SEX, DEATH AND MELODRAMA

A Feminist Critique of Hans Urs von Balthasar

Tina Beattie

IT IS DIFFICULT TO OVERESTIMATE the significance of Hans Urs von Balthasar for the development of the Church's theology of sex since Vatican II, particularly under the papacy of John Paul II. While feminist theologians have by and large ignored von Balthasar, a growing number of conservative Catholic thinkers have been turning to him as the Church's answer to feminism. Among these, a movement has emerged that calls itself 'new Catholic feminism'. It takes its cue from John Paul II's call for women to promote,

> … a 'new feminism' which rejects the temptation of imitating models of 'male domination', in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation.[1]

A representative selection of 'new feminist' writings can be found in a book edited by Michele Schumacher, titled *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism*.[2] Schumacher presents the book as a constructive dialogue between Catholicism and feminism, but in fact most of the contributors, with the possible exception of Schumacher herself, are highly antagonistic towards feminism. The essays in *Women in Christ* make clear the extent to which this so-called feminism is deeply indebted to the theology of von Balthasar and to John Paul II, to whom the book refers extensively but without a murmur of criticism. Thus a new generation of women writers have added their voices to an already significant number of male

[1] *Evangelium vitae,* n. 99.

[2] *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism*, edited by Michele M. Schumacher (Grand Rapids, Mi: Eerdmans, 2004).

theologians—many of them associated with the journal *Communio*—who tend to lack any critical perspective in their reading of von Balthasar.

I want to explain why I think that this wholesale appropriation of von Balthasar's theology is potentially disastrous for the Church's understanding of human sexuality. This means exposing the contradictions and tensions which run through von Balthasar's writings on gender and sexuality. Sometimes, these tensions find expression in a violent rhetoric of sex, death and sacrifice—a rhetoric which should lead any discerning reader to question just how appropriate it is to offer this theological vision as the Catholic Church's answer to feminism.[3]

Von Balthasar and the Second Sex

Like Luce Irigaray,[4] von Balthasar argues that there is an insurmountable difference between the sexes. He claims that,

> The male body is male throughout, right down to each cell of which it consists, and the female body is utterly female; and this is also true of their whole empirical experience and ego-consciousness. At the same time both share an identical human nature, but at no point does it protrude, neutrally, beyond the sexual difference, as if to provide neutral ground for mutual understanding.[5]

However, while all Irigaray's writing is mindful of the need to find a language in which to express the pervasive influence of sexual difference,[6] von Balthasar repeatedly forgets himself, and most of what he writes takes a non-gendered view of humanity. One of two implications must follow. It could be that for von Balthasar it is possible to say a great deal about human beings without reference to gender, so that the influence of sexual difference is not as extensive

[3] For a much fuller and more nuanced presentation of the ideas in this essay, see my forthcoming *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (London: Routledge).

[4] Luce Irigaray is often presented as a leading figure in French feminist thought, but she is in fact Belgian and does not call herself a feminist.

[5] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory: Volume II: Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, translated by Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990 [1976]), 365.

[6] See Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1985 [1974]); *Sexes and Genealogies* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993).

as he claims. More probably, von Balthasar's 'man' (*Mensch*) is in fact only the male (*Mann*). Man is the normative human being, and woman is his other in such a way that she is not authentically other at all. Since Simone de Beauvoir published *The Second Sex* in 1949,[7] feminists have been arguing in these terms: in the prevailing discourses of our culture, 'woman' is not a subject in her own right but merely a projection of man, enabling him to know who he is by showing him who he is not. Thus she becomes identified with all those ostensibly feminine attributes that do not fall within his definition of masculinity, but in such a way that she has no access to an identity or subjectivity of her own. She functions only as negation and lack in relation to him. For de Beauvoir, the solution is for women to seek equality with men—equality here understood in terms of a non-gendered model that minimises the biological significance of sexual difference.

De Beauvoir's feminist critique can certainly be applied to Catholic thinkers such as von Balthasar, but with some interesting complications. Von Balthasar inherits from the Catholic tradition a highly symbolic and dynamic understanding of sexual symbols—symbols which have generally been used more as metaphors expressing the relationships between human persons and God than as biological and scientific definitions of the body. So, while men were traditionally represented as 'masculine' and godlike in relation to women, in relation to God they were 'feminine' and creaturely. Von Balthasar draws on the mainstream usage: in his writing, God the Father is often imaged in terms of the initiative and activity attributed to the male sex, while God's creation, including male humans, appears as the 'active receptivity' of the female sex. But von Balthasar is making his own innovation in Catholic tradition when, partly in reaction to feminism, he insists on a fundamental psychological as well as physiological difference between the sexes, and—crucially—when he stresses its theological significance. He and the Catholic theologians who follow him are therefore using the language of male and female in two quite different ways: as a metaphor for the relationship between creator and creation, and as a reinforcement of a particular vision of

A fundamental difference between the sexes

[7] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated by H.M. Parshley (London: Penguin, 1986 [1949]).

gender roles. The first of these usages has attracted considerable criticism from feminist theologians because of its problematic identification of masculinity with reason, transcendence and God, and of femininity with emotion, the body and creatureliness. However, von Balthasar's attempt to retain this metaphorical terminology while also interpreting it as a literal description of human sexuality results in considerable inconsistency. One cannot coherently insist on a radical and non-negotiable difference between the sexes, while at the same time arguing that men as well as women are feminine in relation to God.

Von Balthasar's account of how men and women function as human beings is rigid and essentialist as far as women are concerned: a woman, by virtue of her bodily givenness, can only be maternal and feminine. But when he is speaking of human beings at large in relationship to God, he draws on female images to express not only who women are before God, but also who men are. In this context, though the male body becomes an important symbol for Christ and for

ecclesiastical office, it is the female body that offers man the signifiers he needs in order to position himself before God. What are the consequences here for women? That is the question that needs to be explored.

For all its prolific and sometimes poetic excess, von Balthasar's theology is based on a particular account of gender which structures his whole understanding of relationships within God, between God and creation, and between men and women. The following quotation illustrates this vividly:

> The Word of God appears in the world as a man [M*ann*], as the 'Last Adam'. This cannot be a matter of indifference. But it is astonishing on two counts. For if the Logos proceeds eternally from the eternal Father, is he not at least quasi-feminine vis-à-vis the latter? And if he is the 'Second Adam', surely he is incomplete until God has formed the woman from his side? We can give a provisional answer to these two questions as follows: however the One who comes forth from the Father is designated, as a human being he must be a man if his mission is to represent the Origin, the Father, in the world. And just as, according to the second account of creation, Eve is fashioned from Adam (that is, he carried her within him, potentially), so the feminine, designed to complement the man Christ, must come forth from within him, as his 'fullness' (Ephesians 1:23).[8]

Here, we begin to encounter some of the problems with von Balthasar's theology. First, it depends on what Irigaray would term a 'phallocentric model': it equates God's creative power with male sexual activity, so that in von Balthasar's Christology (and indeed ecclesiology) it becomes important that only a male body can represent God, in a way which comes close to an idolatry of the masculine. Although this association of God's originating power with male sexuality has been a pervasive influence in Christian theology, the link depends on Greek philosophy, and not at all on the Bible. Neither in the creation story of Genesis nor in Luke's annunciation narrative is there any suggestion that God's creative initiative should be likened to an act of male insemination.

[8] Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Volume III: Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, translated by Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992 [1978]), 283-284.

In the second place, von Balthasar himself often refers to the originating activity of God also in *maternal* language and imagery:

> Man is brought forth into the world from God's creative womb; not, of course, in one single act of sending forth, like a human birth, for God must continually accompany the finite being and hold it in existence, but nevertheless in an act that establishes man in his existence in the world and frees him for this.[9]

Such writing suggests that God's creative and sustaining power can be expressed just as effectively in maternal metaphors, so why does von Balthasar repeatedly contradict himself by insisting on the essential maleness of Christ with regard to his divinity? A likely answer to this question is that to relinquish the association between maleness and Christ's divinity would open the way to women priests:

> … in so far as Christ is a man, he … represents the origin, the Father, for the fruitfulness of the woman is always dependent on an original fructification. Neither of these points is to be relativised, nor is the resultant representation of the origin by the Church's office.[10]

But if we read this in the context of the earlier reference to 'God's creative womb', we might ask which Father fructifies God's womb—a question that is obviously unanswerable and absurd. The attempt to

[9] Von Balthasar, 'Movement Toward God' (1967), in *Explorations in Theology: Volume III: Creator Spirit*, translated by Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 15-55, here 31.
[10] Von Balthasar, 'Women Priests? A Marian Church in a Fatherless and Motherless Culture', *Communio*, 22/1 (Spring 1995), 164-170, here 168.

freeze these gendered analogies in the service of a particular ideology of sex and priesthood can be shown to result in theological nonsense.

But it is also interesting to note that von Balthasar seems to define femininity as something which proceeds from or emanates from the masculine. Thus, Christ must be 'quasi-feminine' because he proceeds from the Father, and the feminine, 'designed to complement the man', comes forth 'from within him'. But a being who is produced as another's potential from within himself and in order to complete him is a projection, not an authentically different person. This becomes clear elsewhere, where von Balthasar borrows a quotation from Erich Przywara (an extensive influence on his work), referring to the Pauline epistles:

> It is true, on the one hand, that the man is the 'head' of the woman, the 'body'; but it is also true, on the other hand, that the woman, the 'body', is the man's 'fullness' and 'glory'.[11]

An individual who exists as another's fullness, as his glory, is not a genuine other. As Irigaray would argue, a woman who exists as man's fullness is nothing but the mirror wherein man sees only the other of himself.

The Female Body

Let us now turn to the role of the female body in von Balthasar's account of the drama of salvation, bearing in mind that 'she' is both the man's fantasy and his feminine *persona*. She comes into being to complete his masculine identity, and he becomes her in relation to the masculinity of God in Christ (who is also 'quasi-feminine' in relation to God the Father). But who, then, is she?

Von Balthasar argues that the meaning of the creation of the sexes in Genesis can only be fully understood from the perspective of Calvary. When the Church is taken from the side of Christ on the cross, the full significance of the creation of Eve in Genesis is revealed. To explain how this is so, von Balthasar turns to the relationship between Mary and the Church, and to the identification of Mary's

[11] Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: II*, 373, quoting Erich Przywara, *Mensch, typologische Anthropologie,* (Nuremberg: Glock und Lutz, 1958), volume 1, 140-141.

mission with that of the Church. On Calvary, Mary 'renounces her "I"'[12] in order to allow the Church to come into being. This means that,

> … the Mother must increasingly renounce everything vitally personal to her for the sake of the Church, in the end to be left like a plundered tree with nothing but her naked faith ('Behold, there is your son!'). Progressively, every shade of personal intimacy is taken from her, to be increasingly applied to the good of the Church and of Christians.[13]

Von Balthasar's understanding of Mary is highly complex, but this suggestion that her personal identity is sacrificed on Calvary is very important, for it holds the key to unlocking the hidden dynamics that I want to suggest drive von Balthasar's theology of woman. It is my contention that his staging of the Christian drama results in the female body's elimination, not its redemption, since 'woman' is redeemed only in the 'body' of the Church, where only male bodies are necessary for the enacting of the nuptial relationship between Christ and the Church.

In von Balthasar's reading of Genesis, the first human, alone in creation, is male. The woman comes into being as secondary and contingent, for he can exist without her—even if his existence is lonely, incomplete and 'not good'. In Mary, the woman fulfils the purpose of her bodily existence when she gives birth to Christ. On Calvary, her bodily mission complete, the mother of Christ surrenders her identity to that of the Church, so that the female body no longer has any theological function or significance. Rather, in Christ the male body has become complete through the bringing into being of his feminine other, the Church. But this is not an individual, bodily other. It is a womanly community, wherein the man assumes the role of woman in order to enter into a 'suprasexual' relationship with the male Christ. The complication to this elegant sexual metamorphosis, however, is the persistent presence of the female body. Woman does not disappear when Christ dies on Calvary, but remains as an incarnate, sexual

Mary's whole purpose is to give birth to Christ

[12] Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: III*, 352.

[13] Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics: Volume I: Seeing the Form*, translated by Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1982 [1961]), 341.

presence, unravelling man's virginal dreams of wholeness by constantly luring him towards sex, the body and death. Let me attempt to justify these claims about what von Balthasar's position amounts to.

Von Balthasar is regularly acclaimed as a theologian who restores the body to theology. John O'Donnell claims that 'one of Balthasar's favourite words is "bodiliness"'.[14] Yet I want to suggest that von Balthasar's theology is profoundly hostile to the body. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his treatment of sexuality. For von Balthasar, our experience of sex is so contaminated by its association with death that we have no way of knowing what unfallen sex might have been

[14] John O'Donnell, *Hans Urs von Balthasar* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1992), 57.

like.[15] On Calvary, the 'suprasexual' relationship between Christ and his Bride, Mary/the Church, is revealed as it was intended by God in the beginning, since 'the vicious circle of sexuality and death is broken'.[16]

Von Balthasar's 'suprasexuality' is expressed not by marriage but by celibacy. It is hard to find in his work any real connection between the exalted vocation of the suprasexual celibate, and the day to day realities of human sexuality.[17] In fact, there is a persistent resistance to sexuality and the body running through his theology in a way that allows little if any scope for the bodily goodness of sexual love. Only eschatological 'suprasex' rises above his repeated association of sex with sin and death. He repeatedly suggests that the most lethal enemy that Christ must conquer is the flesh, supremely identified with the female sex, and that this is an unrelenting and deadly struggle. In order to demonstrate this, I want to consider briefly his description of Christ in hell on Holy Saturday, and of the Church as *casta meretrix*, or Chaste Whore.

Von Balthasar's account of Holy Saturday is regarded as one of the most original aspects of his theology. My concern here is not with his theology *per se*, but with his language and imagery. In hell, Christ experiences 'the second death' which,

> … is one with sheer sin as such, no longer sin as attaching to a particular human being, sin incarnate in living existences, but abstracted from that individuation, contemplated in its bare reality

[15] As Aidan Nichols quaintly observes, 'Balthasar takes more seriously than many modern students the assertions of the Fathers that in their state of original righteousness the proto-parents would not have known sexual arousal and the woman defloration as we know them now': *No Bloodless Myth: A Guide Through Balthasar's Dramatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 2000), 86. (Do men really still think of women as being deflowered by sex?)

[16] Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Volume III*, 325.

[17] This is perhaps not unrelated to the fact that much of von Balthasar's theology was written while he was living in the home of Adrienne von Speyr and her husband, Werner Kaegi. For a highly deferential account of this relationship, see Johann S. M. Roten, 'The Two Halves of the Moon: Marian Anthropological Dimensions in the Common Mission of Adrienne von Speyr and Hans Urs von Balthasar', in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, edited by David L. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), and Von Balthasar, *First Glance at Adrienne von Speyr*, translated by Antje Lawry and Sergia Englund Lawry (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1981 [1968]). I do not have the space here to explore the significance of von Balthasar's relationship with von Speyr, but her presence needs to be borne in mind in any discussion of his sexual theology. One might question the eagerness of recent theologians, including Pope John Paul II, to embrace von Balthasar's sexual theology when it is informed by this rather bizarre relationship, which surely has more than a whiff of symbolic adultery about it.

> as such (for sin *is* a reality!). In this amorphous condition, sin forms what one can call the second 'chaos' ....[18]

This is not now the active suffering of Calvary, but a state of total passivity in which Christ is rendered utterly powerless and dependent upon God the Father. Von Balthasar searches for words that will express this 'being in the abyss'[19] of Christ in hell, and he finds these in the language of the Book of Revelation:

> And when the great harlot of Babylon, as quintessence of the sin of the world, 'has fallen', and 'has become a dwelling place of demons, a haunt of every foul spirit', when she has been abandoned on all sides to be 'burned with fire' in 'pestilence and mourning and famine' (Revelation 18:2,8), when men see, at first only from 'far off' the 'smoke of her burning' (18:9,17), when she is 'thrown down' and is 'found no more' (v. 21), when the smoke arising from her 'goes up for ever and ever' (19:3), we have beneath our eyes the ultimate image to which Scripture has recourse in the representation of pure evil's self-consumption. ... For what is consumed can no longer be kindled again by contact with a Living One. It can no longer do anything more than consume itself eternally like a flame that is darkly self-enclosed, 'to engulf for ever in the empty abyss the final burnt out relics of all that can be burned'.[20]

For von Balthasar, the most appropriate image to describe the 'pure evil' of hell, the 'quintessence' of sin, is the harlot—the sexual female body finally exterminated in the fires of hell.

This metaphorical association of the female sex with chaos, hell and death is hardly new. But it has a deadly consistency when used by von Balthasar, because the disappearance of the female body from the story of salvation is already implicit in his interpretation of Genesis. Like Mary, 'woman' must surrender her identity, her personhood and her sexual body, in order to become one with the Church, and in order to let 'him' become 'her' in his suprasexual love affair with Christ.

[18] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, translated by Aidan Nichols (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1990 [1967]), 173.

[19] Von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 154.

[20] Von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 173-174. For a Christian writer to use such language in the immediate aftermath of the *Shoah* beggars belief, and makes me wonder why none of the men who translate, study and interpret von Balthasar seem to question this.

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From a late manuscript of von Balthasar:
'In the Desert: The Woman and the Dragon'

In reality, however, the female body does not disappear, and the celibate priest's violent psychological struggle to overcome the power of his own sexual desire is projected onto Christ himself, so that it becomes a cosmic battle between God and the flesh. In an early work, *Heart of the World*, written soon after his meeting with Adrienne von Speyr, von Balthasar describes the struggle between Christ and the earthly Church, an unfaithful bride who paints her face and goes whoring with the world. In a chapter titled 'The Conquest of the Bride', he gives a lurid account of Christ's battle to subdue this wayward bride:

> It is with you, my Body, that I am forever fighting the great, apocalyptic battle. … I, the strong God, have betrayed myself to you—my Body, my Church … I surrendered to the temptation of … delivering myself up to the obscure chaos of a body, of plunging below the shiny surface of the flesh; the temptation of passing over into this world—this simmering darkness, opposed to the Father's light … I dared to enter the body of my Church, the deadly body which *you* are. … No wonder you realised your advantage over me and took my nakedness by storm! But I have defeated you through

> weakness and my Spirit has overpowered my unruly and recalcitrant flesh. (Never has woman made more desperate resistance!)[21]

The widespread failure among those who engage with von Balthasar to question the violence of his sexual rhetoric is disturbing. It makes one wonder to what extent male theologians remain oblivious to the denigration of female sexuality which informs much of the theological tradition, and which is given new life by von Balthasar, particularly in his reclaiming of the medieval idea of the Church as *casta meretrix*.

In this context, von Balthasar turns to the writings of the thirteenth-century Bishop of Paris, William of Auvergne, who describes the earthly Church in terms of the biblical harlot. In von Balthasar's paraphrase, William condemns the clergy who,

> … prostitute Holy Church, because for squalid gain they invite all and sundry to shame her. And so her nipples are cracked and her breasts torn out ….[22]

There follows a long quotation from William, in which the Church is described in the words of Jeremiah, 'You had a harlot's forehead; you would not blush' (Jeremiah 3:3), and in the words of Isaiah, 'Babylon, my beloved, has become an abomination to me' (Isaiah 21:4). The following gives a flavour of what this lengthy diatribe amounts to:

> Is there anyone who would not be beside himself with horror at the sight of the Church with a donkey's head, the believer's soul with the teeth of a wolf, the snout of a pig, furrowed ashen cheeks, the neck of a bull, and in every other respect so bestial, so monstrous, that a person seeing it would freeze with terror. … We are no longer

[21] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Heart of the World*, translated by Erasmo S. Leiva (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1979 [1954]), 194-197. There is surely something sickening about this image of a rapist Christ. I find it startling when Aristotle Papanikolaou argues that von Balthasar's idea of kenosis might be an effective theological resource for the healing of victims of sexual abuse, in his 'Person, Kenosis and Abuse: Hans Urs von Balthasar and Feminist Theologies in Conversation', *Modern Theology*, 19/1 (January 2003), 41-65. I do not know what it would be like to read 'The Conquest of the Bride' as someone who had herself been abused, but I cannot imagine what form of healing we could be talking about.

[22] Von Balthasar, '*Casta meretrix*' (1948), translated by John Saward, in *Explorations in Theology: Volume II: Spouse of the Word* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 193-288, here 196.

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> dealing with a bride but with a monster of terrible deformity and ferocity.[23]

In her analysis of what she calls the 'prophetic pornography' of the Old Testament, J. Cheryl Exum speaks of 'the ethical problems raised by passages in which a male deity is pictured as sexually abusing a female victim'.[24] As well as the references in Isaiah and Jeremiah, she refers to the harlot imagery of Hosea, in which the prophet's unfaithful wife becomes the personification of Israel, whom God threatens to strip naked and expose to her lovers. Exum argues that the failure by biblical scholars to question this violent sexual imagery is an indicator of problematic attitudes to female sexuality that are still all too current. The general point, which is already highly relevant for feminist readings of von Balthasar, becomes all the more pertinent in the light of Exum's argument that these biblical passages are directed at a male audience:

[23] Von Balthasar, '*Casta meretrix*', 196-198.

[24] J. Cheryl Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 102.

> The way to insult a man is to call him a woman. You insult him more if you call him a filthy whore who is going to have her genitals exposed, which is what these prophetic accusations do.[25]

In this context, it is surely suggestive that von Balthasar's vitriolic denunciation of the *casta meretrix* is directed at the male office-holders of the institutional Church, as also is his sexual tirade in 'The Conquest of the Bride'. Like the prophets of old, von Balthasar seems to think that the best way to describe men's infidelity to God is through metaphors of wanton female sexuality. Thus his Christ humiliates sinful men by casting them in the role of whores who must be raped and conquered so that he can purify them. The female flesh, meanwhile, is the abyss, the non-being, onto which this fantasy of rape and denigration is projected.

Ways Forward

Given these difficulties, it is perhaps not surprising that feminist theologians have chosen to ignore von Balthasar. Nevertheless, his growing influence among Roman Catholic theologians, and some Anglican ones, makes it important that feminists should undertake critical readings of his work. It is worth asking, then, if there is anything that can be retrieved from von Balthasar for a theology of human sexuality informed by feminist insights.

Any feminist reinterpretation of von Balthasar would have to offer an extensive deconstruction of the abusive, violent rhetoric that so often poisons his ideas. Nevertheless, if his work manifests the poison, it might also provide the cure. In his writings, the Church's theology of sex, historically accumulated over two thousand years, internalised by countless men and women in their battle against their own sexuality, reaches an apotheosis—in no small part because of the pressure of twentieth-century feminism and the issue of women's ordination. Von Balthasar's theology brings to light a flaw that runs through the Catholic theological tradition with regard to sex. If we can understand where he is coming from, we might acquire a much greater understanding of the creative

[25] Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, 102.

I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns … holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: 'Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations'. (Revelation 17:4-5)

departures we need to make if we are to develop a more healthy and life-affirming theology.

Von Balthasar's theology at times cries out for liberation from its enslavement to a particular sexual ideology, so that its more radical and interesting insights can be allowed to flourish. For example, his theology of the motherhood of God might provide a resource for reflection on the female body's sacramental significance, and on how the priesthood might represent the maternal dimension of God's creative and sustaining power. His sometimes highly fluid and unstable sexual symbolics might invite a postmodern rediscovery of the metaphorical possibilities of pre-modern theology, before the poetry of theological language became ensnared in more rationalist and systematized forms of argument. Such a reading of von Balthasar's theology would require an abandonment of the sexual essentialisms that it is made to serve, and a critical exposure of the violence which distorts his representation of human sexual embodiment. Then, the play of sexual difference might be opened up to much more fluid and dynamic sacramental exchanges than von Balthasar allowed for. Perhaps, indeed—though I remain to be

convinced—such a prospect would enable a feminist to move beyond the rape and violence in his writing and enter into a truly fertile exchange with him.

Tina Beattie is a Senior Lecturer in Christian Studies at Roehampton University and a Senior Fellow in CRUCiBLE, Roehampton's new Centre for Education in Human Rights, Social Justice and Citizenship. She has written widely on questions of theology and gender, notably in her book *God's Mother: Eve's Advocate* (London: Continuum, 2002). She also broadcasts, and contributes frequently to *The Tablet*.