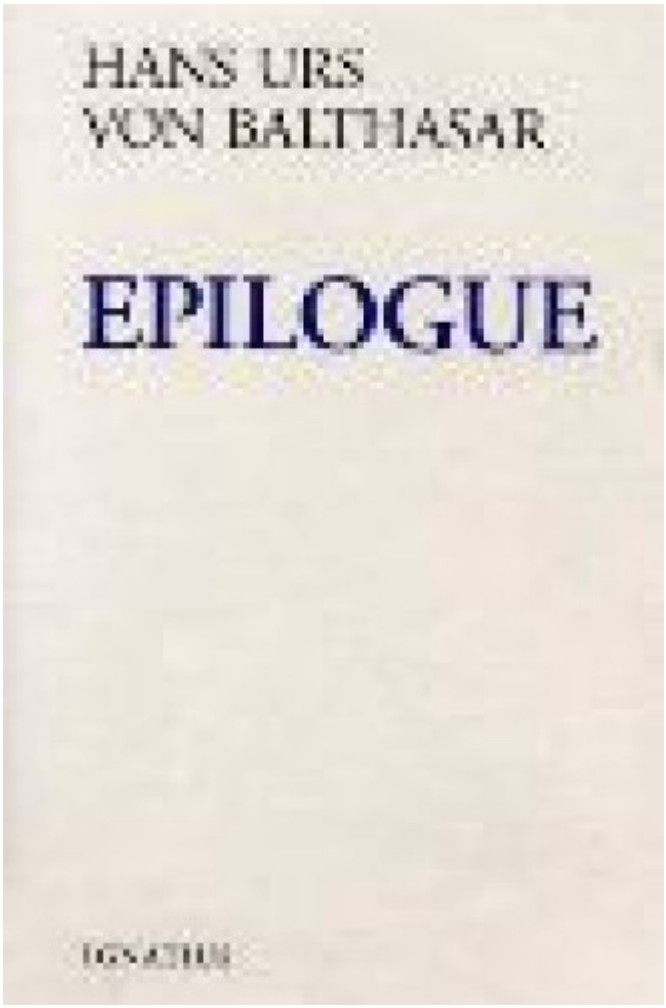
Theo-Logic, Volume 3/Epilogue

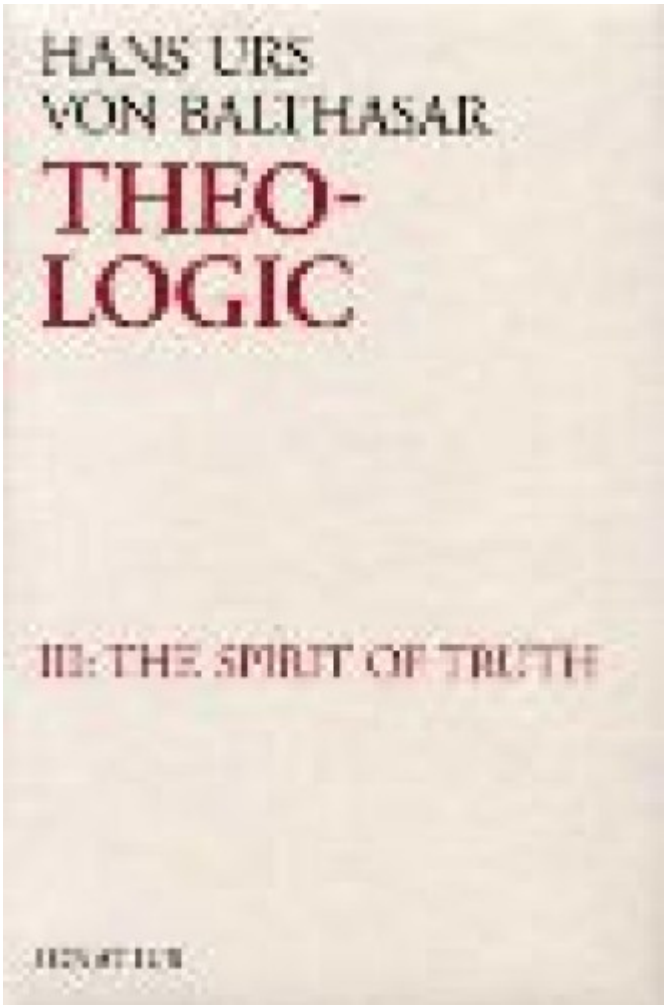
reviewed by William C. Placher in the May 30, 2006 issue

In Review



Epilogue

Hans Urs Von Balthasar
Ignatius



Theo-Logic, Volume 3: The Spirit of Truth

Hans Urs Von Balthasar
Ignatius

These volumes complete the English translation of the major works of one of the greatest and most perplexing theologians of the 20th century. Born in 1905 to a Swiss Catholic family, Hans Urs von Balthasar showed even in childhood remarkable gifts as a pianist and student of philosophy and literature. He joined the Jesuit order in 1929, and he found the textbook theology he was forced to study hopelessly boring. His attitude toward theology began to change when he went to France and came into contact with Henri de Lubac and other “new theologians” who were getting behind the textbooks to rediscover the church fathers—though Balthasar spent more time translating French literature into German than studying theology.

In 1940 he took a job as a student chaplain in Basel, and soon he met Adrienne von Speyr, a Protestant physician whom he quickly converted to Catholicism. Both she and Balthasar describe how she had visions of the passion of Christ, and of Mary, angels and saints (she claimed to have encountered Ignatius Loyola while walking down the street). She accomplished miraculous cures and received the stigmata, the wounds of Christ miraculously manifested on her own body. She composed scripture commentaries by dictating to Balthasar while she was in a trancelike state, as if herself taking dictation from above. For the rest of his life Balthasar insisted that his own work was based on hers and was far less important, but even his admirers (this reviewer emphatically included) find her life story unsettling and her prose unreadable.

Balthasar and Speyr set up a “secular institute”—a community of people committed to celibacy and other traditional monastic vows but holding regular jobs and living “in the world.” Because of his commitment to this community, the Jesuits forced Balthasar to leave the order. Thereafter no bishop would accept him as a priest in his diocese, so Balthasar lived in poverty, moving in for a time with Speyr and her husband. He started a small Catholic press, publishing then-radical works like Hans Küng’s *Justification* and Karl Rahner’s plea for freedom in the church. He wrote a sympathetic study of Karl Barth, which Barth himself much admired but which put its author even farther outside the Catholic theology of the time. Balthasar was not invited to attend Vatican II even as an adviser.

Vatican II affirmed many of the values for which Balthasar had been fighting, but he felt deeply uncomfortable with much of its legacy—or at least with the more liberal interpretations of that legacy. He soon wrote a blistering attack on Rahner’s perspective on the future of Catholicism and argued for a view of the sexes in which men must take the active role and women the passive, but insisted that the passive is not inferior to the active. People began to identify him as a conservative.

Balthasar wrote three great multivolume works: the seven-volume *Theological Aesthetics* (translated into English as *The Glory of the Lord*), the five-volume *Theo-Drama* and the three-volume *Theo-Logic*. Aesthetics is the starting point. Balthasar believed that in thinking about the true, the good and the beautiful, modern philosophy and theology had gone wrong by starting with theories of truth, turning then to ethics and getting to aesthetics at the end if at all. Beauty, he insisted, is not a decorative add-on. Rather, when we see the beauty of a bird in flight, of an act of love, of an old man’s face or of the stars on a winter night, we grasp something of

their essence otherwise unknown to us. Beauty gives us access to reality.

Glory is the theological equivalent of beauty, but it is not quite the same thing. Christ's suffering on the cross, for instance, manifests God's strange glory, but it is not, in human terms, beautiful. Yet Christ is "the form of all forms and the measure of all measures," and "the very apex and archetype of beauty in the world." Tracing the theme of divine glory from Greek drama to the Bible to the history of theology to contemporary philosophy (he really had read everything), Balthasar showed how, when seen from a christological starting point, the world reveals God.

The five volumes of *Theo-Drama* tackle the vexing problem of divine power and human freedom in an original way, through the analogy of a dramatic production. Like an author or director, God specifies what is to happen on stage while we, like actors, play our parts more or less well. To sin is to act one's part so badly that the power of the play is in danger of becoming lost. Yet it never gets entirely lost. Like Barth, from whom he learned so much, Balthasar maintained that we can and should hope for (though not take for granted) the ultimate salvation of all.

For Balthasar the basis of that hope lay in his understanding of Holy Saturday, a radical reinterpretation of the creedal assertion that Christ descended into hell. According to the traditional Catholic view, shared by Luther and many other Protestants, Christ marched triumphantly into the realm of the dead to free the righteous figures of Old Testament history. Balthasar understood the descent into hell as the lowest point of Christ's self-abasement. After the crucifixion and before the resurrection, Christ traveled to the place of those who have ultimately rejected God, not in triumph but in solidarity with those who are separated from God.

> He is (out of an ultimate love however) dead together with them. And exactly in that way he disturbs the absolute loneliness striven for by the sinner: the sinner, who wants to be "damned" apart from God, finds God again in his loneliness, but God in the absolute weakness of love.

God preserves our freedom by letting us reject him, but then God comes to be with us in the dark place of our rejection, so that it isn't so dark after all.

Already in his late 70s when he began writing *Theo-Logic*, Balthasar shortened the task by republishing *The Truth of the World*, which had originally appeared in 1947, as the first volume. The second volume focuses on Christology and the third on the

Holy Spirit. Parts of this work address traditional theological topics as explicitly as anything he wrote, making it more clear than ever just how trinitarian his thought is.

The heart of Balthasar's trinitarian theology lies in a focus on God's love. The Father gives away everything to the Son, the Son descends into the hell of absolute separation from the Father, and the Spirit enters into the ugliness of our sinful hearts. But because God is love, these acts of love do not destroy divinity; rather, they most fully manifest it.

In volume 3 of *Theo-Logic*, Balthasar argues that Hegel, that most trinitarian of philosophers, got God wrong by understanding the Trinity as a grasping to fulfill incompleteness rather than as pure self-giving—as *eros* rather than *agape*. Using a phrase from Irenaeus, Balthasar describes the Son and Spirit as the Father's "two hands" doing the divine work of love in the world. The Spirit works objectively in the church—in its hierarchy, liturgy, sacraments and law—and subjectively in prayer, forgiveness and Christian witness.

In the *Epilogue* Balthasar picks up some key themes of his whole work, moving from the "forecourt" of universal human questions to the "threshold" of Christian apologetics to the "cathedral" of trinitarian and christological theology, arguing that more comprehensive interpretations are to be preferred to the less comprehensive, so that "whoever sees more is right."

For those just beginning to read Balthasar, these final volumes are not the place to start. *The von Balthasar Reader*, edited by Medard Kehland and Werner Löser (Crossroad, 1982), provides a good selection of his works. *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, edited by Edward T. Oakes and David Moss (Cambridge University Press, 2004), offers helpful interpretations from leading Balthasar scholars.

Theologians as varied as Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams and the brilliant French philosopher-theologian Jean-Luc Marion, who holds Paul Tillich's old chair at the University of Chicago, are great admirers of Balthasar. His work offers openings to dialogue with the Eastern churches, and John Paul II identified him as his favorite theologian and planned to make him a cardinal (Balthasar died, in 1988, a few days before the scheduled ceremony). Yet it's my sense that an ambitious young Catholic theologian might be better off not specializing in Balthasar these days. He is too conservative on some issues for the progressives and too bold in theological

innovation for cautious conservatives.

Still, references to Balthasar are cropping up in all sorts of theology, and true theological genius is so rare that we cannot afford to ignore it when it comes along. Balthasar will be read a hundred years from now, but whether he will be influential ten years from now is harder to say, so I will let Balthasar himself have the last word: “This . . . work can hardly be more than a bottle thrown into the sea. To find land and have someone actually come across it, now that would be a miracle. But sometimes even miracles happen.”