

Cambridge University Press

0521891477 - The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs Von Balthasar

Edited by Edward T. Oakes and David Moss

Excerpt

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1 Introduction

DAVID MOSS, EDWARD T. OAKES

At least among professional theologians, Hans Urs von Balthasar tends to perplex more than he manages to inspire. To be sure, he can inspire. For example, the journal he founded, *Communio*, now appears in twelve languages (including Arabic). But subscribers never exceed the number – itself already quite small – usual for most other professional theological journals. More to the point, few Catholic departments of theology in Europe or North America consider it essential to have a Balthasarian expert on their respective faculties (a similar attitude towards liberation theology, transcendental Thomism, or feminist theology, by comparison, would seem vaguely revanchist).

To some extent, however, this situation has begun to change. In fact, this volume in the *Cambridge Companion* series testifies to what seems to be an incipient sea change in attitudes towards this unusually productive, subtle, and complex theologian.¹ For that reason, the editors wish to stress that this collection of essays by a wide array of scholars wishes not so much to inspire as to address the perplexity that seems to be an inherent part of everyone's reaction to Balthasar's thought. We make no claim to have *resolved* the perplexity that so many readers feel upon encountering his theology for the first (or even umpteenth) time. Perhaps, after all, *perplexity* is but the reader's inevitable response to an author's *complexity*. Thus, all that the following chapters can realistically hope to accomplish is to *address* that perplexity through a careful exposition and critique of his complex thought.

The scholars who so generously volunteered to contribute to this volume – a task that cannot have been easy – come from a variety of denominational affiliations (Anglican, Catholic, Methodist), areas of expertise (ecumenism, literary theory, historical theology, feminism, patristics, systematic theology), and convictions about the value of Balthasar's work (from mostly appreciative to mostly critical). Contributors come roughly equally from Great Britain and the United States and include men and women, lay scholars and clergy.

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One reason for Balthasar's relative isolation – perhaps even alienation – from the guild of professional theologians is that he does not come out of, or represent, a *prior* school of thought. Except, of course, his own. But that is just the point: liberation theology, transcendental Thomism, feminist theology, the religion–science dialogue – all of these were born from, and grew up out of, large social forces; they react to trends, internal or external, that will not disappear for a long time to come. But Balthasar has more or less single-handedly heaved up a huge mountain range of theology, one that perhaps cannot be ignored as if it did not exist but certainly can be dismissed as *sui generis* and personally idiosyncratic. What is worse (at least for his interpreters), his positions cannot be easily categorized. Neither liberal nor conservative as these shopworn terms are normally understood, his theology is in fact extraordinarily subtle and learned, so much so that it not only cannot be aligned with any contemporary trend, but even sits uneasily inside *any* school of thought in the history of theology. Although Balthasar has frequently been compared to the Church Fathers (no surprise there, given the contributions he has made to patristic scholarship), he is in fact quite critical of the Platonic assumptions that govern early Christian thought. He is certainly no scholastic either and made no secret of his fury at the 'sawdust Thomism' in which he was schooled in his days as a Jesuit seminarian; yet he wrote an important monograph on St Thomas's theology of ecclesial charisms,² and his remarks on Aquinas in the volume on premodern metaphysics in the fourth volume of *The Glory of the Lord* are almost entirely positive.

One can thus readily imagine why it has taken so long for Balthasar to 'catch on' and to receive the kind of critical appropriation and assessment that he deserves (and, as the editors so fondly hope, that he receives here). It is normally the practice in volumes of this kind for the editors to give a 'preview of coming attractions' by providing an overview of the chapters to follow and fitting them into the purpose of the volume in question. In this case, however, the editors feel that the list of contents and the chapters to which it refers can speak for themselves. But since none of the chapters treats of the key moments in his life, and because Balthasar's isolation from the world of professional theology has certain roots in the accidents of his life's history, it seemed best to the editors that this introduction provide at least the bare outlines of his biography.

Born in Lucerne, Switzerland, on 12 August 1905 of an upper-middle-class family of noble stock (hence the *von* in his name), he quickly developed his precocious talents in music and literature at a Benedictine *Gymnasium* in Switzerland (he later transferred to a Jesuit *Gymnasium*, where he noticed a certain poverty of musical appreciation and training in the Jesuit *ratio*

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studiorum in comparison to the Benedictine curriculum³). Although to some extent his life might seem as uneventful as Immanuel Kant's,⁴ he certainly lived through tumultuous times, and that tumult affected his family deeply, as his cousin, Peter Henrici, so vividly described:

He came from an old patrician family in Lucerne which had given his hometown army officers, statesmen, scholars, and churchmen – abbots and abbesses, canons, and a Jesuit provincial of Mexico. His father, Oscar Ludwig Carl Balthasar (1872–1946), was the canton *Baumeister*, responsible, among other things, for the St Karli Kirche, one of Switzerland's pioneering modern church buildings. Through his mother, *née* Gabrielle Piezcker (d. 1929), cofoundress and first general secretary of the Swiss League of Catholic Women, he was related to the Hungarian martyr-bishop, Apóron von Győr, who was shot by Russian soldiers in 1944 for harboring some women refugees in his house. His younger brother Dieter served as an officer in the Swiss Guard. His sister Renée (1908–1986) was Superior General, from 1971 to 1983, of the Franciscan Sisters of Sainte Marie des Anges. He spent much of his childhood at the Pension Felsberg run by his grandmother, where cosmopolitan attitudes and trilingualism (German, French, English) were taken for granted . . . As Balthasar himself has testified, his childhood and youth were pervaded by music, for which he had quite an extraordinary talent.⁵

But music was not to be his destiny, for he entered the doctoral programme in *Germanistik* (an interdisciplinary field of German studies, encompassing both literary and philosophical approaches to the canonical German authors) at the University of Zurich. Shortly before he graduated, he made a retreat in the Black Forest under a Jesuit renowned for his fervour and preaching skills and heard a call from God (that came to him, he said, like a bolt of lightning) to join the Jesuit Order and become a Catholic priest. His time in the Society of Jesus, however, was not particularly happy. The training he received in the Jesuits is what dismayed him the most, and the way he once described it speaks volumes about the kind of isolation that would later mark his whole life:

My entire period of study in the Society of Jesus was a grim struggle with the dreariness of theology, with what men had made out of the glory of revelation. I could not endure this presentation of the Word of God and wanted to lash out with the fury of a Samson: I felt like tearing down, with Samson's own strength, the whole temple and burying myself beneath the rubble. But it was like this because,

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despite my sense of vocation, I wanted to carry out my own plans, and was living in a state of unbounded indignation. I told almost no one about this. [My teacher at the time, Erich] Przywara understood everything; [to him] I did not have to say anything. Otherwise there was no one who could understand me.⁶

These remarkable lines refer to Balthasar's time studying the prescribed manual Thomism during the philosophy part of his training in Pullach (near Munich). Things marginally improved when the time came to study theology in Fourvière (near Lyons, France), for there he met the great patristic scholar, the famous French Jesuit Henri de Lubac, under whose tuition he went on to write important monographs on Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor, and Origen, among others. But to judge from his literary output at the time, his heart still seemed set more on literature, for he spent most of his time reading and translating into German the great figures of contemporary French literature, such as Paul Claudel, Charles Péguy, Georges Bernanos, and Paul Valéry.

After his ordination to the priesthood on 26 July 1936, he was assigned to the distinguished Jesuit monthly *Stimmen der Zeit*, headquartered in Munich near Ludwigstrasse, where 'the boots of the SS sounded ever more loudly . . . and no ear could escape the loudspeakers set up everywhere in the city' (*MW*, 13). As a Swiss citizen, Balthasar could leave Germany without travail, and his superiors gave him the choice of becoming a professor of theology at the Pontifical Jesuit University in Rome, the famous Gregorian University, or of assuming a position as student chaplain at the University of Basle. Given his alienation from the desiccated theology of his day, we are not surprised that he chose direct pastoral work. 'Fresh student life brought new life into unrealistic theoretical knowledge' (*MW*, 13), he said of that assignment; and for the first time he seemed happy and content with the life he had chosen.

Then he met the twice-married Protestant physician, Adrienne von Speyr, who converted to Catholicism under his auspices and who was the recipient, almost upon their first encounter, of mystical graces so intense that it eventually prompted him, under her encouragement, to leave the Society of Jesus in order to found a 'secular institute', a kind of religious order for lay people, without the external trappings of a habit or life in common. (It was the inability of the Jesuit Order to allow one of its own members, working under obedience to Jesuit superiors, to direct a totally different canonical entity without interference that eventually, after a ten-year negotiation, forced Balthasar out of the Jesuits.) There can be no doubt that it was this encounter with Dr von Speyr, more than any other event

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in his life, that led to Balthasar's isolation from the wider guild of professional theologians. Not only must one accept his claims about the graces she received (on his account graces not seen since Teresa of Avila); but more to the point one must come to terms with his insistence that his own theology is *directly* derived from hers: '[I want] to prevent any attempt being made after my death', he said shortly before he died, 'to separate my work from that of Adrienne von Speyr. [This] is not in the least possible, either theologically or in regard to the secular institute now underway' (*OT*, 13; translation altered for context).

One of the major apostolates of this institute, whose official name is *Johannesgemeinschaft* (the Community of St John), was its own publishing firm, the now famous *Johannes Verlag* (St John's Press), whose early books included such epochal 'liberal' books as Hans Küng's dissertation *Justification* (an attempt to reconcile Karl Barth's teaching on justification with that of the Council of Trent), Karl Rahner's manifesto *Free Speech in the Church* (an appeal that theologians be given more room for manoeuvre by freeing them of the fear of constantly being delated to Rome for heresy), and Balthasar's own *Razing the Ramparts* (an attack on the 'fortress mentality' of the Catholic Church in the wake of the Modernist crisis when Pope Pius X condemned all forms of historical criticism of the Bible and any attempt to find correlates in human experience to the data of revelation).

But perhaps most inflammatory of all was Balthasar's book on Karl Barth, which had the misfortune of hitting the bookshops a year after Pius XII issued his encyclical *Humani Generis* on 12 August 1950, which condemned Balthasar's teachers in France and insisted that all theologians maintain the teachings of the First Vatican Council that the existence of God can be proved by reason. In his Barth book, Balthasar had tried to meet Barth's critique of natural theology at least halfway by holding that, while Vatican I might be theoretically right that the existence of God can be proved, it had said nothing about those proofs actually out there for the testing – all of which, Balthasar allowed, in a concession clearly designed to effect a *rapprochement* with Barth, had been devised by postlapsarian man, whose reason was infected by original sin.

No wonder, then, that Rome grew suspicious, even to the point of opening a *miramur* file on him in the Holy Office. No wonder, too, that after leaving the Society of Jesus Balthasar could find no bishop to incardinate him.⁷ And no wonder, finally, that none of the Swiss bishops invited him to join them as a *peritus* (expert theological consultant) when Pope John XXIII convoked the Second Vatican Council, the most important religious event of the twentieth century.

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The great irony in all this, of course, is that the Council represented the complete vindication of all that he was struggling for during his 'wilder-ness years' as a Jesuit and later as a rootless secular priest. Finally, just as Balthasar had long been hoping for, the most authoritative teaching body of the Catholic Church was solemnly calling for a dismantling of the bastions of a fortress Church. Moreover, that same Council appealed to the Church Fathers as a collective fount of wisdom and opened itself to the very world of non-Christian and secular learning that he himself had spent a lifetime trying to master. But as everyone knows, that is not how things turned out: soon after the conclusion of the Council, Balthasar grew anxious about various trends that were being justified in its name, and he threw all his energies into openly opposing the majority trend in theology, especially as advocated in the pages of the international journal *Concilium*, which he cheekily countered with his own anti-accommodationist periodical, the journal *Communio*.

The upshot of all this can easily be imagined. In Hans Urs von Balthasar we encounter a man teeming with paradoxes: working in isolation, yet the founder of an entirely new school of theology; under suspicion first in Rome and then by his own national bishops, yet now regarded with almost equal suspicion, even hostility, by many professional theologians in the wake of Vatican II; the spiritual director of a woman whose story even Balthasar enthusiasts find unsettling, yet whose own theology is not so much mystical in the manner of St John of the Cross as it is 'aesthetic' and literary. In short, the man cannot be categorized, which is itself probably part of his isolation: what is not familiar and easily pigeonholed must perforce be ignored.

The editors wish to stress again that this volume makes no attempt to resolve these paradoxes or to force this elusive and subtle theologian into some preconceived category of either right or left, traditional or progressive, Platonist or Aristotelian, patristic or modern. Balthasar has treated almost every single theme that comes under the purview of systematic theology, and St Paul's manifesto, 'I capture every thought to make it obedient to Christ' (2 Corinthians 10:5) could well serve as Balthasar's motto too. Each author in the succeeding pages seeks first and above all to come to terms with Balthasar's position on these matters and then to wrestle with his views – with varying degrees of critical appreciation. But given what was said above, it will not surprise the reader of this introduction that certain motifs arise again and again.

Perhaps the most important motif to note in the course of reading this book is the feature of Balthasar's theology that must surely be the oddest of all: as many authors explicitly, and nearly all implicitly, show, Balthasar is that most peculiar of theologians – one who is both intensely *traditional*

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(perhaps the most traditional of all twentieth-century theologians) and yet also astonishingly, startlingly *idiosyncratic*. Such a combination certainly makes for fascinating reading. If this *Companion* can convey at least a little of that fascination, it will have served its purpose.

Notes

- 1 Nor is this volume the only indicator, for books and monographs on Balthasar's theology are starting to appear with some regularity. In a perceptive notice of a recent book on Balthasar's ethics, one reviewer noted that the book under review 'in some ways signals the long-deferred mainstreaming of Balthasar among English-speaking theologians, his liberation from the ghetto of antimodernism or conservatism where some writers had interred him. As such, it offers hope that Catholic theology is moving beyond the misleading categories of liberal and conservative'; Fredrick Christian Bauerschmidt, review of Christopher Steck's *The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Crossroad, 2001) in *The Thomist* 67/3 (July, 2003): 494–7; here 494.
- 2 *Thomas von Aquin: Besondere Gnadengaben und die zwei Wege menschlichen Lebens. Kommentar zur Summa Theologica II/II qq. 171–182*. Deutsche Thomas-Ausgabe, volume xxiii (Heidelberg: F. H. Kerle; Graz, Vienna, and Salzburg: A. Pustet, 1954), pp. 252–464.
- 3 To put it mildly. By Balthasar's account, things seemed pretty grim under Jesuit tutelage: '[In my youth] I spent endless hours on the piano; then at Engelberg [the Benedictine establishment] I had the opportunity of taking part in orchestral Masses and operas. When some friends and I transferred to Feldkirch [the Jesuit school] for the last two and a half years of my secondary education, we found the music department there so noisy that we lost the inclination to play' (*OT*, 36).
- 4 Tellingly, the only biography so far written of his life, the Italian Elio Guerriero's *Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Milan: Edizione Paoline, 1991; German translation Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1993), had to content itself with mostly recounting Balthasar's books in chronological order. Only when scholars are allowed access to the archives of the Jesuit Order in Rome covering the years from 1940 to 1950, when Balthasar was attempting both to stay in the Order and to found and direct a 'secular institute' (a kind of 'religious order' for the lay state) with Adrienne von Speyr, and when the archives of the Swiss diocese of Chur are also opened covering the years 1950–56, when Balthasar was seeking incardination as a secular priest, can a critical biography be written.
- 5 Peter Henrici, SJ, 'Hans Urs von Balthasar: a Sketch of His Life', *Communio: International Catholic Review* 16/3 (fall, 1989): 306–50; here 307–8. One sign of his musical gifts can be gleaned from the frequently recounted anecdote that when he had to move into a new house in Basle in 1967, he left behind the scores to all of Mozart's music: they were unnecessary to him, as he already knew them all by heart.
- 6 Characteristically, these remarks are made almost in passing in the course of the introduction that Balthasar wrote to Adrienne von Speyr's journals recounting her mystical endurances (mystical 'flights' would hardly be the term to do justice to what she underwent) in *Erde und Himmel: Ein Tagebuch*. Part II: *Die Zeit der grossen Diktate* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1975).

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- 7 In canon law a priest who belongs to a religious order and who leaves that order must first be recognized by a bishop and, canonically if not geographically, be incorporated ('incardinated') in that bishop's diocese. Without such incardination, the priest is forbidden to say Mass in public, preach, or hear confessions. From 1950 to 1956 (when the bishop of Chur incardinated him), Balthasar was just such a sacerdotal Ishmael. These years were a time of real poverty for him.

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Part I

Theological topics

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2 Revelation

LARRY CHAPP

REASON, REVELATION, AND THE LIBERAL PROJECT

It must be admitted that ‘revelation’ as a theological topic is not without ambiguity. The very definition of revelation is in dispute, with critics pointing to its rather vague delineation as a separate topic of theological discourse well into the medieval period. Rather than getting bogged down in these sorts of questions, however, perhaps the best place to begin a treatment of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s theology of revelation would be with his most basic assertion: in revelation we have a sovereign divine action *pro nobis* that makes God known to his creatures in a manner that they can apprehend (*LA*, 7–8). It is God who speaks in revelation and it is humanity who listens and responds. Even if it must be admitted that divine revelation makes use of worldly forms and words, these structures are ‘taken up’ into an essentially divine act and given a new context within a divinely constructed ‘form’ (*Gestalt*). For Balthasar, revelation is not a species of a much broader genus that can be loosely called ‘religious manifestations’ or ‘divine epiphanies’. In Christ we have an utterly unique event without parallel that judges all human expectations rather than being judged and tamed by them. There are definite affinities with Barth here in Balthasar’s insistence that revelation carries within itself its own theological warrant, its own self-authenticating, ‘engracing’ logic. Balthasar does not deny that there is a role for analogy, philosophy, and ‘natural theology’. However, the issue is whether anthropology and/or cosmology will be allowed to govern christology, rather than the reverse. And on that issue he is consistently, even rigorously clear: Balthasar will reject any systematic approach that attempts to locate the significance of revelation within an overarching ideological scheme of some kind, especially when the attempt is made reductively to ‘explain’ revelation as an outcropping or even as an epiphenomenon of various anthropological capacities or cosmological processes. Thus, *Christian* natural theology must be viewed as an *a posteriori* attempt to think about the implications of a revelation already given, and