

Vassula Rydén's *Heaven is Real but so is Hell* – lunatic fringe or contemporary spiritual classic?

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It seems that scarcely a month goes by without a new best-seller written by an author claiming to have glimpsed The Beyond. As I have pointed out elsewhere, although academic theology has largely shown a marked unwillingness to engage with such literature, the current appetite of the popular imagination for near-death experience ('NDE') testimonies has definitely become a social phenomenon.¹ A couple of headline-making examples appearing in recent years should suffice to indicate that, contrary to what advocates of a thorough-going secularization may like to suggest, many of us still appear to have Heaven on our collective minds. One over which much virtual ink has been spilled on the internet is *Heaven is for Real* – the story of 3 1/2 year-old Colton Burpo's brush with Paradise when at death's door with appendicitis. A second, written from a very different perspective but inevitably raising many of the same questions, is *Proof of Heaven* by former Harvard Medical School neurosurgeon Eben Alexander III. In it, Dr Alexander details his remarkable transcendent experience during a deep coma induced by bacterial meningitis, a narrative whose informational content could not, according to conventional scientific logic, have been generated by a brain deemed medically incapable of conscious experience. It seems that this recent spate of NDE literature has not only struck a chord with a wide readership; as the sharp reaction from the New Atheist constituency (spearheaded by Sam Harris) to Dr Alexander's *Newsweek* article in October 2012 demonstrated, it has also become the front-line of the philosophical battle between believers in the existence of a spiritual dimension and hardcore scientific materialists for whom the world is essentially a WYSIWYG system.

'Heaven', it would therefore seem, has been very much in literary fashion of late. It would however appear that the same is true regarding discussion of the existence of its dark eternal corollary, Hell. At the same time that *Heaven is for Real* was riding high in the New York Times sales lists, megachurch pastor Rob Bell was making the cover of *Time Magazine* for his provocative reassessment of traditional notions of eternal punishment in the book *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, which sparked a major firestorm within North American Evangelicalism in 2011.

The likelihood is that the ears of many people who have been interested in either of these controversies will prick up on hearing of the new Barnes & Noble bestseller *Heaven is Real but so is Hell* by Greek Orthodox author Vassula Rydén, whose name I first encountered some months ago in the course of an academic research project on latter-day Christian mysticism. If the book's title might suggest that its contents directly reference the furore over Bell's *Love Wins* or the NDE literature, then readers arriving with such expectations may initially find themselves disappointed, if not bewildered by *Heaven is Real's* account of the author's dealings with the supernatural. Indeed, if they are not familiar with Eastern Orthodox or Catholic spirituality, they may find its thought-categories exotic, if not disconcerting territory. They would nonetheless do well to persist with the book as it will rapidly become apparent that Vassula Rydén is not merely jumping on a publishing bandwagon but offering a challenging and uniquely personal narrative that will surely leave many wanting to investigate further. Indeed, it can be argued that this modestly-sized

¹ www.peterjohnbannister.com/TheReturnofSpirit.pdf . A podcast discussion of issues connected with near-death experience reports between myself and Alex Tsakiris from the perspective of faith-science dialogue for the website 'Skeptiko' can be heard at <http://www.skeptiko.com/peter-bannister-sees-hope-for-science-religion-dialog/>

volume is actually as important a publication as either *Love Wins* or *Proof of Heaven*, if not more so. It is not for the faint-hearted, however; *Heaven is Real* is a book that puts the reader attempting to assessing its credibility in an awkward situation. Put simply, either the author and her entourage are liars on a grand scale and have been so for over two decades, or - if the audacious claims of her testimony are authenticated - this is a book with truly far-reaching logical implications about ultimate reality.

Like that of Eben Alexander, Vassula Rydén's experience of a spiritual realm outside that of our normal sensory perception (described with details which are at times remarkably similar to those of NDE reports) blows the New Atheist view of the human being out of the water if genuine. Unlike the neurosurgeon, however, Mrs Rydén also attests to the reality of God, the Devil, Heaven, Hell and Purgatory in a manner that would, if affirmed, authoritatively vindicate the viewpoint of historical Christian orthodoxy. This is not to say that she can be classified as a 'conservative' in any straightforward fashion; among other things, she has a track-record of great generosity towards other faith traditions, having received several awards for her inter-religious work. Nonetheless, the vision of Christianity that emerges from *Heaven is Real* is certainly at odds with the many revisionist or demythologizing projects (from Bultmann to Borg, Crossan, Spong, John D. Caputo, Peter Rollins and others) that have been asserting for some time that only way forward for Christian faith is the jettisoning of traditional doctrinal concepts as impossibly outmoded. Equally, although Vassula Rydén is insistent that the goal of human existence is union with God, her theology cannot be assimilated to popular New Age notions. You will not find her asserting that human beings are either already Divine or can attain divinity either through their own efforts at self-improvement in this life or via a cycle of reincarnation - interpretive lines favoured by many, though by no means all NDE enthusiasts.

In this respect the closest parallels in the recent NDE/mystical literature are not with Dr Alexander's engaging account in *Proof of Heaven*, whose narrative is certainly arresting and extremely thought-provoking from a scientific angle but whose speculative metaphysical interpretation of ultimate questions leaves many issues unaddressed. *Heaven is Real but so is Hell* is rather far more convergent with Catholic testimonies such as those of Gloria Polo, Sondra Abrahams and Marino Restrepo, whose remarkable *From Darkness to Light* recounts his conversion to Christianity after a mystical experience in the Colombian jungle following his kidnapping by FARC guerrillas in 1997. Or, from a Protestant perspective, Rev. Howard Storm's haunting *My Descent into Death* which has become something of a classic in the NDE literature, and whose conversion to Christianity interestingly occurred in 1985, the same year as that of Vassula Rydén.

What is potentially explosive about *Heaven is Real but so is Hell*, making it a book that will be difficult to ignore, is the four-fold aspect of its author's claim that what she is saying carries more authority than mere private opinion. Firstly, provocatively asserting her God-given ability to perceive a spiritual reality veiled to the majority of us, she offers vivid and frequently counter-intuitive descriptions of her own personal mystical visions (which she alleges began during childhood and show no evidence of resulting from any flirtation with occult practices). Secondly, she provides details of a dramatic and apparently unprovoked conversion experience at the age of 43 while living in Bangladesh which commentators have found difficult to explain in rational categories. Still more intriguing is the third element, her alleged reception of over a thousand pages of supposed messages from the Trinity, Mary and the Angels compiled over an 18-year period (1985-2003) and published under the title 'True Life in God'. Written in a style frequently comparable to that of the classics of Christian mystical literature of past centuries, this huge corpus - which I analyzed in its entirety in the course of my comparative research - has provoked intense theological debate and much

opposition from the sceptics. It has also however fascinated specialists, not least because of many passages whose sophisticated literary structure and dense content seem inexplicable in human terms given Vassula Rydén's lack of formal theological training and limited command of written English. Furthermore, as the later chapters of *Heaven is Real* makes clear, 'True Life in God' has undeniably been taken extremely seriously at the highest levels of Church authority, leading to a respectful (if cautious and inconclusive) personal dialogue between Mrs Rydén and the then Cardinal Ratzinger – now history's first Pope Emeritus - in Rome in 2004.²

All these three claims to have encountered the Divine in terms of mystical vision, spontaneous conversion and the receipt of heavenly messages might be dismissed as unverifiable, being events of irreducibly private experience whose authenticity is impossible to evaluate for outsiders. It is with the fourth element that Vassula Rydén ups the ante and more or less forces the reader to decide whether her narrative is truth or fabrication, leaving little middle ground for other interpretations. *Heaven is Real but so is Hell* contains extensive accounts of numerous miraculous healings and other spiritual manifestations alleged to have occurred during the 25 years of the author's ministry as an evangelist and often outspoken advocate for Christian unity, in which she has received the support of not a few Roman Catholic Cardinals, Bishops and leaders of other Christian denominations impressed by her case.

The world's religions are of course replete with individuals who have written accounts in each of these four categories of religious experience (visions, sudden conversion, Divine messages, supernatural phenomena), but to find them all in the same narrative is highly unusual, to say the least. Especially given that Vassula Rydén does not fit the 'normal' profile associated with Christian mystical writing of a nun in a closed contemplative order. Instead, *Heaven is Real* has been penned by someone whose life as an expatriate housewife until her 1985 conversion seems to have been dominated by cocktail parties and tennis championships with little if any evidence of interest in spiritual matters. Even 25 years later, you are likely to find her in jeans, T-shirt rather than monastic attire, with the Twitter account rather than the cloister her domain.

This is a book which defies any kind of conventional categorization, reading at times like a treatise of elevated mystical theology and at others like a folksy autobiography aimed at a mass audience (Vassula Rydén may be a familiar name in specialized discussions of contemporary prophetic literature, but *Heaven is Real* is her first publication aimed at a popular readership). It should be said that anyone unswervingly committed to a materialist view of reality is likely to be deterred very quickly. Those with a strongly rationalist *a priori* against discussions of phenomena outside the bounds of what is widely regarded as mainstream science are unlikely to stay the course with *Heaven is Real* (even if it might be said that what is being described in it is no stranger than the average 101 course on quantum physics). The same probably goes for readers who react allergically to any discussion of the existence of the angelic/demonic, viewing such accounts as nothing more than the projections of a diseased religious imagination or a pre-modern worldview. Idem readers from certain Protestant quarters for whom any talk of Purgatory is an immediate red flag, although it might be pointed out here that such a position is far from unanimous within Protestantism, the case of C.S. Lewis being perhaps the best-known indicator to the contrary.

² Details of this dialogue are given by one of its instigators, Danish theologian Niels Christian Hvidt (author of a major study on mysticism entitled *Christian Prophecy: the Post-Biblical Tradition* (Oxford : OUP, 2007), with a foreword by Cardinal Ratzinger), at <http://www.cdf-tlig.org/report.pdf> .

For anyone who does not consign it to the 'lunatic fringe' after the first few chapters, *Heaven is Real but so is Hell* should nonetheless prove a compelling, if disturbing read. Particularly in the final sections in which the author, on the basis of the heavenly messages she claims to have received, reveals a sobering vision for the future of the world. One in which a radiant hope for God's loving renewal of creation is counter-balanced by an entirely unsentimental emphasis on the inescapable reality of Divine Justice – or rather humanity's reaping of the consequences of our own actions. This may well be a bridge too far for readers looking for a more superficially soothing conclusion. For others who are prepared to countenance the idea that Vassula Rydén might just be telling the truth about her own life and her communications with God, it may however well serve as a reminder of central but all-too-often forgotten elements of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Questions of judgment and Divine prerogatives over creation which admittedly make us uncomfortable but which we cannot simply ignore if we are not to follow the path of much contemporary theology in re-shaping God in our own image. The overriding message of the spiritual reality check that is *Heaven is Real but so is Hell* is that old-fashioned talk about sin, repentance and sacrifice is not a recipe for religious depression, but an indispensable component of a spiritual journey towards a glorious destiny. One which is offered to all through God's all-embracing love but which can only be attained if we are prepared to face the truth about and ourselves and our relationship to the Divine.

This is not a book which is likely to leave those who make it through to the final page feeling indifferent. Read if you dare.