

## Christ as performance: On Hans Urs von Balthasar's dramatic Christology from below

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### Abstract

This essay will explore Hans Urs von Balthasar's Christology as performance from below. It will begin by introducing Balthasar's theodramatic project as presented in his five-volume work *Theo-drama*. Here, it will be shown how Balthasar engages with and uses the conceptual resources of drama and the theatre to develop a theological dramatic theory with the performance of Christ at its very centre. This will be followed by an investigation into Balthasar's dramatic Christology and what he saw as the re-performance of the Christ-drama on the world stage. The essay will then conclude with a few brief remarks on the continued relevance of Balthasar's dramatic Christology, especially for those interested in doing – and performing – theology from below.

### Keywords

*Hans Urs von Balthasar; Theo-drama; Christology; performance; the Christian life*

## Introduction

Twentieth-century Swiss Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, is perhaps best known for his work in theological aesthetics – and rightly so. His theological consideration of beauty in the seven-volume work *The Glory of the Lord* is an ambitious and, in the context of modern theology, ground-breaking undertaking, which has played a crucial role in establishing theological aesthetics as a vibrant field of theological enquiry today.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, there has, however, also been an increased interest in the project that followed his theological aesthetics, namely, his

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1 See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics I–VII* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982–8). Hereafter cited as *GL I–VII*.

theological dramatics.<sup>2</sup> With this project – developed in the five-volume work *Theo-drama* – Balthasar set out to construct, in conversation with the world of theatre, an elaborate theological dramatic theory, in which he would, amongst other things, work out his mature Christology. Following his initial contemplation of the beautiful form of Christ in his aesthetics, Balthasar's dramatics would include what could be regarded as his definitive views on the person and work of Jesus Christ, as the “chief actor in the theo-drama as Christianity understands it.”<sup>3</sup>

One of the most interesting, and perhaps unexpected, aspects of the Christology that Balthasar advances as part of his theological dramatic theory, is the fact that it is in the first place – by his own account – a Christology “from below.”<sup>4</sup> Instead of following what he describes as “the usual textbook approach, which starts with an essentialist Christology that claims prior knowledge of Jesus’ nature as the Incarnate Word, even before the action begins,” Balthasar takes his departure from Jesus’ actual, embodied life on earth, from his dramatic existence on the world stage.<sup>5</sup> For Balthasar, who Christ is – also eternally as the second person of the Trinity – is expressed in and through what Christ does. It is as performance, Balthasar believes, that Christ is revealed to the world, and as performance that others are beckoned to follow him, so that Christian discipleship can ultimately be seen as the re-performance of the Christ-drama.

As part of this volume on theology from below, this essay will explore Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Christology as performance from below.<sup>6</sup> It will begin by introducing Balthasar’s theodramatic project, before turning to Christ’s life and mission as dramatic performance. Next, attention will be given to what Balthasar saw as the re-performance of the Christ-drama on the world stage. The essay will then conclude with a brief remark on

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2 See Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory I-V* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982–8). Hereafter cited as *TD I-V*.

3 Balthasar, *TD III*, 17.

4 Balthasar, *TD III*, 150.

5 Aidan Nichols, *No Bloodless Myth, A Guide Through Balthasar’s Dramatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clarke, 2000), 95.

6 Parts of this article will use and draw on sections of the author’s PhD Dissertation.

the continued relevance of Balthasar's dramatic Christology, especially for those interested in doing – and performing – theology from below.

## Balthasar's theological dramatics

Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological dramatics can best be described as a theological reflection on the enactment of the good, both by God, in Christ, and by humanity. While his aesthetics was thus concerned with the seeing of the beautiful, especially as it comes to expression in and through the person of Christ,<sup>7</sup> the focus in his dramatics is on divine and human action, on that which is done in – and for the sake of – the world.<sup>8</sup> It is this emphasis which prompts Balthasar to turn his attention to the one art form which, according to him, has the unique ability to convey and make visible the performative dimensions of both human existence and – importantly – divine revelation, namely drama (from the Greek word “dran”, meaning “to do” or “to perform”) as it is acted out on the theatre stage.<sup>9</sup> For Balthasar, Christian theology indeed has much to gain from engaging with, and utilising the conceptual resources of, stage acting. This is, then, what he sets out to do in the five volumes of *Theo-drama*, as well as a number of other supplementary writings, with the aim of constructing a theological dramatic theory with the performance of Christ at its very centre.

In the first volume of *Theo-drama*, Balthasar begins by doing much of the theoretical groundwork for the project lying ahead. He explicates, for example, how his work in theological dramatics will build on, unify and augment various “trends” in modern theology (including, *inter alia*, that

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7 See Aidan Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad: A Guide Through Balthasar's Aesthetics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clarke, 1998), especially 1–66 and 211–253.

8 Balthasar, *TD III*, 18–20.

9 See Balthasar, *TD I*, 9–12. Balthasar writes in this regard: “What interests us here [that is, in this reflection on goodness] is the whole phenomenon of theatre: the sheer fact that there is such a thing as a structured performance and ultimately the actual substance of the play itself. Our aim will be to show how theology underlies it all and how all the elements of the drama can be rendered fruitful for theology” (9). See also Ben Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3–4.

of “orthopraxy”, “dialogue” and “political theology”),<sup>10</sup> while also offering an *apologia* as to why theology should engage with the world of theatre, despite various claims throughout history that Christianity and the stage are incompatible realities, a view he regards as “fundamentally illogical.”<sup>11</sup> This is also followed by an extensive exploration of the intersections and correspondences between drama as it is acted out on the theatre stage and the drama of everyday life. Here Balthasar shows how the theatre serves as a mirror which reflects and thereby illuminates human existence in all its complexity and ambiguity, while providing us with language and imagery to describe and makes sense of the action taking place outside the theatre auditorium in dramatic terms.<sup>12</sup> For Balthasar, the theatre is thus both a visual representation of life, as well as the “supreme symbol” by which life can be viewed and interpreted.<sup>13</sup>

The last-mentioned function of the theatre becomes particularly important as Balthasar’s theo-dramatic project progresses. Towards the end of the first volume, he offers an initial reflection on what it would mean to think of human beings as actors on the world stage who perform certain roles.<sup>14</sup> This idea is further explored in the second volume of *Theo-drama*, a

10 See Balthasar, *TD I*, 26–50, as well as *TD II*, 62–77. For a helpful discussion of Balthasar understanding and use of these different “trends” in his theological dramatic theory see Nichols, *No Bloodless Myth*, 12–16 and Stephan van Erp, *The Art of Theology: Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Theological Aesthetics and the Foundations of Faith* (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 89–91.

11 Balthasar shows that this anti-theatrical prejudice within Christianity in many ways began with Tertullian’s text *Concerning Plays* (c. 197). In this polemical work, Tertullian described the “mixture of obscenity and cruelty” that was found on stages all over the Roman empire and repeated the stoic objections to the “arousing of the passions.” Balthasar argues that, although this critique was, perhaps, justified at the specific moment in time, there was no need for it to be passed-on without any further critical reflection for centuries on end, as came to be the case. Yes, Tertullian and those who followed in his footsteps did denounce the theatre, but this, Balthasar argues, can only be seen and understood for what it actually was, namely, a “timebound amalgam of [early] Christian awareness”, not an infallible statement of timeless truth that ought to be followed blindly until kingdom come. For Balthasar, our lives here on earth, as well as Christian truth, are far too dramatic to ignore or denounce the reality of the theatre in our theological reflection. See Balthasar, *TD I*, 89–104. For more on the complicated relationship between Christianity and the theatre see Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1981).

12 See Balthasar *TD I*, 15–23 and 135–480.

13 For more on this dual function of the theatre see Nichols, *No Bloodless Myth*, 21–46.

14 See Balthasar, *TD I*, 481–648.

work in which Balthasar develops a dramatic anthropology emphasising human freedom as the condition which renders action on the world stage possible.<sup>15</sup> From the third volume of *Theo-drama* onwards, Balthasar also explicitly uses this symbol of the theatre to depict and reflect on Christ's life and mission on the world stage. It is to this dramatic Christology, centring on the performance of Christ from below, that we now turn.

## Christ as performance from below

Balthasar is often viewed as a thinker who attempts to do theology from the “frosted heights of Thomas Mann’s magic mountain.”<sup>16</sup> According to Karen Kilby, a troubling feature of Balthasar’s work is indeed the fact that he occasionally composes his theology from “above history,” from what could be regarded as a “God’s eye view.”<sup>17</sup> For this reason, it is remarkable that the Christology he presents in his theodramatic project is, in the first instance, a Christology “from below,” an “ascending Christology” which takes as its point of departure Christ’s “overt function” before moving to questions about his “covert being.”<sup>18</sup>

The impetus behind this move is undoubtedly Balthasar’s turn to, and theological engagement with, the theatre. In the theatre, he holds, one learns who a character is, through what the character does.<sup>19</sup> Yes, one could read the programme notes and character descriptions beforehand, but it is in seeing and hearing the characters’ actual words and deeds on stage that the inner-dimensions of their identities begin to be revealed. In the theatre, performance indeed is – and continually becomes – revelation. Balthasar

15 See especially Balthasar, *TD II*, 173–334. For an excellent study of this focus of Balthasar’s dramatics, see Thomas Dalzell, *The Dramatic Encounter of Divine and Human Freedom in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2000).

16 Graham Ward, *Christ and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 130.

17 Karen Kilby, *Balthasar: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 5. 4; 40-1.s became influential because log one another) of God) the Jesuits) loves, usic and lite Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 5. 4; 40-1.s became influential because log one another) of God) the Jesuits) loves, usic and lite Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 13. See also Matthew Levering, *The Achievement of Hans Urs von Balthasar: An Introduction to his Trilogy* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2019), 213–15.

18 Balthasar, *TD III*, 149, 221.

19 See e.g. Balthasar, *TD I*, 281–97.

suspects that this similarly holds true when it comes to questions regarding the Jesus-character – someone, he notes, who also did not “start by declaring who he is,” but rather “by doing things,” by performing certain actions on the world stage.<sup>20</sup> Instead of, therefore, focusing on Christ’s pre-existence or ontological makeup so as to put forth yet another “purely extra-historical, static, “essence” Christology,”<sup>21</sup> Balthasar begins by investigating Jesus’ life as a “concrete play,” as a performative event from below which – as will be shown – can and should be re-performed by others.<sup>22</sup>

The way Balthasar conducts this investigation, is by focusing his attention on the script-outline of Jesus’ performance on the world stage, on what he views as the “libretto of God’s saving drama” on earth, namely, the biblical witness.<sup>23</sup> As someone trained in the reading and analysis of literature, who frequently remarked that he is not firstly a theologian but a literary scholar,<sup>24</sup> Balthasar’s study of the drama of Jesus’ earthly existence is grounded in scriptural exegesis.<sup>25</sup> He writes that the “utterly astounding and unforeseeable answer to the question who Christ is,” should primarily be sought in the dramatic narrative “of the New Testament.”<sup>26</sup> Much of

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20 Balthasar, Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *You Crown the Year with Your Goodness: Sermons through the Liturgical Year*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 99.

21 Balthasar, *TD III*, 149.

22 Balthasar, *TD III*, 53, 149–262.

23 Balthasar, *TD I*, 2. See also the important section titled “The Place of Scripture in Theodrama” in Balthasar, *TD II*, 102–15.

24 The reason behind this oft-repeated remark was the fact that Balthasar did not complete a doctorate in theology but in *Germanistik* with a dissertation on the idea of the “end of the world” in modern German literature. See Alois M. Haas, “Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Apocalypse of the German Soul: At the intersection of German Literature, Philosophy and Theology”, in David L. Schindler (ed.), *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 45. For an interesting study on Balthasar as literary critic, see Christopher D. Denny, *A Generous Symphony: Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Literary Revelations* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016).

25 For more on Balthasar use of and engagement with the biblical text see William T. Dickens, “Balthasar’s Biblical Hermeneutics”, in Edward T. Oakes and David Moss (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs Balthasar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 175–86, as well Mark A. McIntosh, *Christology from Within: Spirituality and the Incarnation in Hans Urs von Balthasar* (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2000), 29–37.

26 Balthasar, *TD III*, 149–50. See also *TD III*, 55, where Balthasar asserts: “The first task will be to gain access to the figure of Christ, which is only possible through pondering

Balthasar's Christological enquiry thus consists of him examining, in conversation with critical biblical scholarship,<sup>27</sup> Jesus' words and deeds as recorded in the Gospels. By doing so, he gradually comes to the conclusion that, at the very heart of the drama of the Christ-event, as presented to us by the biblical text, is the motif of kenosis, that is, the continual turning towards, and surrendering of the self to, the other.<sup>28</sup>

For Balthasar, the role that Jesus performs on earth, the very mission of his life, is indeed marked, from beginning to end, by a persistent desire to draw near to, identify with, and surrender himself to his fellow actors on the world stage, as part of his obedience and self-surrender to the one whom he calls Father.<sup>29</sup> Instead of, therefore, seeking only his own good, as is common practice in our self-centred world, Jesus' dramatic existence – everything he says and does – stands in service of and is aimed at bringing about the good for others, particularly the poor and the persecuted, the hungry and the weeping, those who have been forsaken and forgotten by the rulers of this world, and also feel forsaken and forgotten by God.<sup>30</sup> This is seen – act after act – in how Jesus recognises and embraces people from all walks of life; in how he heals them, feeds them, and washes their feet, thereby restoring their God-given dignity in the most profound manner.<sup>31</sup> With Christ, we thus find a certain bodily posture towards others, a way of being in the world, which is solely defined by self-giving, other-serving love.<sup>32</sup> This kenotic performance, Balthasar shows, naturally turns the kingdoms of this world – aimed only at uplifting and serving the rich and

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the specific character and structure of the New Testament sources, the Gospels in particular.”

27 It is interesting to note that, a major part of the opening section of the third volume of *Theo-drama* is, in fact, dedicated to discussing, at length, the history and notable ideas and findings of critical biblical scholarship. See the section “The Problem of Method”, in Balthasar, *TD III*, 59–122.

28 Balthasar, *TD III*, 21, 150, 301. See also McIntosh, *Christology from Within*, 59–74 and Graham Ward, “Kenosis: Death, Discourse and Resurrection”, in Lucy Gardner, David Moss, Ben Quash and Graham Ward (eds.), *Balthasar at the End of Modernity* (London: T&T Clark, 1999), 15–68.

29 McIntosh, *Christology from Within*, 70.

30 Balthasar, *TD III*, 43, 152–3, 516.

31 Balthasar, *TD III*, 152–3, 516, as well as Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology, Volume V, Man is Created* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 447.

32 McIntosh, *Christology from Within*, 67.

the powerful – on their heads, which is why, he believes, Jesus is brought to the cross.<sup>33</sup>

According to Balthasar, the drama of Jesus' suffering and death, as well as his descent into the abyss of Hades,<sup>34</sup> does, however, not encumber his kenotic performance on the world stage. It rather brings it to fulfilment, to its cathartic climax. Balthasar notes that Christ's passion, for us and with us, indeed becomes the conclusive, all-defining act of self-giving love in world history, in which we glimpse something of the eternal self-giving love marking the primal, kenotic existence of the triune God.<sup>35</sup> That this is the case is confirmed in and through the reality of the resurrection.<sup>36</sup> For Balthasar the resurrection serves as the definitive affirmation from above of Jesus' performance from below.<sup>37</sup> It is the divine vindication and proof that the life Jesus lived and the actions he performed leading to his death were, and will always be, God's will for humanity and the world; and that he himself is, in fact, the very revelation of God and God's goodness on earth.

Balthasar moreover argues that, as an affirmation of the Christ-drama from above, the resurrection also opens “up a new acting area” from below, where everyone is invited, encouraged, and enabled to share in and re-perform the Christ-drama of kenotic, self-giving love in the world.<sup>38</sup> “Now that his word and example have been among us,” he writes, “active human love – individual and social, personal and acting through structures –

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33 Balthasar, *TD IV*, 433–52, 497.

34 In his attempt to uncover what the Church means when it confesses that Christ *descendit ad infernos*, that is, descended “into hell”, or “to Hades”, or to “the realm of the dead”, Balthasar argues against any interpretation where Christ is seen as some sort of warrior-king, who triumphantly enters the netherworld, binds up the devil, delivers the righteous, and leads them to salvation. For Balthasar, it is, rather, important to accept and declare that Christ was really dead in solidarity with all those who have died throughout history. For Balthasar, “hell” or “hades” is thus not some sort of penitentiary, where sentient persons are actively held captive by the devil. He rather sees it as a place, or, in fact, “non-place”, marked by complete lifelessness, where everything that “was” in this world, “is” no more. See in this regards Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale, The Mystery of Easter* (San Francisco: Ignatian Press, 1993).

35 Balthasar, *TD III*, 183–90, 201, 505–36.

36 Balthasar, *TD III*, 51.

37 Balthasar, *TD IV*, 132, 487.

38 Balthasar, *TD II*, 91.

cannot be postponed.”<sup>39</sup> What has thus been performed from below, and affirmed from above, now also beckons to be re-performed from below by others; and it is to this re-performance of the Christ-drama that we turn in the penultimate section of the essay.

## The re-performance of Christ from below

For Balthasar, the re-performance of Christ is, in essence, about learning to say “Yes”, with Mary,<sup>40</sup> to the Christ-event, and entering ever-deeper into the “acting area” that has been opened up by the resurrection, so as to increasingly embody and perform, through the grace of God and the working of the Spirit, the drama of Jesus’ kenotic, self-giving love in the world.<sup>41</sup> Contrary to Hegel,<sup>42</sup> Balthasar is thus convinced that as human beings respond to the “call of Christ,”<sup>43</sup> and open themselves up to the role they are called to play by God, there can be an “inexhaustible

39 Balthasar, *GL VII*, 129; Todd Walatka, *Von Balthasar and the Option for the Poor, Theodramatics in the Light of Liberation Theology* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 37.

40 For Balthasar, the “prototype” of the human “Yes”, uttered in response to, and in continuity with, the divine “Yes” spoken in Jesus, is found, first and foremost, with Mary, the mother of Jesus (Lk 1:26–38). Mary’s “Yes”, Balthasar writes, is the “supreme instance of the true Christian and human attitude before God ... [It is] without a trace of mere passivity or resignation ... [but] calls for the active participation of man’s united powers, a wholehearted effort to banish anything that could spoil the purity of first receiving the divine message and substance, and then living it.” See Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *A Theology of History* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 121, and especially the Mariology which he develops in *TD III*, 283–360. See also the ecumenically-minded discussion of this aspect of Balthasar’s theology in Edward T. Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 250–73, a chapter titled “The Finite Yes.”

41 Balthasar, *TD II*, 91, *TD III*, 263–282.

42 Balthasar shows that, according to Hegel, the Christ-drama – as the drama of all dramas – is a unique, unrepeatable event, which, as such, brings an end to all other dramatic expressions on earth, both on the theatre stage and the world stage. See Balthasar, *TD I*, 54–69. For more on Balthasar’s reading of and engagement with Hegel, especially in his dramatics see Cyril O’ Regan, *The Anatomy of Misremembering: Balthasar’s Response to Philosophical Modernity. Volume I: Hegel* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2014) and Matthew Levering, *The Achievement of Hans Urs von Balthasar: An Introduction to his Trilogy* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2019), 83–149, a section titled “Theo-Drama: A Hegelian Critique of Hegel.”

43 See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 9, 391. Balthasar writes that this call “is not just something required for the

multiplication” of Jesus’ unique performance on the world stage;<sup>44</sup> that even after his ascension, Christ can continue “to play in ten-thousand places,”<sup>45</sup> as ordinary people give analogical expression to his dramatic existence in and through the drama of their own lives.

It is important, here, to note that Balthasar’s understanding of Christian existence as the re-performance of the Christ-drama on the world stage is strongly dependent on the logic and language of analogy, as taught to him by his mentor at Pullach, Erich Przywara. Building on Przywara’s thought, Balthasar argues that just as every creaturely reality, in its particularity, shares in and analogically expresses something of the being of God, as affirmed in the *analogia entis*, so every Christian life and mission, in its particularity, can come to share in and analogically expresses something of Jesus’ kenotic mission on earth, resulting in what could be called an *analogia missio*. For Balthasar, there is thus not only an analogy of being, but also an analogy of mission, an analogy of “acting and of attitudes” between “Christ and the Christian”.<sup>46</sup>

But what would such an analogical re-performance of the Christ-drama entail? While acknowledging the complexity, as well as the contextuality, of this question and its answer(s), Balthasar argues that, for him, a life which participates in, and conveys something of, the Christ-drama, will ultimately be one which recalls “to the world the form of Christ,” amidst

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establishment of a Christian state of life; it is the very essence of the Christian state of life and even of the Christian life, as such.”

44 Balthasar, *TD II*, 270.

45 See the priest-poet Gerald Manley Hopkins’ poem “As kingfishers catch fire” in Norman H. MacKenzie (ed.), *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 141. It is interesting to note that Balthasar had a very high regard for Hopkins and that he holds an important place in his aesthetics. See e.g. Balthasar, *GL III*, 359–99.

46 See Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 387; Angelo Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar, A Theological Style* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), 7; Marc Ouellet, “The Foundations of Christian Ethics according to Hans Urs Balthasar”, in David L. Schindler (ed.), *Hans Urs Balthasar*, 237; as well as Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 72. For more on Balthasar’s use of analogy and his relationship with Erich Przywara see e.g. Junius Johnson, *Christ and Analogy: The Christocentric Metaphysics of Hans Urs Balthasar* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

and in response to the particularities of daily life.<sup>47</sup> As such, it will be a life which is not “complacent and self-absorbed,” a life not focused on the “selfish and isolated self,”<sup>48</sup> but one marked by solidarity, self-surrender and a “loving readiness for service,” especially aimed at those on the margins of society.<sup>49</sup> In short, it will be a life defined by kenotic love, where the self-giving, other-serving existence of Jesus functions as “concrete categorical imperative,” as the “personal norm” of how one should think and act in the world.<sup>50</sup> To Balthasar’s mind, followers of Christ are, accordingly, not sent onto the world stage with an idea or philosophy from above, but with a dramatic praxis from below, with a form of being in – and for – the world, which beckons to be lived-out – or, then, performed – in a tangible, embodied manner.<sup>51</sup>

Balthasar proceeds by acknowledging that, as was the case with Christ, this kenotic performance from below, can, and usually does, culminate in instances of suffering and death, as it continues to challenge and subvert the powers of the day.<sup>52</sup> What Christ said and did on the world stage brought

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47 Balthasar, *The Christian State of life*, 221–2.

48 Balthasar, *The Christian State of life*, 79–80.

49 Balthasar, *TD IV*, 420.

50 See Hans Urs Von Balthasar, “Nine Propositions on Christian Ethics”, in Heinz Schurmann and Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (eds.), *Principles of Christian Morality*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 79–84. Balthasar wrote these propositions for the “International Theological Commission” right in the middle of working on his theodramatic project.

51 Given our sinful, selfish natures and all-too-human inclination to constantly do the opposite of what is good and true, Balthasar knows that this is not something that happens overnight. For him, the “Christian state of being”, is rather a life-long process of purgation and formation (*paidaia*) in which a person gradually become “attuned to” Christ through God’s grace and the working of the Spirit. Balthasar writes the following about grace in his book on Karl Barth: “[B]ecause of the character of grace [to be an event of transformation], it leaves room for all real events and phases that makes up man’s way to God: conversion, progress, backsliding, cooperation and obstacles. Redemption is not affected “in one lump”, so to speak, as if all the petty details of daily life were ultimately meaningless... Redemption comes to us respecting our incarnate lives in time, leaving room for us to continue to change as we follow in the footsteps of the incarnate Lord. The steps we take in this discipleship have their own inherent meaning and weight. God takes our decisions seriously, working them into his plan by his holy providence.” Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, 377–8. For more on Balthasar idea of “attunement” to Christ, see *GL I*, 241–7 and also *TD III*, 50–5.

52 See Balthasar, *TD III*, 281–2 and also Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Christian and Anxiety*, trans. Dennis D. Martin and Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press,

him to the cross. Whoever, thus, follows in his footstep, acting as a “person in Christ” from below,<sup>53</sup> can expect the same fate. For Balthasar, it is here, however, that the resurrection, as affirmation from above of the Christ-drama from below, retains its revolutionary significance.<sup>54</sup> According to him, the word spoken by God in and through the resurrection echoes throughout the ages, proclaiming, even in the most dire situations, that darkness and death will not have the final word, but will be subsumed by, and transformed into, light and life, definitively in the world to come, yet also already now, in a provisional manner, as God’s kingdom of justice and peace breaks into our present reality. While marked and governed by “life into death,” the drama of the Christian life, Balthasar writes, is also, therefore, marked and governed by “life out of death,” by the joyful and defiant hope of the resurrection. This hope, Balthasar notes, can and should form part of the performance of those following Christ, especially “in places where, humanly speaking, and from the point of view of this world, no further hope remains, or where no involvement seems worth the trouble”; places, it could be said, where “death” needs to be turned into “life.”<sup>55</sup> In an important passage in the last volume of his theodramatic project, Balthasar writes the following:

Christian hope, theological hope, goes beyond the world, but it does not pass it by: rather, it takes the world with it on its way to God ... This implies that the Christian in the world is meant to awaken hope, particularly among the most hopeless; and this in turn means that he must create such humane conditions as will actually allow the poor and oppressed to have hope. Hope must never be individualistic: it must always be social. It cannot simply hope that others will attain eternal salvation; it must enable them to cherish this hope by creating conditions that are apt to promote it.<sup>56</sup>

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2000), 23, where Balthasar speaks about how sharing “with the Lord a concern for [one’s] neighbour, [leads to shared] suffering and shared anxiety.”

53 See Balthasar, *TD III*, 230–62.

54 Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Credo: Meditations on the Apostles’ Creed*, trans. David Kipp (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 53; *TD IV*, 363.

55 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Engagement with God: The Drama of Christian Discipleship* (London: S.P.C.K., 1975), 9; *TD IV*, 363; *TD V*, 333.

56 Balthasar, *TD III*, 176.

According to Balthasar, the drama of the Christ-event, which includes Jesus' life and ministry, as well as the “unity-in-duality” of his death and his resurrection,<sup>57</sup> is thus something that can and should be re-performed from below on the world stage, not only by those who are, for example, called to ordained ministry, but by anyone beckoned by the “call of Christ”<sup>58</sup>. In a fascinating passage at the end of the third volume of *Theo-drama*, Balthasar writes that the re-performance of the Christ-drama should not be understood in an exclusivist or elitist sense.<sup>59</sup> No, anyone, “even outside of Christianity,” he holds, “who is willing to break out of their egoistic narrowness and do the good simply for its own sake, is given a light which shows them the way that they can and should go,” a light which “both uncovers truth and communicates a life that is more alive.”<sup>60</sup> The invitation to live one’s life in accordance with the life of Jesus of Nazareth, is thus all-inclusive; it is an invitation that is offered to everybody. There is no avoiding Christ’s “gesture of embrace,” Balthasar writes.<sup>61</sup> Christ “has a way of making himself understood to everyone”; Christianity, and also the

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57 See Balthasar, *TD V*, 333.

58 While Balthasar held the priesthood (and the whole hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church, including the “primacy of Peter”) in very high regard, and understood his own “mission” as one of ordained ministry, he believed that what is needed in the Church today is “ordinary” Christians, who, in their day to day lives, faithfully re-perform the *missio Christi* (which is why he, together with Adrienne von Speyer, started the secular order of the Community of St. John, which remains operative until this day). In his important booklet, *Razing the Bastions*, he says the following about the importance of lay ministry (with words that would later be echoed in Vatican II’s *Lumen Gentium*): “Today there is no doubt that the hour of the laity is sounding in the Church. Previously ... the laity counted for little. The theology was made by priests and the result accorded with that fact. The church buildings of that time (such a heavy burden for our acts of worship today, since it is impossible or very difficult to realise the liturgy in them as a community celebration), at best allowed only the lay elite into the most sacred precincts, while the people had to remain at the back. Today, a sleeping giant is stretching himself; undreamt-of powers, lying idle up to now like the powers in water not yet brought together to form a dam, and pregnant with primal energies, are beginning to move ... The future of the Church (and today she has the greatest opportunities) depends on whether laymen can be found who live out of the unbroken power of the Gospel and are willing to shape the world.” Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Razing the Bastions: On the Church in This Age*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), 38–43.

59 Balthasar, *TD III*, 528.

60 Balthasar, *TD III*, 528–9.

61 Balthasar, *TD IV*, 433.

Church, has “no monopoly here.”<sup>62</sup> Each human being, Balthasar believes, is beckoned, following a “personal encounter with the living Christ,”<sup>63</sup> to say “Yes” to the performance of the Christ-event, and, in doing so, to become a co-actor with Jesus on the world stage, performing his liberating truth of kenotic love from below.<sup>64</sup>

## Conclusion

As is arguably the case with his friend and colleague in Basel, Karl Barth,<sup>65</sup> it is often difficult to get a grip on Hans Urs von Balthasar’s extended theological project, in part because of the sheer amount of writings he produced,<sup>66</sup> and in part because of the complexity of his thought, which often leaves even seasoned theologians “perplexed”.<sup>67</sup> Together with someone like Edward Oakes,<sup>68</sup> I would, therefore, like to suggest that, alongside his work in theological aesthetics, a particularly fruitful place to begin one’s engagement with his thought could be his theological dramatics. For whereas Balthasar’s thinking – as Karen Kilby rightly holds – often descends into what could be viewed as reified abstraction, we find here – especially in the early stages of the work – a surprisingly accessible and down-to-earth understanding of the person and work of Christ, on account of Balthasar’s engagement with drama and the world of theatre. The Christology that Balthasar develops in his dramatics is indeed, as shown throughout this article, firstly a Christology from below, which sees and construes the life of Christ, as well as the life of Christian discipleship, in performative terms – which arguably makes his thought highly relevant in our contemporary situation.

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62 Balthasar, *You Crown the Year with Your Goodness*, 241.

63 See Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 215.

64 Balthasar, *TD I*, 22.

65 For more on Balthasar and Barth’s friendship, see D. Stephen Long, *Saving Karl Barth: Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Preoccupation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

66 Balthasar produced just short of a hundred books and almost a thousand articles in his lifetime.

67 See “Introduction”, in Edward T. Oakes and David Moss (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs Balthasar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1.

68 Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption*, 230–1.

In a world that has perhaps become deaf and indifferent to a Christian message being preached from above, while suffering and injustice continues to rage below, a lot can be said today for a theology focused on that which is done on the world stage; a theology not merely concerned with what is confessed, but with what is embodied and performed, as a concrete enactment of this confession. And this is what we find in Balthasar's dramatic Christology. For him, it is indeed clear that the Christ-event is, in essence, an action in and upon the world, a dynamic and embodied performance from below that can and should also be re-performed from below, so that God's goodness can permeate and bring restoration and healing in the world – something that is undoubtably desperately needed at this moment in time.

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