

DEVELOPING GROUPS

THEOLOGY AND ECOLOGY

Topic: Theology and Ecology in Dialogue:
Balthasar and Ecological Identity
Conveners: James Schaefer, Marquette University
Peter Ellard, Siena College
Moderator: Aurelie Hagstrom, Providence College
Presenter: Connie Lasher, St. Joseph's College of Maine
Respondent: Terence Nichols, University of St. Thomas

This session explored aspects of Hans Urs von Balthasar's work in its contribution to theology's dialogue with ecology. In a paper entitled "Theological Anthropology and Ecological Identity: The Dialogical Contribution of Hans Urs von Balthasar," Connie Lasher examined Balthasar's engagement with Goethe and Heidegger, whose legacies have figured prominently in the history of contemporary environmental thought.

The paper first examined Balthasar's 'dialogue' with Goethe and Heidegger as found in volume five of *The Glory of the Lord (The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age)*. Balthasar's reading of the history of transcendental aesthetics displays, as its central hermeneutical feature, his "dialogical" understanding of the *analogia entis*, and its gradual displacement by modernity's inherently "monological" *identitas entis*. Goethe is lauded by Balthasar in his refusal to yield to romantic-idealist forms of identity thinking and his rejection of modern subjectivity's Promethean trajectory, including the mechanistic-reductionist tendencies of scientific methodology—all of which, according to Balthasar and Goethe, perpetuate an anthropocentric domination of nature. Lasher argued that Goethe's commitment to the philosophical concept of polarity and reverent objectivity before the expressive forms of nature presents a "natural" counterpart to Balthasar's use of analogy and his "kneeling theology." In similar vein, Balthasar commends Heidegger's attempt to overcome forgetfulness of Being, thereby exhibiting convergences with deep ecology's appropriation of the latter in its understanding of the human relation to nonhuman nature. However, according to Balthasar, Heidegger's thought does not penetrate beyond an *identitas entis*, and thus leaves unresolved certain aporiai which, Lasher noted, contemporary environmental philosophy also recognizes.

The content of Balthasar's contribution was then outlined in terms of its "Goethean" and "Heideggerian" axes. Balthasar calls for a Christian renewal of metaphysics which builds upon Heidegger's legacy while overcoming problems

which the latter's rendering of the ontological difference presents. Balthasar's "fourfold distinction" couches the mystery of difference between self and other, the ontological difference, and the 'real distinction' within the *analogia entis* and the God-world relation as ultimately the sole guarantor of the positivity of otherness, existence-as-gift, and thus the integrity of finite form. His analysis is, in short, an *apologia* for wonder before the mystery of finitude and the experience of nature's beauty. Lasher presented aspects of the "Goethean axis" of Balthasar's contribution as found in *Theo-Logic I (The Truth of the World)* wherein Balthasar upholds the integral significance of expressive form in the particular entities of nonhuman nature, in relation to which the human must recover a posture of receptive openness. Balthasar's analysis explores ascending "degrees of interiority" in nonhuman nature, an analogous intersubjectivity which demands of the human "service" and "reverence"; he calls for a recovery of "formation" (*Bildung*) in learning to read the forms of nonhuman nature and insists that these serve as an indispensable *praeparatio* for God's revelation in Christ. Within the pathos of the postmodern context, Balthasar asserts "the witness borne by Being becomes untrustworthy for the person who can no longer read the language of beauty." Thus, Lasher argued, his theological aesthetics and renewal of metaphysics contribute not only to a Catholic recovery of ecological identity, but also constitute its mandate within the context of the new evangelization.

Terence Nichols's response commended Lasher's efforts to bring Balthasar into dialogue with contemporary environmental/ecological thought. He noted especially Balthasar's recovery of the centrality of wonder, renewal of a metaphysics of wholeness, and the "objective" methodological orientation of his theological aesthetics. Nichols queried Balthasar's reading of Aquinas vis-à-vis the analogy of Being, in which the former's characterization seems to imply a kind of "readiness" or potency with regard to the *actus essendi*. He also pointed to the need for a theological aesthetics to provide an adequate account of destruction and extinction in nature, and not solely its beauty. Nichols noted the potential difficulty in reconciling (1) Balthasar's notion of truth with the regnant scientific-model epistemology, and (2) the "Goethean" centrality of *form* vis-à-vis contemporary biology. Nichols concluded that Balthasar's contribution is ultimately complementary to, and not conflicting with, the scientific enterprise.

The ensuing discussion highlighted, *inter alia*, theological and epistemological bases of Balthasar's understanding of *form*, and his recovery of a post-Heideggerian account of wonder apropos a contemporary technocratic cultural milieu. Balthasar's notion of analogous intersubjectivity raises the question, and possibility, of applying "analogously" to nonhuman nature central themes of his anthropology.

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