

THE THEOLOGY OF HANS URS VON BALTHASAR

The workshop started with a paper by Roch Kereszty on *The Relationship between Christ, Church and Israel in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*. While using Balthasar's major works, Kereszty focused on two of Balthasar's essays which deal explicitly with this theme: 1. *Eisame Zweisprache*, a dialogue with Martin Buber, the most important Jewish theologian-philosopher of the twentieth century (ET: *Martin Buber and Christianity* [New York: Macmillan, 1962]); 2. "Bruder Jude" in *Wer ist die Kirche?*, 137-45 (Freiburg: Herder, 1965) (ET: "Church and Israel" in *Church and World* [New York: Herder, 1967] 166-76).

Martin Buber and Christianity was published before Vatican II when Catholic-Jewish dialogue was virtually nonexistent. Yet, even from the perspective of forty years it provides fresh insights for the Jewish-Christian dialogue.

In "The Church and Israel" the biblical foundations for Balthasar's understanding of the dialectic relationship between Israel and the Church are outlined in a highly condensed exegesis of Romans 9-11. Balthasar's conclusions have a twofold significance: they make the Christian claim more understandable if not attractive for a Jewish believer, while at the same time they also serve to rejuvenate Catholic theology itself.

The average Christian view, as Balthasar sees it, had made any dialogue with the Jews for two thousand years totally irrelevant.

According to Balthasar, such a negative attitude could have developed only by forgetting "the dazzling light that falls on Israel from the 11th chapter of the Epistle to the Romans." A careful rereading of Romans 9-11 makes clear that there are weighty theological grounds for a dialogue with Israel. According to Paul, the ultimate goal of Israel's historical election was to form the Church consisting of Jews and Gentiles, the eschatological "Israel of God." However, the Gentiles, inserted as "wild olive branches 'against nature'" into the noble olive tree, the historical Israel, become the Church to the extent that they share in the fruitfulness or the rich sap of the root (Rom 11:17). Thus the Church can neglect her Jewish root only at her own peril, at the risk of being cut off from the root that has preceded her and keeps her alive. The extreme results of such a rupture would be a form of gnosticism, Marcionism, or even Hitlerism.

In Buber's theology Balthasar sees an authentic reappropriation of the earliest stage of Jewish faith that can help rejuvenate Catholic Christology and ecclesiology. At the same time, he intends to show that Buber's method of

reductionism, which discards the history of the Jewish Bible as deformation, does injustice to the very dynamism of God's revelation in Israel's history.

First, Kereszty summarized the enrichment which a reassertion of the Old Testament roots provides for Catholic Christology and ecclesiology, according to Balthasar.

The Jewishness of Christ is more than a mere empirical datum. It is a theological fact without which we would distort and misunderstand him. Jesus embodies the hope, the obedience, and the faith of Israel in its purest form when he announces that God's kingly rule is drawing near and when he sacrifices his life for its coming.

The Church of the Gentiles must become aware again and again that she has been inserted into "something which is older than herself," that holy root of historic Israel, "in virtue of which she is what she is."

The individual Christian must go through the stages of the same "education course" historical Israel went through in order to perceive rather than distort the mystery of Christ. The Church should always be aware that the partial hardening of Israel is temporary "until the full number of the Gentiles enters." The Church's attitude towards contemporary Israel, then, must be inspired by a religious awe and reverence deriving from her knowledge of God's plan of universal mercy.

But the dialogue should also challenge Buber (and Israel whose faith he represents). 1. If God enters into solidarity with the tragedy of his creation—as Buber maintains—then, since Buber does not accept the mystery of the Incarnation, he can explain it only by a "kabbalistic pantheism." 2. If one accepts the whole history of Israel as guided by God's providence (including her later, postexilic history, the rising of apocalyptic expectations and the period of God's silence when prophecy becomes extinct), it is hard not to see a forward movement of renewed expectations, disappointments and questioning which compels Israel to an "incomprehensible destination," the riddle of which cannot be found within her own history. However, Buber regards as decline all that took place after the period of kings. As a result, his view of the prophetic and sacramental principles reduces Israel's destiny to a purely secular task of building a just social order.

After outlining Balthasar's position, Kereszty made some further suggestions for a dialogue with Israel.

1. We Christians should support and rekindle, when needed, Israel's own faith in the providential guidance of her *whole* history and, consequently, in the sacred, revelatory character of the whole Jewish Bible including the apocalyptic writings. Our primary task should consist in confirming the eschatological hope of Israel, beyond that of a reductionist existential eschatology or that of mere secular progress, emphasizing trust in God whose creative mercy transcends the potential of our history. In this way we, Christians and Jews, can already be united in an analogous hope.

2. Buber's own acceptance of man and woman as the created image of God and his own philosophy of the I-Thou relationship could provide further grounds for a dialogue. Buber himself acknowledges that when the *I* says *Thou* he does not mean a limited, restricted object. Every *Thou* and especially a personal *Thou* is perceived as boundless and "fills the heavens." "In each *Thou* we address the eternal *Thou*." If any human being may become the revelation of the Eternal Thou, why can God not choose one particular concrete human being who recapitulates in himself the whole existence and history of Israel and in whom his glory is revealed in the fullest way?

3. Another line of thought that could make the hypostatic union for the Jewish soul more intelligible is to see it as the ultimate expression of God's solidarity with suffering mankind. On the one hand, this absolute solidarity would not be possible if God himself had not become the subject of a full human experience including suffering and death. On the other hand, the hypostatic union does not degrade God to an idol, since God is not identified with the finite dimensions of the human nature of Jesus.

The ensuing discussion converged on the following themes: Why did Balthasar choose Buber as a dialogue partner? How to dialogue with those Jews who take more seriously the observances of the Torah than Buber does? Is Balthasar's contention about the Jewish tendency to reduce eschatology to secular progress true?

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