

REVIEW ARTICLE :

The Glory of the Lord

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The Glory of the Lord—A Theological Aesthetics, vol. 1 *Seeing the Form* : by Hans Urs von Balthasar. T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1983. Pp. 691. Price £ 19.95.

The womb of any given theology is not simply God's Word in Scripture or the reflection on that Word which we call tradition, but it is Word and tradition reflected, refracted, mediated by the culture in which it emerges, whether that culture be Christian or not. In the attempt to articulate a Christian theology in India the womb of our thought is aesthetic to the roots of its being. For Hinduism as it is practised centres around form and light, the form and the splendour, the manifestation of inner light, which von Balthasar discerns as the main contours of aesthetics (p. 20, p. 118). Hinduism, and the culture which it has shaped, has a prima facie claim to be considered the aesthetic religion par excellence. An authentically Indian Christian theology cannot therefore neglect the dimension of the beautiful : if it does so the placenta is prematurely cut and there is no chance for the child to grow in the womb. For this reason Hans Urs von Balthasar's massive theological aesthetics, the six volumes of which the publishers hope to release in English by 1985, can only be considered of the very first importance for Christian theology in this country. The present volume, the first in the series, appeared in German in 1961. Its concerns are introductory and manifestly call for further elaboration ; even so they provide a great deal of material for reflection.

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The author has the distinction not only of having written a profound contribution on Cappadocian theology, and a well-known series on the saints of the Catholic church, but of having written what is probably still the best single book on Karl Barth. This ecumenical breadth, the eirenical spirit in which von Balthasar approaches his theme, adds greatly to the value of the work.

Seeing the Form is divided into three sections. In a first, introductory section he makes a preliminary delimitation of the sphere of aesthetics and its role in theology, and then deepens this with a review of Protestant and Catholic essays in theological aesthetics, largely since the Enlightenment, seeking to account for the very small place such aesthetics have occupied in the theology of either part of the Western Christian church. According to Kant, aesthetics is the doctrine of the beholding and perceiving of the beautiful, of what it means to see the form. We therefore pass, in a second section, to an account of what this means for the subject, and then, in a third to the theological object which this presupposes.

Lest Protestant readers be tempted to ignore both this review and the book forthwith, perhaps misled by the remark on the importance of the aesthetic dimension in Hindu culture, let it be said that the book as a whole can be regarded as an extended comment on Scripture and Incarnation, and that these two themes are never absent. Von Balthasar is not interested in constructing an aesthetic theology, that is, in subjecting Christian theology to the canons and norms of some philosophical aesthetic. (The relation between these two is the subject of volume 3). His concern is "to do aesthetics at the level and with the method of theology" (p. 38). Theology is controlled as much by the object for von Balthasar as it is for Barth, despite their disagreement over the *analogia entis*. But then what is the necessity for a theological aesthetics? Because Being manifests itself in form; because man's being is form; because we know God in his self revelation in and through form. In a polemic directed at historical criticism and sustained throughout the book, von Balthasar alleges (surely rightly) that we "no longer

have a vision for wholeness" and for this reason the idea of beginning with form appears questionable.

Our meddling intellect
Misshapes the beautiful form of things :—
We murder to dissect. (Wordsworth)

Form critical researchers "are quite incapable of perceiving the objective form which the Gospels propose" (p. 466), both because the whole is lost in the dissolution of the parts and because faith is resolved into subjectively and not conceived as correspondence to an object. Von Balthasar maintains as a first principle on the other hand "the indissolubility of form" (p. 26). The whole cannot be understood in terms of the parts. On the contrary, we need to return to the primary of the contemplation of the form. Only through form can we be "captivated and transported", a process which in this work might well stand for the reality of mission. For if anything is certain it is that if Christ is "cast at India like a stone", a hail of verbal missiles, nothing will occur but the growth of Hindu fundamentalism answering in kind. Mission is fundamentally a matter of allowing the attractiveness of Christ to shine, an aesthetic not a military reality. The phenomenon of "secret Christians" is a response to precisely this reality, mediated above all by Scripture (cf. p. 127).

Von Balthasar finds that the Church Fathers and the theologians of high Scholasticism were able to use aesthetic categories in their theology because they attributed the beauty of creation in an eminent sense to the creator and because they understood the eschatological *doxa* as already present in creation from the Resurrection on. By and large, however, this understanding was eliminated from both Protestant and Catholic theologies, with certain notable exceptions, particularly Hamann, Herder, Scheeben and, in modern times, Gerhard Nebel.

The root of the disappearance of aesthetics from Protestant theology is discerned in the actualism of Luther reacting against the idea of an all encompassing principle of Being in which nature and grace were not funda-

mentally viewed apart. The dialectic which Luther posited, the concealment of everything divine under its opposite, was radicalised by Kierkegaard, for whom the apostle and the genius, the religious and the aesthetic, were mutually exclusive figures. When the Lutheran Nebel attempts to elaborate theological aesthetic he is radically hindered: "from the standpoint of Protestantism, beauty has to be transferred wholly to the sphere of event" (p.67). Von Balthasar finds in Protestantism "a cold methodological protest" bearing 'the indelible mark of Cain" (p. 48). An authentic theological aesthetic can only be grounded in Protestantism when the actualistic perspective is radically cut back allowing sufficient space for contemplation of the objective form.

Sympathetic as he is to Barth and Nebel, it may be doubted whether von Balthasar has really done justice to the concerns he chooses to label 'Protestant' here; and the question whether a theological aesthetic can be constructed within an actualistic perspective remains open. That is to say, we do not have to be committed to the *analogia entis* to elaborate such an aesthetic. In Christ act and being coincide and from this centre point, as von Balthasar himself demonstrated, a whole series of analogies extend which allow the contemplation of the form. In the work as a whole we say that the assumption that it makes sense to speak of "the inwardness of absolute Being" or "the innermost light of Being" is taken too much for granted. Von Balthasar's argument (in his book on Barth that the *analogia fidei* necessarily presupposes the *analogia entis* is not a self-evident truth and was never accepted by Barth as being so. The way to a theological aesthetic grounded on God's being in act is by no means foreclosed.

Damaged by the split between faith and reason which began with Descartes, the aesthetic theme nevertheless reasserted itself strongly in the period of Romanticism, though in the form of an all too aesthetic theology which failed to distinguish sufficiently between creation and revelation. Von Balthasar finds in the neo-Thomist Scheeben the transition to a more soundly based theo-

logical aesthetics, where the theory of beauty is developed from the data of revelation itself. This task is structured in two phases, as theory of vision (theory about the perception of the form of God's revelation) and theory of rapture (the considered elevation of man to share in God's glory). The main bulk of the book may be considered an elaboration of these.

The presentation of the subjective side of the contemplative act falls under two main headings: the light of faith, and the experience of faith. Under the former, von Balthasar first argues that faith and knowledge are not to be set over against each other. Rather, we see in the two great biblical "theologies of experience", John and Paul, a unity between seeing and knowing. "Faith seeking understanding" is not an adequate characterisation of theology, biblically speaking. There is not only a finding through contemplation, incorporation into Christ through faith and sacraments, participation in the Holy Spirit. We then go on to a delineation of the form of faith which is understood as the interior completion of the philosophical act of response to the light of Being. No more than faith and knowledge are theology and philosophy antithetical: "Man's ultimate attitude in response to God's self revelation can stand only in the most intimate connection with that other ultimate attitude of man which is philosophic" (p. 143). Faith is both supernatural, response to the divine sign giving, and natural, response to the innermost light of being. The dualism of sign and signified interior light shines through the form. Such a form through which the light shines is precisely what we have in Christ.

The perspective of the presentation of the evidential force of the form of revelation is basically trinitarian. If faith is "participation in the free self disclosure of God's interior life and light" this is not to be understood in any Neo-Platonic sense but as faith's "personal love encounter" with Trinitarian reality. "The pantheistic Tat tvam Asi, which identifies subject and object in their depths can be resolved only by virtue of the unity between God and man in the Son...and by virtue of the Holy Spirit who

proceeds from this incarnate Son in his unity with the Father" (p. 195). Nevertheless this Trinitarian reality is not different from the light at the heart of being, a light which finds expression in many religions, philosophies and mysticisms where, though it is easily obscured, human beings may be led to a true worship of the true God. At this point we enter a small cavil: can we really concentrate thus on the philosophic act as the climax of the discernment of the light of Being, and then further speak of religious philosophical systems and mystical paths? We do not live in a world of philosophers and mystics but of largely hungry women and men and especially children. No doubt von Balthasar would agree that if we are to speak of the manifestation of the light of Being it should rather be in the context of that transcendence whereby the pavement dweller and the woman who daily walks four miles for her water are still able to laugh, love and even dance occasionally. It is one thing for the framework of a theology to be 'Mediterranean' as von Balthasar confesses, another for it to be intellectually elitistic. If it is the latter it is simply another form of oppression. But it is an advantage of the aesthetic category that it is by no means present or even savoured by one class alone, indeed, perhaps for this aspect of the kingdom also, the poor have privileged access.

From the somewhat uncertain ground of the light of Being von Balthasar comes to *terra firma*: "In the form of Christ offered to us, the interior light of grace and faith confronts its only valid verification, because here and only here a form becomes visible in which everything makes sense for the light beholds it" (p. 171). This revelation presents itself as the revelation of the inner depth of God, and here above all it is difficult to distinguish subjective and objective. Here we are pushed at once away from the question of our experience to the experienced form. In this form we have both "a wholly unique quality" and an "objective, demonstrable beauty of all proportions" (p. 188). Through this form the interior light of the eyes of faith becomes one with the exterior light that shines from Christ. "The whole mystery of Christianity, that which distinguishes it radically from

every other religious project, is that the form does not stand in opposition to infinite light, for the reason that God has himself instituted and confirmed such form... The form itself must participate in the process of death and resurrection, and thus it becomes coextensive with "God's Light Word" (p. 216). On these grounds von Balthasar calls Christianity "the aesthetic religion par excellence". Now this assertion about the Christian mystery, about form, and the submission of the form to death and resurrection this one can see discussed where Hindus and Christians meet, both as venerators of the 'light of Being', however differently that may be understood.

There follows an extended (200pp.) discussion of "the experience of faith" which is concerned, in a thoroughly Protestant way, again and again with Scripture. Faith is the attunement of the whole of our existence to God, and as such it is itself an object of experience. For both John and Paul this means progressive growth into Christ's existence which cannot be reduced to a single content or state, a single sensual or spiritual perception. Following Aquinas, von Balthasar describes this as attunement to Being as a whole, an attunement mediated by our intentional acts and the mediation of the creaturely in the form of Church, Scripture and sacraments. Such experience receives a constant self-criticism within the Church which is highlighted as it is found in Scripture, and in Patristic and medieval theology. Here for the first time we encounter the subject of "mysticism" which is affirmed, but in a very properly biblical perspective. The absorption of objective evidence by interior experience von Balthasar takes to be the tragedy of—Protestantism! For both the Fathers and Scholasticism "mystical" experience was not something *sui generis* but a particular unfolding of the general "normal" experience of faith. This experience comes only within the context of the Church, of "archetypal experience", the encounter with the God of the Bible. The experience of Christ is that which is truly archetypal, a model for all other Christian experience; the apostles and eyewitnesses, above all Mary, are relative and dependent archetypes. We are called to

"imitate the total structure of their Christ experience" (p. 306). Tradition is the link between archetypal and imitative experience. Three things may be said to characterise the Biblical experience of God: God gives himself to be perceived in a manner at once sensory and objective; this perception cannot be spiritualised, as occurs not only in Valentinus but in Bultmann; the experience is always proleptic, an anticipation of an eschatological experience of God. From a long discussion of Jesus' experience, Old Testament experience, Marian experience, the Apostles' eyewitness, the variety of theologies within the New Testament, von Balthasar turns finally to the question of "spiritual senses", a doctrine invented by Origen appealing to Proverbs 3.5 and Hebrews 5.14 and which has as its object "that innermost central capacity whereby we can touch and feel God and, above all, whereby we can, in dark immediacy, savour him in his exquisiteness" (p.371). These senses necessarily run counter to an ultimate monism: "Spiritual senses, in the sense of Christian mysticism, presuppose devout bodily senses which are capable of undergoing Christian transformation by coming to resemble the sensibility of Christ and of Mary" (p. 378). Von Balthasar closes with a review of the relation of Spirit and senses as conceived by Barth, Guardini, the philosopher Gustav Siewert, and the poet Paul Claudel. "In his own way each of them conceives man as a sensory—spiritual totality and understands man's two distinctive functions from the standpoint of a common centre in which the living person stands in a relationship of contact and interchange with the real, living God" (p. 405).

Von Balthasar's emphasis is entirely on the role the senses play in our experience of God. He constantly has illuminating things to say as, when discussing the Old Testament, that the theophanies of Genesis are "the sensory point of departure for the history of the people and its election" (p. 333) or, discussing the Apostles: "They do indeed have senses but not yet spiritual senses. In this they are a permanent archetype of the apostolic church with her *fides ex auditu*" (!) (p. 346). And yet—with all the emphasis on sense—there is very little histori-

cal-material understanding of experience. On the contrary, this world remains highly religious. Here it seems that von Balthasar was not prepared to accept from Barth that religion may not be the privileged locus of experience of God. He understands Jesus firmly in the context of the Old Testament, but if we map out a phenomenology of Old Testament experience of God how little there is of religion about it! How much rather of the dull business of organising society on more just lines, of the brokenness of all too human relations, of political perceptions, of common sense and the market place. Von Balthasar describes Wisdom literature most beautifully as "the Holy Spirit of Scripture reflecting on itself" (p 43), but it is this precisely as the common sense, earthy, humourous reflection of man on his situation. This same rootedness in the everyday, this experience of God in the humdrum is most sharply focussed in Jesus also, as witness his parables. God is a historical materialist we might say, and the object determines our experience of the object. Sense experience *per se* is not enough! The beautiful is experienced not alongside, or above, or below the historical material, but through it.

The third and last section of this first volume turns from the subject of experience to the object, in truth a turning which, as von Balthasar admits, has constantly pressed through the account of experience. Just as faith and knowledge were one, so in Christ Word finds perfect form. Jesus is not a sign pointing beyond himself to some "Christ of faith": "What is seen, heard, and touched is the 'Word of Life'" (p 437). Nevertheless there is of course a hiddenness of revelation determined by the tension of body and spirit, God and creation, and grace and redemption. This tension is most extreme in the incarnation which is "the most extreme manifestness within the deepest concealment" (p 457). Here the paradox of the beautiful vision is foreshadowed, that God's ever greater incomprehensibility constitutes the content of the vision. We are now brought entirely to Christ as 'the centre of the form of revelation'. Christ is understood under the aesthetic categories of measure, form and quality, seeking to understand his "interior rightness and evidential power". When

we think of the manifestation of Krishna to Arjuna in the Bhagavada Gita a discussion between Hindu and Christian in these terms certainly suggests itself. For von Balthasar of course Christ is measured by himself and 'measure' implies the concordance between Christ's mission and his existence. Here at the centre form is known in event (p. 474). The interior proportion and harmony between God and man in this event makes it an archetype of the beautiful: For this beautiful object *is* revelation: it is the beauty of God that appears in man and the beauty of man which is to be found in God alone" (p. 477). Only the form which God takes in Christ allows there to be form between God and man in general. Without this "the finite is absorbed by the infinite and the non identical crushed by identity. In the non-Christian realm therefore consistent religion (in its mystical form) is in a state of unresolvable conflict with aesthetics (which then also includes religious and political myths), and this conflict can in the last resort be terminated only by a de mythologisation of religion and, consequently, also by the dying away of religion, for man cannot live without an interior image" (p. 480). Would anyone care to set this as a question for the Hinduism paper? To all intents and purposes we see consistent religion, in its mystical form, in harness with aesthetics, expressing itself with beauty and vigour through a vast collection of myths which show few signs of mortality. Later, von Balthasar takes up the ancient Christian theme which Farquhar elaborated in *The Crown of Hinduism*: "If Christ is to be *the* Unique One, then, we look at his form, what must happen is that all other forms, in spite of their qualitative difference and even opposition, come more and more to exhibit related characteristics, while he, who had seemed to be related to them and capable of being classified under the same general categories, now appears in ever greater isolation, incapable of being reduced to anything whatever" (p. 502). Thus stated this circumvents the objection Hogg brought to Farquhar, namely, how Christ can be an answer to a question which has not been asked. Whether we speak of the 'light of Being' or not, aesthetics undeniably operates at a much more interior level than that of question and answer. To put it

another way, Hindu Christian dialogue has operated for too long on the level of the first two transcendentals only : goodness and truth. It is the concern of this book that these two can in no way be divorced from the third, beauty. "If Christ is the image of all images, it is impossible that he should not affect all the world's images by his presence, arranging them round himself" (p. 419). Argument whilst indispensable, is not enough. If Christ is the crown of Hinduism it is in virtue of the beauty of the image which "proves itself" over against other images by its own evidential force.

The book concludes with a consideration of the mediation of the form through Scripture and the Church, and the attestation of the form, the witness of the Father as it is seen and experienced in Jesus, the witness of history in what we know as the Old Testament (this section contains a valuable discussion of myth), and the testimony of the 'cosmos. These two sections are, like the long section on experience, theology of the Holy Spirit, their theme a revelation in Scripture and Church which points beyond itself to Christ. Despite the sin of the Church and the humanity of Scripture we are here on the borders of a theory of rapture. "By making present ('transporting') the form of Christ within Scripture and the Church the Spirit at the same time makes man present ('transports' him) within them and, through them, to Christ. This is what the Fathers called the *admirabile commercium et connubium*" (p. 604). Significantly, theology, which Barth described as 'the most beautiful of all sciences' is understood in the same way and those accustomed to contrast a sterile logomachy with mystical or other experience could learn from this discussion: "Theology attains to its form as a figure drawn up by God himself and it can, therefore, pass back and forth from the realm of pure logical exactness into an experience which radiates from the archetype—an experience which leads to contemplation and can only become truly mystical: this fact confirms rather than questions its character as form" (p. 601).

The author concludes his foreword with an invitation. Confessing the Mediterranean bias of the work and the

need for the perspective of other cultures, especially those of Asia, he ends: "May those qualified come to complete the present fragment." Indian Christian theology is still at the stage of the Apologists: a series of attempts to express the truth of the Christian revelation in terms of the prevailing culture, which include a number of false starts. We await an Origen, after John the Evangelist the founder of theological aesthetics, who, with profound understanding not only of the truth and goodness but of the beauty of the Hindu form, can bring all the treasures of this beauty to the service of he whom Origen discerned as the most beautiful of all forms and images, the Word made flesh.