

NOTES

OF ART AND THEOLOGY: HANS URS VON BALTHASAR'S SYSTEMS

There is magic in the word "system." A religious awe rises up before the attempt to order all. From 1936 to 1965, Protestant theologians were constructing, writing, and publishing great systems. After a Mozart concerto, Karl Barth labored on his *Church Dogmatics*. Challenged by Asia as well as New York City, Paul Tillich moved ahead from his existential Christology to a vision of Spirit in history and completed his *Systematic Theology*. Rudolf Bultmann's program for Christians in form-critical exegesis, New Testament theology, and secular demythologizing was accepted and expanded by disciples. To Roman Catholics, squinting at the sunlight of modern theology after 1955, not only the scope but the very idea of a contemporary system seemed beyond their reach. Today, however, the system builders in Christian theology are largely Catholic. We have Karl Rahner's *Foundations*, two volumes of Edward Schillebeeckx' tripartite Christology, a two-volume systematic phenomenology of Catholicism by Richard McBrien, two introductory volumes on theology by David Tracy. Finally—and his dominant position among the system builders may have eluded us—we have a creator of a cluster of systems, Hans Urs von Balthasar. Not only the scope of his program of three new interpretations of the Christ-event but the thought-form (art) he has chosen to voice the first two systems draws our attention to him in a new way.

Balthasar is one of the European Roman Catholic theologians who between 1935 and 1965 shaped theology. He is not as well known in the English-speaking world as Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, or Hans Küng. Moreover, he is known through fragments—works only partially translated—or through small essays. What complicates his reception even more is his recent critique of certain directions in theologians such as Rahner and Küng and his consequent appropriation by an intellectually conservative minority. One hears he is a Barthian, a mystic, a papalist. The true Balthasar, however, is not an integrist but a cultural theologian whose work ranges from the ecclesiological to the mystical and whose career began with a study of religion in German idealism. His major works are collages of culture and Christianity. The systematician whom we will look at more closely is a patrologist, a competent historian of Greek and German philosophies, a pioneer in the rediscovery of Maximus the Confessor, a translator of Paul Claudel.

Balthasar is now seventy-six years old. As a young scholar he saw the weakness in Neo-Scholasticism's rationalism and dualism. Though Bal-

thasar has been at times critical of Hegel and Schelling, his mentor Erich Przywara showed him how to take seriously the intellectual milieu which German thought before and after Nietzsche had generated. The richness and the paradox of Balthasar's systems are explained by an inner dialectic in their composer's thought, a polarity between Przywara, a pioneer of Roman Catholicism's study of modernity, and Karl Barth, the titan of neo-orthodoxy.¹

What interests us is not content or conflict but form. In 1961 Balthasar began to publish a theological system entitled *Herrlichkeit* ("Glory"). Its seven volumes (the final volume has not been finished) were original not only in the elegance of style and breadth of ambition but especially in their inner format: *Herrlichkeit* was an aesthetic theology. The Christian faith was explained through the leitmotif of art, particularly the visual arts. The system did not simply point out Christian themes in works of art. Rather, the expression and reality of Christianity were interpreted as art. Balthasar compared the light of faith to aesthetic contemplation and illustrated the ambiguity of Christ by showing that he is portrayed in the New Testament as God's ikon (Phil 2:6; Rom 8:25) open to several interpretations by those around him. Numerous philosophers and theologians were mined to support his interpretation of revelation as a polychrome work of art. The data of the Old and New Testaments he synthesized around biblical motifs such as "glory," "image," "form." The New Testament easily assumes this aesthetic form because in the Incarnation the Word made flesh appears as at once present and hidden.

What is amazing about this three-thousand-page system is not only its originality—a first aesthetic theological system—but its location; for *Herrlichkeit* was intended to be the first of three systems. Each would explore Christianity from a different perspective, the perspectives of the three great transcendentals of metaphysics: the beautiful, the good, the true. The first system would be an aesthetic, the second a dramatic ethic, the third a logic (more in the sense of Hegel than Aristotle). Each flows from a different power of the human personality: from aesthetic contemplation, from moral action, from reason. Because these interpretations of the Christian reality and faith are so formally different from the traditional systems veined by logic, Balthasar's works differ from one another more than Hegel does from Schelling, Aquinas from Scotus.

The second system, *Theodramatik*,² began to appear in 1973, and the

¹ For the sources of Balthasar's thought, cf. *In der Fülle des Glaubens* (Freiburg: Herder, 1980); a bibliography of his writings from 1935 to 1975 is available from Johannes Verlag, Einsiedeln.

² *Theodramatik*: Vol. 1, *Prolegomena* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1973); Vol. 2, *Die Personen des Spiels*: Part 1, *Der Mensch in Gott* (1976); Part 2, *Die Personen in Christus* (1978); Vol. 3, *Die Handlung* (1980).

fourth of five volumes has just been published. The interpretative form for these thousands of pages is drama. On the world stage of freedom and sin, Creator and creatures act out a play of ethical action and moral reflection. With this system we are invited to contemplate not the canvas of the Logos, Jesus of Nazareth, but the dialectic of revelation and tragedy hidden and disclosed in the epic of a single life and of the life of the human race.

What interests us is the entire complex of theater, the very existence of something like performance and play. This totality is to become transparent to revelation, all of its elements used as forms for theology. . . . We do not plan a quick bridge from theater to theology; the world of the theater is not going to be used as an instrument for easy application to theology. Rather, the metaphor of theater is a suitable point of departure for a theological dramatics, for it represents the inner social world and activity of people. In theater we will try to perceive a kind of transcendence which through a transformation—the dialectic of mask and costume as hiding and disclosing—can come into a pure openness where it allows revelation to come towards it. Then, in metaphor, a door to the truth of real revelation opens. (Vol. 1, pp. 9, 11, 12)

Like Wagner's *Ring* and Goethe's *Faust*, the *Theodramatik* begins with a "Prologue." It introduces the author's objectives. What is theodrama's relationship to aesthetics and to traditional theology? Is it not true that great currents of contemporary culture converge in what can be called the universal stage of drama—event, dialogue, role, praxis and politics, action, freedom are all there. Still as prologue, Balthasar offers a history of the theories of the theater as they illumine the mystery of human existence; then he surveys the attitudes of the Christian churches and theologians towards the theater. The first volume's second section treats "the dramatic ensemble" of theater: world, author, actors and actresses, director, audience, performance, and dramatic genre. All assume a seriousness and catalytic power as applied to the Christian vision of life and history. The third section is a philosophical anthropology which spotlights the human being as actor. Who am I? What am I, an individual or a collectivity? A solitary comedian or a future saint?

The second part of *Theodramatik*, "The Players," appeared in two volumes. The first considers the human being as the player on a stage poised between heaven and earth. God, too, is neither mind nor cosmic force but an agent. Upon this truth all biblical revelation is grounded. The human personality is also a free but finite agent. Balthasar draws on the apophatic tradition of dark faith and a hidden God to find in human existence a dramatic theater, at times lyric, at other times epic or tragic. Predestining grace and finite freedom in self-determination set the stage for each act. At the center is Christ, and the system continues on to

develop a Pauline Christology followed by a study of God's justification in personal history on earth.

The third part (but the fourth book published) treats the "action of the Play." Upon the stage of the human planet a play is enacted. Its action, Balthasar begins, finds its point of departure in the Apocalypse. He calms our surprise at this potentially flimsy mooring of the divine and human drama in mere symbol by pointing out that this New Testament book in fact deals with the conflicts of history over God's presence in Christ, the Lamb. The unsatisfying but ever-seductive numbers and religious pictograms are images of an epic drama. Balthasar recalls that the apocalyptic genre is not limited to the last book of the Bible but appears in its Gospels and Epistles. So, if we wish to find drama in Scripture, we must look not only at Jesus' dialogues and passion but also at the dramatic atmosphere of his age—apocalyptic. It is, too, a theatrical forecast of the future resolution of theodrama. The two central sections of Part 3 develop first an anthropology of action, then an active Christology. The first and second Adam are players. "Action" describes the personal being and narrative of Adam, individual and collective, through topics like finitude, time and death, freedom and evil. The Christology is formed into soteriology, for that is the action of Jesus Christ par excellence. If soteriology must end in cross and resurrection, Balthasar situates both in the world of the Trinity, the ultimate and universal agent, and in the milieu of the Church, whose continuing liturgy is sacramental drama. The paschal mystery, Eucharist, and the community of saints lead us back to the Apocalypse.

In a heading which recalls what may be the ultimate theme of the New Testament but which often eludes Christian notice, a theology of history is arranged around "The Slaughter of the Logos." Jesus' person is the stage of contradictory forces: they call and scandalize, they bring love and provoke evil. This unwisdom of the Christ (1 Cor 1:1 ff.) is both the script and the provisional finale of theodrama as we perceive God's plan through faith. Not the beginning nor the final act but the middle scenes belong to the Church, for through its polarities, changes, and traditions grace endures through history.

The activity of the drama is far from ended. Although, as with all great stories and plays, the outcome can now be predicted, just how Balthasar plots the last act, the "Finale," remains to be disclosed in the final volume.

As their author takes pains to repeat, these systems are not about aesthetics or theater, not histories of Christian motifs in the fine arts (although an encyclopedia of culture adorns their scaffolding); they are perspectives, stances, rethinkings of the reality of Christianity.

Two admirable qualities stand out in particular: the wealth of insights

brought from so many areas of the humanities to illumine Christian belief, and the original concept of the systems themselves. At times the reader feels a haste in composition or is annoyed at a repetition of entire sections (a problem with systems which Aquinas observed in the prologue to his *Summa theologiae*) and a plethora of hints left floating, undeveloped.

These books are, first and foremost, system. They are not, however, as all-encompassing as a reader might initially believe. Their sources are almost exclusively European, largely German. Shaw, O'Neill, Pinter—the pathos of British and American theater is not prominent. As an exploration of what is basically good in human life before the revealing Word, theodrama claims to be a fundamental ethics. Whether Anglo-Saxon and American ethicists would see life as a drama between cosmic forces of good and evil, a drama capable of resolution in heroic but clear choices, is questionable.

System is synthesis. Because of Balthasar's studious respect for the Bible, *Theodramatik* comes close to being a theology of the New Testament. The artist's cartoons of figures are filled in with colors and images from Scripture. These books may well be a stimulus to thinking biblically about life, though exegetes may question a facile, rapid use of Scripture. At times we are being offered not the New Testament unfolded but a very high level of spiritual reading.

Balthasar's originality lies in structure more than in content. As long as he is unfolding for us approaches leading to Christ, propaedeutical questions drawn from religion, culture, and metaphysics (Paul Tillich's questions, Justin Martyr's *logoi spermatikoi*), the Swiss theologian's creativity seldom flags. The core of Christian revelation, however, is rarely reached. We have not a new theology of grace in history but new arrangements of biblical and theological insights, phrases, and motifs. Some Barthian fear keeps Balthasar at a distance from the temple precincts of revelation, from the incarnate Logos and his testimony in Scripture; these can be illumined but not essentially re-presented. Hence the occasional anxious dismissals of Rahner and Teilhard de Chardin. Like Barth, Balthasar seems to identify a Christocentric theology with orthodoxy, even as the reader wonders if the ultimate theme of theodrama is not the story of Jesus but the play written by God's action in freely-offered presence amid lives of transcendental openness and sin.

Christianity as a work of art in Christ who is God's *doxa*, human life as a theater of evil and grace in players and Player—in the last analysis, Balthasar has given us in his systems works of art. Despite weaknesses that lie within these thousands of pages, the greatness of the vision shines through the form. The structure is the message.

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