HANS URS VON BALTHASAR SOCIETY

EDWARD OAKES' *PATTERN OF REDEMPTION*

Presenter: Edward T. Oakes
Respondent: Mark A. McIntosh

Most theologians agree that their discipline is a "second-order" activity, meaning a subsequent, reasoned reflection upon the prior data of faith and revelation. Oakes introduced his book by showing how Balthasar himself handles this distinction between first- and second-order activity internal to Christian faith. As it happens, Balthasar's own degree was in *Germanistik* and not theology, and so it is not surprising to learn that he draws on literary categories to explain the role of theology in relation to the life of faith.

In the first volume of the *Theodramatik*, Balthasar devotes a number of pages to a contrast between epic, lyric and dramatic modes of thought, heavily favoring the latter. The priority he gives to the *dramatic* mode is his way of emphasizing the first-order claims of faith: faith is first and foremost a doing, a response to a kerygma which demands obedience before it gives birth to thought. And this response is the drama of the soul saying "Yes" or "No" to God.

This is why Balthasar holds that the art of drama, especially when we are speaking in poetic terms, is the highest form of art, because it encompasses all other art forms. Nonetheless, Oakes took a few moments to explore the contrast between epic and lyric styles.

In the history of poetry one can notice two distinct trends that run through the course of literature: that between the civic and the private. To illustrate the difference we can cite two poets who appear in the *Odyssey*, Phemius and Demodocus. Phemius was a bard at the court of Odysseus' palace in Ithaca who was forced by Penelope's suitors to sing for them and whom Odysseus spared because of his skills (Book XIV); similarly Demodocus was a poet in the court of Nausicaa's father Alcinus who before Odysseus departs Phaecia is commanded by the king to sing for the entertainment of the court. After this performance Odysseus is himself asked to contribute to sing of his trials. Hoping to affect his audience as he himself had been moved by the songs of Demodocus, he regales his audience with vivid stories of his adventures.

Now as it happens all the poets in the *Odyssey* are of this type: either suppliants like Phemius and Odysseus or servants of the court like Demodocus, or again like Phemius. And surely Homer was a poet in this tradition as well: a bard who joined the court or campfire and sang for the community and its entertainment. These are poets who write as *citizens*, tailoring everything they write to the interests of the community.

In the *Iliad* things are quite otherwise. Here the only person who recites any poetry is Achilles: that is, when he is sitting in his tent singing of heroes and taking pleasure in his lyre, after withdrawing in anger from the society of his fellows. But note: he has no audience for his songs. Patroclus is with him in his tent, of course, but sits off to the side, waiting for his friend to finish. Achilles is the one Homeric hero who questions his obligations, is servant to no one and no one's fellow citizen; he sings for himself alone—he is the lyric poet par excellence. And his literary heirs are all poets whose first law is the law of their genius, seers who live in voluntary or psychological exile, at home only in their art. When they address an audience, it is no finite class or existing category of readers. It is either, on one hand, the universe or all mankind or things that don't listen, like mountains or skylarks.

Critics call these two traditions of poetry the civic and the vatic, from the Latin word for prophecy, itself the root of the German word *Wut* for madness. Now there is no question that as a theologian Balthasar would want his work to be considered in the civic tradition. Although he gives priority to the dramatic mode over either the epic or lyric styles ("epic" and "lyric" roughly correspond in Balthasar's terminology to what I have called the "civic" and "vatic" traditions), Balthasar recognizes that theology is a second-order reflection upon the drama of redemption, and so must be an activity that sets forth the drama of salvation in prosaic terms. Nonetheless, he would certainly see that activity as meant for the benefit of the community. Which makes all the more ironic and even poignant his isolation, an isolation that was one of the major motifs of the work.

We can see in the distinction between the civic and vatic a clue to understanding the phenomenon of Balthasar's isolation. The isolation comes from the fact that, while Balthasar wants to be a bardic theologian working on behalf of the tradition, he nonetheless sees that tradition as being at war with itself. This was the burden of chapter 6, "The Archeology of Alienated Beauty," which lays out Balthasar's analysis of that tragic "dissociation of sensibility" that has virtually insured that *any* theologian attuned to the beauty of revelation will feel alienated from the official theology of the schools and from the guild of theologians.

This thesis is the single most striking feature of Balthasar's thought that has put into my mind the contrast of civic and vatic poetry. For what one will find among so many pioneers of literary modernism such as Eliot, Pound, D. H. Lawrence, Joyce, and Yeats, is first how they brought the vatic tradition into the twentieth century and secondly how they had all diagnosed their poetic isolation

as resulting from a cataclysm in the past that made them feel lost in historical time: "to be modern was for them to be disenfranchised from a significant past." The analysis of the critic Edward Mendelson acutely analyses this pathos:

> Vatic writing had always given credence to a lost mythical arcadia, a distant time when society was hierarchically secure and the grand manner still a natural tone of voice. Now the modernists translated this myth into a serious interpretation of history. They looked back to a recent European cataclysm that left society and art in exhausted disorder. Eliot saw the moment of change in a seventeenth-century "dissociation of sensibility . . . from which we have never recovered." For Lawrence it occurred when the explorers of America brought syphilis to Europe. Yeats, convinced he lived in a debased century, dated the unbroken age in 1450, when the gyres of his historical cycles were in balance.[1]

Acute readers of Balthasar's two volumes on clerical and lay styles will be struck by his "elective affinities," so to speak, with the great figures of literary Modernism. Of course, as is pointed out in Chapter 6, Balthasar locates the cataclysm as occurring in that very period that so many others of his ilk would view as the high point of Catholic culture: the thirteenth century. This puts him at odds with the Chesterbelloc school of historiography, not to mention with Leo Strauss who locates the cataclysm in post-Periclean Athens, or with the neoconservatives of *Commentary*, who claim to discover the catastrophe in the late 1960s. But perhaps the *location* of the catastrophe is immaterial: what counts is the view of history itself that would want to locate a Fall within its events. And that is perhaps a common feature to all conservative thought, from Plato through Burke to Alasdair MacIntyre. And Balthasar's name certainly conjures up the image of a conservative. To quote from Medard Kehl's introduction to *The von Balthasar Reader* ([New York: Crossroad, 1982] 4):

> The name Hans Urs von Balthasar carries with it a particular tone in today's Church. Some, who judge him predominantly from his great theological and historical works, see him—transcending all preliminary labels—as one of the most significant figures in theology today. Many others, however, who know him only form some smaller controversial works, paperbacks, and newspaper articles, content themselves with placing him—approvingly or disapprovingly—on the "conservative side" of the Church. There are certainly grounds enough for this. For many years he has done battle with a sharp tongue against certain postconciliar "trends" in the Church in order to uncover in them numerous hidden ambiguities and inclinations which would "lighten the ballast of what is Christian." Examples of this would be: the "trend" to the Bible (with neglect of the whole subsequent tradition), to the liturgy (which frequently dissolves into spiritual managing and community self-satisfaction), to the ecumenical movement (at the price of leveling one's own tradition), to the "secular world" (with a simultaneous devaluation of the "sacred," the "mystical," and the "monastic").

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[1]Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden* (New York: Viking Press, 1981) xvii.

This list, of course, could be extended, and in fact Kehl does not fail to mention Balthasar's conservative position on obligatory celibacy or women's ordination, the cult of theological pluralism, the primacy of contemplation over action, his deep reservations about liberation theology, and so on. Louis Dupré seconds this judgment when he tartly notes that "one may call his attitude 'conservative' in the sense that he attempts to 'conserve' a tradition which he, unlike many who claim the title, thoroughly knows."

Nonetheless, the view of Balthasar as a conservative touches only on the outer surface, the membrane, so to speak, of Balthasar's thought. Inside is a much more radical theologian. Hence the irony of Balthasar wanting to be a "civic" theologian when in fact he was primarily a "vatic" one. And Balthasar's reliance on the mystical insights of Adrienne von Speyr certainly puts him in the vatic tradition, no doubt further contributing to his isolation. But it was the thesis of the book that underneath the vatic oddities of his theology there lurks one of the great public, civic theologians of the twentieth century.

Mark McIntosh commended Fr. Oakes for his effort to draw together important themes from throughout Balthasar's work and especially for his excellent contextualizing of Balthasarian theology in its philosophical, literary, and theological backgrounds. He suggested that an ongoing question for the Society would be the assessment of Balthasar reception in North America and proposed four possible themes under which that might be taken up: (1) the question of Balthasar's approach to Holy Scripture about which Oakes has some important points to make; (2) the questions which Oakes alludes to regarding the possible gnosticizing and tritheistic implications of Balthasar's trinitarian thought; (3) the methodological questions inevitably arising from an assessment of the relationship between the thought of Balthasar and the witness of Adrienne von Speyr; and (4) a possible openness in Balthasar's thought to important themes in postmodernism particularly the reconnection of form with content, thought with feeling, theory with practice.

In the second half of his paper, McIntosh proposed that one way to get to the heart of Balthasar would be to adopt an approach similar to George Hunsinger's treatment of motifs in Karl Barth. Just as the two old Baslers' beloved Mozart gives a characteristic impulse to every theme he utters, so Barth and Balthasar might perhaps be understood in terms of the fundamental motifs of their thought. Such an approach would also spare us from the totalizing temptation to isolate one or another putative master concept (perhaps the triumph of grace for Barth and, who knows, obedience to mission for Balthasar?) which supposedly will explain everything else. These motifs McIntosh developed in a preliminary way for discussion: actualism (focus on the actual event of God in Christ and the eternal trinitarian event), inclusivism (our language and experience are taken up into an ever greater fulfillment of meaning), objectivism (the objective reality of God is made known not merely extrinsically but as the believer is ever more available to the mission of the Son), vocationalism (the

encounter with God comes as the believer is called into her or his true role within the mission of the Son), eideticism (the form or eidos of revelation is adequate and cannot be left behind because it is itself a sign of God's self-donating being), synthesism (theology must always seek the understanding that lies at the point of convergence of all the mysteries).

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CRITERIA OF CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

Conveners: Matthew Lamb, Boston College
Robert Imbelli, Boston College
Presenter: Avery Dulles, Fordham University

A working group on the Study of Criteria of Catholic Theology organized the preconvention seminar that drew more than 140 participants. Matthew Lamb opened the session by sketching the origins of the gathering and underscored the felt need to provide an integrative forum in face of the growing specialization of theology, with the ensuing danger of fragmentation. Robert Imbelli then introduced Avery Dulles with an expression of gratitude for his singular contribution to Catholic theology over a period of more than thirty years. Imbelli made particular reference to Dulles' *The Craft of Theology*, which served as background reading for the session.

In his paper (published in full in *Communio*, Summer 1995), Dulles identified fifteen criteria of Catholic theology and elaborated briefly on each. They included the legitimate place of reason within the theological enterprise; the knowability of God, founding a positive, if analogous, intelligibility; the catholicity of Jesus Christ and his cosmic centrality; a missionary universality; the ecclesial mediation of faith; sacramentality and worship; communion with Rome; and ecumenism. In addition, Dulles also highlighted continuity with the past as condition of authentic development; the sense of the faithful, requiring broad consultation; acceptance of authority; understanding of Scripture within tradition; fidelity to the Church's magisterium in a spirit of mutual respect; association with the magisterium with the aim of authentic collaboration.