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Christianity and the Weight of Words

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Raymond Gawronski SJ, *Word and Silence: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Spiritual Encounter between East and West* (Angelico Press, 2015).

In the din of today's technological society—fueled by the abstract “languages” of political ideology, mass media, and consumerism—it is especially tempting to reject language altogether, to escape into silence and stop listening to others, when their words seem too often a means of manipulation. However, in his monograph on the theme of “Word and Silence” in Balthasar's thought, Raymond Gawronski shows that the temptation to escape from the noise of our shared life, into solitary silence, is a perennial temptation of *homo religiosus*. To fallen man, the way of radical self-renunciation and negation (“self-flight”), found in the mystical and ascetic strands of most religions, appears to be the sole means of fully transcending the clatter of “self-seeking” human desires. Remaining sympathetic to this religious urge for silent repose, Gawronski elucidates, by contrast, Balthasar's fundamentally positive Christian theology of language. For him language is essentially a function of our dialogical nature, which images the truth of God's triune love. Holy silence, accordingly, is an active mode of receptivity toward the super-eminent, eternal “dialogue” between the divine persons, revealed to us in Christ the Word (*logos*).

Elegantly illuminating this thesis through an impressive command of Balthasar's German-language oeuvre, *Word and Silence* has rightly become a “classic” in the secondary literature since its initial publication in 1995. However, early reviews of it by heavyweight theologians Edward Oakes and Paul Griffiths both claim it does not make good on its subtitle: “the Spiritual Encounter between East and West.” Specifically, one does not find there a dialogue between Balthasar's Catholicism and the major Eastern religions, each speaking from its own perspective. Rather, Balthasar's (admittedly inexperienced) perceptions of the world religions serve as a foil for a distinctly Christian understanding of “Word and Silence.” As “the religion of silence *par excellence*,” Zen Buddhism, in particular, serves as a cipher for human attempts to lose oneself in the silent “non-word (*Unwort*)” beyond all words, that is to say, in the hidden ground beyond multiplicity, change, passion, and finitude. Gawronski highlights this tendency, *mutatis mutandis*, in Neo-Platonism, Gnosticism, Jewish mysticism, Islamic mysticism, Hindu mysticism, German Idealism, and even supposedly Christian mystics like Gregory Palamas and Meister Eckhart. So long as one bears in mind the inadequacy of this approach for understanding these distinct forms as such, this comparison remains useful as a means to elaborate the distinctiveness of Catholic Christianity.

According to the latter, God is the infinite mystery of self-giving love, in which the divine persons always “speak” and receptively “listen” to the others in perfect accord. Balthasar's analogical language attempts to convey how all perfections hold together in the infinite mystery of triune love. To describe

God as the archetype of language itself, one may speak of the Trinity as an eternal “dialogue” between the Father and the Son—in the Holy Spirit. God the Father expresses his most basic love by giving away all of himself, indeed all of his infinite being, to his beloved Son. In gratitude for this total gift, the Son offers all of himself in return and expresses his readiness to speak their love to creatures in the form of Jesus Christ. The Son is thus *the* Word (*logos*), by which the Creator Spirit draws creatures into his eternally triune “dialogue.”

Lest this notion of a personal “dialogue” with the ever-actual Creator seem too anthropomorphic, Gawronski emphasizes that, for Balthasar, “God’s Word to man remains far above, and other than, human dialogue.” In Chapter V on his theology of prayer, a highlight of the book, Gawronski describes the appropriate posture of the creature as one of contemplative listening and watchful waiting for signs and “words” of God’s ever-greater grace. “Dialogue” remains a meaningful analogy here, because God’s glorious Word descends in the incarnation to encounter humans where we are—in concrete history—to elicit lives of prayer. While all words take on an objective meaning beyond the speaker, our words of repentance, praise, thanks, and fidelity, spoken in response to Christ, generate forms of life in the Church that draw us into the glory of his triune love. Christian speech is a humble, but radically creative, “echo” of the Word who descends to us from above, saving us from death and sin by dying with us, in order to raise us into his everlasting communion. The word “echo” here does not convey mere repetition, since by praying, the creature freely receives and offers *himself* to the Father, together with Christ. “Echoing” God’s Word to us in Christ, our own creaturely words return to the Father by sharing in the Son’s total and eternal self-communication to him.

Gawronski thus illuminates the essential difference between Christian language and both ancient mythology and non-Christian negative theology. For Balthasar, he explains, mythology is closer to the truth insofar as it intuitively grasps the *personal* nature of being; yet it does not grasp the difference between the absolute Giver and his free gift of creation. On the other hand, radical negative theology involves the progressive mastery of those techniques by which the “mystic” (*myesthai*: initiation) rises beyond finitude, and indeed personhood, into the silent One. Contrary to this sophisticated approach, reserved for elites, Christianity claims that Jesus died on the cross for “the non-mystical, the non-gifted, the simplest and most foolish.” The crucified and risen Word speaks to each of us, through the actual events of our lives, beckoning us, not to renounce them for a putatively better existence, but to freely hand them over to his transformative glory. Thus, Christian belief in the events of Creation and Resurrection “coincides with the intuition of the child and the primitive, that the world actually is.” In Balthasar’s philosophical anthropology, accordingly, the childlike “cry of praise” in response to the gift of being takes primacy over sophisticated discursive speech.

At the theological level, Mary stands as the archetypal “hearer of the word,” who empties herself in humility to be filled with the mystery of God’s revelation. Proclaiming her “yes” to the Father’s offer to impregnate her with his Word in the Annunciation, she thus fulfills the Old Testament type of Israel as the Bride of Yahweh and becomes the personal form of the Church. Gawronski here plays with the German “*Jawort*,” which literally mean “yes-word,” but more specifically invokes the “I do” of matrimony. Mary’s *Jawort* to God is similar to a supreme marriage vow since it creates an indissoluble and intrinsically fruitful covenant between them. Indeed, this “I do” immediately gives rise to the supreme fruit of the Christ-child. Bearing within it unbounded gratitude, praise, faithfulness, and motherly affection, her simple response is an eminently creative human word. Mary’s obedient listening to God’s perpetually creative Word, acting in history, gives rise to a spontaneous Echo that lasts forever.

Gawronski's consistent emphasis on Balthasar's preference for humble receptivity over an imposed *via negativa* offers an illuminating rejoinder to the common criticism of him in academic theology today, namely, that he oversteps human limits by saying too much about the inner life of the Trinity. In truth, Balthasar merely "echoes"—albeit in the way of a genius—the ever-greater truth of the divine Word, who gathers together all the countless words of creation, as he comes from and returns to the Father. Far from denying human limits, Balthasar affirms them precisely as the created foundation for our personal response to God's self-revelation. His vivid analogies for the Trinity aim to ground our own lives in the Creator's infinitely greater, all-encompassing "personal" life. By contrast, academic theologians who rigidly hold fast to the dominance of the apophatic method tacitly undermine the everlasting significance of finite humanity and humble discipleship in Christ. If God himself were not super-personal, our individual lives would fade after death into his sheer silence, finally representing only so much noise. It seems that the chaotic din of modern technology and the empty mystery of "God" in much of academic theology are two sides of the same dialectical coin, so to speak.

Still, for a monograph on another theologian, *Word and Silence* could itself benefit from greater conceptual precision. Gawronski's rich integration of key leitmotifs (the Christian as perennial child; Mary as consenting Bride-Church; technique vs. listening; etc.) fails to directly articulate the conception of language it implies all along: words, at bottom, are revelatory events of truth whereby distinct persons—foremost the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—enact the super-intelligible meaning of being as love. This deeply contemplative book nevertheless succeeds in recapitulating the theology of Christian language it so beautifully describes.

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