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THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS

By Francesca Monateri

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It. *Estetica teologica*; Fr. *esthétique théologique*; Germ. *theologische Ästhetik*; Span. *estética teológica*. Theological aesthetics is the attempt to develop a Christian theology in the light of the third transcendental, that is to say: to complement the vision of the true (*verum*) and the good (*bonum*) with that of the beautiful (*pulchrum*). Rather obviously it investigates the multifarious nexus between theology and aesthetics that can be reconstructed both from an aesthetic and a theological perspective. Thus, there are two main paradigms of theological aesthetics. The first – the *theology of aesthetics* – elucidates aesthetic reality from the point of view of revelation. The second – the *aesthetics of theology* – focuses on the idea that the theological order is subordinated to an aesthetic conception. Nevertheless, scholars have also recognized a kind of *third way* which starts from the equipollence between aesthetics and theology in order to express the theological core of aesthetics and the aesthetic nature of every theology.

THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS AND ITS ORIGINS

Our current appraisal of theological aesthetics must necessarily take into consideration the great importance attached to it by Hans Urs von Balthasar. Balthasar's work – *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik* – makes clear to us that theology and aesthetics are two sides of the same coin. Even if this occurs in a very particular sense.

In this perspective, theological aesthetics never coincides with aesthetic theology. The former – *theological aesthetics* – figuratively reconfigures the tradition of thought by writing a history of forms (Balthasar 1982: 25). The second – *aesthetic theology* – declines the aesthetic attribute in a worldly and limiting sense: from a humanized and secularized sense of beauty, it moves toward revelation, starting with the arts, (Balthasar 1982: 79-116). Thus, aesthetics, from the point of view of theological aesthetics, is not just a philosophy of art (Amoroso 2008: 11-14), but rather a purely morphological study. A constant point of reference in Balthasar's work is Johann Wolfgang Goethe. In this sense one can consider *Herrlichkeit* as the development of a morphological paradigm.

The most attractive point of Balthasar's morphology is that the only possible aesthetic form for modern times has its origins in Christianity, in the incarnation of Christ (Balthasar 1982: 27). From the non-existence of a form before the incarnate God, emerges the idea of a form in terms of a project proper to Roman Catholicism. It is in theological aesthetics that the formal vocation of Catholicism violently emerges, which Balthasar was not the only one to see. As it is well known, for Schmitt the Roman Catholic Church represented the perfect political form as it can administer its own political body through the holy communion (Schmitt 2016: 36). However, Schmitt was not alone in this, Maritain, too, thought along the same lines (Bröckling 1994). In these readings, theology assumes an explicitly aesthetic connotation realized as a force that withholds the form: the symbolic structuring of the historical present. It shapes the world's order, protected against the aggression of a shapeless nihilism. In this sense theological aesthetics is rather clearly linked to the political commitment of theology. Balthasar himself was aware of this. His conception evolved through Karl Barth on the one hand (Webster 2004: 241-55), and Romano Guardini on the other (Quash 2004: 155-6, Balthasar 2010). From Barth, Balthasar derived the idea that the holy Cross is a *concrete universal* and in that he saw the possibility of giving form to a historical epoch (Barth 1962: 307-33). At the same time, it was Guardini who transmitted to Balthasar the political value of the crucifixion (Guardini 1953). As is well known, Guardini was a reader of Schmitt and Balthasar inter-

preted Guardini. What this brought to Balthasar, therefore, was the Schmittian lexicon: the crucifixion as a decision.

Balthasar moved from Schmitt's terminology to the idea that forms were never necessary but always a result of decisions. Just as it was for Schmitt, Balthasar felt that the decision was the only way to give shape to an historical era in the painful awareness that it was devoid of it. This was already true in Balthasar's degree thesis where – still a Germanist and not yet a theologian – he queried what form should be chosen for contemporaneity: Prometheus, Dionysus and Christ crucified simply became forms, myths, whose validity could be weighed (Balthasar 1998). In this sense, theological aesthetics represented the possibility of achieving a *concrete universal*: Balthasar sought to create a mythology for his own contemporaneity.

The origins of theological aesthetics, along with its constant tension between German Romanticism and Roman Catholicism, reveal its formal vocation, which only partially permeates contemporary debate.

CONTEMPORARY DEBATE ABOUT THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS

Balthasar was not the first to focus on the link between aesthetics and theology. There are several examples: Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, Jonathan Edwards, Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Barth. However, Balthasar was the first to systematically define theological aesthetics and he represents the starting point of the contemporary debate, even if his morphological tension seems to be almost entirely lost. The current debate can in fact be summarized in three major questions: 1. How can art function as a source of and in theology? 2. How is aesthetics a shaper of meaning in today's culture? 3. What is the essential role of beauty in theology? (Thiessen 2004: 204-6).

For the first question, the focus is on the work of art: what is the relationship between experiencing art and experiencing God? Can the arts generate or trigger religious experience? If so, can it be validated?

From this perspective, there is a vital analogy between aesthetic and religious experience (Viladesau 1999). On the one hand, they have in common the contemplative attitude of the subject involved. On the other, their objects differ. Here, the question of the relationship between art and truth is of utmost importance, since theology also claims truth. If aesthetic experience can lead to the truth, it will be one of the possible roads to reach God. Interpreters who support this thesis insist on the emotional component of the aesthetic experience: art has intellectual components, of course, but these are always enhanced by emotions. This is the point of art: to affect our sense of perception and emotions directly. This view point was greatly influenced by Alciato and Ripa's idea of iconology and emblems. What Alciato's and Ripa's works share is precisely the lowering of the intellectual idea to the level of the senses: how perception is rendered tangible in the image (Alciato 1531, Ripa 1593). This is also why art is often more powerful than concepts and words. The aesthetic experience would then be a kind of immediate way to access God.

What has to be underlined about this perspective is that the link between aesthetics and theology is all resolved to the advantage of theology: aesthetics is only one of the possible ways, the most immediate, but it is not necessarily the best one.

In the second question, aesthetics has a different value: the work of art is a creator of meaning and therein lies its link with theology (S. Hawkins *et. al.* 2008). The question is whether art still has the ability to understand an era, and the answer is yes: art can be assigned a symbolic value just as much as theology can.

It is a thesis that consciously opposes the Hegelian end of art in which art is no longer able to adequately embody and communicate the truth, that is, absolute or divine spiritual content. Behind the opposition to Hegel, lies the hypothesis that secularization has never fully materialized. Not only do we still need mythologies in the present, but works of art and theology perform the same task: to help man fill a void of meaning (R. MacSwain *et. al.* 2012, Sequeri 2016: 5-8).

For these interpreters, the relationship between aesthetics and theology seems to be balanced, more than ever. They truly seem to be two sides of the same coin, none prevails over the other. In this perspective, something of Balthasar's idea is preserved: the need for mythologies along with the possibility of being able to respond to them through a theological aesthetic.

The third question maintains a closer link with Balthasar. The focus shifts from the work of art to beauty, by returning to its origins. The beauty of God is poured out in nature and the road to God is a path that is created by forms. Divine beauty is something impossible to experience and it is believed by faith, but the world created in his image allows to access to it. Here aesthetics becomes rarefied. As much as Balthasar had tried to save *theological aesthetics* from *aesthetic theology*, we are dealing with a beauty that is truly worldly but which is contemporarily transcendental. Once again, theological aesthetics is a rejection of secularization in order to preserve transcendence. Yet it seems to be the moment when the link between aesthetics and theology is resolved to the advantage of aesthetics. While theology becomes worldly, aesthetics is elevated, the mystery of God is the mystery of nature and its forms (Forte 2017). However, not just nature. Humanity itself is an effigy of Christ, made in his pure image. At this point, theological aesthetics is played out within the trinitarian dialectic, leading us to go beyond Balthasar, towards Florenskij, to stop thinking about the trinity and begin to live it in a trinitarian manner from within (Coda 2006).

The contemporary debate on theological aesthetics involves theologians more than aesthetic scholars. The aim thus is to bind both the theory of art and the idea of beauty to faith in God. It is a problem that from the point of view of aesthetics may seem relatively interesting. Yet the idea of a Christian morphology is something that runs through Western history from the beginning. The intriguing part of these studies is therefore to ask the question: does a theological morphology exist? And what does it mean? A question that refers back to the *political* significance that theological aesthetics has assumed and can assume.

THE ITALIAN POINT OF VIEW

The Italian debate in particular has added relevance to the link between aesthetics and theology, emphasizing its political value as well as its morphological aspect. While Giorgio Agamben – re-thinking Benjamin’s intuitions – sees something extremely dangerous in the aestheticization of theology, Massimo Cacciari focuses on the aesthetic matter of the theological concept of *katechon*, as a necessary ordering form which must hold firmly against the impending chaos between the First and the Second Coming.

In Agamben’s theory, theological aesthetics refers rather directly to a mystification of the political order. In his opinion, it leads to the binary alternative between the aestheticization of politics and the politicization of art, without freeing itself from its constraints (Agamben 2007). By contrast, Cacciari sees theological aesthetics as a *formative* force capable of “withholding” the anomy from prevailing (Cacciari 2013). Here there is something positive in the link between aesthetics and theology that Agamben chooses not to see: an exhausting defense of the *Form*.

Only Roberto Esposito captures the melancholic nature of Balthasar’s aesthetics that would like to repair the relationship between the political and the transcendental order, broken by modern philosophical thought (Esposito 1988: XVII; 29-32). In this sense, rather than trying to reconstruct that link by theological aesthetics, one must get rid of it by leaving behind the lexicon and categories of political theology (Esposito 2020).

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