

# Balthasar and his Christology

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*Hans Urs von Balthasar, the important Swiss theologian, will be celebrating his eightieth birthday on August 12th.*

Pope John Paul's singling out of Hans Urs von Balthasar for the Paul VI award, for his contribution to Catholic theology, almost certainly marks his emergence as the preferred Catholic theologian of the pontificate.<sup>1</sup> Interest in his thought is bound to increase, especially with the English translation of his master-work *Herrlichkeit*, now proceeding.<sup>2</sup> Our aim here is to present what can only be an introductory picture of the man and his work, still—amazingly—so little known in the English-speaking world in spite of the fact that his eightieth birthday is at hand and he has been writing for fifty years. We are not attempting to summarize everything (that would be an impossibility) but considering the central theme of his writing, his Christology.

## *The man*

Balthasar was born in Lucerne in 1905. It is probably significant that he was born in that particular Swiss city, whose name is virtually synonymous with Catholicism in Swiss history. The centre of resistance to the Reformation in the sixteenth century, in the nineteenth it led the Catholic cantons in what was virtually a civil war of religion, the War of the *Sonderbund* (which they lost). Even today it is very much a city of churches, of religious frescoes, of bells. Balthasar is a very self-consciously *Catholic* author. He was educated by both Benedictines and Jesuits, and then in 1923 began a university education divided between four Universities: Munich, Vienna, Berlin—where he heard Romano Guardini, for whom a Chair of Catholic Philosophy had been created in the heartland of Prussian Protestantism<sup>4</sup>—and finally Zürich.

In 1929 he presented his doctoral thesis, which had as a subject the idea of the end of the world in modern German literature, from Lessing to Ernst Bloch. Judging by his citations, Balthasar continues to regard playwrights, poets and novelists as theological sources as important as the Fathers or the Schoolmen.<sup>5</sup> He is prodigiously well-read in the literature of half a dozen languages and has been called the most cultivated man of his age.<sup>6</sup> In the year he got his doctorate, he entered the Society of Jesus. His studies with the German Jesuits he

described later as a time spent languishing in a desert, even though one of his teachers was the outstanding Neo-Scholastic Erich Przywara, to whom he remained devoted.<sup>7</sup> From the Ignatian *Exercises* he took the personal ideal of uncompromising faithfulness to Christ the Word in the midst of a secular world.<sup>8</sup> His real theological awakening, however, only happened when he was sent to the French Jesuit study house at Lyons, where he found awaiting him Henri de Lubac and Jean Daniélou, both later to be cardinals of the Roman church. These were the men most closely associated with the 'Nouvelle Théologie', later to be excoriated by Pope Pius XII for its patristic absorption.<sup>9</sup> Pius XII saw in the return to the Fathers two undesirable hidden motives. These were, firstly, the search for a lost common ground with Orthodoxy and the Reformation, and secondly, the desire for a relatively undeveloped theology which could then be presented in a myriad new masks to modern man.<sup>10</sup> The orientation to the Fathers, especially the Greek Fathers, which de Lubac in particular gave Balthasar did not, in fact, diminish his respect for historic Scholasticism at the level of philosophical theology.<sup>11</sup> His own metaphysics consist of a repristinated Scholasticism, but he combines this with an enthusiasm for the more speculative of the fathers, admired for the depth of their theological thought as well as for their ability to re-express an inherited faith in ways their contemporaries found immediately attractive and compelling.<sup>12</sup>

Balthasar did not stay with the Jesuits. In 1940 they had sent him to Basle as a chaplain to the University. From across the Swiss border, Balthasar could observe the unfolding of the Third Reich, whose ideology he believed to be a distorted form of Christian apocalyptic and the fulfilment of his own youthful ideas about the role of the eschatology theme in the German imagination. While in Basle Balthasar also observed Adrienne von Speyr, a convert to Catholicism and a visionary who was to write an ecstatic commentary on the Fourth Gospel, and some briefer commentaries on other New Testament books, as well as theological essays of a more sober kind.<sup>13</sup> In 1947, the *motu proprio Provida Mater Ecclesia* created the possibility of 'secular institutes' within the Roman Catholic Church, and, believing that these *Weltgemeinschaften* of laity in vows represented the Ignatian vision in the modern world, Balthasar proposed to his superiors that he and Adrienne von Speyr together might found such an institute within the Society of Jesus. When they declined, he left the Society and in 1950 became a diocesan priest under the bishop of Chur, in eastern Switzerland. Soon Balthasar had published so much that he was able to survive on his earnings alone, and moved to Einsiedeln, not far from Lucerne, where, in the shadow of the venerable Benedictine abbey, he built up his publishing house, the *Johannes Verlag*, named after Adrienne von Speyr's preferred

evangelist. She died in 1967, but he continues to regard her as *the* great inspiration of his life, humanly speaking.

### *The work*

Balthasar's writings are formidable in number and length. Any one area of his publications would constitute a decent life's work for a lesser man. In patristics he wrote accounts of Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor.<sup>14</sup> In literature, he produced a major study of Bernanos<sup>15</sup> as well as translations of Claudel, Péguy and Calderón. In philosophy he turned his thesis into three massive tomes under the title *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele*,<sup>16</sup> from Lessing through Nietzsche to the rise of Hitler. Although a major idea of this work is the notion that the figure of Christ remained a dominant motif in German Romanticism, more significant for Balthasar's later Christology is his essay *Wahrheit: Die Wahrheit der Welt*,<sup>17</sup> in which he argues that the great forgotten theme of metaphysics is the theme of *beauty*.

Balthasar presents the beautiful as the 'forgotten transcendental', *pulchrum*, an aspect of everything and anything as important as *verum*, 'the true', and *bonum*, 'the good'. The beautiful is the radiance which something gives off simply because it is something, because it exists. A sequel to this work, intended to show the theological application of its leading idea, was in fact never written, but Balthasar had given clear hints as to what it would contain. What corresponds theologically to beauty is God's *glory*. The radiance that shows itself through the communicative forms of finite being is what arouses our sense of transcendence, and so ultimately founds our theology. Thus Balthasar hit upon his key theological concept, as vital to him as *ens a se* to Thomists or 'radical infinity' to Scotists. In significant form and its attractive power, the Infinite discloses itself in finite expression, and this is supremely true in the biblical revelation. Thus Balthasar set out on his great trilogy: a theological aesthetics,<sup>18</sup> concerned with the perception of God's self-manifestation; a theological dramatics,<sup>19</sup> concerned with the content of this perception, namely God's action towards man; and a theological logic<sup>20</sup> dealing with the method, at once divine and human, whereby this action is expressed.

### *Balthasar's Christological revolution*

Balthasar has insisted, however, that the manner in which his theology is to be written is Christological from start to finish. He defines theology as a mediation between faith and revelation in which the Infinite, when fully expressed in the finite, i.e. made accessible as man, can only be apprehended by a convergent movement from the side of the finite, i.e. adoring, obedient faith in the God-man. Only

thus can theology be Ignatian and produce 'holy worldliness', in Christian practice, testimony and self-abandonment. Balthasar aims at nothing less than a Christocentric revolution in Catholic theology. It is absolutely certain that the inspiration for this derives, ironically for such an ultra-Catholic author, from the Protestantism of Karl Barth.

In the 1940's Balthasar was not the only person interested in theology in the University of Basle. Balthasar's book on Barth,<sup>22</sup> regarded by some Barthians as the best book on Barth ever written,<sup>23</sup> while expressing reserves on Barth's account of nature, predestination and the concept of the Church, puts Barth's Christocentricity at the top of the list of the things Catholic theology can learn from the *Church Dogmatics*.<sup>24</sup> Not repudiating the teaching of the First Vatican Council on the possibility of a natural knowledge of God, Balthasar set out nevertheless to realise in Catholicism the kind of Christocentric revolution Barth had wrought in Protestantism: to make Christ, in Pascal's words, 'the centre, towards which all things tend'.<sup>25</sup> Balthasar's acerbity towards the catholic theological scene under Paul VI derives from the sense that this overdue revolution was being resisted from several quarters: from those who used philosophical or scientific concepts in a way that could not but dilute Christocentrism, building on German Idealism (Karl Rahner), evolutionism (Teilhard de Chardin) or Marxism (liberation theology), and from those who frittered away Christian energies on aspects of Church structure or tactics of pastoral practice, the characteristic post-conciliar obsessions.<sup>26</sup>

### *Jesus Christ as the 'Gestalt Gottes'*

In his person, life, death and resurrection, Jesus Christ is the 'form of God'. As presented in the New Testament writings, the words, actions and sufferings of Jesus form an aesthetic unity, held together by the 'style' of unconditional love. Love is always beautiful, because it expresses the self-diffusiveness of being, and so is touched by being's radiance, the *pulchrum*. But the unconditional, gracious, sacrificial love of Jesus Christ expresses not just the mystery of being—finite being—but the mystery of the *Source* of being, the transcendent communion of love which we call the Trinity.<sup>27</sup> Thus through the *Gestalt Christi*, the love which God *is* shines through to the world. This is Balthasar's basic intuition.

The word 'intuition' is, perhaps, a fair one. Balthasar is not a New Testament scholar, not even a self-taught one like Schillebeeckx. Nor does he make a very serious attempt to incorporate modern exegetical studies into his Christology. His somewhat negative attitude towards New Testament studies follows from his belief that the identification of ever more sub-structures, redactional frameworks,

'traditions', *pericopai*, tears into fragments what is an obvious unity. The New Testament is a unity because the men who wrote it had all been bowled over by the same thing, the glory of God in the face of Christ. Thus Balthasar can say, provocatively, that New Testament science is not a science at all compared with the traditional exegesis which preceded it. To be a science you must have a method adequate to your object. Only the contemplative reading of the New Testament is adequate to the glory of God in Jesus Christ.<sup>28</sup>

The importance of the concept of contemplation for Balthasar's approach to Christ can be seen by comparing his view of perceiving God in Christ with the notion of looking at a painting and seeing what the artist has been doing in it.<sup>29</sup> In Christian faith, the captivating force (the 'subjective evidence') of the artwork which is Christ takes hold of our imaginative powers; we enter into the 'painterly world' which this discloses and, entranced by what we see, come to contemplate the glory or sovereign love of God in Christ (the 'objective evidence') as manifested in the concrete events of his life, death and resurrection.<sup>30</sup> So entering his glory, we become absorbed by it, but this very absorption sends us out into the world in sacrificial love like that of Jesus.

This is the *foundation* of Balthasar's Christology, but its *content* is a series of meditations on the mysteries of the life of Jesus. His Christology is highly concrete and has been compared, suggestively, to the iconography of Andrei Rublev and Georges Roualt.<sup>31</sup> Balthasar is not especially concerned with the ontological make-up of Christ, with the hypostatic union and its implications, except insofar as these are directly involved in an account of the mysteries of the life.<sup>32</sup> In each major moment ('mystery') of the life, we see some aspect of the total *Gestalt Christi*, and through this the *Gestalt Gottes* itself. Although Balthasar stresses the narrative unity of these episodes, which is founded on the *obedience* that takes the divine Son from incarnation to passion, an obedience which translates his inner-Trinitarian being as the Logos, filial responsiveness to the Father,<sup>33</sup> his principal interest is located very firmly in an unusual place. This place is the mystery of Christ's descent into Hell, which Balthasar explicitly calls the centre of all Christology.<sup>34</sup> Because the descent is the final point reached by the *kenosis*, and the *kenosis* is the supreme expression of the inner-Trinitarian love, the Christ of Holy Saturday is the consummate icon of what God is like.<sup>35</sup> While not relegating the crucifixion to a mere prelude, Balthasar sees the One who was raised at Easter as not primarily the Crucified but rather the One who for us went down into hell.

Balthasar's picture of the descent is taken from the visionary experiences of Adrienne von Speyr and is a world away from the concept of the triumphant preaching to the just which nearly all

traditional accounts of the going down to Hell come under.<sup>36</sup> Balthasar stresses Christ's solidarity with the dead, his passivity, his finding himself in a situation of total self-estrangement and alienation from the Father. For Balthasar the descent 'solves' the problem of theodicy, by showing us the conditions on which God accepted our foreknown abuse of freedom: namely, his own plan to take to himself our self-damnation in Hell. It also demonstrates the costliness of our redemption: the divine Son underwent the experience of Godlessness. Finally, it shows that the God revealed by the Redeemer is a Trinity. Only if the Spirit, as *vinculum amoris* between the Father and the Son, can re-relate Father and Son in their estrangement in the descent, can the unity of the Revealed and Revealer be maintained. In this final humiliation of the *forma servi*, the glorious *forma Dei* shines forth via its lowest pitch of self-giving love.

### *A question*

Balthasar's account of the *kenosis*, and especially of the descent, leaves a great many questions unanswered that more than manual-bound Scholastics would consider needed asking. Here, if anywhere, as Giovanni Marchesi has said, his writing is a 'visione immaginifica' rather than a true systematics.<sup>37</sup> But Balthasar would not necessarily deny this. I find it interesting that so much of the hymnographic tradition echoes Balthasarian themes. Certain theologians, while not formally engaged in their craft, have in fact come up with a Balthasarian theology. There are two possible conclusions to be drawn from this. *Either*, Balthasar's theology is simply a spiritual rhetoric, suitable for preaching or devotion but no more. *Or* such men wrote better than they knew. They expressed that deeper response to revelation which Balthasar calls 'aesthetic'. They saw the glory of the Cross,<sup>38</sup> the glory of the self-emptying of the Word Incarnate, and behind that the indescribable beauty of the Trinity itself.

Praise to the holiest in the height,  
and *in the depth* be praise.  
In all his words most wonderful,  
most sure in all his ways.<sup>39</sup>

- 1 On 23.6.1984; an English-language account is provided in *L'Osservatore Romano* for 23.7.1984.
- 2 H.U. von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik* (Einsiedeln 1961—9); ET *The Glory of God* (Edinburgh and San Francisco 1983—).
- 3 Balthasar's own estimate of his life and work is in *Rechenschaft* (Einsiedeln 1965). The most thorough study of his theology to date is A. Moda, *Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Bari 1976); for his Christology see also G. Marchesi, *La Cristologia di Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Rome 1977).
- 4 See H.U. von Balthasar, *Romano Guardini. Reform aus dem Ursprung* (Munich 1970); the title is significant.

- 5 See especially *Herlichkeit III/1*.
- 6 By H. de Lubac in 'Un testimonio di Cristo. Hans Urs von Balthasar', *Humanitas* 20 (1965)—p. 853.
- 7 H.U. von Balthasar 'Die Metaphysik Erich Pryzwara', *Schweizer Rundschau* 33 (1933), pp. 488—499. Pryzwara convinced himself of the importance of the analogy of being in theology.
- 8 Balthasar has compared the 'evangelicalism' of the *Exercises* to that not only of Barth but of Luther! See *Rechenschaft* op. cit. pp. 7—8.
- 9 See R. Aubert's summary of the *Nouvelle Théologie* in *Bilan de la théologie du vingtième siècle* (Paris 1971), I. pp. 457—460.
- 10 Pius XII, *Humani Generis* 14—17.
- 11 Stressed by B. Mondin, 'Hans Urs von Balthasar e l'estetica teologica' in *I grandi teologi del secolo ventesimo I* (Turin 1969), pp. 268—9.
- 12 De Lubac spoke of Balthasar enjoying 'una specie di connaturalità' with the Fathers; but he has never suffered from that tiresome suspension of all criticism of patristic theology which is sometimes found, not least in England. In *Liturgie Cosmique: Maxime le Confesseur* (Paris 1947) he points out that the Fathers stand at the beginning (only) of Christian thought, pp. 7—8.
- 13 H.U. von Balthasar, *Erster Blick auf Adrienne von Speyr* (Einsiedeln 1967), with full bibliography.
- 14 *Parole et mystère chez Origène* (Paris 1957); *Présence et pensée. Essai sur la philosophie religieuse de Grégoire de Nysse* (Paris 1942); *Kosmische Liturgie. Höhe und Krise des griechischen Weltbilds bei Maximus Confessor* (Freiburg 1941).
- 15 *Bernanos* (Cologne 1954).
- 16 *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele* (Salzburg 1937—9).
- 17 *Wahrheit. Wahrheit der Welt* (Einsiedeln 1947).
- 18 Thus *Herrlichkeit* op. cit.
- 19 *Theodramatik* (Einsiedeln 1973—6).
- 20 The 'Theologik' is not yet written; a good idea of its likely contents may be gained from *Das Ganze im Fragment* (Einsiedeln 1963).
- 21 'Der Ort der Theologie', *Verbum Caro* (Einsiedeln 1960).
- 22 *Karl Barth. Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie* (Cologne 1951).
- 23 By Professor T.F. Torrance, to the present author in a private conversation.
- 24 op. cit. pp. 335—372.
- 25 *Pensées* 449 in the Lafuma numbering.
- 26 See *Schleifung der Bastionen* (Einsiedeln 1952); *Wer ist ein Christ?* (Einsiedeln 1965); *Cordula oder der Ernstfall* (Einsiedeln 1966). The notion that, because Christian existence has its own *form*, which is founded on the prior *form* of Christ, Christian proclamation does not (strictly speaking) need philosophical or social scientific mediations, is the clearest link between Balthasar and Pope John Paul II. See, for instance, the papal address to the South American bishops at Puebla.
- 27 *Herrlichkeit I* pp. 123—658.
- 28 *Einfaltungen. Auf Wegen christlicher Einigung* (Munich 1969).
- 29 Cf. A. Nichols OP, *The Art of God Incarnate* (London 1980), pp. 105—152.
- 30 For an excellent analysis of Balthasar's twofold Christological 'evidence', see A. Moda op. cit. pp. 305—410.
- 31 By H. Vorgrimmer, in *Bilan de la Théologie du vingtième siècle* op. cit. pp. 686ff.
- 32 We can say that, had Balthasar been St. Thomas, he would have begun the *Tertia pars* of the *Summa* at Question 36: *de manifestatione Christi nati*.
- 33 'Mysterium Paschale', in *Mysterium Salutis III/2* (Einsiedeln 1962), pp. 133—158.
- 34 *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe* (Einsiedeln 1963), p. 57.



- 35 'Mysterium Paschale', art. cit. pp. 227—255. Balthasar speaks of a 'contemplative Holy Saturday' as the centre of theology, in contra-distinction to G.W.F Hegel's 'speculative Good Friday'.
- 36 See J. Chaine, 'La Descente du Christ aux enfers', *Dictionnaire de la Bible, Supplément II*.
- 37 G. Marchesi, op. cit. p. 351.
- 38 The French translation of *Herrlichkeit* is entitled 'La Gloire et la Croix'.
- 39 Newman's affirmation in verse four of the angelic chorus in the 'Dream of Gerontius' that what refined flesh and blood in the Incarnation and Atonement was a 'higher gift than grace' recalls Balthasar's insistence that the divine Son did not come primarily to teach (*verum*), or to help us (*bonum*) but to show us himself (*pulchrum*).

## The Liberation of Christology from Patriarchy

Rosemary Radford Ruether

The doctrine of Christ should be the most comprehensive way that Christians express their belief in redemption from all sin and evil in human life, the doctrine that embraces the authentic humanity and fulfilled hopes of all persons. The theological categories adopted by early Christianity to define the doctrine of Christ—early Christology, in other words—would seem to be inclusive of women. And yet, of all Christian doctrine, it has been the doctrine of Christ that has been most frequently used to exclude women from full participation in the Christian Church. How is this possible?

Early Christianity used the word 'logos' to define that presence of God which has become incarnate in Jesus Christ. This term drew on a long tradition of religious philosophy. In Greek and Hellenistic Jewish philosophy, the divine Logos was the means by which the transcendent God came forth in the beginning to create the world. The Logos was simultaneously the immanence of God and the ground of creation. Through the Logos God created the world, guided it, was revealed to it and reconciled the world to God.

The Logos was particularly related to the rational principle in each human soul. By linking the term Christ, the Messiah, through which God redeemed the world, to the Logos, early Christianity prevented a split between creation and redemption threatened by early