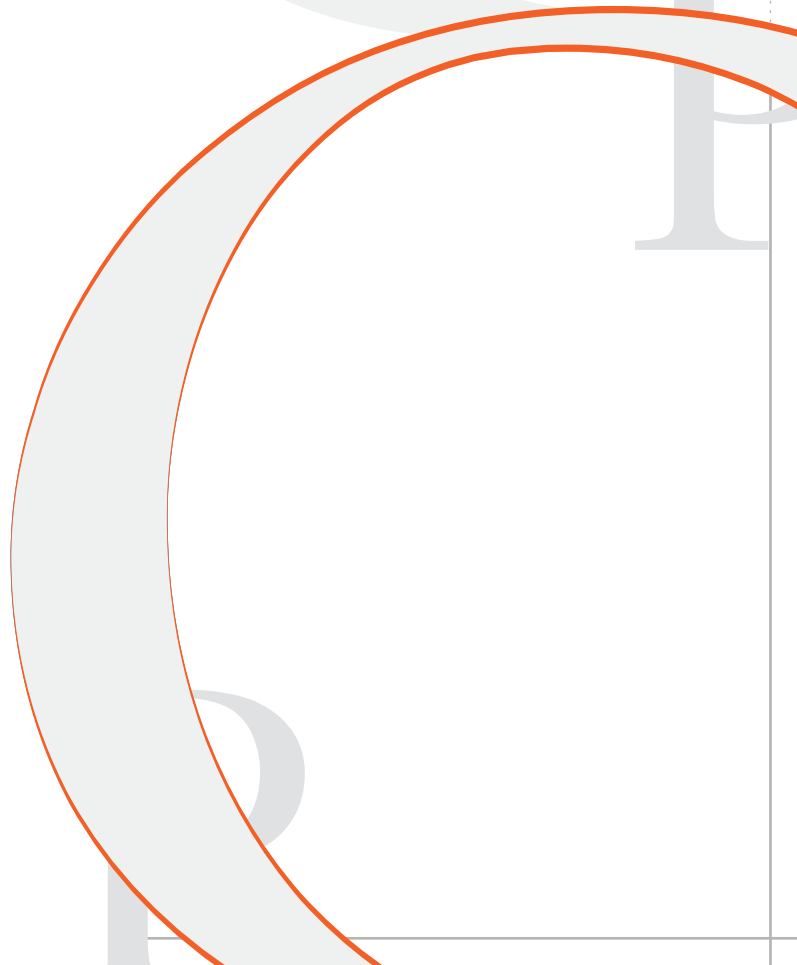


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RADICAL ORTHODOXY

Theology, Philosophy, Politics



Radical Orthodoxy:

Theology, Philosophy, Politics

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Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics

GOD, CREATION, AND EVIL: The Moral Meaning of *creatio ex nihilo*

David Bentley Hart

ROMANS 5:18-19: Ἀρα οὖν ὡς δι' ἑνὸς παραπτώματος εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους εἰς κατάκριμα, οὕτως καὶ δι' ἑνὸς δικαίωματος εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους εἰς δικαίωσιν ζωῆς· ὥσπερ γὰρ διὰ τῆς παρακοῆς τοῦ ἑνὸς ἀνθρώπου ἁμαρτωλοὶ κατεστάθησαν οἱ πολλοί, οὕτως καὶ διὰ τῆς ὑπακοῆς τοῦ ἑνὸς δίκαιοι κατασταθήσονται οἱ πολλοί.

ROMANS II: 32: συνέκλεισεν γὰρ ὁ θεὸς τοὺς πάντας εἰς ἀπειθείαν ἵνα τοὺς πάντας ἐλεήσῃ.

I CORINTHIANS 3:15: ...ζημιωθήσεται, αὐτὸς δὲ σωθήσεται, οὕτως δὲ ὡς διὰ πυρός.

I CORINTHIANS 15:22: ὥσπερ γὰρ ἐν τῷ Ἀδὰμ πάντες ἀποθνήσκουσιν, οὕτως καὶ ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ πάντες ζωοποιηθήσονται.

I CORINTHIANS 15:28: ...ἵνα ἡ ὁ θεὸς πάντα ἐν πᾶσιν.

I TIMOTHY 2:3-4: ...θεοῦ, ὅς πάντας ἀνθρώπους θέλει σωθῆναι καὶ εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν ἀληθείας ἐλθεῖν.

I TIMOTHY 4:10: ...θεῷ ζῶντι, ὅς ἐστιν σωτὴρ πάντων ἀνθρώπων, μάλιστα πιστῶν.

I.

I have to confess a certain unease with this topic. Something tells me that, treated candidly, it confronts us with a very obvious equation, of crystalline clarity, whose final result will be either all or nothing (neither

of which is a particularly tractable sum).¹ I also fear repeating arguments I have made in the past, and thereby retaining both their strengths and their deficiencies. I am especially keen to avoid arguments that rely in a very particular way upon the classical metaphysics of transcendence, to which I remain ever faithful, but which can also constitute something of an easy escape from troubling problems. The temptation, to which I have often yielded, is to invoke the ontology of ontological supereminence, or impassibility, or the eternal plenitude of the absolute (or what have you) to remind us that God *in se* is not determined by creation and that, consequently, evil does not enter into our understanding of the divine essence. All of this is true, of course, but left to itself it inexorably devolves toward half-truth, and then toward triviality—a wave of the prestidigitator's hand and Auschwitz magically vanishes. And so I should prefer here to address the other side of that metaphysical picture: the unavoidable conclusion that, precisely because God and creation are ontologically distinct in the manner of the absolute and the contingent, they are morally indiscernible.

The first theological insight I learned from Gregory of Nyssa—and I suspect the last to which I shall cling when all others fall away—is that the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is not merely a cosmological or metaphysical claim, but also an eschatological claim about the world's relation to God, and hence a moral claim about the nature of God in himself. In the end of all things is their beginning, and only from the perspective of the end can one know what they are, why they have been made, and who the God is who has called them forth from nothingness. And in Gregory's thought, with an integrity found only also in Origen and Maximus, protology and eschatology are a single science, a single revelation disclosed in the God-man. There is no profounder meditation on the meaning of creation than Gregory's eschatological treatise *On the Soul and*

¹ This piece was originally written for presentation at the *Creatio ex Nihilo* conference at the University of Notre Dame (July 2015).

Resurrection, and no more brilliantly realized eschatological vision than his *On the Making of Humanity*. For him, clearly, one can say that the cosmos has been truly created only when it reaches its consummation in “the union of all things with the first good,” and that humanity has truly been created only when all human beings, united in the living body of Christ, become at last that “Godlike thing” that is “humankind according to the image.”

My topic, though, is not Gregory’s theology, but only the principle that the doctrine of creation constitutes an assertion regarding the eternal *identity* of God. It is chiefly an affirmation of God’s absolute dispositive liberty in all his acts: the absence of any external restraint upon or necessity behind every decision of his will. And, while one must avoid the pathetic anthropomorphism of imagining God’s decision to create as an arbitrary choice made after deliberation among options, one must still affirm that it is *free*, that creation can add nothing to God, that God’s being is not dependent on the world’s, and that the only necessity in the divine act of creation is the impossibility of any hindrance upon God’s expression of his goodness. Yet, paradoxically perhaps, this means that the moral destiny of creation and the moral nature of God are absolutely inseparable. For, as the transcendent Good beyond all beings, he is the transcendental end of any action of any rational nature; and then, obviously, the end toward which God acts must be his own goodness: he who is the beginning and end of all things. And this eternal teleology, viewed from the vantage of history, is a cosmic eschatology. As an eternal act, creation’s term is the divine nature; within the orientation of time, its term is a “final judgment.” No matter how great the autonomy one grants the realm of secondary causes, two things are certain. First, as God’s act of creation is free, constrained by neither necessity nor ignorance, all contingent ends are intentionally enfolded within his decision. And, second, precisely because God in himself is absolute, “absolved” of every pathos of the contingent, his moral “venture” in creating is infinite. For all causes are logically

reducible to their first cause; this is no more than a logical truism, and it does not matter whether one construes the relation between primary and secondary causality as one of total determinism or utter indeterminacy, for in either case all "consequents" are—either as actualities or merely as possibilities—contingent upon their primordial "antecedent," apart from which could not exist. Moreover, the rationale—the definition—of a first cause is the final cause that prompts it; and so if that first cause is an infinitely free act emerging from an infinite wisdom, all those consequents are intentionally entailed—again, either as actualities or as possibilities—within that first act; and so the final end to which that act tends is its *whole* moral truth. The traditional ontological definition of evil as a *privatio boni* is not merely a logically necessary metaphysical axiom about the transcendental structure of being, but also an assertion that when we say "God is good" we are speaking of him not only relative to his creation, but (however apophatically) as he is in himself; for in every sense being *is* act, and God—in his simplicity and infinite freedom—*is* what he does.

II.

Between the ontology of *creatio ex nihilo* and that of emanation, after all, there really is no metaphysical difference—unless by the latter we mean a kind of gross material efflux of the divine substance into lesser substances (but of course no one, except perhaps John Milton, ever believed in such a thing). In either case, all that exists comes from one divine source, and subsists by the grace of impartation and the labor of participation: an economy of donation and dependency, supereminence and individuation, actuality and potentiality. God goes forth in all beings and in all beings returns to himself—as, moreover, an expression not of God's dialectical struggle with some recalcitrant exteriority, but of an inexhaustible power wholly possessed by the divine in peaceful liberty. All

the doctrine of creation adds is an assurance that in this divine outpouring there is no element of the “irrational”: something purely spontaneous, or organic, or even mechanical, beyond the power of God’s rational freedom. But then it also means that within the story of creation, viewed from its final cause, there can be no residue of the pardonably tragic, no irrecoverable or irreconcilable remainder left at the end of the tale; for, if there were, this too God would have done, as a price freely assumed in creating. This is simply the logic of the truly absolute. Hegel, for instance, saw the great slaughter-bench of history as a tragic inevitability of the Idea’s odyssey toward *Geist* through the far countries of finite negation; for him, the merely particular—say, the isolated man whose death is, from the vantage of the all, no more consequential than the harvesting of a head of cabbage—is simply the smoke that rises from the sacrifice. But the story *we* tell, of creation as God’s sovereign act of love, leaves no room for an ultimate distinction between the universal truth of reason and the moral meaning of the particular—nor, indeed, for a distinction between the moral meaning of the particular and the moral nature of God. Precisely because God does not determine himself in creation—because there is no dialectical necessity binding him to time or chaos, no need to forge his identity in the fires of history—in creating he reveals himself truly. Thus every evil that time comprises, natural or moral—a worthless distinction, really, since human nature is a natural phenomenon—is an arraignment of God’s goodness: every death of a child, every chance calamity, every act of malice; everything diseased, thwarted, pitiless, purposeless, or cruel; and, until the end of all things, no answer has been given. Precisely because creation is not a theogony, all of it is theophany. It would be impious, I suppose, to suggest that, in his final divine judgment of creatures, God will judge himself; but one *must* hold that by that judgment God truly will *disclose* himself (which, of course, is to say the same thing, in a more hushed and reverential voice). Even Paul asks, in the tortured, conditional voice of Romans 9,

whether there might be vessels of wrath stored up solely for destruction *only* because he trusts that there are not, that instead *all* are bound in disobedience *only* so that God might prove himself just by showing mercy on *all*. The *argumentum ad baculum* is a terrifying specter, momentarily conjured up only so as to be immediately chased away by a decisive, radiant *argumentum ad caritatem*.

III.

But this creates a small problem of theological coherence, for a rather obvious reason. To wit—and this should be an uncontroversial statement—the God in whom the majority of Christians throughout history have professed belief would appear to be evil (at least, judging by the dreadful things we habitually say about him). And I intend nothing more here than an exercise in sober precision, based on the presumption that words should have some determinate content. Every putatively meaningful theological affirmation dangles upon a golden but fragile thread of analogy. It must be possible to speak of God without mistaking him for a being among beings, an instance of something greater than himself. Between God and creatures lies an epistemological chasm nothing less than infinite, which no predicate can span univocally. Even Scotists believe that, within the weak embrace of a largely negative *conceptum univocum entis*, the modal disproportion between the infinite and the finite renders the analogy between God and creatures irreducibly disjunctive. But neither can theological language consist in nothing but equivocal expostulations, piously but fruitlessly offered up into the abyss of the divine mystery; this would evacuate theological language not only of logical, but of *semantic* content; nothing could be affirmed—nothing could *mean* anything at all. And yet, down the centuries, Christians have again and again subscribed to formulations of their faith that clearly reduce a host of cardinal Christian theological usages— most especially moral predicates like

“good,” “merciful,” “just,” “benevolent,” “loving”—to utter equivocity, and by association the entire grammar of Christian belief to meaninglessness. Indeed, so absolute is this equivocity that the only hope of rescuing any analogy from the general ruin would be to adopt “evil” as the sole plausible moral “proportion” between God and creatures.

Nor am I speaking of a few marginal, eccentric sects within Christian history; I mean the broad mainstream: particularly, I suppose it pleases me to say, but not exclusively in the West. Let us, briefly, dwell on the obvious. Consider—to begin with the mildest of moral difficulties—how many Christians down the centuries have had to reconcile their consciences to the repellant notion that all humans are at conception already guilty of a transgression that condemns them, justly, to eternal separation from God; and that, in the doctrine’s extreme form, every newborn infant belongs to a “*massa damnata*,” hateful in God’s eyes from the first moment of existence. Of course, the very idea of an “inherited guilt” is a logical absurdity, rather on the order of a “square circle”; all the doctrine *truly* asserts is that God imputes to innocent creatures a guilt they can never have contracted, out of what from any sane perspective can only be called malice. But this is just the beginning of the problem. For one broad venerable stream of tradition, God on the basis of this imputation delivers the vast majority of the race to perpetual torment, including infants who die unbaptized—though one later, intenerating redaction of the tale says the children, at least, though denied the vision of God, will be granted the homely beatitude of the *limbus infantium* (which mitigates but does not dispel the doctrine’s moral idiocy). And then the theology of “grace” grows grimmer. For, in the great Augustinian tradition, since we are somehow born meriting not only death but eternal torment, we are asked to see in God’s narrow choice *ante praevisa merita* to elect a small remnant for salvation, and either to predestine or infallibly consign the vast remainder to everlasting misery, a laudable generosity. When Augustine lamented the soft-heartedness that made

Origen believe that demons, heathens, and (most preposterously of all) unbaptized babies might ultimately be spared the torments of eternal fire, he made clear how the moral imagination must bend and twist in order to absorb such beliefs. Pascal, in assuring us that our existence is explicable only in light of a belief in the eternal and condign torment of babies who die before reaching the baptismal font, shows us that there is often no meaningful distinction between perfect faith and perfect nihilism. Calvin, in telling us that hell is copiously populated with infants not a cubit long, merely reminds us that, within a certain traditional understanding of grace and predestination, the choice to worship God rather than the devil is at most a matter of prudence. So it is that, for many Christians down the years, the rationale of evangelization has been a desperate race to save as many souls as possible *from God* (think of poor Francis Xavier, dying of exhaustion trying to pluck as many infants as possible from the flames). Really, Reformed tradition is perhaps to be praised here for the flinty resolve with which it faces its creed's implications: Calvin had the courage to acknowledge that his account of divine sovereignty necessitates belief in the predestination not only of the saved and the damned, but of the fall itself; and he recognized that the biblical claim that "God is love" must, on his principles, be accounted a definition not of God in himself, but only of God as experienced by the elect (toward the damned, God is in fact hate). And it is fitting that, among all models of atonement, Reformed theology so securely fastened upon a particularly sanguinary version of "substitution"—though one whose appeasements avail only for a very few, leaving the requirement of an eternal hell for the great many fully to reveal the glory of divine sovereignty.

Very well. So these aspects of Calvinism represent the *reductio ad absurdum* of the worst aspects of an immensely influential but deeply defective theological tradition. (And, as an Orthodox, I would simply be keeping up tradition if I were merely to denounce all of these doctrinal deformations as just so much Western

Christian “barbarism” and retreat to the pre-Augustinian idyll of Byzantine theology.) Surely, though, we need not grant that the larger Christian understanding of God is morally contradictory. Would that the matter were quite that simple. For all of this follows from an incoherence deeply fixed at the heart of almost all Christian traditions: that is, the idea that the omnipotent God of love, who creates the world from nothing, either imposes or tolerates the eternal torment of the damned. It is not merely peculiarity of personal temperament that prompts Tertullian to speak of the saved relishing the delightful spectacle of the destruction of the reprobate, or Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas to assert that the vision of the torments of the damned will increase the beatitude of the redeemed (as any trace of pity would darken the joys of heaven), or Luther to insist that the saved will rejoice to see their loved ones roasting in hell. All of them were simply following the only poor thread of logic they had to guide them out of a labyrinth of impossible contradictions; the sheer enormity of the idea of a hell of eternal torment forces the mind toward absurdities and atrocities. Of course, the logical deficiencies of such language are obvious: After all, what is a *person* other than a whole history of associations, loves, memories, attachments, and affinities? Who are we, other than all the others who have made us who we are, and to whom we belong as much as they to us? We *are* those others. To say that the sufferings of the damned will either be clouded from the eyes of the blessed or, worse, increase the pitiless bliss of heaven is also to say that *no* persons can possibly be saved: for, if the memories of others are removed, or lost, or one’s knowledge of their misery is converted into indifference or, God forbid, into greater beatitude, what then remains of one in one’s last bliss? Some other being altogether, surely: a spiritual anonymity, a vapid spark of pure intellection, the residue of a soul reduced to no one. But not a person—not the person who was. But the deepest problem is not the logic of such claims; it is their sheer moral hideousness.

IV.

Among more civilized apologists for the "infernalist" orthodoxies these days, the most popular defense seems to be an appeal to creaturely freedom and to God's respect for its dignity. But there could scarcely be a poorer argument; whether made crudely or elegantly, it invariably fails. It might not do, if one could construct a metaphysics or phenomenology of the will's liberty that was purely voluntarist, purely spontaneous; though, even then, one would have to explain how an absolutely libertarian act, obedient to no ultimate prior rationale whatsoever, would be distinguishable from sheer chance, or a mindless organic or mechanical impulse, and so any more "free" than an earthquake or embolism. But, on any cogent account, free will is a power inherently purposive, teleological, primordially oriented toward the good, and shaped by that transcendental appetite to the degree that a soul can recognize the good for what it is. No one can *freely* will the evil as evil; one can take the evil for the good, but that does not alter the prior transcendental orientation that wakens all desire. To see the good truly is to desire it insatiably; not to desire it is not to have known it, and so never to have been free to choose it. It makes no more sense to say that God allows creatures to damn themselves out of his love for them or of his respect for their freedom than to say a father might reasonably allow his deranged child to thrust her face into a fire out of a tender respect for her moral autonomy. And the argument becomes quite insufferable when one considers the personal conditions—ignorance, mortality, defectibility of intellect and will—under which each soul enters the world, and the circumstances—the suffering of all creatures, even the most innocent and delightful of them—with which that world confronts the soul. Again, Reformed tradition is commendable for the intellectual honesty with which it elevates divine sovereignty to the status of *the* absolute theological value, and sovereignty understood as pure inscrutable

power. But, alas, the epistemological cost is extravagant: for Reformed theology is still dogmatically obliged to ascribe to God all those predicates (except “love”) that scripture supplies, and so must call God “good,” “just,” “merciful,” “wise,” and “truthful.” But, transparently, all have been rendered equivocal by the doctrines that surround them; and this equivocity is necessarily contagious; it reduces *all* theological language to vacuity, for none of it can now be trusted; the system, in the end, is one devoid of logical or semantic content: it means nothing, it can be neither believed nor doubted, it is just a formal arrangement of intrinsically empty signifiers, no more true or false than any purely abstract pattern. And obviously no refuge is offered by the stern teaching of the human intellect’s “total depravity,” as that merely reiterates the problem of equivocity, but with the appropriate dressing of ceremonious cringing. In the words of John Stuart Mill, “To say that God’s goodness may be different in kind from man’s goodness, what is it but saying, with a slight change of phraseology, that God may possibly not be good?”

Again, however, it is not only Reformed theology that suffers from this contagion of equivocity; it infects every theology that includes the notion of an eternal hell—which is to say, just about the whole Christian tradition.

V.

I suppose I might be accused not only of overstatement, but of having strayed far from my topic. To me, however, this all follows inexorably from the doctrine of creation. This is not a complicated issue, it seems to me: The eternal perdition—the eternal suffering—of any soul would be an abominable tragedy, and so a moral evil if even conditionally intended, and could not possibly be comprised within the ends intended by a truly good will (in any sense of the word “good” intelligible to us). Yet, if both the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and that of eternal

damnation are true, that evil is indeed comprised within the intentions and dispositions of God. And, while One may hope that some limited good will emerge from the cosmic drama, somehow preponderant over the evil, at such an unspeakable cost it can be at best a relative and tragically ambiguous good. And what, then, would any damned soul be, as enfolded within the eternal will of God, other than a price settled upon by God with his own power, an oblation willingly exchanged for a finite benefit—the lamb slain from the foundation of the world? And what then is God, inasmuch as the moral nature of any intended final cause must include within its calculus what one is willing to sacrifice to achieve that end; and if the “acceptable” price is the eternal torment of a rational nature, what room remains for any moral analogy comprehensible within finite terms?

The economics of the exchange is really quite monstrous. We can all appreciate, I imagine, the shattering force of Vanya’s terrible question to Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov*: If universal harmony and joy could be secured by the torture and murder of a single innocent child, would you accept that price? But let us say that somehow, mysteriously—in, say, Zosima’s sanctity, Alyosha’s kiss, the million-mile march of Vanya’s devil, the callous old woman’s onion—an answer is offered that makes the transient torments of history justifiable in the light of God’s everlasting Kingdom. But *eternal* torments, *final* dereliction? Here the price is raised beyond any calculus of relative goods, and into the realm of absolute—of infinite—expenditure. And the arithmetic is fairly inflexible. We need not imagine, in traditional fashion, that the legions of the damned will far outnumber the cozy company of the saved. Let us imagine instead that only one soul will perish eternally, and all others enter into the peace of the Kingdom. Nor need we think of that soul as guiltless, like Vanya’s helpless child, or even as mildly sympathetic. Let it be someone utterly despicable—say, Hitler. Even then, no matter how we understand the fate of that single wretched soul in relation to

God's intentions, no account of the divine decision to create out of nothingness can make its propriety morally intelligible. This is obvious, of course, in predestinarian systems, since from their bleak perspective, manifestly, that poor, ridiculous, but tragically conscious puppet who has been consigned to the abyss exists for no other purpose than the ghastly spectacle of divine sovereignty. But, then, for the redeemed, each of whom might just as well have been denied efficacious grace had God so pleased, who is that wretch who endures God's final wrath, forever and ever, other than their surrogate, their redeemer, the one who suffers in their stead—their Christ? Compared to that unspeakable offering, that interminable and abominable oblation of infinite misery, what would the cross of Christ be? How would it be diminished for us? And to what? A bad afternoon? A temporary indisposition of the infinite? And what would the mystery of God becoming man in order to effect a merely partial rescue of created order be, as compared to the far deeper mystery of a worthless man becoming the suffering god upon whose perpetual holocaust the entire order of creation finally depends? But predestination need not be invoked here at all. Let us suppose instead that rational creatures possess real autonomy, and that no one goes to hell save by his or her own industry and ingenuity: when we then look at God's decision to create from that angle, curiously enough, absolutely nothing changes. Not to wax too anthropomorphizing here, like some analytic philosopher of religion, but let us say God created simply *on the chance* that humanity might sin, and that a certain number of incorrigibly wicked souls might plunge themselves into Tartarus forever; this still means that, morally, he has purchased the revelation of his power in creation by the same horrendous price—even if, in the end, no one at all happens to be damned. The logic is irresistible. God creates. *Alea iacta est*. But, as Mallarmé says, “un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard”: for what is hazarded has already been surrendered, entirely, no matter how the dice fall; the aleatory venture may be intentionally

indeterminate, but the wager is an irrevocable intentional decision, wherein every possible cost has already been accepted; the irrecoverable expenditure has been offered even if, happily, it is never actually lost, and so the moral nature of the act is the same in either case. To venture the life of your child for some other end is, morally, already to have killed your child, even if at the last moment Artemis or Heracles or the Angel of the LORD should stay your hand. And so, the revelation of God's glory in creatures would still always be dependent upon that evil, that venture beyond good and evil, even if at the last no one perishes. Creation could never then be called "good" in an unconditional sense; nor God the "Good as such," no matter what conditional goods he might accomplish in creating. And, here too, the losing lot might just as well have fallen to the blessed, given the stochastic vagaries of existence: accidents of birth, congenital qualities of character, natural intellectual endowments, native moral aptitudes, material circumstances, personal powers of resolve, impersonal forces of chance, the grim encumbrances of sin and mortality... Once again, who would the damned be but the redeemers of the blessed, the price eternally paid by God for the sake of the Kingdom's felicity?

To be clear: I am not attempting to subject God to an "ethical" interrogation, as though he were some finite agent answerable to standards beyond himself. That would be banal. My concern is the coherence of theological language in light of the logically indispensable doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. The golden thread of analogy can stretch across as vast an apophatic abyss as the modal disjunction between infinite and finite or the ontological disproportion between absolute and contingent can open before us; but it cannot span a total antithesis. When we use words like "good," "just," "love" to name God, not as if they are mysteriously *greater* in meaning than when predicated of creatures, but instead as if they bear transparently *opposite* meanings, then we are saying nothing. And, again, the contagion of this equivocity necessarily consumes theology entirely.

VI.

Of course, theological language is determined by scripture; which is why I began with some of the New Testament's most famously universalists verses, including those asserting a strict equivalence between what is lost in Adam and what saved in Christ; I could have added several more. It is odd that for at least fifteen centuries such passages have been all but lost behind so thin a veil as can be woven from those three deeply ambiguous verses that seem (and only *seem*) to threaten eternal torments for the wicked. But that is as may be; every good New Testament scholar is well aware of the obscurities in what we can reconstruct of the eschatological vision of Jesus's teachings. And, really, plucking individual verses like posies from the text here and there is not the way to see the entire landscape. The New Testament, to a great degree, consists in an eschatological interpretation of Hebrew scripture's story of creation, finding in Christ, as eternal Logos and risen Lord, the unifying term of beginning and end. For Paul, in particular, the marvel of Christ's lordship is that all walls of division between persons and peoples, and finally between all creatures, have fallen; and that ultimately, when creation is restored by Christ, God will be all in all. There is no more magnificent meditation on this vision than Gregory of Nyssa's image of the progress of all persons towards union with God in the one "pleroma" of the *totus Christus*: all spiritual wills moving, to use his lovely image, from outside the temple walls (in the ages) into the temple precincts, and finally (beyond the ages) into the very sanctuary of the glory—as one. By contrast, Augustine, in the last masterpiece produced by his colossal genius, wrote of two cities eternally sealed against one another, from everlasting in the divine counsels and unto everlasting in the divine judgment (the far more populous city destined for perpetual sorrow). There is no question to my mind which of them saw the story more clearly. Or which theologians are the best guides to scripture as a whole:

Gregory, Origen, Evagrius, Diodore, Theodore, Isaac of Ninevah...George MacDonald.

Here however, again, the issue is the reducibility of all causes to their first cause, and the determination of the first cause by the final. If we did not proclaim a *creatio ex nihilo*—if we thought God a being limited by some external principle or internal imperfection, or if we were dualists, or dialectical idealists, or what have you—the question of evil would be an aetiological query only for us, not a terrible moral question. But, because we say God creates freely, we must believe his final judgment shall reveal him for who he is. So, if all are not saved, if God creates souls he knows to be destined for eternal misery, is God evil? Well, why debate semantics? Maybe every analogy fails. What is not debatable is that, if God does so create, in himself he cannot be the good as such, and creation cannot be a morally meaningful act: it is from one vantage an act of predilective love, but from another—logically necessary—vantage an act of prudential malevolence. And so it cannot be true. We are presented by what has become the majority tradition with three fundamental claims, any two of which might be true simultaneously, but never all three: that God freely created all things out of nothingness; that God is the Good itself; and that it is certain or at least possible that some rational creatures will endure eternal loss of God. And this, I have to say, is the final moral meaning I find in the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, at least if we truly believe that our language about God's goodness and the theological grammar to which it belongs are not empty: that the God of eternal retribution and pure sovereignty proclaimed by so much of Christian tradition is not, and cannot possibly be, the God of self-outpouring love revealed in Christ. If God is the good creator of all, he is the savior of all, without fail, who brings to himself all he has made, including all rational wills, and only thus returns to himself in all that goes forth from him. If he is not the savior of all, the Kingdom is only a

dream, and creation something considerably worse than a nightmare. But, again, it is not so. God saw that it was good; and, in the ages, so shall we.

LAUGHTER AND THE BETWEEN: G. K. Chesterton and the Reconciliation of Theology and Hilarity

Duncan Bruce Reyburn

The secret of life lies in laughter and humility.

– G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics*.²

I offer this book with the heartiest sentiments to all the jolly people who hate what I write, and regard it (very justly, for all I know), as a piece of poor clowning or a single tiresome joke. For if this book is a joke it is a joke against me. I am the man who with the utmost daring discovered what had been discovered before. If there is an element of farce in what follows, the farce is at my own expense; for this book explains how I fancied I was the first to set foot in Brighton and then found I was the last ... I did, like all other solemn little boys, try to be in advance of the age. Like them I tried to be some ten minutes in advance of the truth. And I found that I was eighteen hundred years behind it ... I did try to found a heresy of my own; and when I had put the last touches to it, I discovered that it was orthodoxy.

– G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*.³

INTRODUCTION

Søren Kierkegaard tells a parable about a fire that breaks out backstage in a theatre. Seeing the untamable flames and the spreading destruction, a clown, already dressed up for his performance, steps out onto the stage

² Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1: Heretics, Orthodoxy, The Blatchford Controversies* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1986), 107.

³ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 213-214.

to warn the audience that their lives are in danger and to plead for help. Unfortunately, the onlookers regard the clown's pleas as nothing more than showmanship and they applaud him enthusiastically for his performance. As his pleas grow more desperate, the crowd laughs and responds with even greater applause. And so, as Kierkegaard concludes his tale, he writes, "I think the world will come to an end amid general applause from all the wits, who believe that it is a joke."⁴

It is not difficult to see why this story is usually interpreted in terms of soteriology: the burning theatre is analogous to a dying world, and the clown is analogous to the Christian church, which through her representatives is trying desperately to save it from destruction. It is difficult not to notice, though, in what way this analogy collapses: the church, both historically and at present, is hardly ever charged with clowning around. It is generally accused of many other things—irrelevance, naivety, mythologizing, moralizing, bigotry, and so on⁵—but generous and unnecessary frivolity is rarely one of them. This happens to be the "Lacanian lord of misrule,"⁶ Slavoj Žižek's biggest problem with so much of Christendom: it has 'somehow managed to miss the joke of Christianity.'⁷ While Žižek is not very clear on precisely what he means by the "joke of Christianity,"

⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations: The Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard*, edited by Charles E. Moore, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2007), 404. Joakim Garff points out that the basis of this story is factual: This exact sequence of events happened in St. Petersburg on February 14, 1836. By misunderstanding the clown, a number of people ended up losing their lives, in *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, translated by Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 774.

⁵ In *The Everlasting Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993 [1925]), 256, Chesterton observes that such a vast array of (often contradictory) criticisms of Christianity exist that there must be something there (in Christianity) worth examining.

⁶ William Desmond, *The William Desmond Reader*, edited by Christopher Ben Simpson (Albany: State of New York University Press, 2012), 243.

⁷ Adam Kotsko, *Žižek and theology* (London: Continuum, 2008), 153.

his claim that Christianity and hilarity have often been taken to be at odds is not entirely without substance.

The earliest extra-biblical reference to jollity in Christian theology is found in one of Clement of Alexandria's (circa 150-215) letters.⁸ Although laughter, in his view, was a decidedly human phenomenon, he regarded it as permissible only in the rare cases when it was not irreverent or disrespectful. However, while including provisos concerning when laughter might be appropriate, he also did not support his readers' having a morose or severe countenance.⁹ Since he accounts for the various moods of man, his view of laughter may therefore be considered fairly balanced, although it is not without its problems. A less balanced view is found, however, in records on the Pachom monks of the fourth century, who were forbidden to joke and were severely punished if they laughed at prayer or meal times.¹⁰ Ammonius, a disciple of a particularly unhumorous Pachom monk and saint named Anthony, suggested that "[l]aughter is the beginning of the destruction of the soul" in that it "dispels virtues" and "pushes aside" all-important "thoughts on death and meditation on the punishment."¹¹ In a similar vein, Basil of Caesarea (circa. 329-379) held that the Christian "ought not to indulge in jesting; he ought not to laugh or even to suffer laughmakers."¹² For Basil, humor was the result of a "failure of self-mastery"—that is, it was taken

⁸ John Ferguson, *Clement of Alexandria* (Farmington Hills: Twayne Publishers, 1973), 82; Andrew Stott, *Comedy* (London: Routledge), 173.

⁹ John Kaye, *Some Account of the Writings and Opinions of Clement of Alexandria* (London: J. G. & F. Rivington 1835), 77.

¹⁰ Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religion* (London: Routledge, 1997), 67.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹² *Ibid.*

to be antithetical to the virtue of self-control that was deemed an aspect of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5.22).¹³

Later, at the turn of the fifth century, St. John Chrysostom, especially in his reading of the Gospel attributed to his namesake (John 16.20), painted a picture of Christ as somewhat dour-faced, although arguably, as in Clement's case, his problem was not with laughter per se, but with an excess of it, as well as with laughter that was out of keeping with a virtuous character.¹⁴ Still later, St. Benedict (480-543), in his famous *Rule*, presented the provocation of laughter as contrary to a holy life. This was typical of various monastic regulations, which considered laughter to be the grossest breach of the rule of silence, and was also something sometimes considered to make the mouth filthy.¹⁵ Another medieval monastic figure, Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), echoed this icy stance toward laughter in her suggestion that it was a sin because it offered relief from the very labor that God had dished out as a punishment for defying him in Eden.¹⁶ This trend of finding Christianity against hilarity is, however, not restricted to medieval monastics. John Wesley, for example, spoke out against his brother-in-law because of his ability to "break a jest, and laugh at it heartily."¹⁷ John Calvin, too, was known for being particularly crabby: he certainly did not laugh easily, and if there is humor to be discerned in his work it is largely of the "mordant", 'pungent', 'biting' and 'cutting' variety."¹⁸ Here was a man who knew how to take the fun out of fundamentalism. Although, if you will forgive my flippant use of

¹³ Vassilis Saroglou, "Religion and Humor: An *a priori* Incompatibility?" in *Humor* 15, no. 2 (2002), 201.

¹⁴ Gilhus, *Laughing Gods*, 67.

¹⁵ Stott, *Comedy*, 174.

¹⁶ Barry Sanders, *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 129.

¹⁷ Samuel Joekel, "Funny as hell: Christianity and humor reconsidered", in *Humor* 21, no. 4 (2008), 416.

¹⁸ Charles Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2008), 11.

theological caricature, perhaps humor and laughter are predestined for some and not for others.

In a similar vein, other examples of grave pietists and dreary theologians have also been cited by others to argue that so-called "Christians ideals" have been used on numerous occasions to bolster the cause of the hilarity-deficient, but it is important to recognize that this eschewal of laughter and the humorous is not entirely unique to Christian history. Rather, people of various cultures and traditions throughout history, even in the classical pagan world, have regarded laughter and humor as improper, especially since these were often taken to imply a lack of propriety and respect.¹⁹ It may therefore easily be argued that external (cultural), rather than internal (theological), factors were primarily responsible for having Christians miss of the so-called joke of Christianity, perhaps especially in their impression that Christ is more of a grim figure than a joyful one. It is often pointed out, for instance, that the Gospels show Jesus weeping but never laughing, indicating for some that he must have had no sense of humor—but the logic of such a conclusion is deeply flawed.²⁰ The gospels also never refer to Jesus urinating or humming to himself, but the absence of such references is not necessarily an indication that he did not do so. It is certainly possible that a *Zeitgeist* of seriousness could have resulted in this picture of an unsmiling and laughterless Jesus, as well as led to various intimations that Christianity ought to be humorless.

¹⁹ Mary Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling and Cracking Up* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 1, 3, 112; Albrecht Classen, *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, edited by (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 18, 32, 69, 194, 293, 323, 494, 531.

²⁰ There are those, like Elton Trueblood, who have studied the humor in Jesus' teaching at great lengths. Trueblood indicates that while the Jesus of the New Testament is not described as laughing, he certainly cannot be said to lack a sense of humor, in *The Humor of Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

Still, the commonplace picture of a humorless Christianity is somewhat worsened by some fairly recent research in psychology done by Vassilis Saroglou, who demonstrates both argumentatively and empirically that religion and humor ought to be taken as possessing an *a priori* incompatibility. His study “from a personality psychology perspective” suggests that “religion associates negatively with personality traits, cognitive structures and social consequences typical of humor.”²¹ Saroglou is using the term *religion* rather than *Christianity*, but it is clear from the context of his study that Christianity is the religion most implicated by his research. He makes the claim that “it is possible that religious people may have a good sense of humor *despite* their religiosity,” but insists that we should not assume that their sense of humor is “*because* of it.”²² His confidence in his conclusion stems from his observation that religiosity predictably produces a number of qualities that result in a failure of a sense of humor: closed-mindedness, rigid dogmatism, intolerance, and a resistance to ambiguity. In Saroglou’s view, humor may be human, but it is certainly not divine, which also implies that it is therefore theologically unsupportable. Another researcher, David Feltmate, also rejects the congruency of humor and theology (albeit to a lesser degree than Saroglou) when he argues that the empirical should not give rise to the speculative. The appropriateness of such an injunction notwithstanding, his contention is that humor theory ought to be “ruthlessly materialistic” and therefore dismissive of any suggestion that the self is “porous” and thus “open to the supernatural.”²³

Now, as empirical as Saroglou’s and Feltmate’s research may be, it is also philosophically questionable, owing to its reliance upon a dubious

²¹ Saroglou, “Religion and Humor: An *a priori* Incompatibility?”, 205.

²² *Ibid.*, 206.

²³ David Feltmate, “The Sacred Comedy: The Problems and Possibilities of Peter Berger’s Theory of Humor”, in *Humor* 26, no. 4 (2013), 538-539.

presupposition. It is clearly true that a lot of religious people are closed-minded, rigidly dogmatic, intolerant, and resistant to ambiguity, but such descriptors could easily be applied to those who would regard themselves as non-religious, or even outright atheistic. The question, then, ought not to be whether Christians lack humor and therefore also the capacity to laugh, but whether it is possible to legitimate absolute humorlessness in theological terms. In other words, the central question is how Christianity, and its emphasis on "reconciliation of all things" to the Christ of faith (Colossians 1.15), may or may not be reconciled to humor and the laughter that results from an encounter with a good joke. To present an answer to this question, I turn to the work of G. K. Chesterton—a theologian who was forever laughing, joking, and defending the ephemeral. This was a man who had a remarkable "faculty of enjoying things" and whose "laugh was the loudest and most infectious of them all."²⁴ I want to explore here what it was in Chesterton's theology that allowed him to befriend and defend the jocular. My contention is simple: Chesterton's hilarity is perfectly congruent with his theology and is not just an anomaly owed to his temperament. To argue this, I put forward the claim that Chesterton's theology is distinctly paradoxical, and therefore open to the doubleness that humor is founded upon, and also that the centrality of the virtues of honesty, humility, and hospitality to his philosophy provide fertile soil for glee to grow. While I cannot here solve the question of whether Christian theology and humor are always reconcilable, tackling Chesterton's work may prove at least somewhat helpful for engaging with this much larger issue.

²⁴ Ian Ker, *G. K. Chesterton: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 18.

I. CHESTERTON, HUMOR, AND WILLIAM DESMOND'S FOURFOLD SENSE OF BEING

Chesterton accedes, when it comes to matters of faith, that “far from it being irrelevant” to resort to silliness, it is in fact “the test of one’s seriousness.”²⁵ He claims that “[i]t is the test of a good religion whether you can joke about it.” If you can “take examples from pots and pans and boots and butter-tubs” then your theory, philosophy, or religion may have some genuine validity.²⁶ Here, Chesterton is not offering an oxymoronic logic that claims that the serious *is* silly, but is alluding instead to the fact that what matters is primarily one’s attitude toward reality, not just one’s opinion of it. By insisting that attitude forms the context for dogma, Chesterton’s theology exposes the wrongheadedness of a great many thinkers, Saroglou included, who have mistaken the content of belief for the container. For while the specifics of belief are not unimportant, what is primary is one’s posture toward reality; in fact, it is a particular posture toward reality that dogma serves. Dogma is made for reality, not the other way around. In Chesterton’s thinking, as also in Kierkegaard’s theology, the truth and the way to the truth are the same thing.²⁷ To disregard the way (understood as one’s posture or attitude toward reality) is tantamount to disregarding reality itself. What matters is not just a statement of belief, but the very syntax of that belief.²⁸

To explain this notion of how one’s stance can help, or perhaps even inhibit, one’s sense of humor, the philosophy of William Desmond is particularly

²⁵ G. K. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 27, Illustrated London News 1905-1907* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 206.

²⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 27*, 206.

²⁷ Christopher Ben Simpson, *The Truth is the Way: Kierkegaard's Theologia Viatorum* (Eugene: Cascade, 2011), 5.

²⁸ G. K. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 36, Illustrated London News 1932-1934* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 63.

instructive. It is through Desmond's lens of the "fourfold sense of being" that Chesterton's theology of humor is contemplated below. This fourfold, which is rooted in Aristotle's contention that "being may be said in many ways,"²⁹ may be offered as a way of grappling with our relationship with the multiple facets of reality. It traces the contours of various conditions of mindfulness before the world in a kind of phenomenology without phenomenological reduction and thus helps us to understand, in particular, the way that we figure and configure our language about things. This will obviously have a bearing on the way that language operates in various forms of the comical.

The first sense of being is the univocal sense, which "stresses the immediate [and arguably obvious] unity of being and thus prioritizes a simple sameness over multiplicity, mediation, and difference."³⁰ While the univocal is not untrue to being—after all, determination is essential for identifying and distinguishing the other senses of being—it is clearly resistant to humor in a few ways, and may therefore help to explain, at least partially, why certain theologians and theologies have tended toward solemnity. In particular, it resists complexity, especially with regard to the way that the same relates to the other. By seeking perfect coherence and consistency, and thus often tending toward literalism, it tends to flatten the possibility of surprise and consequently rests all too easily on unambiguous absolutes. Humor cannot thrive in a world perceived exclusively in terms of the univocal because humor is by nature the result of having incongruity answer to congruity, in a clash between the same and the other.

By stressing the (supposedly) unmediated same, the univocal tends to support a kind of monomania. In attempting to fix the truth determinately in rigid

²⁹ William Desmond, *Philosophy and its Others: Ways of Being and Mind* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 6.

³⁰ Christopher Ben Simpson. *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern: William Desmond and John D. Caputo* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 29.

thinking, playfulness is rejected out of hand. Somewhat unsurprisingly, just as laws against laughter will ultimately fail to prevent laughter (as many a serious monastic has discovered), the univocal cannot sustain itself. It is forever confronted with its own limitations, which undermine its absolute claims.³¹ It is probably for this reason that jokes are often on the univocally inclined: the confrontation with otherness at the center of humor is helpfully exaggerated by this self-limiting univocal solidity. Chesterton demonstrates this, for instance, when he offers that the “Morbid Logician seeks to make everything lucid, and succeeds in making everything mysterious” and that “[t]he Determinist makes the theory of causation quite clear, and then finds that he cannot say ‘if you please’ to the housemaid.”³² It is not insignificant, as is made clearer below, that the fault lines in the univocal are unveiled so well by the presence of paradox.

While Christian theology certainly makes absolute claims, and thus includes the univocal as much as any other discourse, it is not properly understood as univocal and, at least in this regard, cannot be understood as contrary to humor and laughter. Reinhold Niebuhr, for one, points out that humor has a disarming quality that he intimates is in fact central to Christian theology: “The sense of humor is ... a byproduct of self-transcendence. People with a sense of humor do not take themselves” or their views “too seriously. They are able to ‘stand off’ from themselves, see themselves in perspective, and recognize the ludicrous and absurd aspects of their pretensions.”³³ Humor, in other words, requires what C. S.

³¹ William Desmond, *Being and the Between* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), xiv-xv.

³² G. K. Chesterton, *G. K. Chesterton: Essential Writings*, edited by William Griffin (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003), 55.

³³ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Discerning the Signs of the Times: Sermons for Today and tomorrow* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1946), 111-131.

Lewis calls "a taste for the other."³⁴ It requires a protagonistic shift, a decentering of self, that the univocal does not allow. Against this undiluted univocity, Chesterton is often toying with multiple perspectives. In fact, to survey his theology is to discover a complex picture of constant re-evaluations, reflections, and re-contextualizations. He warns us, after all, against the person who thinks only one thought—that is, the person whose perspective is rigid without any reason.³⁵ The person with only one thought stops all other thinking; in Chesterton's view, the thought that stops thought is the only thought that ought to be stopped.

Perhaps, then, humor and laughter would be more at home in the equivocal sense of being, which "stresses" an unmediated or even unmediatable "manyness over unity, difference over sameness, ambiguity over clarity."³⁶ In its obsession with an exaggerated and indeterminate sense of dispersion, disconnection, and difference, equivocity forces otherness to recede into unintelligibility. In the equivocal, the mind is divorced from being, and as a consequence a kind of hyper-subjectivity tends to take over, one that is highly uncertain of itself—if indeed it even allows for such a thing as a self—and yet, paradoxically, it is highly certain in this very hyper-subjectivity of its own uncertainties. In this, the same and the other remain permanently alienated from each other.

The equivocal sense is true to being in that it stresses the becoming of being—that is, it highlights the fact that being is a dance of impermanences and unquenchable dehiscentences. But it fails to be true to being by insisting upon a somewhat absolutized fragmentation, and it shares in the conundrum of univocity by being self-subverting—beneath a sense of difference there is always a

³⁴ Gilbert Meilaender, *The Taste for the Other: The Social and Ethical Thought of C. S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978).

³⁵ G. K. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 29, Illustrated London News 1911-1913* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 207-210.

³⁶ Simpson, *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern*, 29.

sense of the same. To those who say that “[t]here is not an abiding thing in what we know,” Chesterton responds that “it cannot be true that there is nothing abiding in what we know. For if that were so we should not know it at all and should not call it knowledge.”³⁷ He points out that “the fact of two things being different implies that they are similar. The hare and the tortoise may differ in the quality of swiftness, but they must agree in the quality of motion. The swiftest hare,” for instance, “cannot be swifter than an isosceles triangle or the idea of pinkness.”³⁸ Moreover, mediation is always involved, even when we perceive that a thing is beyond mediation. That we recognize its mysteriousness is precisely the result of being confronted with the limits of mediation. Desmond suggests that comedy is one articulation of the “fertile equivocality of human being,” although he also points out that the equivocal does not account completely for our laughter.³⁹ In non-sequiturs, such as the one offered by Chesterton on the swiftness of the hare, we especially have a sense of the equivocal, and yet our ability to get the joke rests on a mediation and a sense of solidity that is not accounted for by the equivocal. While the equivocal may try to suppress the determinable, the determinable always finds a way to break through.

For this reason, the modern dialectical sense of being may appear, at least at first, to be a better option for accounting and allowing for humor, since it is an attempt, as Hegel’s philosophy shows, to grapple honestly with the sameness presented by the univocal and the difference perceived by the equivocal. After all, as Lydia Amir observes, “humor is the result of a conflict between the self and an external object.”⁴⁰ Thus, the “humorist”—especially as one who accesses a

³⁷ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume I*, 78.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ William Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 116.

⁴⁰ Lydia B. Amir, *Humor and the Good Life in Modern Philosophy: Shaftesbury, Hamann, Kierkegaard*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 212.

"sublime or contemplative mood"—will "[speak] the truth about himself in his relation to the other or the object."⁴¹ The dialectical sense ought to be able to accommodate humor and laughter better than the univocal and equivocal senses of being. Nevertheless, it is clear that it attempts to recover the univocal after equivocity and thus places the emphasis on the side of the same, at the expense of the other. The result is that even the different is perceived ultimately as being unified on the side of the familiar—that is, as something that can be synthesized into the same by self-mediation.

For the Hegelian dialectician, humor is a kind of inversion of the sublime—an experience, that is, of the infinite within the bounds of the finite.⁴² In accordance with the dialectical sense of being, laughter itself, far from being a "signal of transcendence" (to borrow Peter Berger's term),⁴³ is rooted in immanence and embodiedness, as if the joke is always intended to be an affirmation of one's material self. Hegel himself suggests that "[t]he general ground for comedy is ... a world in which man as subject or person has made himself completely master of everything that counts to himself."⁴⁴ The fact that the opposite is also easily arguable—namely, that laughter also propels us away from our self-enclosed intellectualizations—should alert us to the limitations of the Hegelian view. While it is not my aim here to discuss Hegel's philosophy of humor in any depth, I have mentioned the above to highlight how his dialectic, as a posture toward being, must ultimately undermine humor, even where it seems to accommodate otherness. By mediating the other into the same, it promotes, albeit unwittingly,

⁴¹ Ibid., 214.

⁴² Benjamin Rutter, *Hegel on the Modern Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 217.

⁴³ Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Boston: Anchor Books, 1970).

⁴⁴ Rutter, *Hegel on the Modern Arts*, 217.

the explaining of any joke. This inevitably results in the eradication of humor, or any possibility of laughter, even if humor and laughter were originally present.

This is precisely the problem highlighted by E. B. White when he notes that “[a]nalysts have had their go at humor, and I have read some of this interpretative literature, but without being greatly instructed. Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.”⁴⁵ This is a problem often noted by humor theorists. When reflecting on Arthur Koestler’s theories on humor, David Nathan, for instance, has this to say: “Expert Schmexpert, he still tells the joke like no comedian would have done. If you want to know about comedy, go to the comics.”⁴⁶ “There is no mathematics or geometry of the comic,” Desmond writes; “When we thus determine the meaning of a joke, we kill it; spell out a joke and there is no laughter.”⁴⁷

“Laughter,” Desmond contends, “is ultimately grounded in the generous agape [ἀγάπη] of being, though most of it takes shape in the equivocal.”⁴⁸ For Desmond, this ἀγάπη as the recovery of the equivocal after dialectic reflects a particular type of mindfulness that takes heed of the other senses of being, but resists any attempt to control being through self-mediation, since being is ultimately not a mere intellectual exercise. Being, as D. C. Schindler observes, is “everything ... *and more*.”⁴⁹ It presents itself always as excessive, inexhaustible, and

⁴⁵ White, E.B. & White, K.S. *A Subtreasury of American Humor*, (New York: Coward-McCann, 1941), xvii.

⁴⁶ David Nathan, *The Laughtermakers: A Quest for Comedy* (London: Peter Owen, 1971), 13. It is, however, a mistake to assume that the analysis of humor should necessarily be funny. The analysis of anything is never the same as the thing analyzed, even when it is a suitable reflection of the truths revealed by what is being analyzed.

⁴⁷ Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 116.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ D. C. Schindler, *The Catholicity of Reason* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2013), 4.

overdetermined. Thus, Desmond offers what he calls the *metaxological* stance toward being. Metaxology, as a discourse (λόγος) of the between (μεταξύ), affirms our being as between-being. The metaxological, as an "intermediation between beings who are open wholes until themselves, without being completely determined by themselves,"⁵⁰ "is the truth of the univocal, equivocal, and the dialectical. When we try to articulate it, we are trying to find the right words for what is given in the overdeterminacy of ... original astonishment."⁵¹

The metaxological affirms our between-being, which is precisely what Chesterton does when he notes that humor rests on an understanding of the "Dual Nature of Man"; the "primary paradox" is that "man is superior to all the things around him and yet is at their mercy."⁵² Man has a kind of "spiritual immensity within" that is always co-inherent with his "littleness and restriction without."⁵³ This fact reads as a joke, "for it is itself a joke that a house should be larger inside than out."⁵⁴ Elsewhere, Chesterton writes that "Man himself is a joke in the sense of a paradox. That there is something very extraordinary about his position, and therefore presumably about his past, is the clearest sort of common sense. Alone of all creatures he is not self-sufficient, even while he is supreme." The human being, Chesterton says,

⁵⁰ Desmond, *William Desmond Reader*, 38.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵² G. K. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 28, Illustrated London News 1908-1910* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 66. In Milbank's assessment of Chesterton, he equates the metaxological with Chestertonian paradox, in *The Monstrosity of Christ*, edited by Creston Davis (Boston: MIT Press, 2009). John D. Caputo seems skeptical of this equation of the metaxological with the paradoxical but I nonetheless think that Milbank's assessment is fitting, especially when taken in the context of the aim of Chesterton's paradox and Desmond's metaxology, which is, if a generalization may be allowed, to recover a sense of astonishment within our concrete experience of the world.

⁵³ G. K. Chesterton, "Humour: Encyclopedia Britannica," 1928.
<http://www.cse.dmu.ac.uk/~mward/gkc/books/Humour.html>. Retrieved 10.11.2014.

⁵⁴ Chesterton, "Humour: Encyclopedia Britannica".

dare not sleep in his own skin; he cannot simply put his own food into his own stomach. He has to put the latter first into an oven and cover the former first with external and foreign hair; always sleeping in somebody else's skin. In one sense he is a cripple amongst the creatures; he is at once imperfect and artificial like a monster with two glass eyes and two wooden legs. He is propped upon crutches that are called furniture; he is patched and protected with bandages that are called clothes. Properly visualized, he is grotesque, not when he sits on a hat, but when he allows a hat to sit on him. Properly understood, he is not so ridiculous when he sits on a hat as when he sits on a chair; for then he is acting like some monstrous sort of crippled quadruped and equipping himself with four wooden legs. Why the lord of creation is a cripple in this queer sense is an open question; but some maintain that it is because he once had a bad fall.⁵⁵

Chesterton echoes these thoughts in his book *The Everlasting Man*:

The simplest truth about man is that he is a very strange being; almost in the sense of being a stranger on the earth. In all sobriety, he has much more of the external appearance of one bringing alien habits from another land than of a mere growth of this one. He cannot sleep in his own skin; he cannot trust his own instincts. He is at once a creator moving miraculous hands and fingers and a kind of cripple. He is wrapped in artificial bandages called clothes; he is propped on artificial crutches called furniture. His mind has the same doubtful liberties and the same wild limitations ... Alone among the animals he feels the need of averting his thought from the root realities of his own bodily being; of hiding them as in the presence of some higher possibility which creates the mystery of shame.⁵⁶

Chesterton articulates man's between-being by highlighting two aspects of our experience of the between. The first follows Plato's understanding of man: he

⁵⁵ Chesterton, "The Anatomy of the Joke," 1922.

http://www.cse.dmu.ac.uk/~mward/gkc/books/Man_Orthodox.html. Retrieved 10.11.2014

⁵⁶ Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993 [1925]), 36.

is somehow both an animal and yet also godlike.⁵⁷ This is why, for Chesterton, "the process which ends in a joke necessarily begins with a certain idea of dignity."⁵⁸ This sense of "dignity is in some way implied beforehand."⁵⁹ Chesterton argues that there are things that require no previous experience and yet can still "break on a person"—things like beauty or knowledge—but "incongruity cannot break on him without the pre-existence or pre-supposition of something with which it fails to be congruous."⁶⁰ The second aspect of the human experience of being between involves a sense of being fallen, which indicated by "the mystery of shame." We, as the "image of God," are caught between what we experience ourselves to be and what we hope ourselves to be.⁶¹ The idea is expressed in the paradox that whatever we are, we are not ourselves. Our ideals are constantly being undermined by the brute facts of our material reality. This second experience of the between involves a strong sense of the corruption of the ethical. It is in the experience of these two betweens that humor originates. Thus, Chesterton contends that "[w]hatever is cosmic is comic" and also that "all grotesqueness is itself ultimately related to seriousness. Unless a thing is dignified, it cannot be undignified":⁶²

Why is it funny that a man should sit down suddenly in the street? There is only one possible or intelligent reason: that a man is the image of God. It is not funny that anything else should fall down; only that a man should fall down. No one sees anything funny in a tree falling down. No one sees a delicate absurdity in a stone falling down. No man stops in the road and roars with laughter at the sight of snow coming down. The fall of thunderbolts is treated with some gravity. The fall of roofs and high buildings is taken

⁵⁷ William Desmond, *Art, Origins, Otherness: Between Philosophy and Art* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 195.

⁵⁸ Chesterton, "The Anatomy of the Joke."

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 27*, 205-206.

seriously. It is only when a man tumbles down that we laugh. Why do we laugh? Because it is a grave religious matter: it is the Fall of Man. Only man can be absurd: for only man can be dignified.⁶³

In the above, Chesterton deals with the first sense of our between-being: namely, the experience of having our expectations thwarted by our actions. Nevertheless, in pointing out that there is humor in this, he does not neglect the second sense of our between-being: namely, the disjunction between the ideal state of being and the corruption of that ideal, which is still inevitably a sign—perhaps even a sacrament—of the first sense of our between-being. He goes so far as to say that even vulgar jokes point to the sublime. He suggests that “once you have got hold of a vulgar joke you may be certain that you have got hold of a subtle and spiritual idea.”⁶⁴ Those who make vulgar jokes do so because they have observed “something deep” that “they could not express except by something silly and emphatic.”⁶⁵ They have seen “something delicate which they could only express by something indelicate.”⁶⁶ The ground of being and meaning speaks with a fair degree of lucidity even in being contradicted by nonsense.

Chesterton regards this sense of being between as distinctly human, which is why he points out that the human being is “[a]lone among the animals” in being “shaken with the beautiful madness called laughter; as if he had caught sight of some secret in the very shape of the universe hidden from the universe itself.”⁶⁷ It is only man who is caught in this awareness—this perplexing, curious astonishment—of his own sense of being between. Of course, we do laugh at animals, but they never share in the joke, because they do not have this same

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 28*, 66.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 36.

sense of being between; we laugh at the laughter of the hyena or the "fantastic shapes of the other animals" only because they are "mirrored in the mind of man."⁶⁸ They become extensions of our own self-understanding. Even the "camel's hump and the rhinoceros' horn are human secrets and even human possessions."⁶⁹ We definitely "know the pelican and the penguin better than they know themselves."⁷⁰ As the world reflects us and as we reflect the world, we are made even more aware of our being as being between. And as we are made more aware of our being between we are opened up more fully to both the profound and the ridiculous.

Chesterton argues that we too easily lose this sense of the between, and thus need a philosophy or theology that helps us to retain it. He explains this need by means of a joke, thereby implying that it is philosophy or theology that upholds our sense of the between that will help us to retain our sense of humor. He writes, "I have often had a fancy for writing a romance about an English yachtsman who slightly miscalculated his course and discovered England under the impression that it was a new island in the South Seas."⁷¹ The same logic of this joke is followed by Chesterton's friend J.B. Morton, in his story about a reputable rocket scientist, "Dr. Strabismus (Whom God Preserve) of Utrecht," who sets off amidst ridiculous fanfare to be the first man to land on the moon. Alas, "Dr. Strabismus (Whom God Preserve) of Utrecht," is high on ambition but low on skill; thus he and his crew end up landing in Worthing (while thinking, in deeply academic seriousness, that it is the moon).⁷² The strange joke-logic followed by both Chesterton and Morton is used by Chesterton to set up the question that guides his first in-depth exploration of Christianity in a book,

⁶⁸ Chesterton, "The Anatomy of the Joke."

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 211.

⁷² J. B. Morton, *The Misadventures of Dr. Strabismus* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1949), 1-17.

Orthodoxy (1908): “What could be more delightful than to have in the same few minutes all the fascinating terrors of going abroad combined with all the humane security of coming home again? ... What could be more glorious than to brace one’s self up to discover New South Wales and then realize, with a gush of happy tears that it was really old South Wales?”⁷³

For Chesterton, these questions bring to mind what he calls the “main problem for philosophers,” which can be expressed in a simple question: “How can we contrive to be at once astonished at the world and yet at home in it? How can this queer cosmic town, with its many-legged citizens, with its monstrous and ancient lamps, how can this world give us at once the fascination of a strange town and the comfort and honour of being our own town?”⁷⁴ How, in other words, can we have a sense of the same (the self, the familiar) *and* the other (that which confronts the self, the strange) without sacrificing either in the totalizing acceptance of non-mediation in univocity or equivocity, or even in the distorting, self-serving mediation of dialectic?

In Chesterton’s mind, it is precisely a Christian (that is, Catholic) theology that presents us with a “philosophy” that best supports our being between as the best expression of our actual experience of the world and as the best account of mediation. It echoes what Christopher Ben Simpson calls a *theologia viatorum* that is forever “between a *theologia nomdicum* and a *theologia beatorum*,”⁷⁵ as well as John Milbank’s insistence, borrowed from Chesterton, that the desire at the core of human nature involves wanting to be at home, and thus to have a sense of wholeness, and wanting to be abroad, and thus to have a sense of the

⁷³ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 212.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Simpson, *The Truth is the Way*, 5.

infinite.⁷⁶ It is the very theology that allows for the yearning at the core of our being that is, as Desmond explains, both a "horizontal exigence for wholeness" and a "vertical openness through otherness to what is ultimate."⁷⁷

This double-posture of belonging and longing, I believe, is a significant starting point for answering the question of what it is in Chesterton's theology that allows him to retain his sense of humor and laugh so heartily, although it may not necessarily provide an absolutely comprehensive explanation for how theology and humor may be reconciled. Obviously, as Conrad Hyers has noticed, in the Bible, as in comedy, things are turned on their heads in a perpetually startling display of paradoxical confrontations; for example, self-importance is thrown down and poverty is raised to the stature of wealth.⁷⁸ Still, it is not enough simply to say that "Christianity appeals to paradox" and therefore supports humor, even if such a claim aligns so well with the incongruity theory that remains at the center of humor research, with its strong references to "contradiction" and "discrepancies."⁷⁹ After all, as already intimated by the examples referred to above, one does not have to look far before one finds an overly stern theologian who expresses nothing but a noble and solemn adherence to the paradoxes of Christianity.

Chesterton provides an interesting remedy to this problem by pointing out that it is possible to "have absorbed the paradox" and have therefore also "lost the point."⁸⁰ It is possible, in Chesterton's mind, to hold to a paradox in such a way as to fail to "see the joke"—that is, to hold to a paradox without seeing it as a

⁷⁶ John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), 210.

⁷⁷ William Desmond, *Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness: An Essay on Origins*, (Wipf & Stock, 2013, second edition), 17.

⁷⁸ Joekel, "Funny as hell: Christianity and humor reconsidered," 421.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 37, Illustrated London News 1935-1936* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 75.

paradox.⁸¹ The whole purpose of paradox, as an extension of analogy's insistence upon comparison, is to set up the shock of contradiction, since "putting things side by side is a necessary preliminary to having them clash."⁸² But to have its fullest force, paradox needs to be taken, as in the case of the doctrine of analogy, as that which by rhetorical force can propel the paradoxologist into the metaphysical truth that is found beyond the bounds of linguistic expression. To use Chesterton's words, one might say that paradox is "stereoscopic," in that gives a person the opportunity to see rather than merely absorb and synthesize two different pictures, and yet be able to see "all the better for that."⁸³

The entire purpose of paradox is not in its verbal construction, taken wholesale as a clever proposition, but to let things be themselves, to indicate toward the sheer quiddity of things. This is to say that it exists to, as Chesterton says, let red be red and white be white, without their being mixed to form the disgustingly anaemic mixture that is the color pink.⁸⁴ Paradox should always be held in such a way as to be "suggestive" and "fruitful" rather than "barren" or "abortive."⁸⁵ It should, by grappling with the sheer intractability of being, overcome "mental inertia" by retaining an openness to otherness and that which is beyond otherness without overemphasizing the two extremes of alienation or complacency.⁸⁶ The question of how this is done thus becomes important. Paradox, as a metaxology or wording of the between, ought to be held in a particular way. To borrow from Milbank, it is not that "impossible contradiction" must be overcome through dialectics in the end, but rather that "an outright

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Hugh Kenner, *Paradox in Chesterton* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1948), 25.

⁸³ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume I*, 230.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 29*, 53.

⁸⁶ Kenner, *Paradox in Chesterton*, 17-18.

impossible *coincidence of opposites* ... can (somehow, but we know not how) be persisted with."⁸⁷ There is something irreducible in being, something revealed by the joke, that ought to be recognized in its very irreducibility.

2. HONESTY, HUMILITY, AND HOSPITALITY

In Chesterton's mind, there are certain primary values according to which an authentic Christian theology operates, and as it turns out, these happen to be the very conditions within which humor itself can operate. They are honesty (implying "perfect sincerity"), humility (implying a healthy "absence of self-esteem" and even worship), and hospitality (implying "boundless good temper," flexibility, generosity, and gratitude).⁸⁸ It turns out that the enemies of these qualities are also the enemies of humor: pride,⁸⁹ complacency,⁹⁰ dishonesty,⁹¹ irreligiousness, and idolatry.⁹² Other enemies of humor—a lack of playfulness, literal-mindedness, authoritarianism, and a lack of courageous risk-taking—are more easily recognized when honesty, humility, and hospitality are taken to be primary values.

On the first of these values, Chesterton observes that many people seem "to assume that the unscrupulous parts of newspaper-writing will be the frivolous or jocular parts" but suggests that this "is against all ethical experience," for "[j]okes

⁸⁷ John Milbank, "The Double Glory, or Paradox Versus Dialectics: On Not Quite Agreeing with Slavoj Žižek" in *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic*, edited by Creston Davis (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 163.

⁸⁸ Ker, *G. K. Chesterton*, 110.

⁸⁹ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 107.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 326.

⁹¹ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 27*, 206.

⁹² G. K. Chesterton, "On Seriousness", 1920, http://www.cse.dmu.ac.uk/~mward/gkc/books/The_Uses_of_Diversity.html#seriousness. Retrieved 10.11.2014.

are generally honest.”⁹³ “Complete solemnity,” on the other hand, “is almost always dishonest.”⁹⁴ Solemnity, in Chesterton’s mind, is a way of distorting the truth of things, and especially our relationship with—that is, our posture toward—that truth. He argues that “balance” is lost when people are “being pelted with little pieces of alleged fact” that construct a picture “made up entirely of exceptions.”⁹⁵ Journalism, for Chesterton, provides many examples of such a distortion of reality, for we will learn that “Lord Jones is dead” even if we never knew that he was alive to begin with.⁹⁶ Whereas “[t]he writer of a ‘snippet’ of news can refer to ‘a fugitive and frivolous fact in a fugitive and frivolous way,’” the “writer of the leading article has to write about a fact that he has known for twenty minutes as if it were a fact that he has studied for twenty years.”⁹⁷

Seriousness, in Chesterton’s view, is far more likely to create a damaging divorce of humor and religion; indeed, he contends that seriousness is the “fashion of all false religions. The man who takes everything seriously is the man who makes an idol of everything: he bows down to wood and stone until his limbs are as rooted as the roots of the tree or his head as fallen as the stone sunken by the roadside.”⁹⁸ “Honesty,” on the contrary, “is never solemn; it is only hypocrisy that can be that. Honesty always laughs because things are so laughable.”⁹⁹ An example from Chesterton’s own life illustrates the hilarity of honesty, especially in its desire to put things properly into context. He writes:

⁹³ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 27*, 95.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ G. K. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 33*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 95.

⁹⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *The Penguin Complete Father Brown* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 246.

⁹⁷ G. K. Chesterton, “On Seriousness.”

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ G. K. Chesterton, *The Apostle and the Wild Ducks* (London: Paul Elek, 1975), 136.

The other day, I was nearly arrested by two excited policemen in a wood in Yorkshire. I was on holiday and was engaged in that rich and intricate mass of pleasures, duties, and discoveries which for the keeping of the profane, we disguise by the exoteric name of Nothing. At the moment in question I was throwing a big Swedish knife at a tree, practising (alas, without success) that useful trick of knife-throwing by which men murder each other in Stevenson's romances.¹⁰⁰

Chesterton explains that at this point he was accosted by two policemen who accused him of damaging the tree. Chesterton, in earnest, points out that this was not true because he 'could not hit' the tree.¹⁰¹ Here, then, it is precisely in his honesty that we find him at odds with his own ideal. The surprise of any joke, after all, is not found predominantly in the contradiction of reality, but in the subversion of our configurations of reality; it challenges what has been taken for granted as truth in order to allow for the possibility of a more authentic encounter with truth.

For Chesterton, such an encounter with and admission of truth requires humility—even the humility that recognizes the limits of our ability to recognize the truth, or the limitations of reason to account for human experience.¹⁰² Chesterton suggests that "being undignified is the essence of all real happiness, whether before God or man. Hilarity involves humility; nay, it involves humiliation."¹⁰³ Even the idea of being made to laugh "contains the idea of a certain coercion' that confronts us with a kind of 'furious self-effacement."¹⁰⁴ This self-effacement in the face of a joke is reflective of the great reversal that is at the center of Christian teaching, which is indicated by the words of Jesus: "Blessed

¹⁰⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles* (London: Dover, 2007), 138.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² G. K. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume XXXVI: Illustrated London News 1932-1934*, (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2011), 60.

¹⁰³ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 28*, 24.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 459.

are the poor in spirit" (Matthew 5.3) and "The last shall be first" (Matthew 20.16). Chesterton's own reading of one of the Beatitudes follows this same logic: "Blessed is he that expecteth nothing, for he shall be gloriously surprised ... Blessed is he that expecteth nothing, for he shall possess the cities and the mountains; blessed is the meek, for he shall inherit the earth."¹⁰⁵ It is possibly this kind of reversal that Chesterton has in mind when he notes that "[r]eligion is much nearer to riotous happiness than it is to the detached and temperate types of happiness in which gentlemen and philosophers find their peace."¹⁰⁶ He suggests that "[r]iot means being a rotter; and religion means knowing you are a rotter."¹⁰⁷ A state of fallenness makes hardly a dent in the realization of the Kingdom of Heaven; rather, it is in the vulnerability of humor—in this recognition of the twin possibilities of 'lightness of heart' and of the "hurt" in the fact of corrupted ideals—that the Kingdom is more readily recognized.¹⁰⁸

Nevertheless, there are times, Chesterton suggests, "when we are almost crushed, not so much with the load of the evil as with the load of the goodness of humanity, when we feel that we are nothing but the inheritors of a humiliating splendor."¹⁰⁹ The idea of regarding humility as the ground for humor stems from Chesterton's conviction that "it is always the secure who are humble."¹¹⁰ The secure are even humble enough to laugh at their own jokes, for "[i]f a man may not laugh at his own jokes, at whose jokes may he laugh? May not an architect pray in his own cathedral? May he not (if he is any artist worth speaking of) be

¹⁰⁵ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 69.

¹⁰⁶ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 28*, 24.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 25.

¹⁰⁹ Chesterton, *The Defendant*, (Wildside Press, 2005), 41.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 81.

afraid of his own cathedral?"¹¹¹ In Chesterton's view, hilarity follows humility because humility is a sign of security: "This combination of joy and self-prostration is a great deal too universal to be ignored."¹¹² In fact, "[i]f humility" is ever "discredited as a virtue" it would be because of a "collapse of joy."¹¹³ Chesterton observes that pessimism and bitterness tend to go hand-in-hand with "self-assertion."¹¹⁴ Thus, for him, pride does not go before a fall, but is the fall.

Two ideas are raised in this homage to humility. One of the oldest of the theories of humor is known as superiority theory, which suggests that laughter is the result of a subjective sense of one's superiority over a thing or person or people group. This offers, in my view, a purely dialectical and therefore overly universal or impersonal reading of humor, in that it suggests that all humor concerns the mediation of the other into the same. While there may be some truth to this theory, it is terribly self-limiting. Against this, Chesterton's understanding of humor, as a subjective experience, stresses that the primary source of our laughter is our submission to the specifics of the joke before us. This is to stress again that our sense of the humorous is rooted in a genuine confrontation with otherness, in its uniqueness, and our consequent obedience to the quiddity of that otherness. Chesterton's linking of humility and hilarity fits with an obvious and certainly quite universal fact about human nature: people will joke and laugh more easily when they feel safe. Although laughter and joking can take place in stressful circumstances, even the function of this use of humor is generally to provide comic relief—that is, a sense of safety even within difficult or perilous circumstances.

¹¹¹ Chesterton, *Collected Works*, Volume 27, 95

¹¹² Chesterton, *The Defendant*, 81.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

Humor, as St. Thomas Aquinas suggests, provides “playful relaxation”—something only possible in serene circumstances.¹¹⁵ This understanding of humor as arising from a sense of stability complies nicely with Thomas Veatch’s theory of humor, which stipulates that one of the “conditions for the perception of humor” is a combination of the perception of a “violation of some subjective principle” with a definite sense that “the situation” is actually “normal.”¹¹⁶ Additionally, Peter McGraw’s “benign violation theory,” which builds on Veatch’s theory, is rooted in this same perception of security; a joke is only received as a joke in something unsettling or threatening if the source of the instability or threat is perceived to be benign.¹¹⁷

It is in this connection of humility to security that Chesterton is able to sustain the view that humor and seriousness are not ultimately antithetical but are instead intimate partners. Even in his reading of *The Book of Job*—a deeply serious book about the agonies of human experience—he therefore discovers a God who winks and laughs.¹¹⁸ That a great deal of Christian theology remains seriousness is not to say that it is opposed to joy. Even if “Catholic doctrine and discipline” are perceived as providing stubbornly serious walls, “they are the walls of a playground” within which hilarity can run riot.¹¹⁹ Chesterton contends that Christianity provides the “frame” that has “preserved [even] the pleasure of Paganism.”¹²⁰ This view challenges the sustainability of Žižek’s complaint about the lack of humor in Christianity, and perhaps even my own quip above about the lack of humor in John Calvin. Just as the fact that we do not have direct

¹¹⁵ John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), unpaginated e-book.

¹¹⁶ Thomas C. Veatch, “A theory of Humor,” in *Humor* 11, no. 2 (1998), 161-215.

¹¹⁷ Peter McGraw & Joel Warner, *The Humor Code*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 10.

¹¹⁸ See G. K. Chesterton, *In Defense of Sanity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2013), 91-102.

¹¹⁹ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume I*, 350.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

evidence that Jesus laughed is not enough to make the claim that he or his followers are forbidden to laugh, perhaps it is precisely because of serious theology that genuine laughter may be possible. Perhaps those who laugh do not laugh because they have not been serious enough.

This view of laughter and humility as related to security also has something to say about the way we relate to community. Chesterton notices that a "joke falls flat" when a person is confined to a kind of "insane individualism" that pride establishes.¹²¹ The purpose of a joke is to be "good enough for ... company."¹²² To be in on a joke, one has to be in favor of the "uproariously communal."¹²³ Levities cannot be secrets, but are always in-jokes for those privy to the camaraderie of humor and laughter.¹²⁴ Consequently, for Chesterton, humor, together with being rooted in honesty and humility, is always reliant upon an attitude of hospitality. One has to be on the side of the joker—empathetic with his stance toward reality—in order to see "what he is making fun of."¹²⁵ A "good man ought to love nonsense," although this ought not to be at the expense of sense.¹²⁶ Even if it sounds like a contradiction in terms, this appreciation even of the alien in the comical is ultimately reflective of an appreciation of a sense of belonging, of having a home. Thus, Chesterton suggests that "[c]entripetal people are jolly" while "[c]entrifugal people are a bore."¹²⁷ It is those who have a sense of the center, who are honest and humble before genuine otherness while also retaining a strong sense of their own being-at-home, who have the greatest capacity for delighting in the delightful.

¹²¹ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 28*, 32.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 33*, 536-537.

¹²⁶ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 28*, 324

¹²⁷ Ibid., 355.

This raises the question of what the center of Chesterton's theology is. What is the primary springboard for his jollity? Chesterton's fundamental image for one who genuinely revels in between-being is the image of a child. When he writes of a theology that seeks astonishment, he explains that the thing he means "can be seen, for instance, in children, when they find some game or joke they specially enjoy. A child kicks his legs rhythmically through excess, not absence of life. Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, ... they want things repeated and unchanged":¹²⁸

They always say, "Do it again"; and the grown up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun; and every evening, "Do it again" to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.¹²⁹

This becomes a resounding theme throughout Chesterton's body of writing, this intense need to return to the familiar as if it were new. His theology may therefore be understood, in essence, as a reflection of the Christian hope for a renewal of all things (Revelation 21.5). Just one of many examples of this can be found in Chesterton's essay *The Riddle of the Ivy*:

More than a month ago, when I was leaving London for a holiday, a friend walked into my flat in Battersea and found me surrounded with half-packed luggage.

'You seem to be off on your travels,' he said. 'Where are you going?'

With a strap between my teeth I replied, 'To Battersea.'

¹²⁸ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 263.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 263-264.

'The wit of your remark,' he said, 'wholly escapes me.'

'I am going to Battersea,' I repeated, 'to Battersea via Paris, Belfort, Heidelberg, and Frankfort. My remark contained no wit. It contained simply the truth. I am going to wander over the world until once more I find Battersea. Somewhere in the seas of sunset or of sunrise, somewhere in the ultimate archipelago of the earth, there is one little island that I wish to find: an island with low green hills and great white cliffs. Travellers tell me that it is called England (Scotch travellers tell me that it is called Britain), and there is a rumour that somewhere in the heart of it there is a beautiful place called Battersea.'

'I suppose it is unnecessary to tell you,' said my friend, with an air of intellectual comparison, 'that this is Battersea?'

'It is quite unnecessary,' I said, 'and it is spiritually untrue. I cannot see any Battersea here; I cannot see any London or any England. I cannot see that door. I cannot see that chair: because a cloud of sleep and custom has come across my eyes. The only way to get back to them is to go somewhere else; and that is the real object of travel and the real pleasure of holidays. Do you suppose that I go to France in order to see France? Do you suppose that I go to see Germany in order to see Germany? I shall enjoy them both; but it is not them that I am seeking. I am seeking Battersea'.¹³⁰

Here, Chesterton claims that he is *going* to *where he is*, which implies, quite rightly, that he is somehow *distant* from where he *is present*. The paradox here, even in its syntax of intimacy, exaggerates distance; to leave is to properly understand, as if for the first time, what it is to arrive at the very place one is leaving from. This is what Milbank points out in his discussion of paradox as a "misty conceit."¹³¹ Paradox brings near what is distant, and creates a space between what is near, thus revealing that there is nearness *in* distance, and vice versa. This reclaiming of the distance in nearness, and vice versa, mirrors Chesterton's ongoing desire to return to a state of sinless innocence, to have his

¹³⁰ Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles*, 162-163.

¹³¹ Milbank, "The Double Glory, or Paradox Versus Dialectics," 160-176

perspective repeatedly renewed.¹³² In short, Chesterton's theological project hinges around not just the possibility but the reality of things made new, recovered, and reconciled.¹³³ Using a frivolous example, he says that "[i]f you do not think it extraordinary that a pumpkin is always a pumpkin, think again. You have not yet even begun a philosophy. You have not even seen a pumpkin."¹³⁴ Again, the problem at the center of our human experience—a problem that eradicates one's sense of connection to God, his world and other human beings, as well as one's sense of humor—is the problem of pride. In Chesterton's view, "all evil began with some attempt at superiority."¹³⁵ In the final analysis, for him, Christianity presents an opportunity to regain a healthy perspective by reclaiming a perspective of the world untainted by pride. Although various literary devices are used to reflect this concern—including the use of defamiliarization and humor—Chesterton's central image for this renewal of

¹³² This theme of recovering the new is ongoing in Chesterton's work. I offer three examples of this here. The first is Chesterton's story about a bored boy's encounter with a stranger who insists that the boy try on a range of colored spectacles, thereby converting the world into a green world, then a blue world, then a red world, and, finally, a yellow world. At the end of this visual experiment, the boy is confronted again with the world that he actually lives in and is astonished to find its vivid and various colors staring back at him. The boy sees the world "with new eyes." In *The Coloured Lands* (London: Dover, 2009 [1938]), 17-49. Then, in a novel, Chesterton sets up a series of strange but benevolent ruses, conducted by the so-called Club of Queer Trades, to force people to confront their worlds with replenished astonishment, in *The Club of Queer Trades* (London: Hesperus, 2007 [1905]). In another novel, Chesterton tells the story of a man named Innocent Smith, who goes to tremendous and sometimes perplexing lengths to, as Alison Milbank suggests, "receive his own life back as a present," in *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians: The Fantasy of the Real* (London: T & T Clark, 2009), 122; Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *Manalive* (Mineola: Dover, 2000 [1912]). For Chesterton, "The prime function of the imagination is to see our whole orderly system as a pile of stratified revolutions. In spite of all revolutionaries it must be said that the function of the imagination is not to make strange things settled, so much as to make settled things strange; not so much to make wonders facts as to make facts wonders," in *The Defendant*, 53.

¹³³ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 313.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 387-388

¹³⁵ Chesterton, *In Defense of Sanity*, 341.

perspective is found in the practice of confession, the act of owning up to one's own faults by opening one's self up to the Divine. He suggests that

when a Catholic comes from Confession, he does truly, by definition, step out again into that dawn of his own beginning and look with new eyes across the world He believes that in that dim corner, and in that brief ritual, God has really remade him in His own image. He is now a new experiment of the Creator. He is as much a new experiment as he was when he was really only five years old. He stands, as I said, in the white light at the worthy beginning of the life of a man. The accumulations of time can no longer terrify. He may be grey and gouty; but he is only five minutes old.

I noted above that there is no shortage of humorlessness in church history, and it is therefore somewhat understandable that people like Žižek and Saroglou, among others, would suggest that humorlessness is a problem faced particularly by the religiously inclined. However, such a view of history is too limiting to convincingly argue that Christianity and hilarity cannot be reconciled. Indeed, a closer look reveals that Christianity and hilarity may be reconciled, not in spite of Christian theology, but strictly because of it. Even Žižek agrees that quite a number of theologians do seem to see what he calls the "joke of Christianity," including Luther, Chesterton, and Kierkegaard—thinkers whose fidelity to paradox is obvious. Still, Chesterton's response to the critique that implies that Christians lack humor would probably be the same as the response he offered to Robert Blatchford when he criticized Christians for being capable of evil. Chesterton suggests that the problem is not that Christians are bad, but that "human beings" in general "are bad" despite claiming to be "so good."¹³⁶ Where there is humorlessness in Christians, it may simply be a problem of personality or circumstance, but it is not, in Chesterton's theology, a problem relating to what Christianity itself advocates, for "Christianity is itself so a jolly thing that it

¹³⁶ Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 391.

fills the possessor of it with a certain silly exuberance, which sad and high-minded Rationalists might reasonably mistake for mere buffoonery and blasphemy.”¹³⁷ In fact, it is because of its emphasis on holding paradox carefully, as a conversation between the same and the different, and its valuing of honesty, humility, and hospitality, that Christianity and hilarity are easily reconciled, even if the Gospel narratives do not depict a laughing Christ. Therefore, Chesterton, who begins his book *Orthodoxy* with a question of how we might reconcile our desire for a sense of being at home with our desire for adventure, is able to conclude with a reverie on the hidden laughter of Christ:

Joy, which was the small publicity of the pagan, is the gigantic secret of the Christian. And as I open again the strange small book from which all Christianity came; and I am again haunted by a kind of confirmation. The tremendous figure which fills the Gospels towers in this respect, as in every other, above all the thinkers who ever thought themselves tall. His pathos was natural, almost casual. The Stoics, ancient and modern, were proud of concealing their tears. He never concealed His tears; He showed them plainly on His open face at any daily sight, such as the far sight of His native city. Yet He concealed something. Solemn supermen and imperial diplomatists are proud of restraining their anger. He never restrained His anger. He flung furniture down the front steps of the Temple and asked men how they expected to escape the damnation of hell. Yet He restrained something. I say it with reverence; there was in that shattering personality a thread that must be called shyness. There was something that He hid from all men when He went up a mountain to pray. There was something that He covered by abrupt silence or impetuous isolation. There was some one thing that was too great for God to show us when He walked upon our earth, and I have sometimes fancied that it was His mirth.¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Ibid., 374.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 365-366.

A SUPERNATURAL NOWHERE: How Radical Orthodoxy and Lonergan Studies Have Failed to Get Along (And Why they Should)

Jonathan Robert Heaps

In this short article I will attempt to clear away just one of the several obstacles to theological collaboration between Lonergan studies and Radical Orthodoxy. For a little less than two decades, John Milbank and Neil Ormerod (both senior scholars in their respective communities) have been unnecessarily dismissive of one another's theological projects. Indeed, both have repeated their long-held, but too facile, critiques in recent publications. In 2014's *Beyond Secular Order*, Milbank continues to accuse Lonergan of imposing quasi-Kantian apriorist anachronisms upon Aquinas' account of the *verbum mentis*, a critique he first leveled in 1997's *The Word Made Strange*.¹ In a 2014 *Theological Studies* article, Neil Ormerod has repeated his evaluation of Milbank's project as an inherently

¹ John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Hoboken, NY: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014); John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1997). Milbank implies this critique as early as 1990's *Theology and Social Theory*, insofar as he cites Lonergan's *Insight* alongside Rahner's *Spirit in the World* as examples of post-Kantian "Transcendental Thomism," (John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2 edition [Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006], 296).

conceptualist enterprise, an appraisal he had leveled as early as 1999 in a *Philosophy and Theology* article responding to Milbank's treatment of Lonergan in *The Word Made Strange*.² I am of the opinion that, even more than simply misreading one another, Milbank and Ormerod are missing an opportunity to model a constructive exchange between two theological enterprises, which have more in common than has been heretofore been appreciated. I hope in what follows to both gesture toward a way beyond the misreading and, onwards, to the ground on which a mutually beneficial dialogue between Lonergan studies and Radical Orthodoxy might take place.

I will briefly review that 1999 article by Neil Ormerod criticizing John Milbank's treatment of sources and express my concern with its concluding remarks, which suggest Milbank and Lonergan's projects are dialectically opposed. In order to show why I believe that conclusion is too hasty, I will examine an illustrative passage from Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* that at the very least complicates the matter in promising ways. In fact, I hope to show how Ormerod and Milbank (and so perhaps Lonergan studies and Radical Orthodoxy in general) share certain important theological commitments that could ground significant theological conversation and collaboration. I will then, finally, try to suggest some potential avenues of conversation in light of Ormerod's more recent scholarly publication on the nature—grace distinction. Ultimately, I hope this can provide some small occasion for expanding dialogue between two theological enterprises that make culture and history central themes.

² Neil Ormerod, "The Grace–Nature Distinction and the Construction of a Systematic Theology," *Theological Studies* 75, no. 3 (September 2014): 515–36; Neil Ormerod, "It Is Easy to See': The Footnotes of John Milbank," *Philosophy & Theology* 11, no. 2 (January 1999): 257–64.

'THE FOOTNOTES OF JOHN MILBANK'

More than 15 years ago, Neil Ormerod published an article in *Philosophy & Theology* criticizing John Milbank for supporting his claims with overly general reference to the sources in question.³ The article considers a short, but Ormerod thinks illustrative, passage from Milbank's *The Word Made Strange* (*TWMS*), in which Milbank offers brief criticism of Bernard Lonergan's *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*.⁴ Lonergan's book (originally five articles published in *Theological Studies*) analyzes Aquinas on the intellect and how the procession of the *verbum mentis*, or inner word, as act from act, can shed some (albeit dim) light on the procession of the Trinitarian persons, pure act from pure act. Milbank attributes to *Verbum* the exegetical position that "the active element in the mind, for Thomas, arises insofar as the mind is able to 'transcend' the intentional concept, or the inner word."⁵ According to Milbank, because Lonergan had overlooked the converging identity of the *forma exemplaris* (which he takes for the 'idea' in Aquinas' work) with the *imago expressa* (which he, even less plausibly, takes for the 'inner word' in Aquinas), Lonergan's work misleads its readers by suggesting that the mind's intentional encounter with 'external *esse*' occurs somewhere in a reaching beyond ("transcending") language. Ormerod's article, after noting the opaqueness of Milbank's prose, fairly dismantles Milbank's criticisms of Lonergan, from the claim that *forma exemplaris* and *imago expressa* are central for Aquinas to his claim that Lonergan is anachronistically imposing a post-Kantian transcendentalism upon Aquinas.

³ Ormerod, "It Is Easy to See."

⁴ Bernard Lonergan, *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe S.J. and Robert M. Doran S.J., Vol. 2 in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, (Toronto, Ont.: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

⁵ Milbank, *TWMS*, 93.

Ormerod's analysis of Milbank's criticism lands some heavy blows. As the article's title suggests, Milbank's footnotes do little to support the terse certainty with which his claims about Lonergan and Aquinas are made. A single reference to the entirety of Lonergan's *Verbum* (a 250 page volume, Ormerod reminds us) backs Milbank's interpretation thereof. Ormerod also points out that the single article in the *Summa* to which Milbank refers to support his reading of Aquinas fails to mention *forma exemplaris* or *imago expressa*, nor do the root terms *forma* and *imago* appear there at all.⁶ Ormerod goes on to argue that the very text cited (*ST*, I, q27,1) reveals how Milbank conflates image with species or form. This would place Milbank's account at odds with Aquinas' faculty psychology, in which image is grasped by the senses or imagination, but form is grasped by the intellect. Furthermore, Ormerod is certainly right when he goes on to note how Milbank has overlooked the sense in which Lonergan appeals to intellectual transcendence, namely by reference to distinct acts of judgment that follow upon acts of understanding.⁷ Indeed, that is the central point of the psychological analogy for Lonergan; acts of judgment proceed from acts of understanding, as the Son proceeds from the Father, pure act from pure act. Again, I certainly agree with Ormerod that Milbank's claim that Lonergan denies "Aquinas' clearly articulated belief in a relational 'emanation' at the highest level of intellectual act" is as difficult to understand as it is infelicitous with Lonergan's position on

⁶ I will let Ormerod draw the explicit conclusion himself: "So in a text which Milbank chooses for his refutation of Lonergan, a text which is so clearly about Aquinas' analysis of the inner word, we find no reference to the phrases Milbank identifies as central to understanding Aquinas' analysis," (Ormerod, "Milbank's Footnotes," 259).

⁷ On this point, however, I think Ormerod overlooks Milbank's allusion to Maréchal and Rahner in his characterization of Lonergan's account of the mind as actively transcending intentional concepts. Though Milbank is certainly in good company grouping Lonergan with so-called "transcendental Thomism," it is a characterization Lonergan himself resisted, (see Bernard Lonergan, "Philosophy and the Religious Phenomenon," in *Philosophical and Theological Papers 1965-1980*, Vol. 17 in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, [Toronto, Ont: University of Toronto Press, 2004], 393-4).

intellectual emanation.⁸ Understanding that proceeds unto knowledge (*i.e.*, true judgment) is, in the second chapter of Lonergan's *Verbum*, quite explicitly an ontological participation in uncreated Light.⁹ In any case, not much of Milbank's criticism survives Ormerod's point-by-point evaluation, and some readers of Milbank may feel vindicated, at least anecdotally, for their sneaking suspicions that Milbank's presentation of their favorite figures may have been, well, *not quite right*.

Of course, those who would be further gratified by the rehearsal of Ormerod's now 15 year-old argument against Milbank's reading of Lonergan can find and read the article for themselves. My central concern here is to review a respect in which I think Ormerod uncharacteristically over-extends his evaluation of, and so his conclusions about, Milbank's larger project. Ormerod himself raises the question whether, "at this stage one may wonder what is left of Milbank's critique of Lonergan and his analysis of the inner word." He answers, "Not much on the basis of the evidence provided."¹⁰ Yet Ormerod pushes the matter further on to an evaluation of Milbank's general position on knowledge and language. It

⁸ Ormerod, "Milbank's Footnotes," 261; I am concerned here too that Ormerod misses what is at stake for Milbank in making this criticism of what he no doubt takes to be Lonergan's "post-Kantian transcendentalist" position. Indeed, Ormerod's otherwise well-founded reply to the "transcendentalist" label (namely that Lonergan finds good reason to suppose Aristotle and Aquinas deployed a proto-phenomenology of consciousness in developing their metaphysical accounts of knowledge) offers evidence that he misses the allusion Milbank appears to be making to "transcendental Thomism" and its post-Kantian paths around conceptualist rationalism. As I have already mentioned, this categorization is common, but mistaken with regard to Lonergan's philosophy and theology.

⁹ Lonergan, *Verbum*, 100; Thanks to Dr. Ormerod for pointing out to me that Milbank (with Catherine Pickstock) claims John Jenkins "refuted Lonergan" by resisting "Lonergan's epistemologization of Aquinas theory of truth which is still fundamentally an Augustinian illuminationist one," (see John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* [London: Routledge, 2000], 19, n. 9). Lonergan only "epistemologizes" the theory of truth insofar as he claims that one can only come to discover for one's self the fact of ontological participation in uncreated Light by coming to some modicum of self-knowledge. This claim seems, so far from a Kantian assumption, to be a nearly analytic proposition.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 263.

is at this point that I think Ormerod moves from a detailed and utterly fair dissection of Milbank's excesses to a programmatic dismissal that may not prove charitable, strategic, or quite accurate.

Ormerod's concluding dismissal of Milbank is something of a Lonerganian commonplace: what ails his opponent are undiagnosed conceptualism, an anti-realist rejection of true judgment, and an operative (albeit implicit) notion of the real as "already out there now."¹¹ Certainly these are common enough ailments in our epistemological ecosystem, and so elements of his diagnosis may well, in the final analysis, stick in the case of Milbank. However, I am worried that it may have been arrived at on the basis of the doctor's terminological allergies rather than an adequate examination of the patient's symptoms. That Ormerod refers to Milbank's "linguistic idealism" as "static conceptualism" could tip us off that perhaps the criticism is missing its mark.¹² Many critical adjectives may fit Milbank's ambitious project, but "static" hardly seems one of them.¹³ I would contend that, at least in Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* (TST), his "linguistic idealism" opposes itself, not to Lonergan's critical realism, but to the very sorts of naïve realism that overlook the constitutive role meaning plays in the human world, which, it is worth noting, should include not just neo-scholastic

¹¹ I will not go into these in any great detail, but for now it suffices to say that they mean one's interlocutor takes knowing to be a matter of applying universal concepts or signs to the right particular experiences, that he or she takes the incommensurability of universal concepts to particular beings to preclude the possibility of knowing *das Ding an sich*, and takes the criteria of "real beings" to be something like the "already out there now-ness" a kitten attributes to a real saucer of milk as opposed to a hallucination or realistic photo of the same. The entire first part of Lonergan's major philosophic work, *Insight*, is devoted to developing an account of knowledge that accords with the data of cognition given with being intelligently conscious and avoids these epistemological dead-ends, (see Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, 5th edition, Vol. 3 in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992]).

¹² Ormerod, "Milbank's Footnotes," 263.

¹³ One of my colleagues has suggested we might better speak of "Milbank's *frenetic* conceptualism."

Thomism, but also all forms of reductive materialism, both scientific and Marxist.¹⁴ If this interpretation of Milbank's linguistic idealism proves plausible, then I propose that those who are convinced by Lonergan's postmodern development of Aquinas' theory of knowledge, like Neil Ormerod and myself, ought to see in Milbank an imperfect ally rather than an irretrievable enemy.

MILBANK'S PREFERRED INTEGRALISM

A survey of Milbank's works, for the sake of evaluating his "linguistic idealism" in general, is beyond the scope of this short study. Instead, much as Ormerod selected a small excerpt to treat as an illustrative instance, I will here excerpt a paragraph from *TST* that, rather than "dialectically opposed horizons," suggests a promising overlap in theological purpose between Lonergan and Milbank (and Ormerod). The passage is taken from Chapter 8, titled, "Founding the Supernatural: Political and Liberation Theology in the Context of Modern Catholic Thought." The chapter opposes an ostensibly Rahnerian approach on the natural-supernatural distinction to an ostensibly Blondelian approach. In the passage at hand, Milbank pits a spatialized construal of the relationship (Rahner) against an understanding that locates the relationship within the generation and transformation of signs and meanings in history and culture (Blondel). This passage, I believe, evinces agreement between Milbank's and Ormerod's approaches to the nature-grace distinction on several topics: the inadequacy of overtly spatial metaphors for construing the grace-nature distinction, the static conceptualism that leads to that kind of spatialization and so hypostatization

¹⁴ The position is, in fact, rather more complicated than even this, since Milbank takes *philosophical* realism to be impossible (and rejects MacIntyre's realism as an instance of this), but says that his final *theological* position "assumes a realist cast," (Milbank, *TST*, 5). In other words, to suggest Milbank's idealism is a) his final position and b) at bottom an anti-realism is to miss the force of his argument about the inadequacy of secular reason.

with regard to the distinction, and the need to think the distinction in terms of history and culture instead. In fact, it was Ormerod's 2014 article in *Theological Studies* on the grace–nature distinction, and Lonergan's potential contribution to theologies thereof, that returned me to this passage in *TST* and, in part, spurred the idea for this little article.¹⁵ I will argue, then, that Ormerod can find an ally in Milbank on this topic and so, perhaps, on others as well. Furthermore, I believe Milbank's concern for moving beyond static concepts of nature and the supernatural (as spatially related “areas” or “regions”) to an account of the supernatural as operative through history and its constitutive cultural meanings implies that his so-called “linguistic idealism” resists considering the real as “already out there now” and instead insists on what a Lonergan scholar might call a “world mediated by meaning.”¹⁶

Milbank turns to the natural–supernatural relation in Chapter 8 of *TST* out of concern for the possibility of a theology that can respond critically to society. He sees the dominant discourses of Catholic political and liberation theology as committed to an “integralism,”—which Milbank defines as “the view that in concrete, historical humanity there is no such thing as a state of ‘pure nature’”—that effectively makes the conclusions of secular social science inviolable. He calls this version of integralism a “Rahnerian transcendentalism.”¹⁷ Milbank

¹⁵ Ormerod has also published a short follow up article; see Neil Ormerod, “Addendum on the Grace–Nature Distinction,” *Theological Studies* 75, no. 4 (December 2014): 890–898.

¹⁶ Of the world mediated by meaning, Lonergan writes, “As the child learns to speak, he [or she] moves out of the world of his [or her] immediate surroundings towards the far larger world revealed through the memories of other [people], through the common sense of community, through the pages of literature, through the labors of scholars, through the investigations of scientists, through the experience of saints, through the mediations of philosophers and theologians,” (Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 2nd ed. [Toronto, Not: University of Toronto Press, 2003], 28.)

¹⁷ Of course, Ormerod's article gives us reason to wonder how representative of Rahner's approach Milbank's characterization may turn out to be. Nonetheless, answering that suspicion will have to remain a task for another day. For now, I will accept Milbank's labels in the interest of accurately representing his position.

characterizes the link between this integralism and an ineffectual political theology as follows:

The social is an autonomous sphere which does not need to turn to theology for its self-understanding, and yet it is already a grace-imbued sphere, and therefore it is *upon* pre-theological sociology or Marxist social theory, that theology must be founded. In consequence, a theological critique of society becomes impossible.¹⁸

Far from aiming to argue against a left-wing politics, Milbank wants to argue instead against this species of integralism in order to bolster left-wing politics against the increasingly unavoidable realization that "it is impossible for anyone to accept any longer that (secular) socialism is simply the inevitable creed of all sane, rational human beings."¹⁹ Instead, he insists Christianity must serve as the norm against which a socialist politics must be measured, rather than the other way around. Milbank believes that if a genuinely theological critique of society and politics will take root, it must do so in the soil of a different kind of integralism. He identifies this alternative integralism with what he calls Blondel's "supernatural pragmatism." He believes this alternative escapes the prison of "the governing modern assumption that *poesis* mark out the sphere of the secular" and "points the way to a postmodern social theology."²⁰ This, in a significant respect, is the point of *TST* as a whole.²¹

¹⁸ Milbank, *TST*, 208.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 209.

²¹ In *TST*'s first chapter, Milbank calls this assumption out as his primary target, writing, "Not only to social scientists, but also to theologians like Harvey Cox, it has consequently seems obvious that the sphere of the artificial, of *factum*, marks out the space of secularity... However, the 'obvious' connection of the *factum* and the secular can and must be called into question," (*Ibid.*, 11).

Thus we turn to the paragraph I have in mind as site of potential cooperation between Milbank and Ormerod, and we turn to it by asking a question: how can Blondel's version of integralism effect such a transition?

Only the French [read: Blondelian] version truly abandons hierarchies and geographies in theological anthropology, because it refuses even to 'formally distinguish' a realm of pure nature in concrete humanity. Nor, for this version, is the encounter with grace situated at the margins of every individual's knowing (as for Rahner), but rather in the confrontation with certain historical texts and images which have no permanent 'place' whatsoever, save that of their original occurrence as events and their protracted repetition through the force of ecclesial allegiance. No social theory can set limits to the capacity of these events to become 'fundamental' for human history, any more than it can in the case of any other events. The version of integralism which 'supernaturalizes the natural' is, therefore, also the more historicist in character, because it does not identify the supernatural as any permanent 'area' of human life. But neither does it locate 'nature', although it recognizes the always finitely mediated character of participation in the supernatural. Where the supernatural impinges as the cultural recurrence of an event, it is at once recognizable as 'different', and, at the same time, as limitlessly capable of transforming all other cultural phenomena. One can conclude that, in avoiding any hypostasization of human nature, in stressing the historical, by insisting that the later and superseding may assume priority over the earlier and apparently more basic, the French version of integralism points in a 'postmodern' direction which has more contemporary relevance than the view of Rahner.²²

Though we are certainly within our rights to echo Ormerod's comments about the difficulty of Milbank's prose, I want to highlight one recurring feature of Milbank's contrast between Rahnerian and Blondelian integralism: a rejection of any construal that *spatializes* the relation between the natural and the supernatural. Milbank prefers Blondel's approach because it "truly abandons *hierarchies* and *geographies* in theological anthropology," and refuses to "formally

²² Ibid., 208–209.

distinguish' a *realm* of pure nature." It does not *situate* grace "at the margins of every individual's knowing," nor identify the supernatural with an "'*area*' of human life," nor "*locate*" nature within the same.²³ Though he does not explicitly explain this aversion to spatial metaphors for the natural–supernatural distinction, the problem seems to be that they establish impenetrable "zones" for secular and theological reason, such that the constitution of the social (via *poesis*) places it "essentially '*outside*' the Church and the basic concerns of theology."²⁴ Recall that, for Milbank, this is the central modern assumption to be overturned by *TST*—namely, that the *factum* is identical with the secular.

Perhaps it is evident, to recur to the *Philosophy & Theology* article with which we began, how Ormerod's assumption that Milbank's reference to "external *esse*" reveals Milbank's fundamental commitment to an "already out there now" real seems generally at odds with at least *this* passage in *TST*.²⁵ Moreover, this passage seems to conflict directly with Ormerod's more recent claim that Milbank's discussion, in his short 2005 book on Henri de Lubac, of a "middle" between the natural and supernatural "spheres" or "realms" evinces a latent conceptualism that "hypostatizes (these) concepts into distinct realities."²⁶ Instead, Milbank's analysis would lead us to ask whether such a diagnosis better suits an ostensibly Rahnerian approach that symbolizes the immanence of the supernatural in terms of an infinitely receding visual horizon found reflexively in every instance of "taking a good look."²⁷ Rather, I take Milbank to be rejecting

²³ Though there it is difficult to determine exactly what Milbank has in mind by "insisting the later and superseding may assume priority over the earlier and apparently more 'basic,'" it does carry the implication that, in addition to rejecting spatializations, Milbank also rejects brute temporality as the deciding factor in distinguishing natural and supernatural.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 208.

²⁵ Ormerod, "Footnotes," 263.

²⁶ See Neil Ormerod, "The Grace–Nature Distinction," 530, n. 44.

²⁷ Against the objection the Rahner and Blondel hold basically the same position, Milbank writes, "Here [in *Spirit in the World*], Rahner argued that, in every act of understanding, the

the logic relating to spatially extended bodies, which precludes two things from occupying the same location at the same time. Within such a spatial logic, that is the foundation of all really meaningful distinctions; one thing is not another because they are not in the same space. But if the natural and the supernatural are not spaces, regions, areas, spheres, or locations, then perhaps we can think their coincidence without collapsing their distinction.²⁸ Or, to put the matter in more Lonergan-centric terms, we might say that Milbank is insisting on a natural–supernatural distinction that is a genuine theory of the distinction, one put in terms of its intelligible and dynamic structures, not a merely static description of its topography.

In what would this theory consist? Milbank's prescription is more difficult to discern than his proscription against "any hypostatization of human nature," but I think two central determinations can be identified in the above passage. Rather than synchronic spatializations (or even bare chronologies, *a la* epochal thinking), Milbank thinks political theology and its attendant integralism must be thoroughly *historical* and *cultural*. Events, images, and texts occur and are repeated within an ongoing cultural polity (the Church), and it is precisely in the *cultural recurrence* of these events that we encounter the supernatural.²⁹ Milbank is critical, in fact, of both Henri de Lubac and Hans Urs von Balthasar (both of whom make substantive appeal to Blondel's philosophy in their theological projects) for "refusing to face up fully to the humanly constructed character of cultural reality" and, thus, failing to identify that process with human

intellect has a preconception (*vorgriff*) of the openness of Being itself, which alone permit grasp of the contingency of the particular object understood. Blondel likewise claims that in every act of understanding, what is understood is not equal to the aspiration of the will. However, Blondel, unlike Rahner, does not understand the transcending capacity of the self only in terms of something permanently in excess of finite instances," (Milbank, *TST*, 211).

²⁸ And perhaps "the middle" Milbank wants to find in the work of de Lubac is a relation, not a place.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 209.

participation in the supernatural.³⁰ Milbank seems to have in mind that the historical process of encountering, appropriating as constitutive, and creatively re-instantiating, the texts, images, and practices of ecclesial-cultural making *is* the supernatural as immanent to the natural. Lonergan scholars might recognize two familiar notions hiding just underfoot here. First, Milbank seems to hold a commitment to the human world as mediated by meaning. I would wager that Milbank's self-described "linguistic idealism" names precisely this commitment. Second, this mediation of meaning is an inescapably historical process and, in fact, the dynamic unfolding of that process constitutes history itself. Thus, if I may venture another translation, a Lonergan scholar might call the religious dimension of this process the mediated and mediating phases of theological and ecclesial *praxis*.

ANGLES OF APPROACH

Though there remains much about which Ormerod and Milbank can disagree, it seems to me that these two central and organizing commitments—to avoiding spatializing (and so hypostatizing) human nature and to making culture and history central in our theologies—could be the ground on which a substantive collaboration between Radical Orthodoxy and the increasingly broad Lonergan enterprise could be established. Ormerod himself mentions, in the article on the nature–grace distinction mentioned above, the need to move away from an overly compact metaphysical consideration of human nature that “tends to bracket out or mask the social, cultural, and historical dimensions of human existence,” because “human existence ... is fully historically (socially and culturally) constituted.”³¹ Though Ormerod offers Robert Doran's development

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ormerod, “Grace–Nature Distinction,” 530.

of Lonergan's scale of values as a theoretical apparatus for integrating these elements into a theological anthropology, he acknowledges similar concerns to Milbank that such formal determinations can "easily fall over into the type of conceptualist extrinsicism that dominated Catholic theology after Trent" without some more dynamic movement that penetrates across the formal differentiations of our theoretical types, thus linking the social, the cultural, and the historical intrinsically to the supernatural. For this movement, Ormerod appeals to Lonergan's "healing and creating vectors" that supernaturalize human nature in history through God's grace. Ormerod (via Lonergan) perhaps unknowingly echoes Blondel's account of a grace that is doubly "afferent," entering into our human existence both from "without" and from "within," both from "above" and from "below."³²

The dynamic expansion of a relatively compact notion of "human nature" that Ormerod is advocating—namely, a normative scale of values (which includes the social, the cultural, and the religious) as acted upon by creating and healing vectors in history—makes the historical mediation and concretization of religious values an integral feature of understanding human being. Thus, I can imagine Milbank (and Radical Orthodoxy in general) being, at the very least, willing to engage in a dialogue about a broadly compatible intellectual program. The task of an adequately historically-minded theology remains ahead of us, and many hands would make lighter work. I can also imagine that intramural interest would be further piqued by Ormerod's advocacy of Lonergan and Doran's explicitly Trinitarian account of how human meanings and values participate in

³² See, in Oliva Blanchette's intellectual biography of Blondel, the latter's defense of integralism and "Social Catholicism" against the charge of modernism by distinguishing theologies that think of religion as having its source in "efférence" or intra-human emergence, those that identify a single "afference" from without (extrinsicism), and his own that identifies a "double afference" of God's grace from both without and within human beings (integralism), (Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010], 232–233).

the supernatural through culture and history. Lonergan's relatively unknown theological theorem, the "four-point hypothesis," has its origins in Lonergan's Latin theology, but Doran has done a great deal of work in the first volume of *The Trinity in History* to elucidate the significance of sanctifying grace and the habit of charity as created participations in the Trinitarian life.³³ One fruit of Doran's development is a rich articulation of the "Law of the Cross," in which the gift of God's love makes truly non-violent political action possible by giving human beings an other-worldly willingness to endure suffering, so that evil might not be returned for evil.³⁴ Such action, and the meanings and values through which a culture might come to promote it, seems generally compatible with Milbank's desire for an ontology of peace with which to resist modern ontologies of violence. I believe that Lonergan scholars can, and should, on this point (and I hope many others) collaborate with those theologians positioned within the Radical Orthodoxy constellation, for the sake of a robust theology of the supernatural in history that may speak a critical and uplifting word to social and political forces for the good of the poor, the grieving, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers, and the persecuted.

CONCLUSION

By acknowledging how certain Lonerganian habits of critique may have occluded points of shared theological concern between Lonergan studies and Radical Orthodoxy in Ormerod's analysis of Milbank, I have sought to occasion

³³ Robert M. Doran SJ, *The Trinity in History: A Theology of the Divine Missions, Volume 1: Missions and Processions* (Toronto, Ont.: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

³⁴ Of the Law of the Cross, Doran writes, "The supreme good into which fidelity to the Law of the Cross, which enjoins the return of good for evil done, transforms the evils that afflict the human race is the emergence of a new community in history and in the life to come, a community that in theological terms can be understood as the whole Christ, Head and members, whether explicitly Christian or not, in all the concrete determinations and relations constitutive of this community," (see Doran, *The Trinity in History, Vol. 1*, 231–245).

second thoughts about the compatibility of the two on questions of meaning and history. Both Ormerod and Milbank resist static, hypostatizing descriptions of the nature–grace relation, and resist them for the sake of a more sophisticated and dynamic approach to the supernatural. Such an approach would find the supernatural operative in the constructions of human meaning and the contingent unfolding of human history. Both theologies set out heuristic determinations (or, we might say, eschatological expectations) for how political and social structures can be transformed by the entry of God’s love in Jesus Christ into both of these. Furthermore, both theologies, one by implication and the other by design, resist the modern assumption that the secular is co-extensive with the social. Along the way, I have sought to indicate how seemingly opposed manners of speaking (which can be so terminologically allergenic to one another) can, with some exegetical effort, be shown to express quite concordant positions. These can be identified if patient dialogue can persist unto the spontaneous flash of mutual understanding.

Reviews

A VERY CRITICAL RESPONSE TO KAREN KILBY: On Failing to See the Form

D. C. Schindler

A (Very) Critical Introduction to Balthasar. By Karen Kilby. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012, xii + 176pp.

Karen Kilby complains at the beginning of her recent introduction to the thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar that, unlike most theologians, he does not give critics a “useful target” that would allow one to get a handle on his work: “In Balthasar there is no such handle—no central or even apparently central methodological statement, no acknowledged allegiance to a particular philosophical thinker or school, and no one point where it is easy to say, if he is wrong here, something is wrong about the whole business.”² In a 1976 interview published not so long ago in *Communio*,³ Balthasar was asked

² Karen Kilby, *A (Very) Critical Introduction to Balthasar* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 7.

³ Michael Albus, “Spirit and Fire: An Interview with Hans Urs von Balthasar,” *Communio* 32, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 573-93. Kilby restricts herself to the English translations of Balthasar, and exclusively to the secondary literature on Balthasar in English, presumably because of the

whether his theology does have a founding center, a methodological point that guides his work as a whole and so gives it its defining character. In response to a question concerning his difference from Karl Rahner, with whom he has often been associated, he offers an observation that is quite useful for anyone who would wish to understand what he is about. While he and Rahner had initially contemplated working on a joint project, it became evident to them that their “starting-points were always different. There is a book by Simmel which is called *Kant and Goethe*. Rahner has chosen Kant, or if you will, Fichte, the transcendental approach. And I have chosen Goethe, my field being German literature.”⁴ As he goes on to explain, the key to his approach is the notion of *Gestalt*, “the indissolubly unique, organic developing form.” It is this key, we shall see, that unlocks the connections between the various dimensions of his exceedingly rich theology. Because Kilby fails to grasp the essential nature of form, and for that reason fails to see how the “panels” of the “tryptich” of Balthasar’s *Trilogy* are intrinsically related, her criticisms miss their mark at every point. “If she is wrong here,” we might say, “something is wrong about the whole business.” Rather than respond point by point to her various criticisms, we will simply discuss this central issue and suggest how it leads Kilby to misinterpret the three joints of the trilogy. Then, we will indicate how the notion of form explains Balthasar’s style—contrary to Kilby’s most basic charge of his exhibiting a “performative contradiction.” Finally, we will conclude with a few observations about what seem to be Kilby’s own presuppositions about the nature of knowledge and truth, which compromise her capacity to offer valuable criticism. The reason for this brief essay is not primarily to criticize Kilby, but to take the

overwhelming amount that has been written in other languages, but one would have expected her at least to consult a relatively brief interview with Balthasar in which Balthasar gives his own account of his general approach, since this interview has indeed appeared in English translation.

⁴ Ibid., 579.

occasion to try to characterize in a succinct way at least a basic aspect of Balthasar's way of doing theology, which may seem so foreign in the context of the contemporary academy.

The heart of Kilby's critique of Balthasar is that the form of his work contradicts the content of his theology, in two essentially related ways. On the one hand, while he emphasizes the mystery of revelation and its surpassing of all human attempts to comprehend it, in his accounts he soars above all of the sources of theology—scripture, tradition, and the work of other theologians—and so gives himself what amounts to the perspective of an omniscient narrator. He *says* that there is an abiding mystery, in other words, but he *thinks* and *writes* as if there isn't. Perhaps more directly still, Balthasar aims to develop his theology in the mode of drama, which is meant to integrate the subjective/personal dimension (lyric: spirituality) and the objective/theoretical dimension (epic: theology). According to Balthasar, God's Word is not merely spoken to, but *sent into* the world, and this divine action requires a responsive action on the part of man. There is no neutral place to stand outside of this "Theo-drama"; any would-be spectator will inevitably find himself called into the play as a co-actor (*Mitspieler*). And yet, Kilby argues, the perspective that Balthasar apparently takes in describing this drama belies the claim that there is no place outside on which to stand. Apart from the one apparent exception of his book insisting on retaining a (non-presumptuous) hope for universal salvation, Balthasar always seems to "know too much" about whatever it is he treats. Rather than being *in* the undecidability of dramatic interaction, he seems always to place himself above it all. Thus, as Kilby explains, the problem with Balthasar's theology is quite subtle, but pervasive: what is objectionable is not a matter of the content of any particular theological idea so much as it is the form of his theology, the approach he takes. She concludes that there is something therefore especially

dangerous about Balthasar, and worries about his growing influence. The aim of her book is thus to counteract that influence.

To determine whether Balthasar is in fact caught in a “performative contradiction,” of course, first requires that we come to terms with what Balthasar himself understands by the ideas he presents. This means we must orient ourselves by his basic presuppositions. One of the most fundamental of those presuppositions, which underlies and informs every part of his thinking, is that the transcendentals are inseparable. Balthasar gives this traditional axiom a rather strong interpretation: in his theology, it means, for example, that beauty is essentially dramatic because of the intrinsic presence of the good, that truth is essentially aesthetic, that goodness is essentially “veridic,” *i.e.*, manifestive of truth, and so forth. All of these dimensions are at play in form. The notion of form that Balthasar identifies as the unifying center of his thought therefore does not belong exclusively in the sphere of aesthetics, but runs through all of his work; the form unfolds a different aspect of its endlessly rich significance according to each particular order (aesthetics, drama, logic), but each depends on the others for its proper meaning. Kilby, however, interprets aesthetic form as separate from goodness and truth, she interprets drama as separate from beauty and truth, and—mostly by implication here because she never explicitly raises the question of the truth, for significant reasons, as we will see—she interprets truth as separate from beauty and goodness. As a result, the effigy of Balthasar’s theology comes to appear as something ugly, evil, and false, and so, if nothing else, at least perfectly adequate to the criticism Kilby intends to make of it. Let us look at each of these dimensions in more detail.

The key to Balthasar’s notion of form, when it is interpreted within the context of the circumincession of the transcendentals, is its paradoxical unity of opposites: form and splendor, subject and object, immanence and transcendence, time and eternity, surprise and fulfillment, freedom and obedience, manifestation

and hiddenness, and so forth. We cannot enter into a full discussion of any of these in the present context, of course, but there is a fundamental point that bears immediately on Kilby's assessments. For Balthasar, a form—*Gestalt*—is a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Genuinely to perceive a form, then, is to move beyond not only any of the identifiable parts of a thing in particular, but indeed all of them together. There is a crucial paradox here: it is one and the same thing, as it were, that gathers the various aspects of a thing together into a whole and simultaneously opens that whole up as luminous—that is, as an inbreaking of transcendence. This is why the (immanent) order of beautiful form and the transcendence of its splendor cannot be separated, and so why the vision of form (a grasp of the definitive wholeness) coincides with rapture (a being carried out “beyond” oneself). It is also why the dramatic action that occurs in response to the perception of form is able to take place, so to speak, *inside* that form, and why this action ultimately acquires the shape of a definitive commitment of freedom (rather than disconnected reactions to one set of circumstances after another). And, finally, it is why the understanding of the truth of God is not primarily a subjective appropriation of some concept, however vast, but even more basically a fruitful and fulfilling *ex-propriation* of the knower in the Spirit and into the form of Christ.

Kilby is right to identify the notion of form as lying at the center of Balthasar's aesthetics, but wrong to think it belongs only there. What is distinctive about the aesthetics is not form *per se*, but the *perception* of form. Kilby's failure to see this leads her both to isolate the aesthetic in a manner that radically distorts it, and then to miss the essential presence of form in drama (not to mention in logic, but in fact she does not address this aspect of Balthasar's theology in her book). Her distortion of aesthetic form becomes evident in several ways. First of all, Kilby asserts that the vision of form in Balthasar “transfixes” the beholder, whereas the

crucial word for Balthasar is “enraptures.”⁵ (Her overlooking the importance of this point is perhaps why she is able to make the very odd claim that “eros” has no place in Balthasar’s theology.⁶) To transfix is to paralyze; to enrapture, by contrast, is to carry away, to provoke, to attract in a manner that ignites one’s internal energies, and so to bring one *truly* outside oneself—*i.e.*, to initiate the drama. Second, Kilby repeatedly *opposes* aesthetic form to truth. For example, “Theology then [*i.e.*, when conceived aesthetically in Balthasar’s sense] becomes focused, not on examining or expressing the *truths* of revelation, or on bringing out its coherence, or illuminating its meaningfulness, but instead on expressing and examining the *beauty* of revelation.”⁷ Form, for her, concerns beauty *rather than* meaning. It is thus separated from all content (*i.e.*, it is form conceived “formalistically”). Indeed, Kilby herself enacts what she criticizes by setting aside at every turn what she calls the “substance” of Balthasar’s ideas and attending simply to their form, or style, looking for patterns that she then can evaluate on their own. As a result of its separation from goodness and beauty, form gets, as it were, “sentimentalized”; it becomes, one might say, an inner feeling that has no purchase on reality and cannot be verified. Instead, the presumption becomes that form can only be arbitrarily asserted, and so imposed from the outside. Note, there is no real “rapture” (apart from an excited feeling, perhaps) possible in this case because there is no substantial form *into which* one could be moved.

⁵ This “transfixation” is indeed for Kilby the governing theme of Balthasar’s aesthetics. The title she gives to the section in which she presents this aesthetics is “Transfixed: Seeing the Form” (Kilby, 42). If she had written instead, “Enraptured: Seeing the Form,” one notes immediately how different the note struck would sound—and how much more faithful this alternate view would be to Balthasar’s own understanding.

⁶ Consider for example his positive judgment, at the outset of the trilogy, of Dionysius’ privileging of the term ἔρως over ἁγίασις (*Glory of the Lord*, volume 1: *Seeing the Form* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982], 121-23, and his comment on the liturgical text from the Christmas Preface, which he presents as a paradigm of the phenomenon of “seeing the form,” as he understands it: “There is a good reason why the word used is *amor* (ἔρως) and not *caritas*” (ibid., 121).

⁷ Kilby, 48.

If one takes such a notion for granted at the outset, as Kilby does, then talk of form can never be anything but authoritarian self-assertion. The horizon that she imposes on theology, against which alone Balthasar's ideas are allowed to appear, is that of political positioning, which is why she never once asks whether an idea she is considering might be true, but instead relentlessly asks only one sort of question: Who is *he* to say such things? By what authority? How does *he* know? And so on.

There are two important implications of Balthasar's notion of aesthetic form, properly interpreted, in this context. On the one hand, it means that a beautiful form cannot be grasped piecemeal, but necessarily has an "all at once" character to it (as has always been recognized, from Plato and Aristotle to modern thinkers). Kilby mentions this feature of form, but seems to forget the significance of this point when she goes on to complain that Balthasar's problem is that he does not allow a gradual, fragmented grasp of form. To insist on a piecemeal construction of a form is in fact to deny that there is such a thing as form at all, or at the very least to deny that form is graspable *simply*. One may, of course, approach a form in some sense by stages; however, these stages are not fragments that one then assembles, but initial intimations of the whole *qua* whole, all of which get recast with every deeper insight. This does not at all mean, however, as Kilby seems to believe, that the "all at once" character of the perception, once achieved, implies there is nothing "more" left to perceive. Quite to the contrary. This brings us to the second implication: precisely *because* the form is a whole greater than the sum of its parts, a grasp of its "all at once" character is at the very same time an awareness of its "excess," and so a precondition, as it were, for a sense of its mystery. It is only *because* one has had a definitive insight into a form that one realizes it would be possible to write volumes upon volumes and never say everything that could be said; one could translate and publish and receive dictation from others unceasingly, one could

spend a good deal of one's writing illuminating the work of others who also, from different perspectives, glimpsed the form, and know that the form has become only more mysterious through it all.

Kilby seems to think that a person without insight, or with only partial, fragmentary grasps of a thing, is in the best position to preserve a sense of its excessive mystery. But is this true? It seems rather to be the case that one cannot even have a sense of the partiality of a perspective *unless* one has a grasp of the whole of which one's perspective is a part—which means, as we will propose at the end, that Kilby's "epistemic humility" turns out in spite of itself to be far more immodest, and (what is most problematic for one who would wish to enter into dialogue with her) incorrigibly so by its very nature. If Kilby were correct, one would have to say that a person who is ignorant of poetry, for example, one who knows nothing about a particular author, and indeed who can make out only a word or two here or there in the poem because it is written perhaps in an unfamiliar language, will necessarily have a greater sense of the inexhaustible meaning of the poem, indeed will more likely never run out of things to say about it, than someone who has a profound insight into the poem and can see how all the strange and surprising images fit—miraculously—together. Or to take Kilby's own example: it is only the person sitting so close to the drums at a concert he couldn't manage to hear anything else, and so could only "suppose" that there was in fact a symphony going on, who would best appreciate the excessive mystery of the music being played.⁸ It is hard to imagine how such a suggestion could be plausible to anyone other than a person who can't get the tunes of postmodern thinking out of his or her head. Clearly, one whose hearing is eclipsed by the drums would have a sense of having missed something essential, of being powerless to attend to the symphony and thus to bring to

⁸ Kilby, 151.

mind the fullness of the music performed, but this is quite different from standing in awe of the music's mysterious depths.

Kilby's desire to preserve the mystery of revelation, the authority of scripture and tradition, the importance of dialogue with other thinkers, and so forth, is laudable. But her failure to grasp the nature of form turns this desire in a direction we would ultimately have to judge to be fruitless. For Balthasar, reality presents itself as form, which, as we have seen, means that the better one grasps it, the more evident its mystery becomes. Reality itself has a dimension of depth, which understanding works to make manifest. Kilby's rejection of form or its accessibility implies, by contrast, that reality is essentially *flat* to the extent that it enters into our vision. In this case, one can preserve mystery, not by entering more deeply, more centrally, into reality, but rather only by holding oneself back or keeping to the edges—remaining, so to speak, next to the drums, even if better seats were available. In this case, mystery becomes something negative, and due primarily to subjective disposition. It is no longer convertible with truth in what Balthasar calls the objective “miracle” of being, but instead coincides simply with ignorance or non-knowing. Contrary to her intentions, no doubt, Kilby nevertheless deprives God and the world of mystery because the “darkness” that would otherwise be caused by the overfull light of the depths comes about, for her, only if we succeed in reminding ourselves, perhaps out of good intentions, to shut our eyes. The irony is that this sort of “modesty” in fact makes the self the arbiter, the granter of mystery.

Just as Kilby separates beauty from goodness and truth, she also separates goodness from beauty and truth—in other words, she treats drama as if it had nothing to do with form.⁹ For Kilby, the essential feature of drama is open-

⁹ John Milbank has recently challenged the view that we are presenting here, namely, that, for Balthasar, drama is a matter of form and so remains in essential continuity with the aesthetic—and of course eventually also with the realm of truth. In the second edition of *The Suspended*

endedness and undecidability. She thus claims that the only place where Balthasar's theological style does justice to its content is in the book *Dare We Hope*, in which Balthasar resolutely guards against presumption about "how things will turn out," as it were. To be sure, the notion of "surprise" is a central one for Balthasar, and is crucial to his notion of drama. But it is only in superficial instances of drama that surprise is essentially connected with subjective ignorance. To be prematurely informed "whodunnit" during a B-grade detective show is to lose interest in the program altogether. But we all already know the culprit in *Macbeth*, and yet it remains dramatic for us every time we see it well-performed. Kilby explains that a dramatic theologian would be "one who is caught up, in the midst of things, and who cannot claim to have read or to have a grasp of the whole script in advance."¹⁰ Is it really the case that an actor who has never read a script, or who is only fed one line at a time, would be better able to enter into a drama than one who had read and re-read a script, and

Middle (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), Milbank makes the provocative claim that Balthasar ultimately leaves form behind in his transition to the theatrical theory. We see evidence of this, Milbank explains, in "the Preface to the *Theodrama*, where Balthasar speaks of an action that lies beyond 'form' and the contemplable—to which the riposte must be, how can there be an action at all, especially an action upon something, which does not in some sense appear and which is not regardable (whether or not it is 'comprehensible')?" (Ibid., 77). Milbank confesses that his claim will be one "at which many will protest," and indeed the many will turn out to have good reason: the very text Milbank cites here to support his provocative claim says the precise opposite of what he imputes to it. Balthasar raises, here, the possible objection that the divine drama is somehow "invisible" or non-appearing, not as an expression of his own thesis, but as a challenge to his entire project, which is the reason he takes such pains to show why it is untrue. As he explains quite plainly in the preface, drama does not go beyond *form*, as Milbank supposes, but only beyond passive, detached *spectation* of form, which is why drama "expands aesthetics into something new," even while aesthetics remains in this expansion "yet continuous with itself" (*Theo-Drama*, volume one: *Prolegomena* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988], 17). Love is not in the least "beyond form" for Balthasar. In fact, one could say that the contrary affirmation represents a particularly succinct summation of his theology as a whole. For a clear presentation of this, see his book *Love Alone Is Credible*, especially chapter nine, which is entitled "Love as Form."

¹⁰ Kilby, 63.

lived with it for months?¹¹ Again, it is hard to see how any one would think this is the case, outside, perhaps, of certain streams in the contemporary academy. According to Kilby's understanding, one cannot have true drama without a certain formlessness and incompleteness, and she takes for granted that Balthasar shares her understanding of the nature of drama without attempting to ascertain whether this is the case. In fact, one cannot understand drama as Balthasar does without coming to terms with his notion of form. Just as aesthetic form is a coincidence of form and splendor, so too is drama a form in which the openness of surprise coincides with the closure of insight, resolution, and definitive action. Balthasar points to God's inner life as the *Urdrama*. For Kilby, this would have to mean either that Balthasar thinks of the Trinitarian relations as reflecting a paradigmatic undecidability and incompleteness, or that he simply does not know what he is saying. In other words, he is either shockingly heretical or shockingly confused about his own theology. We might agree with Kilby that there is some confusion here, but we suggest it does not in fact belong to Balthasar.

For Balthasar, the essence of drama lies in the reciprocal dependence of apparently opposed movements, and thus an irreducible tension that comes to light only with a grasp of their unity in the whole. It is only such a view of drama that explains why Balthasar can describe God's inner life as the proto-drama. The ancient Greeks, the "inventors" of the genre, based their plays on myths already well-known to the audience, and would sometimes recount the essential plot as a prelude to the play in order that ignorance about the ending not distract the audience from the drama of the action. The action in Greek drama,

¹¹ The infamous Broadway show from 2011, "Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark," apparently went through a record 183 dress rehearsals, in part because the script was constantly being re-written by a group of writers in response to audience reactions. The actors, thus, received new lines at every rehearsal. The question is, does this represent a paradigm of drama, or a failure of drama?

then, primarily consists, not in presenting a surprise-ending, but in gradually laying bare, layer by layer, the profound tensions that constitute human existence. The most essential surprise of drama, we might say, comes from the “vertical” depth rather than the “horizontal” undecidability, which is why it is coincident with the perfection of form. Thus, a “dramatic theology,” understood in Balthasar’s rather than in Kilby’s sense, is one that aims to bring to light the irreducible tensions of the life of the world inside of the life of God. But the only way to show forth tensions is to exhibit the encompassing whole that they bring about, and indeed the whole that allows them in fact to be tensions. Disjointed fragments carry no tension because they lack any internal unity to each other, which means that incompleteness as such is undramatic. This point perhaps sets into clearest relief the difference between Balthasar and Kilby. If it is true, then it follows that one will better be able to bring out dramatic tension the more adequately one succeeds in bringing the whole to light. It is therefore *precisely* a sense of drama (and not the betrayal of such a sense) that would drive one to seek as full and as comprehensive an account as possible. When Balthasar says that the theologian cannot stand outside of the drama, what he most fundamentally means is not that he does not know what he is talking about (in which case it would be presumptuous indeed to publish one’s writing). Rather, he means that the theologian does his thinking *inside* the glorious (*herrliche*) form that has laid claim to him—*i.e.*, he thinks as a believer that belongs to Christ, rather than as a neutral scholar. Christian thought thus has an obligation to this form. The effort to display the meaningful form that brings out the tensions of existence is dramatic because it is bound in obedience to something greater than itself. Because of the essentially dramatic nature of form, as Balthasar understands it, to the extent that one’s writing succeeds in bringing it to expression, one’s writing will itself take on that quality—it will reflect the light of the form that, in turn, calls the reader to decision and action. If Balthasar leaves

the question of universal salvation open in *Dare We Hope*, it is not because he happens to remember himself only in this one instance, as Kilby supposes, but because the outcome of the freedom of individuals in history is of a different order than the issue, for example, of the soteriological nature of the incarnation. And it is only a grasp of the *form* of the drama of the incarnation that allows us to remain open in theological hope to the outcome of individual human freedom.

The primary characteristic of a dramatic theology, in short, is that it strives to find the center that gives life to all the parts, rather than in the first place marshaling narrowly framed arguments for or against one or another of these parts in isolation from the rest. In other words, a dramatic theology will exhibit precisely those features that Kilby identifies as evidence of the *lack of drama*. Balthasar's style is no "performative contradiction": it is in harmony with his understanding of drama, and it contradicts only Kilby's own (essentially postmodern) concept.¹²

We have mentioned beauty and goodness so far. As for truth, we have said that Kilby does not seem very concerned with it in this book; she makes virtually no reference to the final part of Balthasar's trilogy (apart from, in one place, expressing astonishment at how many different authors are mentioned in one of the sections). It should be evident that, once again because of his paradoxical sense of the nature of form, for Balthasar, the definitiveness of truth is not only compatible with, but is in a certain respect an indispensable condition for, the openness of mystery. We will not belabor this point, except to indicate that it implies a "non-possessive" notion of knowledge in which the certainty of one's

¹² Kilby draws her notion of drama, and the critique she makes of Balthasar based on it, primarily from Ben Quash (see Kilby, 64-65). Quash, for his part, gets his notion of drama, not from Balthasar, but from Foucault. For a discussion of the inadequacies of such an approach, see my *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Dramatic Structure of Truth* (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2004), 21-25.

grasp of a thing coincides with one's respect for its abiding otherness. Running through the whole of Kilby's discussion, by contrast, is what we could say is a modern, liberal assumption that these dimensions are essentially opposed. According to this assumption, one threatens the freedom of others precisely to the extent that one makes a truth claim, regardless of the content of that truth; in order to ensure respect for others, one needs to loosen one's grasp on truth. But of course the irony is that this assumption makes truth and knowledge oppressive by nature. They appear to be so because they ultimately reduce, as we saw above, to authoritarian self-assertion. And this follows because one has interpreted form in an essentially subjectivistic way. The only way to avoid oppression and domination, given this interpretation, is to limit knowledge, or—as Gianni Vattimo has “argued”—to practice self-irony regarding truth claims. When Kilby explicitly sets aside all consideration of substance, *i.e.*, any engagement with a truth claim as a truth claim, in her discussion of Balthasar, she is in effect determining *a priori* that his presentation of form in the matter at hand is *essentially not* an articulation of the reality of a thing, of the matter as it in fact is. Instead, it can only be an imposition. Knowledge is domination; to avoid domination, one must limit knowledge and truth claims. Thus, when Balthasar attempts to give an account of the whole, to articulate a truth that would illuminate the ways various things are related to one another, given the terms she has set (without argument), Kilby can only understand this as Balthasar's “silently positioning” himself so that he has control. Theology, apparently, is all about power relations, so that if one is not giving power, one is taking it. What one is never doing is enjoying community in the truth. But is it possible finally to enjoy community in any other way?

If one does not accept the tired “hermeneutics of suspicion” that Kilby apparently presupposes here, one can make much more obvious and compelling sense of all of the time Balthasar spends—more than perhaps any other author in

our age—elucidating the thought of others rather than simply laying out his own. If he has the “God’s eye view,” as Kilby characterizes it, what point would there be in going to such lengths at every turn to present others’ insights? Rather than assuming that this is simply an exhibition of his erudition and mastery, one ought to consider the possibility Balthasar thinks that these authors say something indispensable, both to him and to all of us, something that has perhaps been overlooked. One of the things that attracts people so fervently to Balthasar is precisely the fact that his theology enkindles a love for the tradition and implants a desire to get to know the Church’s great saints and theologians better.¹³ Balthasar does indeed attempt to present the whole whenever he writes, but a whole is not oppressive of its parts (how could it be?); if it is a proper whole, it liberates them all to be what they are, it brings to light their uniqueness. There is no opposition, in principle, between truth claims and freedom. If a truth claim in fact enslaves, that is evidence that it is false or incomplete, but because the claim deliberately aims at truth there are grounds in this case for correcting it.

One of the ways Kilby characterizes the problem she sees in Balthasar is by saying he is essentially an “unfettered” theologian, who worked essentially in isolation and so without the natural restraints that occur in one’s thinking when one is beholden to the standards of a press or editorial board, and when one is surrounded by colleagues working in different areas and possessing different backgrounds.¹⁴ But Kilby has clearly not been to visit the archives in Basel, where decades have been spent trying to bring order and accessibility to the *mountains* of substantial correspondence Balthasar wrote in his lifetime. Rather than being narrowly obsessed with his own writing, Balthasar occupied the first

¹³ See, for example, the “testimonies” presented in *How Balthasar Changed My Mind*, ed. Larry Chapp and Rodney Howsare (New York: Crossroad, 2008).

¹⁴ See Kilby, 38–40.

hours of every day—the most important time for work—with the task of writing letters and responding to requests from others, whether those were famous theologians or first-year graduate students. The “colleagues” with whom he discussed not just his work but the problems facing the Church and the world, the great figures of literature and art, and the central questions of philosophy and theology, were some of the greatest minds and spirits of his time. The notion of truth as fruitfulness grew not only out of his long study of the tradition, but also out of his constant dialogue with others.

In the last pages of her book, Kilby attempts to show her fairness and raises a striking question: “Might there not be, it could be asked, underlying the criticisms I have been raising, something very like a modern anxiety toward wholeness, a refusal to countenance even its possibility?”¹⁵ The question ignites one’s hope that she will reflect on the guiding presuppositions that have gone without explanation or argument, and perhaps try to justify them. But one’s hopes are disappointed; she doesn’t answer the question, or even make an attempt. Instead, she simply articulates yet another repetition of her complaint that Balthasar is oppressive because his theology is founded on a “symphonic” conception of truth. Because this is what she writes in response to the question she raises, one can only interpret her as “performing” the answer that she fails to give explicitly. That answer is “Yes.”

Let us, in closing, consider the difference between these two approaches to reality in relation to the question of what Kilby calls “epistemic humility.” One of the epigraphs of *The Glory of the Lord*, volume IV, is a verse from Goethe: “Whoever cannot give account / Of three thousand years, / Let him remain in darkness, unlearned, / And live from day to day.” Balthasar is here taking the principle of “seeing the form,” not as a presumption (the Kantian *a priori*, we

¹⁵ Ibid., 149.

recall, was Rahner's foundation), but fundamentally a *task*. Balthasar feels an *obligation* to account for the whole as adequately as possible because of the claim that the whole makes on him (this is the essence of beauty). It is an essentially other-centered approach, and in this sense it is a fundamental expression of "epistemic humility." Only a truth claim, as we indicated above, can be corrected, because only one who claims truth can be claimed *by* truth. Balthasar's approach is by its very nature and intention open to criticism *precisely because* it is an attempt to see the whole. Criticism of Balthasar, in this respect, is important; indeed, for Catholic (and catholic) thinkers it is indispensable: where his vision is too narrow, where he fails to account for some aspect of reality, of scripture, of the tradition, that is essential, where he exaggerates or oversimplifies, is essential to point out, and one does a service to his thought to make whatever shortcomings it betrays known. Balthasar's reading of other thinkers demonstrates just this disposition. He attempts first of all to articulate the center of the person's thought as generously and as carefully as he can, and only then to offer criticism. Indeed, his method is even more "Ignatian," in that he is best described as entering into the other's thought so that the other is enabled to bring himself, as it were, to judgment. But Kilby shows no such disposition, at least in the reading of Balthasar she offers here. As we observed above, she does not evaluate any of the substance of Balthasar's thought or seek to discern whether what he says might be true. Indeed, she does not even attempt to make any of the substance evident. The question that she raises at the very outset of the book—which, we ought to recall, she presents as an *introduction* to his thought—is not, "What is the fundamental aim of Balthasar's theology?" Or, "How do the parts of his thought fit together?" Instead, she asks—as the "entry" question (!) to orient her discussion—"How can one, then, *catch hold of* Balthasar well enough in order to be able to criticize him?"¹⁶ Does one, we are prompted

¹⁶ Ibid., 6 (italics are Kilby's).

to ask in return, most properly *begin* an assessment of an author in the mode of epistemic humility by finding the best way to get him in one's "grips" so that one may most effectively criticize him?

It would be tempting to say that Kilby is presenting here a "performative contradiction," but on second thought this is not true. In fact, the method follows from her assumptions about the nature of things. If one takes for granted *a priori* that the form of things, of ideas, of thinkers, may perhaps be there but lies outside of any capacity to see it, one is saying in effect that there is no obligation to look for it. One is saying, in other words, that partial perspectives, because they are unsurpassable, are effectively absolute. Kilby quite evidently feels no obligation to find the center of Balthasar's thought, in order to be able to judge it. Indeed, she apparently feels no obligation to read any secondary literature that might help to present the center—and so perhaps challenge her own reading—but only the authors who already agree with her judgments (apart from general references to a few positive overviews of Balthasar's oeuvre at the very outset of the book, there is scarcely a single substantial reference in the footnotes to anything in the secondary literature that is not directly critical.)¹⁷ She in fact makes no effort to enter into it and consider, empathetically, what he is trying to say and weigh its relative truth. One will note, if one rereads her text with this in mind, that Kilby does not say a *single* positive thing about Balthasar in the entire book that she does not immediately substantially qualify or simply undercut—if not in the very next sentence, at least in the very next paragraph.

¹⁷ It is perhaps worth pointing out that this present critique of Kilby's book was originally written in response to an invitation to contribute an "afterword" to be published along with her text, since there was concern her text was so one-sidedly critical. But Kilby refused to allow it. There is an irony that an author who so strongly criticizes a theologian for allegedly seeking to hold the master perspective in a conversation would herself deny a hearing for a view "from the other side," so to speak. The point in mentioning this is not to make an *ad hominem* argument, but simply to show that the insistence on "allowing the other to speak," no matter how sincerely meant, is almost inevitably contradictory in fact, and typically coincides with a willingness to exclude out of hand a genuinely different perspective.

The approbation she gives to *Dare We Hope*, significantly, comes in an *appendix*. While Kilby's emphasis on partiality might seem to give space to the other, her treatment of Balthasar's theology reveals the real implications of her assumptions: precisely because a detachment from the whole makes the fragment absolute in itself, one cannot help but impose one's own views on another, and measure the other by those views in a manner that allows no appeal.

Balthasar's thought, founded on the notion of form, seeks the *center* of things out of a desire to get to the heart of the matter. And this desire has the structure of humility, because it is set on something larger than the self. He seeks the center of Christianity—to display the form of Christ—and he seeks the center of the various thinkers he engages, even and especially the ones he seeks to criticize. Clearly, one cannot offer valuable criticism except of that which one has understood. Kilby rejects *a priori* the availability of a center, which means she simply relieves herself of any responsibility for trying to find it. She makes no effort to see the center of Balthasar's thought, but contents herself with “partiality” and “fragments,” and more or less ad hominem potshots that arise from a selective reading. A person wishes to learn something from a good criticism, which is why it is not in principle a contradiction to write a “very critical introduction,” *i.e.*, an effort to present a thinker to one unfamiliar with him or her that is coupled with a judgment on that thinker. But one learns virtually nothing substantial about Balthasar from this book. Kilby does not reject the study of Balthasar altogether, but her final judgment of this thinker is quite damning: “the one thing in my view one ought *not* to learn from him is how to be a theologian.”¹⁸ Her own book may have been a better introduction to Balthasar's theology if she had attempted to learn from him, if not how to

¹⁸ Kilby, 167.

approach the great Christian mysteries with a humble and faithful intelligence, then at least how to be a proper critic.

HILLBILLIES AT THE GATE: Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt's *Thomas Aquinas: Faith, Reason, and Following Christ*

Brendan Thomas Sammon

Thomas Aquinas: Faith, Reason, and Following Christ. By Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, xii + 342 pp.

As anyone who has had the privilege of conversing with a Thomist knows, devotees of St. Thomas can be a fastidious bunch. And, given the magnitude of Thomas's influence and the complexity of his thought, it is not without some warrant. If the substance of Thomas's work were a cultural form, then surely the guardians of his thought would be justified in constructing a kind of aristocratic Beverly Hills to safeguard and guarantee a standard of Thomistic excellence. And to the extent that this metaphor bears any validity, Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt can be thought of as a sort of theological Jed Clampett. Clampett, as many may recall from the theme song that opened the popular television show "The Beverly Hillbillies," was a southern "hillbilly" who, after discovering oil on his property, relocates to join the aristocracy in Beverly Hills. Most of the endearing qualities of this program stemmed from the fact that, amidst all the elite, fastidious folk in Beverly Hills,

Clampett's folksy, backwoods wisdom time and again won the day. The Clampett family remains forever true to their simple roots as southerners despite being immersed in the aristocratic elitism of Beverly Hills. Perhaps the only reason this metaphor is worth rehearsing is because, in an article back in 2004, Bauerschmidt confessed that if he had to put a name on his reading of Thomas, it would follow in that endearing tradition that Flannery O'Connor dubbed "Hillbilly Thomism."¹ And in the same way that Clampett brought a real-world, down-to-earth quality to the aristocrats of Beverly Hills, so too does Bauerschmidt's *Thomas Aquinas, Faith, Reason, and Following Christ* bring a similar down-to-earth quality to the group of "perfect Thomist gentlemen."²

This is not Bauerschmidt's first venture into this world, however. His 2005 publication of *Holy Teaching: Introducing the Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas Aquinas* has proven to be an immensely helpful examination of Thomas's thought for both beginners and specialists alike.³ That this work spans across the spectrum of Thomist knowledge is a testament not only to the quality of Bauerschmidt's writing, but also to the nature of Thomas's thought; it is like a song with seemingly simple words set to highly complex music that evokes as much wonder as it satisfies. Consequently, it is a music that invites continuous listening. As many specialists of his thought can attest, sometimes the beauty of Thomas's thought becomes most clear when transposed for the non-specialist. And with his second contribution to this effort, Bauerschmidt's "Hillbilly Thomism" demonstrates a capacity to illuminate in clear tones the complex

¹ Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, "Shouting in the Land of the Hard of Hearing: On Being a Hillbilly Thomist," *Modern Theology* 20:1, Jan (2004) 163–183; the same article also appears in *Aquinas in Dialogue: Thomas for the 21st Century*, Jim Fodor and Frederick Bauerschmidt, (eds.) (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 2004).

² Bauerschmidt, "Shouting in the Land of the Hard of Hearing," 163.

³ Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, *Holy Teaching: Introducing the Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005).

music of the Angelic Doctor in ways similar to a Pieper, a Davies, or a McCabe. And much like Thomas's thought itself, the clarity of these tones does not come at the expense of the complex music. On the contrary, their clarity derives from the underlying complexity, analogically elevating the reader's intellect more deeply into the mysteries it expresses.

The main thesis of *Thomas Aquinas, Faith, Reason, and Following Christ* is that Thomas's "intellectual project"—a phrase that Bauerschmidt admits is somewhat misleading since it "is not purely intellectual but is woven into the fabric of a way of life" (81)—is, "consistently and without deviation, holy teaching as a way of life" (80). As he expresses it elsewhere, his a work that wants to present "how Aquinas appears when set against the background of the methods and aims of the thirteenth century Order of Preachers" (315). This means that there is, in Bauerschmidt's reading, a conscious emphasis on the evangelical dimensions of Thomas's thought. Honing in on Van Steenberghen and McNerny, who for Bauerschmidt represent a trend in Thomist thought since the mid to late nineteenth century, Bauerschmidt rejects their view that Thomas's important achievement is most significantly philosophical. He sees a strength in the opposing position, represented most completely by Gilson, that to know a thinker one cannot dispense with the concrete, historical origins out of which his or her thinking emerges. Rather, the occasion of the genesis of this thinking must be seen as an "indispensable auxiliary" (44). As is well known, Thomas's concrete, historical context is one in which his primary concern is a living, acting faith in the Triune God. This makes Thomas's work less an intellectual "project" and more an "intellectual ministry, the ministerial role of the teacher of divine wisdom" (81). A significant part of this ministry involves, for Thomas, praising all that God has created and the order to which this act of creation gives rise and which is supremely available to rational inquiry. One of Thomas's great achievements, as those familiar with his work know, is to maintain and promote

a deep respect for human reason and the knowledge it can acquire apart from divine revelation without in any way compromising or diminishing the necessity of divine revelation for human destiny.

With this in mind, Bauerschmidt begins his account of Thomas's intellectual ministry by examining the knowledge of God that reason apart from revelation is capable of acquiring. Here, reason is viewed in the context of the *Preambula fidei*, as something that not only "walk before faith, but are in a real sense walking toward faith" (83). According to Bauerschmidt, reason identifies above all the desire to know "why," and assumes a congruence between being and mind, that is to say, between the reason why things are the way they are and the capacity within the human intellect to even ask the question "why" at all. It is within the context of this "why" that Bauerschmidt presents clarifying explanations of the primary philosophical tools used by Thomas: the four modes of causality, the distinction between substance and accident, the distinction between essence and existence, the question of God's existence, and the nature of creation. Delving into these issues is certainly nothing new, but in Bauerschmidt's hands they are presented with a lucidity that surpasses some of the best expositions of these matters found among late modern commentators.

One of the more notable characteristics of Bauerschmidt's treatment of these issues is his capacity to explain their more difficult features with helpful simplicity without in any way skirting around the complexities manifest in the debates to which they have given rise over the centuries. For instance, in a mere five pages or so, Bauerschmidt provides a very incisive yet very accessible account of the debate surrounding the *desiderium naturale*, the natural desire for God and the beatific vision (128–134). As the controversy surrounding De Lubac's *Mystery of the Supernatural* demonstrates, the ambiguities of this debate can be often exacerbated when interpreters attempts to present one of the two sides ('pure nature' vs. 'supernature') rather than the problem as it inhabits

Aquinas's own thinking. Like many of the great commentators in the Thomist tradition, Bauerschmidt is able to demonstrate the ways in which both sides embody something of Thomas's own teaching and the way they each fall short. He further admits that in Thomas's own thought there are obscurities that surround this issue but reads these obscurities as perhaps reflecting Thomas's own recognition of the paradoxical nature of the issue itself. And in Bauerschmidt's reading we encounter a Thomas who was not, contrary to many modern interpretations of the Angelic Doctor, a calculating rationalist bent on solving problems. Instead, here is a Thomas for whom theological problems such as this are moments of contemplation and deeper intimacy with the God to whom they refer. In a word, here is Thomas as a poet-minister for whom mystery is an event to be celebrated rather than a celestial mathematician for whom mystery is a problem to be solved.

The image of Thomas as poet-minister seems to capture the Thomas that Bauerschmidt brings to light. Before being a philosopher, or a theologian, and especially before being an Aristotelian, Thomas is above all a Dominican. And the fact that he defies his family's wishes to become one merits asking why he makes such a choice. After all, if Thomas had primarily been interested in becoming an Aristotelian philosopher, "he would have been better advised to become a secular master in the arts faculty than to become a preaching friar" (175). This returns us to Bauerschmidt's primary argument, though toward the end of Part I, now grounded upon not only an analysis of Thomas's account of reason, but also the way in which reason opens to faith. It is in this context that Bauerschmidt examines the crucial notion of *conventientia*—a topic whose complexity is underscored by the lack of secondary literature throughout the commentary tradition.⁴ As a mode of argumentation, and therefore a mode of

⁴ One of the more recent examinations of *conventientia* in Thomas can be found in Gilbert Narcisse, O. P. *Les Raisons De Dieu, Argument de convenance et Esthétique théologique selon saint*

mind, *convenientia* is rooted in the relation between the seeing involved in *scientia* and the seeing involved in faith; or to put it another way, where *scientia* involves a seeing of causes enabling a determination of effects, and faith involves a seeing of effects that lead to a love for the Cause, *convenientia* stands in between these. This means that *convenientia* can also be validly understood as a way of thinking and arguing that derives from beauty, which is itself—in Thomas’s own account—in between the good and the true: the infinite excess of the good pursued in faith and the determination of truth found in *scientia*. And where other commentators may be reluctant to recognize the unity across the distinctions, which Thomas so often emphasizes—say, the unity between *convenientia* and *scientia*—Bauerschmidt crosses these distinctions with aplomb. Concerning this aforementioned relation, Bauerschmidt writes: “...it seems that this is often forgotten when it comes to thinking about the “scientific” character of Thomas’s theology. For if deduction must be an operation carried out using principles derived, at least in part, from induction, then it would seem that *scientia* is founded on something that bears more than a passing resemblance to *convenientia* ... This means that, in relation to *scientia*, *convenientia* is not only for Thomas an alternative path of theological reasoning, but lies at the very foundation of *scientia*” (165). Observations such as this would no doubt be rather disconcerting for certain Thomists—say, those with a more analytic approach—but that does not make them any less correct. Nonetheless, the correctness of this (and other) insights registered throughout *Thomas Aquinas: Faith, Reason, and Following Christ* depends upon the strength of Bauerschmidt’s claim concerning Thomas’s overall priority in his work. It is fitting, then, that Bauerschmidt closes Part I with a more thorough analysis of this claim.

Thomas d’Aquin et Hans Urs von Balthasar (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1997) a source that informs Bauerschmidt’s thinking as well.

Part II is titled "Following Christ," and embodies the opening of reason to faith, or the faith toward which reason is walking. It contains three dimensions that constitute the final three chapters of the book: "The Way of God Incarnate" (chpt. 5); "The Way of God's People" (chpt. 6); and "Thomas in History," in which Bauerschmidt provides a reading of the development of Thomas's thought in various historical contexts.

Bauerschmidt's account of Thomas's Christology is illuminating not only for the way it navigates many of the stormy issues with both caution and ease, but also for the comprehensive use and application of Thomas's texts. True to the form of his thesis, Bauerschmidt looks with equal eyes to both of Thomas's great *Summae* right alongside Thomas's unfortunately often less-read scriptural commentaries (not to mention his *Compendium theologiae*, *De potentia*, *De Veritate*, and others). Emphasizing the "Cyrillian" character of Thomas's Christology, Bauerschmidt refers to it as a "single-subject Christology ... a single divine subject consisting of two natures, divine and human. In other words, when we ask *what* Christ is our answer is twofold—divine and human—but when we ask *who* he is our answer is singular: God the Son" (188-9). Bauerschmidt proceeds to provide a very lucid account of several dimensions involved in this—a lucidity that he credits Thomas himself for allowing. But he rightly cautions that even though Thomas's view is clear, difficulties, aporias, and puzzles remain. And in the context of *Sacra Doctrina*, they ought to, "[f]or the goal of *Sacra Doctrina* is not to arrive at a final explanation but rather the proper locating of mystery by distinguishing it from both the rationally knowable and the nonsensical" (193). Insights like this remind us of a mystical, or devotional, dimension of Thomas that is often too subtle if present at all in some of Thomas's keenest commentators, and Bauerschmidt provides an immense service for not only bringing it to light, but for foregrounding it as central to Thomas's thinking. There is a great deal more in this chapter that space won't allow me to examine

here. Suffice it to say that topics such as Christ's relation to creation, Christ's saving act in terms of "priestly mediation," "the efficacy of the cross," and the "resurrection" each receive the kind of clear yet concise and acute treatment as all that preceded.

Chapter 6, "The Way of God's People" continues to elucidate the various complex debates that derive from themes associated with Thomas's ecclesiology. In order to understand the way of God's people it is first necessary to understand human activity in light of what Bauerschmidt refers to as the chapter's two guiding "axioms" (283): that 'grace does not destroy nature but perfects it' and 'the soul is not the whole human being, but only part of one: my soul is not me.' In light of this, Bauerschmidt opens with an account of the principles of human action: "Powers of the Soul: Knowing and Loving;" followed by "Dispositions and Virtues." Here we find helpful examinations of what might be considered the internal dimensions of human action. Action and the soul are intimately bound up since, for Thomas, "the soul is best thought of not as something that occupies a body, but rather as the capacity of a living being to act in certain sorts of ways" (231). It is here within human activity as the powers of the soul where the dynamic of human immanence opens to the powers of divine transcendence.

Along the way, there is a helpful examination of the debate about the tension between "voluntarism" and "intellectualism" in Thomas. Characteristic of Thomas's own methodology, Bauerschmidt suggests that it might be best to approach it in two different ways. The first requires that we ask which has priority in human activity: will or intellect? When Thomas's thought is examined from this perspective, Thomas appears to be more an intellectualist given that he ultimately concludes that "we cannot will what we do not understand" (*Contra Gentiles* III, c. 26, n. 16). Admittedly, were the examination to end here it would give the impression that Thomas holds a certain type of human understanding as the measure for what is lovable. But how, then, could anyone ever love that

which is beyond understanding? How could one ever love God? This is where the second question becomes important: is the intellect or the will a “higher” or “nobler” power? This question opens a complexity that cannot be resolved as easily as the last question, and much of what this question uncovers reveals a Thomas for whom, like Augustine before him, love is everything. However, Bauerschmidt’s final judgment is careful and measured. He does not say here that Thomas can then be considered a “voluntarist” as much as an “intellectualist.” Rather, after carefully examining the ways in which, for Thomas, love, and thus the will, have priority over the intellect, the conclusion is simply that the label “intellectualist” does not appear to be either wholly accurate or helpful because Thomas indeed recognizes the vital place of the will and the indelible importance of love. What we have here is a way of reading Thomas that appears not only aware of the need to remain balanced when treating such a complicated thinker, but also illuminates that very balance in Thomas himself. Similarly careful readings guide Bauerschmidt’s analysis of human dispositions and virtues, the law, and grace. What comes to light is the way in which a careful, “middle” reading of Thomas is perhaps the only way to disclose the genuine substance of Thomas’s own thinking. Especially when that thinking is dealing with the difficult tensions between seemingly opposed phenomena—grace and free will, intellectualism and voluntarism, e.g.—this middle-logic is not only helpful but vital to allowing Thomas’s own thinking to come to light.

After discussing the role of human activity in the way of God’s people, Bauerschmidt turns to the life of grace, which holds the various strands of human activity together in a unified movement toward God. In the hands of other scholars, Thomas’s account of grace can become dry and abstract, often creating more confusion than necessary. But in Bauerschmidt’s hands, and in accordance with his thesis, Thomas’s account of grace is embedded in a narrative of the human person’s journey toward beatitude. The primary theme is

love, and how does one examine love except in the context of relationships? Looking primarily at Thomas's *Commentary on the Ten Commandments*, Bauerschmidt offers an account of grace that grows out of Thomas's role as a friar preacher. Here the reader is invited to see the complexity of Thomas's thinking vis-à-vis his life in the trenches of everyday Christian living, but to see this complexity in all its splendor as something that draws us closer to the divine mystery. This method guides Bauerschmidt through the following two sections of this penultimate chapter: "Formation in the Virtues," and "The Sacramental Life." Throughout these sections, it becomes clear that approaching Thomas's thought in terms of Thomas's life as a friar preacher illuminates a dimension of Thomas's thinking that provides a more complete and clear picture of the Angelic Doctor.

In one of the book's most original sections, Bauerschmidt, following Robert Wielockx, offers a theo-literary analysis of Thomas's poem *Corpus Christi, Adoro te devote*, because "[i]t is perhaps in Thomas's Eucharistic poetry that the theological and devotional come together most seamlessly" (273). Here we see in Thomas how it is possible to unify sophisticated philosophical thinking with devotional, spiritual, and liturgical content. Prayer becomes a kind of "argument," which for many may seem like an odd if not repellant way to understand the latter. But if that is so, it is only because of the very limited and reductive tone that the word 'argument' has taken in our late modern context. For Thomas, argument was not confined to a process of discursive analysis but more broadly included anything that brings human beings closer to the God who is truth itself. T. S. Eliot said that "genuine poetry can communicate even before it is understood."⁵ He wrote this in an essay on Dante, who himself was deeply inspired by scholastic thought in general and Thomas Aquinas in particular.

⁵ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), 238.

Again, approaching Thomas as a poet might grate against what many perfect Thomist gentlemen might consider to be Thomist orthodoxy. Some may find it totally unintelligible given the vague nature of poetry. However, Bauerschmidt's analysis of Thomas's thought as it appears in his poetry testifies not only to the fact that Elliot and Dante were onto something, but that perhaps anyone aspiring after that perfect Thomist gentlemen orthodoxy (again, if I may be allowed this vague and indeterminate reference) may be missing something important in the Angelic Doctor.

Bauerschmidt closes this penultimate chapter with an examination of Thomas's eschatology, under the title of "The Patria," which is the theme that closes Thomas's *Adoro te*. After speculating on reasons as to why eschatology is so scarce among modern commentators on Thomas, Bauerschmidt suggests that it is a dimension best approached in light of the two axioms noted above (that grace perfects nature, and that my soul is only part of me). Why? Because in this way, we can understand how human destiny is concerned with perfecting rather than replacing creatures, and that such a perfection involves embodiment. Describing Thomas's eschatology as "demythologized," Bauerschmidt contends that Thomas's vision was driven by the desire to offer a "scientifically plausible translation of scriptural imagery" (287), a translation that Bauerschmidt laments is simply not plausible today. But even here, Thomas is read as a man of his time, whose eschatological thought was the most non-developed area of his theology (given his untimely death). Hence, it tended to follow the general thinking of his day.

The book closes with a chapter title "Thomas in History," which intends to provide a broad sketch of the historical reception of Thomas's work since his death. The primary principle that animates this chapter is summarized by Bauerschmidt in its opening paragraphs: "...if we are going to do theology, we have to do it as the historically embodied beings that we are by nature, which

means that we inevitably speak of God not in tongues of angels, but in some historically-inflected human language ... To grasp the thought of any thinker of the past, we must grasp it as past, to one degree or another, because historical context makes a difference" (292). The first issue that comes to light concerns the origins of Thomism, which reveals two important facts. First, Thomism develops, not as a movement of enthusiasm over Thomas's work, but rather as a defense of Thomas's reputation by his own Dominican order. Second, that most of the controversies surrounding Thomas were more philosophical than theological in nature. As a result of this first phase, so Bauerschmidt contends, Thomism would be forever forged as a school of thought primarily, although not exclusively, by its philosophical positions. With this in mind, Bauerschmidt proceeds to examine some of the early responses to Thomas as a second phase of "Thomism"; from Luther's anti-Thomism to the early Jesuits' 'eclectic Thomism,' from Cajetan to Suarez, Bauerschmidt provides to the reader an illuminating historical vision of how Thomas not only shapes various controversies and issues but is himself shaped by these issues his thinking is used to confront.

A third phase, which is perhaps most relevant for our time, examines Thomism in the modern period, most importantly within the context of the modernist crisis Thomas was enlisted to combat. There is of course much to be learned about Thomas and his reception during this period, but another lesson—with more practical importance—also comes to light: the various attempts to make Thomas into a champion of authentic philosophical orthodoxy not only tended to present a less than complete picture of Thomas, but also conflated Thomas with scholasticism as a whole. As a result of encyclicals like *Aeterni Patris* and *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, a distorted picture emerged which gave the impression that the High Middle Ages could be identified with a single form of scholasticism, which itself was personified by Thomas Aquinas. This makes the

work of figures like Gilson, Chenu, and Congar all the more important for how it served to bring balance to the force of Thomism. This also had the positive effect of raising the important question of historical context in the development of theology itself. The more accurate picture of Thomas as a thinker who engaged seriously with the problems of his day also had the added effect of inspiring Catholic theologians to engage the problems of modernity rather than fleeing to the museums of Catholic thought.

This led to an explosion in the mid-twentieth century of hyphenated Thomisms (transcendental-Thomism, existential-Thomism, Wittgensteinian-Thomism, etc.). These are significant because they signify both the way in which Thomas's example was now receiving as central a place as the content of his thought, but also the fact that Thomas continued to hold a place of authority. Perhaps it was out of a desire to imitate the Angelic Doctor rather than admire him (to borrow that splendid Kierkegaardian distinction) that eventually led to the decline in his own authority. Surely, any imitation of Thomas would necessarily involve a thorough knowledge of the remarkable variety of sources within the Catholic faith. Bauerschmidt does not speculate on this point, but it is worth noting how the mid-twentieth century *ressourcement* movement, and its eventual impact on Thomism, arose during a time when Thomas's posterity was in a phase of imitation rather than mere admiration.

By way of closing his study, Bauerschmidt brings to consciousness three issues that are all connected to that which has guided his methodology all along. The first concerns the question as to what is meant by "historical theology." Here, Bauerschmidt invokes Richard Rorty's notion of the dialectical tension between "historical reconstruction" and "rational reconstruction," as a play of "historicism and anachronism" (309). Together in dialectical tension, these enable the practice of what Rorty calls *Geistgeschichte*, a way of asking "meta-questions" about how a canon develops so as to allow one to become more

aware of both the distance and continuity with that past. But to avoid becoming an account of disembodied ideas, so Rorty maintains, this must all be done in the context of “intellectual history” that emphasizes the social and material dimensions of historical movement. Bauerschmidt provides a brief summary of how this applies to Thomas, but it is clear that this is what his entire project has set out to do. Including an explicit account of his methodology here only serves to verify the success that Bauerschmidt has had in his goal.

The second concerns the reaction to the potential drawbacks from over-historicizing Thomas and his influences. So, although some of Thomas’s suppositions about the natural world can be abandoned, it was believed that to stay true to Thomas one had to draw the line at his metaphysical commitments. To cast these as being merely a part of his historical context would, so it was believed, collapse into a modernist relativism. Consequently, there arose an approach that believed it was possible to “rationally reconstruct” (à la Rorty) even Thomas’s metaphysics because, as those labeled (pejoratively) *la nouvelle théologie* had maintained, what guaranteed authentic continuity was “the revealed-given” (Chenu) or an “affirmation” of a fundamental theological truth rather than in concepts and categories. There is, one might say, an excess of theological content—what Chenu refers to as ‘a body of master-intuitions’—that is worked out through exegesis and historical inquiry in the light of faith. This working out differs across time and space, drawing upon different emphases in style and system. Differences in time and place mean that different rational instruments will be used for inquiry into this theological excess. Thomas’s use of Aristotle in his own inquiry, then, is unique to his time but also relevant for us today since it provides insight into the nature of inquiry itself, but also because it allows us to sharpen our own instruments. As Bauerschmidt puts it, “It is only when we, by historical reconstruction, attend to Thomas’s positions as he himself articulated them, and place those views within “the whole human fabric”

(*tout le tissu humaine*) in which Thomas labored, that we can know how to proceed, by the work of rational reconstruction, to think of how Thomas's positions might be relevant in our own context" (312).

Finally, Bauerschmidt asks to what extent one may find something like a historical theology in Thomas himself. "To put it another way," he writes, "should historically-minded Thomists simply think *about* Thomas, or can they think in some sense *with* Thomas?" (314) Thinking with Thomas means, of course, bringing a degree of historical consciousness to Thomas's own thought, but also recognizing the ways in which his thought, although not historically naïve, was simply not as concerned with historical reconstruction as we are today. But for Bauerschmidt this is part of the value that Thomas offers to us late moderns: conditioned as we have become to perhaps overemphasizing the value of historicism—as Bauerschmidt cleverly puts it, "maybe our awareness of historical contingency is itself a historical contingency" (315)—Thomas reminds us that even within our historical inquiry, we are always seeking truth.

Bauerschmidt has made a valuable contribution to Thomistic studies with *Thomas Aquinas: Faith, Reason, and Following Christ*—or perhaps we might say, in the spirit of the titular metaphor, he 'struck oil' with this contribution. This book offers a resource that brings an important "folksy" dimension of Thomas to the aristocratic community of perfect Thomist gentlemen. As a work, it offers benefit to both novices and seasoned readers alike. There is a liveliness of style and clarity of thinking that makes reading this work both satisfying and enjoyable. More importantly, there is a sketch of Thomas that illuminates features of his thought that are all too often neglected by even the most esteemed Thomists. It is certainly possible to understand Thomas against the background of his metaphysics, or against the background of some other philosophical dimension. As Bauerschmidt himself suggests, any given thinker will be better understood against the various backgrounds that constitute his or her context. But when one

background ends up dominating the picture, later generations of scholars are shortchanged in the limited picture they receive. Bauerschmidt's contribution in this sense is not only valuable but necessary for bringing sharper focus to a figure whose slightly blurred image has all too often been confused with his authentic face.

THEOCRACY AND APOCALYPSE: Political Theology of Artur Mrówczyński-Van Allen

Paweł Rojek

Between the Icon and the Idol. The Human Person and the Modern State in Russian Literature and Thought: Chaadayev, Soloviev, Grossman. By Artur Mrówczyński-Van Allen. Translated by Matthew Philipp Whelan. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books 2013, pp. 164.

The life of Vladimir Soloviev revealed the fundamental dilemma of Christian political theology. Soloviev devoted many a year to developing principles of a Christian political system. In his famous *Lectures on Divine Humanity* he tried to draw political conclusions from Christology, and in *Russia and the Universal Church* he formulated a Trinitarian ideal of society. Shortly before his death, however, he apparently lost confidence in the possibility of implementing a Christian political ideal, and in his last work, *Short Story of the Anti-Christ*, he anticipated a imminent apocalypse.¹ It

¹ See Vladimir Soloviev's *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, trans. Boris Jakim (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press 1995), *Russia and the Universal Church*, trans. Herbert Rees (London: The Centenary Press 1948), and *War, Progress, and the End of History: Three Conversations, Including a Short Story of the Anti-Christ* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press 1990).

seemed that the state in which he previously saw a means of implementing the kingship of God, he eventually deemed the Antichrist's tool. So, the fundamental alternative is the following: is Christ's kingship related to—as Soloviev thought for many years—making some theocratic political ideal real in history by human efforts, or—as he seemed to maintain at the end of his life—is it only eschatological in nature, and will happen only by God's action and beyond time?

I would like to ponder here the answer to this fundamental question, formulated by Artur Mrówczyński-Van Allen and inspired by the tradition of Russian religious thought, particularly by Soloviev's history. Mrówczyński-Van Allen is one of the most interesting Polish Christian thinkers, and the Granada school of Archbishop Javier Martínez, of which he is a significant member, is one of the most interesting intellectual phenomena in Europe. In his works, Mrówczyński-Van Allen combines modern post-secular philosophy with the tradition of Russian thought in an original manner. The book *Between the Icon and the Idol. The Human Person and the Modern State in Russian Literature and Thought: Chaadayev, Soloviev, Grossman*,² published recently in the U.S., is a summary of his research up to now. In this work, the author not only presents a contemporary interpretation of Russian thought, but also formulates an original idea of political theology, though he distances himself from this term. More precisely, Russian thought is used by him—in the spirit of the late Soloviev—to criticise the modern state, which turns out to be an institution that is by nature totalitarian and impervious to Christian transformation. It seems, however, that despite his reluctance to the modern state, Mrówczyński-Van Allen avoids the passive apocalypticism so characteristic nowadays of a certain circle of Polish

² Artur Mrówczyński-Van Allen, *Between the Icon and the Idol. The Human Person and the Modern State in Russian Literature and Thought: Chaadayev, Soloviev, Grossman*, trans. Matthew Philipp Whelan (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books 2013). Numbers in brackets in the body of the text indicate page numbers of this book.

Catholic intelligentsia.³ This may be noticed especially in his further works, in which he develops some ideas presented in his book. In his recent essay "Eklezjoteja" [Ekklesioteia], as yet published in Polish only, he points out that the Church is not merely a particular form of political community itself, but that it may also shape the surrounding institutions.⁴ This fact, in turn—as I will try to show—may pose the problem of a Christian state anew.

RUSSIAN IDEA

Mrówczyński-Van Allen's book concerns the relation of man to state in Russian thought. Reference precisely to Russian thought of the 19th and 20th centuries is not incidental. According to the author, although Russian thought is "largely unknown in the West," it "belongs to the most valuable heritage of human thought ... a heritage that still offers answers to many of the questions before which Western philosophy remains powerless."⁵ It is so because Russian religious writers and philosophers formulated a Christian alternative to the Western formula of modernity. The so called Russian Idea, says the author, is "nothing more than an attempt to find an alternative to the tendency—so characteristic of contemporary civilization—to build humankind on the basis of the temporal and the finite, leaving behind the religious dimension."⁶ Russian thought is therefore fundamentally integral. In fact, there has never been either a

³ The intellectual center of the Polish present-day apocalypticism seems to be the journal *Czterdzięści i Cztery*, see its manifesto: Rafał Tichy, "Czas na Apokalipsę," *Czterdzięści i Cztery* 2 (2008): 4–53.

⁴ Artur Mrówczyński-Van Allen, "Eklezjoteja. Wprowadzenie do Patrystycznych Źródeł Unionizmu w Kontekście Unii Horodelskiej," *Presje* 38 (2014): 76–92. The essay was published together with polemical comments by Paweł Grad, Tomasz Kurzydło, Jan Maciejewski, Paweł Rojek, and Marcin Suskiewicz, as well as the author's replies to them.

⁵ Mrówczyński-Van Allen, *Between the Icon and the Idol*, 80.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 92.

Renaissance or an Enlightenment in Russia, and this is why the Russian tradition, to a great extent, avoided the dualism so characteristic of Western tradition. Russian thinkers, says Mrówczyński-Van Allen, “reject the separation between supernatural and natural, or between religion and politics”⁷ and propose, as he puts it, “the experiment in the return to the union between faith and reason, between theology and philosophy.”⁸ So it seems that in many respects Russian thought anticipated the criticism of modernity formulated by Radical Orthodoxy, a fact that has already been noticed in the West.⁹

The long subtitle of Mrówczyński-Van Allen’s book indicates three authors to whom he devotes the most attention. The first of them is Pyotr Chaadayev, one of the first Russian philo-catholics, spiritual father of Westernisers, officially declared insane by Tsar Nicholas I’s regime. Mrówczyński-Van Allen convincingly accounts for the mysterious fact of the sudden change from his radical Westernism into a near Slavophilia. Chaadayev initially believed that Russia could learn from Europe how to build a Christian social and political system. When, in 1830, he realised that Europe had forsaken this task, he started to proclaim that Russia had an independent mission. In the end, however, Russia’s task in both periods of his thought was basically the same—the implementation of the kingdom of God on Earth. Incidentally, Mrówczyński-Van Allen reminds readers about the strong influence of Catholicism on Russian culture; however, the assessment of this impact is not at all unambiguous,

⁷ Ibid., xvi.

⁸ Ibid., 128.

⁹ Adrian Pabst and Christoph Schneider, “Transfiguring the World through the Word,” in *Encounter Between Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy*, eds. Adrian Pabst, and Christoph Schneider (Burlington, VT: Ashgate 2009), 1–25.

because, for example, the great influence of Latin scholastics among secular clergy barred the Orthodox from the heritage of Church fathers.¹⁰

Another broadly commented upon author is Vladimir Soloviev. Mrówczyński-Van Allen accentuates the essential theocentrism of his philosophy: "Soloviev's work was characterized by the conviction that the Incarnation of God, Jesus Christ, was the central event in the history of humankind, in the whole cosmic process, and that it comprised the centre of all human *theoria* and *praxis*."¹¹ Theocentrism led Soloviev to the ideal of theocracy, that is, Christian politics.¹² It is noteworthy that Mrówczyński-Van Allen is more interested by Soloviev's apocalyptic turn than by his theocratic search. He remarks that "in his final work, the idea of a Christian state disappeared to give a way to the final design of the United Church as the antithesis of the state."¹³ The impulse for this sudden change was allegedly a deeply personal experience of evil and perception of a dangerous distortion of the Christian ideal in the doctrines of Tolstoy, Marx, and Nietzsche. The author positively assesses the turn from theocracy to eschatology. It is precisely the recognition of the state as Antichrist that "enables us to situate Soloviev's vision within the most genuine Christian tradition,"¹⁴ a tradition that Mrówczyński-Van Allen recognises himself as heir to as well.

The third author referred to is Vasily Grossman. Finding philosophical themes in Russian literature is hardly surprising; indeed, the integral Russian tradition does not clearly distinguish these spheres. However, reaching for a

¹⁰ Mrówczyński-Van Allen, *Between the Icon and the Idol*, 44–5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹² See Paweł Rojek, "Mesjańska teologia polityczna Włodzimierza Sołowjowa," *Presyje* 28 (2012): 160–70.

¹³ Mrówczyński-Van Allen, *Between the Icon and the Idol*, 97.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

Soviet writer whose work has not seen many interpretations yet seems, in my opinion, very original. Mrówczyński-Van Allen holds that Grossman “masterfully translates Soloviev’s ontology and eschatology into the language of personal experience,”¹⁵ whereby evidently the ontology and eschatology of Soloviev’s last, apocalyptic period is meant. Grossman was a sharp critic of the modern state, which he saw—no less than the late Soloviev—as a dangerous idol. As the author says, “with absolute mastery and outstanding perspicacity did he interpret the totalitarian nature of contemporary society and identified the idolatric nature of contemporary state.”¹⁶ Mrówczyński-Van Allen notices that the antithesis of the Moloch-state is, in Grossman’s novels, the woman-mother figure, able to sacrifice and to give life; the answer to the banality of evil is the quotidianity of good.

In this way the lineage of Russian thought is concluded. It started from the sentiment of Russia’s great historical mission, then yielded moving theocratic projects, next passed through the piercing experience of eviland, finally, ended in a silent private resistance against the totalitarian state. According to Mrówczyński-Van Allen, the most important message of the Russian Idea concerns exactly the problem of state. “We are not condemned to the slavery of the Antichrist’s ‘kingdom of death,’ of the modern state. We are continually given the possibility of living in freedom. And this freedom can only be given to us by Jesus Christ, and the space of this freedom is the Church.”¹⁷ The alternative to the state is the community of the Church. The originality of Mrówczyński-Van Allen’s interpretation is that this alternative is of a public and not merely private character.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, xvi.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.

STATE

Mrówczyński-Van Allen's book is about the "interpretation of totalitarianism from within a tradition of Russian thought" (2013: xvi). According to the author, the living tradition of Eastern Christianity allowed for a much deeper diagnosis of, and more radical response to, totalitarianism than the secularised Western tradition, and Russian society more effectively resisted totalitarianism than, for instance, the German one. The problem of totalitarianism is not, however, a merely historical issue, as for Mrówczyński-Van Allen any modern state is by nature totalitarian. He suggests that the concept of the totalitarian state, likewise of the modern state, is essentially a pleonasm.¹⁸ I will try to briefly reconstruct here the argument that leads to this rather radical and perhaps surprising statement.

Man faces a fundamental choice between idol and icon. This popular distinction is interpreted by Mrówczyński-Van Allen in a rather general yet subtle way. Idol is an image of itself, while icon refers to something other. Hence idol assumes self-deification, does not require transcending itself or giving to others, whereas icon refers to something higher, implies incessant self-transcendence, a giving of itself to others. Man was created as icon and not idol. Being in the mode of idol is based on renunciation of God, and being as icon is accepting Him. Idolatric existence is responsible for individualism, egoism, and, eventually, alienation, while iconic life leads to community, love, and a wholesome life. In the former case, man creates a totalitarian state; in the latter, he lives in a freedom-giving community. Thus, the title of the book *Between the Icon and the Idol* becomes clear.

The idolatric state is based on a completely different principle of action than are iconic communities. Mrówczyński-Van Allen's analyses departs from

¹⁸ Ibid., 122.

Maximus the Confessor's distinction between the difference (*diafora*) and the division (*diairesis*). In a state, unlike in a community, differences between people lead to division between them.¹⁹ Hence, as he asserts next, the state "entices to oppose evil with counter evil,"²⁰ is based on "mutual interests"²¹ and the "logic of accusation,"²² whereas communities do just the opposite; namely, they invite forgiveness, assume gratuitousness, and are based on the logic of gift. The state aims at universalisation of its principle and, gradually, provided that it does not encounter opposition, replacing communities that act in a different way. Spheres of Christian life abandoned by communities are taken over by impersonal state law. Consequently, according to the author, "the ministry of justice stealthily usurps the place of the ministry of forgiveness, conquering us with the logic of accusation and erecting its power upon the structure of institutionalized vengeance."²³ As a result, the contemporary state, exactly like the totalitarian one, leads to the destruction of communities within it. Mrówczyński-Van Allen reiterates: "Paraphrasing St. Augustine, we might describe the modern state as *privatio communis*;"²⁴ "The fundamental characteristic of modern society, and therefore of the modern state, is *privatio communis*."²⁵ *Privatio communis*, or lack of community, is exactly what we call—following Hannah Arendt—totalitarianism.

This argument leads to the conclusion that the liberal state—as basically every state—is by nature no less totalitarian than a Nazi or communist state. All these

¹⁹ Ibid., 125.

²⁰ Ibid., 146.

²¹ Ibid., 125.

²² Ibid., 147.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., xxv.

²⁵ Ibid., 141.

forms, Mrówczyński-Van Allen says, "belong to the one and the same tradition. They are human creations, made in the image and likeness of humans."²⁶ The author provides two evocative pieces of evidence of this internal identity. On one hand, he notes that the same company that produced Zyklon-B for the Auschwitz concentration camp today produces the abortion pill RU 486 for the needs of liberal society.²⁷ On the other hand, he notices that the communist *homo sovieticus* once described by Russian writer Alexander Zinoviev does not in essence differ from a representative of a liberal Generation P, depicted nowadays by Victor Pelevin.²⁸ In the systems of modern states there exists a concordance of fundamental principles, a continuity of the most important institutions, and a unity of anthropological types produced.

CHURCH

The opposite of the idolatric state is the iconic Church. While the state is based on impersonal exchanges, the Church postulates gratuitous donations. The Church is the paradigm and source of all communities; hence, it also represents the greatest rival to the modern state and for this reason has been ruthlessly fought by every form of state organisation.

Mrówczyński-Van Allen insightfully remarks, referring to William Cavanaugh, that Church community is based on the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. He says: "Christian participation in the growth of Christ's body itself questions the false order imposed by the state. Christian participation in the Eucharist disables the false theology and the false anthropology of the self's isolated will,"²⁹ and

²⁶ Ibid., 83.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 91–2.

²⁹ Ibid., xxvii.

further, “The event of the Incarnation, renewed at every Eucharist, reminds us of our nature as icons, as sons and daughters of God. It overcomes the alienation in which the idol of the modern state mires us.”³⁰ Therefore, as he writes in one of his Polish works, “there is probably no Christian category more alien to the secular mind than sacrament and sacramental logic.”³¹

The idea of the sacramental basis of community is developed in the essay “Teologia Ciała jako Teologia Oporu” [Theology of Body as Theology of Resistance].³² The author remarks that family is the fundamental form of community; it relies on the unity of bodies and community of blood. The Eucharist allows for the spreading of this special kind of specific community to all the Church created by it. “Ties of blood, which bound classical community, spread among all people. Real and novel Christ-centric community of Church, community of Christ’s body, became attainable.”³³ And further: “the centre of our *politeia* is Eucharist, and its fulfillment—the universal coronation of Christ as the king of universe—its first act is in the spouses’ bedchamber.”³⁴

Mrówczyński-Van Allen emphatically asserts that the Church is a public and political community. In my opinion, this is one of the most significant statements of his political theology. According to the secular view, the state has a monopoly in the public sphere, and the Church may at most deal with the faith of individual citizens and their behaviour in the private sphere. Contrary to that, Mrówczyński-Van Allen claims: “The primary issue, the fundamental issue,

³⁰ Ibid., xvii.

³¹ Artur Mrówczyński-Van Allen, “Wyobrażenia Teo-polityczna (2). Nowa Teologia Polityczna,” *Frona* 54 (2010): 88–107.

³² Artur Mrówczyński-Van Allen, “Teologia Ciała jako Teologia Oporu,” *Frona* 61 (2011): 66–99.

³³ Ibid., 84–5.

³⁴ Ibid., 94.

consists in rediscovering the identity of the Christian community as a community that possesses a natural political dimension,”³⁵ though he realises that such a declaration is always perceived by defenders of the state as an illegitimate usurpation.

The political character of Church does not and cannot, however, mean—and this is the second fundamental statement—that it shares the character of the state. Mrówczyński-Van Allen repeats, following Cavanaugh, that the Church “should have no desire for the power of the state.”³⁶ He elucidates: “Communion ... is no flight from politics, but rather a radical break from the false politics of the *civitas terrena*. Its politics are false in the sense that the modern state as such is false, because it is only a degraded and banal copy of the body of Christ.”³⁷ The concept of the political is therefore clearly distinguished from the concept of the state. The Church—contrary to the views of secularists—has to be political, but—counter to the views of theocrats—cannot be state.

Now I will try to bring a level of systematization to Mrówczyński-Van Allen's remarks, relying upon the reconstruction of his ideas on the nature of the state presented above. It appears that his opinions rely on distinguishing two dimensions: the logic of action and the sphere of action. On one hand, people may act according to the logic of interest or the logic of gift. On the other, they may act in the private sphere or public one. Combining these two dimensions gives four possible kinds of human relations.

³⁵ Mrówczyński-Van Allen, *Between the Icon and the Idol*, xxvi–xxvii.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, xxvii.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

	<i>private sphere</i>	<i>public sphere</i>
<i>logic of interest</i>	market	state
<i>logic of gift</i>	family	church

The market is an example of logic of interest in the private sphere. In the economic game, at least as it is understood in modern times, there is no place for gift and mercy. It is supposed to be likewise in the case of the state, which acts on the principle of logic of interest in the public sphere. The difference between the market and the state would rely only on the fact that private consumers attend to their own interests only, while the public state is guided by common good, understood as the sum of the individual interests of citizens.

An obvious example of logic of gift is the family. Family life is founded on gift and forgiveness, and not on equivalent exchanges or, God forbid, vengeance. Family, however, has a private character, and this means that it limits its rules to a more or less narrow circle of kinship or affinity. The Church is a public community based on the principle of gift, understood—as has been discussed—as a sacramental extension of family. The proposed classification of human actions and institutions illustrates a continuity between the contemporary market and the state, on the one hand, and between the family and the Church on the other. It also shows what the influences of the logic of interest and the logic of gift may look like in both spheres. Family life may be permeated with the rules of the market, though the family may also shape economic behaviours by modifying the concept of exchange and gain. The market that succumbed to the logic of

family would cease to be a market in the usual modern understanding. Similarly with the Church: on one hand, it is at risk of yielding its logic to the secular logic of state and must therefore be careful not to turn into a group based on a common interest; on the other, it may try to shape the life of political communities. If, however, the sacramental logic of gift encompassed the state it would cease to be the state in the sense we know from modern history.

In the book *Between the Icon and the Idol* Mrówczyński-Van Allen mainly discusses the threats that are connected with the colonisation of the Church by the secular logic of state. Especially, and paradoxically, striving to have influence over the state may lead to the obliteration of the Church's independence. "The Church is therefore not sent into world to be assimilated and diluted by the 'open society.' The liturgy and the sacraments do not simply generate interior individual principles or 'values' (purportedly) necessary to carry out public functions in a (purportedly) neutral and autonomous public sphere. Much too often, the contemporary search for the so-called 'presence of Christians in public life' means, in practice, the abandonment of the public space of the Church, the public space that she is herself."³⁸ This is, I think, a very apt critique of the liberal reading of the Church's social teaching, which leads indeed to the radical separation of the private sphere from the public, and to the privatisation of religion.

The subsequent essay "Eklezjoteja" is an important complement to these analyses. It deals with the nature of the political community of the Church, for the Church itself is a political community and may expand the logic of its action into the surrounding institutions. This is a reversal process in which the pre- or post-secular logic of the Church colonises the political sphere. The *Ecclesia* creates its own ideal of the *polis* that is a *politeia*, called by Mrówczyński-Van

³⁸ Ibid.

Allen a *ekklesioteia*. He says: “the independence of the Church from other political communities enabled it to influence the formation of these communities. Naturally, these influences have been mutual, nevertheless [...] it was possible to launch a thoroughly thought out vision of the Church as a reality that transforms political communities, which in consequence was to foster the development of small and big communities, the political nature of which was obvious.”³⁹ A historical example of a sizeable political community influenced in that way by the Church was the Polish-Lithuanian Union of Horodło in 1413. The document of Union, which was a direct consequence of the marriage of the Polish queen Saint Hedwig and the Lithuanian prince Jogaila, started with a solemn religious preamble and led to the adoption of Lithuanian noble stock by their Polish counterparts. In the act of the union, like in the Church community, the familial and sacramental logic of gift was extended into the public sphere. Hence, as Mrówczyński-Van Allen says, “the Union of Horodło, and with it perhaps the whole history of Poland, is of exceptional significance to contemporary Christian thought.”⁴⁰ It is worth noting that he shares this interest in the old Polish political system as an alternative to modernity with Polish messianists, for whom precisely the union between Poland and Lithuania was to be the model of the future world order. He differs from them, however, in saying that there is a limit to the process of turning the secular *politeia* into a religious *ecclesioteia*. The limit is a modern state. To him, a “Christian state” is apparently a contradiction, for the same reason that a “totalitarian state” is a tautology.

³⁹ Mrówczyński-Van Allen, “Eklezjoteja”, 185

⁴⁰ Ibid., 174.

CAN A STATE BE SAVED?

Mrówczyński-Van Allen protests vehemently against using the term “state” as the equivalent of the Greek *polis* and Latin *civitas*. Speaking of the “state of God” in St. Augustine—he says, for example—is ridiculous.⁴¹ The practice against which he protests is deeply rooted in contemporary literature; it even penetrated—he states with horror—Church documents.⁴² “So, this apparently small detail, he says, indicates a basic problem of contemporary political thought, the problem of mystification hidden in the concept of state.”⁴³

I think that this seemingly minute detail also points to a fundamental problem with Mrówczyński-Van Allen's proposition. Naturally, it is not merely the terminology that is at stake. The objection to using the concept of the state for designating pre- and post-modern political communities harbours a conviction about the fundamental non-continuity between community and state. This discontinuity—as I will now try to show by referring to the case of Soloviev—seems, however, of certain inconsequence; it is surely the last trace of dualism in Mrówczyński-Van Allen's proposal. Fortunately, it also seems that his own concept of the state and community—as I will soon try to prove—allows this to be avoided.

The turning point in the history of the Russian Idea was to be—as Mrówczyński-Van Allen suggests—Soloviev's shift from theocracy to apocalypticism. The dream of the Christian state in history yielded to the vision of a united Church in opposition to the state at the day of reckoning. But does not this transition mean undermining theocentrism and returning to the well-known Western dualism? It is hard to dismiss the impression that numerous

⁴¹ Ibid., 179; “The State of God” is the usual Polish translation of “Civitas Dei”

⁴² Ibid., 175.

⁴³ Ibid., 176.

commentators appreciated the last phase of Soloviev's work precisely because they think he resigned from what they believed was a dangerous utopian monism. For example, the Polish scholar Jan Krasicki says that "the fact that our philosopher finally renounced the hope ... of transforming the idea into history ... may be seen as the most happy ending of the idea of his life,"⁴⁴ and, evidently with relief, he states that in the last stage of his work, Soloviev was "thinking in the categories of *diastasis*, historical discontinuity, radical break between what is historical and eternal, between what is earthly, immanent and what is transcendent."⁴⁵ If Krasicki is right, this means that Soloviev simply abandoned theocentrism and resigned himself to the dualism of the idea and the history of the transcendent and the immanent.⁴⁶

Personally, I think that there has been no real shift in Soloviev's philosophy. I am ready to agree with another Polish commentator, Janusz Dobieszewski, who wrote that in his later works Soloviev "discredited not theocracy but—in his language—theocracy as 'an abstract principle,' theocracy as the product of pure, schematising thought, theocracy that is prone to degeneration (and not realisation) into the form that may be found in *A Short Story of the Anti-Christ*."⁴⁷ Since there has been no turn, there is no problem with its possible dualistic implications.

The story of Soloviev's alleged shift from theocracy to apocalypse shows, in my opinion, that it is impossible to stick to theocentrism while simultaneously maintaining that some sphere of reality (for instance, a state) is impervious to

⁴⁴ Jan Krasicki, *Bóg, Człowiek i Zło: Studium Filozofii Włodzimierza Sołowjowa* (Wrocław: FNP 2003), 248, see also Russian translation: Yan Krasitskiy, *Bog, Chelovek i Zlo: Issledovaniye Filosofii Vladimira Solov'yeva*, (Moscow: Progress-Traditsiya 2009), 260.

⁴⁵ Krasicki, *Bóg, Człowiek i Zło*, 268, Krasitskiy, *Bog, chelovek i zlo*, 278-9.

⁴⁶ See Paweł Rojek, "Sołowjow i Tajemnica Zła," *Przegląd Filozoficzny* 54 (2005): 340-5.

⁴⁷ Janusz Dobieszewski, *Włodzimierz Sołowjow: Studium Osobowości Filozoficznej* (Warszawa: Scholar 2002), 426-7.

Christian transformation. Mrówczyński-Van Allen certainly avoids the worst kind of dualism (namely, the allocation of the private sphere to religion and the public one to the state), as he accepts the essentially political character of Church and its power to transform political communities. However, a dualism of communities and the state, in my opinion, remains in force.

Is this dualism inescapable? One of the most valuable elements of Mrówczyński-Van Allen's analysis is the comparison of principles on which the state and community are based—the state is founded on interest, while community is based on gift. The concepts of interest and gift, however, appear not only in political philosophy and phenomenology but also in social anthropology. I think that precisely such an anthropological analysis may help the distinction analysed by the author to be viewed in a new way. For the theory of exchange shows that pure interest and pure gift comprise only the extreme points between what is more or less interested and gratuitous. Taking this into account, there can be no dichotomy, but rather a continuum between the state and community.

Besides, human actions typically combine the logic of gift and the logic of interest. The same act may be treated both as a fulfillment of community obligation as well as of duty to the state. For instance, care for one's family, a paradigmatic example of gift, is also—though not everyone realises this—required by family law. Military service, and even taxes, too, may be recognised as acts of free offering, and not only burdensome duties one owes to the state. Hence it appears that gift and law are not mutually exclusive, for it is not the possible sanctions, but the real intentions, that decide the nature of an act.

Mrówczyński-Van Allen's analysis shows also that the problem of a Christian state is tightly connected with the idea of Christian economy. If “divine

economy”⁴⁸—as Stephen Long puts it—is possible, then “divine politics” should also be, for the market and the state are founded on the same principle of interest, which nevertheless may be limited and modified in many ways. In one of the recent issues of *Pressje* journal we investigated the possibility of institutional solutions that would increase the number of more gratuitous exchanges and diminish the number of more interested exchanges in the overall sum of transactions. We argued that this would be a way of Christian transformation, modelled on the image of the Holy Trinity, of economic life.⁴⁹ The title of this particular journal issue was therefore “Ekonomia Trynitarna” [Trinitarian Economy]. Solutions increasing the proportion of gratuitousness in politics can also be imagined on a similar principle. The equivalent of cooperatives in economics could be, for example, local participatory communities being part of the ideal of the “self-governing republic” formulated in the eighties by the Polish Solidarity movement.

It seems that analysis of the underlying principles of the state and community presented by Mrówczyński-Van Allen leads to the conclusion that the difference between them is quantitative, rather than qualitative. This statement leads, in my opinion, to concrete practical postulates. Christians should not renounce their possible influence on existing states, but rather try to expand the range of the principle of community that they know from family and Church life. Ideally, sacramental principles could encompass all spheres of political life. In such a case, the Christian state would simply emerge. Mrówczyński-Van Allen perhaps

⁴⁸ Stephen D. Long, *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market* (London: Routledge 2000).

⁴⁹ Marcin Kędzierski, “Ekonomia trynitarna,” *Pressje* 29 (2012): 26–39, cf. Paweł Rojek, “Ekonomia, Wzajemność i Trójca Święta. W Obronie Ekonomii Trynitarnej,” *Pressje* 32–33 (2013): 260–8; we were inspired to some extent by Wolfgang Grassl’s brilliant paper “Civil Economy: The Trinitarian Key to Papal Economics” delivered at Panel Session “Economic Justice and the Encyclical Caritas in Veritate,” Association for the Study of the Grants Economy, Allied Social Science Associations Conference, 8 January, 2011, Denver, CO.

would not call it “state,” but it seems to me a mere terminological issue. The possibility of Christian influence on state should not be nevertheless excluded in advance by terminological decisions.

Mrówczyński-Van Allen's book is “a proposal for the interpretation of totalitarianism from within a tradition of Russian thought.”⁵⁰ Eventually, he concludes that the Russian tradition is essentially a radical form of Christian tradition, while a totalitarian state is fundamentally a radical form of a modern state. On this basis, his book is not so much an analysis of historical phenomenon from the point of view of local tradition, but rather a Christian interpretation of the modern state in general.

It seems that Mrówczyński-Van Allen ultimately goes beyond the alternative attributed to Soloviev. Christians should not build a top-down state theocracy—as Soloviev seemed to think early on—nor passively await the Second Coming, as he later appeared to believe. Christians must live in the community of the Church, which by nature is of a public and political nature. This community, relying on the sacraments, may influence and transform, according to its own logic, the surrounding groups and institutions. Perhaps this is what Soloviev really meant himself. In principle, as I have tried to show, this process may also pertain to the state. If this is so, *ekklesioteia* seems to be the third way between theocracy and apocalypse.

⁵⁰ Mrówczyński-Van Allen, *Between the Icon and the Idol*, xvi.