

future of God in each act of daily life. For Aquinas at least, this is surely what is meant by acts of intellection that do what they say, so that for us to engage in such thinking ourselves in the way that he opens. These are matters of faith that belong at the heart of an ecumenical ethics, and that may even restore to reason its own highest possibility.

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NO BLOODLESS MYTH: A GUIDE THROUGH BALTHASAR'S DRAMATICS by Aidan Nichols OP, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 2000. Pp. 268, £16.95 pbk.

The volumes of Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Theodramatik* — now fully translated by Graham Harrison as the five volumes of *Theo-drama* — are an immense achievement. This, surely, is a judgement one can hardly contest. An engagement with this odyssey today demands, I would suggest, not only patience with a style and manner of theologising which appears both strikingly original and yet strangely anachronistic, but also, quite probably, the leisure of a long summer vacation! This at least was the way I originally got through it. Today, Balthasar arrives amongst us — or at least amongst the majority of us — as the name of a formidable theological and literary 'achievement'; a body of work comparable to the *Church Dogmatics* or *Theological Investigations*. This may be an obvious enough point; nonetheless it would seem to raise a somewhat deeper question. For how are we to read Balthasar today when flesh and blood theologian disappears behind the mask of theological authority? And this can surely be no slight issue in the work of a theologian for whom the very matter, or *Sache*, of Christianity lies in the logic of handing-over and bestowal. What gift, if gift it be, has Balthasar bestowed on us? Aidan Nichols in his series for T & T Clark, *Introduction to Hans Urs von Balthasar* is helping us to discern.

In the first volume of this trilogy, *The Word Has Been Abroad: A Guide Through Balthasar's Aesthetics*, Aidan Nichols exhibited a remarkable ability to synthesise and summarise the sprawling seven volumes of *Herrlichkeit*. Here, in *No Bloodless Myth*, he repeats the feat with, if anything, the more demanding and complex argument of *Theo-Drama*. Nichols is a companionable, indeed one is tempted to say incomparable guide, remarkably sure footed and assured — if not overly interested in allowing his party of admiring tourists to linger long. He does not have much choice in compressing several thousand pages into a mere 250 page commentary.

The point of *Theo-Drama* is not to reinvigorate Christian theatre — just as the point of *Herrlichkeit* was not to bolster a specific Christian art. Rather, what Balthasar's whole endeavour is directed towards is drawing to the centre of the stage the very 'drama

intrinsic to divine salvation' itself. The Balthasarian project thus charts a remarkably extravagant course in an age of theological fragmentation. That is to say, it sets itself to present an 'all-embracing context' for the very activity of theology itself. The manner in which it seeks to do this is first, in the *Prolegomena*, by outlining a 'network of concepts and images' by which to express the utter uniqueness of divine action (Vol I); second, by charting the play of freedom, human and divine (Vol II); third, by taking this 'play' up into the very 'play of freedoms' in Jesus Christ (Vol III and IV); and finally in *The Last Act* (Vol V) — a volume 'saturated by the thinking of Adrienne von Speyr' — by treating Christian eschatology.

If one can confidently give oneself to Nichols' commentary here — and there can be little doubt that it is a first class resource for English readers just beginning to find their way into Balthasar's vision — then the question of Nichols' own assessment of this work, with which he is now so intimately familiar, becomes one of considerable interest for the reception of Balthasar. And here I think a further comment should be made which concerns the way in which Nichols handles the most daring, contestable or, as some would see, most irresponsible of Balthasar's (and increasingly Adrienne's?) ideas. For there is much in the *Theo-Drama* which is, let us say, as Balthasar once said of Gregory of Nyssa, 'audaciously creative'. To take but one, although one massive, chunk of this creativity here. All the way from his conviction concerning a 'primal *kenosis*' in the Trinity, through his commitment to the resources of a penal substitution theory and on into his remarkable theology of 'Holy Saturday', Balthasar's theology is described by Nichols as walking 'a knife edge between orthodoxy and heresy' (166). No doubt many would wonder whether it is a balancing act that Balthasar manages to bring off as successfully as Nichols' commentary may occasionally suggest. Nichols is not particularly forthcoming with the details here. For sure we may recognise a basic sympathy on his part for Balthasar but there still remains the danger here that in recounting an almost seamless progression in Balthasar's argument all kinds of difficulties or plain oddities are in danger of being swept up into the whole.

Nichols' work though is to be welcomed and recommended. It is in its own turn a splendid achievement and, at this moment I would say, a graceful handing on. We must hope that in Nichols' commentary on Balthasar's final panel of the Trilogy, he will find room to offer his own reflections on this theology of ecstasy and glory. He is, after all, one of the very few anglo-saxon theologians in a position to do so today.

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