

HANS URS VON BALTHASAR

Essay by Tom Stuckey

Balthasar was born in Lucerne, Switzerland, in 1905. His aristocratic Catholic family ensured that from his earliest year he was immersed in music and high culture. He studied philosophy and German literature at the University of Zurich followed by a doctorate in Vienna & Berlin. In 1929 he became a Jesuit and continued to study philosophy before moving to the Jesuit school in Lyon. Under Danielou and Lubac he turned to the works of Origen, Maximus & Gregory of Nyssa and acquired an enduring love of the Church Fathers.

He was ordained priest in 1936, worked briefly in Munich before moving to Basel because of Nazi attacks on freedom. He had come to realise that theology did not easily fit within a university setting where the arts and theology had become split apart. He also noted a similar separation of theology from sanctity within the Roman Church. Catholicism was preoccupied with internal matters at the expense of its mission to the world.

In Basel he fell under the spell of the mysticism of Adrienne von Speyr. Her 'dark nights' were to have a profound impact in shaping his thoughts about hell and Holy Saturday. In Basle, as chaplain to students, he and Adrienne were able to realise their vision in the formation of a community for lay people: the Community of Saint John. Their pioneering work, although receiving the backing of appropriate ecclesial authorities, caused many in the Church to be uneasy.

In 1950 he ceased to be a Jesuit. He was not invited to be a participant in the Second Vatican Council and even banned from teaching. Nevertheless his reputation grew to the extent that Pope John Paul II made him a cardinal in 1988. He died at the age of 83 two days before his inauguration.

His Theological Writings

His theological writings are not only breath-taking because of their number (over thousand items) but because of their imaginative originality. He sought to unfold 'the infinite treasure of Christ' (Eph 3.8) by recasting theology within categories of glory and beauty. This is no accident given his love of Bach and Mozart and his appreciation of great works of art. He described truth as 'symphonic'. Although a theologian he was primarily a pastor. Theology and spirituality belonged together. Traditional theology only offers 'bones without flesh' while the pious literature of modern spirituality (a compound of asceticism, mysticism, spirituality and rhetoric) gives flesh without bones.

He considered this modern separation to be as disastrous for the Church as the Great Schism of the 11th century and the Reformation of the 16th. Balthasar in his various versions of theological dogmatics attempts to bring together what had been separated.

The object with which we are concerned is man's participation in God which, from God's perspective is actualised as 'revelation (culminating in Christ's Godmanhood) and from man's perspective is actualised as 'faith'...This double

and reciprocal *ekstasis* – God’s ‘venturing forth’ to man and man’s to God – constitutes the very content of dogmatics’.¹

His lasting friendship with Karl Barth, who was twenty-one years his senior, began in Basel. Barth said of Balthasar that he was the ‘most astute Catholic interpreter of his writings’.² Across the Protestant and Catholic divide, they were finding considerable common ground. Both were indebted to Anselm. Unlike the Catholic theologians Rahner and Lonergan, who sought an accommodation with modernity, Balthasar drew his critique from his Patristic studies and like Barth developed his thinking from an understanding of the Trinity. Balthasar argued ‘remove the doctrine of the Trinity and there would be nothing left of any significance and prayer itself would be robbed of its potency.’³ Rahner disagreed and believed that removal of the Trinity would not greatly affect religious writings nor the life of most Christians. He and Moltmann labelled the theologies of Balthasar and Barth as the ‘New Chalcedonianism’.

At the heart of these debates over theological method is the question of the relationship between nature and grace.⁴ Both Barth and Balthasar take the reality of evil and the corruption of sin with the utmost seriousness.⁵ They rejected all ‘from below’ approaches to theology. Knowledge comes ‘from above’. Their anthropologies were derived from their understandings of the humanity of Jesus and they insisted that even the Trinitarian nature of God is only revealed in and through Christ.⁶

By revealing the Trinity, Jesus Christ also reveals to us the proper relationship between finite and infinite freedom, not least by showing us that God has made room within himself for otherness.⁷

While Descartes said ‘I think, therefore I am’, Barth and Balthasar would say ‘I am addressed, therefore I am’. The cross of Christ is an embarrassment for all theologies which, springing ‘from below’, are built on logic and human reason. Their stance posed questions about the validity of theism and ‘natural theology’.

While Barth repudiates all natural theology, Balthasar is more nuanced. He sees creation preserved and elevated in Christ. This natural knowledge of God however remains secondary because true knowledge can only be seen after it has first been revealed and recognised in Jesus Christ who demonstrates how the supernatural is impregnated into the natural.⁸ Balthasar often quotes Paul’s paradoxical saying ‘To know the love of Christ which surpassed knowledge’. This enables him to give proper attention to the mystery of creation in silence and wonder.

Theological Aesthetics

Balthasar rejoices in the free self-giving of God focused in Christ and displayed in creation. This nevertheless comes with a warning:

Moderns, in short, tend to get stuck on the surface of things, equating knowledge of a thing with knowledge of its appearance, reducing things to the sum of their measurable

parts...if the modern person is incapable of seeing the whole manifested in the part, how will he be able to see either God, manifested in the person of Jesus, or the figure of Jesus, manifested in the plurality of the biblical witnesses? ⁹

His seven volumes of theological aesthetics are entitled ‘The Glory of the Lord’.¹⁰ He warns that the person who is incapable or seeing worldly beauty will miss the flashes of glory when they appear. The primary task of Christians today is to be responsible guardians of God’s glory.

Only beautiful theology, that is, only theology which, grasped by the glory of God ... has the chance of making any impact in human history by conviction and transformation.¹¹

Balthasar’s joining together of revelation and beauty lead him back to Bible. Glory and holiness are inseparable in the Old Testament. God’s people are called to ‘be holy as I am holy’ (Lev.19.2). The revelation and concealment of glory is compressed and intensified in Israel. In their story, however, we witness an attenuation of that glory because of Israel’s disobedience. Yet there is paradox here in that God appears to be more present with his people in their exilic forsakenness. How can ruin, death, Hades and judgement be displayed as glory? That is the theme of the New Testament in which the term ‘glory’ occurs 116 times and the verb ‘to glorify’ more than 60 times.

John’s Gospel with its references to ‘glory’ is a favourite. ‘The Johannine writings present a journey from the primal glory of the Trinity to the eschatological glory of the Trinity’.¹² The incarnation, cross, Easter Saturday and resurrection are aspects of this *doxa*, key texts being John 1.14, 16.13-14, 17.21-23. Light and darkness, revelation and concealment are features of this journey from *kenosis* to *plerosis*.

In the New Testament ...the dust is blown off the original intention of God...In Jesus’ death, the Old Testament motifs of judgement and mercy come together because God’s forsakenness reaches the extreme of the human sinful condition transforming the grounds for judgment into shibboleths of love. With the cross our sinfulness is unveiled for what it is... But this truth is enveloped in another unveiling – God’s glory in the world shaping us to his glory as people fully alive.’¹³

Glory is revealed through Jesus Christ’s obedience to the point of death and hell. God’s glory shines forth in his complete powerlessness. ‘John invites us to see Jesus’ ‘formlessness’ in the passion as a mode of his glory...It is in his deformity that we see the mystery of the transcendental form’.¹⁴

The truth of glory is a new aesthetic of beauty and goodness. Although Balthasar is a lover of the arts, the beauty advocated here has little to do with classical Greek ideas and forms. This new aesthetic of beauty as truth and love is found in the hidden luminosity of being revealed in the darkness of the cross.

Balthasar is therefore putting a question mark against our worldly aesthetics of beauty. Christians are called to offer the world a new metaphysic of being – the glory which has been lost. This is demonstrated in a liturgy of life. Faith thus becomes an aesthetic act.

Theological Dramatics

Christ's role in the drama of salvation consists in bringing together the various Old Testament promissory figures into a final form which affirms and transcends them. We are not to seek after knowledge of God apart from the cross. In this he affirms Luther's *theologia crucis* **but** he does not set it in opposition, as Luther does, to a theology of glory. Balthasar sees glory and beauty in the whole process of incarnation.¹⁵

Both Barth and Balthasar were acutely aware of the collapse of European civilization and the atrocities of war. This gave them a realistic sense of evil. Christ's descent into hell is an important theme showing how far God was prepared to go to suffer the alienation and misery of sin. This suffering takes place within the Trinity showing that God is no apathetic Being.

What happens within the Trinity is essentially dramatic. The cross is not only a sign of reconciliation but, following Anselm, it is also an act of judgement in which the righteous God demonstrates his wrath. In this drama of salvation the author is the Father, the chief actor the Son and the director is the Holy Spirit. Gerard O'Hanlon describes the four dynamics within Balthasar's *Triduum Mortis*.¹⁶ First the cross is a Trinitarian event in which justice and love are revealed to be one (Anselm). Second, the descent into hell is given a new prominence in a process of *kenosis* whereby God not only becomes man obedient unto death but becomes sin for our sake.¹⁷ Third, the embracing of pain and sin within the Trinity is an act of 'supra-suffering' love pointing to the 'pre-sacrifice' of God before all time and for all time – 'the Lamb slain from the foundations of the world'. In this way God is seen to change yet at the same time remain the same. Fourth, we are called not only to be observers but co-players, participants and actors in this theological drama. Indeed 'we are invited to become co-redeemers with him (Col.1.20). Balthasar however is fully aware that we are poor actors in this divine drama and instead find ourselves 'putting on an act'. The double-mindedness of sin runs deep.¹⁸

Theology of mission

Mission begins within the Trinity. There is a *processio*, within and beyond the Trinity. It is a movement from Jesus the man to the Father, and thus to the Son, and from Jesus to the Spirit.¹⁹ In Jesus there is a process of becoming as he journeys toward the *hour* where person and mission coincide.²⁰ Along with Moltmann and others Balthasar insists that mission includes the ethic of justice and the necessity of being along-side of the poor. However, he cautions against utopian approaches of hope and is critical of those aspects of Liberation theology which have more to do with Marx and Hegel than with the Bible. He realistically states that structures will always be unjust. This world is passing away therefore discipleship and mission are enacted under the sign of the Apocalypse.²¹ The Church must recognise its own lack of competence in dealing with structural change. Is the Church any better than civil society in reflecting the Kingdom of God in and through her own conduct and structures?

Contemporary society has lost touch with its roots in God. The mission of lay-people is one of quietly planting seeds of hope rather than shaping the world through power and domination. Unless a grain of seed falls into the ground and dies it will not bear fruit (Jn.12.24). Christians should lead lives of simplicity not luxury. Their presence does make a difference. 'Christ did not leave the Father when he became man to bring creation to fulfilment and neither does the Christian need to leave his centre in Christ in order to mediate him to the world...'.²² In this way we transfigure all areas of human life. Lay Christians, in particular, are urged to be competent in the social, economic and political sectors of society so as to facilitate this transformation. Is he assuming that if individual Christians live as they should, then structural evil will be reduced?

The Marian principle.

The post-resurrection Church was hierarchically structured with a Marian, Petrine and apostolic character.²³ Balthazar's anthropology, derived from his Christology, leads him to Mary.

For Rahner, Christology is considered to be the ultimate consequence of anthropology...conversely for Balthasar, Mariology represents the ultimate realisation and model of anthropology'.²⁴

Balthasar seeks to overcome the split between theology and spirituality by personalizing the mission of the Church through the actions and life of Mary. Fruition and birth are key motifs (as in John 15) which take him into the 'spiritual womb of feminine contemplation'.²⁵ and to an understanding of mission modelled on Mary. Through her obedience Mary illuminates the mystery of *ecstasis* and *kenosis*. The image of Madonna and child illustrate fruitfulness. Thus Mary is more than just a model for Church she is Church.

The importance of childhood emerges from this. Wisdom begins with wonder (which is the young child's natural disposition). Jesus teaches the indispensability of child-like attitudes (Mk 9.37). The incarnation of Christ shows the eternal significance of being born and the utter blessedness of coming forth from the womb.²⁶ The helplessness of the infant is an embarrassment for those who glorify 'man come of age'. Tragically, our modern culture quickly erodes the sense of wonder found in the young child. The astonishing teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is not only a 'linguistic form of wonder' but an attempt to restore a knowledge which has not been distorted by sin or by the loss of innocence. This has nothing to do with childishness but rather about enhancing the fullness of adulthood.

Jesus addressed his Father as 'Abba' because of the 'undying childlikeness of his heart'. Even when he became a fully grown man he never left 'the womb of the Father'. Jesus therefore exhorts us to become like little children and to that end 'bestows the grace of a new childhood... in water and Spirit...'.²⁷

There are obvious dangers in putting the child at the centre of the stage. For a priest with paedophiliac leanings a child can become an object of love and a victim of lust. Today in

some families the child has become the focus of attention to such an extent that the life of the parents revolves around the child's demands and wants. Moreover, in our contemporary consumer culture children are especially targeted and shaped to be future consumers of goods.²⁸

The eschatological situation.

The final volume of 'Theological Aesthetics' concludes with a reflection on 'the barque of Peter'. Although Peter is called to abandon his boat, Jesus returns to it for preaching, teaching and travel. For Matthew the boat is an important symbol of Church. The message of the Synoptic Gospels is clear; the little band of disciples will survive the storms and the tempests which assail the Church. However, at the end of John's Gospel the boat image fades when Peter becomes a shepherd.

Luke retains the boat image of Church and, from his knowledge of the Old Testament stories of Noah and Jonah, makes the most of it in the final chapters of Acts. The boat of the Gospels now becomes a large cargo ship carrying a motley crowd of passengers. He graphically describes how the ship, caught in a cross wind, is driven by the storm. Cargo is jettisoned and finally the ship's tackle. 'All hope of being saved is finally abandoned' (Acts 27.20). Paul however disagrees. His hope springs from God's promise. This hope is communicated to the passengers through a celebration of the Eucharist. No lives are lost even when the ship eventually splinters and breaks apart on a sandbank. Clinging to bits of maritime debris all the travellers make it safely to the shore. For Balthasar this is the eschatological mystery of the Church. He concludes:

The Church herself, as the body of Christ, will not escape in her visibility and her institutional character....The risen Lord too is once more a visible form but one that has passed through the gulf of the abyss.²⁹

He makes this affirmation because the post-Easter Church 'retains Good Friday and Holy Saturday at the centre, where the human form and visibility of God are swept away, extinguished and buried'.

ISSUES

- The separation of theology and spirituality today
- No Christianity without the Trinity
- Sin and evil are tangible and real
- His aesthetic of beauty contradicts Western traditions of beauty
- Christ's descent into Hell give a new prominence
- Structures will always be unjust
- Ecclesiology should be shaped by Mariology
- The recovery of childhood innocence
- The Church is only seen to be Church when its visible structures are swept away

NOTES

1. Bede McGregor & Thomas Norris (eds). *The Beauty of Christ*. McGregor & Norris T&T Clark 1994, p.5
2. John Thompson, 'Barth and Balthasar: An Ecumenical Dialogue' found in McGregor & Norris (ibid), p.173.
3. Bede McGregor, 'The Wider Ecumenism' found in McGregor & Norris (ibid), p.201.
4. Rodney A Howsare. *Balthasar. A Guide for the Perplexed*. T&T Clark International. 2009, p.66.
5. At root here is the question of sin and evil. As I have shown elsewhere in my discussions on the wrath of God is sin a matter of dysfunction and confusion or is it a toxic cancer of the soul. Tom Stuckey, *The Wrath of God Satisfied: Atonement in an Age of Violence*, Wipf & Stock, 2012, pp.100f.
6. Howsare (ibid), p.65.
7. Howsare (ibid), p.106.
8. Barth later comes to a similar view in his Dogmatics IV.3 first part, where the Word of God in Christ finds an echo in creation.
9. Howsare (ibid), p.69-7.
10. Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*. (7 vols), T & T Clark, Edinburgh,
11. Angelo Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar. A Theological Style*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1995, p.5.
12. Brendan Leahy, 'Theological Aesthetics', found in McGregor & Norris (ibid), p.40.
13. Leahy, (ibid), p.38.
14. Leahy, (ibid), p.39.
15. Howsare (ibid), p.90.
16. Gerard O'Hanlon, 'Theological Dramatics' found in McGregor & Norris (ibid), p.97.
17. Christ truly died and in the tomb Christ he was in solidarity with the dead. It is here rather than on the cross that redemption is fully completed as he is literally 'made sin'. Christ's abandonment by God is real and he bears the punishment for all sin. This further descent after the cross is disputed by Ratzinger and others though he does acknowledge that Christ visits men and women of the past. (Lyra Pitstick. *Christ's Descent into Hell: John Paul ii, Joseph Ratzinger & Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Theology of Holy Saturday*, Eerdmans, 2016, p.57f).
18. S.Joel Garver, 'Balthasar's Theo-Drama, www.joelgarver.com
19. Scola (ibid), pp.57f.
20. Scola (ibid), p.78.
21. O'Hanlon (ibid), p.104.
22. Scola (ibid), p.46.
23. Barth disagrees but then he defines Church in an almost congregational way. He not only rejects Mary but also the idea of sacraments and 'saints'.
24. Johann Roten, 'Marian Light on our Human Mystery', found in McGregor & Norris (ibid), p.137.
25. Leahy, (ibid), p.51.
26. John Seward, 'Youthful unto Death: The Spirit of Childhood', found in McGregor & Norris (ibid), p.143.
27. Seward, (ibid), pp.150-4.
28. 'Caught in a world of temptations, Pied Piper-ish, our children are being led into oblivion by devices and social media, which seem remarkably anti-social' (John Bird, 'The Big Issue' May 7-13, 2018, p.11).
29. Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, Volume VII, p.543.
30. *The Glory of the Lord*, (ibid), p.541.