



## Seeing the Form

*Hans Urs von Balthasar*

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The work opens with a critical review of developments in Protestant and Catholic Theology since the Reformation which have led to the steady neglect of aesthetics in Christian theology. From here, von Balthasar turns to the central theme of the volume: the question of theological knowledge. He re-examines the nature of Christian believing (here he quickly draws widely on such theological figures as Anselm, Pascal and Newman) which gives due place to the particular kind of 'knowing' which develops within the personal relationship to the believer to the God mediated through the revelation-form of Jesus Christ

## Seeing the Form Details

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### Aeisele says

*The Glory of the Lord, vol 1: Seeing the Form* is the first in Hans Urs von Balthasar's massive theological trilogy, one of the most important works of the 20th century theology. Balthasar uses the ancient philosophical categories of the "transcendentals" (Beauty, Goodness, and Truth) to structure this work (over 17 volumes!), and vol 1 is a justification and initial exploration of the first of those transcendentals, Beauty. It's hard to overstate how impressive Balthasar is in this volume. He takes on an entire tradition that denigrates Beauty as a category describing Being, starting with the Reformation, through the Enlightenment, and into Catholicism's "elimination of aesthetics from theology." The introduction, which is the first part of this work, looks at the scope of this history, and argues that by doing this theology has given up on the notion of the splendor of "form," the way the beauty of form implicates the truth and goodness of Being. Ultimately, for Balthasar, giving up on aesthetics in theology is a betrayal of the incarnation, for "the Incarnation uses created Being at a new depth as a language and means of expression for the divine Being and essence" (29). The Incarnation is the essence of all aesthetics.

After the introduction and the justification for aesthetics, Balthasar structures the work in terms of what Catholic theology has labelled "Fundamental Theology" (looking at how the individual perceives God - in Balthasar's terms, the "theory of vision"), and "Dogmatic Theology" (looking at the objective content of theology, what Balthasar calls the "theory of rapture," which is based on the "egressus-regressus" typology of medieval theology).

The "theory of vision" (Part II) addresses basic issues, just as faith, knowledge, and their relationship, and especially experience. The sections on experience are really great, because unlike say a Schleiermacher, who focuses on a neutral, modern human's experience, Balthasar focuses "archetypal" experiences - Jesus', primarily, and then the OT experience, Mary's, the Apostles, as well as the way Paul, John, and the other epistles talk about it.

The "theory of rapture" is the second part, and is all about the way in which God meets humanity in history, and humanity comes to participate in God. The big topics here are obvious: revelation, Christ, and how Christ is mediated and witnesses to.

This is an intense volume. It's not easy, and as a Protestant with some basic, differing assumptions, I certainly can't go some places Balthasar goes. However, my initial reading of this volume was less about agreement, and more about entering into the strange world of Hans Urs von Balthasar's thinking. This is a perfect book for that.

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### Spencer says

Although it is properly set within Balthasar's wider work *Glory of the Lord* and the even broader 'trptych' consisting of the aesthetics, *Theo-Drama*, and *Theo-Logic*, *Seeing the Form* is one of the best single volumes of theology I have ever read. In it, Hans Urs von Balthasar, attempts to reclaim "beauty" as an essential category for theology. On analogy with inner-worldly beauty, God's glory shows itself to the eyes of faith which it itself grants us. This showing itself occurs in a form - a particular concrete and determinate reality - which is the expression of its own mysterious depths. These depths are expressed precisely *in* the form, which is never simply cast aside to get to the 'real meaning' behind it (e.g., in mere allegory). Jesus Christ is the ultimate form of God's self-expression, and as such is the ultimate organizing principle of any truly theological aesthetic. Christian faith, therefore, is a matter of an ever-deepening vision in which God himself is seen in his self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Balthasar takes us through a breathtaking array of implications of this basic form-principle of theological aesthetics in the fields of fundamental theology, dogmatics, epistemology, ecclesiology, sacramental theology, philosophy and Christian experience.

## Greg says

Probably the most important piece of sustained theological writing since Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics, however, unlike Barth it is from a Catholic as opposed to a Reformed perspective.

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## John says

The first volume of Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics, *Seeing the Form* is difficult to quantify in a few words. At its base, Balthasar wants to recapture aesthetics, or beauty, in the task of theological reflection. Where truth and goodness have dominated the discipline, beauty has fallen on hard times. For in a world devoid of beauty, both goodness and truth become compromised as well.

The pinnacle of beauty in the world (not to mention truth and goodness) is Jesus Christ. Balthasar's work orbits around Christ with a focus and an attention to detail that I have not seen exceeded in theological literature. This helps not just in articulating his overall point, but also in pressing on through some of the more dense and philosophical sections of his book.

Ultimately, Balthasar believes that in taking on the form of Jesus in an ever-increasing fashion, Christians and the Church will shine with his light more purely and more in line with our fundamental natures as creations of God.

This doesn't even begin to scratch the surface of this monumental work. I suspect I'll be reading sections here and there from it for the rest of my life.

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## Paul says

So obviously von Balthasar is a genius, *Herrlichkeit* is, taken as a whole, probably the most impressive theological work of the twentieth century, etc. etc. But after reading about half of the *Trilogy* so far (all of *Theo-Logic*, about half of *Theo-Drama*, and two volumes of *Glory*), I have to say . . . Hans needs an editor, badly. The typical reader of von Balthasar may not be aware that these books were originally self-published and hence not edited (Johannes Verlag is basically a vanity press, though obviously von Balthasar could be published anywhere). It's actually similar to Kierkegaard, who was independently wealthy and self-published all of his work, and who also really, truly, seriously needed an editor . . . the final 300 pages of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* are such a mess that it's hard to believe Kierkegaard let it go into the world in that state.

With *Glory*, Von Balthasar's basic instinct was correct; he's right that the average theological work is superficial and has to leave too much out, so indeed, why not just include everything, and write a complete 7-volume theological aesthetics without any concessions to length. Sounds great! But my point is that he didn't need 4500 pages; 2500 would have easily done the trick. With *Seeing the Form*, the introduction to the 7-volume series, he spends the introduction (i.e., the introduction to the introduction) rambling on and on about various Protestant theologians, German Idealist theologians, etc., for no discernible reason; they aren't mentioned again for the rest of the volume, and the figures that he talks about do not even vaguely represent all the possible approaches that could be taken to aesthetics. On pages 58-67, he decides, sure, I'll just

include a rambling summary of Gerhard Nebel's Lutheran aesthetics ...? What on earth does this have to do with setting the stage for a theological account of beauty? And why would that be in an introduction, especially when there's literally an entire volume (vol. 3) in the series that will cover these figures? Also, why is the introduction 117 pages long?

The intro is one of many examples of von Balthasar's strange emphasis on German theology circa 1750-1900; he can't go twenty pages (even when talking about Anselm or whoever else) without somehow bringing up Hegelian dialectic, or Scheeben, or Schelling, or Barth, or etc. Maybe it's just because he was friends with Barth and always had Protestant-Catholic dialogue somewhere in the back of his mind? I'm not sure why, exactly, but it's certainly distracting, and does nothing to help his arguments. Von Balthasar's early work (on Maximus, Gregory, Origen, etc.) is far more impressive imo; tightly focused and incredibly insightful. With the *Trilogy*, these moments of insight are somewhat more rare.

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### **Mac says**

Deep, powerful, rigorous, and wonderful. One of the best things I've read this year, and one that I suspect I'll come back to many times over the course of my studies.

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### **David Miller says**

Warning: spending time with Hans Urs von Balthasar leads to intoxication of the mind! What a thrilling read. It seems to be a near-literal translation from the German and so is somewhat hard to follow at times, and I wish the inline Latin, Greek, and French phrases had been translated (as has been done with the 2nd volume of this work). Still a great read, and just what I needed at the time. He touches on many things I had wondered about: the actual experience felt by the people the Lord speaks to in the Bible; the fact that the Lord's glory is to be discovered by everyone, and theologians at their best only describe what they have seen; and that Jesus Christ (a person) is the truth and the life, the crux of world history, the measure of beauty.

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### **Dwight Davis says**

One of the best and most beautifully written works of theology I've read. Especially helpful were the chapter on grace and HUVB's sections on scripture and liturgy. A really astounding work of theology that will take a few more reads to fully appreciate.

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### **Darby Hughes says**

Extremely difficult read, but rewarding at points. The author is a Catholic theologian/philosopher, so as a Protestant, I couldn't endorse some of his theology, but much is shared ground when dealing with the subject of beauty and aesthetics.

I probably wouldn't have read this if I knew ahead of time how dense and erudite it is, but thought I'd take on the challenge. Glad I did, and glad I'm done!

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## Christina "6 word reviewer" Lake says

Six words can't do it here!

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