Passion, Drama and Identity: Aidan Nichols on von Balthasar’s Theodrama

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Reading No Bloodless Myth: A Guide Through Balthasar’s Dramatics is analogous, in many ways, to reading through the director’s notes from the best production of King Lear of the last half century: it details, simplifies and fulfills the original. Nichols is no stranger to von Balthasar, having previously written a commentary on Balthasar’s theological aesthetics: The Word has been Abroad: A Guide Through Balthasar’s Aesthetics (Catholic University Press of America 1998).

No Bloodless Myth is divided into six sections of eighteen chapters, of which five sections parallel the five volumes of Balthasar’s Theodrama (Ignatius Press 1988–98). Nichols outlines the basic structure and the dynamics of Balthasar’s argument: Introduction (pp. 3–7), Prolegomena (pp. 11–46, Volume 1), Persons in the Drama: Man and God (pp. 49–92, Volume 2), Persons in the Drama: The Person in Christ (pp. 49–135, Volume 3), The Action (pp. 139–182, Volume 4), and the Last Act (pp. 185–248, Volume 5). In these sections, Nichols clearly indicates the fundamental concerns that motivated the development of Balthasar’s Theodrama. Of particular importance is the connection he makes between the Theodrama and Balthasar’s Theological Aesthetics (chapter 1) and his analysis of Balthasar’s methodology and the major issues that have shaped the development of systematic and dogmatic theology in the twentieth century (chapter 2). Moreover, the chapters on theological anthropology (chapter 6) and Christology (chapter 7) and Balthasar’s theology of the atonement (chapter 12) clearly articulate the human need for God and God’s response. In essence, it is Balthasar’s radical position that we are not persons until we are included in and take up parts in the drama that expresses God’s relation to the world (p. 89). For Balthasar, God’s action in Jesus Christ brings our fragmented lives (p. 158) into a new type of narrative and a new type of time (pp. 95–8); one that provides us with an identity and fulfills time by giving us a
mission (pp. 41, 46) that has, in the Spirit, continuity in discontinuity and discontinuity despite continuity (p. 97).

Moreover, Nichols’ detailed exposition of the central arguments of the *Theodrama* performs Balthasar’s argument as he explicates it. This work is not just an abstract map from which a reader might infer what it is to face the problems and promises of living in Balthasar’s territory. *No Bloodless Myth* guides the reader to an appreciation of the extent and depths of Balthasar’s concerns by helping the reader to participate in the drama Balthasar believed constitutes the relationship between God and humanity. Nichols’ presentation of the *Theodrama* is driven by the same energies that are the focus of Balthasar’s work. Certain passages of *No Bloodless Myth* resonate with the same passionate involvement in the mission of Christ that lead Balthasar to write his *Theodrama*:

Jesus *both* looked ahead to a reality that was infallibly coming, *and* did so in the ‘calm security’ of someone living entirely for his mission here and now. He did not merely live with a view to what he called ‘that hour’, but anticipated it by living constantly in the immediacy of the mission given him by the Father. Jesus enjoyed, then a unique theological sensibility for time … Jesus saw the time of this world *within* the unity of his own destiny, rather than, as with any other human being, locating and measuring his destiny within the flow of world-time … Jesus’s consciousness of his mission was that he had to abolish the world’s estrangement from God in its entirety – that is, to deal with the sin of the whole world … on the one hand, he is entirely dedicated to the Father at every moment of his earthly life; his earthly work and prayer form part of his redeeming task which is not, then concentrated solely in the future, on the Cross. Precisely this gives Jesus his constant serenity, and enables him to speak of the Father’s righteous love, its mercy and its demands, as a reality here and now … [However], the decisive part of his earthly mission is still to come; his life is moving towards a ‘baptism’, towards the ‘cup’ he must drink and which will prove in the drinking humanly unbearable, stretching him beyond all limits. (p. 98)

If we compare this to the passage from the *Theodrama* that guides Nichols’ performance:

His life is running toward an *akmê*, (a culminating point) that as a man he will only be able to survive by surrendering control of his own actions and being determined totally by the Father’s will (Lk 22:42 par) … he must bear the totality of the world’s sin (Jn 1:29) being ‘made to be sin’ (2 Cor 5:21), becoming ‘a curse’ (Gal 3:13) by the all-disposing will of the Father … We can say that this apocalyptic dimension – if Jesus lives within this horizon of expectation – is most definitely concentrated in him, his person, his span of life (including his death), his destiny. He has to deal with the world and its time on the basis of his unique, temporally circumscribed, human existence: his final ‘hour’ contains the entirely of world-time, whether or not the later continues to run, chronologically, ‘after’ his death (*Theodrama III*, pp. 110–111),
it is clear that Nichols and Balthasar share the same Spirit and commitment to making theology relevant to salvation of the world. It is their participation in this work of God in the church that makes what they write and how it is written theology in the service of proclamation. No Bloodless Myth is, in addition, a significant introduction to systematic and dogmatic theology.

However, despite the excellence of Nichols’ work as a guide to the Theodrama, a contemporary reader might ask why should we read Balthasar, particularly when his project is so vast as to require years of inquiry to achieve any real depth of understanding? If it is not simply a matter of academic or historical interest, our exploration of a particular theologian should be determined by how a particular theological work resolves difficulties we have in knowing and doing the will of God for our times.

For some, it is a matter of faith that theology is one way of knowing what faith means and implies. For others, theology is a way of discovering how to fit ourselves to God’s purposes. When theology guides our thought and our lives, theology is also wisdom. Balthasar’s Theodrama is a work in theological wisdom, wisdom that responds to the deepest longings of the human heart. Ultimately, Nichols’ exposition of Balthasar’s anthropology and Christology in terms of freedom, identity, mission, and discipleship (pp. 71–80, 81–92, 95–105, 157–171), finds its theological purpose and importance in its wisdom.

For Balthasar, human identity is a function of God’s mission, the purpose that responds to and resolves our essential restlessness in this world. Succinctly put, we are often restless because we lack a sense of the significance of our lives. In our freedom, our openness to the world, we are rootless, fragmented, homeless. Our fragmentation and restlessness, however, is a matter for Christology not anthropology. It reflects the essential Trinitarian constitution of human identity (pp. 71, 73, 104). For Balthasar, particularly in the context of volume III of the Theodrama, it is the Trinitarian identity of Christ, the hermeneutics of discipleship, and the logic of time, abstract as they seem, that connect the mission of God to our deepest needs and highest hopes.

It is the problem of the identity of Jesus Christ that raises the problem of time (p. 98). If Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, and through the cross and resurrection also transcends both the promise of the Old Testament and in the procession of the Holy Spirit transcends the particularism of his specific mission to Israel, then the identity of Jesus the Christ can only be constituted as the identity of a dramatic narrative (p. 103). Thus, Jesus in the dramatic narrative of the New Testament is a prophet, but also so much more. Jesus fulfills the kingdom of God in his time, but even more, Jesus is the fullness of the promise to come. He is in the moment the end in its fullness, yet the end is just beginning to fill the future. The way and the truth and
the life have been revealed, yet the ways that creation and humanity will fulfill the will of God have not yet been revealed. Thus, God’s eternal time comes into history in unexpected ways (pp. 107, 141). This is as much a matter of the freedom of God to do new things as it is a matter of human freedom. God will be freely self-giving to shape a salvific theodrama (p. 72). As Nichols notes, in the Trinitarian relations that constitute the identity of God, the going out into the world of the Son involves a discontinuity that is bridged by God’s faithfulness to Christ and the Spirit as much as it is bridged by Christ’s faithfulness to the purposes of God (pp. 131–3). This is the theodramatic pattern of continuity and discontinuity. This pattern of faithfulness, however, when expressed in the human history cannot be predicated and involves certain radically orthodox implications for the identity of Jesus Christ.

For Balthasar, Christ is genuinely and intimately involved in the contingencies of the moment (pp. 103–4). He must, according to Balthasar, learn obedience. Christ is faithful to God’s mission. The details of that faithfulness, however, are dramatic. Jesus acts in creative ways to bring about the kingdom of God in difficult circumstances. In the final analysis, Jesus’ incarnation of the mission of God requires that the purposes of God be revealed dramatically and progressively (p. 132) in contact and conflict with the world, as the story of Christ, the disciples and the mission of the church develops (pp. 140–3). Patterns of faithful discipleship will themselves be dramatic and narrative in form: there will be conflict, and as the promises of God dramatically shape the shapes of human freedom, there will continuity in discontinuity and discontinuity through continuity.

These insights and connections, especially as they are worked out in connection to the themes of the more expressively Christological and eschatological volumes (III and IV) should lead us to read and interpret Balthasar’s work as a significant key to unlocking the dynamics of the stories that promise (or threaten) to shape our future.

Finally, if there is any qualification to the praise that should accompany No Bloodless Myth, Nichols and Balthasar could benefit from a way of doing theology that is more explicitly connected to telling a story. Balthasar’s references to scripture are appropriate and deeply suggestive but their narrative dynamic is often obscured by his argument and architectonic. If we are to take Balthasar’s Theodrama seriously, the gospel narrative and stories that develop this narrative are necessary to shape our discipleship in Christ. For example, a number of years ago a young pastor, my wife, was offered the possibility of working with inmates of a maximum-security prison. Her task was to ‘do a drama’ for Christmas in the grey cinder block chapel that occupied one part of the prison yard. Her choice was the Second Shepard’s Play, a medieval mystery play. In this drama, on the night of Jesus’ birth, a thief steals a lamb, is caught and condemned to death. But Mary asks
that the thief be forgiven and released to prevent violence from defiling the sacredness of this holy night. The thief is released and runs away. In the performance, however, this is not what happened. Many of the prisoners could not read, write, or speak that well. So, she told them the story, scene by scene, and translated what they said into a script which they memorized. All went according to the basic plot line until the end. The inmate who played the thief did not want to run away. He wanted to return and present the lamb he had stolen to the Christ child. When asked why he wanted to do this, he said, ‘This King doesn’t mind a thief hanging around’. This response shaped the end. The thief returned with the lamb, wrapped up in his arms. When he presented this gift to Mary, she slowly lifted it up for all to see. It was a crucifix; the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world. ‘Amazing Grace’ not ‘Silent Night’ was the hymn that concluded this prison drama.

Christ certainly did not mind a thief hanging around. This thief, shaped by the story whose purpose is to show the identity of the Christ child, was caught up by the story into the mission of the Son of God. So, he changed the way the play ended. The theodrama of this narrative is the story of how one person discovered their name, their identity, and their ultimate destiny in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. For Balthasar, God’s theodrama will help guide readers to their own unique destinies in the story of God’s salvific mission. Nichols’ No Bloodless Myth is a superb guide to how Balthasar’s Theodrama guides and shapes theologians and theologies towards their ultimate mission in God’s future.

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