

## CURRENT THEOLOGY

### HANS URS VON BALTHASAR'S THEOLOGY OF AESTHETIC FORM

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Since the recent publication in English of the first three volumes of *The Glory of the Lord*, it has become redundant to sing the praises of Hans Urs von Balthasar's great work. *Herrlichkeit*, a seven-volume *summa* of theological aesthetics, as comprehensive as it is original, began to appear in Basel 25 years ago. What until recently had remained a cult book reserved to a small number of patient, theologically erudite readers sufficiently familiar with the German language to appreciate B.'s creative but often poetically obscure use of it, may now attract a larger but probably less critical readership in America. I have contributed to the high praise the *magnum opus* deserves in an essay (in *Religion and Literature*) that mostly deals with the literary, third volume, *Studies in Theological Style: Lay Style*. Here I would like to write a more critical assessment, analyzing more closely the theological issues as they emerge primarily in the first two volumes, *Seeing the Form* and *Studies in Theological Style: Clerical Style* (covering the patristic and medieval periods), with occasional references to the as yet untranslated volumes on the Old and New Testament.<sup>1</sup>

The division between clerical and lay draws us immediately into controversy. The author claims to have chosen official theologians, "so long as such were available, who were able to treat the radiant power of the revelation of Christ both influentially and originally, without any trace of decadence; but after Thomas Aquinas theologians of such stature are rare" (2:15). Theology has become specialized, one *Fachwissenschaft* among others, out of touch with cult and piety, deprived of aesthetic form and bodily substance. As a result, the volume dealing with the modern age features only names such as Dante, Pascal, Péguy, Hopkins,

<sup>1</sup> References to the volumes translated into English will be by volume and page. The English titles are: 1: *Seeing the Form* (1982); 2: *Studies in Theological Style: Clerical Styles* (1984); 3: *Studies in Theological Style: Lay Styles* (1986). The translation, a joint American-British enterprise, stands under the direction of Joseph Fessio, S.J., and John Riches. All volumes were published in the U.S. by Ignatius Press and Crossroad Publications. References to the OT and the NT volumes will be by the German numbering, respectively 3/1 and 3/2 (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1965 and 1969).

Soloviev, and yes, Hamann and Saint John of the Cross, theologians but presumably not "official" ones. Some readers may object to B.'s intellectual bias or, for that matter, to the conception of theology here presented. Yet their reservations should offer no excuse for remaining unacquainted with this majestic work. B. has provided an approach to theology that, though not entirely new—Matthias Scheeben may count for a noteworthy predecessor—has never been attempted in such a sustained, comprehensive manner. The project includes, besides theology proper, two volumes on exegesis, a thorough discussion of Western metaphysics before and after Christ, and a volume of outstanding essays on religious literature in the modern age.

#### THE INCARNATION, ARCHETYPE OF DIVINE AESTHETICS

At the center of this titanic enterprise stands a simple idea. When God assumed human nature in the Incarnation, He transformed the very meaning of culture. Henceforth all forms would have to be measured by the supreme form of God in the flesh. Theology itself, indissolubly united to this visible form, would have to cease being a purely theoretical speculation and adopt an aesthetic quality. It would have to show in its very structure and diction "the diversity of the Invisible radiating in the visiblensness of Being of the world" (1:431). In fact, its tendency during the modern age has gone in the opposite direction. It has satisfied itself, if we may believe the author, with rationally interpreting nature and history (fundamental theology) or Scripture (exegesis) or both as incorporated in the tradition (dogmatic theology). By thus neglecting the form element in the Incarnation, it has fallen short of doing justice to revelation itself. However strongly it may have asserted the Trinitarian nature of God revealed in Christ, it has failed to show that nature in the very form of revelation. It ends up, then, viewing this form as a mere sign pointing toward a mystery that lies entirely beyond it. For B., on the contrary, the revelation in Christ manifests a divine "super-form" (1:432). In Christ, God not only discloses the mystery of his nature; He shows it.

Theological aesthetics, then, consists in the science of the divine form as it stands revealed in Christ and, through that prism, reflected in cosmos and history. The reader may find the term "aesthetic" inappropriate. Does aesthetics not deal with beautiful form? In fact, it is precisely the beauty of form, which makes it shine with a luster exceeding that of any and all of its components, that constitutes the proper object of B.'s study. The "glory" of the title consists not in the form as such but in its shining, in that mysterious surplus that renders it beautiful and distinct from true, good, or being. But then the objection returns: Does the beautiful shine not originate in a subjective mode of perceiving unrelated

to what transcends any perception? Then, how could aesthetics, the science of beautiful form, claim a place in theology? Unquestionably, theology should refuse to exchange the content of the revealed for its subjective impression. But B. unambiguously repudiates the "impressionist" subjectivism of an aesthetics based more on the harmonious relation which the human subject establishes toward the form than on the form's intrinsic quality of radiance. For him as for the Greek Fathers (and, indeed, for Plotinus), the light of beauty breaks forth from the form itself, not from the subject's perception of it. The author's insistence on this point may make us wonder why he chose the 18th-century term "aesthetics," which still carries the connotation of "perceiving," for describing his own, far more objective approach. Beauty, for him, as a transcendental quality belongs to Being itself and is, indeed, its primary manifestation. This ontological nature, the opposite of any aestheticism, disposes it to reveal the depth of God's presence in all forms.

Now B. does not deny that God's Being remains essentially hidden. Whatever divine form expresses does not cease to be "mysterious" to the human mind. But then the more fundamental question arises, whether a form manifesting divine hiddenness can be more than a mere sign pointing to a divine reality that is either formless or unknown. For a clarification of this crucial point, the reader must wait until the discussion of Bonaventure at the end of Vol. 2. Here B., following the Seraphic Doctor, removes the essence of form entirely from subjective perception and relocates it in the ability to express. The expressive power itself may remain hidden behind the visible appearance. Nevertheless, the visible form, unlike a mask, manifests the very expressiveness of the hidden power. Precisely as manifesting form, beauty becomes the clarity of truth—the *splendor veri*. Consistently B. rejects, with Bonaventure and Cusanus, the idea that the revelation of God in nature (which he accepts), even when viewed in the light of Scripture, constitutes an image of God. The created cosmos possesses its own structure, which in no way resembles the divine form but which by its very existence, however defective and internally conflicting, manifests God's expressiveness. The person of Christ, *splendor lucis aeternae*, manifests, of course, much more than creation does. Nevertheless, even his humanity conceals as much as it discloses: the more it reveals, the more it manifests God's utter mysteriousness. By identifying the essence of form with expressiveness, B. avoids the facile theological aestheticism of a copy theory. Even within the Trinity the Son is the Image of the Father because he brings the Father's Being to full expressiveness, not because he "resembles" the Father. Each form emerging from the divine expressive power, including the Son, expresses God in an original manner.

But does ontological expressiveness render beauty a suitable category for Christian theology? The revelation of God in Christ is not merely the ultimate manifestation of Being. This very particular expression, culminating in the supreme failure of the cross, conflicts with ordinary aesthetic standards. "The Christ *epiphaneia* of God has nothing about it of the simple radiance of the Platonic sun of the good. It is an act in which God utterly freely makes himself present, as he commits to the fray the last divine and human depths of love" (2:12). At this point one either abandons the project of a theological aesthetic as being too far removed from the common understanding of aesthetics, or one rebuilds it on a wholly different footing. B. has followed the latter course. Rather than rendering his theological aesthetic a subspecies of that aesthetic tradition which has developed from Plato to Heidegger, he has set up an analogous order that, while sharing the general norms of expressive form, obeys laws that are entirely its own. When Christian theology confronts the form implied in a philosophy of Being, "there can be no question of a univocal transposition and application of categories" (1:119). What we have, instead, is an analogy "in a supereminent sense," where the order of Being reveals from above the categories of aesthetic form. As in Eckhart's theory and in that of most Christian mystics, the analogy between the divine and the human order does not move in an ascending line (from the creatures to God), but in a descending one that views creation in a divine, revealed light. Similarly, B.'s theology of form plunges its roots more deeply in the NT than in a philosophical aesthetic. The suffering and death of Christ, far from being the exception it would be in a worldly aesthetic, here becomes the model. B. agrees with Barth that a Christian aesthetic must start from the cross. He differs from him, however, in not admitting any definitive caesura between this theology of form and a philosophical aesthetic. Revelation sets up a new analogy which, rather than separating it from intramundane aesthetics, establishes new norms and criteria for it. The suffering and death of Christ has, in fact, opened new form perspectives on "the nocturnal side of existence" for which earlier theories had no place.

The entire volume on the NT (3/2) presents the divine glory as essentially consisting in the kenosis of God's Word. That Word was from all eternity destined to silence—first in Christ's hidden life, then in his passion and death, finally in the descent into hell. According to B.'s untraditional reading of the "descent," in his death Christ continued to remain deprived of faith, hope, and charity, redemptively suffering the *poena damni* for those whom he liberated (3/2:125). Cross and damnation thereby come to belong to the very essence of divine form. A theological aesthetic describes how God's perfection becomes actually manifest, and

Scripture reveals it to consist in the "correspondence between obedience and love, between self-annihilation in hiddenness and the ascent toward manifestation" (3/2:242).

#### MODERN THEOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN AESTHETICS

An even more fundamental problem concerns the continuity of this new aesthetic of form with that of our natural perception in the modern age. If the *analogia crucis* is to penetrate our entire vision of the real, it must at some point link up with an idea of God based upon the *analogia entis*. Do the consciousness and the language available within our culture still allow an aesthetic of grace? Has "the perspicuity of the *analogia entis*" not been destroyed by the modern world picture? To be sure, to the pious mind there continues to exist an analogy "from above," descending from God to the creature—and in this respect the pious mind may perceive God in the creature today as much as before. But a theological aesthetic requires more than this inward vision: it must be able to *present the world as manifesting God's presence*. This requires the analogy from above to be complemented by some analogy from below which supplies the religiously symbolic language and imagery to implement its vision and extend it over the entire world. In a culture that has come to view the cosmos as self-sufficient, this has become exceedingly difficult. More and more faith tends to depend exclusively on revelation and/or on the inner experience. God has to be known through His revelation and through His inner voice, so to speak, in isolation from the world. Within this perspective the battle cry of the Reformation, *sola fide*, appealed to the mentality of the modern age. Even the Catholic representative figures presented in Volume 3 perceived the natural link between God and cosmos as broken. John of the Cross and Pascal resist the *sola fide* doctrine only by stressing the inner experience of faith, not by reconnecting faith with cosmic experience.

In one sense this reunites nature with the order of grace. John of the Cross at the end of *The Living Flame* exclaims: "Here lies the remarkable delight of this awakening: the soul knows creatures through God, and not God through creatures. This amounts to knowing the effects through their cause, and not the cause through its effects" (4:4; cited in 3:150). But the negatives in this statement are as weighty as the affirmatives, and in them the modern mind most clearly reveals its impact. John's entire *oeuvre* stands under the sign of negation: he denies not only pleasure and sensuousness, but also intellectual experience and, in the end, all image and form (3:127–28). He may have been unique in the radicalness of his divine vision and in this respect differ even from Teresa. But his particular attitude merely brings to a head the general

difficulty modern culture encounters concerning the very possibility of the cosmos to reveal, even in a minimal way, the *theological form*. The first writer B. classifies among the "moderns," Dante, may well have been the last one to enjoy that unbroken vision of grace and nature. After him theological form increasingly comes to be reduced to the "formal" aspect of the expression rather than revealing itself in the very experience of the cosmic structure. Having destroyed the visible link between God and cosmos, the modern world view has impaired the expressive ability of worldly form in a theological vision. When B. criticizes Pascal's "harsh dualism of the future . . . between science and supernatural piety" (3:189), he describes in fact a common situation which reduces the chances of success of his own enterprise.

Our world is no longer illuminated by the light of grace; whatever divine light reaches the modern believer's mind illuminates mostly the inner realm of the soul. The separation which Barth and some Reformed theologians insist on making between the realms of nature and grace, as well as the "desincarnation" of all theology in the modern age, are not coincidental phenomena. They express a separation which *de facto* exists in the modern religious mind. How does B. overcome these restrictions imposed by our age? Most of the time he attempts to overcome them by a critique of the present. In Volume 1 he forcefully denounces the elimination of aesthetics from theology. Protestantism has severed the seeing of faith from the hearing. Catholicism has separated nature from grace. In both cases theology has become a specialized branch of knowledge supported by the science of Being qua Being. Yet to correct a cultural perspective, it is not sufficient to note its distortion. For that distortion affects those who perceive it as well as those who do not. B. tends to camouflage that modern predicament under the historical parts of his work. In reading his sensitive descriptions of the traditional "seeing of the form," we may come to feel that the end of the lean years is in sight. But he fails to inform the reader how usable the symbolization of a past age remains for the present condition. The dramatic difference of our situation prevents a simple return to the past. It is not always easy to distinguish the historical parts of this work from its theological theses.

What, according to the systematic first part, the restoration of the aesthetic form in theology requires, leaves no doubt that very different conceptions of philosophy and theology are needed than the ones that now dominate the Schools.

The formal object of theology . . . lies at the very heart of the formal object of philosophy. Out of those mysterious depths the formal object of theology breaks forth as the self-revelation of the mystery of Being itself; such a revelation cannot be deduced from what the creaturely understanding of itself can read of the

mystery of Being . . . (1:145).

The theological answer alone fully responds to our philosophical questioning. Only the eyes of faith perceive the encounter with Being in its full depth (1:146). Indeed, B. insists, only an encounter with the living God in the form of revelation enables us truly to philosophize (1:146). Of course, at this point we have abandoned the modern position altogether. As matters stand today, philosophers rarely look for answers concerning the ultimate mystery of reality beyond this world (though some may invoke a permanently undefinable "transcendence"). Hence philosophy is not likely to gain additional light from theology at all. But even if it allows itself to be enlightened by it, it still will not "find God in all things." Undoubtedly, at one time revelation provided "the inwardness of absolute Being, the mystery of its life and love which is the manifestation of the depth of philosophy's formal object" (1:148). Aquinas as well as Augustine and Anselm succeeded in integrating their philosophical theory of knowledge with the Christian Trinitarian model. Yet with the fundamental change in the world picture the continuity from philosophy to theology vanished. Modern philosophy, however open-ended, is no longer assured that its efforts will emerge in the idea of the Trinitarian God or, for that matter, in any idea of God at all. *The Glory of the Lord* assumes that philosophy must become reunited with theology. Only within that assumption does B.'s theological aesthetic acquire its full meaning.

Theology, from its side, must build upon the natural mystery of Being. "A 'supernatural' piety, oriented to God's historical revelation, cannot be such unless it is mediated by a 'natural' piety, which at this level presupposes and includes a 'piety of nature' and a 'piety of Being'" (1:447). When in the cognitive act the human intellect reaches, beyond its immediate object, Being itself, God should become manifest both as revealed and concealed. Evidence directs the mind beyond itself "towards what can be 'given' . . . only in the mode of non-evidence" (1:450). At this point B. combines the theory of the dynamism of the intellect developed by Neo-Thomists (Rousselot, Blondel, Maréchal) with Nicholas of Cusa's *docta ignorantia*. The impact of the 15th-century philosopher remains apparent throughout the discussion, most clearly in the analogical ascent from the multiplicity of beings to their transcendent unity. "It is the not-being-one which separates beings and human existence that, as the most extreme enigma of Being itself, points beyond itself to identity" (1:448). The process cannot be reversed. Unity does not demand multiplicity; hence all multiple beings are contingent, while their unity is necessary. But this philosophical theology results in a negative theology. Philosophy does not know the nature of this divine unity, any more

than it understands that divine unity's relation to multiple beings. Modern philosophers would object that such a "philosophical" theology has already moved well beyond what a process of philosophical reasoning unassisted by theology is able to establish. B. might not contradict them on *their* terms. He himself declares (e.g., 1:432) that the perfection of the form of the divine unity can be perceived only in the light of faith. Philosophy, contrary to current opinion, possesses only a relative autonomy, sufficient for rendering finite being intelligible in its own right but inadequate for answering the ultimate questions philosophy itself raises.

Here as elsewhere B., under the impact of de Lubac's critique of the supernatural as an independent order of the real, defends a more intimate harmony of nature and grace than the one that has dominated the theology of the past four centuries. Precisely upon this harmony he founds his theological aesthetics. Only if grace fully penetrates the natural order can finite form, rather than merely limiting the divine, become able to express it. But the capacity to express God's inner life in finite form further requires that that life itself be, more than an absence of form, an "infinitely determined super-form" (1:482). That precisely is what the mystery of the Trinity has revealed. Revelation has not introduced a new form, but a new presence in the form of nature. Creation, having its light obscured by the Fall, required a new, explicit revelation to regain its original powers of manifestation (1:458). Even after the revelation of the Word, the divine mystery remains intrinsically concealed to the human mind. Hence, the more God becomes manifest in His revelation, the more He remains hidden. This is how B. understands the messianic secret in Mark's Gospel: by divulging the mystery of his mission, Christ would have distorted it, while in the writings of John this secrecy has become so totally identified with the nature of its manifestations that "the self-concealment of the Light is its revelation" (1:485). We detect Pascal's thesis: any religion that fails to bring out God's hiddenness cannot be true (*Pensées*, no. 598, ed. Chevalier).

#### THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS AND AESTHETIC THEOLOGY

God remains the "other," but as wholly other, Eckhart and Cusanus taught, He also surpasses otherness itself. Thus, despite its concealment, a revelation of the divine manifests human nature, and indeed all of nature, to itself. Conversely, nature attaining its supreme clarity in the human person, naturally reveals God's very being, not however through a natural aesthetic, "because it is only through being fragmented that the beautiful really reveals the meaning of the eschatological promise it contains" (1:460). The Alexandrian and Cappadocian Fathers still wrote out of such an aesthetic vision. B. knows their tradition well. But in Vol.



2 of *The Glory of the Lord* he reaches back even further to Irenaeus, with whom Christian theology originated. This redoubtable antagonist of Gnosticism, against Valentine's dualist spiritualism, insists on seeking the figure of grace in nature itself. The flesh is "not without the artistic wisdom and power of God," but "God's hands are accustomed, as they have been from the time of Adam, to give their work a rhythm and hold it strongly, to support and place it where they choose" (*Adv. haereses* 2, 330-31, cited in 2:73).

If the essay on Irenaeus splendidly "anticipates" B.'s own theory, the rest of the volume on "clerical style" displays his supreme confidence as well as the awesome scope of his learning. He daringly omits those figures who would obviously support his theory—such as Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus Confessor—and deliberately selects writers who have been traditionally interpreted in a different sense (Denys the Areopagite) or whose tendencies running in a direction opposite to his own pose a real challenge to this theory (Augustine and Anselm). The inspired discussion of Denys shakes long-established positions by a straightforward defense of this controversial writer. Instead of regarding him as a rather too faithful follower of Proclus who, under a fraudulent authority, succeeded in releasing straight Neoplatonism upon an unsuspecting Church, B. presents him as an original, authentically Catholic thinker. He exculpates Denys' work from the charge of a dangerously radical negative theology by showing how it gravitates toward a theology of form rather than foundering on a formless absolute. The essays on Irenaeus and Denys show how solidly B.'s theological aesthetic remains within an earlier, Greek tradition which it effectively enables us to recapture.

The efforts to rescue the early Western tradition from its later dualist interpretations appear somewhat less convincing. Here also the author displays a masterly control over his material, often forcing us to correct our reading as well as our reading perspective. Nevertheless, they leave one with a sense of incompleteness, even of doubt. The essay on Augustine abounds in original, brilliant insights. The first part forms a classic commentary on *De vera religione* and *De libero arbitrio*. But these works date from Augustine's early period. The *Confessions*, so promising for an aesthetic approach, are used only for illustrative material. From the young Augustine the author leaps directly to the late Pelagian controversies, leaving the reader a fragmented, essentially incoherent picture of the relation between nature and grace. It may not be possible to render Augustine's ever-developing theories consistent with one another. But B. adds to that inherent problem by failing to show how the discrepant theories may at least be related.

The essay on Anselm again may count as a tour de force. It reorients

our vision of this heavily "rationalized" thinker. Yet we finish reading it with as much frustration as anticipation: anticipation because of the new code of interpretation it holds; frustration because the actual reinterpretation needed for supporting the thesis of *The Glory* fails to appear. The volume concludes with a long essay on Bonaventure. The reader wonders: Why not St. Thomas? The reason, it would seem, lies in that Bonaventure, alone perhaps in the West, has gone to the heart of what constitutes B.'s essential insight. From the vision of the crucified Seraph at its center, this theology of form radiates its aesthetic light over all of nature and history. Bonaventure's vision closest resembles B.'s own. Still, the essay is not flawless. Its disproportionate length as well as a certain diffuseness betray the syndrome of an all too understandable battle fatigue of one just emerged from reading hundreds of dense pages of Scholastic theology who knows them to be no more than a small part in this titanic enterprise. Considering the special kinship between the author and his subject, one wonders whether this section would not have become the historical centerpiece of the entire *oeuvre* if it had been written first. Even in its present form it remains a significant contribution toward understanding both the main thesis of *The Glory of the Lord* and the often misinterpreted theology of the spiritual Franciscans.

On the whole, his treatises on clerical and lay theologians of form are models of their kind. All of them are competent and some of them appear likely to influence theological as well as literary readings for years to come. In the volume on the clerical tradition he moves with the ease of one who after half a century of serious study knows the area as well as anyone living today. This confidence apparently induced him to set up new challenges for himself rather than to return to authors long familiar. It may also explain some of the puzzling absences. Where are Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor? The real answer (rather than the one B. gives himself) appears to be that they feature in his earlier work. Less explainable is the absence of Cusanus, who appears to be constantly present in the author's thought.

In the modern age, when theology has become abstractly rationalist according to the author, he turns to poets and "lay" thinkers for support of his theological aesthetic. Having discussed the splendid essays devoted to them in the third volume in *Religion and Literature*, I can forgo here any detailed analysis. In them the distinction between this theological aesthetic and any aesthetic theology appears most clearly. While strongly defending the theological significance of the natural form against any kind of supernaturalism, B. nevertheless insists that a natural aesthetic is insufficient for a Christian understanding of the natural form, and, of course, even more so for the Christian form. To measure the Christian

mysteries by the criteria of ordinary aesthetics, as Chateaubriand did in his *Génie du christianisme*, may at best result in an aesthetic theology, never in a theological aesthetic. In the perspective of revelation Christ himself, the form of God in this world, should become the ultimate norm not only for measuring the form of revelation but even the "natural" forms of cosmos and history. If the Christ form must provide the final principle for theologically interpreting all other forms, we can no longer rely on these other forms for "seeing" the forms of revelation. Yet how could any aesthetic be anything but "natural"? Is the very concept of the aesthetic not grounded in a natural ability to perceive "natural" forms?

B., fully conscious of the decisive significance of this question, has devoted the most profound pages of his opus to an attempt to answer it. To repeat, he does not deny the relative autonomy of the natural form, but he assumes this natural aesthetic into an aesthetic of grace which, while fully respecting its autonomy and incorporating it, nevertheless views the Christian mysteries in their own light, and in that light aesthetically transforms the entire form of the cosmos. That light is derived from the same divine-human form which appears in it. Revelation itself radiates the light in which we see its form. *In lumine tuo videbimus lumen*. "The light of faith stems from the object which, revealing itself to the subject, draws it out beyond itself—into the sphere of the object" (1:181). God's revelation establishes both its content and the believer's ability to comprehend it. Christ reveals as the God who expresses, and stands revealed as that which He expresses. Unlike the Socratic teacher, He does not merely teach the truth: He *is* what He teaches. His form conceals as much as it reveals, but that concealment belongs essentially to the nature of what He reveals. The light, then, within which the believer apprehends God's manifestation originates entirely in the manifestation itself. So does the believing response to it: faith does not exist *alongside* Christ's word but is God's own response to it given by one "enacted" by God (Eph 2:10). The believer assents "within the object of his faith" (1:192), thereby partaking in the eternal yes the Son speaks to the Father. The union of the believer with Christ links the two constituent parts of the act of faith: the object and the response to it. The eye with which the believer sees God, as Eckhart forcefully expressed it, is the eye with which God sees Himself. In modern language, the conditions for the possibility of "theological" knowledge are the very conditions that constitute the "theological" object, with this important restriction, that the object itself provides the conditions for its knowledge. "The light of faith cannot . . . be thought or even experienced as a merely immanent reality in our soul, but solely as the radiance resulting from the presence

in us of a *lumen increatum*, a *gratia increata*, without our ever being able to abstract from God's Incarnation" (1:215).

#### THE EXPERIENCE AND THE LIGHT OF FAITH

The union of object and act of faith, as B. presents it, rests upon another theologoumenon: faith, far from standing opposed to experience (as past theology frequently implied), creates its own experience. The Eastern Church, with its theology of God's uncreated light manifested in Jesus' transfiguration, has never ceased to proclaim this supernatural experience of faith. Even in the West, particularly in Augustine, faith included experience as an essential part of itself. Not until Suarez was the "supernatural" quality of that experience disputed and lowered to a psychological level. The unity of the two is crucial to B.'s thesis. If experience does not belong to the essence of faith itself, the form construed on the basis of that experience possesses no theological standing whatever. A study of theological form then turns into a branch of natural aesthetics (as it did in the aesthetic theologies of the romantic era), wherein the form functions only as the *appearance* of a totally different, supernatural reality. For B., the gnosis of theology grows entirely out of the experience of faith and belongs to the same order. "Theology deepens *pistis* into *gnosis* so far as this is possible on earth, and it does this through a contemplative penetration of the depths of individual facts" (1:601). Precisely because it originates in the experience of faith, all Christian theology possesses both an aesthetic and a mystical quality. All too often modern theology has restricted the "light of faith" to a divine communication of a set of principles which theology then, by purely rational methods, developed into an autonomous system. Following the older tradition, B. regards faith as a comprehensive, supernatural experience in its own right—intellectual, volitional, emotional—through which God's Spirit takes possession of the human mind.

The "gifts of the Holy Spirit," bestowed seminally by grace, lead the believer to an ever deeper awareness and experience both of the presence within him of God's being and of the depth of the divine truth, goodness, and beauty in the mystery of God. This experience is usually referred to as Christian *mysticism* in the most general sense of the term (1:166).

God's revelation, for B. as for Augustine, establishes its own sensorium in the soul (1:249, 163).

Nor should this experience of faith be separated from the natural experience which it fulfils and transforms. The impact of the object of faith affects the mind's natural orientation toward Being. "Along with the ontic order that orients man and the form of revelation to one another, the grace of the Holy Spirit creates the faculty that can appre-

hend this form, the faculty that can relish it and find its joy in it, that can understand it and sense its interior truth and rightness" (1:247). The encounter in faith transforms the soul's ontic dynamism into a direct receptivity for the Christ form. Though fulfilling the mind's natural aspirations, the experience of faith emerges from *within* faith, is conducted by the standards of faith, and results in seeing the form of faith (1:225-27). Even as a great work of art imposes its own spiritual a priori upon the viewer or the hearer, faith conveys its own intrinsic necessity to the entire natural order (1:164).

Yet grace "imposes" its form without doing violence to nature. The revelation in Christ occurs within a divinely created nature which already in its own being manifests God's eternal presence. Hence revelation must not only adopt the form of this world; it completes that form by extending it to its ultimate archetype, God's triune nature. Hence the highest form-quality of the Christ, his divine relation to the Father and the Spirit, stands not opposed to the structure of this world: it appears as a form *within* this world, yet one from which that world itself must receive its definitive form. I write "definitive" because Christ is not a sign pointing beyond itself to an invisible God: he himself, the indivisible God-man, *is* the reality he signifies, "man insofar as God radiates from him; God insofar as he appears in the man Jesus" (1:437). Being ultimate, the Christ form should not be measured by other forms: it becomes itself the measure of all. For B., as for Bonaventure, the Son is archetype of all things because he is absolute expression. "The likeness which is the truth itself in its expressive power . . . better expresses a thing than the thing expresses itself, for the thing itself receives the power of expression from it."<sup>2</sup>

The Incarnation would not constitute the definitive form if Christ's humanity had merely been a form God randomly adopted. An arbitrary form would remain extrinsic to God's inner life. To be definitive, the God-man must express God's own form (1:480). An inexpressible Infinite would crush the finite form under its weight, and the Incarnation itself could have no more than a docetist significance. What Christ reveals in his own reality, however, is that intradivine relationship whereby God Himself is form. "In the Son of Man then appears not God alone; necessarily there also appears the inner-trinitarian event of his procession; there appears the triune God . . ." (1:479). God is able to express Himself in Jesus because he is expressive in his divine nature, and Christ's humanity, far from being a concession made to human frailty in God's self-revelation, *is* the divine reality itself as it becomes manifest.

<sup>2</sup> In *1 Sent.* 35, q. 1, ad 3. Quoted in 2:293.

What remains concealed in him (his divinity) has not been withdrawn from manifestation, but rather manifests the inscrutable, divine mystery itself. As in the work of art, no ulterior reality hides behind the form: the form, totally manifest, adduces its own evidential power. Incomprehensibility constitutes as much a positive property in the form of God's revelation as the continuing mystery does in a beloved person (1:186). Both the concealed and the overt become object of the perception of faith. "Visible form not only 'points to' an invisible, unfathomable mystery; form is the apparition of this mystery, and reveals it while, naturally, at the same time protecting and veiling it . . . . The content does not lie behind the form but within it" (1:151). The entire mystery of Christ becomes visible, including its Trinitarian origin.

The theophany of the baptism at the Jordan and that on Mount Tabor are the manifestation, through his bodily visibility, of his dignity as eternal Son of God, of his relationship to the Father, whose voice is heard and points to him, and of his relationship to the Spirit, who descends upon him or envelops him with light as God's *doxa* (1:200).

Only the aesthetic perception of form fully transcends the otherwise persistent dualism between the external sign of faith and the internal light: the light breaks forth from the form itself.

The question how the experience of faith concretely relates to the objective form of revelation belongs to the wider issue of what B. terms "mysticism in the most general sense of the term" (1:166). This reference implies some continuity between the ordinary experience of faith and its intense, mystical experience. The topic of mysticism appears in three long passages: first in a survey of the Fathers in the history of Christian experience (1:265-84); next in a section specifically devoted to mysticism in the Church that concludes the discussion of experience in faith (1:407-16); finally in the essay on St. John of the Cross (3:105-71). Judging from the overall emphasis he places upon experience, one would expect B. to be favorably disposed toward mystical theology. In the beginning of the essay on Bonaventure, the longest in Vol. 2 and the one in which the author displays the greatest affinity with his subject, he quotes with obvious approval the Franciscan's rejection of abstract school theology: "reading without unction, speculation without devotion, research without wondering, prudence without exultation, hard work without piety, cleverness without humility" (*Itinerarium*, prol., 2:268).

Yet B.'s attitude remains surprisingly ambivalent. His severe criticism of "non-Christian" mysticism, a frequently recurring term that refers to Eastern or to Neoplatonic movements, does in fact also affect Christian mystics whose spiritual ascent tends to leave the form behind (1:477).

Moreover, the separation between faith and experience has fostered an abusive equation of *all* religious experience with extraordinary states of consciousness. "A truly living experience of faith includes (according to Ignatius of Loyola, for instance) a certain experience of both nearness to God and distance from God, of consolation and desolation . . . and yet none of this need yet be given the name of mysticism in the strong sense of the word" (1:412). Nor does the essential presence of experience *in* faith justify identifying faith with that experience, as some early mystical movements (such as that of the Messalians) tended to do (1:276). Even John of the Cross's spiritual theology leans toward such an equation. But he corrects this tendency (at least in part) by declaring that faith-experience to be basically an experience of absence (3:167-68). For him, as for all genuine mystics, that experience culminates in "the nonexperience" of the dark night. Such a total renunciation "in the surrender of one's own experience to the experience of Christ" (1:412) lies at the opposite side of modern subjectivism. Still, experience remains a legitimate ingredient of all faith, and the degree of its intensity remains a secondary matter in a theology that defends "a superabundant irradiation . . . beyond every demand and expectation" (1:417).

But not all the problems surrounding mysticism are of modern making, and B. expresses equally strong reservations about the origins of the mystical traditions proper in Christianity. For Evagrius and his followers, as well as for Augustine, the goal appeared to be "a 'vision' of the formless God in his inaccessible light" (1:315). The author sees this anti-incarnational bias continued in Diadochus, Aquinas, Eckhart, John of the Cross. In fact, he sweepingly concludes, due to a naive equation of Holy Spirit with spirit, and flesh in the biblical sense with Platonic bodiliness, Christian mysticism as a whole has "belittled the form of biblical vision" (1:316). Platonizing and gnosticizing currents have everywhere stimulated the drive to move beyond all form. Yet, if the God of the NT has permanently entered the visible world, mysticism must remain faithful to its scriptural archetype if it is to deserve the name Christian at all. It must, as it did in Paul and in John, include a sensuous as well as a spiritual dimension.

Rather than absorbing the finite into the infinite and destroying the form, Christian contemplation should aim at the *Ein-bildung* of Christ in the soul. In this respect, even John of the Cross fails to pass B.'s test of a typically Christian mysticism (3:159). The night of renunciation may be an indispensable stage, but not an ultimate goal. The night presents merely the "formless" part of the form, the "experience of non-experience" (1:413). For B.'s taste, John of the Cross still shared too much the Neoplatonic attitude toward form and figure. At the same time, John

reinstated the form in his poetic expression, thus creating a tension between the aesthetic form of his writing and the antiaesthetic nature of his message (3:126). In the paradox of his mystical poetry, John's formless negativity regains a solid foothold in form. But B. demands more. Individual mystical grace is not intended for the particular member only, but for the Church as a whole (1:414). As a special charism it must remain fully integrated within the communion of love that links all the members of the Church. John has severed the bond between his form of contemplation and the ecclesial charism. "It becomes essentially a mysticism of the individual, an experience between the believer and God alone . . ." (1:411).

#### ATTEMPT AT AN EVALUATION

With a feeling of awe the reader closes the final volume of this last great *summa*, so original and so traditional, in which Tridentine theology attains its final, perhaps most beautiful expression. B.'s work concludes a theological epoch of the Catholic Church—a period of solid scholarship, enormous erudition, and deep piety. Displaying the majestic grandeur of a Byzantine liturgy, its religious culture sufficed for those inside the tradition, while it remained relatively inaccessible to outsiders. By the time B. began writing, the pressure upon the self-contained structure had become severe and cracks began to appear. There had been crises before—the one caused by Vatican I, the Modernist crisis—yet each time the structure had shown its remarkable resilience. What occurred around the middle of this century was different. The pressure came from within the main body, not from a few recalcitrant elements. Among them were those in the vanguard of Catholic theology and philosophy, those who "taught" B. (especially Henri de Lubac). He himself experienced the tension and felt the need to remedy the situation that caused it. Yet his strategy differed from that of others. Rather than attempting to expand the limits of orthodoxy, he strengthened the internal unity of the structure by mobilizing those elements that had remained unused and that may well have constituted the Tridentine Church's greatest asset. Primary among them, the aesthetic creativity dispersed over various areas of the Christian experience. The period immediately preceding World War II, when B. received his formal training, witnessed a veritable outburst of a powerful Catholic art and literature, as well as the emergence of patristic, liturgical, and mystical studies, the rediscovery of a national Catholic identity, and the creation of a dynamically original yet also respectfully traditional Catholic philosophy. Most of those elements the stubbornly monolithic school theology of the previous decades had failed to integrate. B. rallied those *disiecta membra* to the support of a Christian identity



which he perceived as being in extreme danger. This design gives his work a polemical edge. Yet the very purpose of strengthening the internal coherence of the structure and widening its base removes it from the controversies with a secular society or even from a direct dialogue with it.

A project of this nature runs the risk of yielding to integrist rigidity and/or to aesthetic constructivism. B. has avoided these pitfalls throughout the seven volumes of *Herrlichkeit*. 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. His name has occasionally been used as a rallying cry for reactionary forces in Roman Catholicism. Unjustifiably, it seems to me. A theology of glory can never be "fundamentalist," we learn in the volume on the NT (3/2:102-3), because the immediate encounter between God and the Christian precedes doctrinal articulation. The magisterium interprets revelation; it does not lay its foundations. Its pronouncements "do not aim at constructing a system which eventually would come to replace Scripture either in whole or in part" (1:555). In fact, they possess no autonomous form of their own. Even Scripture constitutes only a part of the revelation. It can claim no form "which can be understood and apprehended in itself" (1:546). Nor is B. simply a traditionalist. His views on Augustine's theology of damnation, on Dante's hell ("the *reductio ad absurdum* of Scholastic theology" [3:90]), on Christ's descent into hell to suffer the pain of the damned and to liberate the captive souls (3/2), move far from the center of tradition.

On the other side, a major "aesthetic" construction such as *The Glory of the Lord* must somehow creatively integrate the oppositions and internal tensions of the entire tradition. No more than any great artist has B. succeeded in resolving them all. I noted the ambivalence in his discussion of mysticism. There are others, less conspicuous but not less powerful. Even the relation between nature and grace, central to the theme of *The Glory of the Lord*, at times appears less than harmonious. B. criticizes Scheeben, the first Catholic thinker to write a theological aesthetic, for the sharp "fracture" between nature and the supernatural order (1:114). But neither has his own synthesis attained final consistency. This becomes evident enough in his attitude toward other religions. The principle of harmony forces the author to recognize their significance and, indeed, their indispensability for a full communication of grace (e.g., 1:213). Christ becomes "the measure, both in judgment and redemption, of all other religious forms in mankind" (1:171). Yet B.'s own treatment reflects more judgment than redemption. Of course, the nature of a theological aesthetic requires a clear delineation of the specific form of

the Christian message. But his concern for formal clarity has led him to paint the contrasts in harsh tones. The temptation to exaggerate the opposition increases when other faiths move in a direction that threatens to dissolve precise form, and thereby jeopardize the very possibility of a theological aesthetic—as, in his view, Hinduism and Buddhism do. Nevertheless, if the particular significance of the Christian form lies precisely in its ability to harmonize nature and grace, then it would seem to demand religious openness toward other faiths. Instead, we find unqualified rejections of “every form of non-Christian mysticism” for lacking in objectivity (1:216), or of Hinduism for “dancing [all forms] away” (1:217), or of Buddhism for being a religion that “climbs up toward the divine” (1:496) rather than waiting for a divine message from above. B. even questions “anything which passes for an analysis of religious existence outside Christianity” (1:231). He writes: “Outside Christianity there is no way of understanding how this supremacy of the whole does not necessarily entail the shattering of finite form through an act by which personal consciousness surrenders and sacrifices itself like a drop that is lost in the ocean of Nirvana” (1:193). Evaluations of this kind contribute little toward enhancing the form of Christian faith, while they endanger the integrity of its content. B. never engages in a real dialogue with other faiths, not even with Judaism, of which he, more perhaps than any previous theologian, has shown the intrinsic significance for the Christian form (1:336–37). Even with respect to other branches of Christianity he maintains a distant aloofness.

Behind this attitude lies a constant concern to safeguard the integrity of the Christian form principle as well as its uniqueness against a Gnosticism which he detects behind Christian mystical movements as well as behind the Jansenist and Protestant distrust of nature. “From Valentinus to Bultmann this flesh and blood has been spiritualized and demythologized” (1:314). Even a general typology which places the Christian form within the context of other religious forms—Judaism, the religious movements of Mesopotamia and Egypt, Hellenistic culture—B. considers a threat to its uniqueness.

This form . . . does not appear as something relatively unique, as might be said of the creations of other great founders. Qualitatively set apart from them, the Christ form appears absolutely unique; but on the basis of its own particular form, the Christ form relates to itself as the ultimate centre the relative uniqueness of all other forms and images of the world, whatever realm they derive from (1:507).

Though he claims that Christ mediates all other forms (1:527 ff.), they appear to lose their religious justification once the Christ form appears.

Not to accept that form amounts to "objectively misapprehending it either in whole or in part" (1:509)—a misapprehension which "cannot be exempt from a certain kind of guilt" (1:510). This severe judgment rests upon the dubious assumption that the Christ form "*appears* absolutely unique" (1:507). But how can any form appear as absolutely unique? Does form not by its every nature relate to a formal context from which it can never become completely detached? One wonders whether B. has not stretched the concept of form beyond what it can bear in a Christian theology. To assert that the form is "the apparition of the divine mystery" (1:151) is as true as it is ambiguous. The Incarnation would not "truly" reveal if in Christ we did not actually apprehend the irradiation of God's inner form. Yet must we not distinguish the form actually *perceived* "with the eyes of faith" from the invisible form *believed* to be present on the basis of that perception? "Form" here is used in an analogous way, and the English word, closer to the German *Bild*, brings out a fundamental ambivalence hidden in the German *Gestalt*. In Christ *appears* the form (*Gestalt* here approaches *Bild*); but the mystery of God's internal life we *believe* to possess a Trinitarian *Gestalt* (not *Bild* and hardly form). While fully accepting the presence of a gnosis in faith, we still may distinguish the gnosis of perception from that of "dark knowledge." Here perhaps lies the element of truth in mystical and negative theology not sufficiently appreciated by B.<sup>3</sup> In 3/1:30 he defines *Gestalt*, with Cusanus, as a "contracted" representation of the Absolute. But for the Renaissance mystic the contracted expression never surpasses the *docta ignorantia* in which what we know does not formally appear.

One may even wonder whether the emphasis on form characteristic of Catholic Christianity has not been achieved at the expense of the significance of the Word so strongly stressed in the Protestant tradition. Should we not view the Reformation precisely as an attempt to regain the fulness of the Word which, while transparent in the form, nevertheless resists becoming identified with that form? Remembering how formal perfection killed the religion of classical Greece, one cannot but share the Protestant concern. To be sure, any downgrading of the form in Christianity may result in an extrinsic imputationism or in an empty negative theology. But these are hardly live issues today. The difference between Protestantism and Catholicism can no longer be defined by a contrast between pure faith (in the word) and "form." The time may have arrived for subtler distinctions, both within the word and within

<sup>3</sup> I have dealt with this more extensively in my *The Common Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1984) and in "Negative Theology and Affirmation of the Finite" in *Experience, Reason, God*, ed. Eugene Thomas Long (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1980) 149-57.

the form. B. treats even the *word* of Scripture as a superform which provides entirely its own light; he plays down what is uniquely characteristic of words, i.e., that they require interpretation. The normal means for grasping a form prove insufficient for B. when it comes to Scripture, not, as we might think, because words are by nature *more* open to other words, but because for B. the word of Scripture is *less* than other forms open to the context that surrounds it. No hermeneutic independent of the living faith of the Church can truly enlighten the believer, in his opinion.

While Scripture does indeed have a form, this form is of theological relevance only insofar as it is an indication and a testimony of the form of revelation of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. . . . Scripture itself belongs to the sphere of revelation and, being the normative testimony, it is itself a part of revelation. For this very reason Scripture cannot claim for itself a form which can be understood and apprehended in itself (1:546).

Concretely, the proper form of Scripture cannot be approached by means of independent philological methods. Even the OT is to be understood not through itself but through the NT (1:549). Surprisingly, these principles seem to affect less the reading of the OT than that of the NT. Though the author possesses a command of exegetical methods and a philological erudition enviable even to specialized scholars, they appear to have small impact upon his conclusions. Modern biblical scholarship is mentioned, even used, but rarely taken seriously. The two letters of Peter are attributed to the apostle, the Apocalypse to John, Hebrews to Paul—all without the trace of a doubt about the effect a different authorship might have upon their interpretation (e.g., 1:352, 355, 358, and 3/2 passim). Here, as in some other parts, the reader feels distant from the currents that are moving the theology and even the spiritual life of our contemporaries. The Olympian detachment of an aesthetic construction which isolates the reader from his own life world risks estranging precisely those who feel most impressed by it. One may only hope that they will succeed in overcoming this resistance, for *The Glory of the Lord*, in spite of its flaws, constitutes one of the major theological achievements of our century.



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