

HANS URS VON BALTHASAR SOCIETY
AND KARL RAHNER SOCIETY
(Joint Session)

Topic: Theology in Dialogue: von Balthasar and Rahner
 Conveners: Peter Casarella, The Catholic University of America
 David L. Schindler, John Paul II Institute
 for Studies of Marriage and the Family
 Moderator: Howard Ebert, St. Norbert College
 Presenters: Barbara Sain, University of St. Thomas, Minnesota
 Theodore Kepes, Jr., Providence College
 Respondents: James K. Voiss, St. Louis University
 Larry Chapp, DeSales University

Barbara Sain's presentation, "Expression in the *Theo-Logic*: Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Manifestation of Divine Truth in the World," examines the question: "How can divine truth be revealed in the world without overwhelming the finite structures of creation?" A key to Balthasar's answer is to be found in his notion of expression. Expression is radiance of being and of truth and not merely an objective category. The expression of concrete form manifests the unity of subjective interiority with natural forms in the world. Subjective receptivity to reading these forms is by no means a deficiency of being, and active receptivity is a form of welcoming the presence and truth of an object. Balthasar constructs an expressive account of language, interpersonal love, and the nature of truth grounded in the analogy of being. Revelation builds upon this foundation even as it surpasses it. The Son comes into the world as the perfect expression of the Father. As with Bonaventure, Christ's human form of truthful expression is the high point of worldly truth *and* absolutely unique. The Spirit too is divine radiance rooted in an expressive, triune movement. Throughout the *Theo-Logic* Balthasar underscores the positivity of the other. Trinitarian otherness lends positivity to the distinctness of creation from Creator, and even the paradoxical silence of the Word on the Cross is illuminated by trinitarian unity in otherness. Regarding the comparison to Rahner, Sain cited Balthasar's claim: "Rahner has chosen Kant, or if you prefer, Fichte: the transcendental starting point. And I—as a Germanist—have chosen Goethe." The quote suggests there is a decisive difference between Kantian criticism and a way of thinking that can read the form (*das gestaltlesendes Denken*). But she noted that one could exaggerate even this nuanced opposition.

In his response to Sain, James Voiss demonstrated fundamental similarities between Balthasar's account of expressive form and Rahner's theology of the symbol. Rahner's invocation of the theology of the *reductio in mysterium* suggests further agreement, e.g., the framing of all theological utterances by God's own mystery and the need to avoid watering down the particular identity of Jesus Christ. But Voiss questioned the adequacy of the Goethe/Kant divide. A more fundamental difference, he argued, stems from different sources and forms of questioning:

Balthasar looked to the saints and other traditional sources while Rahner sought to weigh the meaning of Christian faith in a complex world. For Voiss one might also discover differences in the way both Ignatian thinkers “saw the form.”

With his presentation, “Toward a Unified Vision: The Integration of Christian Theology and Evolution in Karl Rahner’s Understanding of Matter and Spirit,” Theodore Kepes opened the second part by presenting an overview of Rahner’s metaphysics in *Spirit in the World* and the response therein to Kant’s critique. Kepes also summarized the treatment of human beings as transcendently open to divine revelation in *Hearers of the Word*. He then outlined Rahner’s theory of evolution by considering spirit-matter at its origin in God and through its transformation towards its final end, the initial completion of this transformation in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, and the final consummation of the evolving universe when it attains its full potential to receive the offer of God’s grace. Rahnerian evolutionary theology thus construed contrasts notably with the materialism, determinism, rationalism, and atheism in Dennett’s evolutionary theory. In essence, Rahner shows that Christian theism is not grounded solely on empirical experience but on the personal encounter with the living, incomprehensible God, manifest in the infinite horizon of human self-consciousness and made explicit in its categorical and historical revelation of God through the loving spirit of Jesus Christ. Rahner therefore offers a strong, viable, and comprehensive response to Dennett’s reductionist account of theism.

Larry Chapp sought to reframe the question. Modern scientific materialism, he said, arose as “a countermythos” to the Christian worldview. Dennett and like-minded scientists willy-nilly erect a simulacrum of the Church. One must not reject science as such, he said, only its Promethean attempt to totalize reality. Chapp then built upon W. Kasper’s claim that purely transcendental approaches obscure the moment of personal decision. On that basis, he continued, one could develop an approach to the natural sciences that made no apology for explicitly theological assumptions. Balthasar’s trinitarian metaphysics of love responds more cogently than transcendental anthropology to the social challenge underlying the discrete claims of scientific materialism.

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