

And there is better to come. Taylor seems to work with a different view of unfolding salvation history and eschatology than Calvin. Taylor helpfully corrects misappropriation of Calvin in one way, but pushes beyond Calvin in another.

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Todd Walatka, *Von Balthasar and the Option for the Poor: Theodramatics in the Light of Liberation Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2017), pp. xii + 249. \$69.95.

Todd Walatka's *Von Balthasar and the Option for the Poor* offers a novel, not to say surprising, take on von Balthasar. He begins by recognising the significance of von Balthasar's theology for the development of Catholic theology following the Second Vatican Council, and then identifies the emergence of liberation theology (and the 'preferential option for the poor') as one of the key themes to emerge after the Council. Walatka acknowledges that in von Balthasar's major work, his 15-volume trilogy centred on the theodramatics, he initially offers an unsympathetic ('rather chilly') response to liberation theologians. However, his case is that to take von Balthasar's theology seriously, in particular his stated aim in the *Theo-Drama* to 'do justice to concrete Christian existence in its personal, social, and political dimensions', requires first a more generous reading of liberation theology and then to extend the range of the *Theo-Drama* so that it becomes a 'truly liberating theodramatics'.

This is what Walatka sets out to do. His first three chapters seek to summarise von Balthasar's basic philosophical and theological commitments, dealing in turn with his philosophical anthropology, his reading of liberation theology and then the fundamental affirmations and structure of his aesthetics and theodramatics. Key to this third chapter are what Walatka identifies as 'key, structural points of commonality' (p. 19) between von Balthasar and liberation theologians, particularly in his focus on the concrete form of God's revelation in Jesus Christ and the influence of Ignatian spirituality on his understanding of mission and role in the life of the church.

Walatka suggests that 'Balthasar's theodramatics would be more adequate on its own terms if his account of theodramatic tensions between God and humanity and within humanity were more attentive to the oppressive disparity between rich and poor, the suffering of the poor and vulnerable,

and saintly acts of solidarity on behalf of the poor' (p. 101). This is the task he undertakes in his second three chapters, in which he focuses first on the christological centre of von Balthasar's theodramatics, then the theological anthropology of mission deriving from this and finally on his ecclesiology, as 'the mission of the Church takes place in a world marked by social inequality and violence, and, far from being natural realities or an unchangeable part of the stage, oppressive structures must be recognised as theodramatic realities that oppose God's gift of life', so that 'the mission of the Church demands a communal option for the poor that resists such structures' (p. 20).

Walatka argues that von Balthasar makes 'two fundamental commitments' which enable the option for the poor to shape his theology in a more significant way than his words suggest; the first is 'his theological aesthetics', especially 'his insistence on the importance of the particularity of Christ and the disposition of receptivity for discerning the truth of God's revelation', and the second is 'the Christology and anthropology of mission at the center of his theodramatics, particularly their Ignatian character' (pp. 170–1). He suggests that what prevents von Balthasar from doing this is his fear that liberation theology is dependent on a 'promethean' view of history, one which comes 'too close to modern utopian thought' and tends accordingly 'to reduce salvation to social and political liberation and diminish the distinction between earthly progress and eschatological salvation' (p. 63).

Given von Balthasar's experience of twentieth-century totalitarianism, we can perhaps understand why he should be cautious of such claims. However, this also raises the issue as to how far his vision of the kingdom of God actually engages with human history. Given his focus on the interpersonal aspects of Christian discipleship, which Walatka suggests is at the expense of addressing those structural and societal forces which are also part of human experience, the question remains 'does his overall view of history ultimately undermine transformative Christian action?' (p. 196).

Interestingly, this is precisely the challenge which von Balthasar himself addressed to Karl Barth, when in his 1951 study he raised the concern of 'christological constriction' or 'narrowing', the challenge that since all things have been done in Christ, there was no longer any space left for a meaningful human response. Von Balthasar's response then was to advocate a theology in which 'redemption comes to us respecting our incarnate lives in time' as 'God takes our decisions seriously, working them into his plans by his holy providence' (*The Theology of Karl Barth*, p. 378). It seems to this reader that Walatka's work returns to this same issue – and suggests that

if the church is indeed to be a 'Sacrament of salvation' playing its part in the great theodrama as von Balthasar intends, then it needs to respond to precisely those issues raised by liberation theologians. Walatka's case is that von Balthasar's writings stop short of where his theology rightly leads him – and it's a case clearly and powerfully made in this insightful study.

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Bruce McLennan, *McCheyne's Dundee* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), pp. vii + 183. \$20.00.

As the title indicates, this volume covers two distinct but closely related themes: social conditions in Dundee in the 1830s, and the religious revival associated with the ministry of Robert Murray McCheyne in the city's St Peter's parish during these same years. The first part draws on some contemporary documents relating to the local history of Dundee, and the resulting picture is a sombre one. The Victorians may have prided themselves on being 'people of the Book', but the Book had little influence on industrial and commercial practices. Wages in the city's linen and jute industries were low, bread was dear, housing was scarce, rents were high and working conditions grim. Jobs in mill and factory went to women and children because they cost less, the resulting role-reversal left many men with little to do apart from drinking and brawling, and the lives of generations of youngsters were blighted by atrociously long working hours. It is hardly surprising that many never reached the age of 20.

Overtaken by the mass displacements of the Industrial Revolution, the church was overwhelmed. The impossibly large size of parishes, the shortage of church buildings, seat-rents which placed the pews beyond the reach of the poor, the laid-back attitude of many of the clergy, all combined to ensure that the urban poor quickly dropped below the church's radar. Patronage, too, had played its part, McCheyne going so far as to claim that it had cursed the nation's pulpits with 'dumb dogs'. But, then, his own attitude was hardly above criticism. 'The lower orders are very well in their way,' he once wrote, 'but should be kept in their place.'

It was into this situation, well described by McLennan, that McCheyne was inducted in November 1836. He faced a daunting task. St Peter's was a new charge, erected within the historical parish of St John's, and its managers defined very bluntly what they expected of their first minister: he