

see a profoundly Catholic exhibition that ended up as a counter attraction to the Millennium Dome is very well exposed.

The most interesting aspect of this study is the interplay brought into focus between the artist and the patrons, well explored in chapters 4, 6 and 7. The contrary expectations between the vision of the artist and the expectations of their ecclesial clients are given a very original exploration. Chapter 4 on the commissioning of works by the sculptor Henry Moore and the painter, Graham Sutherland for an Anglican Church, St. Matthew's, Northampton seem less about clashes of expectations than of artistic styles. The politics surrounding how a religious image ought to be presented to be seen with edification is brought well to the fore. The issue of who owns the religious image, or its setting or use is treated with a lot of insight. More meaty theology emerges in the skirmishes between the artist and the patron (in this case the Dominicans) discussed in chapter 6.

In this chapter, Howes brings out an odd point, on how little is known on the dispositions of the painters of religious art. This excellent chapter draws parallels between Fra Angelico at San Marco, Matisse's *Chapelle du Rosaire* at Venice and the ill-fated commission for a chapel given to the New York artist, Mark Rothko. The way artistic vision collides with conventional notions of how images should be seen to be believed is exceedingly well drawn. This leads to the best chapter, 7, in the study on the artist as believer, which ranges from Rembrandt to Holman Hunt. A secularised history of art wipes out this issue as a matter of concern. In this regard, Howes performs an important service in rehabilitating this matter that draws sociology and theology into a creative, if not edifying relationship.

The degree to which sacred images facilitate piety is also well handled in chapter 5 on buildings and their religious purposes. Rightly, Howes descends on the notion of 'as if' in Steiner as pointing to the way religious art is to be handled. By contrast to the preceding parts of the study, the last chapters on 'religion to spirituality' and theology and the visual arts seem slightly pessimistic and lack some galvanising vision of what is required. They bear the uneasiness that lurks in Anglicanism on the making of images for religious use, and the virtual impossibility of overturning the effects of the Reformation where the scaffolding of visual piety was dismantled. This accounts, perhaps, for the slight property of nostalgia and regret that floats around the study.

Overall, this is an important work, perhaps far better in its parts than its totality. It deserves wide circulation. Many questions, issues and insights that require deep reflection are brought together in a unique study. Unusually, this introduction comes with two pages of spirited endorsements from the great and the good; in this case, they are very well deserved.

KIERAN FLANAGAN

LIGHT IN DARKNESS, HANS URS VON BALTHASAR AND THE CATHOLIC DOCTRINE OF CHRIST'S DESCENT INTO HELL by Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007, xvi+458 + 9 colour plates, \$55.00 hdk., \$36.00 pbk.*

The reception of the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar must constitute one of the most extraordinary theological phenomena of recent Catholic theology. In some circles he is regarded as the modern Catholic theologian *par excellence*, a staunch defender of the Faith against 'liberal' theologians accused of diluting the particularity of Christian revelation and the distinctiveness of Christian life. Others, often no less 'conservative', argue quite the opposite. For them Balthasar is a theologian whose work is innovative to the point of undermining orthodoxy.

The question remains: Is Balthasar a great modern Catholic theologian, a model of orthodoxy; or a theologian who has misled people into thinking so?

Alyssa Lyra Pitstick clearly holds the latter opinion. In her fascinating book on Balthasar's theology she focuses on a central pillar of Balthasar's thought, his theology of Christ's descent into hell. Traditionally, Christ's saving work has been understood to be pre-eminently his passion and death on the cross. Christ's descent into hell was seen as more the first fruits of his saving work, where Christ descended in triumph in order to lead the righteous to the beatific vision. For Balthasar, however, the traditional view does not do justice to the depths of Christ's love. It is the descent into hell that is the centre of Christ's saving work, understood not as triumphant, but as the casting of the Son into God-forsakenness in order to bring what is furthest from God back to the Father. Central to Pitstick's opposition to Balthasar is that his theology contradicts the traditional doctrine of Christ's descent on several points. It therefore cannot be regarded as a legitimate development of the doctrine, but as a relatively modern invention whose origins are from the 15th century onwards.

In the first part of her book Pitstick examines Scripture and the Tradition to see if these sources give any support to Balthasar's theology of the descent. The problem with the few scriptural texts that may be understood as making direct reference to Christ's descent into hell, such as 1 Peter 3.18-4.6, is that they are somewhat obscure and open to multiple interpretation. Pitstick also examines other scriptural texts that have been understood as prefiguring Christ's descent into hell. The use of typological readings in support of specific positions will doubtless not appeal to some, but Pitstick is surely justified in giving this approach attention, not least because it was used by Balthasar in support of his views.

Arguably more profitable is Pitstick's examination of the Tradition: magisterial documents, patristic and ancient liturgical texts, and religious images. If the triumphant nature of Christ's descent was not a matter of dispute, as she contends, then it is not surprising that Pitstick has to some extent to argue from the absence of works that give credence to the view that Christ suffered in hell. Pitstick builds a strong case, but at one point she states that whilst none of the liturgical texts ever assert that Christ's expiatory suffering continued in his descent into hell, there are a few individual lines that admit of ambiguity (p. 63). It is unfortunate that Pitstick does not pursue this further and give some examples. The problem with language used in the contexts of worship and theology is that words frequently have very different senses from standard usages. Indeed, Balthasar famously makes much of this in his use of the Johannine term 'glory', to embrace what could be viewed as most inglorious, the events of Christ's passion and death. Ambiguities in ancient liturgical texts could be used to argue for the, albeit latent, presence of a neglected strand within the Tradition favouring Balthasar's position. This would be sufficient to weaken Pitstick's claim that Balthasar's theology of the descent is not faithful to the Tradition.

Pitstick's task is more straightforward, however, when it comes to analysing religious images. Eastern icons clearly portray a triumphant Christ in a realm distinct from that of the damned, liberating the occupants from their bondage. That the faithful understood the event as triumphant is underlined by the fact that icons of the harrowing of hell have traditionally been viewed as icons of the resurrection, the resurrection event itself not being depicted. Similarly, Western images before the Protestant Reformation do not depict Christ suffering the pains of the damned, despite the undoubted ability of artists to represent the torments of hell. From about the 15th century it seems that there were some representations of Christ suffering the torments of hell, but Pitstick tantalisingly says no more (p. 83).

In the rest of the book Pitstick gives a detailed and generally negative assessment of those aspects of Balthasar's theology that relate to his theology of

the descent, in particular his Trinitarian theology and Christology. In this way her criticism of Balthasar goes well beyond the issue of a single doctrine, to a comprehensive criticism of his wider theological enterprise.

A case in point is Pitstick's arguments against Balthasar's claim that during his life on earth Jesus did not possess the beatific vision. In taking issue with Balthasar, Pitstick gives what must count as among the most spirited and detailed defences of the traditional position of recent years. Very occasionally Pitstick does not state her position as clearly as she ought, and makes some surprising statements: 'Now if a mode of implementation must be tested, it suggests it is open to correction. Here a choice must be made: Either Jesus never makes a mistake, or sometimes He does... The second option simply means Jesus errs with regard to what is best in some particular moments – and hence also possibly sins' (p. 225). Infallible knowledge does not entail impeccability, and imperfect knowledge in Christ need not result in the possibility that he could have sinned. For the most part, though, Pitstick's exposition is insightful, especially in exposing vulnerable points and problematic implications of some of Balthasar's positions. For example, if Jesus' self-understanding as Son is founded on his awareness of his mission, then how could he have known that he is the Son of the Father, and have understand his obedience as Son, when in hell he lost sight of the Father (p. 168)? More obviously problematic, even for his defenders, is Balthasar's assertion that Holy Saturday is 'a kind of suspension, as it were, of the Incarnation' (p. 196). In this, and in other cases, Pitstick tends to favour non-metaphorical interpretations of Balthasar's language, and use this against him. Thus, if the Incarnation is suspended in some way at the central point of our salvation, then Balthasar needs to explain how Christ's humanity could have had any real importance in his saving work.

Here, as elsewhere, Pitstick's opposition to Balthasar's theology of the descent is so firm that she does not engage with what it is about Balthasar's theology that has had such appeal. Nor does she give any explanation of how such an audacious theology has come to be so influential among many 'traditional' theologians, including the present pope. Key influences on Balthasar's theology of the descent are also little discussed. Karl Barth is barely mentioned, and Adrienne von Speyr mentioned only a few times, mainly in the endnotes. Ironically, Pitstick could have used a discussion of Speyr's role in the genesis of Balthasar's theology of the descent to her advantage. After all, there must surely be concerns regarding the trustworthiness of any original theology so deeply indebted to personal visionary experiences. Yet regardless of such reservations, this is an impressive book. Pitstick has had the courage to challenge a major theological reputation head on, and has done so with great skill. The result is the most sustained and detailed criticism of Balthasar's theology yet published in English, and a work of acute argument in its own right. Advocates of Balthasar will not be able to ignore the issues Pitstick raises. I daresay her book will come to be seen as a milestone in the history of the reception of Balthasar's theology.

JOHN D O'CONNOR OP