

## Christian Identity: from Word to Action

Riga, 15 March 2014

And in years to come, as once before,  
He shall speak, in a human word,  
on a beautiful day, the God, the Ghost,  
who speechlessly works and prepares unknown future things.

Friedrich Hölderlin: *Encouragement*

A voice that cries in the desert<sup>1</sup> is a strange, perhaps even a disturbing idea. After all, in the desert there is nobody to listen to the words that are being spoken. The desert in the world of the Bible was more of an ugly place, full of demons and temptations. In that place of silence and solitude one would rather expect a cry for help than the announcement that help is on its way. Still, when this voice breaks through the everyday logic of ordinary life, the voice of a prophet is being heard: we are addressed by divine proposition.

But how then may we answer this call? How do we get from word to action in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? These are the questions that will be examined in this article. First, by looking at virtuous silence. Second, by examining contemplation and action as necessary complements to the Christian experience. Third, by postulating a dynamic notion of the human person. Virtuous silence and contemplation and action are being discussed with the help of two articles by the Swiss theologian and Roman Catholic priest Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988), while the call for a more dynamic notion of the human person is linked to a general appreciation of post-conciliar theology.<sup>2</sup>

### Word and silence

Language is truly something fascinating. Words are efficient devices, when it comes to motivating people: words may be used to encourage, to show love or to console. Words are the power tools, with which we try to create order in the world we live in. There is something really creative to words: they simultaneously express and fashion reality. Words enlighten, teach, define, limit or simply call someone or something by its name.

In the same time, this has to be clear from the outset, words are being used by fallible human beings and as a result all language is somehow at odds with reality. The words do not match and there never seems to be enough of them. First of all, because reality is so overwhelmingly vast and complex: there is too much of it and it is impossible to even begin to summarise its essence in just a few words or lines. Second, words refer to the real world but they are distinct of reality, they are not reality itself. Third, words may lose their accuracy and persuasiveness as time goes by. In short, the world of words in which we live is a web of meanings, which are dying, being reborn, reincarnated and freshly found.

In his essay "Word and Silence", which originally appeared in 1946, Hans Urs von Balthasar argues that *In all religions there exists a too much of words and a fascination with silence*. It is a feature common to the world religions. Indeed, the longing to escape the endless recycling process of words is closely connected to the religious desire to find an ultimate resting point outside our mutable world. This is the wish to silence all human desires, to escape all earthly limitations and to make a step beyond reality and beyond the world of words.

Already during our lifetime, we make first steps towards the ultimate, towards God. Perhaps, this adventure starts (and ends) with a simple, heartfelt prayer, but that simple prayer may well be the beginning of a more and more intense life of meditation and with God.

The final goal of this desire is known to us only by metaphors: green pastures, still waters, a house with many rooms, otherworldliness, annihilation, nothingness, salvation, *visio beatifica*, the eternal fountain of love. For that reason, it doesn't come as a surprise that Von Balthasar draws the reader's attention to the so-called *negative* or *apophatic theology*. The starting point of this negative theology is the clear embarrassment with words or, to be more precise, with their inadequacy. Negative theology wants to understand God by cleansing the mind of what God is not, which is an endless process of elimination, because, ultimately, every human word falls short to describe the greatness of the transcendent God. Its aim is, in a way, to create a subtle silence.

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 40:3, Matthew 3:3, Mark 1:3 Luke 3:4 and John 1:23.

<sup>2</sup> *Wort und Schweigen* (Word and Silence) and *Aktion und Kontemplation* (Action and Contemplation) in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Verbum Caro. Skizzen zur Theologie* I, Einsiedeln 1960, pp. 135-155 and 245-259.

In some of the world religions, however, someone may become completely detached from the world and even from the words. Once a certain level of enlightenment is attained, even religious teachings become superfluous. In Christianity this fascination with silence is different. In the paradoxical words of Von Balthasar: *A Christian may experience quite the opposite: the boredom of positivity*. Instead of gradually leaving an illusory and changeable world behind (doctrine included), Protestants and Catholics alike are *glued to words and facts* (for example: bible, tradition, church history), *without ever being able to separate themselves from them*. The impossibility to say goodbye to word and fact constitutes our boredom or uneasiness. We have to take account of what has been handed over to us through the ages. We cannot go beyond.

Von Balthasar gives the example of the resurrection, as it is commonly understood. This concept contains a fair deal of permanence and continuity, he explains. Our earthly body, to start with, will not be cast away. On the contrary, we will be dressed with a second dress. We will live in new houses in a city, where the streets are not paved with cobblestones but with gold. In short, the silence of Christianity, Von Balthasar explains, is not one of nothingness or of emptiness. Unlike Buddhists, for example, the self, the soul of a Christian does not eclipse. It does not enter Nirvana, the abyss of non-identity. Not in this world, not thereafter.

But then, Von Balthasar asks himself, if this is all true, how could Christianity ever satisfy the religious desire of its believers for silence? And, furthermore, isn't it true that Christ and his message killed the letter, making it obsolete? The Swiss theologian points out an essential difference between Christianity and other world religions. Christianity, he argues, distinguishes between the many words on the one hand and the Word – with a capital “W” – on the other. In fact, the divine becomes known to us through the Word. With other world religions, Christianity shares the insight that there are not enough words to grasp the divine, but this does not mean that they have become superfluous.

*The Spirit gives life*, Von Balthasar writes. And this is *the Spirit, the Spirit of God himself, who makes use of an alphabet of divine revelation*. This is *the Word of God*. Von Balthasar compares divine revelation with the poet who captures what cannot be said in ordinary language and with the mystic whose words express a silence, which is the silence of God.

With examples from Saint Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 100), Von Balthasar contends that being silent is a religious virtue. Christ the Word left the silence of the Father behind him and appeared in human history. And we believers, Saint Ignatius says, need to be silent to be able to listen. And the more we remain silent, the better the Spirit or the Word, which is Love, will become active.

### **Action and contemplation**

In his essay “Action and contemplation”, Von Balthasar discusses the way in which action and contemplation correlate. He explains how the right appreciation of these two concepts was compromised by the early Christian *bricolage* of Judeo-Christian tradition with a specific Hellenistic philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, Von Balthasar carefully removes the Greek interpretations, which created a clear contradiction between action, on the one hand, and contemplation, on the other. Thus, Von Balthasar uncovers a truly Christian understanding of these words.

Our guide from Switzerland very much insists on how Greek philosophy inspired the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). Accordingly, Saint Thomas drew a clear line between action and contemplation. The love of God, Thomas Aquinas wrote, is part of the contemplative life, but the love of man in charity is a part of the active life. Of course, this first love he regarded as something of a higher quality than the love of the apostolic life.

Thomas made this distinction because of the sinfulness of man and of the world after the fall of Adam and Eve. All human activity was potentially sinful and might draw man away from the contemplative life and God. In the end, Von Balthasar concludes, Thomas Aquinas viewed human self-sufficiency of the eremitical, solitary kind as the most secure Christian way of life.

Acknowledging the genius of Saint Thomas, and rightly so, Von Balthasar insists that the teachings of the *Doctor Angelicus* also contain elements of a less dialectical approach. Actually, Thomas Aquinas was well aware of the fact that contemplation is not merely a passive acceptance of God (Augustine), but an activity in the same time. Contemplation is a goal oriented movement of man towards God (Aristotle) in the same time. And because of this active orientation towards God, contemplation cannot be reduced to something purely intellectual. The will plays a role in this as well.

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<sup>3</sup> An example from Plato (427-347) springs to mind. The Greek philosopher divided men into three groups. (1) The leader of the city state (the famous philosopher-king), who had a soul of gold. He would deal with the *eternal world of ideas*. (2) Soldiers who defended the city had souls made of silver, because of their *virtuous courage*. (3) However, the majority of the men occupied themselves with the *material world*. Their soul was of bronze or iron. Women, children and slaves do not figure on Plato's list.

The truth that is revealed in the act of contemplation must become real as is shown by the Gospel according to Saint John, Von Balthasar explains. Saint John is not implying that mere contemplation suffices, quite the contrary. The Fourth Evangelist very much insists on truth to become active: *He who does the truth.*<sup>4</sup> This, too, is the essence of Saint Augustine's notion of *facere veritatem* (doing or making truth), Von Balthasar writes.<sup>5</sup> Thus, contemplation takes action as its necessary consequence, while action needs contemplation to direct it to the target. Action is by no means detrimental to contemplation, but leads to its fulfilment. This is best illustrated by the examples from the life of Christ, not by philosophical concepts.

### **In the world, not of the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – some question marks**

Silence, solitude, separation from ordinary society and inaction became important aspects of the early Christian lifestyle. This stood in contrast with the world of the Old Testament, but was strengthened by the idea that the end of time was near and encouraged by Stoicism and Neo-Platonic philosophy.

Like Stoicism, Christianity embraced the idea of an inner freedom within man, who, in spite of the corruption and uncertainties of the material world, was not entirely wicked. With Neo-Platonism, Christians affirmed that the spiritual, divine world was more real than the material world. Man emanated from God (creation) and had to redirect himself towards God. Man's soul was locked up in a disposable earthly body, which made the soul suffer because it was in contact with the corrupted world. Body and world – Christians argued – were contaminated with original sin and needed to be harnessed.

Consequently, a strict and ascetic lifestyle was being propagated. Believers had to fight off evil, earthly passions and emotions so that nobler, heavenly passions and emotions could grow. By focussing entirely on the divine, the believer would escape from the material world and qualify for the heavenly afterlife. Christians were in the world, yet not of the world.

A believer had to discipline herself so that she would fit a predefined set of religious, moral, philosophical and social duties, rights and obligations. The tighter the fit, the more someone earned the title of a good worker, citizen, neighbour, mother husband, child and believer. Disorderly, on the contrary, was the desire to break free from this pre-established order. Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this static and introverted image of a person prevailed in Western society. The future, one might say, was oriented towards man's interior, towards his origins and towards what tradition prescribed as useful and valuable.<sup>6</sup>

In *On true religion*, Saint Augustine, for example, points at the immaterial soul as a place of truth, of the divine, of God: *Do not go outward; return within yourself. In the inward man dwells the truth.*<sup>7</sup>

This is a strong contrast with the prevailing attitudes among westerners today. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, outwardness, originality and creativity prevail: in lifestyles, in life projects, in how we look at ourselves, at the social world, at our ideas of ultimate truth and, finally, of God. The important questions of life are not so much *Who am I?* and *How do I fit in?* but rather *What is my share of the action?* and *How can I adjust the world to my needs?* Often, modern man seems to be detached from tradition oriented introspection.

Here lays a great challenge for the Christian Churches of today. The Roman Catholic Church took up this challenge at the second Vatican council (1962-1965). The council fathers rediscovered the world as a site where positive meaning can be found. Furthermore, they reevaluated the call to perfection of all different states of life: all believers, without exceptions, are called to read the signs of the times in the light of faith. From this time, the question is: How can the Christian Churches reconcile their tradition oriented approach with the many life options of the modern day world in a more dynamic and holistic way?

Or, in other the words of Von Balthasar: how can silence reign in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so that the Word can work? How can contemplation lead to decisive and fruitful action in a world, which appears more and more varied and heterogeneous?

### **A kind of conclusion**

Silence – reflection, meditation, mysticism... – is necessary for the Word with a capital "W" to do its work. But how can we hear the Word in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

The words and the Word need silence to be heard. And that what is heard needs to become an active force in our lives. For this reason it is safe to assume that a prayer can never be really strong, if there is no appropriate action that follows. Action may well be something as simple as a gesture of loving kindness

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<sup>4</sup> John 3:21.

<sup>5</sup> Augustinus, *In evangelium loannis*, tractatus XII 13.

<sup>6</sup> In the introduction of *Wahrheit und Methode* (Truth and Method), Hans-Georg Gadamer refers to the notion of *Bildung* (becoming and projecting an image), which prevailed from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Bildung* has its roots in the mediaeval mystical tradition: man had to cultivate himself to become more and more Godlike.

<sup>7</sup> Augustinus, *De vera religione*, XXIX 72.

towards a fellow person, but less spontaneous and more thoughtful as well, for example pastoral or even political engagement.

The process of moving from silence/Word to action, however, is more than just reproducing standard patterns. It is also a work of creativity, originality and appropriation as was shown in Von Balthasar's attempt at deconstructing ancient Greek philosophy. Warning us not to become trapped in black and white schemes, Von Balthasar invites us to search for the right, Christian meaning of traditional concepts (words/Word, action/contemplation). Philosophical tradition suggests oppositions (A = good excluding B = bad) while, from a biblical and patristic perspective interconnection seems the case (A runs over into B and B into A). The same goes for the idea of being in the world and not of the world. Man may become angel like, but hardly ever an angel.

Merely copy-pasting concepts, methods, models and practices from the past would mean that eventually tradition would become dry rock. Yet, without tradition to point believers in the right direction, the necessary inspiration of Love would remain absent and the new would inevitably lack permanence.

But there is more. If it is true that from and in silence we hear the Word, which is Love, we must become instruments of this divine Love ourselves. This means we need to be open to the good: in our world, in our fellow man and in ourselves, before even thinking of trying to distinguish black from white and the many shades of grey in between.<sup>8</sup> Obviously, Love, which we have come to know through the Word itself, must be the central focus of our spiritual life, so that Love becomes manifest in the words we whisper and even more in our actions.

There are also consequences for example for how we look at Church itself and at the many ways in which people shape their lives. It is sometimes amazing to see, how casually and how pretentiously sinfulness is attributed to those who are outside of the Church, while in reality, Church can never be about sinners on the one hand and morally untainted believers on the other. Irrespective of how hard we Christians try to be different from other people, we remain sinners (on a daily basis).

The same holds true of the way we look at something controversial but very important as the values of Europe. Modern-day Europe is a fragile man-made structure that is almost 70 years old. Europe is fraught with contradiction and imperfection and as such, it has incorporated its fair share of original sin. Nevertheless, as Christians we should care for Europe. The reason is relatively easy to understand. If the Holy Land was the birthplace of Christianity, Europe is where Christianity grew into adulthood. And because Christianity came of age in Europe, the sins of Europe somehow mirror the sins of church organisations and individual church members. Here too, there cannot be an absolute division between good and bad, between Church and world.

Meanwhile, we must not fear. We must carefully read the signs of the time: first we hear the Word in silence, but then we need to decide how to let the Word do its work. In the process we become co-workers in, through and of Love.

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<sup>8</sup> Seen from a Christian's perspective such a judgment would reveal that good and bad seeds grow up together.