"On Frederick Bauerschmidt's 'Theo-Drama and Political Theology'"

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Frederick Bauerschmidt's thought-provoking essay raises a question that the rapidly expanding literature on the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar has not yet addressed: "Does Church's fostering of saintliness or discipleship embody 'a genuine politics?'" Bauerschmidt, the author of a forthcoming monograph on the political theology of Julian of Norwich, not only answers the question in the affirmative but answers affirmatively in such a way that the distinctively Christian form of saintliness or discipleship is no less spiritual by virtue of being wholly political.¹ In this note, I will briefly analyze the nature of the question which Bauerschmidt has placed before Hans Urs von Balthasar's theology and evaluate his reasons for claiming that von Balthasar's response to the question, at least in his treatment of political theology in the *Theo-Drama*, is inadequate.²


² Bauerschmidt states that von Balthasar's theology of the secular institute *de facto* eludes the criticism which he levels against his *ex professo* statements on theology and politics. While generous, this is nonetheless an odd claim given that von Balthasar and Adrienne von Speyr saw their joint theological labors and the founding of the institute to be so closely related. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Our Task* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984).
Bauerschmidt is convinced that Balthasar's category of theological dramatics is indispensable for a truly Christian political theology, in his words, for "a political theologia viatorum." Drawing upon the Hegelian distinction adopted by von Balthasar between "epic" and "lyric" politics, he endorses von Balthasar's standpoint in highlighting the distinctive way in which Christian communities are poised between and beyond totalitarian concepts of collective order and romantic exaltations of individual freedom. Again acknowledging his debt to von Balthasar, Bauerschmidt posits theo-dramatic politics as the only possible response to the Titanistic political projects of modernity. A theo-dramatic alternative centered on the person of Christ opens up an imaginative space in which the community of disciples share a real form of existence, a genuine communion. Different forms of action will emerge out of this communion. Christian disciples give witness not only in non-violent resistance to the violent arms of the state but, a fortiori, through those small but highly expressive enactments of agapic co-existence which mark this pilgrim state--"baptizing and breaking bread, caring for the sick and visiting the imprisoned."

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3 Bauerschmidt maintains that Christian discipleship is "not simply a sublation" of the poles of order and freedom but their "the dramatic sublation." In the background of these remarks is the struggle to adopt Hegelian polarities without inadvertently succumbing to a Hegelian synthesis. Bauerschmidt, following J.B. Quash, suggests that von Balthasar may have succumbed to this temptation, a thesis which I do not have time to explore in this note.
Despite his espousal of a theo-dramatic politics, Bauerschmidt is nonetheless troubled by certain nuances that remain in von Balthasar’s approach to the *polis* that stands before the event of the cross. First, he worries that von Balthasar's rejection of modern Titanism may lead von Balthasar to underplay the fact that Jesus has given his followers a way that can be lived not just for individuals but for the community of disciples as a whole. Second, he is also concerned that von Balthasar's comments on the political significance of the cross seem banal. Bauerschmidt focusses on a section of the *Theo-drama* in which von Balthasar worked out his critique of Jürgen Moltmann's this-worldly retrieval of Jewish messianism. In this context Bauerschmidt asks whether von Balthasar's "prioritizing of the vertical over the horizontal does not end up slackening the tensions of historical existence, leading to a Christian practice that is so thoroughly internalized that it can avoid the imperative to manifest crucified love to the world by means of a historically and communally embodied tradition." Third, Bauerschmidt joins those critics who claim that von Balthasar puts too much emphasis on Jesus' "hour" of suffering and not enough on his preaching of the Kingdom before his death. Finally, Bauerschmidt wonders whether "too exclusive a stress on the doctrine of the Trinity" may result in paying short shrift to the fallenness of human society and the marked domination of the social order by what Augustine called the *libido dominandi*.

is perpetuated through a cultural mechanism of scapegoating.\footnote{Von Balthasar actually praises the scapegoat mechanism in the \textit{Theo-Drama}: “Girard’s project is certainly the most dramatic that can be found in contemporary soteriology, or anywhere in theology.” (\textit{Theodramatik}, III, \textit{Die Handlung}, [Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1980], 277) On the other hand, von Balthasar also wonders whether Girard’s undertaking is in some ways comparable to those of Teilhard de Chardin and Karl Rahner in that Girard attempts to construct a comprehensive christology out of a general anthropology. Ibid., 276.}
How can von Balthasar make such a noteworthy contribution to the project of envisioning a political *theologia viatorum* and yet (at least in Bauerschmidt’s estimation) fall flat on his face when it comes to addressing the practical questions about the relationship of theo-drama and political theology? I will confine my response to just a few remarks. Bauerschmidt seems to misinterpret von Balthasar’s distinction between the old and new aeon. The theo-dramatic usage of the distinction needs to be situated in the context of von Balthasar’s 1983 critique of the political theology developed in Jürgen Moltmann’s *Theology of Hope* (1964) and *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (1980). Many of the negative references to a this-worldly Jewish messianism in the fifth of the English volumes of the *Theo-Drama* are intended as a counterpoint to the insufficiently critical appropriation of Ernst Bloch’s revisionary Marxist messianism on the part of Moltmann. Beyond this, von Balthasar’s decision to prioritize the vertical over the horizontal needs no qualification. In his evaluation of the theo-dramatics of liberation, von Balthasar emphasizes the utter helplessness in the eyes of the world of Christ’s victory on the cross. Von Balthasar puts the question back to the political and liberation theologians and especially the practitioners of the politics of non-violence, “Can the cross of Christ be transposed into an effective, inner worldly ‘tactic?’” Von Balthasar is by means setting himself in opposition to those who struggle for social justice on behalf of the poor and oppressed. In fact, he identifies just this task as “a strict, Christian duty.” But unless those engaged in such a struggle give priority to the vertical over the horizontal the impression is going to arise that one’s ultimate freedom

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7 Ibid., 453.
lies elsewhere than in the person of Jesus Christ. When von Balthasar states that Christians still inhabit the inherited “old order” of power politics and dare not “theologize” the self-enclosed and preliminary character of this reality into oblivion, he is not in any way denying the paradoxical position of the Church with respect to the world.\footnote{Ibid., 452.} On the contrary, he is simply pointing us to those parables preached during Jesus’ earthly ministry in which Jesus taught us what can and cannot be achieved by means of this-worldly power. To invert the world’s tactics in the name of paradox into a program for non-violent resistance is still to cling to a tactical rather than a properly trinitarian standpoint.

The very logic of von Balthasar’s trinitarian and “vertical” theology of the powerless, crucified One requires support for those disciples of Christ who devote their lives to the reconfiguration of the social order. Most striking is von Balthasar’s unqualified praise for Madeleine Délbrel, a French convert to Catholicism who collaborated her whole life with Communists in the Parisian suburb of Ivry. About her model of discipleship, von Balthasar states:
Although it never occurred to her to oppose her own efforts to the parish organizations, but rather continually worked along with them, there still there came about in 1944 a kind of second conversion [in Dêlbrel's life], in which God took complete preponderance over everything, even if this "everything" came to include both the Christian and the communist concern for the welfare of humanity. [For Dêlbrel] "God was and remains for me the blinding miracle. For me it was and remains impossible, to put God on one side of the same scale and on the other all the goods of the world, my own and those of the whole human race." She did not reject the ideal of Communism, but heightened it and included it into the demands of the Sermon of the Mount, in the program of a church that nourishes from the inmost sources of faith, love, and hope and turns itself into God's gift to the world.9

Dêlbrel was for von Balthasar not the exception but the rule, i.e., the rule of modern Christian faith.10 In the "lay styles" of modern Christian faith, there is no mediation between the Word of God as it is handed on by the Petrine Church and the agonistic struggle of incorporating the Word Marianly into daily life— not just into one's own life but also in the communal life partaken through the sacrament of the sister or brother who stands at one's side.11


11 See, for example, Die Gottesfrage des heutigen Menschen (Vienna: Herold, 1956). ET: The God
Bauerschmidt offered his criticisms of certain aspects of von Balthasar’s theology with the hope that they would be received in friendship. The high overarching question posed by his essay can certainly be taken in that spirit. Moreover, he has lighted a still unanswered theological mandate to explore the relationship between von Balthasar’s "lay styles" and contemporary political and liberation theologies. For these friendly admonitions, all admirers of von Balthasar's theology should be genuinely grateful to him.