Subj ectivity, Ecstasy, and The Universal Lordship of Jesus Christ: A Consideration of Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics as a Way Forward in The Interpretation of Scripture
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The goal of this paper will be to explore the possibilities which Balthasar’s theological aesthetics presents for scriptural hermeneutics. One of the central issues with which any Christian theology must contend is that of the interpretation and use of the Word of God. This is undoubtedly important, for different ways of approaching the Bible lead to different conclusions on issues extending to all aspects of Christian life. If we consider the problem in connection to our own academic context, disparities in method regarding scripture has amounted to fields which have drifted apart, such that the systematic theologian, the ethicist and the exegete can only critique one another in a limited manner, if at all.

While Balthasar’s aesthetic method does not attempt to provide a solution to all problems in scriptural interpretation, it indeed helps in the formation of a sort of heuristic grammar by which the Bible can be read and applied effectively. This is accomplished by envisioning scripture as something unified, sacramental and transformative and thus central—as it always has been—to the believing community. As the issue at hand is complex, several steps will have to be taken in order bring Balthasar’s contribution into view. In the course of this paper, I shall first outline the historical contours of our contemporary situation in theology, so as to frame Balthasar’s diagnosis thereof and corresponding theology in a clear and relevant manner. I then argue that an implication of one of the theological aesthetics’ central concepts (form) can aid exegetes in our postmodern context by its attention to subjectivity and grounding in the objective order through shared experience of prayerful encounter. Finally, I end with a few remarks regarding how the aesthetics might be of general service to revelation and its role in the discipline of theology.
Background and Diagnosis from a Balthasarian Perspective

Let me begin then, with the historical background. In one of his seminal articles, “Theologie und Heiligkeit,”¹ Balthasar confronts us with the startling fact that, since the advent of the modern period, there have been very few saints who were also great theologians. According to him, dogmatic theology has slowly been losing its spiritual energy, while mystical writers have been adopting more psychological or even a-theological postures in their work. Unlike the early Christian Fathers who often combined metaphysical élan with great insight on prayer and askesis, or even the scholastics who were able to bring together human sciences with faith and revelation, thinkers in the modern period have mostly shied away from the task of integration in one way or another. Balthasar locates the origins of this tendency in the empirical turn taken after the rediscovery of Aristotle in the West.² In grappling with the influx of knowledge which this discovery represented, the scholastics of the high middle ages were able to hold together the insights of the philosopher’s more empirical method while still adhering to a fundamentally participatory and transcendent Christian cosmology.³

This worldview began to change in the later middle ages, when there was a loss in theologians’ methodological confidence in the ability to know about God intellectually and a concomitant stress on the volitional dimension of humanity vis-à-vis the divine. Simultaneously, an empirical and intramundane philosophy ascended to precedence in the study of nature. Theology thus saw the beginnings of a fissure between the realm of discursive knowledge and the emotive, or in other words: the True and the Good. And indeed, this fissure would further manifest itself in the positivistic methods of reformation polemics and other developments in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries such as the emphasis on philology and the beginnings of modern scientific method.⁴

In terms of spirituality in the late medieval and modern period, one encounters a similar one-sided emphasis, where the volitional dimension of the Christian faith is retained and the dogmatic is jettisoned. In Aquinas and Bonaventure, one sees these dimensions held together, but once one gets to mystics such as Eckhart and Cusa, theological elements begin to take a back seat

³ Herrlichkeit 1.35
⁴ David Tracy, in Robert M. Grant and David Tracy, A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible, second ed., (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 154, makes the keen insight that when one encounters a cultural crisis in history, one also encounters a hermeneutical crisis. While Tracy does not include the late Middle Ages in this schema, is it not possible to consider this age in such a manner?
in relation to the subjective interpretation of one’s interior life.5 This prioritization becomes a definitive rift in the Devotio Moderna6 and the apophasis of Carmelite mysticism and Quietism, and is in a different way manifest in the heavily image based spirituality of Saint Ignatius and French Baroque spirituality.7 Even in Catholic theology’s post-conciliar context, much of this fractured vision still remains,8 although it manifests itself in different idioms.9

It is important to mention that this situation is also shared by Western Christians outside of the Roman communion, where the effect has arguably been more pervasive. One sees the divorce between the noetic and mystical dimensions of the faith clearly in the objections Pietists began to raise against Protestant Orthodoxy in the seventeenth century and also in the divorce between evangelicals and mainline protestants in the eighteen hundreds; and it is undoubtedly still going on today in several areas.

While scriptural interpretation may not be the only factor in the theological dis-integration that I have been outlining, it has undoubtedly been a key issue from beginning to end. One could in fact characterize this entire period as a fracturing and estrangement in the theological frameworks which operate in the background to hermeneutics. At the risk of oversimplification: there has been, on the one hand, a strand of Christianity that has been reticent in thinking about revelation critically; and as scholarly knowledge of scripture has advanced over the years, this way of being Christian has not only been marginalized in some sense, but in large part, has failed in bringing Christians to ongoing intellectual conversion, and has also quite seriously failed to engage culture critically. On the other hand, there has been another type of Christianity that has been all too eager to expound what it takes to be the truth of faith with sharp, but spiritually superficial scholarship that largely fails in bringing one to a transformed life.

5 Balthasar in fact only asserts that the metaphysical ethos can still be observed in these two thinkers. While I believe he would agree with my assessment that Cusa and Eckhart prioritize subjectivity, the claim is wholly my own. Cf. Herrlichkeit1.67
7 Particularly as it is articulated by Francis de Sales and Pierre de Bérulle.
8 Although I have been selective for the purposes of this paper, I think it is important to mention that Balthasar does indeed note that there had been several exceptions and steps in the right direction within the context of this narrative. In particular, he considers the work of Matthias Scheben and Heri de Lubac to count for great achievements, and this is not to mention other thinkers in the background such as Peywara or Kierkegaard as making significant cracks in this bleak picture.
9 Another significant issue having to do with interpretation in our post-conciliar period has to do with the plurality of methods that one encounters. While plurality in itself may not pose a problem and is often in fact healthy for theology and Church life, having such a plethora of methodologies could imply serious consequences when not drawn together by some common thread. In particular, such plurality can lead (and arguably is leading) to conceptions of the Christian faith which have so drifted apart that communication is impossible.
Balthasar would say that all of this turmoil has arisen because Christians have failed to maintain an important balance in their stance toward reality, namely a balance between the dimension of Truth and that of the Good. Although it is not obvious at first sight, by taking this standpoint Balthasar views the contemporary situation through fundamentally pre-modern lenses, and in fact believes that a “creative retrieval” of some aspects of this earlier worldview is necessary. In particular, he seeks to recover an understanding of Being as transcendental.11

It might be helpful to explain what this precisely means. First, for Balthasar it is axiomatic that the cosmos is creaturely and by this fact bears some trace of its maker.12 As such, all that exists, is in some sense good. In a similar way, Balthasar and many other classical philosophers take all of creation to be ontologically true. This implies that there is a fundamental correspondence between that which exists and the divine mind which holds it in existence. Likewise from our perspective as creatures made in the image of God, creation is in some sense knowable and it is something of which we can have partial knowledge.

This sciencia is viewed as a good, is it not? Balthasar would say that our very thirst to know is a function of both the fundamental Truth and Goodness of reality as created. But this is not to say that we seek one part of creation because it is good and another because it is true, for Goodness and Truth are in fact one in reality. It is only in our minds that these notions can be separated. On the one hand then, the transcendental notions of the Good and True are to be understood as inextricably rooted in objective reality. Yet there is a very subjective and interpretive dimension to these concepts, because they function as relational terms when we consider them in connection to our own stance vis-à-vis the objective order. In short, it is helpful to understand that the Truth of reality corresponds to the human intellect, whereas the Good corresponds to the will.13 And furthermore, just as in the objective order the True

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10 The term ‘creative retrieval,’ which I believe is apropos in describing the aesthetic project, comes originally from Martin Heidegger and is quoted in W. Norris Clarke, S.J. The One and The Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), p. 1.
11 Herrlichkeit I.35.
13 The idea of Truth and Goodness relating respectively to both the intellect and will, is to my knowledge, not made explicit in Balthasar’s work, but is instead found in W. Norris Clarke S.J., The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), p. 299. I believe however, that such a clarification (if it is not in fact explicitly present somewhere in Balthasar’s vast corpus) is important to make in this paper, as I am attempting to emphasize the subjective dimension to Balthasar’s thinking in order to present it as relevant to our contemporary context. Furthermore, there is reason to believe that Balthasar would have accepted these categories as commensurate with his thinking, due to the fact that: 1) the traditional
and the Good form an irreducible unity, so too do the will and the intellect form a unity in the human person who theologizes.

This implies that the balance in both the subjective and objective orders are hermeneutically reciprocal; thus when one is distorted, the other will lose balance as well. This is of course a real problem on the plane of conceptual theology, but it carries with it other, more serious ramifications; for concepts condition our experiences and interpretations of events, inform our understanding of right and wrong, facilitate or impede spiritual discernment; and on the plane of history, concepts have been the cause of wars. This issue is therefore not a mere methodological problem; it is a spiritual one, and it implies serious consequences.

The Aesthetics

Balthasar’s proposed solution to this problem amounts to a rediscovery of another transcendental notion which encompasses \textit{ipsa natura} the True and the Good in harmony, namely Beauty. As a transcendental, Beauty is unique in that it encompasses the Good and the True but is not reducible to either one of them.\footnote{W. Norris Clarke in fact views transcendental Beauty as a “synthesis” of all other transcendentals; \textit{cf. The One and the Many}, p. 299.}

In his use of the Beautiful in his approach to revelation, Balthasar attempts to construct an aesthetics that is rooted in an ontology informed by revelation itself. By applying the categories of theological aesthetics, he attempts to articulate a heuristic grammar of interpretation which helps to maintain the balance between the True and the Good as it is revealed in Scripture and especially the life of Christ.

Before proceeding, it is important to lay out some of the metaphysical starting points that Balthasar assumes in this endeavor; for only then will it be possible for the implications of his aesthetics to come into view.

First, it is significant that Balthasar uses the Thomistic vocabulary of \textit{form} when talking about the concept of the Beautiful. While understood foremost as a manifestation of intelligible mystery, the concept of Beauty for

\footnote{I am indebted to Philip Cary for inciting me to think about the important interplay between concepts, experiences and actions. See: Philip Cary, \textit{Augustine’s Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist}, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 142.}
Balthasar is never spoken of apart from the concept of the *form*.\(^{16}\) As such, Beauty is inextricably linked to that which draws together and harmonizes lower materials.

As inextricably united to *form*, transcendental Beauty always reveals itself as a whole and not in its isolated parts alone or behind it in any way. To be otherwise would contradict the very notion of *form* as a unitive principle.\(^{17}\) This is a key point in regard to how Balthasar’s method might be used for scriptural interpretation, for it implies that there is a certain irreducible unity to the message of scripture that cannot be taken apart in the final analysis. While there is undoubtedly a subjective dimension to *form* and its reception, the *form* bears within itself its own unifying principles in-dependently\(^{18}\) of anything external to it.\(^{19}\) The canon of scripture is thus in some sense self-interpreting, and in this way it is a manifestation of divine freedom.\(^{20}\)

\(^{16}\) To talk about the same concept, Balthasar also employs the related terms *Gestalt* and *Bild*. He often uses these latter in connection to his theology of the senses which attempt to articulate the recipient nature of the human person. In particular, they are often employed when Balthasar wants to emphasize the priority of “spiritual seeing” instead of more passive dimensions. The term *form* (or *forma*) on the other hand, is the more versatile term which Balthasar employs more frequently. For my current purposes, I am interested in showing the deep subjective dimension that Balthasar’s aesthetic method has to offer our postmodern context. I am not interested in trying to fully flesh this out (e.g. discussing what Balthasar calls the “Marian dimension” of the Christian faith, or his doctrine of the spiritual senses); for entering into such details arguably goes beyond the aims of a paper which intends to strictly analyze methodology, and would furthermore inhibit the applicability of Balthasar’s method to the widest number of contexts. Thus while admitting the importance of these other terms for Balthasar’s overall project, I have chosen to limit myself to only speaking of *form* within the confines of this essay.

\(^{17}\) *Herrlichkeit* I.23

\(^{18}\) My use of hyphenation here is an attempt to emphasize the *form’s* sovereignty over lower particulars; but it is also an attempt not to imply that the *form* presents itself, as it were, in a vacuum. One could instantly cry foul here by saying that Balthasar ignores the subject as active in the interpretive process. But such is in fact not the case, because of the concept of the communication of the form to the subject and the transformation this entails—an event which might be described as an encounter of freedom with freedom. When this notion is considered, it becomes evident that the interpreting subject is not passive in the hermeneutical process, but neither is she totally active. Refer to note 22, for more on this point.

\(^{20}\) See Rowan Williams’ article, “Balthasar and Rahner,” in *The Analogy of Beauty*, J. Riches, ed., (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd., 1986), p. 13-14. Although the issue of freedom is somewhat peripheral to a paper which attempts to isolate Balthasar’s aesthetic method, it is fundamental to the theologian’s thinking, and being so, it is a good concept to consider when trying to assess the importance of his aesthetic approach in relation to the rest of his thought. Specifically, when Balthasar speaks of the Father’s *Verbum* as a manifestation of freedom, two notions are implied: one the one hand, Scripture is envisioned as an unprecedented event which, by its very nature, draws one to loving obedience. In this way, Balthasar stresses the sovereignty of God in relation to the free creatures, but also (and this is a key balancing point) the human person’s fundamental freedom in this relation. On the other hand, Balthasar wants to stress that the manifestation of the Word is an encounter of freedom with freedom, whereby the logoi of finite freedoms are invited into the limitless Freedom of the Father’s Word. The notion of the *form* as self-interpreting without prior-determination is a key juncture point between Balthasar’s Theological Aesthetics and his Theo-Dramatics, and reveals some of the thinkers most central concerns. For a concise statement of this
subjectively recognizing this that the form manifests itself as such and thereby reveals its theophanic dimension. What this means for biblical interpretation is that any method which one employs in understanding the scriptures must in some way draw from and return to the form which governs the canon as a whole. This implies that modern methods which break up the unity of scripture for analysis must yield their results in the end to the form of Scripture in order to serve their purpose.

By this point in my exposition, some might object that Balthasar is simply imposing a metanarrative or philosophical lens over and above Scripture, and thus provides nothing new to the current discussion. Balthasar would reply however that he is instead trying to develop a grammar for interpreting scripture that uses the categories of scripture itself as its operative principles. In terms of what has been said so far, Christ provides the primary category that Balthasar uses in his aesthetics. Christ is the called the Ur-Bild or proto-form of all revelation by which all lesser forms are ordered and toward which they point. And as Christ is revealed to us as the Logos of creation, the notion of a theological aesthetics should not preclude the use of natural philosophy, so long as that philosophy is in-formed by revelation.

Yet is the application of so philosophically charged a term as form admissible? Is this not taking the very highest principle of Scripture, and overlaying it with a notion which originally comes from Aristotle? I believe that this is a problem that is worth exploring, for it will provide an occasion to show just how much the term may be able to facilitate us in thinking about a fundamentally Christian experience in connection to the question of interpretation.

To begin, it is first necessary to consider the issue of the interplay between revelation and human thinking; for the way this question is answered will help to assess the category’s use as a tool for understanding revelation, and hence also Balthasar’s entire aesthetic endeavor. To explore this issue, it must be posited first of all that for Christians, revelation is an excepted fact and an integral part of our tradition. The very word revelation also implies something significant in the discussion here, namely, the fact that it ultimately does not originate within our sphere. In this way, it is a manifestation of the Other on the

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21 Herrlichkeit I.117
22 Herrlichkeit I. 28-30
23 Balthasar in fact uses the term “transfiguration” (Verklärung) when speaking of philosophy’s change once informed by revelation (Herrlichkeit I.109-110). Another issue that arises at this point of convergence between philosophy and revelation for Balthasar is the issue of analogy of being, which is somewhat beyond the scope of this paper, but important for understanding his overall project. For a brief overview of this question see Edward T. Oakes, Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, (New York: Continuum, 1994), p. 15-44.
Other’s terms – and implies the idea of a relational faith and hence also a certain authority. If one therefore desires to accept the notion of revelation as an important and indeed privileged type of information about God, then one must accept it precisely as such in an unqualified manner. Revelation therefore, is necessarily something which always comes from without. But this does not mean that one cannot or should not allow for the appropriate nuances when attempting to understand how it is mediated or received.

Indeed, this is precisely where the issue of form comes in for Balthasar. And it is a key issue for him; for if one does not theologize about the way by which revelation is communicated, then one cannot avoid the dilemma of understanding its meaning in a one-sided manner (e.g. ‘purely objective’ in the fundamentalist sense, or in a totally subjective manner). It might be possible to think of Balthasar’s entire aesthetic program as an attempt to preserve the objective sovereignty of revelation while concomitantly emphasizing the radically contextual dimension of its operation in the world. It is only in this latter sense in fact that revelation is available to theological scrutiny, but as it was shown above in regard to the meaning of the term revelation – both the objective and subjective dimensions must be held. Form then for Balthasar, is not a concept which tries to encompass the divine and nor is it an auxiliary principle which attempts to connect revelation to an autonomous philosophy.

Instead, form bespeaks the horizon of two subjects. In approaching this issue, it might help to recall that form was earlier described as something

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24 By complementing the term ‘relational’ to ‘faith,’ I here want to distinguish the type of faith I am talking about from a mere belief in the truth of something. Rather, I want to stress the similarity of this type of faith to what one means when speaking of faith in another person within the context of a relationship.

25 Herrlichkeit I.28

26 Balthasar in fact devotes many pages specifically to this subject in his chapter, “Die Vermittlung der Gestalt” in Herrlichkeit I.506-581, and also in, “Wort, Schrift, Tradition,” in Skizzen zur Theologie, I, p. 11-27. For the purposes of this paper however, much of what Balthasar says in this chapter will have to be bracketed out of the discussion, because much of it depends too closely on Roman Catholic ecclesial experience. This is not to say that I could or should attempt to bracket out all ecclesial-theological issues which bear upon Balthasar’s theological aesthetics. But in trying to present Balthasar’s method as a way forward in scriptural interpretation, I want to stress as much as possible the common theological doctrines and experiences that his view shares with mainline Christians and not those which would appear foreign to many. While attempting to define this ‘shared view’ in a precise manner would fall outside of the scope of this paper and is arguably beyond the competence of any one person, allow me to say for the sake of openness that I am roughly setting my conceptual limits at the first seven ecumenical councils. As the reader continues, some theological issues which may not be encountered readily in Scripture (e.g. the Trinity) will enter into the periphery of my discussion and it will then become somewhat clearer why I have felt the need to make this clarification.

27 Herrlichkeit I.506-523

which draws together and harmonizes lower materials. Form is thus an irreducible notion of relationality; and indeed, as something that is active and transformative, one might say that the concept of form is both an event and an encounter. In regard to the res to which the term form refers, it is thus neither completely noun nor verb, nor does it have only to do with divine agency. In sum, it is important to notice that there are two active subjects in this picture, and hence also two freedoms.

Thus when Christ is called the form of Scripture, it is not intended to mean that He is this form independent of any viewer, as if the text were inspired in se ipso. When Balthasar speaks of form, he speaks of the appearance of the Logos to free creatures. It is an interpersonal event whereby one subject encounters and transforms another who receives him in a personal, i.e., free manner.

In trying to flesh out this very difficult issue, it would be helpful to give a more subjective description to this picture. If one recalls what was said earlier about the transcendentals, Beauty was considered a sort of synthesis of Goodness and Truth. In connection to what might be called the ‘horizon of encounter’ that has been described so far regarding form, these transcendentals refer to the Divine side, but they are only presented to the human side as attributes of created being. This being case, they function precisely as pointers toward the Divine. The human side of this horizon (being, of course, created in coherence with this schema) corresponds to this picture with Will and Intellect together in response to iconic Beauty. The two horizons thus converge in an interpretive interchange which might best be spoken of as a sort of perichoresis. I think W. T. Dickens aptly describes the tenor of this aesthetic harmony when he explains that “[b]eauty urges us to give up our desire to domesticate and master it. It asks us simply to enjoy it for what it is, rather than for what benefits it might provide.”

Indeed if one recalls what was said about revelation implying a certain personal faith and authority, this abstract picture of form begins to take on an even more personal-relational hue. For especially in regard to Scripture, what is given is given precisely as revelation and in this way, it is an invitation to a relational faith and hope. The manifestation of the form is therefore an event of total relationality and personal freedom. In this event the human is lifted up and transfigured within the Logos (presented as form), in such a way that she...

30 Herrlichkeit 1.506
32 Above, p. 27-8.
33 The personalist dimension to Balthasar’s thinking shoots through all of his works, but in regard to the way it is being spoken of here, one can find very clear parallels in his book, Wenn ihr nicht werdet wie dieses Kind, (Ostfildern, Germany: Schwabenverlag), 1988.
begins to mirror the mission oriented relationality of the form itself.³⁴ The issue of the interpretation of Scripture is thus inseparable from the reality of encounter, the trans-formation of the human person, and the carrying out of the Christian call in the whole of one’s life.³⁵

Fundamentally therefore, theological aesthetics has to do with both appreciating and maintaining the conditions for the possibility of this hermeneutical encounter. As this depends on a proper balance between the Good and the True not only in a conceptual way but also in the context of life, one’s encounter with Christ—especially via the Bible, becomes the primary touchstone for scriptural interpretation within a theological aesthetic framework. Moreover, as this encounter is transformative in such a way that the human subject comes to participate in and mirror the fundamentally evangelistic relationality of the form itself, neither can scriptural interpretation completely ignore its kerygmatic and ecclesiological dimensions.³⁶ When Balthasar’s theological aesthetics are applied to the interpretation of scripture then, the exegete’s task amounts to something like that of the art critic,³⁷ whose goal is to facilitate the admirer in contemplation of the form; and this can include facts and principles which do not come from within the canon proper, but they are used to build up the form, not to explain it away or get behind it.

³⁴ A key quote from the introduction to the first volume of Balthasar’s Herrlichkeit reveals this unity well: “…Aber in dieser wertlosen Offenheit liegt vielleicht doch, für einige wenigstens, der Weg wieder freier zur Urgestalt, die nicht Form unter Formen ist, sondern Form identisch mit Dasein, Form jenseits von offen und geschlossen (weil sie und sie allein beides umfängt), Form sogar jenseits von Autonomie und Heteronomie, weil sie Gott und Mensch in einer unvorstellbaren Intimität verbindet” (Herrlichkeit I.23). The Trinitarian implications of this statement are clear and it is important to note that such issues are always in the background to Balthasar’s theological aesthetics. Whether Balthasar’s method can be employed without overt or operative Trinitarian underpinnings is an arguable point which cannot be dealt with here; but it is an important issue; and even (or perhaps especially) if the answer were to be in the negative, the fruits of such a discussion would likely be of great profit to exegetes.

³⁵ Herrlichkeit 1.26

³⁶ Although I have deliberately tried to bracket out the ecclesiological dimension to Balthasar’s understanding of Scripture from this paper, I think one of its aspects is worth briefly noting. Specifically, I think that what might be called the ‘unitive’ dimension of the form in connection to humanity is extremely important when speaking of the Scriptures. For Balthasar envisions Christ’s presence in a primarily ecclesial-eucharistic manner. Consequently, the form of Scripture is not to be understood only in a way which refers to Christ and the person who reads, as if building up this form were a mere individual endeavor. Instead, the form of Scripture is to be encountered within the form which encounters the Church. Although in Balthasar’s case, this occurs within a Roman Catholic context, I suspect that the contextual implications which perspective offers could raise some healthy questions for academic theologians and exegetes in scholarly and ecumenical contexts.

A Way Forward

Recalling what was said earlier in regard to the importance of balancing the True and the Good, it is possible to see that Balthasar’s theological aesthetics can do much to move current scriptural interpretation in a positive direction. For along with helping to maintain a necessary balance between two dimensions of reality, an aesthetic approach enjoys the conceptual capacity to deal with the inescapable reciprocity of the subjective and objective orders.\(^{38}\) This is perhaps the most relevant characteristic of Balthasar’s contribution in regard to our postmodern context, for theological aesthetics give heed to the inescapable dimension of subjectivity in the interpretive act. For along with raising a host of problems with regard to having any sort of ‘common language’ in biblical interpretation, postmodernity is also the common thread binding biblical exegesis and philosophical hermeneutics together. A theory, therefore, which allows for plurality but also points in the direction of a common experiential form of encounter, ought have much to say in today’s context. For the adoption of a theological aesthetic method as a major language of biblical hermeneutics does not mean that other interpretive schools have to cease. On the contrary, it should mean that these more targeted types of interpretations can become more easily assimilated into a harmonious whole. In addition, assuming a sort of shared grammar of scriptural interpretation will help to provide a common framework by which these other interpretations could be measured. This is arguably also the case concerning the practice of ethics and systematic theology when these disciplines are brought to bear on revelation. Thus while allowing for a legitimate plurality in an academic context, a common language of critique has the potential to greatly enrich the way scholarship conducts itself. Admittedly, this all implies some type of shared experience or perhaps a shared ecclesial context; but this is not necessarily a bad thing to talk about, for discussions of this sort are often necessary to have in academic contexts, where identity can be an important question.

To conclude then, this paper has discussed the both the background to the our contemporary context, as well as the contribution which Balthasar’s aesthetic method offers to our situation. The theological aesthetics has been presented as a possible way forward by virtue of the importance it places on a balanced stance toward the True and the Good in the order of reality, as well as the subjective and objective dimensions to the interpretive act. Moreover, this act was seen to revolve around a free and personal encounter with Christ. In this connection, it has been shown that Balthasar’s approach allows one to dialogue with the contemporary world while at the same time maintaining one’s Christological center. Thus while not necessarily providing answers to all

\(^{38}\) Jason Bourgeois’ work on this subject represents one fascinating attempt to bring Balthasar’s ideas into dialogue with secular hermeneutics; cf. “A comparison of the aesthetic approach of Gadamer and Balthasar,” Josephum Journal of Theology, 12.1 (Win-Spr. 2005) p. 110-119.
problems which may arise in scriptural interpretation, this method provides us with a balanced way to approach these issues; and in this respect, it presents a real way forward in today’s discussion.