

HANS URS VON BALTHASAR CONSULTATION

Topic:	Reading the Poetic and Dramatic: Hans Urs von Balthasar in Theological Conversation with Hinduism
Conveners:	Barbara Sain, University of St. Thomas Nicholas J. Healy, John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family Peter Casarella, DePaul University
Moderator:	Barbara Sain, University of St. Thomas
Presenter:	Francis X. Clooney, S.J., Harvard Divinity School
Respondents:	Edward T. Ulrich, University of St. Thomas Martin Bieler, University of Berne

In his presentation, Francis X. Clooney, S.J. presented portions of his current book project, *His Hiding Place is Darkness*, a study of the Song of Songs as explicated by St. Bernard of Clairvaux and his successors, with particular attention to the drama of the woman in search of her absent beloved. The book's distinguishing comparative feature is to read this material alongside the Tiruvaymoli (Holy Word of Mouth) of the ninth-century Indian Hindu mystic, Shatakopan, this poetry too being read in accord with its traditional Hindu interpreters. Such reading, Clooney proposed, opens up not only dimensions of the spiritual ascent to God but also a new poetic and dramatic way of learning across religious boundaries, as the two bodies of poetry and interpretation interact in ways not reducible to the standard (liberal or conservative) theologies of religions nor narrowly burdened with a sense of irreconcilable truth claims. For this presentation, Clooney described how the grand project of Hans Urs von Balthasar's Trilogie has provided him with a sufficiently capacious and generous vision of theology as poetic (attentive to the beautiful) and dramatic (attentive to the good) as well as logical and truth-seeking. Given the rich complexities of the Biblical and Hindu mystical poetry, Clooney argued, only a vision as grand as von Balthasar's can "bear the weight" of the comparative reading, without sliding into relativism or retreating into exclusivism.

The first response was provided by Edward Ulrich, who began by setting Clooney's scholarship in the broader context of interreligious dialogue. Of particular interest in this current project is the way Clooney brings his study of the poetic back into the task of Christian theology, because that is where he finds von Balthasar's work helpful. Ulrich devoted a section of his response to aspects of von Balthasar's thought that can be fruitful for comparative theology. Although von Balthasar is known for emphasizing Christian particularity, his appreciation for ancient Greek culture reveals a thinker who "in a certain way was open to the non-Christian world in an unparalleled way." This interest in the particular, which is common to von Balthasar's work and Clooney's comparative theology may prove quite fruitful.

In the final section of his response, Ulrich noted that Clooney offers "tools for thinking about the presence of God in other religions" rather than a developed theory of how God might work through various religions. He also points out, as constructive criticism, that for all Clooney's emphasis on the particular in his study of the Song of Songs and the Tiruvaymoli, the Tiruvaymoli does not have a noticeable influence on his discussion of von Balthasar. As Clooney begins to shift from the poetic and dramatic into the theological, the particulars of his careful comparative study play a diminished role.

A second response was provided by Martin Bieler, who began by considering how Clooney situates the poetic and dramatic within von Balthasar's thought as a whole. According to Bieler, Clooney's association of the three parts of von Balthasar's trilogy with poetry, drama, and theology echoes the Hegelian categories of poetic, dramatic, and epic and does not do justice to the overall vision of the trilogy, which is grounded in beauty, goodness, and truth as transcendental qualities of being. If the poetic and dramatic are contrasted with the theological in von Balthasar's thought and the theological is understood to lack dynamism or openness to the new, then the essence of von Balthasar's dramatic theology has been missed. Bieler distinguished himself on this point from Ben Quash, whose work Clooney cites. According to Bieler, if theology (done well) carries the richness of the poetic and dramatic within it and is not prone to rigidity, then it need not be left aside when interreligious dialogue begins.

Bieler addressed the categories of searching, Spirit, and silence: ideas from von Balthasar's work that Clooney uses to begin developing a theological approach sensitive to the poetic and dramatic. In addition to what von Balthasar says about the human search for God, Bieler pointed out, his theology of God contains elements analogous to human searching. We seek because we have already been found by the one for whom we search. Bieler agreed with Clooney that von Balthasar's understanding of the relation of the Son and the Spirit contains interesting insights for interreligious dialogue, where discussion of the Spirit plays a crucial role. He closed this section by emphasizing the unity of silence and word in von Balthasar's theology. Silence can be an appropriate response when words seem to fail, but silence need not be only a loss of words. "In every qualified word there is silence, and in every qualified silence there is a word."

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