Aspects of the Pneumatologies of Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar

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The approaches to the Holy Spirit by two outstanding theologians of the twentieth century are put into dialogue. Their work shows the church and the world that the Spirit’s depths demand constant probing.

Pneumatology, the field of theology that addresses the nature and work of the Holy Spirit, is a vineyard in which both Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar labored mightily. In what follows, I will attempt to present only a handful of themes from their vast writings, but themes that I believe are representative of their views. Their pneumatologies involve particular emphases and some disagreements, but by no means do they stand in polar opposition or fail to complement each other in significant ways.

Hans Urs von Balthasar

Balthasar’s groundbreaking work Seeing the Form offers a pithy statement of his central theological perspective: “What is at stake is always the Incarnation” (575). In the development of Christian theology, many influential thinkers

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and schools of thought (e.g., Gnosticism, some forms of mysticism) have downgraded or even dismissed the importance of creation in general—and the bodily reality of Jesus Christ in particular—and sought after "an 'immediate' vision of God that would no longer be mediated by the Son of Man" (Balthasar 1989, 302). In the twentieth century, thinkers like Rudolf Bultmann inclined in this direction, reading the Gospels as if they were allegories—historical tales that conveyed a timeless truth that lay above or outside the visible world. Against this trend of thought, Balthasar insists that Christian theology must take seriously revelation in creation. In Jesus Christ, God has been made visible, so that we can see "a genuine unfolding of himself in the worldly stuff of nature, man, and history—an event which in a super-eminent sense may be called an ‘appearance’ or ‘epiphany’” (Balthasar 1989, 119).

Upon this foundation Balthasar constructs a theology that takes Jesus at his word: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). He calls this an “aesthetic theology” because it is concerned with the beauty of the appearance of God, a beauty that shines forth from Christ and that “enraptures” believers, moving them to faith and worship. For Balthasar, God saves the world through beauty, taking tangible form in Christ and the church so that creatures like ourselves, creatures who meet reality through our senses and cherish the beautiful in nature and art, might be confronted by ultimate beauty, to which we respond with faith, before which we fall and to which we give praise and adoration.

From these views on Christ, beauty, and faith, Balthasar draws out four dimensions of the nature and work of the Holy Spirit. First, the Holy Spirit is both Revealer of Jesus Christ and Revealed by Jesus Christ. Saint Paul emphasizes that the Holy Spirit “Christifies” believers: “As proof that you are children, God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, ‘Abba, Father!’” (Gal 4:6). Balthasar follows this scriptural trajectory in his insistence that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, the “midwife of the realities of revelation and salvation” (Nichols, 129), the light in which the beauty of Christ is seen and worshiped by the believer. Proceeding on the model of aesthetic experience, Balthasar argues that, just as the encounter with a great work of art involves both beauty and beholder, so, too, the encounter with Christ involves the beauty of his form and the rapture of human response. The Holy Spirit is both the glory that radiates forth from the form of Christ, and the grace that responds from within the believer. Without this Spirit, neither can the form be correctly perceived (“Is this not the carpenter’s son?”), nor can the believer be
transformed (“He went away downcast, for his possessions were many”). The truth of Jesus’ words and actions, the fact that in them we are seeing and hearing God, can only be grasped through the Spirit: “the man Jesus becomes an icon of the Trinity: in himself, through the Spirit, he represents the Father” (1992, 341). Since Christ makes no sense without the Spirit, and neither makes any sense without the Father, Balthasar regards the Holy Spirit as the Revealer—not of the Spirit directly, but of the Father and the Son.

Yet, by revealing the Father and the Son, the Spirit reveals himself: “He is the light that cannot be seen except upon the object that is lit up; and he is the love between Father and Son that has appeared in Jesus” (1993, 111). A masterpiece displayed in a darkened room or a drama performed in a pitch-black hall would lose all capacity to radiate beauty and engage the viewer with its splendor. Just so, a spacious, well lit but empty room would be light without focus, the playground of human fancy but not the stage of revelation, offering no specific form for contemplation and imitation. Thus, as the Scriptures teach, Christ and the Spirit cannot be isolated: “no Christology can ever be developed without an indirect Pneumatology, and conversely no Pneumatology can be developed except as a way into Christology; Christology must be the measure of Pneumatology” (2005, 27).

Second, the Holy Spirit does more than “light up” the Son and the Father: The Spirit “interprets” them. In a sense, Balthasar’s pneumatology is a lengthy gloss on the words of the Lord, “But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth. He will not speak on his own, but he will speak what he hears, and will declare to you the things that are coming” (John 16:13). The Incarnate Son presents, in words and deeds, the truth of the Father; but this truth is not fully declared until the Spirit is sent, as seen in the incomprehension of the disciples following Jesus’ arrest and death (“For they did not yet understand the Scripture that he had to rise from the dead”). But it is no college introduction to the Scriptures, no God for Dummies that the Spirit provides. Rather, it is participative understanding that the Spirit grants. Balthasar upholds “the incarnational tendency of the Holy Spirit” (1995, 61), its ongoing function of teaching the truth of Christ by incarnating Christ in his followers.

To draw a simile from the world of drama in which Balthasar moves so easily, the effect of the Holy Spirit is like coming to understand the character of Hamlet only by rehearsing and performing the part, not by analyzing the text in a classroom. To extend the analogy, if God the Father is the author of the script and the director of the play, and Christ and his followers are the actors, the Holy Spirit is
the acting instructor, teaching the cast—including Christ (“the Spirit drove him out into the desert”)—how to perform, how to grasp their characters from within, how to “live the part”:

[The Spirit will not simply interpret a teaching . . . but will guide us to the vital depths of what takes place between Father and Son, introduce us into the hypostatic realm. Nor will this be a kind of guided tour for a group of tourists visiting an as yet unknown landscape or a fascinating underground grotto: we can only be introduced to the christological reality if we are prepared to be assimilated to it. This unveils the central Pauline aspect of this “guiding” by the Spirit: it makes us to be sons in the eternal Son, filii in Filio. (2005, 18)

Far from simply the conveyance of information about God, the role of the Holy Spirit is divinization, the assimilation of heart and mind, individual and community, to Christ.

Third, Jesus Christ both obeyed the Holy Spirit and sent the Holy Spirit: “As earthly man, he is obedient to the Spirit; exalted, he breathes the Spirit into the world. So he can cause believers to share in both obeying the Spirit and communicating the spirit, essential roles for members of the Church of Jesus” (1992, 259). The relationship of the Christian to the Spirit imitates that of Christ: the believer obeys and communicates the Holy Spirit (1992, 527), pursuing discipleship and sharing gifts in such a way that the church, “the mother of the faithful” (1992, 273), comes to be. Further, since the truth of Jesus Christ is infinite, there is no end of new insight and charism that can be brought forth from the community by the Spirit. The great figures of the saints and the powerful religious movements that have filled the church’s history are the work of the Spirit, constantly re-presenting the beauty of Christ in accord with the needs of each age.

Finally, no prospectus, however brief, of Balthasar’s pneumatology can fail to mention the Blessed Mother, who, as the Council of Ephesus taught, is inextricably bound up in God’s self-revelation in Christ. By being preserved from sin from the moment of her conception, by receiving a unique share in the mission of Jesus Christ, by completely identifying herself with that mission, and by being taken up by God in the fullness of her being, Mary is the exemplary person of the Spirit, the disciple in whom everything (body and soul, freedom and love, faith and hope) serves to show forth and share the beauty of the Lord.

Karl Rahner

Turning to Karl Rahner, one could approach the Spirit from any number of directions (e.g., starting from the experience of prayer, as in 1993, 23–35), but it seems most consistent with Rahner’s own intentions to address pneumatology primarily in terms of his formidable theology of grace.
Rahner argues that humans have characteristic actions: we know things (we possess intellect), and we choose things (we possess freedom). These actions are dynamic drives that push on toward ever greater fulfillment, that is, toward greater happiness. Yet, nothing and no one in this world, however precious or praiseworthy, provides all the happiness we desire. If asked, “Do you know everything you want to know?”—who agrees? If asked, “Do you have enough happiness?”—who responds that their happiness is perfect and could admit no increase? Instead, the human spirit pushes on past every finite thing and relationship (in general, Rahner refers to the finite as the “categorical”) and transcends toward that which has no limits. Humans want more: not some degree of beauty but the fullness of beauty, not some degree of existence but existence itself. This is our “transcendental” dimension, that is, our fundamental openness and longing not for this thing or that thing or even all things, but for more. We are open to and truly satisfied by nothing less than the divine. The human person “aims at God” (1994a, 51), possesses an “orientation to boundless mystery” (1979, 14).

However, this view of the human person does not mean we seek God by getting around or away from the world. The world and God are absolutely distinct, but God is present to us always and only in conjunction with the categorical, that is, with creation and culture. The human creature is a combination of the categorical and the transcendental, and so God comes to us in both these dimensions. In the categorical, God comes in the word of Scripture, in the sacraments, in friendship, art, natural phenomena, in the things we can taste and touch and smell, and in even the most ordinary thoughts and daily routines. In the transcendental, God comes to us in silence, in the innermost heart of the human person, in a way that we cannot taste, touch, or smell. These ways in which God communicates are not at odds, but depend on each other. Without the transcendental, the words of the Gospel would fall on uncomprehending ears, on minds that saw no further than the things of this world, on hearts that sought no more than the stuff that surrounds us. Without the categorical, we would not be creatures of matter, creatures who know ourselves and God by seeing and hearing and thinking.

These dimensions of the human person are the context in which we must understand Rahner’s assertion of “the Holy Spirit as the gift in which God imparts

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First, directly flowing from his view of the human person as both categorical and transcendental, Rahner’s pneumatology strongly asserts “everyday mysticism,” the idea that every Christian—indeed, every person (1978, 126–33)—does and must have experience of the Holy Spirit. “God’s offer of himself belongs to all men and is a characteristic of man’s transcendence and his transcendentality” (1978, 129). This is Rahner’s famous “supernatural existential,” his proposal that God offers the Holy Spirit to every human being on the level of a person’s transcendental openness. Since God desires the salvation of all men and women (Tim 2:4), the Holy Spirit is offered to (not forced upon) every human being. As the human person deals with this and that errand and schedule and project, with all the minor heartaches and major sacrifices, with all the brief joys and committed loves, there is a deeper reality, the longing for more. God freely meets this offer with the gift of the Holy Spirit that raises our hearts and minds above their natural desires and opens them up to receive. First and foremost, the Holy Spirit is God’s self-offer to all people on the level of their basic openness, their transcendental longing.

For Rahner, the Spirit is the agent of Christification, and the church is the concrete means of the Spirit’s work.

Second, this “self-communication of God in the Holy Spirit” (1979, 15) is often not recognized as such, for a variety of reasons. “This transcendental experience of God in the Holy Spirit in everyday life remains anonymous, unreflective, and unthematic, like the generally and diffusely extended light of a sun that we do not see as such, turning instead to the individual objects of our sensuous experience as they become visible in the light” (1979, 17). The beauty and hardship of the categorical realm can lay such claim on our attention that the transcendental longing of our deepest selves is drowned out and covered over. For example, Rahner would agree with St. Paul that love, peace, and faithfulness are gifts of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). However, Rahner would also stress that for many people these experiences are “unthematic,” that is, the person flooded by love and peace does not necessarily identify these experiences as coming from the Holy Spirit. Subject to the hectic demands of modern life and marred by pride and self-satisfaction, Christians may either fail to recognize the working of the Spirit, or thoughtlessly consider their love and peace to be self-made virtues.

Third, Rahner teaches that the Holy Spirit gives rise to the concrete experiences Christians associate with the Holy Spirit: worship, joy, peace, hope, forgiveness,
and the whole scope of practical, church-building powers (leadership, teaching, music, etc.). “We can safely say that all powers and possibilities of Christian action, as authorized, sustained, and animated in the last resort by the Holy Spirit of God, are charisms, gifts of the Spirit” (1983, 208). Through these experiences we become more like Christ. For Rahner, the Spirit is the agent of Christification, and the church is the concrete means of the Spirit’s work (1965, 84).

Fourth, since God makes a universal self-offer in the Holy Spirit to the depths of every human person, whenever people of any religion, or no religion, confront their lives and refuse to deny their transcendence, or that of their fellows (e.g., treating men and women as no more than a means to an end), then such people have accepted the gift of the Holy Spirit. The person who has never heard Christ’s name is still unavoidably, though “anonymously,” confronted by the choice for or against Christ, through the transcendent offer of the Holy Spirit. It may seem odd for the forgiving Buddhist to speak of the “Spirit of Christ” as the source of her peace; yet, from a Christian perspective, Rahner insists that is the case: “Whoever accepts his humanity completely . . . has at the same time accepted the Son of Man . . .” (1980, 17).

As an illustration of this “anonymous faith,” Rahner often uses the example of death, with which every human being is confronted. Is dying experienced (even if it is not so understood) as a passage into mystery, as the final self-surrender to the nameless Mystery that has been at both the edge and the heart of all our daily experiences? Or is it a moment of fruitless despair? The non-Christian who has lived in response to the offer of the Spirit, as this has come both transcendentally and categorically (through other people, communities, and cultural institutions, including religions), is thereby united with the Christ, in an unthematic union that culminates in a Christ-like death. “In this life the chalice of the Holy Spirit is identical with the chalice of Christ” (1983, 206).

Assessment

With so much left unsaid about Rahner’s and Balthasar’s pneumatologies (their particular ways of addressing the personhood and procession of the Holy Spirit within the Trinity, the roles of the Spirit in creation, sacrament, eternal life, etc.), any conclusions must be tentative, and all assessments must be modest. First, both pneumatologies are intensely scriptural in their inspiration and elaboration. Both Rahner and Balthasar agree that without the deeds and words of Scripture—especially the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—to “catch the light,” we would know nothing of the Holy Spirit.

Second, both thinkers stress the connection between the experience of the risen Christ and the experience of the Spirit. From the lesser charisms of daily Christian life to the great, saintly acts of self-sacrifice, from the daily buddings of faith, hope,
and love to the ultimate divinization of the human person, Christ and the Spirit cannot be separated. Both agree that the Spirit does not make us new creations in the Spirit’s own image, but in the image of Christ. Again, as in the New Testament, pneumatology and christology are inextricably linked.

Third, both argue for the sensibility of the Spirit. Like Barnabas, who arrived in Antioch and “saw the grace of God” (Acts 11:19-24), Rahner and Balthasar do not produce otherworldly pneumatologies, in which the Spirit is either perpetually darting about just beyond eyesight or working on a purely invisible, internal level. With the tradition, both speak of the Spirit as the “light” that illuminates within and without. In different languages, both address the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the human person, yet both also emphasize the power and insight the Spirit bestows, the concrete movement toward Christ that the Spirit brings about in prayer and worship, in good works and faithful witness.

Fourth, both claim a unique role for the Spirit in the founding and ongoing life of the church. The Spirit whom Christ breathes upon the apostles and sends forth at Pentecost is the source of all ecclesial unity and power and comes to us today in Word and Sacrament, ministry and moral living, virtue and insight. The Spirit is still at work, forming the Body of Christ and providing those “first fruits” (Rom 8:23) for whose completion all creation groans. Both Balthasar and Rahner insist that where the church is, there is infallibly the Spirit of Christ.

The methodological and substantive differences between the two theologians are well documented and undeniable (inter alia, Kilby 2004 and Williams 1986), if occasionally overdrawn by the partisans of each, while their significant similarities and mutually enriching differences are also overlooked. However, there are points of genuine disagreement, and pneumatology reflects a critical one, a difference with ramifications that affect their entire projects. In Balthasarian terms, if the deeds and actions of Jesus Christ are the incarnation of God, can a different set of deeds and actions (what Balthasar would call a different drama, e.g., the life and teaching of Buddha) radiate the same splendor and truth? Would not such a view turn the Gospels into Gnostic allegories? Rahner clearly wishes to avoid this conclusion and asserts the value of explicit Christian faith (1978, 176) and the absolute importance of the historical event of
Jesus Christ (1978, 157–58). Yet, there remains a strand in Rahner’s thought that suggests that the Holy Spirit supplies the grace necessary for salvation, while the Scriptures offer an absolutely correct, intrinsically valuable, yet ultimately unnecessary interpretation of what the Spirit is offering to accomplish on the level of our silent, unseen openness to infinity. It is not just a question of being saved by Christ without knowing it; rather, it is the deeper question of whether Christ’s death and resurrection brings about our salvation, or simply publicizes a salvation that has already been accomplished.

The difficulty here is not Rahner’s approach to the Holy Spirit as God’s gracious self-communication. No less an authority than Pope John Paul II writes of Pentecost as “that new beginning of the self-communication of the Triune God in the Holy Spirit through the work of Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of man and of the world” (Dominum et Vivificantem, no. 14). The question is ultimately of the relationship of the Spirit to Jesus Christ and the church. Balthasar’s approach stresses the light given off by the specific deeds and words of Jesus Christ, the saving appearance of the glory of God in Christ and the church. And while Balthasar repeatedly upholds that “as Christians we may not only freely admit but ought to expect that that interior religious light which falls from God-seeking souls on the historical forms of non-biblical religions may be the same light that shines in the hearts of believers,” he nevertheless insists that what is so illuminated must be distinguished from “God’s immediate self-witness in historical form and, pre-eminently in Christ, who, as a historical form, demands faith for himself” (1982, 168). The Holy Spirit is at work in the non-Christian world, but as a lighthouse, actively leading these religions toward the visible drama of Jesus Christ and the church. This view of the “questing” Spirit is not necessarily incompatible with Rahner’s pneumatology. However, the specific development of this perspective into a notion of a “supernatural existential,” a universal, anonymous offer of life in Christ that is subsequently, and perhaps only possibly, made conceptual “in reflexive, human words in the church’s profession of faith” (1978, 126–27), is at odds with Balthasar’s aesthetic position on the working of the Holy Spirit through the glorious splendor of “what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands” (John 1:1).

Rahner has no lack of defenders on this score (see Conway), and Rahner’s exact position and the nature and accuracy of Balthasar’s critique are ongoing subjects for theological debate. What is beyond doubt, however, is that in these two thinkers the Holy Spirit inspired powerful self-witness. The pneumatologies of Hans Urs von
Balthasar and Karl Rahner show the church and the world that the Spirit’s depths demand constant probing and admit no complete understanding, but that the Spirit’s power still runs through the hearts and minds of the faithful, not least those who pursue theology.

References


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