7 *GL*, 7, I, 'Verbum Caro Factum', 33–235, esp. the final section 5.c. 'Hell',
8 *GL*, 7.239–385.
9 E. Käsemann, 'The Problem of the Historical Jesus', in *Essays on NT Themes*, London, 1964, 37f.
10 G. Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1960, 60. Volker Spangenberg, whose monograph *Herrlichkeit des Neuen Bundes*, Tübingen: Mohr, 1993 contains an extremely thoughtful account of Balthasar's biblical theology and his exegesis, has criticised Balthasar sharply at this point. 'What makes the interpretation of Balthasar's utterances so difficult at this point is that Balthasar so to speak programmatically refuses to draw any sort of precise distinction between the historical and the dogmatic.' (53) But it is doubtful whether his method of procedure is any the less theologically controlled than that of the scholars of the New Quest, see my *A Century of New Testament Studies*, Cambridge: Lutterworth, 1993, 89–92.
11 *GL*, 7.212
12 For an illuminating discussion of the different understandings of grace in Balthasar's theology, see N.D. O'Donoghue, 'A Theology of Beauty' in ed. J. Riches, *The Analogy of Beauty*, Edinburgh: T.&T.Clark, 1986, 1–10.
13 The terms are of course taken from G. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, London: SPCK, 1984.
14 See his *Schleifung der Bastionen*, Einsiedeln: Johannes-Verlag, 1952.

Von Balthasar and the Dialogue with Karl Barth

Ben Quash

Dramatis Personae

Karl Barth suits the role of a kind of theological Petruchio. Petruchio, you will recall, bursts upon the stage in *The Taming of the Shrew*, with the 'shrew' herself, Katherina, in his sights. He is determined to win the right to the hand of a maiden whom he construes as hostile, just as Barth (the early Barth at least) saw the theological establishment representing all the arrogance and vanity of a liberal theology in thrall to bourgeois complacency. He invades this hostile world in the name of the Word of God; he elects to be 'rough, and woo not like a babe', as Petruchio puts it. And as much of the theological establishment in Europe at the beginning of the 1920s reeled back in shock at Barth's onslaught in *The Epistle to the Romans*, so Katherina is thoroughly taken aback by this

> '. . . one half lunatic
> A mad-cap ruffian and a swearing Jack,
> That thinks with oaths to face the matter out'. (II i)

Petruchio will not deal with Katherina on her own territory. He whisks her away to his own remote and inhospitable house, and then turns her every expectation on its head. This is 'crisis wooing'. Just as, in the early Barth, for the world of the creature to cross over the threshold into the divine world would entail its destruction and immolation, because of the utter difference of God's ways and

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humanity's ways, God's eternity and humanity's time, God's holiness and humanity's sin, so Katherina's entrance into Petruchio's house is entry into an environment in which all her expectations and routines are altered. What she took to be her basic needs and entitlements—food, clothing and sleep—are denied her, or interfered with, as Petruchio hurls her food across the room, stamps on her hat, tears off all the bedclothes. Petruchio' s tone is one of anger, and his manner of communicating is indirect and paradoxical. He is, Katherina gasps in horror, 'a mad-brain rudesby, full of spleen'. (III ii)

This is the Barth of the early, so-called 'dialectical' period (though, as Bruce McCormack has demonstrated in a very fine book, Barth's theology does not *cease* to be dialectical later on, and the highly influential 'von Balthasar thesis' about a clear transition from dialectic to analogy in the 1930s is misleading). This is the Barth who turned many conventional theological expectations on their head by upholding eschatology as the chief virtue of the theology of the primitive Church (versus Overbeck and others).[1] This is the Barth who announced that theology could only be carried out as an act of *daring*: it could have no warrant or foundation other than that given to it by the free movement of the Word of God, which is wholly other. For this Barth, crisis describes not merely temporary or provisional judgments of God here and there, but 'a *permanent* and *universal* feature of the human condition'.[2] There are not, for this Barth, generalizable features of human knowledge and enquiry which can be regarded as secure points from which to advance to a progressively fuller understanding of God and God's ways with us. Culture is not a bridgehead which brings us nearer to grasping God. There is no way we can grasp God. Only God can grasp us, and he does so unbound by our constructions and expectations, our institutions and habits of mind. Rather, perhaps, as Petruchio rejects the Katherina he finds so that the Katherina he eventually makes his wife has, bizarrely, an entirely different character—is almost an entirely different person—so this God, as McCormack puts it, 'rejects what we are and elects what we are not'. Our notions of historical and personal continuity, the importance of human consciousness and the possibility of individual integrity and development—all are shot to pieces by this Petruchio figure. It is a strange thing to be wooed by him. Little wonder that the 'goodly company' of onlookers in the academy and beyond gazed at Barth

> 'As if they saw some wondrous monument,
> Some comet or unusual prodigy'. (III ii)

What shall we say of von Balthasar then? *He* woos, at first glance, somewhat differently. He even construes the object of his attentions somewhat differently: not so shrew-like; not so hostile. Von Balthasar, perhaps, looks on the ways of the world, the movements of human enquiry and accomplishment, as in principle more compatible with what theology does and says—a more suitable consort for theology. The object of *his* wooing, then, is less like the arrogant Katherina, who must, apparently, be broken and reconstructed, and more like her younger sister Bianca, who is charming and gifted. So let us dress von Balthasar (alongside Barth's Petruchio) as Lucentio, Bianca's lover. Lucentio, the wealthy nobleman who arrives in 'fair Padua, nursery of arts' with none of Petruchio's peremptoriness.

Having set upon winning Bianca's hand, Lucentio's approach is to adopt the guise of a schoolmaster and have himself admitted to Bianca's household, where

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his 'lessons' in languages, music, and so on, become vehicles for his declarations of love. This is not the invasion of hostile territory, as for the early Barth. Perhaps we may say that it is in more Balthasarian fashion the entry of theology into 'the realm of human thought [these are von Balthasar's words] . . . into the various schools of thought, perspectives and metaphysical systems that seek to portray worldly reality. Just as it goes without saying that there is culture', says von Balthasar, 'so too we may say that philosophy does exist'.[3] Von Balthasar is, it seems, like Lucentio, far more concerned to make himself at home within the household of his beloved. He does not feel the need to turn her world entirely on its head by removing all her usual points of reference and disrupting all her expectations. Von Balthasar writes that

> '. . . the Church . . . must immerse herself in the terminology of an epoch, even in a specific way of thinking, so that her definitions do not dispense with the task of assessing the value of this terminology'.[4]

And this readiness to countenance a certain early and not-too-hard-won compatibility in lots of ways between the matter of theology, and the world's concerns and modes of expression—so like Lucentio's attitude to the wooing of Bianca—this relative *optimism*, we may say, has major implications for the way that the relationship between nature and grace is envisaged. Von Balthasar writes:

> 'it becomes quite possible to see, first, that the most basic act of nature and the most basic act of grace operate in a harmony or analogy but, second, that a way from nature to grace has been opened up. All the way from a rooted acknowledgment of God by reason (undertaken with grace) to the full supernatural and justifying faith in his word of revelation, there can be many levels, phases, foreshadowings and starting points'.[5]

These caricatures give us an initial impression of the two theologians; and of how they went about their business. And it is worth noting that, presented in this exaggerated way, each seems in certain respects to confirm old Protestant and Roman Catholic mutual suspicions (we will make it our business, in a moment, to show the groundlessness of many of these). Lucentio's inclination swiftly to adopt different clothes and accommodate himself to his environment (the household of Baptista) may put the prickly Protestant in mind of what von Balthasar himself, in inverted commas, calls Catholic 'flexibility'. Protestants, as von Balthasar puts it, too often suppose Catholics to be hiding (like the disguised Lucentio) behind 'politically shrewd and seductive masks':[6]

> 'Slogans like "inculturation [*Anpassungskunst*]", "the distinction between folk religion and theological religion" and sentences filled with "although . . . but then again"—all these threaten to bring about a collapse of dialogue . . .'

Meanwhile, Petruchio is, at least to our modern sensibilities, not a little chauvinist and domineering. His machismo finds, for many readers, an analogy in Barth's theology, and more generally in Protestantism's tendency to undertake a kind of theological 'shouting' which utterly denies (or 'drowns out') the integrity of creaturely voices. Katherina can be allowed to have nothing to say, except on cue, when Petruchio invites her to. Human reason and culture will yield, for this kind of Protestantism, so it seems, no wisdom or insight which will permit them to

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converse with theology. In addition to which, Petruchio, like the stereotyped Protestant with his roots in the Reformation, is a kind of nominalist. A state of affairs does not have its own integrity which must be respected. Rather, an interventionist 'word' will instantaneously declare everything to be different; whether it seems different, or whether it continues to look exactly the same as before. Thus Petruchio:

> 'It shall be what o'clock I say it is' (IV iii)

Catholics suspicious of the Protestant's somewhat ahistorical understanding of what justification means will surely recognize something here.

But caricatures are dangerous things. One of the most engaging aspects of von Balthasar's dialogue with Karl Barth is the exhilarating sense of discovery, on both sides, that there was a great deal more to be said, and a great deal more held in common, than either of these caricatures allows. Barth found, to his delight, that he could have more profound theological conversations with Roman Catholics than he could with most of the Protestant theologians who surrounded him in Europe. He found in such conversations that he had a startling intimation of the *'Una Sancta'*;[7] most significantly because Catholicism seemed still determined to *let God be God* (if anything can be isolated as Barth's watchword, it is that emphasis on, in a manner of speaking, the priority of God). It was around this centre that all the convergences between his theology and that of von Balthasar took place.

The Doctrine of God

We find von Balthasar concurring with, indeed profoundly influenced by, Barth's marvellously and drastically trinitarian vision, his affirmation of the utter sovereignty of the divine initiative, and what Bruce McCormack so effectively characterizes as Barth's 'critical realism'. Critical realism means that Barth accepted a Kantian critique of metaphysics (because he accepted the validity of Kant's epistemology, at least 'where it touched upon knowledge of empirical reality'[8]), while still maintaining that 'the divine being [is] real, whole, and complete in itself apart from the knowing activity of the human subject; indeed, the reality of God precedes all human knowing'.[9] That von Balthasar is in profound agreement with Barth here is shown by, among other things, his assaults on certain brands of mysticism (those which suggest the identity of divine and human in the depths of the human subject) and their issue in Idealism and Romanticism of various kinds. And it could be said that the whole of *Herrlichkeit*—and in particular the opening volume, and the volumes on the history of metaphysics (vols. 4 and 5)—are an exercise in critical realism.

Now there is of course a background to this dialogue, and to all the convergences we see between von Balthasar and Barth, especially where the doctrine of God is concerned. We are not dealing with two isolated theological titans who share an unusual, slightly freakish, bond of sympathy. The figure of Erich Przywara, for example, was a profoundly important shaping influence on both von Balthasar and Barth. Przywara's emphasis on the *von Gott her* was something that spoke to Barth's concerns and awoke his admiration (as it did von Balthasar's). And it was also Przywara who highlighted in Barth's early theology the lack of an adequate doctrine of the Incarnation (see McCormack, p.321). This criticism hit home: Barth devoted serious attention to it, and it was to initiate

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developments in his work that are a recognizable basis for even further convergences between his own theology and von Balthasar's. The maturer incarnational christocentrism of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, a christocentrism which was to be one of the things which Barth and von Balthasar most vigorously held in common, owes a lot, therefore, to the influence of this rather complex Silesian priest.

This to some extent must moderate our characterization of Barth as a theological Petruchio. He moves from an early stress on a relatively formal notion of revelation breaking in on us as the wholly other 'Word of God', to a more substantial, historically-extended appreciation of the incarnate form of God's full revelation in Christ. The *Word* is spoken in the man *Jesus*. The absolute opposition of eternity and time (the negation of time by eternity) gives way to a notion of time's assimilation to eternity—therefore also according a higher dignity to history. In this way a conception of revelation emerges in the maturing Barth which is far more to von Balthasar's taste: a conception of revelation that allows it to make use of creaturely conditions—time and space, form and matter. This conception is to be sure accompanied by an insistence that 'the content of revelation can never be cut off from the *act* of revealing, that is, from the God who freely and sovereignly *chooses* to reveal himself.'[10] But there is an increased sense that the assertion of this freedom need not entail (always and in principle) a hostility or destructiveness towards created terms.

Revelation then, has a form (Christ's form), part of which is an historical *Tendenz* (Christ's history). And all things—*all* things—are made sense of in relation to this form. Creation is only understood when recognized as the outer ground of the covenant made eternally in Christ. No useful doctrine of creation can be 'fleshed out without reference to the covenantal purposes of God'; and no worthwhile anthropology can be devised independently of 'reflection upon the true, restored humanity disclosed in Christ'.[11] Thus, what is called Barth's 'christocentrism' (which von Balthasar, as is often said, shares) is born. Von Balthasar puts it like this:

> 'in everything that pertains to [the] world—the riches offered by creation: science, art, technology—[Barth] never for a moment abstracts from the light that Christ radiates upon these riches'.[12]

Here we have the *comprehensiveness* of a vision which for von Balthasar, as for Barth, is illuminated by the light of Christ, but also the *particularism* of the christological commitment. Like Barth, von Balthasar knows Christ to be the *concretissimum*, and not latent or passive but vibrantly active as such, in a personal history which animates and gives meaning to everything else: scripture; teaching; Christian life and the life of the creation.

There is more that could be said about convergences, but these will tend to be convergences subsidiary to (or entailed by) the principle ones outlined above. What we must now attempt is the delicate job of identifying where the disagreements still are, despite the real sense that kindred spirits are at work here. The most interesting differences, I think, are almost only differences in tone.

The Question of Freedom

Both Barth and von Balthasar have what von Balthasar acknowledges is an 'Augustinian concept of freedom', in that authentic freedom is construed never as

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a kind of abstract free will apart from the invitation and attractiveness of God, but only as 'a form of living within that mysterious realm where self-determination and obedience, independence and discipleship, mutually act upon and clarify each other. ... this domain is that of the Trinity, which grace has opened up for us'.[13] Both share this, and yet there seems in Barth a more narrow construal of the obedience of faith as *passivity* without any genuinely active dimension of creaturely cooperation (a kind of 'monergism') and, on the Catholic side, greater room for 'a creative response to the enabling divine grace (a kind of synergism). This, at least, is how von Balthasar presents the contrast at a number of points in his book on Barth. One of the substantive criticisms of Barth developed at the end of that book is precisely this: that genuine mutuality between God and people is excluded. The creature—the human being—can exercise no really significant initiative. He or she is posited by God as a largely formal presupposition (*Voraussetzung*) of what he has elected to do in Christ. In other words, a basic identity characterises the divine activity, which only seems to unfold into relationship for a moment before folding back into identity again. The divine-creaturely relationship is thus entirely subsidiary to the unified working of the divine will. Thus the figure of Petruchio still haunts even the maturer author of the *Church Dogmatics*, at least as von Balthasar reads him: the Petruchio who seems to be the enemy of any real mutuality between himself and Katherina; who will not permit her to take initiatives or make contributions to their relationship.

This has wider ramifications, if true, for the whole way that nature and history are construed. 'Monergism' would rob them also of a certain integrity. If there is no initiative on the part of the creature then as von Balthasar puts it:

> 'nothing much really *happens* . . . because everything has already happened in eternity . . . Barth rejects all discussion of anything in the realm of the relative and temporal that would make for a real and vibrant history of man with his redeeming Lord and God'.[14]

Linked with this suppression of historical contingency—the deployment of what I have called in another essay (following von Balthasar), an 'epic' rather than a 'dramatic' perspective [15]—there is what is described sometimes as Barth's triumphalism (though he reacted in horror and surprise when Berkouwer called his 1954 book *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*).[16] Barth (von Balthasar suspected) presumed too much that he had got his eschatological bearings, even while warning others of 'eschatological arrogance'.[17] The question von Balthasar poses is whether this is merely a manifestation of the 'courage of faith', properly disciplined by an acceptance of the provisionality of all theological statements and the need for perpetual critical reservation; or whether it is the very un-existential perspective of a 'vast panoramic view' (something that Bultmann, too, criticized in Barth, calling it 'spectator theology').[18] Von Balthasar reacts strongly to Barth's suggestion that reprobation and judgment can be regarded as merely provisional—not because he wants hell to have a large population, but because he thinks we do not have access to a place where we can peep into it and draw such conclusions. He does not want to see what he calls the 'existential character of faith and Christian life'[19] swallowed up in 'the high-spirited superiority of a victorious, all-conquering Yes'.[20] 'Theology', he says, 'must put the accent between the totality of victory and the total seriousness of decision exactly where revelation puts its. By doing so, theology resists the temptation of

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presuming to be the "enlightenment" of revelation'.[21] To do so would be to overstep the legitimate boundaries of theology and begin doing 'metaphysics'. Without losing his basic idea that all evil is 'still fundamentally conquerable', Barth (says von Balthasar) needs 'to be much more flexible at the . . . places where he presses down, ties up and locks in.'[22] He has 'gone a bit too far into the light';[23] his tone 'veritably thrums with a hymnic certainty of eventual victory'.[24]

Von Balthasar, it seems, is the advocate of a far more radical existential irresolution: an arena for human possibilities to determine themselves in various directions. It might be said that the project of *Theo-Drama* is partly an attempt to achieve a corrective of this kind to the Barthian project. He still speaks therefore as a kind of Lucentio against Barth's Petruchio:

> 'Redemption comes to us respecting our incarnate lives in time, leaving room for us to continue to change as we follow in the footsteps of the incarnate Lord. The steps we take in this discipleship have their own inherent meaning and weight. God takes our decisions seriously, working them into his plans by his holy providence'.[25]

The Deadliest Sin

This is pretty much an accepted conclusion about what marks Barth and von Balthasar out from each other, and we can choose to rest satisfied with it. But I want to show what happens when we approach the problem from an entirely different angle. Fergus Kerr's most recent book *Immortal Longings* very interestingly prompts a reflection on what Barth and von Balthasar respectively suppose to be the human being's deadliest sin. Von Balthasar takes the fairly conventional line that Prometheanism—overreaching pride—is the problem. Again and again, when dealing with the philosophers of Enlightenment and their successors throughout the modern period, it is their self-assertion that he condemns. There is in them no obedient attention to the form from which the glory of God breaks forth. Barth, however, as Kerr points out, is more quirky. Human beings are faced with a great divine invitation to participate in the new life opened up by the resurrection, and the sin that holds them back is *Trägheit* (sloth): 'Barth spells this out as sluggishness, indolence, slowness, inertia'. Sin is 'not merely "heroic in its perversion" . . . the sinner is also 'a lazy-bones, a sluggard, a good-for-nothing, a slow-coach and a loafer" . . . [for Barth] inertly drifting is (if anything) a worse sin than shameless self-assertiveness'.[26] So, then, while von Balthasar laments self-assertion (a kind of illegitimate *attempt* at freedom), Barth condemns the *refusal* of freedom.

The perplexity here is that Barth, the supposed monergist, the man whom von Balthasar criticizes for at times 'threatening the reality of the creature' and 'swallowing up the reality of the world' into a Monism of the Word of God'[27], this Petruchio Barth, is in fact the advocate of a kind of joyous liberation in the creature. The command of God, for Barth, is no 'must' but rather a 'may'—an invitation to freedom, and to living as the 'free, open-hearted, willing, spontaneous, cheerful, bright and social being' which God intends her to be.[28] Barth viewed the so-called constraints under which the creature stands as permission to be free.

Von Balthasar, meanwhile, though entering the lists against Barth ostensibly in the cause of the relative integrity of creaturely freedom, is nevertheless the one

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who dwells at far greater length on the creature's need to cultivate receptivity or disposability: *Gelassenheit*. This is definitive, for example, of Mary's role in the Theo-drama. More of this in a moment.

An unusual new angle is opened up here, therefore, on the established Barth-von Balthasar contrast, and it should make us think a second time about what each theologian *actually* stands for when it comes to creaturely freedom and integrity, and therefore more widely the nature-grace debate. We may well find we have cause to undercut von Balthasar's own presentation of what makes him different from Barth.

There can be no doubt that both Barth and von Balthasar order freedom to obedience. But there is a fine but important difference in how they do it, and what they bring to the discussion in terms of presuppositions and concerns. The difference between them can, I think, be suggested in a kind of formula. Barth wants in the creature the *obedient* embrace of *freedom*. Von Balthasar wants the *free* embrace of *obedience*. Barth presupposes that there is initially not-much-to-speak-of in the creature—all is owed to the positing work of the Holy Spirit. The creature becomes interesting as a subject only when he or she stands under the divine call or injunction and responds appropriately. But from this initial restriction of what we might think of as creaturely entitlements or faculties, there opens up a great domain of freedom in Christ—life in a dynamic and open space (which is how he envisages the Church):

> 'We can live life with head held high, with a free heart and a clear conscience, proclaiming to God, Lord, how good are your works!" (Ps. 104:24).'[29]

So Barth says 'obedience' in order then to be able to say 'freedom'. He is not weighed down or preoccupied by questions about some general or abstract or neutral free will in the human. He is not terribly interested in the way that human subjectivity is structured, apart from in the hearing of the Word. He is not bothered with trying to explain how absolute and relative freedoms can co-exist: 'we have no idea or concept for describing it', he says.[30] It surprises him that people can *not* have faith, but he does not agonize over why this is. He concentrates on the *de facto* occurrence of God's speaking and people's hearing. The Word of God, says Barth, 'brings powerfully to light the forgotten truth of creation'—so why speculate about any other supposed 'truths' the creation may have laid claim to apart from this Word's 'striking against it'? A 'natural theology', he says, is, 'justified indeed, necessary—inside revealed theology', but why concern oneself with a 'natural theology apart from revealed theology? It is inconceivable in any case.[31] People answer Christ's call: why look anywhere else if we want to see the meaning and implications of created freedom?

When we understand this, we will perhaps see Barth as less 'epic' than von Balthasar supposes him to be, and more the 'joyous partisan' that he himself hoped to represent. He did not feel the need to defend a set of human entitlements in *principle*, when he could celebrate countless human endowments *in fact*. He hated abstract certainty. He thought that neo-Protestant theology suffered from a certainty that was 'unheard of' in the world of Anselm's *intelligere*. He loathed, eventually, the complacency of Gogarten who was *too* certain about the grounds and warrants of a theology which ought properly to be undertaken only in faith. And he wrote his commentary on Romans not for the sake of unbelievers, but for

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the sake of believers who were *too confident*. This urge remained as much a feature of the later Barth as it was of the earlier. Anyone in doubt about the strength of his feeling on this should read the extraordinary indictment of Job's comforters which Barth dishes out on pages 453-461 of *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.

Barth, then, to reiterate, says 'obedience' in order then to be able to say 'freedom', and to say 'freedom' in quite a specific and distinctive way in the context of a theological ethics. Von Balthasar, in my view, says 'freedom' in a rather more general way in order then to be able to say 'obedience' rather specifically, i.e. rather ecclesially. He is much more preoccupied than Barth with conditions in the human being which are notionally 'prior' to the gracious encounter with God. Von Balthasar takes a trouble which Barth does not to interest himself in how human subjectivity is structured before or apart from any explicit 'knowledge' of Christ. He is prepared, throughout his work, to dwell at greater length than Barth on the character of human selfhood. He assumes a degree of self-possession in individuals, and extends this to apply also to the Church, where, as in the case of individuals, distance is presupposed for the sake of nearness; autonomy is presupposed for the sake of love; irreducible otherness is presupposed for the sake of genuine union.[32] But the outworking of this is that freedom is presupposed for the sake of obedience.

Defence of a formal human autonomy, therefore, issues in a much more specific call for ecclesial obedience than we ever find in Barth. It is here, curiously, that some of the general preconceptions about von Balthasar's 'conservatism' have their roots. Von Balthasar is eloquent about the importance of practical disciplines of self-denial. The saints whose lives he illustrates invariably manifest this quality of being ready to receive an imprint. The archetype of the Church's soul, Mary, is the most perfectly receptive of all Christians (though von Balthasar tries to give a distinctively activist twist to this apparently passive depiction of a mission). Renunciation is tremendously important, and so is respect for the shaping structures of objective Spirit, that is, the institutional Church. These, when accepted obediently, will direct this renunciation and make it fruitful.

We are left, then, facing a persisting difference—often only a difference in style but sometimes too in the topics that are accorded attention—between an early proclamation of creaturely dignity which paradoxically ends in a slightly tetchy summons to worldly individuals that they submit to authorized patterns of behaviour (von Balthasar's line), and a blithe disregard for the creature's claims on integrity which equally paradoxically celebrates wholeheartedly what the creature is once claimed by God (Barth's line). Petruchio and Lucentio have not left us. In the final scene of *The Taming of the Shrew*, you will remember, Petruchio 'frees' Katherina to give voice, while Lucentio must moodily enjoin his wife to come when he calls her.

We of course may, and perhaps with reason, find Katherina's so-called freedom at the end of the play utterly unpersuasive and even sinister. She has become a cipher. And we may, despite arguments put forward here, still feel uncomfortable with the freedom Barth talks about. For all the rapprochement von Balthasar argues for, Barth resists that most crucial aspect of Catholic (and, more particularly, Balthasarian) anthropology, the ability of the creature to *participate* in Christ's work, his sufferings and merits. It is a corollary of von Balthasar's assertion of the human being's ability to receive an imprint that he has room (a room which Barth seems not to have) for an abundance of transpositions of

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Christ's work, and even his characteristics, into the lives of the saints. Individual missions interact with the mission of Christ, and share many of its features, so that they become vehicles of revelation in their own (relative) right.

Von Balthasar, though, has his own problems, and these, ironically enough, are to do with being 'epic'—just that illegitimate presumption to a kind of control of the subject matter of theology which he warned of in Barth. Despite often (and especially in dialogue with Barth) calling for justice to be done to the dramatic and existential dimensions of human existence, von Balthasar is over-inclined to abstract from history's ever-new particularities and construct ahistorical grids or matrices into which creaturely experiences can be fitted. This is most pronounced in some of his work in the area of ecclesiology, but also in the way he patterns the history of ideas: Martin Simon in John Riches' book *The Analogy of Beauty* has some telling criticisms of the way von Balthasar squeezes Hölderlin into a peculiar triangle of different 'types' of idea.[33] And famously, von Balthasar develops a New Testament typology of Christian discipleship, patterning what he calls the four great 'pillars' of Peter, John, Paul and James in relation to one another. Von Balthasar, then, is often inclined to a kind of *architectonic* approach to the description of ecclesial existence before God.

Now some of you may have seen a recent television programme presented by an American called Stewart Brand, entitled *How Buildings Learn*. Brand's thesis was very simple, and rested on a contrast between buildings on the one hand, and architecture on the other. Brand said this:

> 'What I'm really interested in is not architecture; it's buildings. The problem with architecture is that it is allergic to time, because architects keep being asked to create lasting monuments, frozen in time. But buildings have no such presumption. Buildings live in time, the same way we do. In time, we learn. In time, buildings learn'.

And he illustrated this by showing the Ca' d'oro in Venice: its 1434 facade, as he put it, 'faking permanence' (apparently unchanged since it was an architect's plan on paper); and round the back, a *building* showing layers and layers of historical change and adaptation. Von Balthasar's legacy in my view, is *un*healthy where it is most like architecture and least like a building. He knows what is at stake here, and very often he is a most powerful advocate for what he calls 'the kinetic variety of forms and styles' which can be used 'to express the one truth . . .' This, he says, 'arises because of the unimaginable fullness of individual traits in peoples, epochs and personalities in their unique talents and missions'.[34] 'Catholic theology', he goes on, 'will burst the confines of any specific and limited structure of thought.'[35] This is a von Balthasar whose own theology is a 'thinking after' (*Nachdenken*) the history of God with his people, and therefore, at its best, a building where the subject matter is allowed to 'do its own edifying, build its own edifice'.[36] But in certain key places, von Balthasar imposes his own plan on the building. On these occasions, he needs disciplining by Barth's critical reservation—the Barth for whom speaking *confidently* is a *risk*. A risk he embraces wholeheartedly, to be sure; but a risk nonetheless.

Conclusion

What does the dialogue between von Balthasar and Barth bequeath to us now? Their best and clearest joint legacy is the example they give to ecumenical

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theology. At their most brilliant, these two thinkers represent a reverential, though not uncritical, recovery of the full depth and breadth of the Christian tradition. What we need to learn from them, as they do this, is the fact that the arena in which differences are aired ecumenically will always most productively be the doctrine of God—Trinity, Christology, redemption and so on—and only then and in the light of that, Church and Sacraments. The necessary ecumenical debates will be carried out well only inasmuch as Catholicism and Protestantism speak together about their understanding of their common Lord and God, humbly submitting to him, and living from the hope he gives.

1 Cf. Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936* (Oxford, 1995), p.231.
2 McCormack, p.210, n.6.
3 *KB*,p.97.
4 *KB*, p.254.
5 *KB*,p.311.
6 *KB*, p.17.
7 Karl Barth to Edward Thurneysen, 4th February, 1927; quoted in McCormack, p.377.
8 McCormack, p. 130.
9 McCormack, p.67.
10 *KB*, p.48.
11 McCormack, p.454.
12 *KB*,p.197.
13 *KB*, p.129.
14 *KB*, p.371.
15 Ben Quash, '"Between the brutely given and the brutally, banally free": Von Balthasar's Theology of Drama in Dialogue with Hegel', in *Modern Theology* 13:3 (1997), pp.293–318.
16 Barth wrote: 'I'm a bit startled at the title, *The Triumph* . . . Of course I used to use the word and still do. But it makes the whole thing seem so finished, which it isn't for me. *The Freedom*.... would have been better. And then instead of ... *Grace* I would much have preferred . . . *Jesus Christ*.' (Quoted in Busch, p.381).
17 Cf. *KB*, p.186.
18 Cf. McCormack, p.405.
19 *KB*, p.221.
20 *KB*, p.208.
21 *KB*, p.224.
22 *KB*, p.244.
23 *KB*, p.358.
24 *KB*, p.354.
25 *KB*, p 378
26 Fergus Kerr, *Immortal Longings: Versions of Transcending Humanity* (London, 1997), p.41; quoting Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, p.404.
27 *KB*, pp.91, 94
28 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2 quoted in *KB*, p.118.
29 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/3; quoted in *KB*, p.112.
30 Quoted in *KB*, p.133.
31 Karl Barth, *Die Theologie and die Kirche* (Munich, 1938), pp.374–76; quoted in *KB*, p.96.
32 Von Balthasar says these things about Barth (*KB*, p.126), but actually they say far more about his own way of articulating the question of freedom.
33 Martin Simon, 'Identity and Analogy: Balthasar's Hölderlin and Hamann' in John Riches (ed.), *The Analogy of Beauty: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Edinburgh, 1986).
34 *KB*, p.251.
35 *KB*, p.253.
36 *KB*, p.25.

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