

Audience Participation: The Role of Witness in Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Theo-Drama*

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Theology and theatre have been collegial conversation partners at different points in history, especially in medieval times, when large theatrical pageants were mounted to portray the history of the world from Genesis to Revelation, and liturgy-inspired mystery plays and morality productions were popular. However, for the most part, the relationship between the two has been a rocky one. In early Christianity, the theatre mocked Christians and martyrs, and the church returned the sentiment, refusing to let actors receive the Eucharist and demanding that they abandon the profession upon conversion.¹ Despite the overall reluctance of theology to align itself with theatre, Hans Urs von Balthasar insists that the structure of drama appropriately reveals the dynamic complexity and relational nature of theology. In fact, he goes so far as to suggest that all theatre ultimately stems from the original drama: God's story revealed in history.²

Before addressing the role of witness in this divine drama, let me offer a very brief overview of Balthasar's theological dramatic theory. According to Balthasar, the triune God has the chief role(s): God the Father is the story's author, God the Son translates to the play's hero, and God the Spirit is seen as the director.³ While Balthasar admits that these are somewhat poor metaphors for the transcendent nature of the divine subject, the dramatic platform serves him remarkably well in conveying the action of the Absolute as well as serving as a converging point for numerous theological trends. He identifies nine streams of modern theology which he believes find a place within theo-drama: event; history; orthopraxy; dialogue; political theory; futurism; function; role; and the tension between freedom and evil.⁴ For

1. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prologomena*, vol. 1 of *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 97. Hereafter cited as TD1.

2. TD1, 9.

3. TD1, 9.

4. TD1, 25–50.

Balthasar, all of these emphases can be embraced within a larger, dramatic theological approach, because drama by its very nature involves tension, development, and mystery. In fact, it is hard to imagine what could *not* be included within a dramatic framework. This expansive approach illustrates the close connection between drama's inclusive and dynamic nature and Balthasar's commitment to what Margaret Turek calls "a dynamic program of openness to the world."⁵ In other words, the theologian's method follows his conviction.

Throughout *Theo-Drama*, one can find many instances of Balthasar's openness, especially in his broad, yet surprisingly detailed, sweep through theatre history from Greek tragedy to twentieth-century playwrights. His eclectic list of sources indicates his vast knowledge of theatre and a certain reliance on patristic writers. Ben Quash notes that Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor are especially important to Balthasar in revealing "a sense of God's dynamism and freedom," key themes that Balthasar keeps coming back to in *Theo-drama*.⁶ While his centre throughout remains solidly Christological, there is no doubt that Balthasar means to stretch the reader's understanding of God's engagement with humanity by utilising categories usually reserved for the stage. His purpose, as he indicates in the preface to *Theo-Drama*, is to "[erect] an apparatus, as it were, so that gymnasts may eventually exercise upon it."⁷ The model of theological dramatic theory that he carefully constructs in volume one is meant to be a robust structure that can withstand vigorous theological application while remaining flexible enough to act as a springboard for new understandings. Here, again, we see the dual values of dynamism and freedom at work in his methodology.

In theo-drama, Balthasar's emphasis is always on the action of God; therefore, the action, or more precisely *reaction*, of humanity becomes a secondary theme. This disproportional interaction poses certain difficulties, the primary one being the tension between divine and human freedom. In response to the troublesome question, "If God is on the stage, who else *can* act?" Balthasar introduces the idea of witness, a responsive role that addresses

5. Margaret Turek, forward to *Engagement with God* by Hans Urs von Balthasar, trans. R. John Halliburton (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2nd ed., 1986), vii.

6. Ben Quash, "The theo-drama," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 145.

7. TD1, 9.

the abyss between God's ultimate, absolute existence and humanity's finite, limited one.⁸ In exploring the concept of witness, I will draw heavily upon a short section of volume two of *Theo-Drama* entitled "No External Standpoint," which contains many of the topic's core elements.⁹ First, I will look at the context of drama and explain how it applies to theology, paying special attention to certain tensions within both disciplines and noting how the concept of witness addresses them. Second, I will discuss the role of the audience from a theatrical standpoint and show how this relates to Balthasar's concept of witness. Third, the identity of witness and the use of witness in the New Testament will be briefly explained. Finally, having demonstrated that the notion of witness and its theatrical parallel, audience participation, serve as appropriate roles for humanity within the divine drama, I will point out a few of the limitations and potential pitfalls in adopting these ideas as theological models.

At all times, it is important to remember that the paradoxes or tensions that Balthasar identifies are not meant to indicate irreconcilable differences but to reveal the movement of ongoing drama. Dynamic openness is key to understanding theological dramatic theory, and Balthasar's methodology reveals this as well. While the insights he offers are meticulously reasoned and more than adequately supported, he manages to make a few leaps on the dramatic "apparatus" that invite the reader to consider unusual and perhaps challenging angles from which to view theology. Throughout, his method remains scripturally robust and practically flexible, thereby demonstrating the suitability and adaptability of his dramatic theology.

The Drama

We first encounter Balthasar's role of witness in an introductory piece at the beginning of volume two, which explores the *dramatis personae*, or characters, in the drama. In brief succession, Balthasar assigns the main role to the triune God, relegates mankind to the audience, and then breaks what is called "the fourth wall" between stage and spectator. His animated

8. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, vol. 2 of *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 17. Hereafter cited as TD2.

9. TD2, 54–62.

language is indicative of the dynamic nature of the interaction: “In theo-drama...man is startled out of his spectator’s seat and dragged onto the ‘stage.’”¹⁰ In effect, Balthasar is proclaiming humanity to be both audience and participant, passive and active, external to the story yet involved in its outcome. He incorporates all of these paradoxes quite effectively into one role: the role of witness. In order to adequately address the implications of this role and its many facets, we must first turn our attention to the context of drama and its association with theology.

A truly dramatic story needs to incorporate both tension and unity. A narrative is not believable unless the actions of the characters demonstrate integral consistency and a cohesive theme guides the story’s development. Aside from established characters and a comprehensible storyline, development must also be present in drama; a change or transformation is usually precipitated by an obstacle that is not easily overcome. In theo-drama, the main character of God encompasses both dynamism and immutability. In this way, God’s life as revealed to us is already dramatically complete.¹¹ However, somewhat inexplicably, the main character, due to an absolute yet generous nature, makes room on the stage for other players.¹² There is no other way for anyone else to enter the drama except in response to a divine invitation. One of Balthasar’s points in positioning God as the central actor is to recognise that the divide between infinite and finite can only be overcome by an initiative from the infinite one.

As mentioned earlier, Balthasar believes that the core of the unfolding theo-drama is the ultimate abyss between divine, infinite freedom and human, finite freedom. How can the two co-exist when one seems to preclude the other? In addressing this dramatic obstacle, Balthasar begins with the difference between epic and lyrical drama. By epic, he is referring to the universal significance of a story and its grand scheme evident through historical events.¹³ Lyrical drama, on the other hand, is linked with internal instead of external movement, and is more focused on the individual, unique perspective relevant in the here and now. Balthasar associates the notions of epic and lyrical drama with the fields of theology and spirituality,

10. TD2, 17.

11. Ben Quash makes a similar observation. See Quash, “Theo-drama,” 144.

12. TD2, 91.

13. TD2, 55.

respectively. He suggests that theology can be viewed as taking on an objective stance, much like a reporter who is trying to make sense of events. In this way, theology reads the scriptures like a third-party account of what has happened, invariably acting as judge over what it reads. In contrast, spirituality takes a much more subjective attitude, engaging in personal involvement with the scriptures and the larger story. Instead of judging events and accounts, its function is seen most clearly in prayer. Simply put, theology talks *about* God and spirituality talks *to* God.

The problem one encounters here is that an infinite God is arguably unknowable. It is a misconception to suppose that one can really talk *about* God in a definitive manner. Likewise, talking *to* God presupposes that his transcendence is not absolute. In both cases, the mysterious otherness of the absolute subject, God, sets insurmountable restrictions on discourse or interaction. The abyss between God and humanity gapes widely on both fronts. It is at this point that Balthasar turns to the lives of the apostles, introducing an approach that overcomes these obstacles without compromising the integrity of any of the characters. The role of the apostles was to be a witness to the life and works of Jesus, to recount not only what they saw but also to give personal, living testimony to it. In this way, they fulfilled both objective and subjective functions. Similarly, their witness was based on observation as well as participation, making them an integral part of the story.

Another dimension present in the apostles' role of witness was that of divine revelation, which, Balthasar indicates, is the point of unity between epic and lyrical drama or theology and spirituality.¹⁴ In revelation, we see the generous nature of the transcendent One at work, graciously supplying what finite human understanding cannot. This gift is only possible through the initiative of the main character, once again firmly grounding the drama in God's action and not the apostles' works. However, one must be careful to view the nature of God's activity as not complete and final in a static sense, rather as dynamically contagious. In other words, action begets action. When the God-man appeared on the world stage, reaching out in a salvific gesture to humanity, it demanded a response. Humanity, having been acted upon, had to react. Balthasar attempts to capture the somewhat paradoxical nature of obligatory, yet free reaction when he states that the

14. TD2, 57.

event of revelation “challenges the believer, takes him over, and appoints him to be a witness.”¹⁵ It is important to note that this is not a denunciation of human freedom or an endorsement of passivity. By incorporating the term “believer,” Balthasar indicates that the free choice of faith has already been made on the part of the responder. What he is emphasizing here is the notion, that when infinite freedom is at work, it catapults finite freedom into action. Later on in volume two, Balthasar describes the structure of freedom in this way: “Only after God has uttered his absolute Yes to man can man utter his absolute No to God.”¹⁶ To put it in dramatic terms, the audience’s freedom to utter either a Yes of participation or a No of rejection is dependent on the action of the main character onstage. Without infinite freedom, there can be no finite freedom. The two are inextricably linked to each other; the first by love and generosity and the latter by response and reaction.

While it may seem contradictory to associate freedom with obligation, the nature of witness demands that the two never be separated. On the one hand, being a witness carries a strong involuntary element. One cannot always choose what one sees or experiences. The element of choice is evident, however, in the early Christian sense of “martyr,” which Balthasar defines as “bearing witness with [one’s] whole existence.”¹⁷ While many people were no doubt casual observers of Jesus’ life and work, only a few were called to be active witnesses, giving testimony with their lives to his messianic identity and miraculous actions. The integration of the two aspects of freedom and obligation in the single concept of witness can be demonstrated by the common use of the word. A crowd of people can passively “witness” a crime, but only those who step forward to give official testimony are called as “witnesses” in court. By their participation, they have now become an integral part of another person’s story. Their obligation is to give an accurate account, and, by so doing, be a “witness” to the truth.

The paradox of freedom and obligation also reflects the communal nature of drama. We do not act in isolation; our story inevitably affects the

15. TD2, 57.

16. TD2, 123.

17. TD2, 57.

stories of others, which in turn influence a larger story.¹⁸ Balthasar addresses the tension between individual freedom and corporate responsibility by explaining the actor's responsibility in relation to the director.¹⁹ First, he indicates that the actor is not a slave to the director; however, the actor's freedom is only fully realised through the "distinction of roles, which, in turn, is part of an all-embracing social whole."²⁰ Here we observe that freedom *within* a role is not the same as freedom *from* a role. If one has been given a role to play, there is some measure of restraint and restriction necessary in order to serve the larger story. When a role becomes confused and inconsistent, the story begins to unravel, rendering the role irrelevant and perhaps unnecessary. In essence, by neglecting the parameters of a role, actors can in effect write themselves out of the story.

Second, the dual role of originator/director is never one of a passive spectator. Though the director may not be explicitly involved onstage, the drama is performed in his presence. And since he is responsible for the whole play, he must be involved in an integral way, especially in assigning and defining roles and setting the action in motion. As originator or writer, he outlines the acting area, plots the course of action, and ensures that all roles work together as an ensemble to build a cohesive story. He does not seek to manipulate the actors but to assist them in understanding their roles. As writer, he is intimately acquainted and involved with the story. As director, he is intimately acquainted and involved with the actors. This dual role serves to illustrate the transcendent (overseeing the whole story) and immanent (intimately involved in the action) nature of God.

Balthasar incorporates theological themes within dramatic categories in order to demonstrate how tensions and paradoxes are inherent to both. Paradoxes serve to flesh out the story, and tensions provide the impetus for transformation and development. One is never left with a choice between

18. Balthasar also equates the role of witness with representation in an ecclesial sense. "Witness, *martyrion*, is always the individual's response to Christ, but it is always made in the name of the church and concretely represents her. Whether the martyrdom is bloody or unbloody, the person who gives it, staking his whole existence on it, speaks and 'acts', not for himself, but in *persona ecclesiae*." Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Dramatic Personae: The Person in Christ*, vol. 3 of *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 453. Hereafter cited as TD3.

19. TD2, 254–255.

20. TD2, 254.

epic and lyrical, action and reaction, freedom and obligation, subjective and objective, or individual and social aspects; all of these are part of the dynamic narrative. By setting up a dramatic framework, Balthasar shows that theology is never static.

The Audience

Balthasar's configuration of God as author, actor, and director and of humanity as audience is representational of the structure and order he establishes in his larger theological trilogy, of which *Theo-Drama* is the middle part. Balthasar begins with the beauty of God in *The Glory of the Lord*, continues with the action of God in *Theo-Drama*, and finishes with God's truth in *Theo-Logic*. The overall theme is the self-revelation of God, evident through a different lens in each of the three sections. In general, the revelation in aesthetics is invitational, in drama it is confrontational, and in truth it is existential. This is necessarily an oversimplification of what Balthasar takes fifteen hefty volumes to develop, but the point is that the primary subject, in fact, the only subject, is God. It is God who is revealed, God who is acting, and God who exists. Though Balthasar's extensive study is by no means an exhaustive portrait of the divine and does not pretend to approach the totality of meaning, it does provide three distinct models for interpreting God's self-revelation, which are meant to clarify and open up the topic.²¹ In all three sections of his trilogy, Balthasar never veers from the primacy of God. As a result, in theo-drama the activity of human history is always presented within the larger context of divine action. Because Balthasar is dedicated to the all-encompassing supremacy of God, he has no choice but to relegate humanity to the role of audience.

While it might appear that I am belabouring this point and only stating what is obvious, it appears to me that Balthasar's positioning of humanity as audience is somewhat unique. On closer observation, we find that even in religious drama God rarely plays the primary role. In the case of Calderon's medieval *The Great Theatre of the World*, God becomes what Balthasar

21. "...[beauty] is meant to be the communication of a meaning with a view to meaning's totality; it is an invitation to universal communication and also, pre-eminently, to a shared humanity." TD2, 29–30.

calls the “sublime spectator.”²² In the dramatization of biblical stories, such as *The Prodigal Son*, the deplorable state of humanity takes up a large part of the drama, and Balthasar notes that “the ‘world’ can claim half the scenes.”²³ In thirteenth-century passion plays that enacted the life, death, and resurrection of the God-man, the portrayal of Christ was inevitably focused on his humanity and earthly ministry.²⁴ In some cases, Balthasar observes, Jesus was even portrayed as a loser, death and hell rendering him powerless.²⁵ Similarly, in morality plays such as Goethe’s epic *Faust*, evil forces appear to have resources virtually equal to God’s. In dramatizations of the classic battle between good and evil, it is interesting to note that the main characters are usually not God and Satan, but a representative of the human race.

Balthasar identifies this human representation as a Platonic notion, where one character is employed to mirror all of humanity. If one takes this indication of representation and applies it to all the characters in a morality play, the dramatic tension becomes about more than good and evil or even the dilemmas brought on by humanity’s free choice, it centres on multiple “rival claims to totality.”²⁶ What is important to note here is that while all these plays on religious themes involve the characters of God and Satan or various concepts of good and evil, the power position is almost always held by humanity. In contrast, Balthasar assigns *all* the roles to God and places humanity in the audience, thereby positioning the freedom to act first and foremost in the infinite realm.

From Balthasar we now turn to the world of theatre to glean some insights into the role of the audience. Not surprisingly, in comparison to the more active theatrical roles, relatively little has been written on the topic of audience; perhaps this is because its role is usually assumed instead of explained. Nevertheless, the audience remains a crucial element of drama. Cynical types might be tempted to conclude that today’s audience has largely taken on the role of consumer. However, Dale Savidge suggests

22. TD1, 69.

23. TD1, 106.

24. Todd E. Johnson and Dale Savidge, *Performing the Sacred: Theology and Theatre in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 39.

25. TD1, 107.

26. TD1, 191.

that a theatrical event is reciprocal, and not merely in the sense that money is exchanged for a fulfilment of certain expectations. He insists that there is a communication that flows back and forth between the actors and the audience.²⁷ In addition, the social aspect of audience must not be overlooked. While some define audience members as a rather passive group of spectators who reflect the general values of the society of the time,²⁸ Savidge uses more active and participatory language. He observes that the group of people gathered for a dramatic performance form a temporary community and, as such, have the power to impact what happens on stage.

There is no question that the audience plays a vital role in drama. Certainly live performance is not possible without an audience, but what exactly is the function of the audience? Meg Pearson makes a direct connection between audience and witness when she observes that “[certain] spectacular moments in plays recruit their audiences to transform...from spectators into witnesses.”²⁹ She goes on to explain what this role of witness entails. While Pearson identifies only two main elements, I believe that there are four distinct functions to be extrapolated from her observations. First, being a witness is a response to the playwright’s summons to pay careful attention.³⁰ Again, we note that the “first move” comes from the author. Pearson’s choice of the word, “summoned,” is similar to idea of “calling” in Balthasar’s example of the apostles. Likewise, the element of being an eye-witness is paramount to both audience and apostle. Second, a witness is called to be trustworthy. In the judicial realm, a witness must be able to demonstrate their reliability; certainty is based on first-hand knowledge and not on hearsay. Therefore, watchfulness is closely associated with a faithful rendering of dramatic events.

Third, the witness is asked to make a judgment. In a live performance, an audience witnessing a rather dynamic scene often registers its approval or disapproval by applauding or booing. The witnesses are making a judgment on what is taking place before their eyes, deciding whether or not it is just

27. Johnson and Savidge. *Performing the Sacred*, 118.

28. Susan Bennett, “Audience,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre & Performance*, ed. Dennis Kennedy, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 88–89.

29. Meg F. Pearson, “Audience as Witness in *Edward II*,” in *Imagining the Audience in Early Modern Drama, 1558–1642*, eds. Jennifer A. Low and Nova Myhill (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 93. Accessed online.

30. The following points taken from Pearson, “Audience as Witness,” 93–95.

or appropriate to the story as it unfolds. An audience who sits passively and does not register any reaction is not acting as witness, and being a rather poor audience, I might add. Interestingly, Pearson also draws a link between death scenes in plays, which often elicit strong audience reactions, and Christian martyrdom as a form of witnessing.³¹

Finally, a witness must be prepared to testify. Those who have witnessed a theatrical performance or beheld astonishing events are often called on to recount the story to those who were not present. Hearers of their tale receive not only details about what the witnesses observed, but also their interpretation of the events. Part of the value (and no doubt frustration) of eye-witness accounts is that due to no two vantage-points being exactly the same, each eye-witness account is unique in some aspects. In light of this, when two or more witnesses provide precisely matching testimonies in a court of law, they come under suspicion of collusion. In the same way, audience members in a theatre setting tend to remember different details of the play and offer various interpretations of the plot or meaning. By testifying about the event, the members of the audience have in fact become unofficial contributors to the story, even though they are not written into the script.

Pearson's observations about a theatre audience align very closely with Balthasar's concept of witness. His example of the apostles demonstrates all four of the traits described above. The apostles were summoned to be first-hand witnesses to the life and works of Jesus, attentive to what was happening around them. Their trustworthiness was based on their eye-witness accounts, made possible because of their consistent presence in Jesus' ministry and mission. The apostles also registered their approval and disapproval of certain events, especially the death event. Peter, in particular, disagreed several times with how Jesus' destiny was unfolding.³² Though this revealed his ignorance about the overall plot, it did not disqualify him as a witness. As often happens with a theatre audience, the apostles' judgments developed and changed during the course of the story, but their

31. Pearson, "Audience as Witness," 94–95.

32. Matthew 16:21–23 and John 18:1–11 are two examples of Peter trying to intervene in the plot.

sense of engagement remained consistent.³³ Finally, the apostles' testimony became evident through their writings, their leadership in the church, their missionary endeavours, and, for some, their martyrdom. It seems clear that, in many ways, the theatrical concept of audience as witness serves to address the gap between actor and audience as well as the abyss between divine action and human response.

The Identity of Witness

In a passage quoted earlier, Balthasar appears to equate “witness” with “believer.”³⁴ This association would seem to coincide with the words the apostle Paul utters in Acts, when, in his defence before King Agrippa, he recounts these surprising words he heard from a divine voice on the road to Damascus: “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you.”³⁵ In this brief text describing Paul's appointment as a witness, we find many of the same elements that Balthasar identifies in his theological dramatic theory. There is a startling confrontation, an obligation to respond to a summons or calling, an acknowledgement that a finite freedom serves a greater freedom, the centrality of eye-witness account, and the obligation to testify or recount what has been seen.

However, the believer as witness is only part of Balthasar's dramatic theory. He incorporates two different angles in his identification of the witness. As noted earlier, in a judicial sense there is a distinct difference between witnessing an event and being summoned to bear witness in court. Similarly, Balthasar utilizes both universal and particular notions of witness. The title of the brief section in question, “No External Standpoint,” is relevant in regard to the universal aspect. By this title, Balthasar acknowledges that no created being is outside of the divine drama. He states

33. Two of the most dramatic reversals of testimony are that of Peter who both denied Christ and publicly proclaimed him as Messiah and Paul who persecuted Christianity and later became one of its chief advocates.

34. “...in the context of God's action, which challenges the believer, [it] takes him over and appoints him to be a witness.” TD2, 57.

35. Acts 26:15–16, New Revised Standard Version.

that “[it] so overarches everything, from the beginning to the end, that there is no standpoint from which we could observe and portray events as if we were uninvolved narrators of an epic.”³⁶ Here, Balthasar indicates that there is no truly objective approach to theology. Moreover, it is evident that he is speaking to more than just theologians when he goes on to state: “In this play, all the spectators must eventually become fellow actors, whether they wish to or not.”³⁷ Balthasar suggests that all interpretations of world events and final destiny (such as Nirvana, evolution, etc.) are not abolished by a dramatic structure, but can be incorporated into it.³⁸ Balthasar’s openness is in full bloom when he calls the Christian to adopt an “all-embracing” attitude toward the world and engage in what he calls “subjective catholicity.”³⁹ While not endorsing universalism in the sense that all are destined to be Christians, Balthasar indicates that, since the divine drama is infinite, none is outside its purview. While involvement within the drama is universal, specific roles within the drama are not.

The particular role that Balthasar assigns to the Christian believer, in keeping with the paradoxical nature of theo-drama, incorporates both patient non-resistance and active warfare.⁴⁰ This duality is not only indicative of one who imitates Christ, but also echoes the final dramatic role of the Lamb in Revelation. In the final scenes of the divine drama, Balthasar identifies the ultimate examples of witness as *martyrium*: those who give testimony, both in life and in death.⁴¹ These are the ones who, like the Lamb, have been “called and chosen and faithful.”⁴² Balthasar expands on these three characteristics of Christian witness by introducing the concepts of election, vocation, and mission. Through these three elements, universal witnesses become participants or co-actors in theo-drama.⁴³ It is no surprise that these ideas sound very similar to those Pearson identifies in her observations about theatre audiences. Her suggestion that the playwright summons the audience to attentive participation very closely relates to election, whereby a person

36. TD2, 58.

37. TD2, 58.

38. TD2, 59.

39. TD2, 59.

40. TD2, 60.

41. TD2, 60.

42. Revelation 17:14.

43. TD3, 263.

is called into the acting arena by God. The elect, for Balthasar, refers to an entire people chosen by God, be it the nation of Israel in the Old Testament or the Church in the New Testament.⁴⁴ According to Balthasar, election does not refer to God's eternal summons; rather, it denotes the "effect of this call on the freedom of the person called."⁴⁵ In this way, election is temporal in application while eternal in origin. Once again, infinite freedom spurs finite freedom to action.

Vocation, on the other hand, has a more individual emphasis. As exemplified by the apostles, the vocation of witness can take on various forms as each person contributes her unique eye-witness account of what it means to be "in Christ." As a result of this calling and vocation, a witness naturally participates in a greater mission, which involves being sent forth to testify about what they have seen. Balthasar observes that the summons to a vocation of witness is often unexpected (as in the case of Abraham, Moses, and Mary).⁴⁶ In addition, the call is sometimes given to those who seem ill-fitted for the role. Nevertheless, the concern, as always, is not primarily with the performance of the witness but the action of God.⁴⁷ It should also be noted that the role of witness is only made possible in and through Christ; witnesses are given the authority to participate through the grace extended to them by his action. In effect, their participation in the divine drama is essentially identification with Christ and his election, vocation, and mission.

A few observations on the concept of witness in the New Testament might be helpful at this point. Allison Trites suggests several ways in which scripture sheds light on the concept of witness. She indicates that biblical texts not only explain the role of witness but also serve in that role. For example, some scholars believe that the gospel of John can be viewed as a skilful apology meant to convince non-believers that Jesus is the Son of God and that salvation is available through him.⁴⁸ To support this claim, Trites notes that the word "witness" is "particularly conspicuous" in John's gospel, appearing thirty-two times in its verb form, constituting almost half

44. TD3, 266.

45. TD3, 266.

46. TD3, 264.

47. TD3, 265.

48. Allison A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 78.

of all New Testament occurrences of this verb.⁴⁹ In the fourth gospel, we find the concept of witness applied to many different subjects, such as John the Baptist, the Samaritan woman, the works of Jesus, the Old Testament, a multitude of people, the Holy Spirit, the apostles, and God the Father. All of these are called upon to bear witness to Jesus. Jesus, as well, is said to bear witness to the truth in agreement with his Father's testimony.⁵⁰ According to Trites, the concept of witness here is strongly judicial, as if the author is proving his case in response to a challenge.⁵¹ Trites interestingly observes that Pilate serves as a representative voice of the overall theme of witness in the fourth gospel. In effect, he states the case that the writer is trying to make, declaring Jesus' innocence and proclaiming him King of the Jews.⁵²

In the book of Acts, however, the concept of witness is decidedly more missional: the apostle's words and works serve as testimony meant to encourage the early church and disseminate the message of Jesus. While legal terminology is still evident, the purpose of witness in Acts is primarily for the development of the church in a hostile environment.⁵³ As is evident in all the gospels, the importance of eye-witness testimony is vital in establishing the authority of their message. Of special importance is the apostles' witness to the resurrected Christ.⁵⁴ One further detail should be mentioned when discussing the concept of witness in biblical texts. According to Old Testament law, the testimony of at least two witnesses was required in order to substantiate any claim (Deuteronomy 17:6). This principle is carried over into the New Testament concept of witness where we find plurality a consistent theme, perhaps most significant when the human testimony of the apostles is linked to the divine witness of the Holy Spirit (John 15:26, Acts 15:28).⁵⁵ In the scriptural concept of witness, as in Balthasar's notion of spectators called onto the stage, we see the intersection of divine and human intent as both testify to the primacy of the mediating action of God.

49. Trites, *New Testament Concept of Witness*, 72.

50. C.K. Barrett as quoted in Trites, *New Testament Concept of Witness*, 80.

51. Trites, *New Testament Concept of Witness*, 80–81.

52. Trites, *New Testament Concept of Witness*, 85.

53. Trites, *New Testament Concept of Witness*, 128.

54. Trites, *New Testament Concept of Witness*, 144.

55. Trites, *New Testament Concept of Witness*, 121.

As stated at the beginning, at the heart of Balthasar's model of theo-drama lies the abyss between divine and human. However, this separation is not an insurmountable obstacle. In fact, he indicates that it is a necessary precursor to unity.⁵⁶ However, the "leap" necessary to overcome the abyss between divine and human is one that only God can make, and this action leaves us with the mystery of how the Absolute can be both *in* and *above* human history.⁵⁷ Aidan Nichols views this paradox as one to be celebrated because of its generous implications for humanity. He states: "And if the God who alone can untie the knot of existence himself appears on the world stage, this does not invalidate the basic comparison of existence to the drama but gives that drama of lived existence new, transcendent dimensions."⁵⁸ By introducing the role of witness, Balthasar acknowledges the transcendent and privileged nature of humanity's part in theo-drama. Situating humanity as the audience firmly establishes God as the central character; however, the audience is not passive. Pearson's observations about the functions of an audience summoned to act as witness prove the strength of Balthasar's designations in theo-drama. The biblical concept of witness also supports Balthasar's idea that the witness is one summoned by God, one who accepts the gift of grace and unites their life with the calling, vocation, and mission of Christ.

The Challenges of Theo-drama

While the concept of witness is a strong model for divine-human interaction, it nevertheless presents the theologian with several challenges. The first lies not so much in the nature of the role itself nor in Balthasar's quite extensive exploration of its function, but in its application. Early on in *Theo-Drama*, Balthasar poses the question, "If God is acting, who else

56. By way of illustration, he speaks about the relationship between yeast and dough. Alone, he acknowledges, yeast is nothing. But thrust it into dough and a dynamic process is set in motion. The gift of grace, Balthasar suggests, is yeast that, when mixed thoroughly with the dough of a person, initiates a transformation process that enables the person to grow in Christ and participate in his divine mission. See: Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Engagement with God*, trans. R. John Halliburton (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 11–12.

57. TD2, 62.

58. Aidan Nichols, *No Bloodless Myth: A Guide through Balthasar's Dramatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 28.

can act?”⁵⁹ The short answer he proposes is that God, through Jesus, makes room on the stage for humanity as witness, but perhaps a more nuanced approach would be to question the question itself. Balthasar addresses through his query a fundamental theological (and dramatic) problem, but it is (as he acknowledges) a static issue relating to character and not action.⁶⁰ By exploring the list of characters prior to engaging with the dramatic text or witnessing the dramatic action, the query becomes premature. How can one define the nature of the characters before they have acted? The point of drama, after all, is to reveal characters not through exposition but through action. The question seems strangely at odds with Balthasar’s central thesis, and, though he writes many pages in an effort to unravel the complex relationship between role and person, the question serves to reveal an inherent difficulty.

In expounding a theological dramatic theory through the written word, the characters necessarily remain somewhat flat on the page, unpreventably remote. Similar to an action-packed script that does not lift off the page until actors speak the words and perform the stage directions, Balthasar’s *theo-drama* leaves one with a method which describes dynamic movement but never totally delivers it. Despite his insistence that theology is not static, the volumes of *Theo-drama*, for the most part, end up describing and analysing the drama of God instead of presenting a script that invites action. This is no doubt partially due to the limitations of the printed page and the nature of theological discourse. In addition, perhaps enactment is one of the exercises that Balthasar purposely leaves for his readers to perform on the theological dramatic “apparatus.”

Balthasar’s role of witness is an attempt to bridge the gap between passivity and action, and, though it is an adequate model in many ways, it still falls somewhat short of a satisfying union of *being* and *action*. The very reason that drama is employed in the service of theology is to show that God is not just divine Being but also divine Actor. By inference, humanity’s engagement with God must bear this same quality. One example of this imbalance is reflected in his choice of words. The term “believer,” used by Balthasar and many modern theologians to refer to followers of Christ, hints at a subtle downplay of action. The common use of the word refers

59. TD2, 17.

60. TD2, 18.

essentially to a mental exercise of acceptance, or, in religious terms, to an expression of trust based on certain convincing factors. In contrast, the word most often used to refer to followers of Jesus in the gospels is “disciple,” a word that incorporates a whole way of life, not merely an intellectual assent or reasonable deduction. In the gospel accounts where Jesus calls his disciples to follow him, their actions seem to occur concurrently if not prior to belief. In light of this, the first challenge I see in putting forth a theological dramatic method is that of moving beyond description to the place where the drama lifts off the page.

The second challenge has to do with the role of humanity. Though Balthasar incorporates drama effectively and innovatively to introduce us to the person of Christ in the primary role of ultimate mediator, his commitment to a theology from above tends to place humanity in the background to such an extent that one is left wondering what, if anything, the human race contributes to the drama. At the end of volume five, Balthasar briefly addresses this question by suggesting that the world is “a gift made by the Son to the Father, and by the Spirit to both.”⁶¹ While a Christocentric emphasis is in keeping with Balthasar’s insistence that God is the author, director, and actor in this drama, this prioritization serves to take much of the potency or punch out of what is meant to be a theological confrontation. I am no doubt stating the matter too simply and perhaps doing Balthasar a disservice by suggesting that his elevation of Christ as the central character creates a slight dramatic problem. He most certainly addresses the suffering and humility of the Son of God through the concept of *kenosis* and from the very beginning asserts that divine freedom does not negate or denigrate human freedom but empowers it. Nevertheless, I would suggest that Balthasar’s *Theo-drama* would be better served if it allowed the supporting human cast to flesh out their roles a bit more in keeping with the gritty, blow-by-blow accounts of conflict and struggle that we find in the gospels and in the history of Israel. The tensions and paradoxes of which Balthasar writes, those elements central to dynamic movement, demand that the role of humanity not be devalued or deemphasized but be given the same weight as that found in the biblical texts.

61. See “What Does God Gain from the World?” in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Last Act*, vol. 5 of *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 506–521.

What theo-drama must show us, and what those of us who engage with Balthasar's substantial theological contribution must unravel, is how to retain God as author, director, and primary actor while leaving room for all manner of awkward and malevolent characters, who not only interrupt the drama but appear to derail it. We must discern how to engage with this theo-drama, not as objective and unmoved audience members seated at a comfortable distance, but as participants and witnesses who are thrust on stage, compelled by the scenes unfolding before us. As audience participants, we must also become accustomed to the unsettling circumstances which accompany this role: we have limited access to a script; we have little opportunity to rehearse our scenes; and we are not told specifically what is required of us other than to say Yes and keep on saying Yes. This is the promise and the challenge of Balthasar's theo-drama.