

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Dramatic Encounter of Human and Divine Freedom in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* by Thomas Dalzell; *The Word Has Been Abroad: A Guide through Balthasar's Aesthetics* by Aidan Nichols

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Source: *The Furrow*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (Mar., 1999), pp. 184-185

Published by: The Furrow

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27663844>

Accessed: 07-12-2018 12:44 UTC

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## THE FURROW

**The Dramatic Encounter of Human and Divine Freedom in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar.** Thomas Dalzell. Berne: Peter Lang. n.p.g.

**The Word has been Abroad: A Guide through Balthasar's Aesthetics.** Aidan Nichols. T. & T. Clark. £14.95 stg.

Dalzell's book is an adaptation of a recent doctoral dissertation submitted to Queen's University, Belfast. It focuses on one of the most important elements in Balthasar's theology: the relationship between finite and infinite freedom.

In many ways it is a model piece of research. The author takes a clearly defined but disputed area of Balthasar's work and, after careful reading of texts, contributes something new to the debate. The issue under discussion is whether or not Balthasar can take seriously human freedom and history. Does Balthasar's portrayal of a 'dramatic encounter', in which human freedom is thought to participate actively in an ever-great exchange of love in God, lead to a neglect of the socio-historical dimension of human being?

Dalzell concludes that the historical dimension of humanity is taken seriously from the point of view of the individual historical subject. However, because of theology of the Trinity which emphasises interpersonal rather than social relationships, Balthasar cannot give sufficient weight or attention to the social structures which enhance or impede human freedom, and is therefore less committed to their transformation. This also makes it difficult for Balthasar to engage in fruitful dialogue with theologies of liberation or social justice.

This is not a book for beginners, although the introduction and first chapter alert the reader to the wider issues, and locate the debate in the context of other recent research on Balthasar, including by Irish theologians. If one has a problem with the theology contained in this book, it is more likely the fault of Balthasar than of Dalzell, who has produced a very worthwhile and critical work.

Balthasar's works are so immense that a guide-book is welcome and necessary. The book by Aidan Nichols is offered as a companion to the first part of Balthasar's trilogy, the seven-volume *Herrlichkeit*, 'The Glory of the Lord'. After an introduction to Balthasar, and to the transcendental category of beauty, Nichols more or less follows the structure of *Herrlichkeit*.

It is a serious defect, that unlike Dalzell, Nichols makes no attempt whatsoever to critically evaluate Balthasar's work. On the contrary, questionable assumptions which Balthasar makes about the work of others are passed on totally unchecked. In fact, on occasion, Nichols loses any claim to objectivity as, for example, when he writes, '*The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church* is theologically the profoundest book on the papacy ever written' (p. xix).

There are two chapters ('Constellation of Clerics' and 'Landscapes by Laymen') which review people in history by whom, Balthasar believes, the glory of the Lord was particularly delineated and beheld. Not one

woman is selected by Balthasar, and few excerpts from Balthasar's writings bring out his tendency towards élitism as well as these. In fairness, Nichols is aware of this. In the first chapter he quotes Balthasar thus: 'Only the few who (as often before) bear the weight of the whole on their shoulders will receive eyes to behold the primal form of man-in-existence ...' (cited p. 3). But Nichols does not even alert the reader to the implications of this statement for an understanding both of Church and of salvation.

Disciples of Balthasar will welcome Nichols's book. Students will find it a useful companion to their own more critical study and reflection on a theologian whose valuable insights as well as prejudices continue to play an influential role in the life and leadership of the Church.

EAMONN CONWAY

*Galway*

**A History of the Church of Ireland 1691-1996.** Alan Acheson. Blackrock, Co. Dublin: Columba Press/APCK.

The author of this very well presented study is a widely-travelled Ulster Anglican, who represents the evangelical wing of the Church. Dr Acheson states in the preface that the distinctive history of the Church of Ireland deserves a new deal to correct the distortion created by 'a tendency to political correctness on commemorative occasions'.

The whole study, full of historical detail, naming of names and identifying movements, is framed within a commitment to rediscover the significance of evangelical theology, worship and witness within both the Established and the post-1870 Church. Acheson is laden with facts, statistics and information and at times the text becomes weighed down with detail. His spirit is generous and lacking in any form of judgementalism.

While the subject is specific the author uses a wide lens which brings into focus three hundred years of Church history ranging from the Caroline tradition and Bishop Jeremy Taylor through to the contemporary events at Drumcree. The meat in the sandwich is substantial especially in the Georgian and Victorian eras.

Acheson is a distinguished scholar and as a former headmaster of Portora knows how to do his homework. The research has been thorough, the final product reads well and the prose flows freely in spite of the hundreds of names, places and dates crowding the text. That great Anglican preserve, comprehensiveness, pervades the entire work, but it must be said, unobtrusively.

Those who belong to the Evangelical section of the Church of Ireland, and indeed all who share their theology, will find much to interest and inform them in these pages. It should become clear that such an approach to doctrine and worship is a lot more mainstream than some might imagine. There is a gentle form of rehabilitation going on inside these covers and that seems to be the expectation of the writer of the Foreword, Bishop Harold Millar of Down and Dromore. Some of the notable bishops and archbishops of the past three hundred years are given substantial treatment including Jeremy Taylor, William King, William Whately,