

GOD/TRINITY—TOPIC SESSION

- Topics: Balthasar and Rahner on Trinity and Grace in Art, and A Trinitarian Resolution of the Nature-Grace Debates
Convener: Karl Hefty, Saint Paul University
Moderator: Elizabeth Groppe, University of Dayton
Presenters: Jennifer Newsome Martin, University of Notre Dame
Peter Joseph Fritz, College of the Holy Cross
Neil Ormerod, Australian Catholic University

Jennifer Martin and Peter Fritz opened the session with a joint presentation entitled “Balthasar and Rahner on Trinity and Grace in the (Art) World.” In different ways, both speakers intimate a desire to move beyond caricatured readings of Balthasar and Rahner toward irenic, but critical, approaches that foster productive dialogue, whether on points of agreement or disagreement. Starting with Balthasar, Martin asks whether and how far his theological aesthetics might admit or even embrace certain modes of modern or contemporary art. Drawing from the range of Balthasar’s work, she finds a strong argument that his approach is amenable to non-figural modern art, such as Abstract Expressionism, but she is more guarded about certain forms of contemporary art that deny or refuse beauty’s revelatory capacity (perhaps Koons, Warhol, Duchamp, et al.). Setting Balthasar in dialogue with Kandinsky, Condon, Newman, Pollack, and Rothko, Martin argues that his trinitarian emphasis on the plurality of being as symbolic and self-expressive, on the persistence, irreducibility, and positivity of mystery, and on the kenotic theology of Holy Saturday, all point toward to the possibility of divine disclosure in unexpected places, in hiddenness, silence, vulnerability, and abjection. Balthasar is clear: Theological aesthetics must also come to terms with the ugly, the fragmented, and the demonic, or it is only an aestheticism.

Peter Fritz then identified the ingredients of a theological aesthetic in Rahner, albeit one that features “reduced transcendentals,” and God’s own self-reduction to sense perception. If Balthasar and Rahner agree that God’s free revelation involves a gift to another that conditions a free response, they disagree about the form such a free response can take. Where Balthasar requires complete openness and full obedience, admitting no possibility of anticipation, Rahner places a strong emphasis on an individuality that is founded on the divine call. These distinctions of emphasis entail aesthetic differences. Rahner is less interested in the extraordinary (mysticism, martyrdom, etc.) than in the economic deployment of trinitarian love in everyday life. In the world’s mess, beauty can register as an uncanny sublime, where banality is sometimes transformed (Tara Donovan); the good may be deflected by concupiscence and sin, where decency often conceals indecency, or freedom slavery (Kara Walker); and truth apprehended bodily may remain incomplete, tenuous, and irreducibly plural (Bruce Nauman). Contemporary art thus proves to be locus of theology, where such “reduced transcendentals” may be expressed, interrogated, and further developed.

In “A Trinitarian Resolution of the Grace-Nature Debate: Lonergan and the Trinitarian Relations,” Neil Ormerod argues that Henri de Lubac, Lawrence Feingold, and Stephen A. Long neglect to situate the nature-grace problematic in a trinitarian perspective, and thus neglect the properly theological dimension of the nature-grace relationship. Building upon Rahner’s claim that only a trinitarian God can be self-communicating, Ormerod turns to Bernard Lonergan for properly trinitarian approach

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to the mystery of the supernatural. He argues that, unlike formal ontology or theories of the supernatural in general, a trinitarian perspective helps us to resolve disputes about whether God is a natural or a supernatural end, for the natural relation to the Creator is not the only relation with God human persons may entertain. Drawing from Lonergan's essay, "Mission and the Spirit," Ormerod shows that we may also participate in the four inner trinitarian relations (paternity, filiation, active spiration, passive spiration). In any of these participations, the creature enters into a relation to a finality that is gratuitous, supernatural, and beyond the human creaturely capacity. Nevertheless, Ormerod also finds a certain fittingness in Lonergan's proposal that a complete and final supernatural fulfillment would be a relation to God as Father, as the source of all (including the Son and the Spirit), and the end to which they return.

In discussion, audience members broadly embraced the approaches of Martin and Fritz vis-à-vis Balthasar and Rahner, acknowledged that the caricatured receptions of Rahner and Balthasar do not do justice to their thought, and expressed the need for further thinking in these admittedly-debated areas. Other questioners wondered what sorts of art can be viably discussed or dismissed by the proposed rubrics (e.g., would Carl Andre's minimalist art be admitted)? Do certain philosophical discourses (e.g., deconstruction) require a critical resistance from theological aesthetics? In response to Ormerod's presentation, which was also favorably received, one questioner wondered whether de Lubac's use of formal ontology was not a function of its role in the reception of Aquinas that de Lubac was refuting. Ormerod acknowledged this but claimed that de Lubac never worked the issue out in a strongly trinitarian way. Another questioner sought further elaboration on the proposed trinitarian account of the beatific vision. Ormerod granted that these considerations were structural and heuristic and require further phenomenological elaboration with respect to how they may be experienced by the blessed.

KARL HEFTY
Saint Paul University
Ottawa, Ontario