

## ***The Social Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar***

-by Stratford Caldecott  
*Plater College, Oxford*

Hans Urs von Balthasar is one of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century, but often said to have no "social theology". The article seeks to correct that impression. His social theology may be discerned in his practical and theoretical work for the Secular Institutes, his critique of post-Enlightenment culture and thinking (which provide the context for his remarks on Liberation theology) and the Christocentric basis for ethics, including social ethics. In *Theo-Drama*, he specifically addresses the nature of the social sciences in the light of his own Trinitarian and "kenotic" metaphysics.

Through the well-known influence of his ideas not only on the Pope but also on Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, with whom he founded the journal *Communio*, and thus indirectly on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which consolidates the teaching of the Council and the postconciliar popes, the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (d. 1988) has without doubt helped to shape the form of Catholicism and the direction of its development well into the new century. It is often alleged, however, that Balthasar was too "patrician", too classically European, to have a "social theology". In this respect his influence is therefore deemed mainly to have functioned as a counterweight to the more politically radical ideas emerging in the wake of the Council, especially from Latin America. It is the purpose of this article to begin to correct this impression, and to propose that Balthasar's work actually suggests some interesting new lines of thought for Catholics in the social sciences. But Balthasar's social theology can easily be missed if you are looking for something conventionally left-wing. It is of a piece with his mystical theology, and it has at least one very practical expression, namely the Community of St. John that he cofounded with Adrienne von Speyr.

### ***The Implications of Love***

Adrienne von Speyr herself is something of an enigma. She was a Protestant who converted to Catholicism under Balthasar's influence, a medical doctor (and incidentally a married woman) who became one of the greatest mystics of the modern Church.<sup>1</sup> Balthasar was her confessor and confidante, and he even started a publishing company partly to print the extraordinary writings that flowed out of her in a state of holy trance, in which she would

comment upon the Scriptures, or recount visions of the saints who visited her or whom she visited in heaven. Every Easter she would experience the Passion and the descent into Hell. She was a stigmatic and miracle worker, but all of this side of her life was secret and unknown even to her closest family until after her death. It was therefore St. Ignatius of Loyola himself, the sixteenth-century founder of the Jesuits, who told Balthasar through Speyr that they had to start a new religious community. The Jesuits, perhaps understandably, would not accept this, but nevertheless gave permission for Balthasar to leave the Society of Jesus in order to found the Community of St. John. (The Community still exists and is growing, though it does not advertise its existence or proseletyise.)

Balthasar and Speyr believed that the time of the great religious orders and their style of withdrawal from the world was giving way to a time of new communities within the Church that engage more directly with the world in order to transform it. These new types of world community, half way between the religious state and the lay state, became known in Canon Law as "secular institutes". It was a good thing, Balthasar believed, that the Church no longer wielded the temporal power that had once been claimed by the popes, and that she had renounced forever the use of force and fear to achieve her ends. Christendom was at times a noble experiment, but it had failed to give clear expression to many of the priorities of the Gospel. The disaster of the Crusades had shown how easily even the greatest of Christians (such as St. Bernard of Clairvaux) could be deceived into confusing earthly with spiritual warfare. What was needed now was a new nonviolent chivalry, a new kind of consecration in the midst of secular life. That is what his Community of St. John was intended to be, and the same thing is of course happening in many other places and forms, as the Holy Spirit moves the Church towards new ways of being Christian and raises up fresh saints as exemplars and agents of change. Balthasar's book *Tragedy Under Grace*, about the work of Reinhold Schneider, is "written for and dedicated to the Secular Institutes," and along with *The Christian State of Life* forms the richest resource we have for understanding his perspective on the secular world and its transformation.<sup>2</sup>

In the book on Schneider, Balthasar tries to summarize the "experience of the West"--that is, of the European Christian civilization--through a reflection on the work of a German writer who had struggled throughout his life with the problem of Christian existence in the world, especially in history, art and politics. It is the soul of the poet, then, to which Balthasar turns to penetrate the essence of history, not to the researches of the social scientist; psychology is described early on as "the wretched and pernicious surrogate of faith" (p. 53). For the poet understands these events from the inside. Schneider's overwhelming concerns are with the failure of Christendom, indeed with the failure of all attempts to exercise power virtuously in a fallen universe, and with

the consciences of kings. Political power is not necessarily demonic--there can be good, even saintly, kings (Alfred, Louis)--but the history of Christian civilization is centered on the Cross, and involves a struggle in which grace triumphs only through utter darkness. A once-Christian people learn through the outpouring of blood and tears to be ashamed of war. It begins to dawn on them that slavery contradicts the dignity of man. But at the very same time in their history, the modern state and modern technology visit war and slavery upon them in new and unavoidable forms. The nearer one comes to a solution, Balthasar indicates, the further away from it one seems to be driven as the final conflict draws near.

The book culminates in a remarkable passage--too long to quote here--in which Balthasar/Schneider locates the soul of Europe and of the Church herself in the "spirit of chivalry, the "spirit of knighthood" (see especially pp. 247-9, 255-65) which in essence is the service of the sacred through the following of Christ. This following takes the form of the Cross through the threefold renunciation in the evangelical counsels (poverty, chastity and obedience), the pattern of holiness even for those who remain in the secular world of family and politics. Thus the Schneider book connects directly with *The Christian State of Life*, which is largely concerned with precisely this. The latter begins with a study of the calling to love, which lies at the heart of the Gospel and of all Christian social teaching. It then presents a theory of the states of life (lay, religious, priestly) as they develop after the Fall, after the loss of the "original state" in which such distinctions were contained only implicitly and in an undifferentiated form. It is worth noting several particular discussions, which there is no space to summarize adequately here: that of private ownership (pp. 103-20), that of sex and family (pp. 224-49), and that of the secular institutes (pp. 345-64).

Balthasar addressed the question of liberation theology specifically in a book called *Liberation Theology in Latin America*. We cannot hope, he wrote there, that this world will become the Kingdom of God, an earthly utopia. All apparent progress is deeply ambiguous. Jesus sides with the poor, but he does not found a political party against the rich. Nor must the Church form such a party, or refuse the Eucharist to the rich just because they are rich. The Church must not use coercion or violence, but education and persuasion, to convert and transform the world. She must promote universal education and the democratic assumption of personal responsibility within the political process. This alone can overcome the principle of dictatorships steered from the Right or the Left. He concludes as follows:

Today more than ever competent Christians should become active in the social, economic and political sectors of society, where one necessarily confronts hard contradictions and struggles, and where compromise always represents the best solution. . . . The evangelical "peacemaker" has to set up

shop precisely between employers and employees, political factions and economic interest groups. Only by the--dramatic!--collaboration of all will the structures be "converted" from their "sinfulness" and changed more effectively than by violent overthrows or brutal nationalizations behind which there are very often goals sought in utopian and unrealistic fashion.

The urgency of the practical concerns of liberation theology is not called into question by any criticism that may be made of it. But the totality of God's revelation to the world can in no way be reduced to political or social liberation, nor even to the general concept of liberation. Liberation theology has its specific place in a theology of the Kingdom of God. It is one aspect of the whole of theology and, in practical terms, it demands the Church's commitment to the shaping of the world as a whole in a manner conforming with Christ."<sup>3</sup>

In general, Balthasar seems to recognize what the liberation theologians have called structural sin in the political institutions and economic structures that constitute our present world order, while insisting that the sin belongs not to the structures themselves but to the persons who share responsibility for maintaining and perpetuating these (even if only by tolerating them.) On the one hand, he says, it would be simplistic to condemn as sinful all those complex phenomena that go under the name of capitalism. On the other hand, the ideology of the free market, which makes a priority of economic growth and fosters the mentality of consumerism, is in some ways as serious a threat to civilization as communism ever was. The problem is how to work for alternatives when the rules of the economic game are dictated by the powerful. Almost all we can do is encourage new kinds of cooperation and a generosity on a relatively small scale through local communities, starting with the family or the religious house. Balthasar's own community is only one example. Others would include Dorothy Day and her Catholic Worker movement, and Madeleine Delbr el, who worked at street level among the communists and the poor of the Ivry district of Paris until her death in 1964. Balthasar's social theology finds its concrete expression only in radical communities like these, living in the heart of the world but also in the heart of the Church.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Balthasar and "Catholic" Social Science***

Stephen M. Krason (President of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists) has faulted secular social science on a number of important points.<sup>5</sup> From a Catholic point of view, it "lacks a sound philosophical base", being built upon the assumptions of the Enlightenment. It "ignores the supernatural", including the supernatural origin of evil, and need for grace. Being exclusively positivistic or value-neutral it fails to draw distinctions between objective right and wrong, though at the same time it is secretly allied with liberalism, and thus smuggles values through the back door. It is "non-teleological" and closed to

possibility of a divine Providence working through events, let alone the idea that human beings exist in order to attain the beatific vision. It is deterministic, reductionistic and inimical to the traditional or sacramental family. Yet Krason believes that another, Catholic, social science is possible, in which "sound philosophical premises and a supernatural orientation" are intimately interwoven. What I have been calling Balthasar's social theology offers possible directions for such an endeavour, and indeed some sociologists are already beginning to draw upon his work.<sup>6</sup>

I have already mentioned one very slighting reference by Balthasar to psychology in the Schneider book. This has to be balanced against the great care with which he reads and attempts to integrate modern psychology and the social sciences, for example in the last part of the first volume of *Theo-Drama*.<sup>7</sup> (It has to be said that he is more interested in the European, phenomenological tradition than the empirical, Anglo-American tradition of social science research.) In a chapter on "Role as the Acceptance of Limitation", he surveys the field from Durkheim and Mead to Dahrendorf and Goffman, concluding with Peter Berger that the model of "society as drama" can open up "a passage out of the rigid determinism into which sociological thought originally led us", provided we understand that one may freely choose a life-role, or freely transform its meaning. Later in the same volume he returns to Simmel, and the attempt to overcome German Idealism with the birth of the dialogue principle in Martin Buber (*I and Thou*) and Franz Rozenweig (*Star of Redemption*). What we are being prepared for in these pages of Balthasar is the discovery of the full dignity and significance of human personality as the face of reality turned towards God, and called to relationship with others in the theodrama of human society. Personhood is founded in the giving of a name or identity by God. This is the key to the integration of the sciences around the Christian discovery of the Trinity, and thus the key also to the creation of a genuinely non-secular social science.

Balthasar's social theology, which is bound up with his theology of the states of life forms part of a general cultural critique. It is in the five volumes of the series *Theo-Drama* that we find this critique and the underlying theology most carefully worked out.<sup>8</sup> At the reflective level (as distinct from the level of social action and everyday behaviour, of theodramatic praxis), this critique does not call only the social sciences to account. Theology is permitted by Balthasar to transform both anthropology and the metaphysics which underlies all approaches to natural philosophy.<sup>9</sup> Trinitarian love, he believed, is the only foundation for the existence of the cosmos, which is the loving gift of the Creator to ourselves, and of the Father to the Son and the Son to the Father in the Holy Spirit. This love is both the source of a true liberation for the human person, and of the respect we need to have for the world of nature in us and around us, a respect which is a necessary condition of being able to study the

creation in such a way that it will genuinely become intelligible to us. St Thomas, adapting Aristotle, had defined God's nature as pure act. This seemingly technical abstraction is totally transformed once we realize that the act in question is an act of love. It is therefore an act of seeing, of beholding, of giving (revealing) and receiving (adoring). It is a Trinitarian act; an act involving three Persons in the relationship of Giver, Recipient and Gift. Love is at the heart of being, and its dynamism is at the heart of knowing; it is the code that enables us to read the meaning of things.

One particular application of this insight might be mentioned, because it will once again suggest the close integration in Balthasar's thinking between seemingly abstract theological conclusions, cultural critique (thus social science) and spirituality. The tradition that God, being "pure act", could contain no trace of passivity had become associated with the tendency in Christian thought to assign a lower place to woman and to the so-called feminine virtues. In modern society, which increasingly values the hard, driving mechanisms of technological progress and economic competition, theology inevitably becomes entangled with the same attitude. According to Balthasar, on the other hand, to receive something from another is not at all a weakness or imperfection, but intrinsic to the nature of what it is to love. If gentleness and openness to others, or "receptivity", is a feminine virtue, it is also an essential dimension of God. This means that theology is free to revalue the feminine and the spirit of childhood. *Love Alone* contains the following famous passage:

But whenever the relationship between nature and grace is severed (as happens . . . where "faith" and "knowledge" are constructed as opposites), then the whole of worldly being falls under the dominion of "knowledge", and the springs and forces of love immanent in the world are overpowered and finally suffocated by science, technology and cybernetics. The result is a world without women, without children, without reverence for love in poverty and humiliation--a world in which power and the profit-margin are the sole criteria, where the disinterested, the useless, the purposeless is despised, persecuted and in the end exterminated--a world in which art itself is forced to wear the mask and features of technique."<sup>10</sup>

Finally, in a little book called *The Principles of Christian Morality*<sup>11</sup> we find what is perhaps Balthasar's most concentrated statement on the moral life, and thus on the basis of our concern for social justice. It is not in any obvious way a restatement of the natural law, which is often used to argue for a social ethics equally acceptable to Christians and non-Christians. In keeping with his policy of integrating theology and metaphysics, faith and reason, Balthasar's moral theory is explicitly Christocentric. "Christ's concrete existence--his life, suffering, death and ultimate bodily Resurrection--surpasses all other systems

of ethical norms," he writes. The Incarnate Word is not merely a perfect moral example to us, therefore, but the actual incarnation of the moral law. This means that ethics is not primarily a matter of following a list of instructions or commandments (even of those "written on the human heart"), but of following Jesus and ultimately becoming a saint. In fact for Balthasar this "following" is literally without a limit. The sinner is pursued by the love of God into the depths of his alienation from God, into the darkness of abandonment by the Father and the cry of despair. Similarly we must give up on no one; we must be prepared to abandon everything for the least of our brethren; we have to go as far as Jesus goes to express his love for our neighbour. "In this more-than-human, specifically Christian responsibility, which is rooted in Christ's solidarity with every last sinner and poor man, there can be no self-complacent community of Christians, no closed Church."<sup>12</sup>

I have been trying to show that Balthasar does indeed have a social theology, and a social concern, that goes beyond anything normally attributed to him. The practical impact of his work is manifest in the lives of increasing numbers of people who attempt to live at least the spirit of the evangelical counsels in their own circumstances, and who find his emphasis on the call of God helpful in discerning their own vocation in the world and in God's Church. I have further suggested that his theological insights are profound enough to reorient the social sciences in something of the way Stephen Krason suggests they need to be reoriented, if we are to move beyond an academic fixation on the secular and positivistic scientific method and presuppositions that grew out of German Idealism and were so deeply marked by Marxism. It seems to me that Balthasar's work, though no doubt flawed in all the ways any human enterprise is liable to be flawed and imperfect, still offers an important set of resources for the further development of the social teaching of the Church in the second century after *Rerum Novarum*.

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### Notes

1. There is no official biography of Adrienne von Speyr. The following information is gleaned from two books by Hans Urs von Balthasar: *First Glance at Adrienne von Speyr* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), and *Our Task: A Report and a Plan* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994).

2. *Tragedy Under Grace: Reinhold Schneider on the Experience of the West*, Ignatius Press, 1997. *The Christian State of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983).

3. James V. Schall S.J. (ed.), *Liberation Theology in Latin America* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982, p. 146).

4. Here I can only endorse the interpretation of Balthasar's work to be found in David L. Schindler, *Heart of the World, Center of the Church: Communio Ecclesiology*,

*Liberalism, and Liberation* (Grand Rapids and Edinburgh: Eerdmans and T&T Clark, 1996).

5. Stephen M. Krason, "What the Catholic Finds Wrong with Secular Social Science", *Social Justice Review*, Jan./Feb., 1993.

6. In England the Bristol sociologist Kieran Flanagan would be the prime example. See for example his *The Enchantment of Sociology: A Study of Theology and Culture* (London: Macmillan Press, 1996).

7. H.U. von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, Vol. 1 "Prolegomena" (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988).

8. The series was completed by Balthasar before 1983, and published by Ignatius Press between 1988 and 1998. It forms the middle part of a trilogy of series on the Beautiful, the Good and the True. The seven-volume series on Beauty is called *The Glory of the Lord*, and was co-published by Ignatius Press and T&T Clark between 1982 and 1989. The English translation of the final series, *Theo-Logic*, completed shortly before Balthasar's death, is still at the time of writing in preparation from Ignatius Press.

9. I have tried to argue in "A Science of the Real", *Communio*, Fall 1998, that a theo-dramatic metaphysics would help to ground a Christian cosmology and science of qualities as well as an anthropology.

10. H.U. von Balthasar, *Love Alone: The Way of Revelation* (London and Dublin: Sheed & Ward and Veritas, 1968), pp. 114-15.

11. H. Schürmann, J. Ratzinger, H.U. von Balthasar, *Principles of Christian Morality* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986). For a useful discussion of this point, see especially Marc Ouellet in "Discussion: The Foundations of Christian Ethics According to Hans Urs von Balthasar", *Communio* (XVII:3), Fall 1990, pp. 375-401.

12. H.U. von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, Vol. 1 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), p. 39.