SJT 62(2): 202–210 (2009) Printed in the United Kingdom © 2009 Scottish Journal of Theology Ltd
doi:10.1017/S0036930609004694

Article review

Webster's Response to Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*[1]

Though rarely addressed in a direct way, the theology of God's perfection is a central point at issue in contemporary Christian dogmatics. A good many debates of the moment turn on how the perfection of God's life is to be conceived: debates about the relation of the so-called immanent and economic Trinity; about the propriety of explicating the person and work of Christ through the metaphysics of divine and human natures; about the applicability of kenosis to account for the relation of the divine Word to the human career of Jesus; about the constitutive significance of temporality for the being of God; and much else besides. Recent disagreements amongst Barth scholars about the issue of the relation of the doctrine of divine election and the doctrine of the Trinity are in some measure animated by differing conceptions of the perfection of God, and one of the many ways of profiting from Dr Pitstick's book is to read it as, in part at least, an essay in defence of a certain construal of divine perfection. Indeed, one of my hopes for the book is that, once the noise of battle has subsided and the wounded have been dressed and taken to shelter, we may be able to engage peaceably and constructively with some of the material dogmatic issues to which it has drawn our attention. I do not propose to comment in detail on Dr Pitstick's evaluation of Balthasar; any judgements I might reach would be those of a mere amateur, one of those Protestants who in the 1970s discovered in Balthasar something which kept us reading Roman Catholic theology after Lonergan had wearied us and before we had been pointed to the treasures of *ressourcement* theology. Instead, I want to draw out from the book three doctrinal topics of capital importance: the 'finished' character of the redemptive work of Christ on the cross; the relation between theology and economy in the doctrine of the Trinity; and the doctrine of the hypostatic union – in all of which topics, of course, we are pressed to attend to the perfection of God and the acts of God.

The first of these matters, the finished work of Christ at Calvary, can be dealt with quite briskly. Dr Pitstick objects that Balthasar illegitimately prolongs the redemptive ransom of humankind beyond the cross into the descent of Christ into hell. The common catholic tradition has it that 'the Cross itself' is 'the very instrument of Christ's victory, of redemption, and of

[1] Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2007).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930609004694 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sanctification' (p. 65). Because of this, Good Friday and Holy Saturday have very different characters: 'Christ's death on the Cross is the consummation of man's objective redemption, to which the Descent does not essentially contribute, since Christ descends in consequence of His death and to bring the fruits of the accomplished redemption to those who were awaiting it in sheol' (p. 66). The distinction between the two episodes is that between their respective *redemptive* and *salvific* characters: in more familiar Protestant terminology, between accomplishment and application. This distinction Balthasar disregards, so that the descent becomes 'the continuation of the Cross as its invisible counterpart and peak' (p. 98) – his insistence on the *consummatum est* is seriously qualified (indeed, for Dr Pitstick, effectively cancelled) by his proposal that Christ's abode among the dead includes his suffering of the pains proper to hell and is expiatory, the consummate act of reconciling fellowship with sinners.

In much of what is said here about the perfection of the work of Christ on the cross, theologians from across the various traditions of the Reformation will find little or nothing to dispute. Points of disagreement would, doubtless, emerge further down the line, if the conversation were to turn to matters of the relation between the finished work of the Son of God on the cross and the eucharistic worship of the church, disagreements which would cluster around the precise sense of the church's eucharistic oblation. But on the specific point at issue here – that of the continued redemptive suffering of the Son of God after Calvary – Dr Pitstick's worry about Balthasar takes her close to some deep Protestant convictions (they are, of course, by no means peculiarly Protestant). The cross is a historical (and therefore metaphysical) *perfectum*: full, perfect and sufficient, as we say in the communion liturgies of my bit of the Reformation tradition. This does not mean that nothing happens after the cross (though on occasions Protestants given to existentialist enthusiasms were wont to collapse the entire economy of redemption into the 'word of the cross' – a drastic foreshortening which is christologically and soteriologically calamitous). At their best, the theologies of the Reformation (especially of its Reformed wing) have given much weight to the resurrection and the exaltation of Christ, and to his exercise of his prophetic, priestly and kingly offices as the ascended one who bears the name above all names. But the work of *Christus praesens* is that of the application of redemption and of the distribution of its benefits; there is no *redemptive* activity beyond Good Friday. And in this, of course, Reformation theology simply repeats the tradition of the church which says, as Thomas puts it in a passage cited by Dr Pitstick, 'Christ's passion was a kind of universal cause of men's salvation'.[2]

[2] *ST* IIIa 52 a 1.

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This may go some way to explaining why Calvin and the tradition following him (including Barth) made the descent into hell a gloss on Good Friday, drawing attention to the severity of Christ's suffering as he shoulders the dreadful burden of humankind's sin and bears in our stead the wrath of God. In effect, the descent is a kind of narrative expression of the Saviour's anguish. Lacking commitment to the long Christian tradition of reflection on Christ's descent to the souls in prison, and anxious to avoid any compromise of the *ephapax* of the cross, the descent is pulled back into Good Friday. There is an undoubted awkwardness here in handling the historical sequence of the creed, but its dogmatic intent is clear, and at least partially overlaps with Dr Pitstick's desire to ensure that Calvary is not allowed to become a staging-post on the way to a further redemptive event in which the passion finds its consummation.

What of the dogmatics of Trinity and incarnation? Theologians in the Reformed tradition, particularly those for whom the dogmatics of the post-Reformation period has furnished a decisive impulse, often (though not unanimously) have maintained an asymmetry between 'immanent' and 'economic' in teaching about God's triune being and acts, and between the divine and human natures of the incarnate Word. Any such generalisation is admittedly risky. One risk is that of isolating one particular phase of Reformed theological history and claiming its normativity, whether the phase be that of the magisterial Reformed thinkers or that of their scholastic heirs. For what it's worth, my hunch is that the arguments for continuity between the magisterial and the later Protestant divines are at many points stronger than those for discontinuity. Nevertheless, the continuity tends to be more readily discernible in incarnational teaching than in the doctrine of the Trinity, simply because the Reformed christological distinctives emerged earlier, over the course of eucharistic controversies with the followers of Luther, whereas the resources of classical trinitarian dogma became increasingly important in later attempts to articulate a federal dogmatics of the history of redemption. One should also, in present company, keep in mind that Barth is by no means a simple custodian of the Reformed tradition in these (or any other) matters. Though his mind was undoubtedly deeply shaped by what he found in magisterial and confessional Calvinism when he lectured on Reformed historical theology in Göttingen in the early 1920s, he continued to brood on the topics and perhaps never attained a fully worked out doctrine of the Trinity or the incarnation, preferring to generate sets of variations on some common Reformed motifs, with help from a good deal of the rest of the Christian tradition. The variety of the variations is such that – as has been seen in recent interpretative debate about Barth – rather different accounts of

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(for example) his doctrine of the Trinity can be constructed, most of which can claim some degree of plausibility.

All that being said, it is possible to identify some family resemblances over the course of the history of the various Reformed traditions, amongst which has been an interest in giving an account of Christian teaching in which an appreciable role is played by what we can sum up as God's perfection, that is, the utter sufficiency, originality and plenitude of God's life in himself. In the light of such a dogmatic commitment, a conception of God's action towards creatures has so to be governed by the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation that the distinction between uncreated and created being is maintained, but maintained without imperilling the significance of God's external works in the history of redemption. In terms of the doctrine of the Trinity, this means that what is said about the economy of God's acts *ad extra* is 'suspended' from a theology of the inner divine life in its entire blessedness and unbroken peace and fullness. In terms of the doctrine of the incarnation, this means retention of a clear distinction between (though not separation or alienation of) the divine and human natures of the incarnate one, a construal of the Word's 'becoming' flesh in such a way that the Word's transcendence of the flesh is uncompromised, and a sense that even in the extremes of fleshly humiliation the Word's sovereign deity is in no way degraded. All this, of course, is to block any suggestion that God realises his being in the *opera externa* and to steer away from the *crassa mixtura* of God and creaturely being of which Calvin rather strongly disapproved.

Now, if this very rough-and-ready sketch bears any likeness to the Reformed tradition, it suggests a couple of things. First, some of Dr Pitstick's worries about Balthasar are shared by Reformed theology which, in the doctrines of God and Christ, stands squarely within the Western Catholic tradition. Second, commonalities between Barth and Balthasar, particularly in the explication of incarnational doctrine, ought not to be overplayed; those points at which Barth can be made to look more like his Catholic friend are often points at which Barth is a little uneasy with the tradition in which he stands, at least in its scholastic renditions. To explore these themes in a little more detail, we look at the doctrine of the Trinity and then the doctrine of the incarnation.

Dr Pitstick laments the fact that, as she sees it, Balthasar's doctrine of the Trinity proposes an excessive differentiation between the divine persons, and that in the end it is functionally, if not intentionally, tritheistic. It is as if the unity of the divine essence is constituted by the persons in their enactment of the history of redemption. On Dr Pitstick's reading, these problems begin to manifest themselves in Balthasar's emphasis that 'in the economy of Christ's

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mission, the Persons of the Trinity will have proper acts reflecting their personal properties' (p. 116). The point becomes sharp over the matter of the Son's being abandoned by the Father to being dead in sheol: Balthasar appears to read the economic event back into the immanent divine being so that it is as if 'the Trinity is experienced as being destroyed' (p. 119). This is indeed a strong interpretation; it is backed up by an account of the way in which Balthasar conceives of the personal distinctions within the godhead through the idiom of *distance* and *self-surrender*. 'The "eternal event" is the intra-Trinitarian kenosis of the divine nature in virtue of which the divine Persons are to be distinguished. The Father, who is His own being, gives that being perfectly to the Son; He empties Himself, so to speak, in the generation of the Son and in order that the Son be generated' (p. 120). Consequently the descent to sheol acquires prime importance as the consummate manifestation of the relations within the being of God. 'The opposition between God and sin is employed for the revelation of the opposition of relations within the Trinity. As Balthasar sees it, the Father's abandonment of the Son precisely into what is anti-divine is essential to reveal the Trinity. The divine essence, which subsists in opposite relations (Father and Son) united in relation to a third (the Holy Spirit), will receive its most perfect economic expression in the Son's being conformed to what is (positively) most unlike God' (p. 123).

A number of deleterious consequences follow. There is a christological weakness: the entire being of the Son is collapsed into the event of incarnation, and as Dr Pitstick presents him Balthasar cannot affirm 'that the Son remained unchanged in heaven, possessing its bliss, even in His incarnation and passion' (p. 125) – as we shall see, a familiar point in Reformed christology. There is the loss of any sense that the humanity of the incarnate one is redemptively significant, since the real engine of salvation is the trinitarian processions; voluntarism is introduced into the doctrine of the Trinity by the notion of the Son's 'antecedent consent' to the Father; there is more than a hint of divine mutability and passibility which originates in a failure to recognise that 'a person suffers *in a nature*' (p. 133); there is the importation of an improper sense of divine glory, in which the glory of the cross is considered the only appropriate imposition of the term – and much else besides. Behind them all lies a misconception of the relation of the divine persons to the divine essence. As Dr Pitstick understands things, a divine person is a substantial relation and a relation is an *esse in ad*. 'Since a divine Person is a real relation that subsists in the divine essence, in which there are no accidents, each of the three Persons self-subsists even as the divine essence self-subsists . . . Each of the divine Persons then is the divine *esse* (including all its essential perfections), albeit in a unique mode, i.e. in the *esse ad* of a particular relation, that of Father, Son, or Holy Spirit' (p. 282).

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Consequently, 'any division or separation of the essence from the Persons in *reality* is impossible' (p. 282). Balthasar, she argues, reverses this: for him, 'the divine essence exists in these self-subsisting relations' (p. 282), thereby sundering the divine persons from the divine nature (cf. p. 284) – perhaps the inevitable outcome of stressing 'the existence of proper operations' and of inattention to features of the classical doctrine of appropriation. The result: 'the hypostases of which Balthasar here speaks are not the God of the Catholic Faith' (p. 292).

That is quite some charge, and one whose justice I am not competent to assess. But it may nevertheless serve as a reminder of the perils of expanding the notion of kenosis to include the *opera Dei interna*. Put simply, this way of 'feeling our way back into the mystery of the absolute'[3] easily misses the inexhaustible wholly realised perfection of the undivided divine essence. Of course the form of a servant is not alien to God; of course the assumption of flesh is a manifestation, not an occlusion, of who God is in himself. But what is manifest is not so much the eternally kenotic character of the inner divine relations, but the common majesty and wholly self-directed liberty of their acts, by virtue of which alone the Son's suffering in the flesh is truly redemptive. The economic drama does not go all the way down; it reposes on the eternal stillness of the triune being. As eternal realities, paternity, filiation and spiration are not modes of becoming, a passage from one condition to another; nor do they involve dispossession or coming to possess (there is here no communication of essence). It is difficult to see how talk of a primal kenosis can cohere with the common aseity of the persons which is theirs by virtue of the one divine essence in which they all share from eternity.

To this it might be objected that the doctrine of the Trinity ought to release our minds from captivity to an unconverted doctrine of divine absoluteness. The objection is the stock in trade of modern theopaschite teaching, and Barth himself is not insensitive to its force. But to speak of the wholly realised perfection of the undivided divine essence is not to suggest that God's unity is anterior to his triunity, still less to fill the conception of that unity with rubble from pagan metaphysics. It is simply to suggest (1) that God's immanent fullness is the uncreated ground of his economic acts, and (2) that we have not yet understood God's triunity if we allow all the weight to be borne by concepts of the distinction or distance between persons. 'Let us not', says Calvin, 'be led to imagine a trinity of persons that keeps our thoughts distracted and does not at once lead them back to that unity. Indeed, the words "Father", "Son", and "Spirit" imply a real distinction – let no-one

[3] H. U. von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 4 (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996), p. 324.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930609004694 Published online by Cambridge University Press

think that these titles, whereby God is variously designated from his works, are empty – but a distinction, not a division.'[4] *Sed distinctionem, non divisionem.*

One of the ways in which the federal divines of the Reformed tradition sought to secure these points was by rooting the covenant of redemption – that is, the willing and execution of the Father's purpose of glorifying creatures through the Son in the Spirit – in what Jonathan Edwards calls the 'eternal and necessary subsistence of the persons of the Trinity'.[5] The movement which is traced in economy and soteriology is not from economy to theology, but the opposite; and from this vantage point both the relations between the persons of the Trinity and their common relation to creatures are not so much acts of kenosis but of plerosis. Of that plerosis there is indeed a special instance, which is the Word's taking of the form of a servant and his submission to death on the cross. This alone is kenosis; and even here it is the kenosis of the omnipotent Word who can do these things, who can so check his power in the flesh that he may put death to death.

Barth himself can plausibly be interpreted along these lines, though I'm aware that other readers find him more decided in governing the doctrine of the Trinity by the event of the cross. Barth is deeply committed to God's triune self-sufficiency. Certainly, he insists upon the correspondence between God's *opera externa* and God *in se*, and believes that some notions of divine independence are ruinous. But Barth retains a sense of the infinite recess of God's life in himself, without which grace would not be grace. It is worth noting that it was precisely this strand of Barth's thought which the late Alan Lewis picked out for criticism in *Between Cross and Resurrection*, a book whose trinitarian theology is closely companionable to that of Balthasar.[6]

We turn to christological matters. One of the most refreshing elements of Dr Pitstick's book is the candour with which she proposes a dogmatic 'psychology of Christ' (p. 188). This dogmatic psychology reads the events of Jesus Christ out of the confession of the two natures: 'As one Person in two natures, Christ always acts in accord with both His human and His divine natures. Furthermore, all His actions were directed to the end of making possible man's salvation, which requires faith in Jesus Christ as God. Thus, in all the works of Christ, and especially the most significant, both His humanity and His divinity may be apprehended (though sometimes one is more apparent than the other) in order that we might believe this man is God'

[4] *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1. 13. 17.

[5] J. Edwards, 'Economy of the Trinity and Covenant of Redemption', in *The Miscellanies* 833–1152 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 432.

[6] A. E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 207–14.

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(p. 33). A couple of comments are apposite. First, this dogmatic psychology enables Dr Pitstick to approach the task of describing Jesus' history in such a way that his function in the triune economy, and that economy's relation to the life of God *in se*, is premiss rather than conclusion. This steers away from the problems which have so afflicted modern christology, namely that 'humanity' is more 'real' or 'basic' a quantity than 'deity', and its epistemological corollary that the humanity of the incarnate one is available for historical investigation apart from its relation to the divine Word. Teaching about the two natures is allowed to illuminate the history of Jesus, by as it were keeping our gaze steady on the mystery of his person as we approach each episode in the history of the incarnation, above all, the episode of the passion. Second, this 'Catholic' psychology of Christ is shared by much of the christology of the Reformed tradition. Consider, for example, Dr Pitstick's resistance to what Balthasar has to say about the Word's 'deposition' of divine attributes in the economy of the incarnation. For Balthasar, the surrender of the *forma dei* is possible because such 'deposition' is in fact no surrender of deity but the consistent expression of the mutual self-giving or primal kenosis of the triune persons. At least in major classical self-articulations, Reformed christology is decidedly reluctant to try to establish the coherence of Christ's deity with his suffering by projecting kenosis back into the being of God, on the grounds that this would not sit well with what is confessed of God's perfection. Rather, Reformed christology would more naturally make appeal to the Chalcedonian 'without confusion', locate the unity of Christ at the level of the personal hypostasis and so resist the difficulties which attend excessive employment of the communication of attributes. To confess that the Word becomes flesh is not to say that the Word renounces deity (even if this renunciation is itself a divine act), but to say something like the following (this is Calvin on John 1:14):

> When [the evangelist] says that the Word became flesh, we can plainly infer the unity of his person. For it does not make sense that he who is now man should be other than he who was always very God, since it is God who is said to have become man. Again, since he distinctly attributes the name of the Word to the man Christ, it follows that when he became man Christ did not cease to be what he was before and that nothing was changed in that eternal essence of God which assumed flesh. In short, the Son of God began to be man in such a way that he is still that eternal Word who had no temporal beginning.[7]

[7] J. Calvin, *The Gospel According to St John 1–10* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1961), pp. 21–2.

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One other thought by way of brief conclusion. Because increasingly I find myself drawing on the resources of the dogmatics of the post-Reformation era, I am attracted to much of what I find in Dr Pitstick's book: its profound dissatisfaction with constructivist accounts of Christian doctrine, its understanding of the relation of theology and economy, its starting point in the eternal abundance of God. I could wish for more lavish description of the divine missions and what they enact of the perfection of God. But most of all I could wish for a gentler book. So far as I'm aware, we are all 'theologians not yet canonized' (p. 31), and none of us is likely to be. We should be patient with one another in theological debate, especially when we fear another has transgressed a boundary; the apostle commands us that we restore in a spirit of gentleness and look to ourselves, lest we, too, be tempted (Gal. 6:1).

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