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"Experience as a Theological Category: Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Encounter with God's Image"

Peter J. Casarella, DePaul University

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Experience as a theological category: Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Christian encounter with God's Image

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The call to become a follower of Christ is in the first instance a call to accept the obedience of the Son to the Father.

In volume one of *The Glory of the Lord*, Hans Urs von Balthasar argues that the notion of experience can be understood only by entering into the form of Christian faith. In other words, the light of faith actually creates its own experience. In these brief remarks, I would like to examine Balthasar's theory of experience in order to show that such an explicitly theological approach need not entail any form of fideism or theological positivism as long as it remains open to perhaps variant expressions of fundamental theology.

The general argument I would like to defend involves four separate but interrelated claims. First, the theological concept of experience for Balthasar is intelligible only when shaped by the perception of the basic form of Christian revelation. Second, there are pre-theological aspects of perceiving the form which argue for its basic and universal intelligibility, e.g., the experience of the expressive image or symbol and the experience of koinotic love. Third, both of these pre-theological elements allow for and even demand an ever more expressive Christological concentration in order to display what is fully known about the God of Jesus Christ. Fourth, this theological concept of experience cannot be reduced to either an experiential-expressive or a cultural-linguistic model of religion, for the concrete form revealed in the experience of faith ultimately belies both of these categories.

I

The development of a theological concept of experience rests upon an expansion of the domain of faith itself. Louis Dupré describes the relation of experience and the light of faith in Balthasar's thought as follows:

The union of object and act of faith, as Balthasar presents it, rests upon another theologoumenon: faith, far from standing opposed to experience . . . 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.

Dupré correctly identifies von Balthasar's recovery of the Patristic and Orthodox understanding of the intimate union of faith and experience. What is important for our purposes is that the experience created by faith cannot be separated

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1 These remarks were presented to the second meeting of the North American Balthasar Seminar. Apart from some minor revisions, no attempt has been made to change its original form, i.e., a set of theses meant to start a conversation about Balthasar's concept of experience.

2 *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, Vol. 1: Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982), 228-29 (= Herrlichkeit, Band I [Einsiedeln/Trier: Johannes, 1961], 220). Henceforth, all quotations from this volume will be given as GL, along with a reference to the German edition. The translations are my own.

3 By "variant expressions of fundamental theology," I am referring to Balthasar's claim that the openness of the subjective knowledge defies a system. Cf. GL 417-19 (German: 402-4) and 424-25 (410).

from the form of God’s revelation as it appears in the surrender of the whole person to God—intellectually, volitionally, and emotionally—in the act of faith. The form which creates this experience has a distinct character which is neither fully linguistic nor fully apophatic. The formal object which creates the experience of faith is the Logos itself, as the Fathers of the Church such as Origen and Clement of Alexandria exhibited.\(^5\) As uncreated and eternal light, the wisdom of the Logos surpasses all finite forms of expression infinitely. As the form of all perceptible and intelligible expression, the Logos condescends to finite forms of expression, which includes but is not limited to the grammatically ruled utterances of human speech.

The experience of faith has therefore both supernatural and natural forms which can be distinguished only provisionally. The supernatural form of the experience is the outpouring gift of the Holy Spirit. The grace of the Holy Spirit creates a connatural form through which faith is experienced.\(^6\) As Balthasar states:

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 apprehend this form, the faculty that can taste it and find its joy in it, that can understand it and perceive its inner truth and rightness.\(^7\)

In a genuinely theological aesthetics, the natural form of the experience of faith, presupposed and perfected by the grace of the Holy Spirit, is the sensuous perception of form. Two ways in which this form is perceived are found in the expressive image and through kenotic love.

\(^5\) Cf. GL, 136-41 (128-33).
\(^6\) For Balthasar, every experience of faith is an experience of the Spirit. Nonetheless, he cautiously guards against modern versions of the teachings of the Messalians and Euchites. Condemned at the Council of Ephesus, these sects effectively diminished the importance of the Church’s sacraments and of Christian asceticism by arguing that the only way to expel the intrinsic evil residing in humanity was through constant prayer. According to them, the Holy Spirit dwells experientially in the soul only as a result of human prayer. Cf. GL, 269 (258), and New Euchaites (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 40.
\(^7\) GL, 247 (237).

II

Absolutely crucial to Balthasar’s fundamental theology is the distinction between theological aesthetics and aesthetic theology. If we are going to claim, as Balthasar does, that the sensuous perception of the image or of kenotic love in any way lays the foundations for the claims of Christian faith and of dogmatic theology, then the philosophical theories of image and love cannot be based upon a purely inner-worldly scheme. This is not the proper place to adumbrate Balthasar’s contention that the theologian has the task to be the guardian of metaphysics; however, let it suffice to say that image and love are both aesthetic moments which display what we might call the fundamental openness of the person to the mystery of Being.\(^8\)

Image (Bild) is what attracts us and draws us into the perceptible form of the divine self-revelation. According to Balthasar, Er-fahrung, ex-perience, is also Ein-fahrung, interiorization.\(^9\) The interiorization of the image is not a self-reflexive turn to the limitations of purely subjective experience. By viewing the world symbolically, the subject sees itself participating through its own likeness in the divine archetype (Urbild).\(^10\) As in Gregory of Nyssa’s theory of participation, the image is dynamically drawn from within the spatio-temporal confines of history to an always greater union with its eternally begotten archetype.\(^11\) The expression of the divine archetype in finite images points to a unique exemplary form which measures all forms. Against all subordinationist schemes, the expression of the singular divine form in an image is not a diminution of its power. Bonaventure, in a passage cited by Balthasar, states succinctly the core of this theory of the expressive image: “The likeness which is the truth itself in its expressive power . . .

\(^8\) Cf. Ibid., 239 (230-31).
\(^9\) Cf. Ibid., 222 (214), 228 (220), 239 (230).
better expresses a thing than the thing expresses itself, for the thing itself receives the power of expression from it." 

The contribution of Balthasar's theory of the image to contemporary theology has not yet been adequately considered. For Balthasar, the perception of the image is thoroughly incarnate and never merely spiritualized, as Bernard of Clairvaux and his followers recognized with the insight that sapientia, true wisdom, is based upon sapor, taste. Perhaps the most important contribution of Balthasar's theological aesthetics to contemporary theology and exegesis is his recovery of the spiritual senses, a doctrine first elaborated by Origen and later reformulated by Bonaventure and St. Ignatius. Without a proper understanding of the sensuous nature of our perception of the divine, Western theology threatens to lose grasp of its basic sacramental and liturgical origins. Moreover, no one, to my knowledge, has ever thought to compare Balthasar's theology of the expressive image, rooted in the theologies of Gregory of Nyssa, Bonaventure, and even in Goethe's color theory, with Karl Rahner's theology of the symbol. Both Rahner and Balthasar aim to recast Catholic theology in terms of a renewed metaphysics of the expressive image, yet very different theological and, especially, soteriological positions emerge. Neither Balthasar nor Rahner, in my opinion, is deducing in the strict sense Christian doctrine from metaphysics; however, it would still be worthwhile to investigate whether their theological differences cohere with differences in their articulation of the centrality of the symbol to Catholic theology.

Without any further corrective, the theory of the expressive image might still imply that there is a direct, comparable proportion between the infinite archetype of all visible expression and finite forms of its expression. Such an understanding of image and archetype would not only contradict the intentions of the Greek Fathers but would even more strongly militate against Balthasar's tireless insistence upon the formula from the Fourth Lateran Council: "For every similarity between Creator and creature, there is a greater dissimilarity." 16 Balthasar's understanding of kenotic love provides the resources to guard against such misappropriations. The expression of an archetype in an image is neither a necessary emanation from the one nor a dialectical movement of absolute reason itself. Kenotic love is unacted personal love. The divine archetype therefore "chooses" in absolute freedom to surrender to finite form. In the Christian tradition, the name for this form of self-communication is kenotic or self-emptying love, deriving from the christological hymn of Philippians 2. Far from erecting an immanentist or, as Heidegger would claim, "ontological" schema of creator and creature, Balthasar sees the experience of faith as grounded in the free but not self-contradictory choice of the ineffably absolute to be expressed in perceptible form.

The appropriation of this insight has a concrete correlate in the sphere of human experience. Kenotic love is never experienced in terms of feeling or sentimentality. The experience of kenotic love is the experience of resolving to be receptive. 17 In his Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius describes this basic stance as indifferentia, actively preparing to cooperate with self, possession of self, in general." And ibid., 234-35.) Within this analogical structure, God's personal self-communication in an incarnate Word nonetheless remains the most fundamental and unsubstitutable instance of symbolic self-expression. In GL, vol. 1, by contrast, Balthasar starts and ends with the self-disclosure of the objective evidence itself. He views symbolic expression as the emptying of the mystery of Being into symbolic form and therefore a form that can be perceived by the senses. As far as I can tell, the symbolic self-expression of the self-subsisting subject for Balthasar is not, pace Rahner, constitutive of the initial vision of symbolic self-disclosure.


17Cf. GL, 245-46 (236-37). See also New Elucidations, 26. "It can be said with certainty that there is no Christian experience of God that is not the fruit of the conquest of self-will, or at least of the decision to conquer it."
the call which one receives. When describing the experience of faith, Balthasar does not elaborate on the foundational aspects of kenotic love, as he does in *Love Alone*.[18] In the experience of faith, kenotic love is introduced to show that when the act of faith incorporates experience, the experience has a very concrete and even objective form. The specificity of this experience, i.e., the experience of self-sacrificing surrender, would argue against at least two opposed definitions of the experience of faith: a definition based upon mere feeling (even Schleiermacher’s “absolute feeling of dependence”), and a definition based upon blind or rigid obedience which is not borne out of love at all.[19]

III

The third thesis is that both the theory of the image and the theory of kenotic love allow for and even demand an ever more expressive christological concentration if one is to permit what is fully known about the God of Jesus Christ to be revealed in concrete form. The christological concentration of the expressive image is found throughout Scripture even if its classical expression appears in the literature of the Johannine community.[20] Jesus is the theophany itself of God.[21] This means that in the visible form of the revelation of Jesus Christ, God has been revealed as fully not-other. Christ, the complete and perfected human, constitutes the entirety of the experience of who God is.[22] He unifies and orders all images of God in creation to himself.[23] The “image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15) is therefore an image beyond all images. Moreover, when Jesus states in the Gospel of John that the Father and he are one, it is revealed that the appearance of Christ must also transcend the created relation of archetype and image.[24] According to Balthasar, the relationship of the Father and Son embodies an absolutely singular, *hypostatic* union of archetype and image.[25]

There is also the christological concentration of kenotic love. By itself, the christological form of the image still threatens to be dissolved into an inner-worldly aesthetic theology. Without kenotic love, the perceptible form of Christ as the absolute symbol of God can become static and unmediated. The true symbolism of Christ invites the participation of the believer in a concrete form of experience. According to Balthasar, one gains true knowledge of God and of oneself only through freely chosen suffering, i.e., self-sacrifice without either internal or external coercion.[26] Christ is the true man, especially in his experience of suffering. As Balthasar states, Cross and Resurrection, understood as the love and glory of the Lord who bled to death and was forsaken, renders the hieroglyph of humanity decipherable.[27] Christ’s experience in its absoluteness may even include (and this would also be paradigmatic for Christian experience) the non-experience of God.[28] Here one could mention Balthasar’s sometimes controversial defense of the abandonment of the Son by the Father in Christ’s descent into hell. In any case, the call to become a follower of Christ is in the first instance a call to accept the obedience of the Son to the Father. In other words, “God needs selfless vessels into which he can pour his essential selflessness.”[29]

IV

Finally, I would like to address the question of where Balthasar’s theology of experience would fit into the context of current North American theology. David Schindler has already stated, correctly in my view, that if Balthasar’s theology occupies a space “between” the critical correlationism of David Tracy and the alleged anti-correlationism of George Lindbeck, then that “between” is no mere accommodation but the result of the rejection of presuppositions that are common
to both positions. One is tempted to draw a similar conclusion concerning Balthasar’s notion of experience; however, much depends upon how one defines one’s terms. Lindbeck, for example, argues in The Nature of Doctrine that the means of communication and expression of a religion are a precondition, a kind of quasi-transcendental a priori, for the possibility of experience. For Lindbeck the cultural-linguistic form of religious experience conditions the general human experience of the believer in a way that is more determinative than the conditioning of the former by the latter. This view does bear at least a strong resemblance to Balthasar’s contention that faith forms experience. For Balthasar there is no fully neutral human experience to which specifically Christian experiences are then extrinsically correlated. The experience of faith is shaped by what is seen by the eyes of faith. However, as should be clear from what was demonstrated above, this experience displays perceptible analogies to more general experiences of human existence, namely, the experience of the image and the experience of self-emptying love. Even the faith which creates experience, therefore, seeks intelligibility outside of the vision of faith.

Where Balthasar departs from Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic model is not in his defense against the reproach of fideism but in his theory of language. When Balthasar states that faith forms experience, he is assuming a different relationship of language to experience than does Lindbeck. The experience of faith, for Balthasar, eludes even the most non-reductionist “thick description” of the grammar of faith. The expression of Christian faith in linguistically determined forms of life is just one appearance of the very center of Christian faith. Since the argument cannot be developed at length here, I will simply appeal to what Aldo Moda and Rowan Williams have called Balthasar’s “ontology of language.”

A Theological Anthropology, this more intrinsically soteriological understanding of the origin and meaning of human language is developed within the context of a historically mediated theology of the incarnate Word. In brief, Balthasar contends that human language models the self-expression of the divine Logos analogically, inasmuch as, while concepts are mirrored in verbal expression as in an image, the dynamic spirit of a living language can never be fully exhausted by its uniquely human means of outward expression. Similarly, in treating “the experience of faith” in volume one of The Glory of the Lord, Balthasar lauds Gustav Siewerth’s theory that words in their very essence mediate the polarity between sensuous signs and intelligible expression.

Like Tracy (at least in Blessed Rage for Order but arguably in the later, more hermeneutical works as well), Balthasar sees the task of fundamental theology as intrinsic to any systematic elaboration of Christian faith. Unlike Tracy, there is no overarching method of critical correlation guiding Balthasar’s theology of experience. In his inaugural address, Tracy himself recognizes the difference between the two approaches. He classifies Balthasar’s “Bonaventurian” programme for theological aesthetics as a resource for addressing the correlationist’s need to develop criteria of appropriateness to the tradition. As I see it, Balthasar’s theology of experience rests upon criteria that are both more concrete and potentially more comprehensive than “appropriateness” to the tradition. Instead of critical correlation, Balthasar recommends a hermeneutics of integration. Tracy’s method of critical correlation assumes that the sources of fundamental theology and the

(which includes the reference to Moda’s monograph): “Language, for Balthasar, is the means of opening the human subject to ‘being,’ it is the sacrament, we might say, of the totality to which we belong.”


Cf. ibid., 224 (= Das Ganze im Fragment, 250).

GL, 593-99 (380-85).


Ibid., 557.

Cf. GL, 417-19 (402-4).
sources for identifying appropriateness to the tradition are from the outset extrinsic to one another. Balthasar offers a notion of experience which is not simply "adequate" to the tradition. He begins with the manifold appearances of the experience of faith in the theologies of Scripture and in the spiritual life of the Christian tradition. His starting point is not pluralism but the pluriformity, if you will, through which God's personal and triune revelation is visibly expressed. Neither Tracy nor Balthasar would be content with a theological hermeneutic which denies the transcendent horizon within and against which the divine Logos is experienced faithfully by the believer.\textsuperscript{41} However, the reason Balthasar's theological aesthetic never approaches an inner-worldly hermeneutical aesthetic is that the multiplicity of faith's images never blurs the objective evidence revealed from within that experience. In his words:

When God draws near to us in Jesus Christ, even desiring to dwell in us, it does not mean that he forfeits any of his grandeur and incomprehensibility. Instead, these attributes, which until then were hardly more than abstractions to us, suddenly acquire a splendor that makes them concrete for us at the moment when we realize that we are called and are children of the divine Father.\textsuperscript{42}

Meta-anthropology and Christology: On the philosophy of Hans Urs von Balthasar

Martin Bieler

Philosophy has to surpass itself toward theology, for the self-revelation of absolute being is the inmost completion of philosophy.

Hans Urs von Balthasar was not only one of the most eminent theologians of the twentieth century, but was also an excellent philosopher.\textsuperscript{1} The importance of Balthasar's pursuit of philosophy is illustrated by his pointed remark that "theology cannot exist without philosophy."\textsuperscript{2} In the following essay, I will at-

\textsuperscript{41} Cf. David Tracy, \textit{Plurality and Ambiguity} (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 110.
\textsuperscript{42} \textit{New Illuminations}, 45.


\textsuperscript{2} Theologik, 1: Wahrheit der Welt (Einsiedeln, 1985), VII. Referred to in the following as TL.