

## Actualism and Beauty: Karl Barth's Insistence on the *Auch* in his Account of Divine Beauty

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### Abstract

Hans Urs von Balthasar claimed that Barth's *Church Dogmatics* demonstrates a weakening of his distinctive actualism in order to make space for 'the concept of authentic objective form', a point illustrated by the discourse on divine beauty in *CD II/1*. There Barth treats the divine being as an objective form to be contemplated, a seeming departure from Barth's privileged conceptualisation of God as personal subject whose free action humbles our theoretical gaze and graciously provides the material content for proper speech about God. Bruce McCormack has challenged von Balthasar's general thesis, arguing that no weakening has in fact taken place in the *Church Dogmatics*. If this is the case, what then of Barth's discourse on divine beauty? Is it consistent with his actualistic doctrine of God? Is it possible to speak of God both as a free, dynamic event and an object of beauty? Can theological aesthetics find a home within Barth's actualism? This article answers in the affirmative by demonstrating the systematic integrity between Barth's claims about divine beauty and the actualism permeating *CD II/1*. First, the article examines the ambiguity of Barth's specific claims about divine beauty. Barth is both enthusiastic and hesitant in speaking about divine beauty, affirming the concept yet placing careful qualifications on its use. Next, the article illustrates how the nature of these claims is anticipated by the actualism of *CD II/1*, specifically by (1) Barth's clear rejection of divine formlessness, (2) his argument that God's act of self-revelation in Jesus Christ implies an objective triune form for God's being and, lastly, (3) how he grounds discourse on divine beauty in the event of God's dynamic, free love. The article finally contends that the key to Barth's puzzling position on divine beauty is in understanding the precise reason why he registers beauty as a necessary but insufficient theological concept. This qualification is rooted in an important content-form, spirit-nature distinction which frames all discussion about God's being-in-act. Throughout *CD II/1*, objective form is a necessary condition for divine self-expression, but objectivity is always grounded in the freedom of the Spirit. Thus, the freedom-to-love at the heart of God's triune existence is the ground of our experience of God as beautiful, not any continuity with our contemplation of created forms. As such, the creative freedom animating God's triune life provides

the space for, but also the limit to, theological aesthetics by imbuing divine beauty in mystery.

**Keywords:** actualism, Barth, beauty, doctrine of God, theological aesthetics, von Balthasar.

Two of the most historic theological achievements within the pages of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics II/1*<sup>1</sup> are the definition of God's being as a 'being-in-act' and the claim, nestled within his account of the divine 'glory' (*Herrlichkeit*) at the conclusion of the divine perfections, that 'God is beautiful'. In §28.1, Barth's 'motif of actualism',<sup>2</sup> as George Hunsinger describes it, reaches its most formal expression in Barth's rejection of all abstract doctrines of God on the material basis that 'God is who He is in the act of revelation'.<sup>3</sup> In §31.3, as Hans Urs von Balthasar has rightly emphasised, Barth achieves a discourse on the beauty of God hitherto unheard of in Continental Protestant theology. However, the relation of these two achievements arouses the suspicion of a reader like von Balthasar. Is Barth's actualism, which deals in the 'language of occurrence, happening, event, history, decisions, and act',<sup>4</sup> really fit for robust discussion about beauty with its related conceptual universe of form, image, desire and contemplation? Where Barth's dominant emphasis is on how the divine light causes our eyes to see the glory of God through a miraculous event which creates sight in place of blindness, his several glimpses into the beauty of God potentially suggest that our poverty-stricken sight is reinvigorated and rehabilitated via attraction to and delight in the beauty of God's light. As such, glory is conceived in less eventful terms and more as a revealed state of affairs, the divine 'act' is now one masterful work of divine art which solicits and calls for our continual contemplation.

Suspensions of a fundamental tension are heightened by the fact that Barth qualifies his claims about divine beauty with a carefully weighted *auch* (also) expressing Barth's view that beauty is a necessary yet insufficient concept in Christian theological description of the being of God. The implicit suggestion of von Balthasar is that the introduction of this *auch* is an attempt to contain a systemic leak in the train of Barth's thought, but the damage is already done insofar as the discourse of divine beauty provides *prima facie* evidence and

<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, trans. T. H. L. Parker et al., ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (London: T&T Clark, 1957). When appropriate, the original German from *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, II/1 (Zollikon-Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag A.G., 1946) will also be cited.

<sup>2</sup> George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth* (New York: OUP, 1991), p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, p. 257.

<sup>4</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read*, p. 30.

support of the thesis that Barth's later theology is undergoing a 'conversion' from 'dialectic' to 'analogy'.<sup>5</sup> Applying this analysis to Barth's section on beauty, von Balthasar charges that, 'in order to give such a theological aesthetics a home within his own theology, Barth himself had to cut his actualism back sufficiently to make room alongside it for the concept of authentic objective form'.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, the validity of von Balthasar's paradigm of a fundamental shift in Barth's theology has been forcefully challenged, but this leaves Barth's treatment of divine beauty as an outstanding question mark. This article attempts to weave together what von Balthasar perceived as loose ends by illustrating the high compatibility of Barth's actualistic account of God's being with a concept of 'authentic objective form'. After examining the ambiguities of Barth's specific claims about divine beauty, this article will then illustrate how these claims are anticipated in his actualism as it (1) rejects accounts of divine formlessness, (2) necessitates an objective triune form for God's being and, lastly, (3) grounds discourse on divine beauty in the event of God's dynamic, free love. Arguably Barth's greatest contribution to theological aesthetics, and what stills von Balthasar's criticisms, is his claim that the triune nature of God is the true *Geheimnis* – in its double meaning of both 'mystery' and 'secret' – of God's beauty.

### Karl Barth on the Glory and Beauty of God

For Barth, the concept 'beauty' functions to clarify the meaning of the glory of God. 'God's glory is God Himself in the truth and capacity and act in which He makes Himself known as God.'<sup>7</sup> The verb *kundgeben* (to declare; announce; express; make known) does heavy lifting here. The glory of God is the being of God in its perfect *Selbstkundgebung* (self-declaration).

God's glory is first a declaration of the 'truth' of God's very self or essence.<sup>8</sup> This intentional association of divine essence and glory exemplifies how Barth's motif of actualism governs his account of the divine being in two basic ways. Epistemologically, the divine act of revelation is a qualitatively complete expression of the true divine being, so it counts as authentic

<sup>5</sup> For von Balthasar's 'conversion' thesis, cf. *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), pp. 86–167. Originally published in 1951 by Verlag Jakob Hegner.

<sup>6</sup> Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, ed. J. Fessio SJ and J. Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), p. 56. Originally published in 1961 by Johannes Verlag.

<sup>7</sup> CD II/1, p. 641.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 643.

self-declaration. Further, in a stronger ontological sense, all the perfections of the divine being are epitomised in this act of self-declaration. God's glory, as Barth defines it, literally implies that God's being is only in the dynamic event (or act) of self-declaration. There is no being of God that is not declaring itself in this concrete way.

Next, Barth argues that God possesses the capacity and power effectively to declare this truth. Employing the metaphor that God is both the source and radiance of light, Barth claims that the truth of God's essence 'reaches all other beings and permeates them',<sup>9</sup> communicating God's very face in the process. Further, this light effectively creates self-recognition as it vivifies and illuminates that which was once darkness-in-itself so that the existence of darkened creation is redetermined as 'expressions of infinite exultation in the depth of His divine being'.<sup>10</sup> Barth's actualism and its dialectical frame are again in view: the glory of God is the power of God's self-declaration to span the distance ('the infinite qualitative difference') from the depth of God to the depth of all that is not-God in an act which is at once revealing, reconciling and redeeming.

Barth's third consideration is an inquiry into the act (*der Akt*) of this self-declaration. Some modest speculation on Barth's word-choice here is perhaps invited. Why did Barth not define this third aspect of the divine glory as *der Tat* of God's self-declaration, the word which dominates his discussion in §28.1? While *Tat* with its semantic relation to the verb *tun* primarily connotes an accomplished deed, an 'event', the semantic range of *Akt* includes both 'ceremonial act' and 'sexual act'.<sup>11</sup> *Akt* apparently connotes the more formal and sensuous dimensions of an action in distinction to an action's fact and goal. The apostle Paul's very sensuous image of the glory of God in the new covenant as a 'triumphal procession in Christ' which 'spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him' (2 Cor 2:14) may be framing Barth's theological imagination here. Glory is a declarative act with a specific shape and movement, one which awakens taste and fills the senses. And so Barth initiates this section with the question, 'What is the thing revealed in the divine revelation and what is the nature and form of its revealing?'<sup>12</sup> The new and leading terms in this section are *Gestalt* (build, figure, form) and *Form* (form, shape).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 646.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 648.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. respective citations in M. Clark and O. Thyen (eds), *Concise Oxford-Duden German Dictionary*, 3rd edn (Oxford: OUP, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> CD II/1, p. 649.

Barth immediately anticipates criticisms with this line of inquiry, namely, whether this question is a speculative encroachment upon God trying to get behind the fact that God efficiently creates recognition of God's self to the question of how God's glory proceeds and accomplishes this. Barth offers two justifications. First, if God is *really*, truly and completely 'light' and effectively communicates the truth about God's very essence, would not a stop here – 'a blind spot in our knowledge'<sup>13</sup> – presume then a dark cavern in God's being which is inaccessible to us? A God who hides in darkness would finally only be capable of a self-declaration which is 'a mere object – without shape or form'.<sup>14</sup> But God's act of self-declaration, the revelation of the face of Jesus Christ, is true knowledge of the 'face' of God, so it must be affirmed that this divine light has contour, outline and shape. Barth's second justification for inquiring into the form of this light is because light is conceptually distinct from power. Is God's creation of self-recognition solely a matter of the omnipotence of God which 'persuades and convinces by ruling, mastering and subduing with . . . utterly superior force'?<sup>15</sup> Barth's intuition is that the convincing and persuading power – what he will describe as the joyful or evangelical element – of God's glorious light is more than brute power. The lord–servant relation does not exhaust the reality of God's self-relation and relation with creatures. While God is certainly the Lord of God's own being and the Lord of creation, these are at once textured and affective relations of love, that of Father and Son, lover and beloved. So what is it that makes God worthy of love? Why do Father and Son enjoy one another's fellowship? Why does the beloved desire and take pleasure in the presence of her lover?

With the validity of this question established, Barth reaches for an answer which is radical against the background of Reformed Protestantism: 'we can and must say that God is beautiful'.<sup>16</sup> True to Barth's form, after introducing a concept, he soon offers a more robust and controlling definition:

It is to say that God has this superior force, this power of attraction, which speaks for itself, which wins and conquers, in the fact that He is beautiful, divinely beautiful, beautiful in His own way, in a way that is His alone, beautiful as the unattainable primal beauty, yet really beautiful . . . He has it as a fact and power in such a way that He acts as the One who gives pleasure, creates desire and rewards with enjoyment. And He does

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 650.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

it because He is the One who is pleasant, desirable, full of enjoyment . . . God loves us as the One who is worthy of love as God. This is what we mean when we say that God is beautiful.<sup>17</sup>

God's beauty is the reason for his 'power of attraction', an attraction reiterated by Barth's descriptive refrain: 'gives pleasure, creates desire, and rewards with enjoyment'. God is not beautiful because we naturally desire and perceive God as such, but because this is 'a fact' of God's being and the mode of God's glory-in-action. Beauty is wholly objective, grounded in God's self, and true in God alone.

Like all concepts, Barth's treatment of beauty is dialectical, but it contains an extra layer of complexity as Barth insists on qualifying his claims here with an *auch*. The English translation provides the proper emphasis: 'we use the cautious expression that God is "also" beautiful, beautiful in His love and freedom, beautiful in His essence as God'.<sup>18</sup> The rationale for this *auch* requires clarification, as it easily goes unnoticed, lost in the excitement of the profundity of Barth's claims. On the one hand, he expresses the usual precautions attendant upon theological concept-use: beauty is a particularly 'secular' concept;<sup>19</sup> the concept is not of 'independent significance' in the Bible;<sup>20</sup> it may bring us too close to 'the sphere of [human] oversight and control'.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, Barth's insistence on the concept of divine beauty is truly adamant. There is no reason to maintain the 'tragic' Protestant attitude towards beauty based on an over-emphasis of sin and the consequent capacity for idolatry since, as just argued, God's light has efficiently overcome our blindness, graciously healing our eyes and enabling proper recognition of God. The affirmation of divine beauty is *necessary* if God's self-declaration not only calls for 'awe, gratitude, wonder, submission and obedience', but also has and solicits joy.<sup>22</sup>

However, Barth now swings the pendulum back in the direction of conceptual caution. While divine beauty is a necessary affirmation of faith, it can *only* be utilised as an explanation of God's glory and thus must remain on the level of 'only a subordinate and auxiliary idea'.<sup>23</sup> This refusal to make

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 650–1.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 655.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 651.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 653.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 651.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 655.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 652.

beauty a leading concept is based on an important ‘form’ and ‘content’ distinction invoked here regarding the divine glory. The ‘substance’ and ‘content’ of glory are God’s self in the fullness of the perfections; the ‘form’ and ‘figure’ are the beauty of God’s self.<sup>24</sup> In brief, this is how Barth specifies their relation: form and content cannot be divided so that God’s form can be described abstractly from the content of the divine being. Rather, form is necessary to the content. God’s perfect form is the ‘radiating outwards’ of the perfection of God’s content.<sup>25</sup> In his discussion of the Trinity, Barth finally says: ‘it is the content of the divine being which *creates* (*verschafft*) the particular form of the divine being’.<sup>26</sup> Barth’s specific ‘form’ and ‘content’ distinction and arrangement is not without precedent in the history of aesthetics and evidences a hint of Romanticist influence where form is primarily expressive, pointing beyond itself to a higher, infinite depth. Von Balthasar provides some historical perspective on Barth’s configuration:

The appearance of the form, as revelation of the depths, is an indissoluble union of two things. It is the real presence of the depths, of the whole of reality, and it is a real pointing beyond itself to these depths. In different periods of intellectual history, to be sure, one or the other of these aspects may be emphasized: on the one hand, classical perfection (*Vollendung*: the form which contains the depths), on the other, Romantic boundlessness, infinity (*Unendlichkeit*: the form that transcends itself by pointing beyond to the depths) . . . We see form as the splendour, as the glory of Being. We are ‘enraptured’ by our contemplation of these depths and are ‘transported’ to them. But, so long as we are dealing with the beautiful, this never happens in such a way that we leave the (horizontal) form behind us in order to plunge (vertically) into the naked depths.<sup>27</sup>

This more expressivist content/form relation of God’s glory orders and prioritises our modes of theological knowing. The beauty of God as God’s perfect form is a reality which is felt and ‘perceived rather than discussed’.<sup>28</sup> The theologian’s affections are filled with and motivated by joy in response to the beauty of her object, but her intellectual and theoretical attention remains focused on the deeper content, the ‘depths’ of the divine essence.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 654.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 659.

<sup>26</sup> Emphasis mine. *Ibid.*, p. 666; KD II/1, p. 745.

<sup>27</sup> Von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1, pp. 118–19.

<sup>28</sup> CD II/1, p. 657.

While this beautiful element is deeply felt, it can only be pointed at in theology rather than expounded. Aesthetics remains a theological subsidiary at best: 'But again, and above all, reflection and discussion of the aesthetics of theology can hardly be counted a legitimate and certainly not a necessary task of theology.'<sup>29</sup>

With these strictures, Barth still proceeds to offer three glimpses and examples where we perceive the beauty of God: (1) the *perfect form of the divine perfections*; (2) the *concrete form of the triune being of God*; and (3) the *incarnation*. The presence of this section is indicative of what Barth calls 'the border-line character of this whole subject'<sup>30</sup> and emblematic of the fault line to which von Balthasar will draw attention. Is Barth resisting his own dogmatic reservations by describing beauty here? While desiring to maintain the priority of 'content' over 'form', can Barth not keep himself from intellectually indulging in the delightful form of God? What must be noticed at this juncture is that all three of these descriptions of divine beauty eventually *deconstruct* themselves, exemplifying how theology perceives yet fails theoretically to grasp the beauty of God. Contemplation of the form only serves to redirect our attention to the infinite depths of God's being and its irreducible living, dynamic and free character.

First, Barth describes the internally differentiated simplicity of the divine essence, the fullness of the perfections in their 'unity of identity and non-identity, of movement and peace' which incites joy while simultaneously 'bursting through every system and relativizing from the very first the surveys we try to make'.<sup>31</sup> Second, Barth turns his attention to the Trinity, which again exemplifies how the being of God is a being-in-act: the perfections only have such perfect unity as the 'concrete' act of differentiation-in-simplicity of the triune being of God.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the authentic harmony and proportion glimpsed in the perfect form of the divine perfections can be designated even further as triune form. However, the fact that God's being-in-act has a triune figure and shape does *not* make the form of God any more theoretically graspable. Barth can only revert to dialectical patterns of description as he tries to articulate the beautiful surface of the Trinity's 'perichoretic' relations.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 657–8.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 659.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 660: 'without pre-eminence or subordination but not without succession and order, yet without any jeopardizing or annulment of the real life of the Godhead'. This nicely fits into von Balthasar's description of Barth's use of dialectical: 'Thus the methodological contradiction becomes a pointer to God, who contains within himself



Barth concludes, 'To this extent the triunity of God is the secret (*das Geheimnis*) of His beauty'.<sup>34</sup> Here, the sexual connotations of the Akt of God's self-declaration provide a metaphorical aid. The form and shape of the other are intimately given in a manner which awakens and creates desire, pleasure and enjoyment in the beloved, but it is not a givenness that makes the other any more theoretically transparent. While really known and given as an object to be felt and described, God remains personal mystery in the thick sensuality of encounter.

Barth finally turns to a consideration of the beauty of 'the unity of God's majesty and condescension'<sup>35</sup> in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. This union of God with humanity, and the great transposition and exchange within, is accomplished seamlessly in Jesus Christ 'without tension, dialectic, paradox, or contradiction'.<sup>36</sup> Again, the dialectical pattern of Chalcedon is the best theoretical description we can manage of this beauty.<sup>37</sup> While the incarnation is the specific act of God which serves as the sole epistemic point of access to all discussion of the beauty of the divine perfections and triunity<sup>38</sup> and nothing less than the height of God's glory, the ground for this act is the triunity of God. As such, Barth enforces his claim that the Trinity is *das Geheimnis* (mystery, secret) of God's beauty, its inner ground and source:

God is so much One, and simple, and at peace with Himself, that He is capable of this condescension. This estrangement, this union with a stranger, is not strange to Him. It is not just natural to Him. But the fact that He becomes man is the confirmation and exemplification of His unity, the work of the unity of the Father with the Son and of the Son with the Father, and therefore the work of the one divine being.<sup>39</sup>

The miraculous unity-in-difference of the incarnation is always carefully described under the rubric of a 'confirmation and exemplification' of God's eternal act of triune existence. The incarnation *images* the actuality that God's triune being is not self-enclosed, but is capable of and free for fellowship.

no insoluble paradox or logical contradiction, even in the mystery of his trinitarian nature. God is a mystery, not a paradox' (*The Theology of Karl Barth*, p. 78).

<sup>34</sup> CD II/1, p. 661; KD II/1, p. 745.

<sup>35</sup> CD II/1, p. 665.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 663.

<sup>37</sup> 'He is One and yet another, but One again even as this other, without confusion or alteration, yet also without separation or division' (*ibid.*, p. 664).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 662.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

The unique triune existence of God, which might be described as the ontological basis for the First Commandment, is linked here to the Second Commandment. According to Barth, the prohibition of graven images is because God 'resolved' to give himself an image in Jesus Christ and 'the face of Jesus Christ alone' can speak 'at the same time of the human suffering of the true God and the divine glory of the true man'.<sup>40</sup> The beautiful image of God revealed – confirmed, exemplified and imaged – in Jesus Christ does not lead to a theology of the icon, a blanket affirmation of the capacity of creaturely form to mediate God's mysterious beauty.<sup>41</sup> Rather, the particularity of Jesus Christ signifies the limit of all icons as any kind of artistic attempt to represent the beauty of Christ (i.e. his seamless unity-in-difference) leads either to a God not fully suffering or a human not fully glorified. The very sublimity of this act of self-declaration again leads to mystery:

In this self-declaration, however, God's beauty embraces death as well as life, fear as well as joy, what we might call the ugly as well as what we might call the beautiful. It reveals itself and wills to be known on the road from the one to the other, in the turning from the self-humiliation of God for the benefit of man to the exaltation of man by God and to God. This turning is *the mystery of the name of Jesus Christ* and of the glory revealed in this name . . . *There is no other face of this kind.*<sup>42</sup>

Again, while the incarnation exemplifies the divine form of God, and is the very breaking-in of this form within the human world of forms, the mystery of the form of God is not in any way lessened. It remains completely unique in kind as a beauty which seamlessly and dialectically assumes and transforms human perceptions of 'beauty' and 'ugliness'. No other human form – name, face, etc. – can ever express, represent or capture without serious distortion the dialectical unity of cross and resurrection which is the beauty of God in Jesus Christ.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 666.

<sup>41</sup> David Bentley Hart is representative here of one who draws a general principle of analogy from the incarnation: 'For Christian thought there lies between idolatry and the ethical abolition of all images the icon, which redeems and liberates the visible, and of which the exemplar is the incarnate Word: an infinite that shows itself in finite form without ceasing to be infinite – indeed, revealing its infinity most perfectly thereby' (*The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 15).

<sup>42</sup> Emphasis mine. CD II/1, p. 665.

Hans Urs von Balthasar's Interpretation of Barth on Divine Beauty<sup>43</sup>

The above exposition of divine beauty reflects the imprint of Barth's actualism, but in the switch from the event of *der Tat* to the more sensuous encounter of *der Akt*, the drift from describing God's light as powerfully spanning the distance between God and creature to its description as a 'power of attraction', has Barth initiated a shift? Typically, Barth's actualistic theology presumes an infinite qualitative difference between God and created, sinful humanity, one which is only spanned by the gracious 'act' of God. This event is accomplished in spite of human nature, hidden to human capacities. For von Balthasar, Barth's shift in language entails a weakening of this actualism. Now the 'act' which establishes relationship between God and humanity appears to function precisely by awakening a capacity for desire, providing us with an *Anblick* (vision) *des inneren Lebens Gottes*,<sup>44</sup> a vision which attracts us and draws us into fellowship with God. For von Balthasar, a theology cannot achieve a principled emphasis on divine act and divine form simultaneously. Indeed, he traces the roots of Protestantism's anti-aestheticism to Luther's own actualism where 'the event of redemption . . . , the very act whereby the Redeemer . . . enters into the very heart of sin . . . , could not and must not be allowed to gain any breadth or permanence in the world'.<sup>45</sup> For von Balthasar, affirming 'authentic objective form' requires givenness and openness on the part of the object to 'tranquil, attentive contemplation'.<sup>46</sup> Thus, Barth's 'theology of active relations',<sup>47</sup> as long as it retains a foot in Luther's actualistic impulses, cannot engage a meaningful discourse about the objective, enduring and lasting form of God without stilling and firmly planting the divine act enough to let it take root in the soil of this world.

For von Balthasar, Barth's daring indulgence in 'contemplation' of the divine form is thus hermeneutically supportive and symbolic of his basic

<sup>43</sup> Von Balthasar exegetes Barth's section on beauty in *Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form*, pp. 53–7, and vol. 7, *Theology: The New Covenant*, trans. Brian McNeil and ed. John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), pp. 21–4, of his magisterial theological aesthetics. Barth's section on divine beauty arguably remains their greatest point of contact as Fergus Kerr has suggested that 'it is not absurd to see Balthasar's magnificent attempt, in *Herrlichkeit*, to expound a theology centred on the glory of God, as an extension of Barth's reflections on the beauty of God in *Church Dogmatics* . . . in effect, *Herrlichkeit* is a slow, patient and much more elaborate working out of Barth's conception of the divine beauty' ('Foreword: Assessing this "Giddy Synthesis"', in L. Gardner, D. Moss, B. Quash and G. Ward (eds), *Balthasar at the End of Modernity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), pp. 9–10).

<sup>44</sup> KD II/1, p. 746.

<sup>45</sup> Von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1, p. 57.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>47</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read*, p. 30.

paradigm for interpreting Barth in the midst of a theological, and thus methodological, shift.

In addition [to cutting his actualism back for the sake of authentic objective form], it was perhaps necessary to let the first stage of Barth's thought die away – a phase whose inner form lay in the overpowering and uncompromising rhetoric of Luther and the Reformation with its emphasis on the scandal and offence of the Gospel – in order to await the second stage, which as interior form attained the tranquil, attentive contemplation (*theoria*) of revelation which from volume to volume of the *Dogmatics* increasingly withdraws from polemics and concentrates its efforts on making positive statements.<sup>48</sup>

Even if one rejects von Balthasar's 'conversion' thesis,<sup>49</sup> it is certainly true that Barth has matured from his language in the *Romans* commentary of describing the act of revelation as 'the crater made at the percussion point of an exploding shell'.<sup>50</sup> According to Bruce McCormack, by the time of *KD II*, 'the act of revelation which Barth had in view was no longer the series of revelation-events in which God gives Himself to be known to us here and now, but the act of revelation in which all of these subsequent revelation-events are grounded',<sup>51</sup> the act of Jesus Christ's incarnation and the outpouring of his Spirit. The question that von Balthasar presses is to what extent has Barth stabilised God's act of self-declaration? Insofar as God has stabilised it in one historically narratable act, the history of Jesus Christ, has this act ceased to be a pure 'event' and become more of an eternal reality fixed for contemplation?

Bruce McCormack, in his careful reading, warns that Barth's christocentrism is not intended at the expense of his actualism.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, in §28.1, where Barth articulates this actualism stabilised and centred in the divine act in Jesus Christ, God's being-in-act remains an event whereby God freely constitutes the divine being: 'God exists in His act. God is His own decision.'<sup>53</sup> Is there any systematic integrity between Barth's unyielding actualism and his discourse on the perfection of the divine form? Unfortunately, von Balthasar's interpretation never lets us discover an

<sup>48</sup> Von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1, p. 56.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

<sup>50</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th edn, trans. Edwyn Hoskyns (London: OUP, 1933), p. 29.

<sup>51</sup> McCormack, *Barth's Dialectical Theology*, p. 461.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 459.

<sup>53</sup> *CD II/1*, p. 272.

answer to this as he isolates the beauty section from its original context<sup>54</sup> and seeks to reap Barth's exposition for its positive contribution to his project of theological aesthetics – 'the feasibility' of a so-called 'genuine relationship between theological beauty and the beauty of the world'<sup>55</sup> – without recognising the patient and intentional development of a conceptual place for divine form within Barth's actualism.

### Barth's Rejection of Divine Formlessness

Barth's epistemological course is always a direct, non-speculative move from the actuality of what God has done to the possibilities of the divine being.<sup>56</sup> The critical force of this pathway is first to militate against all concepts 'formulated without reference to the nexus of active relations in which God and humanity have their respective modes of being'.<sup>57</sup> Divine formlessness, which will be exemplified here in the Eastern Orthodox theology of Gregory Palamas (1296–1359), is one such abstraction. Interestingly, this abstraction comes within the context of an otherwise act-orientated account of divine light.

Notwithstanding its heightening of traditional Eastern apophaticism, the Palamite's theology earned a reputation as a 'theology of facts' insofar as he stressed the literal, 'factual and nonsymbolic character of such phenomena as the light of Mount Tabor'.<sup>58</sup> His reading of the transfiguration approximates a kind of actualism: either this act of outshining is a revelation of the true light of God or it is an illusion. If true light of God, then this light must be an uncreated, eternal light, which is his very characterisation of the divine activity or energies.<sup>59</sup> Palamas thus makes the connection that the event of this outshining, this true divine activity which illuminates and transforms figure, is a vision of the divine beauty:

the chosen disciples saw the essential and eternal beauty of God on Thabor . . . not the glory of God which derives from creatures, as you think, but

<sup>54</sup> 'Such initial steps [toward a theological aesthetics] find their full form in Karl Barth's isolated treatise on God's glory and (therein) his beauty' (von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, vol. 7, p. 21). 'Isolated treatise' is potentially misleading, hiding the fact that Barth's claims about glory and beauty are systematically prepared for and thus anticipated throughout CD II/1.

<sup>55</sup> Von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1, p. 80.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. CD II/1, p. 5.

<sup>57</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read*, p. 32.

<sup>58</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 2, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 263. My account of Palamas relies upon Pelikan's acute exposition.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 266.

the superluminous splendour of the beauty of the Archetype; the very formless form of the divine loveliness, which deifies man and makes him worthy of personal converse with God.<sup>60</sup>

The subtle introduction of the 'formless' arises not from Palamas' factual orientation, but belies his other major operative theological commitment, divine apophaticism. Eastern apophaticism, in Palamas' hands, was no simple nod towards epistemic humility, but had an ontological basis in divine transcendence where the 'utter unknowability [of the divine *ousia*] was a positive fact and a religious dynamic'.<sup>61</sup> But how did the disciples see the 'essential and eternal beauty of God' if the divine *ousia* remains radically transcendent? The doctrine of divine actions or energies – which is synonymous with the eternal, uncreated light of revelation of the Transfiguration story – thus functions as the necessary mediator between creaturely contemplative vision and the inaccessible divine essence. This mediatorial role conditions the description of the divine light. On the one hand, as a real communication of God's essence, the energies must be described as formless, boundless and uncircumscribable. On the other hand, as communicable to creaturely reality, this light must be described as possessing form and shape with the result that the glorious light of God is paradoxically rendered as the 'very formless form of the divine loveliness'.

For Barth, the integrity of this whole schema separates the being (*Wesen*) and act (*Tat*) into 'two distinct divine spheres' threatening 'the being of God . . . to become completely formless and the form of God completely lacking in being'.<sup>62</sup> The incarnation, the divine act of assuming a particular human flesh and figure, exists solely in the sphere of divine activity, which itself guards the separate sphere of the formless divine essence. As such, the being and act of God exist in paradoxical contradiction rather than in ontological integrity. From a Barthian perspective, the Palamite theology finally surrenders its rigorous thinking of the being of God through and from the facts of divine action to a speculative account: 'The actions of God, such as grace, were divine, having neither beginning nor end. Yet they had to be different from the divine *ousia*; for as Basil had also taught, they were "varied" while the *ousia* was "simple"'.<sup>63</sup> The hierarchical arranging of divine simplicity and essence over the varied divine attributes is indicative

<sup>60</sup> Emphasis mine. From Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, as found in Gesa E. Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (London: SCM Press, 2004), p. 98.

<sup>61</sup> Pelikan, *Spirit of Eastern Christendom*, p. 265.

<sup>62</sup> CD II/1, p. 332.

<sup>63</sup> Pelikan, *Spirit of Eastern Christendom*, p. 269. In original citation, the Greek form of 'varied' and 'simple' appears.

of the nominalist tendency in theology that Barth carefully criticises in §29 on 'The Perfections of God' by arguing, again in the spirit of his actualism, that no cleavage can exist between the essential identity of the Lord – the 'height' of God's sovereign freedom – and the self-declaring glory of the Lord. As such, Barth's insistence in §29 that there is only 'the Lord of glory' (*Herrlichkeit*) is presumed throughout §30, 'The Perfections of the Divine Loving', and §31, 'The Perfections of the Divine Freedom', and then crescendos as the final perfection Barth considers is none other than God's glory (*Herrlichkeit*). For Barth, the 'glory of God' forms an *inclusio* around all discussion of the perfection of the divine being. The mystery of God's essence is not its formlessness, but the 'form' of its simultaneous simplicity (one) and multiplicity (many).

### Conceptual Necessity of Divine Beauty: The Form of God

Barth's concrete actualism therefore leads him to reject divine formlessness. The entire doctrine of God is compromised by what might be called a purely spiritual or formless account of the divine being.<sup>64</sup> If God has no nature or figure, there would be 'no inner life of God' in its triune form of Father, Son and Spirit.<sup>65</sup> In opposition to all 'spiritualised' accounts of divine formlessness, Barth articulates the following rule which governs his actualism: 'Acts happen only in the unity of spirit and nature'.<sup>66</sup> By extension, the being of the living God exists always and only in the unified acts of spirit and nature, rather than submitting to a metaphysical spirit–nature or essence–existence dualism.<sup>67</sup> The fundamental divine act of the incarnation manifests and confirms the triune form and nature of God's eternal being.

At this point, Barth's motif of actualism works in tandem with what George Hunsinger describes as the 'motif of objectivism'.<sup>68</sup> God's being-in-itself is not a Kantian noumenal reality whose phenomenal appearing is the result of the categories of space and time in the mind of the human subject. Rather, God has authentic objective form. In passages like Ephesians 3:18 and Psalm 139:5–10, Barth infers that we are dealing with 'real dimensions in God'.<sup>69</sup> In the development of the perfections of the divine freedom, especially God's omnipresence and eternity, Barth vigorously opposes negative definitions of each as abstractions and rather develops

<sup>64</sup> Cf. CD II/1, p. 267.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> As Barth argues, 'the divine being must be allowed to transcend both spirit and nature, yet also to overlap and comprehend both' (*ibid.*, p. 266).

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Hunsinger, *How to Read*, pp. 35–9.

<sup>69</sup> CD II/1, p. 469.

both concepts with a distinct sense and taste for trinitarian form. Regarding omnipresence, Barth vehemently rejects 'absolute non-spatiality',<sup>70</sup> offering this redefinition: 'God possesses space, His own space, and that just because of His spatiality, He is able to be the Triune, the Lord of everything else, and therefore the One in and over all things.'<sup>71</sup> God's dynamic triune self-relation is the condition for the possibility of omnipresence, of a self-differentiated presence.<sup>72</sup> Likewise, divine eternity is not timelessness, but a positive duration possessing beginning, present and future which Barth designates as pre-temporality, supra-temporality and post-temporality.<sup>73</sup> The simultaneity of these moments forms 'a totality without gap or rift'<sup>74</sup> while possessing an 'order and succession',<sup>75</sup> and even 'a direction which is irreversible'.<sup>76</sup> Eternity and omnipresence as such are 'the form of the divine being in its trinity'.<sup>77</sup> The unique space and time of God (i.e. the real form, shape and dimensions of God) are the necessary ontological conditions for God's triune activity 'without [which] the content of the Christian message has no shape!'<sup>78</sup> Thus, when Barth proceeds in his very next section to discuss 'the form of revelation', he is not curtailing his actualism, but is simply foregrounding this continuous argument for divine form.

The ground on which Barth can speak about a 'vision' of God's inner life is not due to the paradoxical collision of formlessness and form (i.e. formless light) which only leads to an equally paradoxical mystical 'vision' of the unknowable divine essence, but because the incarnation reveals God's eternal act to be a triune existence where God has a vision of God's very own self as an object possessing a concrete triune nature and form. 'As the triune God, God is first and foremost objective to Himself.'<sup>79</sup> What Barth calls God's 'primary objectivity'<sup>80</sup> means that, contra von Balthasar, the being of God as defined by its eternal act has an authentic objective form, a form which is contemplated and delightfully enjoyed, completely regardless of any correspondence with created nature or form. Thus, the glory of God is necessarily also beautiful.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 468.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 469.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 473.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 619.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 612.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 615.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 639.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 615.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 620.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.



### The Conceptual Insufficiency of Beauty: The Freedom of Spirit

The primary interpretative mistake is to assume that Barth's qualification, the introduction of his cautious *auch* into his account of beauty, is due to a truncated fear of aestheticism, which we might define as the principled elevation of a concern for form, including the desire for and pleasure in it, above all other concerns (e.g. epistemic, ethical, etc.).<sup>81</sup> Barth is worried about aestheticism, but only to the degree that any other concept threatens to become an idol and serve as a dominant principle.<sup>82</sup> The true reason for Barth's conceptual submission of beauty to glory has a deeper root in his precise ordering of the form and content of God's being, a relation whose material basis is Barth's explanation of the relationship of the 'spirit' and 'nature' of divine action. Divine acts, which occur in the unity of spirit and nature, do not possess a dormant or empty nature, but only exist in this precise nature as animated through 'the freedom of the spirit' (*die Freiheit des Geistes*).<sup>83</sup> By *Geist*, Barth is signifying the living, dynamic and free character of God. Divine nature (form) is the condition of possibility for God's objectivity, both primary and secondary, but this objectivity exists by and for the sake of personal relationship, the 'I-Thou' relationship God has both within God's own self and establishes with creatures in Jesus Christ. God's unique spatial and temporal dimensions, i.e. the form of Father, Son and Spirit, are unintelligible and non-existent without the dynamic, personal love which engenders the simultaneity of simplicity and multiplicity.

The freedom of God's spirit indicates that God is a self-moved, self-motivating and self-determining 'I'. God's being-in-act is at once a 'being in person' (*Sein in Person*). The freedom of God's 'spirit' is that of a knowing, willing 'I' (*Ich*), one 'which controls nature'.<sup>84</sup> To return to Hunsinger's vocabulary, here Barth's motif of objectivism manifests its intimate connection to his motif of personalism: 'Objectivism is the external basis of personalism, and personalism is the internal basis of objectivism. Objectivism is the condition which makes personalism possible,

<sup>81</sup> Richard Viladesau claims that 'Barth's reservations about theological attention to the beautiful stem from a fear of religious "aestheticism"' (*Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art* (New York: OUP, 1999), p. 28) and then cites Barth's claim in CD I/2 where Barth declares that 'the Church attitude precludes . . . the possibility of a dogmatics which thinks and speaks aesthetically', in *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), p. 841.

<sup>82</sup> 'In our discussion of the leading concepts of the Christian knowledge of God, we have seen that no single one of them is the key, and that if any one of them is claimed as such it inevitably becomes an idol.' CD II/1, p. 652.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267; KD II/1, p. 299.

<sup>84</sup> CD II/1, p. 267.

and personalism is the goal which objectivism establishes and entails.’<sup>85</sup> The triune form of God, which is the necessary condition that allows God to be a sensible object both to God’s self and to us, is for the sake of personal encounter and loving relationship. The divine dimensions are necessary for God’s self-expression to achieve objectivity, but the precise divine form has no natural necessity insofar as its occurrence is the pure event of God’s free self-determination: ‘God is His own decision’.<sup>86</sup> Nature and form serve the purposes of covenantal relationship, the intimate fellowship and communion of personal spirits (*koinonia*). With this ordering clearly in view, Barth describes the basic act of revelation, which is the ‘centre’ and epitome of all other divine action:

The whole content of the happening consists in the fact that the Word of God became flesh and that His Spirit is poured out on all flesh. In this happening the world of nature and sense is undoubtedly subordinate. It is the servant. It is the component which is not important and necessary for its own sake, but only in its relationship and form.<sup>87</sup>

This spirit–nature relation, which has conditioned Barth’s actualistic description of divine being from the beginning, is the template for Barth’s discussion of the ‘form’ and ‘content’ of the divine being in his discussion of glory. The cautious aspect of Barth’s *auch* merely reinforces this relationship, insisting that a contemplation of the ‘form of revelation’ disintegrates without constant reference to the act of the divine freedom-to-love whereby God establishes and sustains both God’s self-relation and relation with humanity. Thus, perhaps surprisingly, Barth’s insistence on the priority of ‘spirit’ or ‘content’ protects the aesthetic character of theology: attention to the spiritual dynamism of God’s freedom-to-love inevitably leads one to ‘feel’ and ‘enjoy’ the triune form of God because God’s love *always* radiates in this precise beautiful form, but attention to the form of God in anyway detached or abstracted from the content loses contact with the energy which determines this beauty, leaving one with an inert mathematical formula of ‘three-fold’ division.

### Conclusion: The Trinity as *das Geheimnis* of Divine Beauty

Hans Urs von Balthasar has a strong inkling that to speak about the ‘beauty’ of Jesus Christ requires that the infinite has firmly and visibly planted itself

<sup>85</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read*, p. 41.

<sup>86</sup> CD II/1, p. 272.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267.

(though without exhausting itself) in the soil of the finite. Thus, von Balthasar argues that beholding the form of Christ requires perceiving the form of 'a salvation-history that leads up to him' which itself 'is embedded in the context of everything created, established, and effected by Christ – the total reality constituted by his work and activity in the world. Only in this context is the form of Scripture perceivable.'<sup>88</sup> The great merit of Barth's account of divine beauty, embedded in his actualism, is to locate the perception and intelligibility of Christ's beautiful form with total reference to the doctrine of the Trinity instead. Only in the context of God's triune form is the beautiful form of the Gospel message perceived. In the face of God alone means without any need for reference to the form of creation or need 'to gain breadth and permanence in the world'. Through the face of Christ alone, we discover that the immanent activity of the triune God possesses vivid dimension and authentic objectivity within its own life. Is there a more 'authentic' or 'objective' form than this?

In regard to his Reformation roots, Barth preserves Luther's emphasis on the 'scandal' of God's radical event of justification, the great exchange accomplished in Jesus Christ, but contra Luther this 'act' is positively grounded in the objective beauty of God's inner life. The cross, in relation to all human wisdom, knowledge and appetite, signifies scandal, the absolute hiddenness of God under the sign of God's opposite. In this sense, the cross is the absolute *Geheimnis* (mystery) or hiddenness of divine beauty. But, in relation to the triune being of God, Jesus Christ on the cross is witness to the divine beauty, displaying the *Geheimnis* (secret) or depths of God's beauty as the dynamic power to achieve union with its opposite, even a stranger and enemy.

At the heart of this beauty, this 'unity of identity and non-identity', lives a dynamic energy. The simple affirmation of God in triune form – Father, Son, and Spirit – quickly becomes a boring and perplexing formula without constant reference to the intense heat of their 'perichoretic' relationship. The divine beauty draws its shape from this perichoretic dynamism at the depth of God's being. If the continual insistence of Barth that the 'content' of the Trinity *verschafft* (creates; provides) the unique triune 'form' sounds abstract, perhaps this is lessened if one recalls Barth's definition of God's freedom-to-love: 'God seeks and creates (*schafft*) fellowship.'<sup>89</sup> The priority of divine 'content' over 'form', the divine 'spirit' over 'nature' is Barth's conceptual attempt to not make 'beauty' the 'word that shall be our first'

<sup>88</sup> Emphasis mine. Von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1, p. 32.

<sup>89</sup> CD II/1, p. 257; KD II/1, p. 288.

(von Balthasar),<sup>90</sup> but instead the creative event of God's free love. And if personal freedom as such serves as the dogmatic starting-point, then beauty – delightful perception of the form of revelation – can never rise to the level of a theological system's organising principle. This does not entail God is without authentic and sensible objective form. The texture of God is real, but only felt and enjoyed as we are delivered over again and again into the mystery of God's dynamic freedom-to-love. This reality demands a spirituality that renounces all prior insistence that 'God must be beautiful', surrendering again to the freedom of the Spirit of the Lord, only to discover that, in God's actual grace in Jesus Christ, we may indeed say with all the certainty of faith, 'God is also beautiful!' Without surprise, such spiritual dynamics bring us back to Barth's approach to the knowledge of the divine reality with which CD II/1 begins: 'Its content is the existence of Him whom we must fear above all things because we may love Him above all things; who remains a mystery (*Geheimnis*) to us because He Himself has made Himself so clear and certain to us.'<sup>91</sup>

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>91</sup> CD II/1, p. 3. I am grateful for the comments of George Hunsinger on an earlier draft of this article.