The immutability of God in the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar

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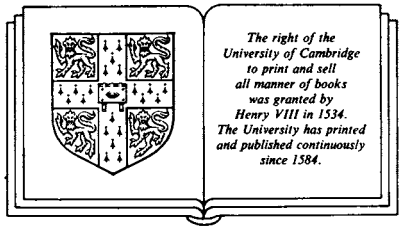

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Introduction

The question of God's immutability in theology in general

It has been an axiom almost right from the beginning of Christian theology that God is immutable, unchanging and unchangeable.[1] And neither can God suffer: he is impassible. There was undoubtedly considerable philosophical influence contributing to the process by which this theological axiom was first established and then maintained – to be God is to be absolute and perfect, admitting of neither increase nor diminution in being, and is in contrast to the creaturely characteristic of becoming. However it was neither established nor maintained without embarrassment and difficulty. Did not the OT seem to portray a God of deep feeling, who reacted and responded to men and women, in particular to the specially chosen covenant partner Israel? What of the NT evidence that Jesus is both man and God, that he suffered and died – is God not affected? And – to foreshorten a long list of possible objections which were in fact put to this established position – what of the very deep instinct of the Christian faithful which assured them that they were in relationship with God, were loved deeply by him, and, so, affected him?

Nonetheless, despite the difficulties and the occasional defection down through the centuries, the mainstream of theological opinion has been remarkably consistent in its assertion of the axiom of God's immutability. The present-day theological enquiry into this whole question is a radical attempt to reassess the validity of the classical position. Many tendencies have merged to issue in such a radical enquiry. The notion of history is central to the modern understanding of the human sciences. The assimilation of this notion by Christianity into the manner of interpreting scriptural and other theological texts, and of grasping the developing relationship between God and his people, led quite naturally from talk of the God of history to the more problematic notion of the history of God. Within an evolutionary world framework the notion of change assumed a positive connotation which it did not have in the cyclic world view of Greek

philosophy, within which the axiom of divine immutability had become established. Now mutability could more easily be seen as a perfection, and so its application to God seemed less objectionable. In the jargon of our time – which yet expresses, if at times too crudely, a real truth – the context was dynamic and not static, and this seemed to apply not just to the process of obtaining truth but also to the content itself. A related tendency was the anti-metaphysical, or at least de-hellenisation, movement within Christianity in this century, with its insistence on a return to the more basic Biblical origins of Christianity: the immutability axiom was especially vulnerable to this thrust. And even where Christianity retained its dialogue with philosophy the influence of Hegel in the last century and now, especially in North America, of the Process school meant that theologians began to call more into question the old assumption of divine immutability.

Of course the tradition had not been purely monolithic on this matter, and particularly in the new theological climate of today theologians began to notice cracks which had hitherto been missed or glossed over. One knew about Scotus Eriugena, Eckhart and the Kenoticists of the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, but these had been comparatively easy to dismiss as mavericks. But what of Origen? Luther? It was at the turn of this century that the question really began to surface: spurred on by the late nineteenth-century works of the Reformed theologians Dorner and Cremer, the Christian theological community in this century, and increasingly in the last thirty years or so, has had to rethink its position on the immutability of God. It is too early yet to hail the achievement of a consensus on this issue. Nonetheless enough has been written to make it clear that the attempt to modify the classical axiom is no mere theological fad. The names of Karl Barth, Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar, all associated with this attempt, bear eloquent testimony to this, as to the inter-confessional nature of the enterprise. In fact the whole movement is catholic in other senses too, bringing together not just Protestants and Roman Catholics but also those usually seen as progressives, conservatives and moderates, and not confining itself to the European theological world but including contributions from North America, Latin America and Asia as well.[2]

At first blush, it is true, the issue of whether God is immutable or not may appear somewhat recondite. After all, how are we to know such intimate details about the being of God who is a mystery, and, really,

would it make any difference if we did know? But on closer examination one begins to appreciate some of the passion and excitement with which theologians discuss this question. If God is our ultimate source of concern it is important that we have an image of him that is as correct as possible, without of course reducing the mystery or exceeding the limits imposed by the divine self-revelation. And one begins to see that more than just our image of God is involved: Christ and his role, creation, the identity, history and end of humankind, including its socio-political dimensions, the Church and its role – all these are part of this issue. The repercussions, then, are vast. They include some possible implications for the nature and development of theological enquiry and truth; if, despite the strong tradition, the axiom of divine immutability need not be considered as part of the Church's solemn teaching as such,[3] nonetheless how can a change in this important teaching be understood as true development and not as contradiction, and thus how can we avoid undermining church teaching in general? Besides, is there not a real danger here of losing something of value, of reducing God to our human image of him – might not the classical Christian position that to be God means to be immutable be the only correct one? The hope is that the tension between this classical position and modern tendencies might be a constructive one and that, in the words of the Roman Catholic International Theological Commission, which reported on this whole area, 'contemporary problems and classical solutions can clarify and enrich each other in productive dialogue'.[4] If this happens then there would be an enrichment both of our image of God and of our understanding of how we should talk about God at all – how we should do theology, in other words.[5]

Hans Urs von Balthasar

Hans Urs von Balthasar is widely recognised as one of the major theological figures of our time, and by now there exists an ample body of literature describing his life and works in general, as well as focusing on central and other specific areas of his thought.[6] Born in Lucerne in 1905, he studied philosophy and German literature in Munich, Vienna, Berlin and Zurich before joining the Society of Jesus in 1929. After studies at Pullach and Fourvière-Lyon, during which he came under the influence of Erich Przywara and Henri de Lubac, he worked as a priest for a brief time in Munich with the *Stimmen der Zeit* periodical, and then as student chaplain in Basle from 1940–8. There

he came into contact with Karl Barth, and there too he received Adrienne von Speyr into the Roman Catholic Church. Through his association with von Speyr he became convinced of his vocation to establish a secular institute, and accordingly had to make the difficult decision to leave the Jesuits in 1950. He then lived in Basle as a secular priest, active mainly as a writer, translator, editor (he founded the publishing house Johannes Verlag, Einsiedeln) and guide to the secular institute there. He was not invited to the Second Vatican Council; however, from the second half of the 1960s onwards his major theological stature became more and more widely acknowledged. This was helped by his appointment to the Papal International Theological Commission in 1969, the co-founding of the review *Internationale Katholische Zeitschrift – Communio* in 1972, and by the many honorary degrees and citations which he was awarded by universities and institutes in different parts of the world. It was due mainly, however, to the vast literary output of amazing range and diversity which he produced over the years; the non-availability of much of this in translation has meant that he is still comparatively unknown in the English-speaking world.[7] Von Balthasar died in June 1988, three days before his investiture as a Cardinal by Pope John-Paul II.

These are some of the rather bare facts; behind them lies the life story of a very remarkable person whom de Lubac has described as 'perhaps the most cultivated (person) of his time. If there is a Christian culture, then here it is!'[8] He escapes conventional classification: a theologian who never taught in a university or seminary, who himself regarded his activity as a writer as secondary to his task of helping the renewal of the Church through the formation of new communities, and who in his writing drew on such diverse sources as classical antiquity, the European literary tradition, Western philosophy, the history of religions, music (he was himself an accomplished pianist),[9] biblical and Patristic theology, the medievals, spiritual writers, and the great Christian theologians of all ages. From all these sources he created an overall theological vision which is of a very distinctive kind and within which his particular contribution to the theology of the divine immutability is located.

Balthasar brings impressive credentials to the project of making a contribution to the theology of divine immutability, a theology which demands both knowledge of and respect for the tradition as well as a certain openness to new ways of interpreting it. He was a respected partner in dialogue with Protestant theologians and was always keen

to acknowledge his own great debt to Karl Barth.[10] He himself was a Patristic scholar of great learning and originality, and he succeeded in retrieving and reinterpreting some of the great Patristic truths and authors.[11] Concerned with systematic thelogy, in debate with modern thought, and part of the renewal within the Roman Catholic Church which led up to the Second Vatican Council and which rejected the arid neo-Thomism of the day, he nonetheless warned repeatedly, after the Council, of the dangers inherent in a kind of openness to the world and progress which would rob the salt of Christianity of its own unique flavour.[12] This led him to adopt a conservative stance on several issues of church discipline, even though throughout his life and in his overall theological stance he showed himself to be no respecter of labels so that he is difficult to classify in the conventional terms of 'left' or 'right'.[13] He was certainly no slavish proponent of orthodoxy and had a great ability to reinterpret in an original way the tradition he knew so well. He was a member of the International Theological Commission, whose report on this issue we have already cited.

The question of God's immutability in the theology of Balthasar

There is little explicit treatment of the question of God's immutability in Balthasar's work before the 1969 publication of his *Mysterium Pascale* (*MP*).[14] It is in this work and in the several volumes of his *Theodramatik* (*TD*)[15] from the 1970s and 1980s that the issue is tackled most directly. However, as always in Balthasar, one notes the tendency for much important information about any particular topic to be scattered almost at random throughout the entire corpus of his writings and not to be confined to any specific *locus*. This means that while *MP* and *TD* will be the main subjects of our treatment here, we will be drawing on many other places in Balthasar's work (especially from the other two parts, with *TD*, of his major trilogy, *Herrlichkeit* and *Theologik*)[16] to fill out the understanding gained from the central sources.

The specific question of God's immutability, in particular its thematic treatment, is not directly the central concern of Balthasar's theological enterprise. Nonetheless, because it is implied in those areas which *are* central to him, it becomes willy-nilly an important element,[17] so much so that Balthasar himself can characterise the issue of God's immutability and how it is to be resolved as *the* centre of

his *TD* (which in itself is clearly at the heart of his other theological writings).[18] It involves the nature of God's engagement with his world and so a discussion of who God is, the person and role of Christ, who we are, and the relationship between us and God mediated by Christ. This means in effect that to get at this issue in Balthasar we will have to consider many of the main areas of theological interest in general.

It will be helpful to indicate in advance the direction in which Balthasar's thought moves. He wishes to retain the term immutability as applied to God. He avoids at all costs the affirmation that God is mutable. Furthermore, while he agrees that some of what immutability involves in God may indeed be understood as the divine fidelity (e.g. to his covenant promise), he is not satisfied simply to reduce immutability to fidelity. What he does point to is a liveliness within God, an 'event', which the more usual understanding of immutability does not convey, and so he attempts to invest the term with new meaning and to call for a new image of God. In doing so he must implicitly at least confront the limits and proper role of theological discourse itself.

Because such is the nature, the process and the direction of his enquiry – unlike one which focuses on a specific, limited area with the intention of treating it in a succinct, comprehensive way – there is no use in asking Balthasar for a definition of the term immutability. The meaning of the term and its nuances will emerge from the cluster of contexts which defines it. For the moment we may use the term heuristically in its common-sense meaning of 'unchanging and unchangeable'. We are asking, then, what Balthasar has to say in answer to the question 'does God change?'

Aim and methodology

Our aim in this study is to establish what Balthasar has to say concerning the immutability of God and to assess the validity of his position. Our approach, then, is issue-centred. This is consistent with the advice given by one of Balthasar's own theological heroes, Maximus the Confessor, that one should attempt to speak the truth and not to list every opinion![19] It means that dialogue-partners who are important for Balthasar (e.g. Rahner, Moltmann, von Speyr, Barth) are treated in order to elucidate the *res*, without claim to comprehensive coverage. This is so even when we initiate a dialogue with English-speaking authors whom Balthasar himself does not address: even though a secondary aim in this is precisely to facilitate

the critical reception of Balthasar's thought in an English-speaking world, the primary aim remains that of assessing the validity of his position on the particular issue in question. It means too that there will be no attempt made to trace the internal development of Balthasar's own thought from his earliest works onwards;[20] development will be noted only when it clarifies significantly the issue at hand. These are important observations. Balthasar's vast and labyrinthine body of work is notoriously ill-fitted to the systematising penchant of secondary writers; but by limiting the enquiry as described, we may effectively isolate as our main sources the works to which we have already referred (*MP*, *TD*, with *H* and *TL* since the parts of the trilogy are intrinsically related), in addition to the collections of essays *Pneuma*, *HC* and *SC*, and the works on history *TG* and *GF*.[21] Furthermore, although the issue itself involves such central areas in theology as Trinity, Christology (including soteriology), creation, history of salvation and eschatology, because our particular point of interest is none of these they may all be treated as subsidiary issues. The advantage of this is twofold: first, issues that are subsidiary may be dealt with carefully in a summary rather than comprehensive way, and this will help us to avoid getting lost in the labyrinth or repeating too much material presented in other works on Balthasar; and secondly, due to the fact that these central areas must be included, even if only summarily, we have the opportunity of glimpsing most of the main features of Balthasar's distinctive and splendid theological vision, features which will be outlined thanks to the thread supplied by the insertion of the immutability motif.[22]

We have already noted that Balthasar's treatment of the issue of God's immutability is scattered in form. It is only implicit in his earlier works, and even in the later period when he gives it a more thematic treatment he does so in service of other, larger theological concerns and in a disconcertingly diffuse way.[23] Can the fragments be gathered together to reveal some kind of recognisable and whole form?[24] It will be the aim of our study to achieve this.

There are many possible ways of organising the order of our enquiry. The one chosen here respects Balthasar's own passionately-held conviction that God, and not the human being, is at the centre of theology – and so it seems appropriate to bracket the remaining data between the mysteries of Christ (source of our knowledge of God) and the Trinity (source of our ultimate answers). Chapter 1, on Christ, gives us the most direct entry into the issue. Chapter 4, on the Trinity,

both gives us our clearest answer to the question and integrates all the other data. Chapters 2 and 3 deal with the remaining data which forms part of Balthasar's position and argument. Chapter 5 initiates a dialogue with English-speaking contemporaries, while chapter 6 offers a final assessment.

Quotations in the text will, for the most part, be given in English, with my own translation where necessary. The masculine form of the pronoun is used with reference to God for reasons of stylistic simplicity and convenience and in full acknowledgement of the divine transcendence with respect to our distinctions of gender. The introductory remarks in the abbreviations list and bibliography supply other important information concerning style of presentation.