Jennifer Newsome Martin

Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Critical Appropriation of Russian Religious Thought.

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This subtle and sophisticated book is primarily a study of the theological method of Hans Urs von Balthasar, conducted in an unusual way. It proceeds by investigating the use to which von Balthasar puts three Russian religious philosophers, Nicolas Berdyaev, Vladimir Soloviev, and Sergei Bulgakov (the last of whom is better regarded as the dogmatic theologian he became) in *their* use of elements from the metaphysical world-view of the German Idealist or, better, 'Real-Idealist' philosopher F. W. J. Schelling. (The author often prefers to call Schelling a 'Romantic' philosopher, thus separating him further from his rivals and contemporaries Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Georg Hegel.) It will already be apparent from these few words of preamble that the task the author has set herself is a complex one. It is also one that in her pursuit of it places considerable demands on the reader.

After an introductory chapter which raises questions principally of method, the book falls into four well-defined parts. The first concerns beauty; the second, radical evil; the third, personal eschatology; and the fourth, the wider eschatology of God as consummator of creation. These are undoubtedly major themes in von Balthasar's corpus, just as they are well-selected vantage-points for viewing the Schellingian-Russian contribution to von Balthasar's overall work.

The difficulty of studying von Balthasar's work by excavation of, as it were, archaeological strata of thought (beneath von Balthasar, the Russians; beneath the Russians, Schelling; beneath Schelling, one of his own inspirational sources, Jakob Boehme, the mystical seventeenth-century Lutheran shoemaker) is such that the program would be, with a less accomplished scholar, a recipe for considerable confusion. Inevitably, a view of the building on the ground (von Balthasar's actual doctrine) shifts in and out of focus as the book proceeds. Yet the upshot of the author's enquiry is clear enough. Von Balthasar's disapproval of Berdyaev, nuanced appreciation of Soloviev, and largely unqualified enthusiasm for Bulgakov reflect the degree of indebtedness of each writer to the Schellingian inheritance—heavy for Berdyaev (especially where Schelling's own use of Boehme's writings is concerned), lighter with the more eclectic Soloviev, and lightest of all (but not, for all that, insignificant) in Bulgakov.

Von Balthasar's willingness to make use of Soloviev (explicitly so in his theological aesthetics) and Bulgakov (explicitly in his theological dramatics and "theology of the Three Days" but also implicitly elsewhere, notably in his

theological logic), shows that he was not minded to blackball earlier Christian writers—even those not in communion with the Catholic Church—simply because they drew upon a philosopher who was himself outside the *philosophia perennis* favored by the fathers and medieval doctors. After all, the philosopher in question may indeed have located important nuggets of truth, worthy to be integrated into a theological synthesis in the Great Church. That may be so even if, as with Schelling, the alien philosopher's *overall* picture of the world is to be rejected, since in von Balthasar's judgment, it was ultimately monistic, and hence incompatible with the God-world relationship of the doctrine of creation, while in its anthropology that picture was "Promethean" or "Titanic," and thus incompatible with the dependent and receptive divine imagehood of the Christian doctrine of man.

But this in turn tells us something that might have gone unnoticed. In his own theological method, von Balthasar was open not just ecumenically (in this case, to the Russian Orthodox) but to truth wherever it may be found—though he also (and this becomes plain in his adjudication of the relative reliability of the three Russians as contributors to theological synthesis) uses as a criterion for the selection and integration of materials the litmus-test of doctrinal orthodoxy as understood in the specifically Catholic Christian tradition. This overall conclusion enables Jennifer Newsome Martin to make good her claim that von Balthasar is neither an "antiquarian" theologian nor a potential heresiarch. If there are, perhaps, relatively few attentive readers of von Balthasar who would view him as either the one or the other, this is still an assertion worth making in and of itself, and not simply because it helps her publisher to market her book.

It should be added that in the course of making, and making good, her claim for von Balthasar's theological method, Newsome Martin also refutes the objection that von Balthasar's theology is simply too assertoric, too confident that it has mastered divine truth. On the contrary, the many voices he allows to speak in the service of revelation, and the epistemic restraint that his emphasis on divine mystery (not conceptual system) engenders, render him a prime example of theological judiciousness, which typically combines boldness with humility. If he resembles any ancient writer, it is the Origen of the biblical commentaries, more so than the Origen of the treatise *On First Principles* (sometimes called the first attempt at a systematic theology).

That is pertinent to the inquiry in hand because the book is ultimately about von Balthasar's theological method and hence his notion of what theology should be. It is also, in the author's view, unavoidable, owing to the salience of the notions of wholeness, totality, and all-unity in the German and Russian sources she is surveying in their Balthasarian mode. For those notions at once raise the spectre of a certain over-assertiveness in the theological description

of God and his design. Her book should be required reading for those whose “very critical” opinion of von Balthasar runs along these lines. And more widely, it contributes significantly to an historical understanding of the creative interplay between Eastern Orthodox thought and the renewal of Western Catholic theology in the mid-twentieth century.

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