

What's Happening in Continental Theology? — 3

## Hans Urs von Balthasar: The Paschal Mystery

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Born in Lucerne in 1905, Hans Urs von Balthasar studied German literature and philosophy at Vienna, Berlin and Zurich, and entered the Society of Jesus in 1929. After further study, he was ordained priest in 1936, and from 1940 worked as Catholic student chaplain in Basel. In 1950 he left the Society of Jesus to become the leader of the **Johannesgemeinschaft** (Community of St. John), a secular Christian community, and head of the **Johannesverlag** publishing house. Now widely regarded as one of the most original and authoritative Roman Catholic theologians of the century, he has written voluminously, not only in the area of Christian doctrine but in the history of literature, philosophy and spirituality. His combination of an astute theological intelligence with an unusually wide-ranging literary culture makes his writing at once enchanting and demanding. This article identifies some of the basic doctrinal themes which pervade his work, and seeks to relate them to his understanding of revelation and of the nature of the theological task.

### Beauty

'Beauty is the word that shall be our first' (*The Glory of the Lord* (ET, Edinburgh, 1983) 18). Von Balthasar's whole theological enterprise could be not improperly described as an attempt to restate the centrality of the category of beauty for Christian faith and Christian theology. His work is pervaded by a conviction that the self-revelation of God is not only truth to be apprehended by the mind nor only commands to exercise the will, but also a manifestation of the sheer beauty and splendour of the being of God. And so his theology seeks 'to complement the vision of the true and the good with that of the beautiful' (*ibid.*, 9). For at the heart of the Christian faith lies the experience of being overwhelmed and mastered by the radiance of God's glory as he shows himself to the world.

It would be easy, but ultimately mistaken, to dismiss this unfamiliar theological starting-point as a kind of religious aestheticism. In fact, von Balthasar's theology of beauty occupies the place which in more familiar accounts of Christian truth is occupied by the doctrine of revelation. That is to say, it is an attempt to identify the self-manifestation of God through which he communicates himself to the world. This self-manifestation is not, however, propositional: God reveals, not a message about himself but rather the splendour of his own being. This splendour is both authoritative and compelling: its claim is absolute, its sheer occurrence as the irruption of God's glory into human history commands by attracting us and taking us beyond ourselves in rapture. And out of such a confrontation with the majesty of God's being, theology is born.

### Jesus, the Form of God

All this may seem excessively formal and abstract. But God's self-manifestation is for von Balthasar neither an idea nor a principle of theological thinking. Rather it is located in the highly particular event of Jesus Christ. God's beauty is not abstract, but personal, incarnate: in Jesus, the beauty of God 'takes form'. For 'only that which has form can snatch one up into a state of rapture. Only through form can the lightning-bolt of eternal beauty flash' (*ibid.*, 32).

This emphasis upon Jesus as the form of God betrays how deeply von Balthasar's work is impressed with the theology of the incarnation. In Jesus, he writes, 'God's word of promise, his



wisdom, his law, his faithfulness are "sent" bodily to our side' (*Elucidations* (ET, London, 1975) 41). Indeed, for him the fundamental Christian mystery is that God's glory has fleshed itself out in Jesus: 'The statement "God became man" is without question central to the Christian witness' (*ibid.*, 35). And because of this, the Christian faith does not have at its heart an idea or a theory, but a deed, a story to be told or a drama to be presented. Only in the particular, concrete form of Jesus is the absolute God to be recognised, for the incarnation is no temporary episode in the divine life but constitutive of God's very being. The history of Jesus of Nazareth is the form of the splendour of God's being, a form which cannot be dissolved or transposed into another key without irreparable loss.

Von Balthasar's strongly incarnational theology has led him firmly to reject attempts to make Jesus a merely relative figure, one of many ways in which the absolute can be encountered in the temporal sphere. He insists upon Jesus as 'the one who is absolutely unique' (*The von Balthasar Reader* (ET, Edinburgh 1973) 119). The history of the incarnation is not simply one instance of a more general presence of God within the history of the world, but rather the unique form of that presence. 'What sets Christianity apart from other religions is the offensive claim that the one who bears all names and yet is without name . . . has once for all declared himself identical with a tiny something or someone in the vast cosmos and among the countless millions of swarming humanity' (*Elucidations*, 35).

There are two important ramifications of this rich insight into the Christological heart of the Christian faith. The first concerns the way in which von Balthasar presents his theology of the incarnation. Because Jesus' history does not merely illustrate or exemplify but actually *embodies* the ways and works of God, Christology is to be fundamentally *narrative or dramatic*. This is because God's self-revelation has an irreducibly historical character: God manifests himself to the world through a fragment of its history, a fragment which makes sense of the whole. Consequently, as soon as theology moves away from the historical form of God's self-disclosure (for example by translating it into conceptual terms) something of the truth which the theologian seeks to communicate is lost. The absolute claim and originality of God's self-presentation cannot be separated from the form in which it appears. And so, however sophisticated the concepts to which it may have recourse, Christology is in essence a matter of re-telling and re-presenting the story of Jesus, since it is in that form that God has identified himself and made himself known.

Von Balthasar is here very deeply influenced by Barth's

presentation of Christological material in the later volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*. From his time as a student chaplain in Basel onwards, von Balthasar has been a very shrewd and profound interpreter of Barth's work, and his study *The Theology of Karl Barth* (ET, New York, 1971) remains one of the most perceptive pieces of writing on Barth, Protestant or Catholic. Above all else, what he has taken from Barth is a sense that it is impermissible for the theologian to seek to 'go behind' the form in which God has revealed himself: the 'truth' which God shows about himself is essentially inseparable from the manner of its occurrence. It is not without significance that von Balthasar entitles his reflections on the event of God's dealings with the world in Jesus Christ a theodramatic.

The second matter to be drawn out concerns the 'catholicity' of von Balthasar's theology. For all his insistence on the highly specific character of God's self-manifestation in Christ, he insists equally that this particularity does not disqualify or cancel out the rest of human history as insignificant. For Jesus Christ is not only the one who is absolutely unique: he is also the one in whom all things find their integrating focus. Out of the specific event of God's disclosure of himself there radiates a light which illuminates in a new way all cultural and religious phenomena. The Christian gospel 'sheds over the whole a light which makes possible . . . a new and deeper appreciation' (*Elucidations*, 36). This correlation of the broadest universality with the densest particularity has its origins in von Balthasar's studies of the Eastern fathers, and in particular Origen, on whom he has written at length and with great insight. Out of such resources has come the impetus for von Balthasar to develop a theology which is integrative but not syncretistic, holding together the universal reach of God's glory with its particular form in the person of Jesus Christ.

### Incarnation and Trinity

Von Balthasar's theology of the incarnation leads to a particular manner of approaching the doctrine of God. Because Jesus 'fleshes out' or 'bodies forth' the nature of God, his history furnishes the key to the inner relationships of the Trinity. The drama of the incarnation, that is, plays out before the eyes of the world the loving unity between Father and Son in the bond of the Spirit. Thus it is truly the incarnation which lies at the root of Christian belief about the differentiated character of God. The life of God is neither flat nor relationless: rather, it is fully societal, bearing within itself both the pain of separation and the mutuality of love.

Such an understanding of God's trinitarian relatedness is narrated in the gospels, notably for von Balthasar in the motif of the obedience of the Son to the will of the Father which echoes through the Gospel of John. In this 'absolute self-giving to the loving will of the Father' (*Pneuma und Institution* (Einsiedeln, 1974) 139), Jesus does not merely exemplify a perfect human spirit fully given over to doing the will of God. Much more are we to trace in his obedience the very ways of God himself. In such a fashion does the logic of belief in the incarnation lead ineluctably to belief in God as Trinity.

Yet it does so in a strange way, following a strange path. For it is precisely in the abandonment of the Son to death on the cross that God's trinitarian nature is embodied — precisely, that is, in that event in which the unity of the divine life seems imperilled in the extreme. And it is only because Father and Son remain — even at the point of their furthest separation — bound together in the Holy Spirit that the divine life does not collapse into the void. For at the cross, God 'proves to be so living, so mobile, that he can reveal his life precisely even in death, his trinitarian communality even in abandonment' (*ibid.*, 402). How does this happen?

'He who speaks of the incarnation speaks of the cross' ('Mysterium Paschale' in J. Feiner, M. Lohrer, ed., *Mysterium Salutis III/2* (Einsiedeln, 1969) 142. At Golgotha, the incarnate Son fulfils his obedience to the will of the Father by submitting to having the sin of the whole world vent its rage on him. His submission is a submission to a powerlessness in which he is no longer in control of his fate, to a descent into the depths of Godforsakenness, as the cry of dereliction testifies. Of that cry, von Balthasar writes: 'The fountain from which the Son lives eternally seem to be empty . . . As the embodiment of sin he can no longer find any support in God; he has identified himself with that which God must eternally turn away from himself' (*Der dreifache Kranz* (Einsiedeln, 1979) 45). And yet the divine life does not at this point break down; the distance between Father and Son at the cross is not a distance in which God is in opposition to himself. Rather, it is the manifestation of the mutuality of God's being, for here, too, there is played out 'the commitment of the divine persons to each other' so that 'the mystery of the cross is the highest revelation of the Trinity' (*ibid.*). The kenosis of the Son 'even to death on a cross' is at one and the same time the plerosis in which God is supremely himself.

To believe that God is three-in-one is to believe that God is love. That is to say, belief in the Trinity is belief, not merely that God acts lovingly but that he is, in his inmost being, related in procession and mission: 'God is love in himself' (*Elucidations*, 23). It is also to believe that God is our God, directed in all his ways towards mankind. For 'he came to us in an event — which had its climax in Jesus Christ — of such self-giving, defenceless, inviting power (or powerlessness) that we understand at least so much; he wants to be for us' (*ibid.*, 24). But how precisely is God 'for us'? That question points us to the heart of von Balthasar's understanding of the atonement.

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### The Mystery of Holy Saturday

The fundamental category in von Balthasar's conception of the atonement is that of *solidarity*. In this he moves significantly beyond some of the more familiar classical models — Anselm's 'satisfaction' theory, the 'penal substitution' of the later Calvinist divines — although the roots of his thinking are arguably deep in the patristic writings. For him, the mystery of redemption is the demonstration in the death of Christ of God's solidarity with the sinner who seeks to estrange himself from God.

To expand this theme, von Balthasar focusses not only on the events of Good Friday and Easter Day, but also on Christ's descent into hell on Holy Saturday. One of the strongest impulses to develop along this direction came from his close collaboration with Adrienne von Speyr, a doctor who was converted under him and who was the subject of mystical experiences of participation in the paschal sufferings of Christ. Von Balthasar later wrote of her that she 'possessed in a special

way a charism of theological insight. To the central insights bestowed on her belong the mysteries of Holy Saturday and hence of hell and universal redemption as well' (*The von Balthasar Reader*, 403). From von Speyr's experiences and writings, von Balthasar has taken the motif of the descent into hell as expressing God's refusal to abandon those who abandon him. Because he shares hell with the sinner, the sinner's wilful attempt to live and die without God is forestalled. Even in hell, God himself is present in the Son. 'On holy Saturday there is the descent of the dead Jesus to hell, that is... his solidarity... with those who have lost their way from God... In this finality (of death) the dead Son descends... He is... dead together with them. And exactly in that way he disturbs the absolute loneliness striven for by the sinner: the sinner, who wants to be "damned" apart from God, finds God again in his loneliness, but God in the absolute weakness of love who... enters into solidarity with those damning themselves' (*Pneuma and Institution*, 408f). However much the sinner may seek to put himself beyond God in 'the complete loneliness of being-only-for-oneself, God himself enters into this very loneliness as someone who is ever more lonely... even what we call "hell" is, although it is the place of desolation, always still a christological place' (*ibid.*, 444).

## REFLECTIONS

Any adequate critical appraisal of von Balthasar's theology would need to devote considerable attention to his sense of the universal scope of the Christian gospel. In particular, it would need to offer a careful account of the Christological basis of von Balthasar's 'catholicism' or 'universalism'. 'Universalism' is not infrequently pilloried by its orthodox opponents as the result of a kind of moral and doctrinal *laissez-faire* which skates lightly over those tracts of Christian teaching which speak of judgement and condemnation, and which imagines one fate to be enjoyed by all, irrespective of their decisions and desires. 'Universalism' of this kind, rarely a serious option and more often than not a popular fantasy, is quite alien to von Balthasar's doctrine of the atonement. His own theology, if it is to be labelled 'universalist', is only so in a very specific (Christological) sense, namely in that it espouses the universal presence of God in Christ to all men, blessed and damned.

Two lines of thought may be fruitful in seeking to appraise his work here. A first set of questions concerns the adequacy of the category of 'presence'. He maintains, as we have seen, that Christ's descent into hell on Holy Saturday is an assertion of the presence of God to those who have chosen to exclude themselves from that presence. It remains unclear, however, in precisely what ways the presence of God qualifies the situation of those in hell. That is so, chiefly because von Balthasar's account gives no hint of the response of the damned to the presence of God in Christ: his presence does not evoke a mutual relationship. God as it were stands before or alongside the sinner, but not in such a way as to make him into a partner. Von Balthasar maintains this assertion of the silent, undemanding presence of God in order to retain the freedom of man. But its soteriological significance is considerably blunted by the lack of an element of mutuality and dialogue between God and man.

A second set of questions centre around the emphasis on human freedom in von Balthasar's account. One of the chief motives of his *Theology of Holy Saturday* is the desire to retain a sense of the universal scope of Christ's redemptive love

without compromising the freedom of man. He sees quite clearly that one of the gravest weaknesses of universalism may be its incompatibility with human freedom: no man is in the end free to reject God. Von Balthasar seeks to hold on to what he sees as the truth of universalism (the 'catholic' scope of God's love) without robbing man of freedom to choose his destiny. God comes 'over to our side in order to open a way for us from within our helplessness and hopelessness — yet without in any way over-trumping that situation with his omnipotence, that is, impugning our freedom in any manner' (*Elucidations*, 40). Now it is precisely in order to retain man's freedom that von Balthasar develops the notion of God as simply present to the sinner without evoking any response — if the sinner were to respond, his free decision to cut himself off absolutely from God would be impugned. But to propose this is to raise questions concerning the effectiveness of God's loving presence. Indeed, it may well be that von Balthasar's desire to do justice to man's freedom cannot cohere with his sense of the universality of God's loving presence, unless that presence be made less than effectual.

Questions in this area have, of course, furnished some of the most characteristic perplexities of the Christian theological tradition, perplexities which remain largely unresolved. But what can perhaps be most fruitfully taken from his work is not so much a set of doctrinal positions as an example of the integration of theological reflection with the life of faith. The Dominican theologian Cornelius Ernst once remarked that theology is, properly understood, 'engaged contemplation' (*Multiple Echo* (London, 1979) 151). Part of the persuasiveness of von Balthasar's theological writing lies in the fact that it is not primarily critical but contemplative. To describe his work in these terms is not to suggest that it is the fruit of private mystical experience rather than the public self-manifestation of God; nor is it to envisage the theologian's task as necessitating withdrawal. What is meant is rather that as *contemplative* theology it is born of a fundamentally receptive attitude of spirit and mind towards God's self-disclosure. Its origin is not critical inquiry but rapture; its most characteristic attitude is that of being utterly overwhelmed by the splendour of God. It is for these reasons that there is for von Balthasar the closest possible correlation between theological reflection and the life of prayer, and that he has called for more 'kneeling theologians' (*Verbum Caro* (Einsiedeln, 1960) 224). If orthodox theology is not infrequently both unintelligent and unimaginative, it may well be that the fault lies not so much in a defective grasp of the truth as in a defective spirituality.

The best introduction to von Balthasar is *The von Balthasar Reader* (ed. M. Kehl, W. Loser, Edinburgh, 1983), which selects representative texts and has a useful introduction and bibliography. He has presented his own thought briefly in *Love Alone: the Way of Revelation* (ET, London, 1968). Two books of shorter pieces are invaluable: *Elucidations* (ET, London, 1965) and *Engagement with God* (ET, London, 1975), as is his classic on *Prayer* (ET, London, 1973). His great work *Herrlichkeit* has recently begun to appear in translation under the title *The Glory of the Lord. A Theological Aesthetics* (Edinburgh, 1983).

Good introductions are offered by D.M. MacKinnon in his *Introductory Essay to Engagement with God*, and by J. Riches in *Theology* 75 (1972) 562-70, 647-55.