Von Balthasar, Rahner, and The Commissar

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Von Balthasar's attacks on Rahner are scattered over several works. Sometimes their expression is very technical, and complex personal factors also play a part. But von Balthasar expresses his concerns vividly and concisely in a bitterly satirical dialogue near the end of a polemical text which he published just after Vatican II: *The Moment of Christian Witness.*[1] A 'well-disposed commissar', a figure symbolising the culture of modernity both in its easy secularism and its nightmare terrors, arraigns a Rahnerian Christian. In less than three full pages, Rahner's theology is made to look ridiculous. For Rahner, God always transcends objects in space and time: we know God only in and through them, as their permanently mysterious, elusive ground. But the commissar refuses to distinguish such talk from secularist atheism:

The commissar	... But don't you have some special belief?
The Christian	That's not so important. The main thing is the word for the time. Today's stress is on love of neighbour. Whoever loves their neighbour loves God.
The commissar	If he existed. But since he does not exist, then in fact you don't love him.
The Christian	We love him inclusively, unobjectively.
The commissar	Aha, so your belief is without an object. We're making progress. Things are becoming clearer.

Towards the end, each of the two claims the other for their side: the commissar accuses the Rahnerian Christian of having joined the secularist, Enlightenment crusade only after all the battles have been fought, while the Rahnerian disciple pleads that the commissar, as one who means well, is in fact in hidden union with the Church: 'you're an anonymous Christian'. This exchange provokes the commissar mockingly to dismiss the Christian. Rahnerian Christianity has no need for him and his ilk to persecute it: 'you've liquidated yourselves and spared us the trouble ...'.

Accounts of von Balthasar's conflicts with Rahner often centre on alleged differences in their theologies of grace, of revelation and of the Church. In particular, is it or is it not legitimate to talk about 'anonymous Christians'?[2] Defenders of Rahner retort that Rahner is not guilty of the heresies which the Balthasarians claim to find in his writing; rather, both theologians have similar concerns.[3] Rahner's concept of the anonymous Christian, rightly understood, follows from the claim that God wills all human beings to be saved—a belief to which von Balthasar, even in *The Moment of Christian Witness* is committed, and on which he writes poignantly.[4] No careful reader of *Hearer of the Word*, or of the tortuous and intricate argumentation of Rahner's classic 1950 essay 'On the Relationship between Nature and Grace', could possibly believe either that Rahner was an intrinsicist, or that he failed to acknowledge the permanent subversiveness of divine grace.[5]

Such textual arguments in Rahner's defence are cogent when taken on their

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own terms. Nevertheless, von Balthasar's criticisms continue to be heard, and to be given credibility. Perhaps, then, the standard lines of argument miss the real point. Perhaps the more immediate, emotionally charged writing of the little play from *The Moment of Christian Witness* indicates a more primal clash of intuitions.

In *The Moment of Christian Witness*, the issue appears as one about the kind of security we can expect religion to give us. The uncertainties and vagueness of what, in the 1960s, was called 'progressive' theology cannot sustain the faith of a martyr. The original German title refers to Cordula, an apocryphal young girl saint. When the martyring Hun attacked, she managed to hide. Then, however, she realised that it is only through death that we find life, and thus emerged from hiding, submitted herself to death, the *Ernstfall*. Thus she became a credible witness.[6] Von Balthasar is inviting a Roman Catholicism infatuated with Vatican II to see itself as Cordula in hiding, and challenging it once again to embrace the call to martyrdom. Contemporary theology, he implies, is too impressed by the uncertainties which a historical critical method generates; respect for legitimate Christian diversity has keeled over into excessive tentativeness, even destructive scepticism, about Christian obligation. The so-called Conciliar renewal misses the whole point about laying down one's life. One might summarize his whole message as a plea to the Church to read John's Gospel straightforwardly, and take it seriously. We must ignore the evidence in the text of neuroses and persecution-complexes; we must stop feeling anxious about the gross disrespect for Judaism this strand of Christianity encourages. Just see it as witness to God's absolute, unconditional, and unquestionable presence among us, a God in creaturely form, a God you can die for.

Balthasar attacks Rahner in *Cordula* ultimately because he finds Rahner lacking in such confident faith. In the appendix to *Cordula*, von Balthasar refers us back to his review of Rahner's *Spirit in the World*.[7] For Rahner, any particular reality points away from itself to a transcendent fullness. Von Balthasar had suggested an alternative account, according to which transcendence is located in an object.[8]

If, as seems likely, von Balthasar claims that Rahner denies that particular realities have any decisive revelatory significance, this is a misrepresentation.[9] Rahner is as insistent as von Balthasar about how 'pure' transcendence, independent of historical reality, is a human impossibility—and indeed, on Christian premises, a divine one. The point at issue, rather, is that for von Balthasar the particular form is an *epiphany* of the transcendent, whereas for Rahner the historical moment of revelation, though essential and constitutive, is always a *pointer towards* an ever greater transcendence.

In the sixth chapter of *Foundations of Christian Faith*, the nearest thing to a full christology that Rahner ever wrote, Rahner applies the principle to Christ himself. God can be present historically only,

> ... in the mode of promise—the promise of the ongoing transcendence of the categorical which affirms absolutely hope's starting point and categorical goal, but only as a mere stage in hope—and in the mode of death—death as the most radical event of that negation which belongs to the very nature of every historically mediated revelation, and which becomes absolute in death because nothing categorical can any longer be hoped for.[10]

Christ is there, not as an unconditional revelation on his own, but as a

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guarantee of an all-embracing process: with him, we have an assurance that our otherwise threatened lives somehow, in God's providence, come to fulfilment. It is in this restricted sense that Rahner glosses Christ's uniqueness:

> We are calling saviour here that historical subjectivity in which,
> - first, this event of God's absolute self-communication to the self-conscious world as a whole is present *irrevocably*;
> - second, that event where this divine self-communication can be unambiguously recognised as irrevocable;
> - third, that event in which this divine self-communication reaches its climax, *to the extent* that this climax must be thought of as a particular moment in the total history of humanity, and thus not simply identified with the whole of the self-conscious world within the divine self-communication.[11]

No one historical manifestation of God, even Jesus, can be the *whole*. Revelation is always pointing us forward, even in heaven. Christianity does not abolish our ambiguous, pilgrim state, but rather encourages us, through the promise of the resurrection, to bear it.

The point at issue between von Balthasar and Rahner, then, is one about how to strike the balance between the definitiveness of revelation and the provisionality of our experience. Von Balthasar implied as much in a 1976 interview:

> I have tried to see Christianity or the figure (*Gestalt*) of Christ in the first place as a figure, and his Church together with Christ. One can walk round a figure and see it from all sides. Again and again one sees something different and yet one sees always the same thing. Thus I do not believe in the pluralism of which Rahner's pessimism is so convinced. Rather I believe in catholicity ... because we—or at least we Christians — always look towards the same thing, even if we also cast glances towards only parts of it.[12]

For von Balthasar, Christ offers a clear revelation of divine beauty. This revelation is multi-faceted, and can be seen in different ways; but pluralism has its limits. Theology must proclaim this revelation in full-throated confidence. It gives us all something to die for.

Rahner never replied in public to von Balthasar's strictures on his theology.[13] One quotation from a talk given to a private Jesuit meeting in 1973 can, however, be taken as a rejoinder:

> If we were to behave as if our being Christian gave us a 'world-view' in which everything fits together harmonically, we would, in the end, be setting ourselves up to be God. This is because the whole of reality is a symphony only for him. To make pluralism into a symphony—as good old Balthasar does—a symphony which we can hear as such: this is fundamentally impossible.[14]

Rahner's epistemology is more, not less, God-centred than von Balthasar's. This God-centredness leads Rahner into a disciplined tentativeness. The kind of security von Balthasar seeks in Christianity is an idolatrous illusion.

Theology and the *Ernstfall*

Von Balthasar is worried that Rahner's reticent, questioning approach to Christianity cannot foster the heroic spirituality of a martyr. It is not unfair, therefore, to introduce into the discussion one of their Jesuit contemporaries and colleagues who actually was martyred, and who left a powerful literary legacy

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from the period when he was awaiting trial and execution: Alfred Delp (1907-1945).[15] Delp was arrested after the Stauffenberg fiasco in July 1944. He had made contributions on Catholic social teaching to a discussion group planning reconstruction from what they saw as Nazism's inevitable defeat. After some months of imprisonment, it became possible for him to write. Here is one of his letters, written in January 1945, shortly before his trial:

> Dear Luise. Heartfelt greetings. I'm doing better again. It's just that each day demands a big, deep breath until it's over.
> Please, before everything else. On the back of page 2 of 'The Situation' there's a suggestion which you should read at once and talk about with Fr Dold. Moreover, Colonel von Wurmb, whom Dr Schmitt knows well, also has good relations with this auntie I mention. Through this 'auntie' one could, were I to be condemned and to survive the day of the judgment (which mostly is not the case), bring an appeal for clemency on the part of my parents to Himmler.
> So, enough of that [...] Meanwhile, I really ask you to hope and to pray with me. ... God has let me gain a beautiful space of inner freedom. That is in any case the grace of these hard weeks, the departure from my self. My security in myself is destroyed. But God's reality gradually comes up on me in greater nearness and density. How was it that one could live by halves and quarters as I have done? [...]
> The business can only, I think, now be put right by God. The resolve to annihilate everything that got anywhere in the vicinity is quite clear. But I rely on God, and dare to move towards him. It doesn't always work easily and well. Like Peter, whom you're so fond of. As long as he looked at the Lord it worked. If he looked at the storm and at himself, then he went under too [...].
> God bless you. Greetings to our friends. Ask everyone to pray who is interested. It's coming gradually: we've become very few here. Write to my sister occasionally. I'm not writing home by this route, since my mother wouldn't be able not to talk about it. Get the children to pray. God bless you, and thank you.[16]

Balthasarian martyrs are so captivated in faith by God's beauteous presence that they can serenely and confidently lay down their lives in response. Delp's martyrdom is rather different. Martyrdom is something which happens to him, where his free choice plays little part. There is faith in abundance regarding God's presence, but no secure knowledge of how or where this presence is operative, either for Delp at the time, or for us who read his writings half a century later. Delp's moving sense of God's abiding providence co-exists with his personal weakness, and with a powerful self-preservation instinct. At the beginning, he is desperately clutching at a straw: he is alluding to an indirect contact which the Munich Jesuits had with Himmler. His letters show, all too understandably, evidence of psycho-religious regression, and of relationships being cut off before the ends can be tied. Like T.S. Eliot's Thomas Becket, Delp comes to doubt his own authenticity and sanity:

> In these last few days I have been doubtful, and wondered if I have become a victim of self-deception, if my will to live has been sublimated into religious illusions, or what it's all been about.[17]

Set against Delp's letters, von Balthasar's vision of martyrdom appears as a

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hagiographical abstraction: the actual experience involves a permanently ambiguous process of disintegration, in which the assurance of faith is always in interplay with an unmanageable unknown. A part of the pain lies precisely in the fact that the 'objective' clarity demanded by the commissars of this world is simply not available. For von Balthasar, Christianity offers some kind of miraculous exception to the human condition's insecurity and unfinishedness, and hence will always be a matter of clear lines and authority. God's last word has been spoken, in unsurpassable beauty. It is for us to contemplate, to respond in obedience—but never to doubt. Rahner's vision is structurally different. Christianity offers a promise empowering us to live and accept that insecurity without denial, in faith and patience.

It would be a complex exercise, and probably a futile one, to adjudicate between the two visions. Each answers different human and spiritual needs, and no Church seeking to appeal widely can afford to do without either of them. But Delp's experience suggests that Rahner's vision is more realistic, and ethically and spiritually more responsible. It offers us a Christianity that works with our fragmentariness. By contrast, von Balthasar's alternative, encouraging us as it does to seek the unsurpassably beautiful, can all too easily legitimate evasion and repression.

1 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness,* translated by Richard Beckley (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 76-78; *Cordula oder der Ernstfall* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1987), 110-112. Both are re-editions. The original was first published in 1966 and the translation in 1969. In what follows I tacitly amend published translations as appropriate.

2 Eg Rowan Williams, 'Balthasar and Rahner', in *The Analogy of Beauty*, edited by John Riches (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1986), 11-34. There is, to my knowledge, no good comparative study taking fully into account Balthasar's attack on Rahner's soteriology in the *Theodramatik*.

3 Some examples: Eamonn Conway, *The Anonymous Christian: a relativised Christianity?: An Evaluation of Hans Urs von Balthasar's criticisms of Karl Rahner's Theory of the Anonymous Christian* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1993); Nikolaus Schwerdtfeger, *Gnade und Welt: Zum Grundgefüge von Karl Rahners Theorie der 'anonymen Christen'* (Freiburg: Herder, 1982); Erhard Kunz, 'Glaubwürdigkeitserkenntnis und Glaube (analysis fidei)', in *Handbuch der Fundamentaltheologie,* volume 4, edited by Walter Kern, Hermann J. Pottmeyer and Max Seckler (Freiburg: Herder, 1988), 414-449, esp 430-440; my review of Stephen J. Duffy, *The Graced Horizon*, in *Heythrop Journal,* 35 (1994), 467-468.

4 *The Moment of Christian Witness,* 73-76.

5 See Karl Rahner, *Hearer of the Word: Laying the Foundation for a Philosophy of Religion,* translated from the first edition by Joseph Donceel and edited by Andrew Tallon (New York: Continuum, 1994), esp 1-22, 55-64; 'Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace', in *Theological Investigations*, vol 1, translated by Cornelius Ernst (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961), 297-318. A footnote on 311-312 of the latter seems politely to imply that von Balthasar is intrinsicist!

6 *The Moment of Christian Witness,* 81.

7 *Cordula,* 124 (the appendix was not translated), referring to *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie*, 63 (1939), 371-379.

8 'But (Rahner's talk of) how the mind (*Geist*) is bound up, listening, with the world perhaps may leave ways open for discovering, "on the basis of the *imaginatio*", an *objective* (emph. PE) transcendence. ... If in the philosophy of religion the intellectus agens has shown itself more and more to be intrinsically 'potential', then this itself provokes the question whether the esse that it points to should really be sought only in terms of a "fullness" (Fülle), with any particular essence (*Wesenheit*) amounting only to a restricted cutout from this "fullness" (*davon alle Wesenheit nur Schranke und*

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Ausschnitt ist). Should we not rather, perhaps, see the formedness of a particular essence (*die Gestalthaftigkeit des Wesens*) as just as much an experience of reality (*Sein*) as the fullness which for us is always empty?' (378-379)

9 E.g. *The Moment of Christian Witness*, 65, on the heart of Christ; *Cordula*, 125, on how intersubjectivity, 'the I-thou encounter, personal love' is decisive in any account of what makes Christian revelation possible.

10 *Karl Rahner, Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, translated by William V. Dych (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1978), 210. For fuller treatment see my 'Rahner, Christology and Grace', *Heythrop Journal*, 37 (1996), 284-297.

11 *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 194— typography and second emphasis supplied PE.

12 'Geist und Feuer. Ein Gespräch mit Hans Urs von Balthasar', *Herder Korrespondenz*, 30 (1976), 72-82, here 76.

13 Eamonn Conway (*The Anonymous Christian*, 91 n.1), drawing on information given him by Herbert Vorgrimler, can give only a handful of perfunctory references in Rahner's published work.

14 Karl Rahner, 'Leben in Veränderungen—Perspektiven der Hoffnung für die Gesellschaft Jesu' (Karl-Rahner-Archiv I B 46), 8. Quoted by permission of the South German Province of the Society of Jesus.

15 On this figure see Jeremiah L. Alberg, 'Alfred Delp: Jesuit', *The Month*, 24 (1991), 289-294; Philip Endean, 'Jesuit Presence and the Struggle for Justice in Nazi Germany', *The Month*, 26 (1993), 240-246. Though a translation exists of the earliest edition of his writings, it is rare, and needs to be replaced by something based on Alfred Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5 volumes, edited by Roman Bleistein (Frankfurt: Knecht, 1982-8). On how there were negotiations for Delp to become involved in a Dogmatik that had originally been conceived as a joint enterprise of Rahner and von Balthasar (from which the table of contents in *Theological Investigations* I.19-37 derives), see Karl H. Neufeld, *Die Brüder Rahner: Eine Biographie* (Freiburg: Herder, 1994), 178-186.

16 Alfred Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4.93-4. [...] indicates passages omitted in the original for reasons of personal delicacy.

17 Alfred Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4.108.

Von Balthasar as Biblical Theologian and Exegete

John Riches

> '[T]heology in the Bible can have no fundamentally different form from later theology in the Church: each is an interpretative act of standing and circling around a midpoint that can indeed be interpreted, but is always in need of interpretation and has never been exhaustively interpreted.'[1]

Balthasar's affirmation of the identity between the theology of the Bible and later church theology, like so much of his writing and work, poses a fundamental challenge to powerful tendencies in the contemporary church, both Protestant and Catholic, at the same time as it claims to be in harmony with the tradition itself. Where Protestant theology from Ritschl and Harnack wants to draw a sharp line between the Bible and the theology of the early church, Balthasar claims a continuity which sees in both the same process of reflection on the relation of the 'Christ-event' to the history of God's love in the Old Covenant *and* the same

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