

Reviews

ELUCIDATIONS, by Hans Urs von Balthasar. S.P.C.K., 1975. viii + 216 p.p. £3.50.

ENGAGEMENT WITH GOD, by Hans Urs von Balthasar, S.P.C.K., 1975. x + 100 pp. £2.25.

Hans Urs von Balthasar's minor works are trickling steadily into the pool of English readership. They offer glimpses of the vision behind the Swiss theologian's still unfinished masterpiece *Herrlichkeit*. The two books under review are, respectively, a set of essays and a condensed biblical theology. Both are characteristic. *Elucidations* of the controlled use of paradox Balthasar delights in, *Engagement with God* of his ability to uncover deep patterns in his textual materials. Neither, perhaps, gives so clear an entry to his thought as *Love Alone: the Way of Revelation*, published in 1968. Neither can be fully appreciated without some sense of his aims in *Herrlichkeit*. Balthasar's encyclopaedic reading of theological tradition convinced him of the need for a 'theological aesthetic' to recover from oblivion the biblical sense of God's 'towards us' as his *glory*, not unrelated to the theory that beauty is a transcendental determination of being. The language of beauty, on that view, is a *necessary* language-game to play in expressing the real. It speaks of the mystery that transcends, yet inheres in, all existents. Balthasar wanted to consider how this medium of 'natural revelation' was taken up into the epiphany of the self-revealing God in Christ. His work developed, as he explains in 'Perceiving the Form' (*Herrlichkeit* I) in two stages: first came an exploration of the role of feeling—response in grasping the Incarnate Word; secondly a doctrine of 'ecstasy'—a term borrowed from the Greek patristic world he had studied in the classic figure of Maximos Confessor. The going-out of Godhead into the world in weakness (in the cross of Christ and the descent into Hell) is itself the manifestation of the divine glory and at the same time indicates how the believer comes to be grasped by that glory. Accidentally, almost, Balthasar had stumbled on an approach

which he has now come to see as a gift from the Lord of the Church in our time to redeem the ambiguities of the aftermath of Vatican II. (I gloss him here, but without apology.) It provides one perspective from which we may reappropriate the dogmatic content of Catholic faith. 'The post-conciliar confusion' (he has written) 'has come about largely because the Council thought that the main questions of trinitarian and christological dogma (and the dependent ecclesiology) could be taken as a basis without more ado, and that they could start straight into the pastoral problems arising from that basis'. It is this perception which constitutes Balthasar's 'conservatism' today.

Elucidations includes essays on topics as diverse as personality in God and the papal persona. Their unity lies in the author's search for criteria for the practice and metaphor-making of the Christian community. Dr Küng has conceded that the conservatives in the Church have at least the merit of asking the right question—namely: What are the essentials of Christianity? Balthasar brushes the compliment aside, declaring that far more important to Christian life is the discernment of spirits in which the Spirit of God appears as 'weighty like the Word made flesh', resistant to the spirit of the age, to any rational penetration of the love of God 'which has embarked on the incomprehensible mystery of being obedient to the cross and to the descent into hell'. The most generous humanism is, for him, opened up only by the most scandalously particular orthodox dogmatism. We can distinguish here a concern, voiced by Dr Karl Rahner in his *The Trinity*, to let the dogmas of faith inform, wherever possible, our convictions about the theory of knowledge and the nature of man. The Chestertonian cast of Balthasar's mind is well expressed in his style in these pieces—a compression of prophetic

passion, metaphysical gleam and intermittent withering scorn. But the spaciousness of the man's vision presses him beyond the wit of the apologist to translucent, even serene conclusions. The essay on the contemporary humiliation of the papacy shows him at his most fearfully ironic, and is to be read by detractors and devotees of the papal office, if they dare.

Engagement with God is, subterraneously, a dialogue with the German 'political theologians' around J. B. Metz and, on the Lutheran side, Jürgen Moltmann. It claims, however, to encapsulate the meaning of the Old and New Testaments in their relation within its hundred pages. That audacity apart, it is a remarkable tour de force, although inevitably thematic — an arabesque on the theme of elect community and world touched at many points in *Elucidations*. Set out with great formal beauty is an analysis of the Christian corporate hope which gives that hope its proper tension with all atheistic schemes of human freedom. It is the *divine* involvement with humanity in the Church that must shape the 'logic' of her own engagement. The Church dare not serve on men Lucifer's 'Non serviam', but no more may she accept the world's agenda—for its own

good. She knows from her Master's fate that just where men's actions cease to be outwardly effective there her work begins in earnest. Balthasar strikes here the authentic note of radical traditionalism. 'In a living tradition, at every moment the original *traditio* (that is, the surrender of the Son by the Father for the salvation of the world) is repeated. And in the process of eternally surrendering herself in imitation of God's act of surrender the Church lives in a perpetual process of death and resurrection within the living Source of tradition'.

Professor D. M. MacKinnon in his excellent preface to *Engagement with God* rejoices in the emergence of this 'professional rememberer' who, steeped in the Christian tradition from the New Testament witness to contemporary poets and novelists in half a dozen cultures, would re-smelt our primary theology of man before God in the furnace of the Trinity. Marred at times by the occasional below-the-belt swipe of priestly polemic, we have here, nevertheless, a kind of re-creation of the sensibility of the Fourth Gospel in modern form. For this is a theology born of prostrate adoration before God's glory and issuing in an anything but supine love of men.

AIDAN NICHOLS OP

VICTORY OVER VIOLENCE, by Martin Hengel. Introduction by Robin Scroggs. S.P.C.K., London, 1975. 93 pp. £1.30.

Dr Martin Hengel, an expert on Jewish religion and politics in the first century A.D., wrote this little book against all those who are in favour of the use of violence to bring about social and political change. We agree with Hengel that Jesus denounced violence and that the use of violence seems to contradict its goal: freedom. Still, we cannot be very pleased with Dr Hengel's book. Only one chapter is devoted to the activity of Jesus and it is clearly the weakest part of the whole book. The other chapters make fascinating reading; they mainly deal with the history of the Jewish liberation movement. The chapter on Jesus falls short. Much more could be said about Jesus's tactics of non-violence, and the 'love of enemies' is not as innocent and nice as Martin Hengel seems to suggest. There are other, more daring, interpretations of Mark 12:13-17 too. According to Hengel Jesus's message was supposed to appeal to the heart of the individual,

and if this were the whole truth nothing would be easier than denouncing violence. Jesus, however, was very much concerned with founding a new community.

It is a pity that Hengel is saying so little, for what we need is a much clearer understanding of what 'non-violence' means and what tactics can be used so that the policy of non-violence is taken seriously and can change the mighty of our time. One would like to hear someone in Latin America or Rhodesia defending non-violence: a German professor and a reviewer in *New Blackfriars*, both writing in comfortable chairs, are not very proper witnesses to the policy of non-violence though they too may speak their mind. I am quite convinced that I am not allowed to use violence in the present situation and I am willing to challenge Martin Hengel when he would use violence. But when someone in Latin America or Rhodesia is using or propa-