

PREFACE

This book compares two figures that are not often associated together within the field of Roman Catholic theology, namely Hans-Georg Gadamer and Hans Urs von Balthasar. This work attempts to find deep structural affinities in the aesthetics and hermeneutics of both thinkers, as expressed through shared metaphysical and anthropological assumptions about the dialogical nature of truth and interpretation. The body of the work will be devoted to analyzing these assumptions of Gadamer and Balthasar, both individually and in comparison with each other. However, this preface is necessary to place the concerns of this book into a broader theological context.

The Reception of Gadamer in Roman Catholic Theology

Few can doubt that the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer has exerted an incredible influence on the field of Roman Catholic fundamental theology. His thought has been applied most especially to questions of the development of doctrine and the appropriation of tradition. This application has been affected by the tension in Gadamer's thought between an understanding of his concept of "fusion of horizons," in which the horizon of the past is fused with the horizon of the present to yield new interpretations of past texts, and his defense of "prejudice, authority, and tradition," in which Gadamer upholds the enduring truth-value of received wisdom from the past.

Theologians who argue for a "revision" of the Christian tradition in light of contemporary experience, such as David Tracy in his early work *Blessed Rage for Order* and Edward Schillebeeckx in the opening chapter of *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, among others, would seem to emphasize the "fusion of horizons" element of Gadamer's hermeneutics, with an understanding of that fusion as the present exercising a decisive influence over the interpretation of the past. In fact, such theologians have been the most prominent in appropriating Gadamer in Roman Catholic circles.¹

However, it seems to me that the above-stated "tension" in Gadamer's thought is partially resolved by understanding his hermeneutics through aesthetic and dialogical categories. Indeed, it is surprising, in the secondary literature on Gadamer, how little the first and third parts of *Truth and Method* (on aesthetics and the dialogical aspects of language) enter into the interpre-

tation of the second part (on hermeneutics proper). It is clear that Gadamer meant all three parts to be interrelated and illustrative of the whole.

The Importance of Aesthetic and Dialogical Categories in Interpreting Gadamer's Hermeneutics

For Gadamer, the experience of the beautiful is one which has both immediacy and enduring value. Its immediacy is displayed through the "non-differentiated" reception of a work of beauty, which means that the interpreter must not place barriers between herself and the radiant truth of the work. There is a metaphysics of radiance at work here, that links truth and beauty and "manifestation." There is also an anthropology which suggests that one enters into the truth of a work only when one allows oneself to be transformed and affected by it. This is one of the "dialogical" aspects of Gadamer's hermeneutics that I wish to emphasize here, namely that one enters into "dialogue" with a work when one makes oneself receptive to its truth-claims. The work is, in a sense, a Thou which communicates truth to us. It is Gadamer's contention that the application of reductive "methods" to the interpretation of a work can impose too much distance upon the interpreter, so that she cannot be receptive to the "subject-matter" that the text discloses.²

David Tracy, in his works *The Analogical Imagination* and *Plurality and Ambiguity*, has begun to see these aesthetic categories (discussed under the rubric of manifestation and disclosure) in the thought of Gadamer, and to highlight them for his readers (including myself). In addition, Tracy's colleague Paul Ricoeur has emphasized the category of "distance" in interpreting Gadamer, as well as suggesting the problematics of its opposite category, total non-distanciation.³

In addition to this growing realization of the aesthetic categories in Gadamer's hermeneutics, the dialogical aspects of Gadamer's hermeneutics have also recently been emphasized by philosophers such as Charles Richard Ringma and James Di Censo. Again, the text or work of art is seen as a Thou which communicates its truth to the interpreter. In turn, the interpreter, through appropriating it in the context of his finite and particular situation, adds his own contribution to this dialogue.⁴

Initial Similarities between Gadamer and Balthasar

My own growing realization of the necessity of aesthetic and dialogical categories to interpret Gadamer's hermeneutics correctly dovetailed with a growing appreciation of those same categories in the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, especially in his volumes devoted to theological aesthetics (*Glory of the Lord*), and in his emphasis on the "dialogue" between divine and human freedom in his *Theo-Drama*.⁵

Delving further into this comparison brought to light deeper similarities between Gadamer and Balthasar, including similar metaphysical and anthropological assumptions of the type that were described above, namely, a radiance metaphysics that links beauty, truth and disclosure, and an anthropology that emphasizes the necessity of being receptive to this disclosure of truth (in the manner of an I-Thou encounter). This is what I have called the vertical-ontological dimension of dialogue. Furthermore, as Marcello d'Ambrosio had already hinted in his book on the hermeneutics of De Lubac, the dialogue between past and present in Gadamer's hermeneutics of tradition finds resonance in the *ressourcement* style of theology, with which Balthasar is also loosely associated, not least through the recovery of a patristic, *lectio divina* style of reading Scripture.⁶ This is what I have called the horizontal-historical dimension of dialogue (i.e., between past and present).

These similarities between Gadamer and Balthasar I have called "aesthetic hermeneutics." It should be noted, however, in the interest of completeness, that Gadamer himself used this term unfavorably to describe the hermeneutics of Droysen, whom he accuses of having a non-integrative view of the relationship between aesthetics and truth.⁷

Theological Differences in Gadamer and Balthasar

Of course, one of the problems in comparing Gadamer and Balthasar, which I discuss in the course of this book, is that Balthasar integrates the categories of aesthetics and dialogue with the revelation of the Triune God, raising them into theological categories without counterpart in the philosophy of Gadamer. So, for example, the aesthetics of Balthasar, even on the level of metaphysics (let alone revelation) are integrated into the doctrine of creation. Indeed, one of Balthasar's contributions here is in pointing out the "giftedness" inherent in the experience of the world (here he takes Heidegger to task for recognizing the giftedness of Being but not the divine source of this gift). This giftedness, which already implies self-giving (kenosis) on the

part of the Triune God, is infinitely enriched when one takes into account the Incarnation, Passion and Death of Christ.

Furthermore, Balthasar's account of the relation between past and present is integrated into a broader understanding of history as leading to and flowing from the salvation wrought by Christ, the eternal present and center of history. In this way, he sees history as having a specific "end," namely the union or recapitulation of the human race into eschatological communion with God. Needless to say, these concerns have no counterpart in the philosophy of Gadamer, despite several shared philosophical presuppositions.

Aims of the Book

One of the aims of this book, then, is to highlight the shared philosophical presuppositions of Gadamer and Balthasar in the areas of aesthetics, hermeneutics, and dialogue. It also leaves open the suggestion that Gadamer's philosophy, when integrated within a theological framework, may provide an opening for a deeper appreciation of Balthasar's theology to an audience that is not normally enamored of him.

It is divided into three parts. The first part is devoted to aesthetics, with Chapters One and Two describing the aesthetics of Gadamer and Balthasar, respectively, while Chapter Three offers a schematic comparison of their similarities (with some attention to theological differences). The second part, devoted to hermeneutics, follows the same format, with Chapters Four and Five describing the hermeneutics of Gadamer and Balthasar, respectively, followed by a schematic comparison of their similarities and differences in Chapter Six.

While the book is largely focused on a description of ideas rather than a historical survey, it nevertheless deals in passing with several prominent figures in the history of philosophy, and their common influence or common rejection by both Gadamer and Balthasar. In Part One, the common engagement of both thinkers with Plato, Kant and Heidegger is discussed, while in Part Two, Hegel forms the backdrop for a discussion of both thinkers' philosophies of history.

Part Three takes a different turn altogether, and encompasses three goals within its one chapter, Chapter Seven. The first goal is a schematic description of the common metaphysical assumptions that both thinkers hold, especially with regard to the disclosure of truth. The second goal is a description and partial evaluation of the critiques that can (and have) been applied to

both Gadamer and Balthasar, while the third goal is an attempt to discuss the application of aesthetic hermeneutics to very specific areas of theological dialogue.

In particular, in Chapter Seven, I focus on a third axis of dialogue that I have called the “horizontal-spatial” (as opposed to the vertical-ontological and horizontal-historical, which I have described briefly above as the dialogue with truth-beauty and with the past, respectively). This third axis focuses on questions of adjudication between conflicting interpretations within the present, either between communities or within them. It offers broad suggestions for what an aesthetic-hermeneutical approach might look like in such dialogues.

I hope that the whole of this book reflects my appreciation for the aesthetic and dialogical elements in the hermeneutics of Gadamer and Balthasar, and my appreciation for the theological integration of these elements provided by Balthasar, for whom theology flows from a profound gratitude and wonder at the beauty of God’s loving self-revelation to us in Christ.

Notes

¹David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1975); Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. by John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1981). It should be noted that Balthasar himself had read *Truth and Method* and cited it in *Theo-Drama* (in passing) in the following places: *TD* 1, 306, n. 4 (on drama and the role of the spectator), 311, n. 16, 428, n. 7; and *TD* 2, 392 n. 109 (on language and its relationship to being and interpretation).

²As to the question of inclusive language, in order to avoid needless circumlocutions, shifts into plural form when discussing “man” or “the human being,” and the awkward he/she form, I will instead alternate regularly between using “he” and “she” to describe “the human being.” Quotes will, of course, use the pronouns contained in the standard English translations.

³David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981); David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987). Ricoeur’s critique has been appropriated by David Tracy and, among others, his fellow Roman Catholic theologian Sandra Schneiders in *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1999).

⁴Charles Richard Ringma, *Gadamer’s Dialogical Hermeneutic: The Hermeneutics of Bultmann, of the New Testament Sociologists, and of the Social Theologians in Dialogue with Gadamer’s Hermeneutic* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1999); James Di Censo, *Hermeneutics and the Disclosure of Truth: A Study in the Work of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur* (Charlottesville VA: University of Virginia Press, 1990).

⁵The best secondary works on Balthasar in English include Edward T. Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Continuum, 1994), Raymond Gawronski, S.J., *Word and Silence: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Spiritual Encounter Between East and West* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), and Larry S. Chapp, *The God Who Speaks: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theology of Revelation* (San Francisco: International Scholars Publications, 1996). Most secondary works on Balthasar do not offer extensive discussions of Gadamer at all. It should be noted that one attempt at a comparison between Gadamer and Balthasar (as well as Schillebeeckx) has already been attempted, in a book by Susan Anne Ross called *Art and Revelation: An Exploration in the Philosophy of Gadamer and the Theologies of Schillebeeckx and von Balthasar* (Ph. D. diss., University of Chicago, 1982). However, she did not devote much to a comparison of the aesthetic categories of the two thinkers, and she reached a conclusion that was much more pessimistic than mine about the “dialogical” nature of Balthasar’s theology. This is probably due to the fact that she implicitly defines dialogue almost entirely in terms of the dialogue between “Christian past” and “contemporary experience,” rather than in terms of the divine-human dialogue in the course of salvation history.

⁶Marcello d’Ambrosio, *Henri de Lubac and the Recovery of the Traditional Hermeneutic* (Ph. D. diss., Catholic University of America, 1991).

⁷ *TM*, 218.