senses” (122).

Let us listen to the author's lucid prose, laying out von Balthasar's contemplative epistemology in its penetration of the nature/grace mystery:

It is through the supernaturally given spiritual senses that one becomes open to the overwhelming beauty of God's revelation while not being alienated by what one sees [...]. Drawing parallels from Balthasar's personalist rendering of the relationship between mother and child, we argued that the spiritual senses are integrated into the self such that they become a part of the human being [...]. When grace arrives, the *whole* human being is changed. Sensibility itself is altered, and one receives senses that are “capable of perceiving the forms of existence with awe” (185).

This book faithfully and respectfully reads von Balthasar, well presenting the tradition. It is a highly recommended essay, a wonderful entry point into the heart of what von Balthasar was about and what informed his vast corpus. The book is a fine, elegant essay that restores faith in the possibility that the academy can be home to an inquiry that does not limit itself to *ratio* but opens its heart to *intellectus* as well. A final note: McNroy marvelously treats the standard complaint of scholars of patristics that von Balthasar uses classic texts in too cavalier a fashion. Let us recall that von Balthasar chose

not to be an academic theologian, but a (learned) “Seelsorger,” a spiritual director: respecting a text, but also presenting it in a way meant to serve the work of the Spirit transforming the hearts and souls in his care. His model was more that of a classical catechetical school than a modern university. And so McNroy writes: “Balthasar occasionally advances a somewhat hermeneutically massaged reading of patristic sources” (11). Respectful, bemused courtesy typical of the remarkably learned mind that marks this lean yet comprehensive study.

In the end, perhaps one knows the elephant best by intuitively entering elephant-ness. And then, one might see the Form—or rather, be seen by the Form. One must have the eyes to see: and, as McNroy sums it all up so well: “Simply put, to see spiritually is to believe” (168). And that is transformative. The alternative would seem to be the blind groping of information armed “ignorant armies clashing by night.”

Raymond Gawronski, S.J. (†)
St. Patrick's Seminary and University

DOI 10.1163/22141332-00304009-01