

Time is Symphonic: The Reception of Tradition in the 21st Century

Anne M. Carpenter
Assistant Professor of Catholic Systematic Theology
St. Mary's College of California

I. Introduction

This essay seeks to sketch the form of tradition's reception in the present age of theology, with particular attention to the phenomenological of time, memory, and possibility in modern theology and philosophy. In its concern over tradition, the topic of this paper is in sympathy with many different eras with many different questions. It seems to me, however, that 21st century theology in particular faces new questions with respect to the reception of tradition, its meaning, and its application in modern problems. Theology's ability to authentically "remember" the past and critically apply it to current matters is under serious question, and not simply or singly as a problem of whether to leave the past behind or retain it. Instead, memory itself has become a problem of intense ambiguity, doubt, and scrutiny. After outlining these present ambiguities, I respond to them with a theological aesthetic of time. Here the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar serves as a guiding force in the essay, drawing from one of some of his major reflections on our multi-modal experience of freedom and time, and from his understanding of truth as "symphonic."¹ These claims, which employ music as a form of theological reflection, allow us possibility to experience many "times" and multiple forms of "remembering" without also sundering the possibility of real and authentic meaning understood continuously through history.

II. Ambiguities in Modern Theological Reception of the Past

A. The 20th Century Context of the Question

The reception of tradition has been a matter of concern in theology since the earliest ages of Christian theological reflection, beginning perhaps most explicitly with Irenaeus in the second century, who coined the term *regula fidei* (rule of faith) to describe that by which the Church makes its judgments of truth. In the centuries since, theology has continued to consider its own past in the present as a major mode of critical reflection on contemporary questions. While John Henry Newman was one of the first to articulate this process thoroughly and critically, one of the more recent formative experiences of this question occurred during and after the Second Vatican Council. In the Catholic Church, two perspectives formed around the articulation of theology in the present: *ressourcement*, which excavated the past (especially the Church Fathers) in order to respond to the present, and *aggiornamento*, which emphasized modernizing the Church's modes of reflection

¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Truth Is Symphonic: Aspects of Christian Pluralism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987).

and expression in order to respond to the present. Typical narratives of this period note a split in Catholic theology over this question, with some theologians – such as Balthasar or Henri de Lubac – falling into the former group, and others – such as Karl Rahner or Edward Schillebeeckx – falling into the latter, with subsequent generations of theologians following suit.² In Protestant theology, a similar crisis emerges over a broader period of time amid a different set of concerns. Friedrich Schleiermacher can be taken as an attempt to modernize Protestant theology in the face of Enlightenment critiques, while Karl Barth represents a reaction against this modernization with a response that emphasizes the cruciform glory of Christ.³ What this “conflict” reveals is a problem of the perception of historical time and its role in the present, and in fact both “sides” are concerned with the same crisis over how to be responsive to the present.

While these perspectives have been formative for theology in its present context in both Catholic and Protestant circles, the original crisis – if I may call it that – of the 20th century has taken a new shape in the 21st. No longer is it possible to categorize theologians as either those of the *ressourcement* or *aggiornamento*, or those of Schleiermachian or Barthian leanings, as perhaps we are accustomed. The old battle-lines have blurred across the edges of a new terrain, one in which all of these perspectives are no longer able to respond with as much thoroughness or relevancy.⁴ Instead, the new terrain is what I would like to call a problem of *memory*, a term whose application I draw from Paul Riceour’s usage, a problem that is much more far-reaching in its strain on the theological task. First I will explain the problem as Riceour describes it, and then I will describe its implications for theology, before responding with a brief sketch of a theological aesthetic of time.

² The old lines of conflict can be seen programmatically in John W. O’Malley, “‘The Hermeneutic of Reform’: A Historical Analysis,” *Theological Studies* 73, no. 3 (September 1, 2012): 517–46; John W. O’Malley, “Developments, Reforms, and Two Great Reformations : Towards a Historical Assessment of Vatican II,” *Theological Studies* 44, no. 3 (September 1, 1983): 373–406; as well as in Richard Neuhaus’s response to O’Malley in “What Really Happened at Vatican II by Richard John Neuhaus,” *First Things*, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2008/09/001-what-really-happened-at-vatican-ii>.

³ See D. Stephen Long, *Saving Karl Barth: Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Preoccupation*, 2014. This book helpfully reiterates both Catholic and Protestant narratives that divide the groups not only from each other, but also among each other. It is also the book that has helped me to see that this form of self-narration is no longer helpful to theology.

⁴ It is possible to see this shifting context in essays as collected in Matthew L Lamb and Matthew Levering, *Vatican II Renewal within Tradition* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Gabriel Flynn and Murray, eds., *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology* (New York: Oxford University, 2012); as well as in the article by Kevin L. Hughes, “Bonaventure Contra Mundum? The Catholic Theological Tradition Revisited,” *Theological Studies* 74, no. 2 (June 1, 2013): 372–98.

B. Ricoeur and Memory

While several philosophers have reflected on history and memory, with important modern interlocutors in figures such as Hegel and Heidegger, or more recently in Derrida, Ricoeur's final work serves as a helpful starting-point for the present question. *Memory, History, Forgetting* is a mammoth text that is in many ways a summation of Ricoeur's lifelong obsession with the role of narrative and history, and in other ways serves as a programmatic response to the ambiguities of phenomenological knowledge.⁵ For my purposes, I will focus on Ricoeur's assessment of history and the project of scientific history. Ricoeur begins by drawing upon Augustine's reflection on memory as a "trace" of the past: memory is not itself the event of the past, but is rather an impression of the past left upon the mind.⁶ This is already something of a problem, since it does not seem that we have access to the past itself, only our memory of it. Ricoeur further problematizes memory by considering it under the mode of history: when we study history, we are attempting to examine events that are no longer the memories of the living. History searches through evidence to form its narratives, but these forms of evidence are themselves traces (documents, diaries, archeology, etc.) rather than the events in themselves, and furthermore these traces are already partially interpreted through the archival process.⁷ That is to say, traces of events are already subject to forms of meaning outside of the original event through the act of archiving. They are then further interpreted by historians, who try to reconstruct the (partially interpreted) event through their own interpretations, which means that the work of historians involves acts of imaginative interpolation or representation that try to "make sense of" the evidence from the past.⁸

Here I am condensing an extended discussion of Ricoeur's, and what I want us to be able to see is the intense distance from the past that any act of interpretation endures. History approaches us not as fact, but rather in a spectral collection of interwoven interpretations, and we are left to doubt whether we actually come to know the past at all. Ricoeur has his own solution to this problem, which I will not recapitulate here.⁹ What I want to understand through him is that the matter of tradition becomes an immensely difficult one, since history itself threatens to become an impossibility: memory reels as something only able to speak in the present tense. Essentially, modern thought has come to wonder whether it is possible or valuable to see history as a legitimate resource in the present.

While in many ways the constraints of time and space have forced me to dramatize a complex problem, it is a real one. For theology, Ricoeur's summary of

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

⁶ See Ricoeur, "Plato: The Present Representation of an Absent Thing," 7-15; "A Phenomenological Sketch of Memory," in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 21-44.

⁷ Ricoeur, "The Documentary Phase: Archived Memory," in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 146-181.

⁸ Ricoeur, "The Historian's Representation," in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 234-280.

⁹ See esp. Ricoeur, "History and Time," in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 343-411.

the problem of history becomes an intense crisis over how the Church is able to authentically *remember* Christ in the present at all. Recovery and modernization are each rendered immobile in the face of this problem: if there is no real memory of Christ, then *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento* are equally as impossible. One solution to this impossibility would be to describe the Church's memory of Christ as an encounter only with his presence in the Church today, in say Scripture or Sacrament, but this fails to really answer the problem of history, and it renders the historical event of the Incarnation of the Word into an absolute non-factor. Christianity would then become either mythological or Gnostic. I think that there is a better option, and it is to this more authentic choice that I now turn.

III. A Theological Aesthetic of Time

A. Roots in *Theo-Drama* and *Glory of the Lord*

Hans Urs von Balthasar is perhaps most famous for his “theological aesthetics” as presented in the volumes of *Glory of the Lord*, and for his “theological dramatics” as presented in *Theo-Drama*. The “dramatics” focus on articulating the collision between finite and infinite freedom in the “drama” of salvation history, which culminates with Christ's surrender on the cross. For our purposes, I want to emphasize the way Balthasar understands the interaction between Christ's human and divine wills, particularly in the crucifixion. Balthasar does not think that finite and infinite freedom – that is, created wills and the single, divine will of God – contact one another on the same horizon. This would result in the absorption or destruction of created freedom by divine freedom, which is boundless; or it would restrict divine freedom into one freedom among many. Instead, for Balthasar infinite freedom operates in its own horizon, the eternal horizon of the Trinity, and is the ground of finite freedom, so that God's will sustains all created wills without the confusion of the two.¹⁰ On the cross, Jesus' surrender to the Father is to be understood as his free, human obedience to the divine will that sustains him. In surrendering, he is most free, since here his freedom becomes an icon that illuminates the divine freedom that upholds it, and an icon as well of the Son's eternal relationship of loving surrender to the Father.¹¹ What Balthasar is able to conceive of in this historical event is, already, an event that is opened to and revelatory of eternity.¹²

¹⁰ There is one volume of the dramatics that is entirely dedicated to the argument I have just summarized. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Vol. II: The Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, trans. Graham Harrison (Ignatius Press, 1990).

¹¹ This is the argument in the subsequent volume, Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Vol III: The Dramatis Personae: The Person in Christ* (Ignatius Press, 1993).

¹² The clearest summary of the implications these theories have on time occur in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Vol. V: The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (Ignatius Press, 1998), esp. 99–140; he repeats these

My sketch of Balthasar's grasp of history as presented in *Theo-Drama* would not be complete without understanding something of the theological aesthetic that serves as its foundation. For Balthasar, Christ is the form (*Gestalt*) of God, by which Balthasar means that the Incarnate One reveals God through the beauty of his form: we are able, through experience of his beauty, to be "enraptured" or lifted up by divine revelation.¹³ While there are many aspects of this form, what is vital to understand is that this form grasps even before we grasp it. Just as with his reflections on freedom, Balthasar imagines that the beauty or glory of God is primary, and orders all other experiences of beauty. Our ability to experience the beautiful is taken up by God so that we may experience his divine glory in Christ. The expression of the beautiful in the created order is opened to and revelatory of eternity.¹⁴

B. Implications of Drama and Glory

Balthasar's theological reflections on both freedom and beauty complexify our understanding of history and the present in a helpful way. With respect to the first, we are allowed to understand history not simply as a series of events that may or may not be lost to us, but rather as a drama of created freedom (or rather, *freedoms*). Because history is so constituted, in order to take proper account of it, we also have to understand that all of its events, as plays of freedom, are always opened out to eternity. That is, history is permeable.¹⁵ With respect to beauty, we are allowed to understand our experience of the present, which is always an aesthetic experience, as similarly permeable. Our experience of anything beautiful is always also an experience that is of its nature open to the experience of the glory of God, because beauty draws us beyond what we might call the facticity of the present into the meaningfulness of the present as ordered by and ordered to eternity.

Here I wish to draw together these themes and further them by adding Balthasar's image of truth as "symphonic." For him, created truth is a unity, but not necessarily "one thing." There are instead many truths, which cohere together harmonically: they "sound" resonant notes even as they also "sound" distinctive notes, as in a symphonic composition.¹⁶ So while we can come to many insights into many truths, these truths each resonate with further questions that relate to further insights and further truths, each ordered to one another. Thus they are a "harmony."

themes at length in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Theology of History* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994); Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Theological Anthropology* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock, 2010).

¹³ Here I have repeated what is the central concern in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, trans. Joseph Fessio and John Kenneth Riches (San Francisco : New York: Ignatius Press ; Crossroad Publications, 1983).

¹⁴ See esp. *Glory of the Lord*, pp. 429-526.

¹⁵ See Philippe Dockwiler, *Le Temps Du Christ: Cœur et Fin de La Théologie de L'histoire Selon Hans Urs von Balthasar*, *Cogitatio Fidei* (Paris: Cerf, 2011).

¹⁶ Balthasar, "Prologue. Truth Is Symphonic" in *Truth is Symphonic*, 7-18.

So now we are also able to understand created truth as permeable, inasmuch as each true thing is never enclosed upon itself, but rather open to all true things.¹⁷

To press these insights ahead, I want to argue that the various permeabilities of freedom, beauty, and truth instigate an understanding of the present that is not open simply to eternity, but also to the past. In other words, it becomes impossible to understand the events of the past as traces irrevocably lost to the past. Instead, if we are grasping freedom symphonically, then each event is able to “resound” with both the past and the future (that is, to be received in the future). We are able to perceive this harmonic resonance because it is *also* beautiful; that is, because it is also ordered by the forms of created beauty, which help us to arrange the sounds into a creative grasp of the past that is also true, even while we are not forced to understand it as merely or simply identical with the past. This is so because no event is a mere atomic moment of time never to be touched by another time, since instead any view of the past also a view of many “sounds” all at once. Looking to the past is at the same time an experience that resonates in the present, creating new sonic harmonies. To drop the symphonic image for a moment, I am arguing in essence that our experiences of the past and the present are not experiences of events confined only to the events themselves. I mean this both vertically – every moment in time is open to eternity– and horizontally – every moment is open to others moments. In other words, the philosophies of history that would close us off from memory fail to properly understand our experience of time.

Here I return to the idea of memory as a helpful way of entering into the problem of the reception of the past in the present. In the context of the theological aesthetic that I have laid out, *memory* – or rather, the *memory of Christ* – ought not be understood simply as a trace of an event no longer present. It ought, rather, be understood more like a resonating sound. This would mean that the “trace” that is memory is not evidence of what *was*, but bears in it an echo of what was. Or, perhaps more strongly, it still bears what *was* in itself through its resemblance to what was. In other words, we are finally able to understand similarity or resemblance not as a distancing relationship to the past (or to the present), but as unitive. That which resembles also bears what it resembles, even as it allows us not to confuse the two as identical, which would simply collapse the past and the present.

C. Outcomes

By way of summary, I will now take some time to clarify the point at which we have arrived using Balthasar’s aesthetic-dramatic theology of history and truth. The problem we encountered was not simply an argument over how to interpret the Christian past in the present, but was rather doubt over whether the past may speak in the present at all. Modern philosophies of history present Christianity with the impossibility of history itself, which effectively cuts off Christianity from its past: both in the form of tradition, and in the form of the historical event of the Incarnation, cross, and resurrection. My response has been to examine the truth of

¹⁷ Balthasar, *Truth is Symphonic*, 21-30.

the Incarnation in order to reconsider the nature of historical events and historical remembering. History, in which human freedom is played out before God, is not closed in upon itself either in its events or in its encounter with eternity. What the Incarnation displays uniquely – I am not arguing for a sort of “pan-Incarnationism” – is a potency that both time and memory analogously bear.

It is not sufficient to argue that Christ is presently with his Church, though it is imperative that he is. This presence also begs the question of the past, and opens us to it. In other words, in the Church we experience the Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father and the historical event of the Incarnation (and its subsequent reception throughout time). In other words, are primary experiences of Christ remain ecclesially located in both Scripture and Sacrament, but these experiences are also historical. We need not dichotomize them, though it remains important to distinguish them. I have argued basically for a certain sacramentality of time, one that enriches our understanding of what it means to remember Christ in the present. This is but a beginning for what I take to be the unique situation and opportunity presented to 21st theology, in distinction from theology of the previous centuries. If theology has in the past several hundred years confronted what it means to be historically conscious, then the theology of the present age now faces the monumental task of integrating this consciousness – as opposed to arguing for it or against it – with the rule of faith.

IV. Conclusion

I close with a thought on this opportunity and its unique place in the current discussions of theology, both within Catholicism and outside of it. What it does from the outset is it relativizes the conflicts of the past century by highlighting our distinctive place in new turns of scholarship. That is to say, historical consciousness allows us to recognize not only the influence of former narratives on our present, but also the ways those narratives fail to be as helpful as they have been in the past. More importantly – and here is my point – the Christian theological task is presented with a fundamental question not merely over its veracity, but instead over whether its contact with its sources of truth is possible in the first place. Rather than seeing this question as a crisis, I would forward it as an opportunity for theology not only to “re-discover” the riches of its past or describe those riches to the present, but rather to consider the ways in which it is always-already enlivened by the freedom and glory of the God who has entered the time that he transcends.