

HANS URS VON BALTHASAR AND CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST THEOLOGY

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[The author initiates a dialogue between Hans Urs von Balthasar and contemporary feminist theology, focusing on three areas: theological anthropology, theological method, and Christology. Each section begins by exploring Balthasar's theological standpoint. This is followed by feminist responses to the themes and questions raised by his theology, both favorable and critical. She concludes by exploring the mutual critiques that each theological standpoint poses to the other, arguing for the fruitfulness of this conversation.]

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GENDER as an analytical lens and category in theology has been brought forth through the works of various theologians in the last four decades. Feminist theologians in particular have emphasized the function of sexism in the construction of Christian theology, identity, and tradition in both historical and contemporary ecclesial and academic circles.¹ Central to their theological task is entering into conversation with the Christian theological tradition through a feminist analysis. Feminist theologians find an unlikely partner in Hans Urs von Balthasar, a theologian who also takes the category of gender as essential to his understanding of theology, the human, and divine action.

My article initiates a dialogue between Balthasar and contemporary feminist theology, focusing on three areas: theological anthropology, theo-

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¹ As defined by Rosemary Radford Ruether: "Feminist theology is about the deconstruction of these ideological justifications of male domination and the vindication of women's equality as the true will of God, human nature, and Christ's redemptive intention" (*Women and Redemption: A Theological History* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998]8).

logical method, and Christology. In each section I begin by exploring Balthasar's theological standpoint. This is followed by feminist responses to the themes and questions raised by his theology, both favorable and critical. I conclude by exploring the mutual critiques each theological standpoint poses to the other. While some Balthasar scholars have explored the function of gender in his theology, I would argue that it has not been given the prominence it deserves.² In addition, these studies have not placed Balthasar in conversation with contemporary feminist theologians.³ The goal of my study is not merely to critique Balthasar through the lens of feminist theology but to engage critically his work as well as some central themes within feminist scholarship. This is, therefore, a mutual exchange.

AN INTRODUCTORY WORD ON BALTHASAR

Often, when one hears the name Hans Urs von Balthasar in theological circles, two things come to mind: the conservative nature of his work and his theological esthetics. One of the greatest theologians of the 20th century, he has, until recently, been caricatured as an extremely conservative, and therefore to many an unappealing theologian. This is a result, in part, of two interrelated factors. First, there is a tendency to judge Balthasar by his shorter, more polemical writings. These concern popular issues such as women's ordination and clerical celibacy. Second, and directly related to the former, is the fact that it is only in the past few decades that the majority of Balthasar's corpus has been translated into the English language.⁴

The second great trademark of Balthasar's work is his theological esthetics which culminates in the seven-volume *The Glory of the Lord*.⁵ It is considered by many to be one of the 20th century's greatest achievements within theology.⁶ Situated as the first part of Balthasar's enormous trilogy,

² Several introductions to Balthasar's theology do not contain an analysis of gender in his theology. See Edward T. Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Continuum, 1997); Angelo Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Theological Style* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

³ The only study that has done so is the recent article by Aristotle Papanikolaou, "Person, *Kenosis*, and Abuse: Hans Urs von Balthasar and Feminist Theologies in Conversation," *Modern Theology* 19 (January 2003) 41–65.

⁴ The last volume of the *Theodramatik*, for example, was translated only in 1998. The first volume of *Theologik* was published in English only in 2000.

⁵ English translation of *Herrlichkeit: Eine theologische Ästhetik*.

⁶ As noted in the opening words of Louis Dupré's often-cited overview of Balthasar's esthetics: "Hans Urs von Balthasar's seven-volume *Herrlichkeit*, completed by 1969, ranks among the foremost theological achievements of our century" ("The Glory of the Lord: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theological Aesthetic," in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, ed. David L. Schindler [San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991] 183).

his esthetics seeks to recover the esthetic form of theology. The trilogy itself is based on the three transcendentals of being: the Beautiful (*Herrlichkeit*), the Good (*Theodramatik*), and the True (*Theologik*). The order of the trilogy is not arbitrary. The manifestation, or theophany, of the esthetics leads to the encounter of the dramatics. As Balthasar wrote: "God does not want to be just 'contemplated' and 'perceived' by us, like a solitary actor by his public; no, from the beginning he has provided for a play in which we all must share."⁷ The theo-drama is followed by the theo-logic, which treats the human articulation of the dramatic event.

To those familiar with Balthasar's theology and with the relevant secondary scholarship, the centrality of gender in my study may seem surprising. While there are various authors that examine the role of gender in his work, the majority of Balthasar scholars do not. When examined, gender is treated primarily in light of Balthasar's anthropology, which, while fundamental to understanding its function in his theology, is not an exhaustive approach. Perhaps one of the more creative aspects of Balthasar's theology is found in the fact that gender is not merely an anthropological category. In addition to revealing something about human nature, as Lucy Gardner and David Moss highlight, "there is another critical role which sexual difference is asked to perform in Balthasar's theology. It is also presented as *analogical* to the difference between the world and God—a difference we shall name *theological difference*."⁸ In other words, gender functions in his concept of God and Christology. However, I would push the point further and affirm that gender permeates every aspect of Balthasar's theology.⁹ Unlike many of his contemporary Western European counterparts, gender is a central analytic category in Balthasar's work.

Balthasar's model of humanity is based on an understanding of the female as primarily receptive and the male as active. Balthasar models human sexuality in very clear terms of activity and receptivity. This giving and receiving is constitutive of the Trinity and also linked to Balthasar's *kenotic* Christology and concept of God. The self-giving and pouring out manifested on the cross and on Holy Saturday are identical to the inner-trinitarian relations of giving and receiving. God's nature is thus relational and con-

⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *My Work: In Retrospect* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993).

⁸ Lucy Gardner and David Moss, "Something Like Time: Something Like the Sexes—An Essay in Reception," in *Balthasar at the End of Modernity*, ed. Lucy Gardner, David Moss, Ben Quash, Graham Ward (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999) 78.

⁹ I agree with John O'Donnell, S.J., when he writes: "Moreover, the reader comes to see that Balthasar's understanding of sexuality is central to his vision and sheds light on every facet of his theology" ("Man and Woman as *Imago Dei* in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Clergy Review* 68/4 [1983] 117).

stituted by action. This, in turn, leads to a Christology that understands Jesus Christ, and consequently humanity, as constituted *in relation*. Relationship and action are foundational to our understanding of God and of humanity. This understanding of God and humanity as relational echoes the insights of various contemporary feminist theologians who see a relational anthropology as central to undermining individualistic and hierarchical understandings of the self.¹⁰

While feminists may find problematic what Balthasar writes about gender, he must nonetheless be commended for attempting to understand the human person in light of his or her embodied sexuality. Balthasar constructs gender *theologically*. Also, as one of numerous theologians that contributed to the project of *ressourcement* in 20th-century Catholic theology, Balthasar's retrieval of "Church Mothers" is consonant with feminist historical scholarship.¹¹ While Balthasar's motivations for historical recovery differ from those of feminists, still they share this tenet in their work.

RELATIONAL ANTHROPOLOGIES AND GENDER COMPLEMENTARITY

One cannot address the question of gender in theology without examining anthropology. Angelo Scola notes that for Balthasar, humanity's self-consciousness "is constituted by two factors: the experience of self-possession, and universal openness, the necessity of recognizing the coexistence of men and things. . . . In virtue of the first pole, freedom is the capacity for self-movement, for responsibility, and for choice; by virtue of the second it is the capacity for assent, for acceptance, and for obedience."¹² The first pole, self-possession, is characterized by autonomy. The second pole of freedom is constituted by relationships with others. For Balthasar, humans have a seemingly contradictory awareness of their freedom. It is contradictory because it is a freedom that is limited.¹³ While

¹⁰ See María Pilar Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993); Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1989); Ada María Isasi-Díaz, "Elements of a *Mujerista* Anthropology," in *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996) 128–47; *In the Embrace of God: Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology*, ed. Ann O'Hara (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995).

¹¹ For an excellent introduction to the influence of Henri de Lubac on the prominence of *ressourcement* on Balthasar's theology, see Kevin Mongrain, *The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar: An Irenaean Retrieval* (New York: Crossroad, 2002).

¹² Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar* 85–86.

¹³ Describing the human condition, Balthasar wrote: "He exists as a limited being in a limited world, but his reason is open to the unlimited, to all of being. The proof exists in the recognition of his finitude, of his contingency: I am, but I could not-be"

humans are free, they have an awareness that this freedom is a gift; we are free yet dependent on God who has given them the gift of freedom. This paradox of the human is understood, for Balthasar, in terms of three polarities: spirit and body, man and woman, individual and community.¹⁴ Humans are always struggling within these polarities to find a sense of our humanity.

Separate But Equal? Balthasar's Gender Complementarity

While Balthasar always argues for the equality of the polarities, in terms of gender the male has priority. This position has a christological foundation, for Balthasar argues that based on man's natural priority Christ was incarnate in male flesh.¹⁵ Balthasar's understanding of the feminine as receptivity and response naturally leads to an ontological priority of the male. While Balthasar wants to maintain the equality of the sexes, it is arguable, as the following passage demonstrates, if he succeeds:

Man and woman are face to face. Here their equal rank is given even more emphasis: man looks around him and meets with an answering gaze that turns the one-who-sees into the one-who-is-seen. . . . Thus the woman, who is both 'answer' and 'face', is not only man's delight: she is the help, the security, the home man needs; she is the vessel of fulfillment specially designed for him. Nor is she simply the vessel of *his* fruitfulness: she is equipped with her own explicit fruitfulness. Yet her fruitfulness is not a primary fruitfulness: it is an answering fruitfulness, designed to receive man's fruitfulness (which, in itself, is helpless) and bring it to its 'fullness'.¹⁶

Three points are significant to highlight. First, for Balthasar, feminine receptivity is an active receptivity, not a passive one; women are actively responsive. Second, there is a tension in wanting to depict both sexes as equal, yet giving the male primary status. Lastly, it is important to note that in their relationship to God, all humans are feminine, for they all respond to God's action. The human as the created feminine creature remains

("A Résumé of My Thought," in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work* 1). I have explicitly decided to maintain the gender exclusive language of Balthasar's writings to emphasize the primacy of the male in his theology.

¹⁴ Gerard Loughlin, "Erotics: God's Sex," in *Radical Orthodoxy* (New York: Routledge, 1999) 150.

¹⁵ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 2: *The Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990) 411; trans. of *Theodramatik: Zweiter Band: Die Personen des Spiels. Teil 1: Der Mensch in Gott* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1976).

¹⁶ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 3: *The Dramatis Personae: The Person in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992) 285; trans. of *Theodramatik: Zweiter Band: Die Personen des Spiels. Teil 2: Die Personen in Christus* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1979).

responsive and receptive to God's revelation, while women take on this role in regard to men in human relations. This leads, inevitably, to masculine activity becoming equated with divine agency. Gerard Loughlin foregrounds the inconsistency of this when he writes: "Balthasar wants equality of male and female but the text displays the priority of the male; he wants the priority of the male but the text insinuates an equality with the female, so we have the 'relative priority of the man', which only whispers the relative equality of the woman."¹⁷ There is an ambiguous understanding of gender that is simultaneously egalitarian and hierarchical in Balthasar's theology.

Balthasar understood the distinction between the sexes as reflective of their *imago Dei*, and fruitfulness plays a central role, for it mirrors the eternal fecundity of the Trinity. By positing gender in the *imago Dei*, Balthasar understood the distinctions between the sexes as embedded in humanity's spirit in such a way that "the physical difference appears insignificant in comparison."¹⁸ The two sexes image the *kenotic* self-giving and receiving of the trinitarian relationships.

Since it is women's essential vocation to receive man's fruitfulness into her own fruitfulness, thus uniting in herself the fruitfulness of both, it follows that she is actually the fruit-bearing principle in the creaturely realm. . . . In the most general terms, this means that the woman does not merely give back to man what she has received from him: she gives him something new, something that integrates the gift he gave her but that 'faces' him in a totally new and unexpected form. . . . She responds through reproduction.¹⁹

Lucy Moss and David Gardner have argued that in this passage, woman is constructed as oriented toward man; her vocation is understood in terms of serving him. By constructing woman's response in terms of reproduction, Balthasar also describes her activity as returning something to the man, purely defining her activity in terms of the male.²⁰ Though women's receptivity is defined as an active fruitfulness, Balthasar nonetheless maintains a biological framework for the relationship between men and women. This generative model orients the female toward the male as active-generative-recipient.

For Balthasar, the responsive human is seen as secondary in relationship to God. "We have already indicated that the creature can only be secondary, responsive, 'feminine' vis-à-vis God. . . . However, insofar as every

¹⁷ Loughlin, "Erotics: God's Sex" 153.

¹⁸ Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1983) 227.

¹⁹ Balthasar, *The Dramatis Personae: The Person in Christ* 286.

²⁰ David Moss and Lucy Gardner, "Difference—The Immaculate Concept? The Laws of Sexual Difference in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Modern Theology* 14 (July 1998) 385.

creature—be it male or female in the natural order—is originally the fruit of the primary, absolute, self-giving divine love, there is a clear analogy to the female principle in the world.”²¹ The human is secondary in regard to God; the female in regard to the male. Therefore, woman is doubly secondary in Balthasar’s theology. This is grounded in Balthasar’s definition of the human as essentially feminine in regard to God. However, in relationship with each other, men have an added masculine principle that is not present in women.

Linked to this theme is Balthasar’s understanding of woman as answer. Once again, returning to an earlier citation, Balthasar defines man and woman as equal, though woman is understood as man’s answer. She is “designed for him.” While her receptivity is active, it is understood as a responsive-active-receptivity. Balthasar’s construction of woman as answer leads to an understanding of woman as constituted by her relationship to man. Her sense of self is defined in terms of the male and is thus secondary.²² In the original German text of Balthasar’s writings the male-female pair is *Wort-Antwort*. The complementarity that Balthasar envisions is more obvious in the original language, yet as *Antwort* to the male *Wort*, the primacy of the male is reinforced. One cannot answer unless spoken to. Woman is constructed as responsive to the male. If one looks at the history of feminist theology, it began as a response to androcentric, patriarchal theological constructions. However, this feminine “response” is quite different from what Balthasar has in mind.

Egalitarian Anthropologies: Feminist Responses to Balthasar

As noted by Mary Ann Hinsdale in her excellent overview of theological anthropology in feminist theology, a critique of androcentric, patriarchal understandings of the human has accompanied feminist theology since its inception in the 1960s.²³ As early as 1960, Valerie Saiving mused: “I am no longer certain as I once was that, when theologians speak of ‘man,’ they are using the word in its generic sense.”²⁴ Instead of attempting to summarize the complexity and depth of feminist theological anthropologies, my com-

²¹ Balthasar, *The Dramatis Personae: The Person in Christ* 287.

²² In Balthasar’s theology, Moss and Gardner hold, woman is “chronologically, temporally, historically, accidentally second” (“Something like Time” 86). See n. 8 above.

²³ Mary Ann Hinsdale, “Heeding the Voices: An Historical Overview,” in *In the Embrace of God: Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology*, ed. Ann O’Hara (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995) 23.

²⁴ Valerie Saiving, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1992; orig. ed. 1979) 25.

ments are shaped by the dialogue with Balthasar's theology. Two themes found in his theology that mirror the concerns of feminist theologians are relational constructions of the human and gender complementarity. While the former resonates with the writings of various theologians, the latter is often met with disdain and criticism.²⁵ For these theologians, the roots of gender complementarity are in the dualistic anthropology of male-mind/soul and woman-body, where women are symbolically subordinate to men.

Mary Aquin O'Neill provides a succinct definition of gender complementarity that sounds eerily similar to the very theological anthropology of Hans Urs von Balthasar.

This anthropology of complementarity, as it came to be known, posits a theology in which the sexes complete one another, not only on the level of reproduction, but in the full range of human existence: social, intellectual, psychological, spiritual. There is a male way of being and a female way, and these can be known from an examination of the bodies of the two and given a fair degree of specificity. Thus men are supposed to be, by nature, active, rational, willful, autonomous beings whose direction goes outward into the world; women are to be passive, intuitive, emotional, connected beings whose natural inclination is inward. This bipolar vision of the sexes leads to an equally bipolar understanding of their respective places, namely, the world and the home.²⁶

As O'Neill emphasizes, this bipolar anthropology essentializes sexual identity and social roles. Feminist theologian Daphne Hampson has noted that a theological anthropology based on a vision of gender complementarity is in sharp contrast the vision of the human embraced by many feminist theologians. In this construction, man is the normative center. "A good way then of marking the male concept of 'complementarity' is to note that the female is always to 'complement' the male and never *vice versa*. That is to say, he is subject, while she is 'other'."²⁷ What is deemed feminine is the male projection of attributes that are excluded from the construction of masculine identity. Taking a slightly different path, Anne E. Carr cites the work of O'Neill who argues that gender complementarity is: "fraught with

²⁵ Lisa Sowle Cahill stands out as a feminist ethicist who embraces a positive interpretation of gender complementarity. "Sexual complementarity involves a partnership of life in the service of community—of the species and of the whole created order." Cahill does not, however, argue for a gender essentialism outside of reproduction. "I do not believe it is now, or ever will be, possible for Christian ethics to enumerate fixed normative lists of male and female characteristics and concomitant social roles" (*Between the Sexes: Foundations for a Christian Ethics of Sexuality* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985] 99–100).

²⁶ Mary Aquin O'Neill, "The Mystery of Being Human Together," in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993) 149.

²⁷ Daphne Hampson, *After Christianity* (Valley Forge: Trinity International, 1996) 192.

problems, the chief of which is that defining male and female polarities (activity/passivity, reason/intuition, emotion/will, etc.), denies the wholeness of human experience and the hopes of women themselves. In this vision of humanity, the activities of each sex are rigidly limited, as is the scope of human freedom, judgment, and responsibility over nature."²⁸ Gender complementarity denies the fullness of the individual human and his or her nature by characterizing certain attributes based on biological sex.

In a thoughtful attempt to bridge the insights of essentialist understandings of the human and what are termed "agnostic," constructivist notions of selfhood, Nancy Dallavalle argues for critical essentialism as a response to the either/or paradigms of current discussions between feminist theory and theology.²⁹ Rejecting essentialist claims surrounding human relationships, Dallavalle notes: "Male and female are to be understood as essential differences, but this difference need not imply an anthropology of complementarity in which male and female only find their meaning in the other."³⁰ Dallavalle acknowledges that gender dualisms saturate theological anthropologies, especially models where women are deemed subordinate to men. Yet another approach is found in the writings of Prudence Allen. In contrast to the "fractional sex complementarity" that dominates anthropologies, Allen proposes "integral sex complementarity" as a viable option for Christian anthropologies.³¹ Fractional sex complementarity sees men as providing certain characteristics, female others, and when combined they make an integrated whole. Instead, Allen offers her integral approach.

If man and woman are considered whole already as self-defining individuals and self-giving persons, then they are more like integers than like fractions. Furthermore, the interaction of two whole beings leads to a more fertile result than simply

²⁸ Anne E. Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (New York: Continuum, 1988) 123. See Mary Aquin O'Neill, "Toward a Renewed Anthropology," *Theological Studies* 36 (1975) 725–36.

²⁹ Nancy Dallavalle, "Neither Idolatry nor Iconoclasm: A Critical Essentialism for Catholic Feminist Theology," *Horizons* 25 (1998) 23–42. Various texts have addressed the question of essentialism within numerous disciplines across the academy. Rebecca Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney, *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997); Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000); Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject: Women's Discourse and Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994). On the history of the philosophical construction of gender, see Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman*, vol. I. *The Aristotelian Revolution 750 BC—AD 1250* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) and her *The Concept of Woman*, vol. II. *The Early Humanist Reformation, 1250–1500* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

³⁰ Dallavalle, "Neither Idolatry Nor Iconoclasm" 37.

³¹ Prudence Allen, "Integral Sex Complementarity and the Theology of Communion," *Communio* 17 (1990) 523–44.

one whole composed of two fractional beings. In fact, in integral sex complementarity, the bonding of two persons creates what can be called a *synergetic* effect, or one plus one adds up to more than two.³²

No matter what the given response, what is clear is that within contemporary feminist theology gender complementarity is, as envisioned in Balthasar's construction, extremely problematic.

While his model of gender complementarity hampers Balthasar's anthropology in the eyes of feminists, his emphasis on relationality as the center of what it means to be human resonates with the work of contemporary feminist theologians. Linked to this relational understanding of the self is the feminist emphasis on embodiment. Rosemary Radford Ruether, in her now classic *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, outlines a feminist anthropology that undermines patriarchal understandings of humanity.³³ Ruether begins her chapter by presenting what she describes as the dual structure of Christian theological anthropology, essence and existence, which represent human authentic potential and historical humanity. Central to this anthropology is the notion of humanity created in the image of God. There is a tension, however, between the notions of male and female created both in the image of God and the tradition that correlates female with lower human nature. "Males, as the monopolizers of theological self-definition, project onto women their own rejection of their 'lower selves.' Women, although equivalent in the image of God, nevertheless symbolize the lower self, representing this in their physical, sexual nature."³⁴ Citing central figures including Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Barth, Ruether presents the classic patriarchal paradigms of women's humanity. In a similar vein, Ruether critiques Romantic and Liberal feminist anthropologies as unsatisfactory models of egalitarian anthropologies. Critiquing gender complementarity, Ruether argues that such models perpetuate gender stereotypes, undermining a notion of human personhood that embraces human nature as both male and female. Women, Ruether argues, "need to appropriate and deepen the integration of the whole self—relational with rational modes of thought—that is already theirs."³⁵ Ruether concludes by offering a relational anthropology that emphasizes our interconnectedness with others.

Latina feminist theologian María Pilar Aquino, in her first book, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America*, argued for an egalitarian anthropology as fundamental to overcome patriarchal and individualistic anthropologies of Western European philosophies and theo-

³² Ibid. 540.

³³ Rosemary R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1993) 93–115.

³⁴ Ibid. 94.

³⁵ Ibid. 112.

gies.³⁶ Central to her study is a critique of any type of subordinationist or androcentric anthropology. These are exemplified in the dualist anthropologies of Augustine and Aquinas. In both, Aquino holds, women are reduced to their procreative function. “For Augustine, the meaning and purpose of the sexual difference between women and men finds its ultimate justification in procreation. ... In Thomas, the biological purpose of women’s existence is explained by the good of the species. Women are subordinate through their auxiliary—and therefore inferior—procreative function.”³⁷ In contrast to this construction, Aquino offers an egalitarian anthropology based on four broad brushstrokes.

First, an egalitarian anthropology must be human centered, placing both sexes at the center of theological reflection. This is *contra* a male centered anthropology where woman is constructed as other. Second, this anthropology is unitarian, undermining a dualistic vision of the human being and human history. Realism is the third feature of this anthropology, which “enters deep into history and struggles to transform the realities that cause death.”³⁸ Last, this anthropology is multidimensional, embracing the complexity of the human. Anthropologies such as Ruether’s and Aquino’s demonstrate that the relational construction of humanity found in Balthasar’s writings is, while problematic, not entirely alien to feminist constructions.

A GENDERED THEOLOGICAL METHOD

In a sense, it is almost inappropriate to speak of Balthasar in terms of method. To speak of theological method often implies an explicit, systematic approach to one’s theology. As noted by J. Randolph Sachs: “Balthasar himself never tires of emphasizing the non-systematic nature of his theology.”³⁹ Nonetheless, there are clear methodological features of his theology. Balthasar scholars have used various ways to describe the meditative dimension of his theology. Sachs notes that for Balthasar, theology and spirituality have an intrinsic relationship.⁴⁰ Edward Oakes has observed that for Balthasar, theological content and form can never be separated from each other.⁴¹ Medard Kehl, I find, has the most succinct and clear definition of Balthasar’s method. “For Balthasar, good theology is contem-

³⁶ María Pilar Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993).

³⁷ *Ibid.* 85.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 88.

³⁹ John Randolph Sachs, “The Pneumatology and Christian Spirituality of Hans Urs von Balthasar” Dr. theol. dissertation, University of Tübingen, 1984, 25–26.

⁴⁰ Sachs, “Hans Urs von Balthasar,” in *A New Handbook to Christian Theologians*, ed. Donald W. Musser and John L. Price (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 496.

⁴¹ Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption* 108.

plation brought to conceptualization.”⁴² Contemplation has both an objective and subjective dimension. It is found in the openness of the divine to the human and the human’s open receptivity to the divine.⁴³ Contemplation, however, is not merely passive receptivity but also entails active participation.

Balthasar offered various discussions of his theological method that affirm the above-mentioned assessments. In his article “The Place of Theology,” he wrote: “From the very outset, one approaches the word of God, the scripture, on one’s knees, prostrate, in the conviction that the written word has within it the spirit and power to bring about, in faith, contact with the infinity of the Word.”⁴⁴ One can see, therefore, why Balthasar’s theology is often characterized as a kneeling theology.⁴⁵ The material of theology must be governed by the event of revelation, must remain contemporary, and must tie the revelation of today with the tradition of yesterday. Balthasar’s emphasis on the spiritual dimension of theology is governed by a concern for what he sees as the cleavage between theology and spirituality. This “schism” of disciplines began with Scholasticism but has come to its fullest fruition in the modern era.⁴⁶ In light of his method, there are three areas where gender has distinct implications: in Balthasar’s relationship with Adrienne von Speyr, in questions of authority in regards to Balthasar’s sources, and in his understanding of the theological task. In all

⁴² Kehl, “Hans Urs von Balthasar” 35.

⁴³ Balthasar, *Prayer* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986) 48.

⁴⁴ Balthasar, “The Place of Theology,” in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 1, *The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco, Ignatius, 1989) 150; trans. of *Skizzen zur Theologie, Erster Band: Verbum Caro* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1960).

⁴⁵ As David L. Schindler writes: “The phrase he coined for the basic way of ‘method’ of theology—namely, ‘*knieende theologie*’: praying or kneeling theology—applies to his own work. A theology whose first ‘method’ is prayer does not exclude other (e.g. historical-critical) methods; but it nonetheless includes these only as it transforms them” (“Preface,” in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work* xi).

⁴⁶ “Coinciding with the growth of scholasticism, medieval spirituality’s intensifying focus on individual experience and affectivity gave rise to a spiraling mutual distrust between spirituality and theology that lingers even today. . . . From 1948 until nearly the time of his death on 1988, Hans Urs von Balthasar was concerned with that separation, particularly as it takes place in the later Middle Ages. . . . The diverging needs of inner-ecclesial formation, on one hand, and apologetic and scientific theology, on the other hand, led inevitably to the doom of theology-spirituality matrix. But that is only the external problem, says von Balthasar, it is only the trap in which the real tragedy takes place, namely the growing loss of that fertile receptive ground in which spiritual consciousness could grow in doctrinal truth. The real tragedy, in other words, is that by the later Middle Ages fewer and fewer saints, mystics, and theologians still knew how to knit spirituality and theology together in their own life and work” (Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* [New York: Blackwell, 1998] 63).

three areas, gender plays a distinct function in Balthasar's understanding of the sources and norms for theology.

The Priest and the Mystic: Balthasar and Speyr

Perhaps no other figure in Balthasar's life has provoked more confusion and sometimes disdain than the medical doctor Adrienne von Speyr. Some, such as Edward Oakes, name Balthasar's relationship with Speyr as the factor that led to his marginal status in 20th-century theology: "[W]e have before us the single most telling factor responsible for Balthasar's isolation from the rest of twentieth-century theology; for Adrienne von Speyr struck (and still strikes) many people as, if not bizarre, at least alienating and too intense for their taste."⁴⁷ Part of the confusion and alienation surrounding the role of Speyr in Balthasar's theology is due to her mystical experiences, where she claimed visions of Mary and direct personal revelation.

However one interprets the relationship and its impact, one cannot deny the role Speyr played in Balthasar's life and intellectual development.⁴⁸ He wrote in the introduction to his book *Our Task*: "This book has one chief aim: to prevent any attempt being made after my death to separate my work from that of Adrienne von Speyr. It will show that in no respect is this possible, as regards both theology and the developing community."⁴⁹ In this book one discovers Balthasar's humble and honest account of the profound influence that Speyr had upon him. Similar sentiments are also revealed in *My Work: In Retrospect*. Balthasar felt Speyr's influence on his writing was extensive. Repeatedly he affirmed the complementary and unified nature of their work, once again denying the possibility of separating the two. In attempting to depict his work since meeting Speyr he wrote: "This is not an easy task. The views and projects I brought with me are so interconnected with what came from her that the two can never be neatly separated."⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption* 4.

⁴⁸ This is in direct contrast to the view given by the recent book of Kevin Monaghan, who downplays the impact of Speyr on Balthasar, in spite of Balthasar's assertions. "The assumption guiding my reading of von Speyr is that von Speyr's influence on his theology was deforming rather than constructive, derived rather than original; von Speyr is essential for psychologically understanding von Balthasar but completely dispensable for theologically understanding him" (Monaghan, *The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar* 11–12). See n. 11 above.

⁴⁹ Balthasar, *Our Task: A Report and A Plan*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994) 13.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 95. Earlier in this volume he wrote: "It is quite impossible to try to disentangle what is hers from what is mine in these later works" (*ibid.* 73). A significant portion of the footnotes in volume five of the *Theo-drama* is from Speyr's work. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 5: *The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1998); trans. of *Theo-dramatik: Vierter Band: Das Endspiel* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1983).

Though at first a Protestant, Speyr converted to Roman Catholicism the very year she met Balthasar. He was her spiritual mentor. Their relationship was one of deep friendship and collaboration. One may question the importance of this relationship in a study of Balthasar.⁵¹ I find, however, that a study of Balthasar cannot be accomplished rightfully without an examination of his relationship to Speyr. John Roten, in his article, "The Two Halves of the Moon: Marian Anthropological Dimensions in the Common Mission of Adrienne von Speyr and Hans Urs von Balthasar," raises as an integral aspect of his study:

The psychological and theological symbiosis with Adrienne von Speyr and—largely because of this symbiosis—Hans Urs von Balthasar's profoundly Marian mental structure. There is ample evidence that not only Balthasar's Marian theology but—even more deeply—his personality structure, the habits of the heart and the intellectual framework, have been influenced and co-shaped by Adrienne von Speyr. Furthermore, it can be shown that Hans Urs von Balthasar's personality structure and his Mariology are intimately related and concurrent.⁵²

Roten's article stresses Speyr's profound influence on Balthasar both personally and theologically. Balthasar edited some 15 of Speyr's works, all containing Marian themes. Her mystical experiences of Mary had a weighty effect on Balthasar. Balthasar and Speyr's relationship was, in their eyes, an embodiment of their theological views. They saw it as "God's willingness to be present in this double figure of priest and mystic."⁵³ In other words, Balthasar as priest and Speyr as mystic together were representational of God's intended humanity in its separate but united roles. The male and female each served a divine purpose that is fully realized in the unity of their relationship.

In addition to their theological collaboration, Balthasar and Speyr together founded a secular institute, the Community of Saint John. In 1947 Balthasar set up the publication house Johannes Verlag in order to publish Speyr's works. During this period, the 1940s, events began to swirl around Balthasar that created an atmosphere of crisis: the death of his father, tensions with the Swiss Jesuits, theological scrutiny, his relationship with Adrienne von Speyr, and his role in the Community of Saint John. The authenticity of Speyr's mystical visions was called into question, as was the Community of Saint John. These tensions and events culminated in his departure from the Society of Jesus in 1950.

⁵¹ Edward Oakes, for example, does not significantly treat Speyr's influence in his monograph on Balthasar's theology.

⁵² Johann Roten, "The Two Halves of the Moon: Marian Anthropological Dimensions in the Common Mission of Adrienne von Speyr and Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Communio* 16 (Fall 1989) 421.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 425.

Balthasar's understanding of the female as active recipient and the male as simply active was, in his eyes, personified in his working relationship with Speyr. Roten, describing Speyr and Balthasar, wrote: "They are kneeling and sitting theology united; the overflowing abundance carried in the womb of the woman and the representative function of the man, called upon to interpret and formulate—all these aspects of a complementary thematic can be found in the different facets of the double mission."⁵⁴ While Roten gives clear priority to the receptive act of Speyr's mystical visions, it is the male's role to intellectualize the content of such visions. The woman actively receives, while the male actively conceptualizes. It is interesting to note that Speyr's mysticism is polarized against Balthasar's intellect. Clearly, in Roten's eyes, Speyr would be incapable of thinking about her own visions. This is not her role. As Balthasar described their collaboration: "For Adrienne, there was the seemingly endless quest for Catholic truth . . . For me, there was an education—first of all literary, then philosophical and theological—which was intended to give me a knowledge of the spiritual tradition of the Church, within which I could situate what was special and new about Adrienne's insights."⁵⁵ Balthasar saw his education as a means of contextualizing Speyr's spiritual visions.

The Prominence of Women in Balthasar's Theology

His relationship with Speyr is one of several instances where Balthasar brings forth the voices of women as theological sources in his work. Speyr's manuscripts, for example, would never have seen the light of day without him. Speyr is also a theological resource in Balthasar's own writing, which he cites among the voices of the Church Fathers. His monographs on Thérèse of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity demonstrate his push to lift the voices of women. This has implications for the theological method of contemporary theology. As Angelo Scola emphasizes:

'Academic theology' does not like being asked to submit to the schooling of Thérèse of Lisieux to learn *Catholic integration* from her. And yet *this* is the way which Hans Urs von Balthasar walked untiringly to the end; this is the way he suggested for theology. I am thinking here of his edition of the works of Marie de la Trinité shortly before his death, and especially of the gigantic work of Adrienne von Speyr. In his activity as a translator and editor, von Balthasar edited many works by women of the past and present. More than any other (male) theologian, he was engaged in a *theological* conversation with these women. He did not see their experiences and reflections as 'spirituality', but as theological contributions.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Ibid. 443.

⁵⁵ Balthasar, *Our Task* 17.

⁵⁶ Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar* 262–63.

While I agree with Scola's assessment of the impact Balthasar's works on women's contributions for contemporary theology, I am hesitant to agree with his contention that women and men are given equal theological weight in Balthasar's corpus. While Balthasar clearly wants to overcome, for example, the cleft between theology and spirituality, I am not convinced that he succeeds given his understanding of the theological task.

Balthasar interpreted his relationship with Speyr as a model for gendered theological activity. Her role, as mystic, was to provide the data which he in turn would shape with his intellectual background into theological reflection. I am not implying that Balthasar did not take Speyr's contribution seriously. He understood her visions as a vital theological resource for the contemporary Church. He cited them as sources in his writings. At the same time, however, in his theological method, her contribution is the spiritual life or vision that informs theology, though it is not exactly theology. There is ambiguity in this model, for among other things, Balthasar understood the split between theology and spirituality to be extremely detrimental for contemporary Christianity. At the same time, unfortunately, this is yet another area where his ambiguous understanding of gender perhaps weakened his work.

Balthasar on Feminism: The Barring of Women from Theology

Linked to this gendered understanding of the theological task is Balthasar's critique of feminism. Balthasar explicitly addressed feminism when he treated the question of the ordination of women. He began by defining feminism as both an "offensive" and an "assault" which seeks the equality of men and women. He argued that women's attempts for the equality of the sexes "can scarcely be done without an unnatural masculinization of woman or a leveling of the difference between the sexes."⁵⁷ Balthasar continued by asserting that the contemporary era is in fact no longer patriarchal, for the era of "the dominance of the father in the clan" is over. Instead Balthasar framed the present in terms of the "prevalence of a rationalism to which natural things and conditions mean above all material for manufacturables." He continued by naming this rationalism as philosophical. Proceeding with his gendered presentation of the philosophical task, Balthasar described the intellectual process as feminine, procreative receptivity that then bears its seeds in myth, images, and concepts. In the current technological and positivistic philosophy, Balthasar contended, the female element vanishes. "There is no longer anything that maternally embraces the human being's existence; under the power of the human

⁵⁷ Balthasar, "Women Priests?" in *New Elucidations*, trans. Mary Theresilde Skerry (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986) 188.

spirit, nature has descended to the level of mere material.”⁵⁸ The feminine is thus equated with the natural.

Balthasar critiqued feminism’s attempts to rectify this situation through entry into the masculine discourse of rational philosophy. “This epochal forgetting, in which the femininity of the woman is also forgotten, cannot be reversed by any kind of rationally expedient planning, least of all by the woman’s moving into the already overpopulated other side.”⁵⁹ Balthasar did not reduce the philosophical process, however, to masculine activity. In a sense, the feminine is the “stuff” from which philosophical reflection emerges. He is in fact critiquing the loss of what he called “the feminine” in current philosophical reflection. How did Balthasar think the current situation can be rectified? “If we can do so, then certainly only through the woman who perceives and understands her role as counterpoise to and spearhead against man’s increasingly history-less world, and then must do just the opposite of what current feminism does. Neither competition with man in the typically masculine field nor a rationally drawn up (with masculine means!) counteraction against the masculine world is meaningful.”⁶⁰ Women must therefore more fully embrace their “femininity” in order to counteract the predominance of the masculine. In some ways, Balthasar’s suggestion is consonant with the project of feminist theology. He is suggesting that women must include their voices in “nontraditional” manners as sources for philosophical reflection in order to transform the nature of that discourse. However, Balthasar did not put these alternative theological expressions on the same playing field as theology.

An example is seen in the fact that none of the twelve theologians mentioned in Balthasar’s esthetics are women. Cyril O’Regan writes, quite apologetically, that the set of twelve in *Glory of the Lord* is not set by the exclusion of women “for female representatives of tradition are treated generously elsewhere in Balthasar’s work.”⁶¹ I contend that this is an intentional omission on Balthasar’s part. There is once again a complementary understanding of spirituality and theology, which can be paralleled to the complementarity of the male and female, where the male remains the active, intellectual component. While wanting to argue for the equality of these roles, it is naïve, given the context of women’s historical marginalization and oppression, to assume that a “separate but equal” understanding of voice ever embraces true equality.

A final area that links Balthasar’s gendered theological method, where the male is seen as the active, intellectualizing force, is found in his very

⁵⁸ Ibid. 188–89.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 190.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 191.

⁶¹ Cyril O’Regan, “Balthasar: Between Tübingen and Postmodernity,” *Modern Theology* 14 (July 1998) 331.

definition of the role of the theologian. Antonio Sciara highlights that for Balthasar the theologian must be engaged in ecclesial office and mission.⁶² Clearly, in the Catholic Church today, this is an impossibility for a woman. In his article "Theology and Sanctity," it is significant that Balthasar defined the theologian as "one whose office and vocation is to expound revelation in its fullness."⁶³ Balthasar here lamented the split between theology and spirituality, yet when women were mentioned (Teresa of Avila, Hildegard of Bingen, Matilda, Bridget, and the two Catherines), they were characterized as mystics and not theologians.⁶⁴ One cannot help but question the significance of this distinction for Balthasar's understanding of the theological task that differs radically from feminist reconstructions of theology.

Transforming the Nature of the Theological Task: Feminist Method

Feminist theology is characterized by a tripartite method: a hermeneutic of suspicion (critique and deconstruction of the past), a hermeneutic of retrieval (recovery of the lost history of women), and reconstruction (revision of Christian categories). This includes a critique of androcentric, patriarchal scholarship and Church life.⁶⁵ This leads to a revisioning of the entire Christian tradition, for both men and women. In the work of feminist theologians one finds a suspicion of giving Christian tradition, Scripture, and theology any sort of normative status due to its androcentric biases. Therefore, women's experiences and struggles for liberation often become the central commitment and norm in their work. Fundamental to feminist theology is recovering women's intellectual histories and the implications of this task. Through their privileging of gender as a primary analytical category, feminist theologians seek to highlight the ideologies operating in historical and current understandings of Christian tradition. Their scholarship demonstrates the dynamics of power and marginalization in Christian discourse.

Elizabeth Johnson describes feminist theology's three-fold method in this manner. She writes: "[F]eminist theology engages in at least three interrelated tasks: it critically analyzes inherited oppressions, searches for

⁶² Antonio Sciara, O.C.D., "Hans Urs von Balthasar: Theology and Holiness," in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work* 122.

⁶³ Balthasar, "Theology and Sanctity," in *The Word Made Flesh* 181.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 190–91.

⁶⁵ In the later work of Catholic theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson there is a fourfold method of ideological suspicion, historical reconstruction, ethical assessment of texts, and hermeneutics of suspicion, of remembrance, of proclamation, and celebration (*Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* [New York: Continuum, 1998] 160–61).

alternative wisdom and suppressed history, and risks new interpretations of the tradition in conversation with women's lives."⁶⁶ Johnson emphasizes the critical lens of feminist theology and the historical dimension of feminist theological projects. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza echoes: "Feminist scholarship unveils the patriarchal functions of the intellectual and scientific frameworks generated and perpetuated by male-centered scholarship that makes women invisible or peripheral in what we know about the world, human life, and cultural or religious history."⁶⁷ This first task in feminist theology is to be mindful of the function of power and marginalization in inherited and current theological discourses.

The second task of feminist theology is dominated by historical research. Through this work, the lost women's voices of Christian traditions are recovered through scriptural and historical scholarship. Part of this task is unearthing the role of silence that led to the marginalization of these women's voices. Schüssler Fiorenza highlights the importance of this step, for a feminist critical analysis must be accompanied by knowledge of women's intellectual contributions throughout the centuries.

Although women have questioned these explanations and internalizations throughout the centuries, we remain ignorant of our own intellectual traditions and foremothers. All 'great' philosophers, scientists, theologians, poets, politicians, artists, and religious leaders seem to have been men who have for centuries been writing and talking to each other in order to define God, the world, human community and existence as 'they saw it.' However that does not mean that women have not been 'great' thinkers and leaders. Yet their thoughts and works have not been transmitted and become classics of our culture and religion because patriarchy requires that in any conceptualization of the world men and their power have to be central.⁶⁸

One should not, however, limit the subject matter of this task to the scholarship of women. Part of this second step includes unearthing the male voices that have been silenced, misinterpreted, or ignored. The third task of feminist theology creates new theological constructions in light of the prior two steps.

In light of Balthasar's theology, there are some points of consonance between his theological projects and those of feminist theologians. Entirely absent in Balthasar is a critical appraisal of the Christian tradition in light of a feminist hermeneutic. This should not be surprising to us. However, in his critique of the severance of theology and spirituality in modern theology, Balthasar is creating the contemporary form of "appropriate" theo-

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1997) 29.

⁶⁷ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Breaking the Silence—Becoming Visible," in *The Power of Naming: A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology* (New York: Orbis, 1996) 168.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 171.

logical reflection. His use of esthetic resources (drama, poetry) within his theology demonstrates his desire to reimagine the form of theological reflection. In this sense, his theology mirrors feminist attempts to include alternative voices and avenues of theological reflection.

Regarding the historical retrieval that marks the second key moment of feminist theological method, Balthasar's *ressourcement* of women's voices is clearly in the spirit of feminist historical scholarship. In a similar vein, his efforts to promote and publish the work of Speyr are to be commended. However, it is in his theological construction that Balthasar falls short of feminist concerns. Balthasar clearly limited the contributions of the very women he celebrates to the realm of spirituality, which is contrasted to academic, male, philosophical and theological reflection. While he clearly took women's contributions seriously, as is seen in the interconnection of his work with Speyr's, the manner in which women's voices are constructed in his theology limit their intellectual contribution.

KENOSIS: CHRISTOLOGICAL HUMILITY AND SUFFERING

The centrality of gender in Balthasar's theology is grounded in his concept of God that is analogously constructed in a model of human sexuality. Balthasar defined the inner-trinitarian relationships in terms of actions, which he analogously designated as sexual. The Father is the active, masculine principle, while the Son is passive and feminine. The Spirit receives both and simultaneously "gives" as the eternal love between Father and Son.⁶⁹ In regard to the Father, the Son is receptive, therefore feminine. The paradox of Sonship is found in the passivity of his activity. However, in regard to the world the Son is active.⁷⁰

Balthasar's Gendered Trinity

Balthasar's gender-defined understanding of the Trinity, including the paradox of the Son's masculine and feminine roles, is seen in the following quote:

⁶⁹ "If the Father in his surrender is 'active' ('masculine') and the Son 'passive' ('feminine': receptive of self, by which, however, as the Begotten One he also actively receives himself), then the Spirit is in himself both the 'most passive' (since he is the result of two personal activities) and the 'most active' (because the encounter of Father and Son in their eternal love is the perfect, sealing act of the Godhead)" (Balthasar, "Preliminary Remarks on the Discernment of Spirits," in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 4, *Spirit and Institution* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995) 341. While Balthasar generally describes the feminine in terms of active receptivity here in this citation he denotes the feminine as passive.

⁷⁰ "According to Balthasar, the activity corresponding to this ontological receptivity is obedience. Thus at the heart of the Trinity we encounter a profound paradox. The Son's activity is really a passivity. His being, his Sonship, consists in obedience. However, in regard to the world, the Son is masculine" (John O'Donnell, S.J., "Man and Woman as *Imago Dei*" 118).

In trinitarian terms, of course, the Father, who begets him who is without origin, appears primarily as (super-) masculine; the Son, in consenting, appears initially (super-) feminine, but in the act (together with the Father) of breathing forth the Spirit, he is (super-) masculine. As for the Spirit, he is (super-) feminine. There is even something (super-) feminine about the Father too, since, as we have shown, in the action of begetting and breathing forth he allows himself to be determined by the Persons who thus proceed from him; however, this does not affect his primacy on the order of the Trinity.⁷¹

Though Jesus' "economic" life, death, Descent into Hell, and Resurrection, the inner or immanent nature of the Trinity is revealed. Balthasar's concept of God is *kenotic*. The life of the Trinity is characterized by infinite self-surrender. The three persons can be conceived only in relationship. "The Father only is, as he who generates the Son, he who surrenders and pours himself out in the Son; and the Son is, only as he who utterly surrenders himself to the Father, acknowledging himself to be the Father's image and glory; the Spirit is, only as witnessing and expressing the love between the Father and the Son, proceeding from them."⁷² The Incarnate Son reveals the life of the Trinity. The Son's self-emptying on the cross reveals the surrender that characterizes the Being of the three persons of the Trinity. As *kenotic*, Balthasar's concept of the Trinity is relational. As Sachs has argued: "Von Balthasar's understanding of God is fundamentally *kenotic* (that is, one of self-emptying love), leading to a conception of the trinitarian persons in a radically relational and paradoxically 'selfless' way. Thus, he suggests, the three in God are not so much different 'selves,' but different modes of divine selflessness."⁷³ Thus it is in God's very nature to surrender God's self in self-emptying love. This is the mode of divine Being. Balthasar's *kenotic* understanding of God informs his anthropology. His image of the human is both relational and self-emptying. Only when the human surrenders finite freedom into the realm of the infinite is true humanity realized.

One must not understand God's self-surrender as in some way God needing humanity. God's self-surrender is expressive of God's essence. The surrender that characterizes the inner-trinitarian life is an expression of God's love, through God's infinite surrender within God's self.⁷⁴ Jesus Christ's surrender on the cross is not *contra* divine nature.⁷⁵ *Kenosis* is the

⁷¹ Balthasar, *The Last Act* 91.

⁷² Balthasar, "Characteristics of Christianity," in *The Word Made Flesh* 169.

⁷³ Sachs, "Hans Urs von Balthasar" 8.

⁷⁴ Balthasar, "What is Distinctively Christian in the Experience of God?" in *Spirit and Institution* 35.

⁷⁵ As noted by Margaret M. Turek, Balthasar does not have a work devoted exclusively to the first person of the Trinity. "Since the Father, as the one-who-sends, 'appears' on the world stage in the mission of his Son, a theodramatic

way of divine being. For Balthasar the cross is where God's glory is revealed. On the cross, the Son is the fullest representation of Triune love between the Father and the Son in the Spirit. The cross is where Jesus' human obedience is in correspondence with this triune love.⁷⁶ Christ's Descent into Hell is the center of Balthasar's Christology. The Descent into Hell marks the end of *kenosis*, and is the ultimate expression in inner-trinitarian love. Christ on Holy Saturday is exemplary of the divine nature.⁷⁷ Soteriology is not added in some way to God's being, for intradivine surrender is part of God's deepest nature.

The Humble Glory of the Cross

In order to transform the human condition from within, God must go to humanity's most extreme disillusionment: death without finding God. In the Crucified One, creation reaches its fulfillment and God reveals God's truest revelation and glory. Jesus takes humanity's place and becomes sin. In the yes of the cross, sin is engulfed by love; through the death and Resurrection humanity is accepted into trinitarian life through the gift of the Spirit. On the cross Jesus takes the no of humanity and transforms it into a yes, leading them into a new life in the Trinity; God's yes outweighs humanity's no. The glory of the cross reveals the paradox of God's power. "The *paradox* must be allowed to stand: in the undiminished humanity of Jesus, the whole power and glory of God are made present to us."⁷⁸ The hiatus of Holy Saturday reveals the logic of God: the hiatus theology must not follow human logic, but instead the 'theo-logic' of God.

Balthasar's *kenotic* Christology also informs his understanding of Christ in solidarity with sinners. In his reflection on Christ's mission in its final stages, the passion and death, Christ is depicted as renouncing all control. "The full universality of his task would be unattainable without his total self-abandonment in Passion and death."⁷⁹ This tension, where a mission accepted in freedom leads to self-abandonment, comes out in its fullness in

approach to a theology of God the Father endeavors to cast light on the aspects of the Father's action evidenced in Jesus' performance of his (eschatological) role. What emerges is a configuration of the Father's dynamic mode of being God in the economy of Jesus Christ from which Balthasar can then extrapolate to the realm of God's eternal, inner-trinitarian Fatherhood." The action of the Son is thus imitative of the 'Father,' since the 'Father' is the source of the Son's action (Margaret Turek, "As the Father Has Loved Me' (Jn 15:9): Balthasar's Theodramatic Approach to a Theology of God the Father," *Communio* 26 [Summer 1999] 295-99).

⁷⁶ Kehl, "Hans Urs von Balthasar" 27.

⁷⁷ Aidan Nichols, "Introduction," in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990) 7.

⁷⁸ Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale* 33.

⁷⁹ Balthasar, *The Dramatis Personae: The Person in Christ* 170.

Mysterium Paschale, one of the most creative pieces in Balthasar's corpus. Here one finds the influence of the mystical vision of Adrienne von Speyr. Meditating on the events of Holy Saturday, Balthasar portrayed Jesus' Descent into Hell and solidarity with sinners as the result of his utter abandonment by the Father.⁸⁰ In the self-emptying death on the cross, God's love and perfection finds its fullest glory. Christ's Descent into Hell is the center of Balthasar's Christology. "In the humility of his obedient self-lowering to the death of the Cross he is identical with the exalted Lord."⁸¹ Therefore, one must follow the path of humility in order to enter into the glory of God. "Man has to accept that he must go through the narrow door of humiliation, of the Cross, encountering the infinite precisely in the most finite, in order to arrive at communion with infinite freedom."⁸² Thus the path of God is the path of humiliation, not the path of glory. God's omnipotence is the powerlessness of the incarnate and crucified One.

Is There Redemptive Suffering?

A Christology that emphasizes Christ's suffering and humility runs the danger of appearing as if it endorses the unjust sufferings of peoples throughout history. This is a critique, for example, found in various feminist theologians. Womanist theologian Delores Williams, writes: "Can there be salvific power for black women in Christian images of oppression (for example, Jesus on the cross) meant to teach something about redemption?"⁸³ After examining and critiquing atonement theories, Williams comes to the conclusion that it is in fact Jesus' *ministerial vision* which offers an ethical practice and vision and which is in fact redemptive. "The cross thus becomes an image of defilement, a gross manifestation of collective human sin."⁸⁴ The Resurrection is God's triumph over this manifestation of human sin.

The theme of *kenosis* as it relates to gender and its implications for feminist theology are fruitful areas of theological discussion. As noted by Aristotle Papanikolaou, many feminist theologians have a negative rela-

⁸⁰ As Oakes has shown, Balthasar deepens this point in his *Theologik*. "In a most telling footnote in this work, he accuses himself of yielding to a 'compromise' in his book *Mysterium Paschale* for merely stating that in dying Jesus showed his 'solidarity with the dead,' rather than coming right out and boldly asserting that Jesus had to be tasting the condemnation and fate of the eternally damned in his descent into hell" (Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption* 282, referring to *Theologik* 2.315, n. 1).

⁸¹ Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale* 79.

⁸² Balthasar, *The Dramatis Personae: Man in God* 276.

⁸³ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (New York: Orbis, 1993) 162.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 166.

tionship with the obedience, self-sacrifice, and humility that accompanies *kenosis*. "As feminists over the past century, and especially in the last half-century, have made clear, this understanding of *kenosis* has been used throughout the history of Christianity to maintain women in situations of oppression."⁸⁵ Papanikolaou is aware that an emphasis on *kenosis* as humility and self-sacrifice has and can lead to oppressive models for women within Christian theology. He finds in the work of one feminist theologian, Sarah Coakley, an understanding of *kenosis* as "power-in-vulnerability" that is a feminist perspective much in consonance with that of Balthasar.⁸⁶

While noting the dangers of an uncritical acceptance of vulnerability in Christian thought, Coakley holds that there is an equal danger in Christian feminist thought's rejection of vulnerability as victimology, namely "the failure to embrace a feminist reconceptualizing of the power of the cross and resurrection. . . . What I have elsewhere called the 'paradox of power and vulnerability' is I believe uniquely focused in this act of silent waiting on the divine in prayer. This is because we can only be properly 'empowered' here if we cease to set the agenda, if we 'make space' for God to be God."⁸⁷ Coakley's understanding of vulnerability does not concern suffering or self-abnegation, "On the contrary, this special 'self-emptying' is not a negation of self, but the place of the self's transformation and expansion into God."⁸⁸ *Kenosis* is understood by Coakley as the human's openness to God, the ability for the human to make room for God in his or her life. Instead of understanding vulnerability as opposed to power and thus leading to victimhood, Coakley defines vulnerability in terms of transformation and openness to receive and give.

In Papanikolaou's work, Coakley is clearly in consonance with Balthasar. Like Coakley, Balthasar does not define *kenosis* in terms of self-sacrifice, but instead in terms of self-giving. "*Kenosis* for Balthasar is not self-sacrifice, but the movements of self-giving toward the other in order to receive the other that are constitutive of divine and human personhood. Personhood, for Balthasar, is not a quality possessed, but a unique and irreducible identity received in relations of love and freedom

⁸⁵ Aristotle Papanikolaou, "Person, *Kenosis*, and Abuse" 41.

⁸⁶ Papanikolaou includes a conversation between two feminist theologians, Daphne Hampson and Sarah Coakley, on the topic of *kenosis*. Hampson rejects *kenosis* as a male construction not useful for women. For Hampson, "The call for *kenosis* as a breaking of the self so that God may be present has no meaning for women who are denied a self within patriarchal and oppressive structures" (ibid. 44).

⁸⁷ Sarah Coakley, "Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of 'Vulnerability' in Christian Feminist Thinking," in *Swallowing the Fishbone: Feminist Theologies Debate Christianity*, ed. Daphne Hampson (London: SPCK, 1996) 107.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 108.

that can only be labeled as *kenotic*.”⁸⁹ Also, Coakley and Balthasar define the human’s relationship with God as *kenotic*: an openness and vulnerability to God’s love. This is a relational anthropology. Papanikolaou sees this thread in Balthasar’s anthropology as consonant with contemporary feminist scholarship. “Though perhaps for different reasons, Balthasar and feminist theologians in general reject Enlightenment notions of the self in terms of individuality, autonomy, independence, and self-sufficiency. They argue for relational understandings of the self, a self that is constituted in and through community and communion. Such notions of the self reject oppositions of the ‘one’ to the ‘other’ but rather affirm a notion of the ‘one’, of identity that includes the ‘other’.”⁹⁰ The ambiguity of Balthasar’s work once again resurfaces. Papanikolaou persuasively presents the relational nature of Balthasar’s anthropology, arguing for its compatibility with feminist scholarship. At the same time, this broader emphasis on relationship is shadowed by an essentialist construction of the actual relationships between the sexes. Balthasar allows for relationality, but only in the manner in which he defines them.

EVALUATION: BALTHASAR AND FEMINIST THEOLOGY

An uneasy alliance can be formed with the works of Balthasar and contemporary feminist theologies. Uneasy, for there are clear moments where Balthasar argues against the very project of feminism or perhaps more importantly, where his essentialist understanding of gender shows the very anthropology feminists attempt to contest. Nonetheless, an alliance remains for there are various points where Balthasar’s work mirrors the concerns of feminist theologians. In this section I affirm some of these areas of tension and consonance between these theological perspectives.

The greatest point of tension between Balthasar and feminist theologians is his complementary understanding of the sexes. The gender ambiguities found in his anthropology are not new to some Balthasar scholars who point to the dynamic understanding of the human in his thought which is sharply contrasted with his static notion of gender. John O’Donnell’s critique of Balthasar’s work is centered on what he sees as Balthasar’s failure to take into account the dynamic nature of sexuality. He is hesitant concerning the sharp divisions Balthasar makes between the sexes.

Therefore, while not wanting to deny the significance of the distinction between the sexes, one is nevertheless led to ask whether we must not also accept a certain fluidity between them. Can we make a simple identification between the male and the masculine, the female and the feminine? Are not masculine and feminine

⁸⁹ Papanikolaou, “Person, Kenosis, and Abuse” 42.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 57.

elements present in each person? In some ways Balthasar seems to admit this, for example, in his theory that Christ is feminine *vis-à-vis* the Father and masculine *vis-à-vis* the world or in his notion that the office-holder is feminine as a member of the church but masculine in his priestly role over the community. If this is the case, is Balthasar justified in rigidly excluding the possibility of women being admitted to orders?⁹¹

In other words, O'Donnell is critical of what he defines as the essentialist nature of Balthasar's understanding of men and women. The charge of essentialism is problematic, given Balthasar's relational and dramatic anthropology. The ambiguity is found in Balthasar's treatment of the relationship between the sexes. O'Donnell is also critical of the paradoxical nature of Balthasar's constructions of gender, especially in regard to church life. If one accepts Balthasar's contention that men and women are equal and complementary, even though the male is primary, and that both men and women share in their natures, why does Balthasar refuse for the masculine principle to be in any way active in women? In other words, since humanity is essentially feminine, men automatically participate within the feminine; however, there is no indication in Balthasar's work concerning how the female embodies the male principle in any way.

Balthasar's work appears to fall into an essentialist camp. Given his broader anthropology, however, a categorization of Balthasar's understanding of the human becomes ambiguous. This is due to his relational and dramatic anthropology. When discussing the human, Balthasar constantly affirmed a dynamic understanding of humanity, grounded in his or her historical and cultural context. The articulation of his anthropology within the *Theo-drama* is an intentional move on his part that refutes an ahistoricized, essentialist depiction of humanity. In addition, his emphasis on the relational nature of the Trinity as constitutive of the *imago Dei* is yet another persuasive argument against an essentialist label on Balthasar's work. One cannot deny, however, that when speaking of gender, Balthasar falls, to a certain extent, into an essentialist paradigm. His insistence on classifying the nature of men and women into a narrow model is problematic.

At the same time, however, Balthasar's essentialist gender complementarity offers an interesting critique of feminist theological anthropologies. Feminist theologians have emphasized, for the most part, the sociopolitical nature of gender. Arguing against an essentialist depiction of the sexes, feminists hesitate to describe any type of universal woman's nature. This has been fueled in recent decades by critiques emerging from women of color, as well as postmodern theoretical rejections of essentialized notions of the self. Feminist theologians have also argued persuasively and forcefully for an emphasis on embodiment, refuting the long-standing dualism

⁹¹ John O'Donnell, S.J., "Man and Woman as *Imago Dei*" 127.

that privileges the mind-soul over the flesh. This emphasis on the body must lead one to examine how humanity's sexual embodiment contributes to the distinctiveness of one's humanity. To put it rather bluntly, men and women are embodied in very different and distinct ways. If you take the body seriously, then you must examine how this distinctive embodiment shapes one's theological anthropology. However, feminist theologians often want to resist discussing any essential attributes to a particular sex, simultaneously celebrating the body, toeing the line between essentialism and constructivism. I am not sure one can have it both ways. Balthasar's theology challenges feminists to discern how one can emphasize one's embodied existence while simultaneously denouncing that it results in any serious distinctions between men and women.

This gender complementarity spills over into Balthasar's understanding of the theological task, where men and women's voices have distinct contributions based on their embodied sexuality. The feminine mystic is seen as the spiritual source for the male academic theologian. In an interesting twist, Balthasar actually privileges the feminine contribution, calling for theology to turn to more esthetic and spiritual resources. However, whether intentional or not Balthasar ends up isolating women's contributions to this mystical realm, downplaying their rational, academic, and theological voice. At the same time, through his desire to transform and expand the sources that inform theology (especially in his emphasis on women's voices), Balthasar is an unlikely ally for feminist historical scholarship.

An example of this is seen in Balthasar's use of literature within theology. A central aspect of Balthasar's intellectual background that has profoundly marked his theology is his studies in literature. As noted by Edward Oakes, Balthasar's training in literature colors his theological method. "What makes a study of Balthasar's work with the German classics so important is the issue of interpretation: for it was from his study of the German classics that Balthasar first received his training as a scholar and thus first came to his method of textual, and even theological, interpretation."⁹² However, the significance of Balthasar's use of literature goes well beyond his textual method; it offers an inter-disciplinary theological contribution. For Balthasar, literary sources are theological. He does not examine literature in order to find religious or theological themes therein. Instead, Balthasar holds literature to be theological.⁹³ However, Balthasar

⁹² Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption* 73.

⁹³ Alois M. Hass notes that Balthasar would most likely be unaccepted by literary scholars and theologians. "The reason is simply that von Balthasar lets the whole fullness of literary, philosophical, and theological mythical formulations converge toward an explicitly Christian mythic, while contemporary literary theology clearly tends toward a philosophical mediation between religion and literature" (Alois M.

does not uncritically accept all literature as theology. For him there are certain literary figures who are also theologians.

One must examine, however, the underlying framework that informs Balthasar's approach to literature as theology. As noted by John Riches, literature and the arts for Balthasar reveal something about being, and for this reason are theological.

Balthasar's theology is marked out, that is, by his own conviction that in the great works of art, literature and music we do indeed perceive something of the truth and reality of *being*. Thus it is clearly of great interest to enquire after Balthasar's own understanding of an indebtedness to the great figures of the German tradition of letters with which he is engaged. . . . It is not simply questions of the formal similarities between literature, art and music, and theological perceiving that interest Balthasar (though such questions do concern him in Vol. 1 of *The Glory of the Lord*) but of the *content* of such widely varied visions.⁹⁴

The content of literature and the arts reveals something about being, in a similar fashion to theological elaborations. This view must be seen in light of Balthasar's contention that through the Incarnation, Jesus Christ transformed the very nature of human culture and cultural expression. Because all of human culture has been transformed, literature is a vital resource of human expression of divine Glory.

The use of literature as a theological resource is not new to feminist theologies, and is central in the work of various womanist theologians. In her introduction to womanist theology Stephanie Mitchem highlights the importance of June Jordan's poetry, for example, to the development of a womanist consciousness. In one of the earliest texts of womanist theology, *Black Womanist Ethics*, Katie Cannon uses the literature and life of Zora Neale Hurston as a key interlocutor for womanist ethics. Cannon's work is groundbreaking at various levels. As Mitchem notes: "By valuing black women's experiences, she challenged the basic assumptions of white, male, Christian ethics about individuals, personal and communal power, and acts of choice. Using Zora Neale Hurston's literature and life, Cannon points to the potential of black literary traditions for social analysis."⁹⁵ In a later text Cannon returns to the centrality of literature for womanist ethics. "It is my thesis that the Black women's literary tradition is the best available literary repository for understanding the ethical values Black women have created

Haas, "Hans Urs von Balthasar's 'Apocalypse of the German Soul': At the Intersection of German Literature, Philosophy, and Theology," in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work* 46.

⁹⁴ Riches, "Afterword," in *The Analogy of Beauty: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986) 182.

⁹⁵ Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2002) 69.

and cultivated in their participation in this society.”⁹⁶ Literature becomes a central resource for accessing Black women’s lives, culture, and worldview.

The works of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker are central voices within womanist theology. Noting that Delores S. Williams has used literature as a theological resource, Dwight N. Hopkins turns to Toni Morrison’s writings as a source for a constructive black theology. Morrison’s literature is a key resource for understanding the spirituality of poor Black women. Hopkins argues: “Furthermore, to do theology from black women’s literature is precisely *theology*. Why? Because the God of justice and love presented and discovered in African American religious values, tradition, and contemporary witness is the same God who freely chooses to reveal an emancipatory spirit in black women’s stories.”⁹⁷ In a similar vein, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes uses literature, specifically Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, to explore the complexity of Black women’s daily lives and realities. Walker herself speaks of the theological nature of her novel when she writes,

Whatever else *The Color Purple* has been taken for during the swift ten years since its publication, it remains for me the theological work examining the journey from the religious back to the spiritual that I spent so much of my adult life, prior to writing it, seeking to avoid. . . . I would have thought a book that begins ‘Dear God’ would immediately have been identified as a book about the desire to encounter, to hear from, the Ultimate Ancestor.⁹⁸

Novels such as *The Color Purple* offer alternative theological resources that demonstrate that if one is going to attempt to recover the voices and experiences of a marginalized people, ‘traditional’ avenues of research are not always appropriate. The most recent monograph by Brazilian theologian Ivone Gebara is yet another example of this, where she uses literary sources to inform her theology of evil and suffering.⁹⁹

Linked to Balthasar’s use of literature is his *ressourcement* of historical voices in the Christian tradition. Balthasar’s encounter with Henri de Lubac was foundational for his love of the Church Fathers. Balthasar’s method is characterized by an examination of historical figures in light of their contemporary relevance. As Edward Oakes notes: “A real assimilation of the thought of the Church Fathers entails, rather, an intensive confrontation with their texts together with a burning concern with the

⁹⁶ Katie Geneva Cannon, *Katie’s Cannon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1996) 61.

⁹⁷ Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) 83.

⁹⁸ Alice Walker, “Preface to the Tenth Anniversary Edition,” *The Color Purple*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992) xi.

⁹⁹ Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women’s Experience of Evil and Salvation*, trans. Ann Patrick Ware (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

situation of the contemporary Church”¹⁰⁰ In other words, the goal of Balthasar’s historical studies is to bring to light the relevance of the material for the contemporary situation. Balthasar offers a critical study of the Fathers in light of their significance for contemporary theology. He is not concerned with historical theology per se, but instead the significance of historical studies for current theology.

Balthasar’s emphasis on the relevance of the past for present study is grounded in his belief that past events and voices remain active contributors even centuries after their historical life. “We are prone to look on historical revelation as a past event, a presupposed, and not as something always happening, to be listened to and obeyed; and it is this that becomes the matter of theological reflection.”¹⁰¹ Instead of seeing history as a dead event, theology today must “embrace the riches of past theology as a living thing, and to endow it with fresh vitality.”¹⁰² The liveliness of the past must be brought into the present in order to enrich the contemporary situation. If the past is seen as a dead event, with nothing to contribute, one loses a significant dimension of one’s historical identity and tradition. The open and living characteristic of revelation is what gives historical events their vibrancy. For Balthasar, revelation as eternal is always alive and speaking, whether its expression occurs centuries ago or in our current situation. Mary Ann Hinsdale has noted that “the task of *historical recovery and retrieval* seeks out the ‘lost voices’ of women in order to restore them to the communal tradition.”¹⁰³ This feminist *ressourcement* strives to incorporate Church Mothers into the canons of theological tradition, and is central to feminist theology. Balthasar is an unforeseen aid in this project, for part of his retrieval includes the voices of women.

In conclusion, it is clear that the relationship between Balthasar and feminist theology will remain at best shaky. However, Balthasar should not be entirely disregarded, for he does offer some important contributions to feminist theological conversations. His most important one, in my view, is the theological construction of gender in his writings. Gender is not merely a sociopolitical category in his work. Instead it has theological value. As feminists currently attempt to navigate an analysis of gender that speaks to the complexity and diversity of humanity, coupled with an emphasis on the embodied significance of gender, dialogue partners such as Balthasar offer unanticipated avenues of theological reflection. If our embodied gender is significant and reflective of the image of God in all humanity, it naturally follows that a theological analysis of gender is a necessary step in the development of feminist theology.

¹⁰⁰ Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption* 128.

¹⁰¹ Balthasar, “Theology and Sanctity” 205.

¹⁰² Balthasar, “The Place of Theology” 159.

¹⁰³ Hinsdale, “Heeding the Voices” 24.