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Holiness, Theology and Philosophy: von Balthasar's Construal of Their Relationship and Its Development

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Abstract

Hans Urs von Balthasar calls for a revival of what he sees as the original relationship between human holiness and Christian theology. He suggests that modern theologians should imitate their patristic forebears to the extent that they combine holy living with an objective stance corresponding to the intellectual rigor proper to theology. The article summarizes von Balthasar's analysis of the development and current state of what he portrays as the problem of separation between theology and human holiness, considers the role of philosophy in shaping the relationship between them, and indicates the way forward for theology, given a Balthasarian analysis. Finally, the article considers how far von Balthasar's approach can alleviate the crisis which theology is currently facing.

Christian theology is currently embroiled in an unprecedented crisis, or so many theologians argue. The impression that theology faces such a crisis is shared by theologians across denominational divides. For example, the prominent Roman Catholic theologian Avery Dulles and the Protestant theologian Edward Farley both agree on this point (see Dulles 1992 and Farley 1983). Moreover, it is not only theologians who have noticed this crisis, for it has also been remarked upon by the historian of religious ideas Van A. Harvey (see Harvey 1991).

Hans Urs von Balthasar, who lived from 1905 until 1988, was perhaps ahead of his time when—as early as the 1940s—he perceived that there was something amiss in theological science. Not surprisingly, therefore, he wrote a great deal about the discipline of theology, paying particular attention to its relationship to both philosophy and sanctity. Avery Dulles has suggested

that von Balthasar's approach to theology, which he regards as a "postcritical" one, might be able to take theology beyond its current crisis. Similarly, Robert Doran, while referring to von Balthasar as a twentieth-century theological giant, proposes that a critical assimilation of his contribution to theology may help to avert a deepening of the crisis (see Doran 1997).

This notwithstanding, it should be noted that Doran may well be underestimating the magnitude of this crisis. For he presents it as the looming threat of Catholic theologians soon finding themselves "engaged in something similar to the Aristotelian-Augustinian disputes in the Middle Ages" (Doran 1997, 61). Aside from the fact that some theologians regard the disputes which took place in the Middle Ages as healthy and creative, it does seem that Doran is missing what theologians such as von Balthasar, Dulles and Farley perceive as the present crisis in the discipline. Moreover, neither Dulles nor Doran offer a comprehensive account of von Balthasar's approach. Indeed, it is perhaps not surprising that Doran should propose that von Balthasar's approach be combined with Bernard Lonergan's, for as he admits: "I am more familiar with Lonergan than with Balthasar" (Doran 1997, 62). Due to the formidable quantity of von Balthasar's theological writings and the unavailability until quite recently of certain key texts in English translation, I expect that the same would be true for many North American and other English-speaking theologians. This, in part, justifies the largely expository character of what follows.

The present article thus aims to supply a comprehensive account of von Balthasar's approach. It considers his understanding of theology, paying particular attention to how he conceived the relationship between theology, philosophy and holiness. And the principal purpose of the following exposition is to leave us better placed to assess the relevance of von Balthasar's approach to the current crisis. And his approach certainly merits consideration, for he is widely regarded as one of the two most important and influential Roman Catholic theologians of the twentieth century. (However, while North American Roman Catholic theologians usually consider the other one to be Lonergan, European Roman Catholic theologians would tend to rank Karl Rahner as more important than Lonergan.)

But before I provide an account of von Balthasar's approach, let me first give a brief characterization of the current crisis as it is seen by Harvey, who, as an historian of ideas, is more explicit than Dulles or Doran about the nature and causes of the crisis.

The Present Crisis in Theology

Harvey (1991, 174) identifies the symptoms of the crisis as "a lack of agreement as to method, standards of assessment, and, most seriously, subject matter" within theology. And to substantiate this claim, he quotes Gordon Kaufman:

Theology apparently has no integrity of standards or demands of its own; its symbols could be used as a kind of decoration for and legitimation of almost any partisan position found in the culture. The once proud queen of the sciences, having lost a sense of her own meaning and integrity, had become a common prostitute. (Quoted in Harvey 1991, 174).

Interestingly, Harvey rejects the commonly held view that the decline in theology is a knock-on effect of the increasingly secular nature of modern society. That version of the "secularization thesis," he regards as far too simplistic as an explanation of theology's demise. Instead, he points his finger at two related factors: first, the professionalization of theology; and, second, a changed definition of the theologian's role (Harvey 1991, 179). In short, Harvey argues that the marginalization of theology was promoted directly by a conception which viewed its utility in professional terms—specifically in terms of the training of clergy. As a result, the subject matter of theology came to be defined as what a member of the clergy needed to know in order to carry out his clerical function, and the role of a theologian thus came to be defined as a trainer of the clergy. One effect of this, Harvey claims, was to remove the subject matter of theology from the concerns of the laity—it was no longer seen as having anything to do with the "life-world" of the ordinary believer (Harvey 1991, 185). And while Harvey's discussion focuses on Protestant theology in the United States, it could be argued that his observations and conclusions apply more broadly, and could be extended to cover Roman Catholic theology both in the United States and in Great Britain.

The blame for the current crisis in theology is thus placed on theologians themselves rather than on wider cultural factors such as secularization. One factor internal to theology which, Harvey insists, has contributed to this crisis is the specialization, or “fragmentation,” within the various sub-fields of the discipline. It is precisely this specialization, he believes, which has led to the loss of any unified sense of meaning which might formerly have attended the practice of theology. Consequently, in his analysis, the principal problem is that the various disciplines within theology have each developed their own distinctive methods and critical apparatus to such a degree that each has its own exclusive scholarly community (see Harvey 1991, 105, citing support from Farley 1983).

One result of all this, according to Harvey, is that although theologians tend to imagine that their work is intellectually accessible and valuable to Christians outside of academia, the reality seems to be that the theology which is produced by university-based theologians is highly technical and academic—so much so that it is often beyond the reach even of theology undergraduates. Furthermore, theologians often define the problems in the discipline, as Harvey (1991, 191) puts it, “in terms of the dominant problems of other specialized disciplines such as linguistics, semiotics, the philosophy of language, and epistemology.” Thus, he continues: “They want to appeal to the laity, but their own ‘reference group’...is constituted by other academics. Moreover, the reward system of the profession, such as it is, requires a curriculum vitae with technical articles in the scholarly journals and books placed with prestigious publishing houses...” (Harvey 1991, 191).

The main thrust of Harvey’s critique, then, is that the current crisis in theology is caused by its being conceived as primarily an academic discipline—a discipline, moreover, whose chief utility lies in equipping specialists (academic theologians or clergy) with the knowledge required for their profession. These two factors have led not only to the fragmentation of theology into various exclusive fields of study, not only to the fragmentation of the sense of meaning or purpose which used to attend the practice of theology, but also to its intellectual marginalization.

Now, von Balthasar also regarded both the professionalization of theology and its division into a number of separate disciplines as threats to the integrity of the subject. However, his account goes further than Harvey's, and attempts to explain the deeper cause of these threats. Moreover, von Balthasar offers his account as more than an explanation. He argues that by looking back at what went wrong in the past, theologians can see how to bring about an authentic recovery of theology.

I begin my exposition of von Balthasar's approach to theology by outlining what, on the Balthasarian view, is involved in being an authentic theologian.

*Von Balthasar's Characterization of the
Authentic Christian Theologian*

According to von Balthasar, every human being is called to fulfill a God-given mission. If this is so, then, *a fortiori*, it must apply to theologians. More precisely, von Balthasar holds that to be a theologian is a God-given mission to bear witness to Christ through passing on, interpreting and thus continuing God's revelation. In addition, he argues that a necessary prerequisite for anyone producing genuine Christian theology is for her to be living a holy life, and his particular notion of the "holy life" is intimately linked to his conception of Christ. In short, according to the Balthasarian view, human holiness is constituted by obedience to the Son of God. In obeying Christ, one imitates the relationship of the Son to the Father, and in so doing, one comes to actualize the Idea given to each of us by God, and which is contained in Christ. Thus, one comes to re-present Christ to the world, and thereby one exhibits human holiness, for Christ is both human and holy. And while the form of the holy life is the same for each Christian insofar as it imitates the basic features of Christ's life, the specific content of the holy life nevertheless differs from individual to individual as each person lives out her individual God-given mission (see Harrison 1999a).

So, von Balthasar proposes that a holy life is expressed through accepting one's calling and thus living out one's mission—a mission which, in the case of theologians, is to engage in theology. Of course, when he makes such a claim, the term

“theology” is meant in the broad sense of all speech or writing about God’s revelation. Thus it includes proclamation and preaching. Hence, in the following, when I refer exclusively to the academic discipline of theology, I use the term “discipline”—otherwise the broader sense is intended.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, to find that, as a theologian whose metaphysics is premised upon such a conception of living the holy life through following a mission, von Balthasar, in his writings from 1948 until his death, should continually return to the link between human holiness and theology. And a bold exposition of his views on this topic can be found in his 1987 article “Theology and Holiness.” There, he states explicitly that each Christian is called to give witness to Christ, and that the way she does so is by living out a mission—one which is not chosen by her but which is given by God. And von Balthasar insists that bearing witness is a decisive mark of an authentic Christian’s relationship to Christ. Moreover, in von Balthasar’s view, in order to bear witness to Christ, a person must somehow share in Christ’s own holiness—a claim he bases on his interpretation of John 17:17-19: “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth” (NRSV). In addition, von Balthasar makes the further claim that any purported theology which is produced independently of the aim to bear witness to Christ by means of one’s specific mission cannot be a form of theology that is of any genuine value to the Christian community. As he writes: “Viewed from the perspective of the Gospel, theology can be nothing other than one form in which Christians who have been sent bear witness to Christ, who himself is and wants to be nothing other than the ‘true witness’ (Rev. 1:5) to the one who sent him” (von Balthasar 1987, 341). The implication is that if one is not bearing witness to Christ, then one cannot be an authentic Christian theologian.

Now, one of von Balthasar’s key claims is that if a person has been given a mission which includes bearing witness to Christ through engaging in theology, then that person’s

discourse about God (*theo-logia*) will necessarily and analytically be informed by a life dedicated to complete self-giving in order to stand credibly before the world and, if God so wills, to maintain his credibility throughout the ages. And perhaps the degree to which he commits his life to bearing witness will be more fruitful than the limitations of his formulations and deficiencies which one is willing to forgive him because of the integrity of his bearing witness. We might mention the following as examples: Origen, Augustine, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Bernanos (von Balthasar 1987, 346–7).

This suggests that, in von Balthasar's view, the cogency of any particular theologian's work will depend ultimately upon her holiness. It is through a consideration of people such as those whom he lists that, von Balthasar continues, it becomes "more and more clear that only 'theology' as the unity of sanctity and witness born in the life of the Church earns its name" (von Balthasar 1987, 347). Indeed, throughout the early Christian tradition, von Balthasar finds confirmation of his view that human holiness and theology belong together: "If we consider the history of theology up to the time of the great Scholastics, we are struck by the fact that the great saints, those who not only achieved an exemplary purity of life, but who also received from God a definite mission in the Church, were, mostly, great theologians" (von Balthasar 1948, 181).

It is in this light that we can understand his call for a re-orientation of theology away from its separation from holiness, and his corresponding call for theologians to recognize what he sees as the proper self-understanding necessary for anyone to engage in authentic Christian theology: one which acknowledges the proper relationship of a theologian to God's revelation and the catholic Christian tradition—such a relationship being, in his view, one where the theologian, situated within the Church, has the aim of conveying God's revelation. In a word, genuine Christian theology cannot arise where a holy lifestyle is lacking. Thus, the most significant threat to the ability of Christian theology to fulfill its function is that of a failure by theologians to live holy lives. In von Balthasar's terms, this constitutes a state of separation between theology and human holiness.

Below, I explain von Balthasar's analysis of the beginnings, development and current state of what he regards as the problematic separation between theology and human holiness. He describes such a separation as existing on two levels: (i) in the person of the theologian; and (ii) between the disciplines of theology and spirituality. I also discuss his contention that Christian theology needs to be rejuvenated through a return to the "unity," on both of these levels, which he believes existed at earlier times between theology and human holiness (his ideal of a "unity" between theology and human holiness drawing its inspiration from his interpretation of the biblical and patristic periods of Christian theology).

However, a word of caution is in order, for while von Balthasar does call for a revival of what he sees as the original relationship between human holiness and Christian theology, he does not propose that theologians today simply re-instate an old and out-dated model of theology. What he does suggest is, rather, that modern theologians should imitate their patristic forebears to the extent that they combine holy living with an objective stance corresponding to the intellectual rigor proper to theology. In practice, this means that theology, as an intellectual endeavor, must always be undertaken not only with precision and clarity but also with an attitude of faith and prayer. This attitude will enable the work of theologians once again to become, in von Balthasar's words, a "prolongation of the message of revelation."

The Separation of Human Holiness and Theology

It is worth noting that the ostensible problem of the separation between human holiness and Christian theology was felt deeply by von Balthasar from the time of his early studies as a Jesuit until his death (see Henrici 1989). Nevertheless, it was not until 1948 that he first set out his views on the appropriate relationship between human holiness and theology. This he did in the first of the two articles which he published under the title "*Theologie und Heiligkeit*." And it is in this 1948 article, translated as "Theology and Sanctity," where von Balthasar first describes the problem as stemming from a separation between teaching and life—that is, a disunity between the content of what Christian

theologians teach and how they live their lives as a means of bearing witness to this teaching.

In von Balthasar's view, the threat to the ideal relationship which formerly existed between human holiness and Christian theology arose after the peak of scholasticism. Prior to this period, any separation between action and teaching (or living a holy life and engaging in theology) was generally looked upon as deplorable. However, after this period, the separation of holy living and Christian theology came to be enshrined in a theological method which gradually came to dominate the subject. According to von Balthasar, this process reached its peak in the Enlightenment, and was still highly influential at the time of his own theological education.

Given that von Balthasar urges a return to the unity of human holiness and theology, then if his injunction is to carry any weight, such a return must be possible. In order to assess the possibility of any such re-unification or in order to determine what it requires and what mistakes are to be avoided, we would need to understand precisely why theology became separated from human holiness in the first place. Without such an understanding, we might hastily conclude that it is an inevitable process, which dooms from the outset any possibility of re-unification. So, let us now consider von Balthasar's account of the genesis of the separation of theology from the living of a holy life.

The Genesis and Development of the Separation

In von Balthasar's view, at least at the time of writing "Theology and Sanctity," the separation between holy living and Christian theology arose as "theology increasingly took on a 'scholastic' form, and Aristotelianism burst in like an elemental force" (von Balthasar 1948, 184). In his judgment, the gain from this development was primarily philosophical, and, *as such*, was certainly not to be denigrated. Moreover, there was no danger to theology in this rapid development of philosophical concepts, provided such concepts "were used as pointers to the final truth which is supernatural and divine" (von Balthasar 1948, 185). What is more, "[t]hese concepts, in being taken up as part of the *assumptio humanae naturae* in Christ, lost nothing of their con-

tent ... but yet," von Balthasar insists, "through this assumption, they must be ... 'transfigured', and become, like Christ's humanity, wholly a function and expression of his divine person and truth" (von Balthasar 1948, 185).

Now, whereas the best scholastic theology respected the proviso that philosophical concepts were to be used as *pointers* to "the final truth," rather than as themselves *expressing* "final truth" (Albert, Bonaventure and Thomas being good examples), post-scholastic theology, in von Balthasar's view, is quite different. This is because

the philosophical propaedeutic came to be considered a fixed and unalterable basis, whose concepts, without the necessary transposition, were used as norms and criteria of the content of faith, and therefore set in judgment over it. Teachers behaved as though man knew from the outset, before he had been given revelation, knew with some sort of finality what truth, goodness, being, light, love and faith were. It was as though divine revelation on these realities had to accommodate itself to these fixed philosophical conceptual containers that admitted of no expansion (von Balthasar 1948, 186).

Accordingly, in the face of this development, only those theologians who "did not allow their ultimate understanding of the truth to be disturbed by the fullness of the irruption of philosophical truth" could embody the "original conception of the teacher in the Church, who was by inner necessity a saint" (von Balthasar 1948, 186).

Here we can observe one of the key features of von Balthasar's thought on the relationship between human holiness and theology: the authentic Christian theologian is by "*inner necessity*" a holy person. According to von Balthasar, it was the status of precisely this inner necessity as a necessary condition for being a genuine Christian theologian which was increasingly undermined by the impetus of the intellectual movements of the post-scholastic period, within which it was assumed that a sufficient condition for someone's being a theologian was that she had a grasp of certain philosophical concepts. Moreover, the status of theology as an academic discipline alongside other disciplines

added to this development by bringing about a new situation in which “theologians” were no longer expected to conceive of their work as bearing witness to Christ or to live according to what they taught—that is, they were no longer expected to live a holy life. In short, displaying human holiness was no longer considered to be a necessary condition for being a theologian. Ultimately, this meant, or so von Balthasar argues, that it came to pass that Christian theology in its original sense was barely engaged in at all.

In a later article, entitled “The Unity of Theology and Spirituality,” von Balthasar presents a somewhat different account of the beginnings of the separation between human holiness and theology. His later view seems even less sanguine, for he locates a split between engaging in theology and living a holy life even further back in history. From the time of the Church Fathers right up to the Middle Ages, the original unity between theology and lived holiness was broken (although some theologians constitute exceptions) due to a perceived need to engage in polemics—one which led to “theologians” drawing upon secular philosophy.

However, von Balthasar claims that the original unity did enjoy a temporary restoration, for the monasticism of the early Middle Ages almost wholly succeeded in closing the gap between engaging in theology and living out a holy life. Jean Leclercq (1978) describes just such a synthesis, running from “Gregory and Bede to the school of St. Victor and its contemporaries, and whose center and pinnacle are the works of Bernard” (von Balthasar 1969, 32–33). Drawing on Leclercq’s account of this period, von Balthasar observes that “[t]he unity seems to have been achieved once again without a seam, though essentially on the basis of monastic, contemplative existence” (von Balthasar 1969, 33). But this return to a unity between living the holy life and engaging in theology was confined to the monastery, and therein lay its weakness. While the unity could survive so long as the monasteries were isolated from the external world, when the theology produced within them encountered the “theology” produced within the universities, the problem re-emerged. For instance, in Bernard’s time, as the famous conflict with Abelard

demonstrates, theologians were again forced to become involved in polemics.

Clearly, there appears to be a significant difference between the positions set out by von Balthasar in the earlier article and in the later one. Perhaps the most charitable way of reconciling this apparent divergence between his two accounts is by interpreting the earlier article as focusing upon the origins of the current, and most substantial, split between living the holy life and engaging in theology, and interpreting the later article as an acknowledgment of an historically earlier, though less substantial, disunity. But regardless of when a separation between engaging in theology and living a holy life first originated, it is clear that a split has indeed existed continuously from the post-scholastic period onwards.

According to von Balthasar's exposition in "The Unity of Theology and Spirituality," the next significant stage in the history of Christian theology after the period when monastic theology had, in a sense, been corrupted by academic "theology"—particularly, by the introduction of Aristotelianism—arrived with Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556). Von Balthasar perceives the fundamental theological vision of the *Societas Jesu* to be the re-insertion into theology—indeed, as its very core—of the original encounter between God, who calls and sends, and the pardoned man or woman, who is sent in obedience. It is von Balthasar's contention that this theological vision could have reunified theology with the requirement of living out a holy life had that possibility been genuinely pursued. However, in reality, the following up of this possibility has had to wait until the twentieth century. And von Balthasar perceives his own theological contribution as the following up of precisely this possibility.

The Theologian and Human Holiness

In "Theology and Sanctity," von Balthasar (1948, 181) uses the term "theologian" to mean "one whose office and vocation is to expound revelation in its fullness, and therefore whose work centers on dogmatic theology." Thus, he does not intend his remarks to apply to those whom we would ordinarily consider to be theologians working in other disciplines (for example, in

biblical studies). Moreover, it goes without saying that von Balthasar's remarks are confined to Christian theology and Christian theologians. He does not claim that his comments apply to the theology or theologians of other religious traditions.

So, it is with Christian theology that von Balthasar is concerned. And with regard to those whom he takes to be the "great saint" theologians up to the time of the scholastics (such as Irenaeus, Cyprian, Athanasius, the two Cyrils, Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Epiphanius, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Chrysostom, Theodoret, Hilary, Ambrose, Augustine, Fulgentius and Isidore), von Balthasar claims, with evident admiration for them, that the reason for their enduring influence is that "the faithful saw in their lives an immediate expression of their teaching and a testimony to its value, and so were made fully confident in the rightness of teaching and acting" (von Balthasar 1948, 181). His assessment is that the harmony of teaching and living out a holy life, which he takes these theologians to instantiate, was a result of their having a correct conception of "truth," which he describes as follows: "the complete concept of truth, which the gospel offers us, consists precisely in this living exposition of theory in practice and of knowledge carried into action" (von Balthasar 1948, 181). Thus, it is a *complete* concept of "truth" with which he is concerned. And, in his view, from the perspective provided by revelation, every "truth," in order for it to be real truth, must be "incarnated in an act or in some action" (von Balthasar 1948, 181). This is because "the incarnation of Christ is the criterion of all real truth" (von Balthasar 1948, 181). Moreover, according to von Balthasar, Christ can assume the role of the criterion of all truth because "his existence manifests his essence, which is to be the 'image of God'" (von Balthasar 1948, 182).

Furthermore, von Balthasar insists that this concept of "truth" is necessitated by his reading of the gospels. In other words, given how he interprets them, any appropriate concept of "truth" to be employed within Christian thought must regard truth as always incarnate in action and related to Christ's incarnation. Consequently, concepts of "truth" drawn from non-Christian philosophies are, in his view, wholly inappropriate to Christian thought.

This understanding of “truth” as requiring incarnation in action also bears upon von Balthasar’s theological psychology. By referring to the “great saint” theologians, he is able to give some content to his understanding of what it is to be an integrated person. For the “great saint” theologians were precisely such integrated persons, and they demonstrate, or so von Balthasar believes, that reflection must be combined with action—which for him means living out a holy life—if a person is to be fully integrated (see Harrison 1999b). Moreover, when a person is fully integrated, she is visibly Christ-like, and thus displays human holiness. And because the “great saint” theologians, being fully integrated, lived out what they taught, “the subsequent separation of theology and spirituality was quite unknown to them” (von Balthasar 1948, 181). In short, the content of a theologian’s work must be “incarnated” in her life. Of course, von Balthasar realizes that such a level of integration is an ideal which is, perhaps, seldom realized in practice. Nevertheless, that does not deter him from making the further claim that unless the possibility of such an integration is presupposed, the activity of Christian theologians is unintelligible.

What this means is not that the attainment of an ideal holy life by a budding theologian is a necessary condition for her engaging in any theology at all. Rather, it means that the possibility of living such a life requires that a theologian should aim towards living it out, for it is in living such a life that the truth is manifest. And this is because a “holy person,” from the perspective of the Balthasarian model of human holiness, is not a finished product, but a Christian whom von Balthasar would describe as living out her mission. Thus, when von Balthasar asserts that Christian theologians ought to be holy people, he should not be construed as being committed to the claim that all Christian theologians must, of necessity, be outstanding examples of human holiness. Instead, all he seems to be claiming is simply that, by inner necessity, they ought to be Christians who are following their missions, for it is by following their missions that they display human holiness. And how do they follow their missions? As indicated earlier, von Balthasar’s view is that they do so by bearing witness to Christ.

In linking the value of any particular theologian's work to her own holiness, a number of conclusions would seem to follow. We could not admit of the apparent possibility that someone who was not striving to live a holy life might nevertheless produce first-rate theology. Given von Balthasar's assumptions, no theology could possibly be of a high standard if it failed to fulfill its function, which is to bear witness to Christ and thus to be revelatory. And that function cannot be fulfilled unless the theology in question is given credibility by the manifest holiness of the theologian. Nor could we admit of the seemingly possible case where a non-Christian or agnostic "theologian" encourages, through her work, other people to move into a Christian faith-stance, while she, herself, remains unconvinced by it.

While these conclusions seem *prima facie* to be counter-intuitive, they are not obviously erroneous. However, von Balthasar's account of the link between the holiness of a theologian and the value of her theology leads to the following seemingly less tractable problem: In the present time, people are often exposed to various theologies which have been developed by theologians whom they do not and, indeed, cannot know personally. Given von Balthasar's position, how could any such theology be accorded credibility?

This difficulty with von Balthasar's account of the link between the holiness of a theologian and the value of her theology might, however, have had less bite at an earlier time. The manner in which Christian theology is usually taught in our day certainly exacerbates this seeming problem. In the Middle Ages, on the other hand, when students of theology tended to be taught directly by the theologian in question, von Balthasar's view would be more compelling. A teacher's theology could fulfill its function because of the student's justified confidence in the holiness of that theologian's life. But then, to the extent that a theologian living a holy life accepted a previous theologian's work, then the holiness of the present theologian could be thought to testify to the sanctity of the previous theologian known to her. Thus, even if the holiness of a far earlier theologian were not widely known, the value of her work could be communicated via a chain of direct contacts from early times until the present-day.

But what of the discovery of a theological work by an unknown author? Were a present-day theologian, who was living a holy life, to consider the newly found work consistent with living a holy life, then her holiness could be thought to testify to the validity of the work in question. And given von Balthasar's presuppositions, such a work could not have been produced by someone who did not live a holy life.

However, this gives rise to an epistemological problem. No doubt it is possible for someone who is not, in actual fact, living a holy life to believe herself to be living one. How could competing claims to holiness be adjudged, especially by those who are not themselves living holy lives? This problem would only admit of a solution if genuine human holiness is discernible. And von Balthasar presumes precisely that human holiness *is* discernible. In his view, phenomenologically, when perceived in the right way, human holiness is indeed a discernible property of those who are living out their missions. It is a property which can be perceived in the world (see Harrison 1999c). Moreover, for von Balthasar, only those engaging in theology who simultaneously display this property by living out holy lives are *authentic* Christian theologians. And this suggests that only they are qualified to assess the merits and demerits of any contribution to the discipline of theology.

Of course, the claim that only those who are living a holy life are qualified to assess the value of a theological work is unlikely to appeal to all present-day academic theologians. Nevertheless, this claim would appear to be a clear implication of von Balthasar's position. And how it is that present-day theologians have ended up lacking the ability to judge which theological works are of real value, as is implied by von Balthasar's standpoint, has, in his view, to do with the separation which has developed between the disciplines of theology and spirituality.

Theology and Spirituality

The degree to which von Balthasar is concerned about the separation between the disciplines of theology and spirituality is explicit in his article "The Unity of Theology and Spirituality." There, he concludes in the final paragraph:

God reveals himself—and thereby his *essence!*—to man in deeds, which at the same time become understandable in words; man answers this self-disclosure as the chosen one, the favored one, the one called, by attempting as a *whole* person (soul and body, prayer and action, inwardness and relation to the world) to form himself in his existence into an answer to God's call. Then he, too, is laid open and revealed in his *essence*. Thereby he becomes a "mirror" (2 Cor 3:18) of God in the world, as Jesus Christ was originally as the "image," "expression" and "reflection" of the Father. If this mirror were pure, one would have to see the whole prototype reflected in it. Thus Christian *praxis* or spirituality would have to mirror the whole of Christian theory or dogmatics. The Pauline epistles can demonstrate that this is correct: from the practical sections the dogmatic section could be reconstructed in all its essentials, should it ever be lost. From this perspective one may ask if it makes sense to continue distinguishing between theology and spirituality in the future. In Origen . . . , such a distinction was not made. The distinction is necessary as a make-shift where dogmatics (above all through polemical controversy) has become so conceptualized that part of the succulence which characterizes the Word of God everywhere is lost. Yet history has demonstrated that the juice, served up as a special dish, cannot give the main dish back its flavor. Flesh and blood must be together originally in order to live; they cannot be brought together after the fact into something living [T]he history of theology proves this statement: Only those theologies became vitally effective in history which bore their spirituality not as an addition but within themselves, which embodied it in their innermost being. (von Balthasar 1969, 43–44)

Hence, in von Balthasar's view, the disciplines of theology and spirituality need to be re-united (their separation remaining an issue within theology to this day; for example, see Kasper 1979, especially pp. 8–11). Moreover, von Balthasar believes that his injunction is justified by a reading of the gospels, claiming that, by concentrating on the Gospel, a route can be found "back to a long neglected aspect of biblical spirituality" (von Balthasar 1969, 40)—namely, that "Christianity is not only to be received

in faith, nor only preached, but performed” (von Balthasar 1969, 41).

We have seen that, according to von Balthasar, a necessary link between engaging in and teaching theology, on the one hand, and living a holy life, on the other, was accepted without question in the pre-scholastic period. By tracing the relationship between theology and spirituality from the time of biblical theology to the present, he is also able to claim that, in the pre-scholastic period, any separation between theology and spirituality as intellectual disciplines was unthinkable, and, in his view, any separation between theology and spirituality simply does not arise in the biblical writings. How, then, has this split arisen? In von Balthasar’s opinion, the current separation between theology and spirituality is, just like the split between theology and the holy life, a result of a certain concentration on philosophical matters. But to understand how this might have led to a separation between the disciplines of theology and spirituality, it is necessary to understand what von Balthasar takes the separation between these disciplines to consist in. And that requires some idea of what he understands by the term “spirituality.”

John Randall Sachs interprets von Balthasar’s understanding of “spiritualities” to comprise the many ways in which Christians attempt to live their faith—the existential “forms” in which the “content” of confessing to the Christian faith is translated into everyday living (see Sachs 1984, 30). This implies that the content of the discipline of spirituality, in von Balthasar’s view, amounts to the study of the holy life. Given this understanding of what he considers the content of the discipline of spirituality to comprise, it is possible to make sense of his view that the split between the disciplines of theology and spirituality resulted from a certain concentration on philosophical matters. Von Balthasar holds that the over-burdening of theology with secular philosophy, and its over-concentration on philosophical matters alien to it, led to its becoming divorced from a *study* of the holy life. Therefore, the study of “Christian life” emerged as a discipline of its own—namely, spirituality. Moreover, this separation between the disciplines of theology and spirituality ties in with the split, discussed above, between the theologian and human holiness, for

the appearance of spirituality as a completely separate area of study marked the extinction of the “complete” theologian: one who embodied her teaching in her life—that is, one who lived out the “unity” of theology and holiness (see Balthasar 1948, 187).

The appropriate response, as von Balthasar makes clear in “The Unity of Theology and Spirituality,” is the return of theology to its origin—in other words, to God’s revelation in Christ, which he describes as the source of Christian mystery. This, von Balthasar believes, would necessitate some kind of re-unification of theology and spirituality, for, as he writes: “Jesus Christ makes it less than ever possible even slightly to divide theology and spirituality; his ‘knowledge’ of God (as especially John 3:11, among other texts, describes it) is one with his devoted attitude of service (true witness as not seeking his own glory, John 7:18)” (von Balthasar 1969, 20). Thus, von Balthasar insists, a study of the gospels reveals that, in bearing witness to Christ, the unity of theology and spirituality should consist in *the unity of knowledge of God and acknowledging action*. And on such a proposed re-unification of theology and the holy life, theology would become both a part of, and a reflection on, revelation.

The contrast between von Balthasar’s conception of theology-as-mission and the conception of theology as a professionalized academic pursuit could hardly be greater. And it seems that the latter conception captures the predominant, modern understanding of what “theology” consists in. For example, in the English-speaking world, the term “theology,” according to the entry by S. W. Sykes (1989, 566) in the *New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, “would now widely be taken to refer to the rational account given of Christian faith.” Furthermore,

[t]he preparatory study for giving such an account would be largely determined by syllabuses of instruction in institutions of higher or further education, such as faculties of theology, seminaries or theological colleges. Here theology is studied either according to conventions of rationality deriving from the theory and practice of modern universities . . . , or according to the requirements of a modern understanding of the ordained ministry of the church, frequently with a close

resemblance to the development of professional expertise (Sykes 1989, 566).

It is precisely this modern view which von Balthasar rejects. He would criticize any such understanding of theology as radically incomplete, for not only does it fail to relate theological activity to God—thus failing even to mention prayer—but it also omits what von Balthasar sees as the theologian's primary function: that of bearing witness to Christ.

Finally, let me briefly outline von Balthasar's proposals for the way forward in theology—proposals which he believes will allow it to overcome both the threat of professionalization and the problematic isolation of the various sub-disciplines.

Von Balthasar's Proposals for the Way Forward in Theology

In his early article "Theology and Sanctity," von Balthasar insists that the way forward for Christian theology lies primarily in a reassessment of its nature. What this actually means, for him, is the need to re-appropriate the conception of theology as the following of a God-given mission (see von Balthasar 1948, 194). His conviction is that theological renewal can only come from the regaining of, what are in effect, certain patristic insights concerning the necessity of retaining a unity between theology and holiness. However, this does give rise to the difficult issue of how to resolve doctrinal disagreements between theologians who succeed in living holy lives, as well as to the related problem of how to resolve disagreements between different schools of theology. The problem is compounded when individual theologians, living holy lives, find themselves in disagreement with the magisterium. These are difficult issues which von Balthasar does not adequately address.

In fact, von Balthasar is well aware that in "Theology and Sanctity" he does not provide a fully worked out theological method which takes account of what he perceives to be the essential link between theology and human holiness. However, he does at least give some indication of how theology ought to be practiced, for he claims that a significant proportion of the subject matter of theology should be "the holy life" as revealed by

phenomenological accounts of its instantiations. Indeed, if one takes seriously the Balthasarian view that the content of God's continuing revelation is the lived relationship (constituted by the following of a mission) which obtains between a person and Christ, then it seems that the proper focus for theological reflection is what those who actually live within such a relationship can tell us about God.

Now, there can be no doubt that the patristic period of Christianity, and the views of the Greek Church Fathers in particular, furnished von Balthasar with his conception of the ideal theologian and the ideal theology. (For a summary of the views of the Greek Fathers on the nature of theology, see Solignac 1991, 463–487.) And given the extent of the influence of the ideas of the Greek Fathers on von Balthasar's views, it is not surprising that his conception of the ideal relation between theology, holiness, and philosophy seems to have more in common with that conception held today in the Eastern Christian tradition (which has descended directly from the Greek Fathers) than with that which prevails in the Latin. Furthermore, given his empathy with the Greek Church Fathers' own assessment of themselves as theologians, and given his admiration for the "great saint" theologians of the Middle Ages, it is not surprising that von Balthasar should have conceived of his own task, as a theologian, to have consisted, to a large extent, in re-presenting elements of an earlier Christian tradition—that is, in making them meaningful and accessible to his contemporary Christians. Consider, for example, his preface to *Love Alone: The Way of Revelation*:

It should hardly be necessary to add that this essay contains nothing new. It seeks to be faithful to the theological tradition of the great saints: Augustine, Bernard, Anselm, John of the Cross, Francis de Sales, Theresa of Lisieux The great lovers are those who know most about God and must be listened to (von Balthasar 1968, 10).

Where von Balthasar's originality lies is in his emphasis on lived holiness as the real focus of authentic Christian theological reflection. Moreover, as he makes clear in "Theology and Sanctity," such a focus, he believes, would lead to a specifically

Christian doctrine of “reality” (by which he means an explanation of human existence and history in the light of revelation; see von Balthasar 1948, 198). And the content of this doctrine would consist in “the understanding of being, but of being as experienced by actual living according to Christ and the Church” (von Balthasar 1948, 198). And as he adds: “What the prayer of the saints, their experience of God in the world, might have to contribute to this doctrine has hardly begun to be explored” (von Balthasar 1948, 198).

Modern theology thus takes a completely wrong approach, in von Balthasar’s opinion, for in separating itself from the discipline of spirituality, both disciplines are de-natured. As he observes: “The saints in modern times are required to describe the way in which they experienced God, and the accent is always on experience rather than on God: for the nature of God is a subject for the theological specialist” (von Balthasar 1948, 192). But, in von Balthasar’s view, to concentrate on the subjective side of the experience, rather than on what the experience can reveal about the objective nature of God, is a disastrous strategy, for it “ends up in the psychological laboratory,” discrediting the ecclesial and charismatic witness of the saints, and “degrading it to the status of a private utterance, which often gives every appearance of being satisfactorily grasped by ordinary worldly methods, very often sub-Christian” (von Balthasar 1948, 192).

Moreover, von Balthasar complains, in cutting themselves off from the experience of God enjoyed by holy persons, his contemporary theologians, insofar as they focus on experience at all, focus on the experience of the average sinner—the ordinary human being—instead of on that of the saints. And this is a great loss to theology because

[m]uch would appear in a very different light were we to apply our reflections to the archetypal function of the saints rather than to the figure presented by the average sinner, for example in the understanding of what a sacrament is and of what its reception means. What does it mean for a saint, when he communicates? He should know, and be able to teach us. What is the significance of a Christian life as a witness to

Christ? What is its theoretical structure, and how is it realized in practice? (von Balthasar 1948, 200).

And despite the fact that, here, von Balthasar is writing about the situation he encountered within theology over half a century ago, his observations remain pertinent.

In short, the way in which theology ought to proceed, in von Balthasar's assessment, is for theologians to begin considering "the constant repetition of the theological existence of the Lord in the life of his faithful and saints" as bearing directly on revelation (von Balthasar 1948, 204). As he pointedly adds: "the saints are not given to us to admire for their heroic powers, but that we should be enlightened by them on the inner reality of Christ, both for the better understanding of the faith and for our living thereby in charity" (von Balthasar 1948, 204). In a word: "their sheer existence proves to be a theological manifestation, which contains most fruitful and opportune doctrine" (von Balthasar 1953, xvii; for his mature position on this topic, see von Balthasar 1985, particularly Chapter Two).

Clearly, the importance to theology which von Balthasar assigns to holy people stems from his belief that genuine Christians express Christian doctrine in how they live their lives (which seems to be a curious inversion of Friedrich Schleiermacher's view that doctrine was an expression of religious experience). And given this assumption, a significant part of the theologian's role ought to consist in the articulation of the doctrine which is existentially expressed through lived holiness—and this concerns the life of the theologian as much as the lives of others. Thus, von Balthasar sees one of the most pressing tasks for contemporary theology to be the development of the best method for drawing out the theological significance of examples of lived holiness. (For one illustration of how theological reflection can focus on the lived experience of holy people, see von Balthasar 1990.) In so doing, theological reflection would serve to make the knowledge of God which holy people manifest accessible to all Christians.

Conclusion

Von Balthasar's contention that in order to be a genuine Christian theologian one must follow a God-given mission to bear witness to Christ through passing on, interpreting and thus continuing God's revelation, and that this cannot be separated from living out a holy life, clearly poses something of a challenge both to the intellectual contributions and to the lifestyles of many of those claiming to be theologians today.

But how does von Balthasar's analysis bear on the crisis facing theology which I described at the beginning of this article? Earlier, I mentioned Harvey's view that the roots of the current crisis lie in the professionalization of theology (including its specialization) and in the changed definition of the theologian's role. It would seem that an adoption of the Balthasarian program for the reform of theology would address all these issues. Von Balthasar's approach rules out a conception of theology dominated by professionalism and specialization. It also defines the theologian's role in terms of a God-given mission rather than as an academic pursuit.

However, it goes without saying that the theology which von Balthasar advocates would have a very peculiar position within those universities in the United States and Great Britain which lack a specifically Christian character. For it would seem highly unlikely that colleagues who were not theologians would accept that the merits of the work of someone in the Theology Department should be measured by standards which are exclusive to theology, and which, moreover, only those living a holy life could apply. This seems to suggest that a Balthasarian approach to theology may only be feasible outside secular universities. Ironically, then, while von Balthasar argues for a reintegration of the various theological disciplines, as well as for a healing of the separation between theology and the holy life, the adoption of his approach could easily result in reinforcing what in his view would be an equally damaging separation within theology: namely, the separation between a university-based "theology" and a church-based (or seminary-based) one. It would surely be somewhat perverse to regard any such eventuality as a solution to a crisis

whose main symptom seems to be the marginalization of theology from other areas of intellectual life.

Hence, von Balthasar's approach to theology may prove to be a double-edged sword to those who try to employ it in order to circumvent theology's current crisis.*

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