

A résumé of my thought

Hans Urs von Balthasar

In the Trinitarian dogma God is one, good, true and beautiful because he is essentially Love, and Love supposes the one, the other and their unity.

When a man has published many large books, people will ask themselves: what, fundamentally, did he want to say? If he is a prolific novelist—for example Dickens or Dostoevsky—one would choose one or another of his works without worrying oneself too much about all of them as a whole. But for a philosopher or theologian it is totally different. One wishes to touch the heart of his thought, because one presupposes that such a heart must exist.

The question has often been asked of me by those disconcerted by the large number of my books: Where must one start in order to understand you? I am going to attempt to condense my many fragments “in a nutshell,” as the English say, as far as that can be done without too many betrayals. The danger of such a compression consists in being too abstract. It is necessary to amplify what follows with my biographical works on the one hand (on the Fathers of the Church, on Karl Barth, Buber, Bernanos, Guardini, Reinhold Schneider and all the authors treated in the Trilogy*), with the works on spiritu-

*In the Trilogy, Hans Urs von Balthasar approaches Christian revelation under the aspect of its beauty (*Herrlichkeit*), goodness (*Theodramatik*) and truth (*Theologik*). Three of the seven volumes of *Herrlichkeit: Eine theologische Ästhetik* have been translated into English and published as *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*. Vol. I: *Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press;

ality on the other hand (such as those on contemplative prayer, on Christ, Mary and the Church), and finally, with the numerous translations of the Fathers of the Church, of the theologians of the Middle Ages and of modern times. But here it is necessary to limit ourselves to presenting a schema of the Trilogy: Aesthetic, Dramatic, and Logic.

We start with a reflection on the situation of man. He exists as a limited being in a limited world, but his reason is open to the unlimited, to all of being. The proof consists in the recognition of his finitude, of his contingency: I am, but I could not-be. Many things which do not exist could exist. Essences are limited, but being (*l'être*) is not. That division, the “real distinction” of Saint Thomas, is the source of all the religious and philosophical thought of humanity. It is not necessary to recall that all human philosophy (if we abstract the biblical domain and its influence) is essentially religious and theological at once, because it poses the problem of the Absolute Being, whether one attributes to it a personal character or not.

What are the major solutions to this enigma attempted by humanity? One can try to leave behind the division between being (*Etre*) and essence, between the infinite and the finite; one will then say that all being is infinite and immutable (Parmenides) or that all is movement, rhythm between contraries, becoming (Heraclitus).

In the first case, the finite and limited will be non-being as such, thus an illusion that one must detect: this is the solution of Buddhist mysticism with its thousand nuances in the Far East. It is also the Plotinian solution: the truth is only attained in ecstasy where one touches the One, which is at the same time All and Nothing (relative to all the rest which only seems to exist). The second case contradicts itself: pure becoming in pure finitude can only conceive of itself in identifying the contraries: life and death, good fortune and adversity, wisdom and folly (Heraclitus did this).

Thus it is necessary to commence from an inescap-

New York: Crossroad, 1982); Vol. II: *Studies in Theological Style: Clerical Styles* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press; New York: Crossroad, 1984); Vol. III: *Studies in Theological Style: Lay Styles* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986). The other two parts of the Trilogy are: *Theodramatik* (five volumes) (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1973-1983); and *Theologik* (three volumes) (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1985-).—Ed.

able duality: the finite is not the infinite. In Plato the sensible, terrestrial world is not the ideal, divine world. The question is then inevitable: whence comes the division? Why are we not God?

The first attempt at a response: there must have been a fall, a decline, and the road to salvation can only be the return of the sensible finite into the intelligible infinite. That is the way of all non-biblical mystics. The second attempt at a response: the infinite God had need of a finite world. Why? To perfect himself, to actualize all of his possibilities? Or even to have an object to love? The two solutions lead to pantheism. In both cases, the Absolute, God in himself, has again become indigent, thus finite. But if God has no need of the world—yet again: Why does the world exist?

No philosophy could give a satisfactory response to that question. Saint Paul will say to the philosophers that God created man so that he would *seek* the Divine, try to attain the divine. That is why all pre-Christian philosophy is theological at its summit. But, in fact, the true response to philosophy could only be given by Being himself, revealing himself from himself. Will man be capable of understanding this revelation? The affirmative response will be given only by the God of the Bible. On the one hand, this God, creator of the world and of man, knows his creature. "I who have created the eye, do I not see? I who have created the ear, do I not hear?" And we add "I who have created language, could I not speak and make myself heard?" And this posits a counterpart: to be able to hear and understand the auto-revelation of God man must in himself be a search for God, a question posed to Him. Thus there is no biblical theology without a religious philosophy. Human reason must be open to the infinite.

It is here that the substance of my thought inserts itself. Let us say above all that the traditional term "metaphysical" signified the act of transcending physics, which for the Greeks signified the totality of the cosmos, of which man was a part. For us physics is something else: the science of the material world. For us the cosmos perfects itself in man, who at the same time sums up the world and surpasses it. Thus our philosophy will be essentially a meta-anthropology, presupposing not only the cosmological sciences, but also the anthropological sciences, and surpassing them towards the question of the being and essence of man.

Now man exists only in dialogue with his neigh-

bor. The infant is brought to consciousness of himself only by love, by the smile of his mother. In that encounter the horizon of all unlimited being opens itself for him, revealing four things to him: 1) that he is one in love with the mother, even in being other than his mother, therefore all being is one; 2) that that love is good, therefore all being is good; 3) that that love is true, therefore all being is true; 4) that that love evokes joy, therefore all being is beautiful.

We add here that the epiphany of being has sense only if in the appearance (*Erscheinung*), we grasp the essence which manifests itself (*Ding an sich*). The infant comes to the knowledge not of a pure appearance, but of his mother in herself. That does not exclude our grasping the essence only through the manifestation and not in itself (St. Thomas).

The One, the Good, the True and the Beautiful, these are what we call the transcendental attributes of Being, because they surpass all the limits of essences and are co-extensive with Being. If there is an insurmountable distance between God and his creature, but if there is also an analogy between them which cannot be resolved in any form of identity, there must also exist an analogy between the transcendentals—between those of the creature and those in God.

There are two conclusions to draw from this: one positive, the other negative. The positive: man exists only by interpersonal dialogue: therefore by language, speech (in gestures, in mimic or in words). Why then deny speech to Being himself? "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (John 1:1).

The negative: supposing that God is truly God (that is to say that he is the totality of Being who has need of no creature), then God will be the plenitude of the One, the Good, the True and the Beautiful, and by consequence the limited creature participates in the transcendentals only in a partial, fragmentary fashion. Let us take an example: what is unity in a finite world? Is it the species (each man is totally man, that is his unity) or is it the individual (each man is indivisibly himself)? Unity is thus polarized in the domain of finitude. One can demonstrate the same polarity for the Good, the True and the Beautiful.

I have thus tried to construct a philosophy and a theology starting from an analogy not of an abstract Being, but of Being as it is encountered concretely in its attributes (not categorical, but transcendental). And as the transcendentals

run through all Being, they must be interior to each other: that which is truly true is also truly good and beautiful and one. A being *appears*, it has an epiphany: in that it is beautiful and makes us marvel. In appearing it *gives* itself, it delivers itself to us: it is good. And in giving itself up, it *speaks* itself, it unveils itself: it is true (in itself, but in the other to which it reveals itself.)

Thus one can construct above all a theological *aesthetique* ("Gloria"): God appears. He appeared to Abraham, to Moses, to Isaiah, finally in Jesus Christ. A theological question: how distinguish his appearance, his epiphany among the thousand other phenomena in the world? How distinguish the true and only living God of Israel from all the idols which surround him and from all the philosophical and theological attempts to attain God? How perceive the incomparable glory of God in the life, the cross, the resurrection of Christ, a glory different from all other glory in this world?

One can then continue with a *dramatique* since this God enters into an alliance with us: how does the absolute liberty of God in Jesus Christ confront the relative, but true, liberty of man. Will there perhaps be a mortal struggle between the two in which each one will defend against the other what it conceives and chooses as the good? What will be the unfolding of the battle, the final victory?

One can terminate with a *logique* (a *theo-logique*). How can God come to make himself understood to man, how can an infinite Word express itself in a finite word without losing its sense? That will be the problem of the two natures of Jesus Christ. And how can the limited spirit of man come to grasp the unlimited sense of the Word of God? That will be the problem of the Holy Spirit.

This then, is the articulation of my Trilogy. I have meant only to mention the questions posed by the method, without coming to the responses, because that would go well beyond the limits of an introductory summary such as this.

In conclusion it is nonetheless necessary to touch briefly on the Christian response to the question posed in the beginning relative to the religious philosophies of humanity. I say the Christian response, because the responses of the Old Testament and *a fortiori* of Islam (which remains essentially in the enclosure of the religion of Israel) are incapable of giving a satisfactory answer to the question of why Yahweh, why Allah, created a world of which he did not have need in order to be

God. Only the fact is affirmed in the two religions, not the why.

The Christian response is contained in these two fundamental dogmas: that of the Trinity and that of the Incarnation. In the Trinitarian dogma God is one, good, true and beautiful because he is essentially Love, and Love supposes the one, the other and their unity. And if it is necessary to suppose the Other, the Word, the Son, in God, then the otherness of the creation is not a fall, a disgrace, but an image of God, even as it is not God.

And as the Son in God is the eternal icon of the Father, he can without contradiction assume in himself the image that is the creation, purify it, and make it enter into the communion of the divine life without dissolving it (in a false mysticism). It is here that one must distinguish nature and grace.

All true solutions offered by the Christian faith hold, therefore, to these two mysteries, categorically refused by a human reason which makes itself absolute. It is because of this that the true battle between religions begins only after the coming of Christ. Humanity will prefer to renounce all philosophical questions—in Marxism, or positivism of all stripes, rather than accept a philosophy which finds its final response only in the Revelation of Christ.

Forseeing that, Christ sent his believers into the whole world as sheep among wolves.

Before making a pact with the world it is necessary to meditate on that comparison.—*Translated by Kelly Hamilton* □