A Man and Three Women—Hans, Adrienne, Mary and Luce

Tina Beattie

This is probably best described as a marginal paper, given in one of the short slots at the conference of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain on the subject of Hans Urs von Balthasar. It is deliberately provocative, intended to raise questions about the relationship between von Balthasar and Adrienne von Speyr in the presence of experts who are in a position to defend him against my charges.

Von Balthasar made extravagant claims about von Speyr's influence on his work, and they understood their relationship as the lived expression of their theological insights about the significance of sexual difference. John Roten writes that "The very concrete symbolism of man and woman was retranslated into theological categories"[1] to such an extent that von Speyr sometimes depicted herself as the Church to von Balthasar's Christ. Given that von Balthasar has become what somebody referred to as the "court theologian" of the Vatican, is there an implicit suggestion in neo-orthodox Catholic theology that the relationship between von Speyr and von Balthasar embodies some kind of symbolic ideal, and what are the implications of this for the theological understanding of sexual difference? In asking these questions I draw on the insights of psychoanalysis, and in particular on the work of Luce Irigaray, but I am not suggesting that theology should be answerable to psychoanalysis nor indeed to any other non-theological discipline. I do however believe that Irigaray's philosophy of sexual difference, informed by her experience as a practising psychoanalyst, offers a rich resource for those seeking to identify both the promises and pitfalls of Catholic sexual symbolism, especially in von Balthasar's theology.

At first glance there is a striking resemblance between Irigaray and von Balthasar, which attests to the influence of Catholicism on Irigaray's thought. Although her position in relation to Catholicism is ambivalent, her use of the symbolics of the Catholic faith is so

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extensive that I would suggest she is most fully understood when read within the broad framework of the Catholic intellectual tradition. However, it is the difference rather than the similarity between von Balthasar and Irigaray that is most revealing, because ultimately, Irigaray's symbolics of sexual difference exposes von Balthasar's theology to be the same old story of the same old sameness, fetchingly disguised in the masks of femininity and not averse to the occasional bit of cross-dressing.

Both Irigaray and von Balthasar are sceptical about the claims of egalitarian feminism, arguing that it can only gain women entry into a masculine, technological culture that has eradicated femininity. Like Irigaray, von Balthasar defends the irreducibility of the two sexes, and both argue that the discovery or rediscovery of the significance of sexual difference is a vital task if we are to avoid the cultural crises confronting us at the end of the twentieth century. However, von Balthasar seems to think that he already knows what sexual difference looks like and what it amounts to, whereas Irigaray suggests we have only the vaguest of ideas. She argues that all present constructs of sexual difference are products of masculinity, so that what poses as the feminine in western culture is in fact the masculine imaginary—a projection onto women of the desires and fantasies that must be repressed in the acquisition of male subjectivity, in a way that denies women access to the symbolics of their own subjectivity. The creation of a culture of sexual difference would entail radical social change beginning at the level of language, not just through cosmetic tinkering to meet the demands of political correctness, but through a fundamental reshaping of language in its syntax as well as its semantics. Irigaray calls for a "double syntax (masculine/feminine)",[2] which can perhaps be imagined in terms of creating a discursive dual carriageway where at present we only have a single track road.

Irigaray's work constitutes a textual weaving together of male and female voices, with her feminine persona subverting the arguments of the men she engages with by strategies of seduction, humour, flirtation and irony. Symbolically, she is suggesting the possible fecundity of a culture of sexual difference by opening the imagination to new visions and ways of understanding when the woman's voice speaks in distinction from but also in harmony with the man's. However, because our culture does not have a symbolics of feminine identity, women must strategically appropriate the language of the unconscious, mimicking the roles of hysteria, mysticism and madness which have been assigned to them: "One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination

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into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it."[3]

The idea of a textual interweaving of male and female voices suffuses von Balthasar's theology after his meeting with von Speyr, and their relationship amounts to an existential living out of their theology. Roten suggests that they could be "a challenging illustration ... of the best that the Church has to offer to men and women, granted that both be shaped and permeated by the common fundamental Marian personality structure."[4] This quote encompasses the whole problematic that I now want to explore, in order to ask what the implications are of setting up this particular relationship as a model for the Catholic community.

Christian anthropology is, in the case of von Balthasar and von Speyr's writings, fundamentally Marian. The significance of masculinity and femininity with regard to the created difference between the sexes derives from a supra-masculine and a supra-feminine principle which can be applied analogously to relationships within the Godhead and between God and humankind. If femininity is understood in terms of Mary's active receptivity, obedience, fecundity and nurture, then the human being is feminine in relation to God, the originating source of life. To quote von Balthasar, "the creature can only be secondary, responsive, 'feminine' vis-à-vis God."[5] Even Christ, as the Logos who "proceeds eternally from the eternal Father," is "quasi-feminine" in relation to the Father, although "as a human being he must be a man if his mission is to represent the Origin, the Father, in the world."[6] Von Balthasar goes on to argue that "just as, according to the second account of creation, Eve is fashioned from Adam (that is, he carried her within him, potentially), so the feminine, designed to complement the man Christ, must come forth from within him, as his 'fullness'."[7]

This account of sexual complementarity entails not the affirmation but the eradication of genuine difference. If woman is man's fullness, coming forth from within him, there cannot also be a "polarity of man and woman."[8] Woman is variously described by von Balthasar as man's "answering word,"[9] his "answering gaze,"[10] the "vessel of fulfilment specially designed for him.[11] But an answer, to be relevant and comprehensible, is defined by and bound to the question. If woman is the answer to man, she can exist only within the parameters of the man's question. She must await his word and respond to his initiative, but how can she then reveal her difference and her otherness? And if woman is man's answer, to whom does she address the question of her own being? Likewise, if woman is a vessel designed for man, then she is, as Irigaray points out, always the place

for another, but has no way of exploring the place of her own existence.[12] Moreover, von Balthasar risks advocating a profoundly unethical relationship between the sexes when he says that Christ, as a man, has active responsibility for carrying out the will of the Father, "while she [Mary], a woman, must wait until she has been touched and taken possession of by him."[13] If this applies to the relationship between Mary and Christ, it is because she is human and he is divine, not because she is a woman and he is a man. To describe a sexual relationship in terms of active man taking possession of passive woman sounds dangerously close to offering a theological justification for rape.

I would also suggest that the idea of feminine passivity, silence and submission which has pervaded Catholic theology and is perpetuated by von Speyr and von Balthasar lacks scriptural justification, and bears little relation to the actual experience of women and mothers through history. Although I am not always sympathetic to the appeal to experience that muddles so much feminist theology, I wonder how many women would recognise themselves in the claim that "The marian element holds sway in the Church in a hidden manner, just as a woman does in a household ..."[14] Women with the means to live out this kind of hidden domestic life are rare in both historical and global terms. If Mary is to be identified with real women (and this quote suggests that she is), then as a poor first century Jew she belongs among those who work from dawn to dusk to provide for their children, and not with the kept wives of the European bourgeoisie. The descriptions of women in the Gospels, including Mary, offer no justification for the kind of feminine virtues advocated by von Balthasar and von Speyr. Far from hiding in the home, the mother of Jesus at times made a public nuisance of herself. In Luke's account of Christ's conception, the male priest Zechariah is silenced and we do not hear much from Joseph either, whereas two pregnant women—Mary and Elizabeth —are given the task of interpreting and proclaiming the significance of the event. The same could be said of Mary of Magdala's encounter with the risen Christ. All this makes a nonsense of von Speyr's claim that "Mary does not herself take part in the revelation of God because fundamentally revelation is no part of a woman's task. Her characteristics are silence and concealment, and they are the mark of all subsequent missions given to woman in the Church."[15] I think we need to recognise the extent to which this idea of Christian womanhood is a cultural construct of nineteenth century romanticism and far removed from the Gospels—although indebted perhaps to some of the Pauline writings. As the foundation for a

universal theology, it risks colonising the world with the sexual values of a bygone western era. In this respect, it is interesting that David Schindler entitles a *Communio* article on von Balthasar, "Catholic theology, gender, and the future of Western civilization." Is the Catholic Church really in the business of perpetuating "Western civilization," and what does this say to all the post-colonial Catholics of the Third World? Is it possible that von Balthasar's theology is by nature a theology of colonisation, not only because of its dependence on the cultural constructs of a European elite, but because of its colonisation of woman by man, dramatically enacted in the colonisation of von Speyr by von Balthasar?

For the most part, von Balthasar's theology accords men mobility between masculinity and femininity (indeed, they are Marian and therefore feminine in a more profound way than they are masculine), whereas women are trapped within femininity by virtue of the biological determinism of being women. Occasionally however, he also seems to suggest that neither sex has such mobility, as when he claims that "Every encroachment of one sex into the role of the other narrows the range and dynamics of humanly possible love ..."[17] So here we have a male theologian who recognises the necessity of his own Marian anthropological make-up, who insists on the polarity of the sexes and the apparently stable relationship between womanhood and femininity, and who seems worryingly vague about how men, given their intractable masculinity, not only can but indeed must also be primarily feminine, while women can never be masculine. Paul McPartlan says that we might almost hear von Balthasar saying that "The poor man ... has to cope with a tension between actual masculinity and spiritual femininity, and will always be inherently more fragile. Not only was Adrienne telling him of the prerogatives of femininity, she was profoundly impressing these mysteries upon him existentially. More than that — she was his defence against his feminine fragility, the host body he colonised in order to express a side of himself that he could not own. Roten refers to von Balthasar's "psychological and theological symbiosis with Adrienne von Speyr and—largely because of this symbiosis—Hans Urs von Balthasar's profoundly Marian mental structure."[19] I am suggesting that the relationship was more parasitic than symbiotic.

In her book, *The Interpretation of the Flesh—Freud and Femininity*, Teresa Brennan argues that women sometimes take on the physical and psychological manifestations of men's projected femininity. In other words, if I as a woman spend a great deal of time with a man who is projecting rather than expressing his femininity, I

will begin to exhibit the signs of his femininity and reflect them back at him, so that he thinks they are actually part of my make-up—which, in a sense, they have become. Roten's essay on the relationship between von Speyr and von Balthasar makes for depressing reading when approached with this suggestion in mind. To give just a couple of examples, Roten says that "the woman alone bears the fruit and brings it forth, she even has to bear the man's impossibility to participate in these acts."[20] Referring to von Balthasar's Marian writing, he suggests that von Speyr was the link between Mary and von Balthasar, having already said that von Balthasar's "personality structure and his Mariology are intimately related and concurrent."[21] This implies than von Speyr was the mediating presence that allowed von Balthasar to connect with and express his own repressed femininity. When he marvelled at von Speyr's visionary insights and the compatibility of their theologies, perhaps he was merely marvelling at his own "profoundly Marian mental structure" projected onto his feminine mirror-image. Most bizarrely of all, Roten quotes von Speyr as saying that she assumed von Balthasar's physical indispositions such as sore throats and nausea, to leave to him free to work. The relationship between them operates almost like that between the ego and the superego, with the uninhibited, non-rational, mystical dimension of von Speyr's visions filtered through the work of von Balthasar. (Roten refers to von Balthasar as the "theological filter, thanks to his knowledge, wisdom, and caution"[22] of von Speyr's work). This is not Irigaray's ironical mimicking of femininity as mysticism and madness, but a woman's entry, body and soul, into the space of a man's unconscious desire. Nor is it the pattern of the medieval women mystics, who experienced their kenosis as women in relation to God. In von Speyr's mystical experience, von Balthasar inserts himself between the mystic and God, as a self-appointed spiritual director who ultimately even decreed an end to her mystical dictations. The fluid symbolics of gender which allowed both male and female medieval mystics to describe their relationship to God in language which assumed and subverted the feminine persona, becomes in the relationship between von Balthasar and von Speyr a symptom of a dysfunctional and repressive sexual relationship based on a too literal interpretation of sexual symbolism. Roten, quoting from the collected volumes of biographical and autobiographical writings on von Speyr, writes that "The spiritual fecundity of the man will be put into the flesh of the woman, in order that it may become fruitful."[23] This peculiar muddling of biological and spiritual categories is indefensible from the point of view of the Catholic tradition and suggests how

impoverished we have become in our symbolism. Medieval art and devotional writings sometimes portray Christ on the cross as giving birth to the Church through the wound in his side, and there is no suggestion that the male flesh needs to appropriate a woman's body to manifest its spiritual fecundity. Indeed, men such as St Bernard of Clairvaux sometimes described themselves as mothers, just as St Anselm prayed to Jesus and St Paul as his mothers. The relationship between the sexed symbol and the sexed body is poetic, endowed with a fluidity of meaning that invites a certain sense of playfulness and perhaps even irony and mimicry in the way we relate to sexual symbolism. At its best, the Catholic tradition exploits the gap between word and flesh as a place of theological creativity and artistic expression. Today, the body and the symbol have become clogged together with biological glue, and maybe we need to find a way to prise them apart in order to rediscover the creative space between them.

It is precisely here that I think there is potential in the theology of von Balthasar and von Speyr, if we approach them in a spirit of healthy discernment with our critical faculties alert. Their theology is easily appropriated by those who seek to defend traditional gender roles, and I have argued that they themselves rooted it too deeply in a culture-specific understanding of the relationship between the sexes. But it also has to be said that this is no ordinary married relationship, even although it is described in the theological symbolics of marriage and fecundity. Von Speyr understood it in terms of the nuptial fecundity of the complementarity of the sexes, resulting in the gestation and birth of their child, the Community of Saint John. This virginal marriage transcends the biological and social functions of marriage, in a way which hints at the potential of Catholic symbolism if it is liberated from the excessive literalism of contemporary moral doctrine. If fertility refers primarily to the shared endeavour of man and woman to bring their gifts to the spiritual regeneration of the world, then many of our present concerns about human fertility and sexuality are misplaced. An incarnational theology requires that we take the body seriously, but Christianity is also about the symbolic transformation of the flesh. Christian sexual symbolism does not relate primarily to the natural and biological functions of the human body but to the relationship between God, the Church, Christ and Mary, in metaphors that are informed and shaped by sexual difference but are not held hostage to the sexed body. This dimension is not lacking from von Balthasar and von Speyr's theology, but in their case a particular relationship with all its human limitations has become too closely

identified with the theological significance of the symbol, just as the symbol has become too dependent on a particular cultural context.

Yet in appealing for a more creative use of sexual symbolism, I also want to suggest that there are human experiences which do transcend gender, and perhaps the ultimate among these are the moments of birth and death. In a mystical identification with Christ on the cross, von Speyr says, "At present, the bearing of sin is so much to the fore that I do not know whether I am a man or a woman." She goes on to say of Christ, "And since (on the Cross) he gives his filial being back to the Father more and more, so that, increasingly, he is purely a man, he somehow loses himself in the anonymity of a generalized human nature. When he is scourged, he takes the sin of man and woman upon his body, which thus becomes a 'generalised' body. Will the Father still recognize and distinguish him, once he has submerged himself in this anonymous state?"[24] This might be one of von Speyr's most significant insights for the dilemma facing the Church today—is the sex of Christ of fundamental significance in the sacrifice of the cross? She seems to suggest it is not, but this vision merits only a passing mention in a footnote by von Balthasar, and does not seem to have prompted him to rethink his defence of the essential masculinity of the priesthood.

As I said at the beginning, this paper is intentionally provocative, and it invites challenge and correction from others who are more familiar with von Balthasar and von Speyr's work. Von Balthasar seems to have been swallowed whole by one faction of the church, and rejected in his entirety by another. This means that in terms of sexual politics, the Church today is increasingly polarised between the stylised guys and dolls of the *Communio* faction, and the politicised androgynes of the *Concilium* faction. It seems to me that both these options indicate an impoverishment of the Catholic symbolic heritage. We have yet to rediscover the theological resources which might allow us to say with Irigaray that "sexual difference would constitute the horizon of worlds more fecund than any known to date—at least in the West—and without reducing fecundity to the reproduction of bodies and flesh. For loving partners this would be a fecundity of birth and regeneration, but also the production of a new age of thought, art, poetry, and language: the creation of a new *poetics*."[25]

1 John Roten, S.M., "The Two Halves of the Moon" in David L. Schindler (ed.), *Hans Urs von Balthasar—His Life and Work* (Ignatius Press 1991), p 73.
2 Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Cornell University Press 1985), p 132.
3 Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p 76.
4 Roten, "The Two Halves of the Moon," p 86.

5 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama* Volume III (Ignatius Press 1992), p 287.
6 *Theo-drama* III, p 284.
7 *Theo-drama* III, p 284.
8 *Theo-drama* III, p 283.
9 *Theo-drama* III, p 284.
10 *Theo-drama* III, p 285.
11 *Theo-drama* III, p 285.
12 See Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (The Athlone Press 1993), pp 34-55.
13 von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life* (Ignatius Press 1983), p 202.
14 von Balthasar, *Elucidations* (SPCK 1975), p 71.
15 Adrienne von Speyr, *The Handmaid of the Lord* (The Harvill Press 1956), p 84.
16 David L. Schindler, "Catholic theology, gender, and the future of Western civilization" in *Communio* 20 (Summer, 1993), pp 200-39.
17 von Balthasar, "Women priests? A Marian Church in a fatherless and motherless culture" in *Communio* 22 (Spring, 1995), p 169.
18 Paul McPartlan, "The Marian church and women's ordination" in William McLoughlin and Jill Pinnock (eds.), *Mary is for Everyone—Essays on Mary and Ecumenism* (Gracewing 1997), p 45.
19 Roten, "The Two Halves of the Moon," p 66.
20 "The Two Halves of the Moon," p 75.
21 "The Two Halves of the Moon," p 66.
22 "The Two Halves of the Moon," p 73.
23 "The Two Halves of the Moon," p 74.
24 von Speyr, quoted in von Balthasar, *Theo-drama* III, p 241, fn 43.
25 Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p 5.

Reviews and Book Notes

THE ENVIRONMENT AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS by Michael S. Northcott, *Cambridge University Press*, 1996, pp 379, £35 hardback.

This is a good book. The author, who lectures in Christian ethics in the University of Edinburgh, argues that the environmental crisis can be understood and negotiated only by a recovery of respect for the harmonies of nature and that the Hebrew and Christian traditions, and especially natural law ethics, offer a more productive response than any.

The first two chapters recall the main features of the environmental crisis (ozone depletion, global warming, pollution, soil erosion, etc.) and the cultural and religious factors at work in the background (Luther's doctrine of creation 'reduced the whole world of nature to a

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