

A Fundamental Theological Study of Radical Secularization and its Aftermath

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By

Alpo Penttinen

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To Olli and Eero, in fraternal thankfulness

Brothers and sisters, I do not consider that I have laid hold of it, but one thing I have laid hold of: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

—Phil 3:13-14

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PREFACE

This book belongs equally to the two main styles of Christian theologizing, namely monastic and academic theology. This has to do with the context of its genesis. The book was originally written as a doctoral thesis for the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. While writing the thesis, I lived at the Monastery of St. Gregory the Great on the Caelian Hill. Consequently, my heartfelt thanks to my academic supervisor, Fr. Ferenc Patsch SJ, for his patient and wise guidance during the work on the thesis. I also thank the second reader of the thesis, Fr. Gerard Whelan SJ, for insightful comments on the manuscript. Likewise, I want to remember the Prior of San Gregorio, Fr. George Nelliyanil OSBCam, with the rest of its monastic community, for providing such a spiritual environment where I could write the thesis that became this book.

My period as a Visiting Scholar at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, during the fall term of 2022 greatly broadened my theological horizons and made this book better. During my time in Berkeley, I was fortunate to live at Incarnation Monastery, from the spiritual atmosphere of which I also benefited enormously.

Numerous persons have offered their help and friendship during my work on this book, both in Finland and Italy, as well as in the US. Unfortunately, I cannot name them all here. During the many years of my theological training, I always imagined myself as a small bee who goes from one teacher to another, collecting the precious nectar of the Word of God from those who have more insight into it than I do. This might sound like a rather egoistic procedure, but I hope that in some way or another it will also contribute something *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*, the only thing that really matters in the end.

In a certain sense, this whole book is a single meditation on Karl Rahner's famous prediction that "the Christian of the future will either be a mystic, one who has experienced 'something,' or he will cease to be anything at all."¹ After the spiritual transformation process of secularization, "religion" is no *a priori* given necessity anymore, but postsecular individuals are free to explore and experience with a myriad of different existential alternatives. This is no relativism, however. Openness for the Other calls for

¹ K. RAHNER, "Christian Living Formerly and Today", p. 15.

an equal responsibility for the Other. Authenticity is in high demand. Is the Church willing to enter into these radically new spiritual dynamics? It would require letting go of many past, even allegedly “immutable,” things, but only to become free for the new things to come (see Phil 3:13-14). Perhaps the present twilight is not so much the dusk of the old but the dawn of the new? Anyway, the direction of the Christian tradition is always “forward, forward, forward.”² We are all equally called to participate in this synodal transformation of the Church and of our human way-of-being-in-the-world, for which the Earth cries ever-more strongly.

A piece of Catholic theology, Biblical and Magisterial references are given in the main text of this book, while all other references are in the footnotes, in an English translation, as far as possible. The Biblical quotations follow the New Revised Standard Version, while the Magisterial references are all easily found at the Vatican website (vatican.va).

The research from which this book flows was made financially possible by grants from the Church Research Institute of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and from the Catholic Church in Finland. I considered them not only as necessary material preconditions for this piece of academic work, but also as signs of inner-Christian, ecumenical fraternity that flourishes in Finland. *Kiitos paljon!*

Special thanks to Dr. Julie Le Blanc who helped me with the English language of this book (all remaining errors being mine, of course).

In many ways, both spiritual and material, my long existential explorations, of which even this book forms a small part, were made possible by my parents Kari and Outi. They are the first to understand that all the years spent in search of God are years well spent.

Many thanks to Cambridge Scholars Publishing for publishing this piece of theological work.

I dedicate this book to my two Roman brothers Olli and Eero in fraternal thankfulness.

Helsinki, January 8, 2024

Alpo Penttinen

² As Pope Francis put it in the press conference on his return flight from Canada on July 29, 2022.

INTRODUCTION

Catholic fundamental theology aspires to find its way into the beating heart of the Christian Revelation, in order to express it in an intelligible fashion in its particular spatio-temporal context, especially in view of those who still find themselves outside the visible bonds of the Church (see 1 Pet 3:15; *FR*, n. 67). In this missionary light—a defining characteristic of the post-Vatican II Catholic Church—a crucial question confronting contemporary Western fundamental theology concerns the *modus procedendi* to adopt after the transformation process of secularization: does the “post-secular” in the first place signify a “Return of Religion,” or should it instead be characterized as the final acceptance of the “Death of God”?³ Or perhaps in this particular case *tertium datur*: secularization not as a unilinear development with any one clearly identifiable result, but rather as a becoming-visible of the spontaneous human multiformity when it comes to existential decisions? As in any case, however, to simply assert human freedom abstractly is an empty notion; what is needed, is a concrete acknowledgment of the way human freedom is, or can be, exercised.

In this book, the post-secular condition—read as the hermeneutical opening of After Secularization—is approached through the speculative concept of Radical Secularization.⁴ It denotes a human way-of-being-in-the-world or form-of-life, which has become totally emancipated from the metaphysical truth-claims of traditional religion, to the point of not being able to take these seriously in the first place. Radical Secularization is not for or against religion, but finds itself so perfectly outside the traditional religious language-game that for it, religious belief does not appear as a real existential alternative to begin with.

Theological discussions of secularization have of course been many in

³ See J. SVENUNGSSON, “The Return of Religion or the End of Religion?”; M. GAUCHET, “Sécularisation ou sortie de la religion?”. For illustrative recent theological and philosophical approaches to the topic, see, respectively, C. DOTOLLO, *Dio, sorpresa per la storia* and P. SLOTERDIJK, *Nach Gott*.

⁴ For the sake of clarity, Radical Secularization as the central concept of the study will always be capitalized, as well as its hermeneutical context of After Secularization. On the meaning of speculation, in difference to mere argumentation, see G.W.F. HEGEL, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 39-40. In theology, the traditional word would be “contemplation.”

the post-WWII period in the West. They have all been fundamentally misguided, however, for the simple reason that only during the past decade or so have the actual consequences of the Western process of secularization become truly visible. Especially the striking resurgence of the “nones,” or of people who do not identify with any religious tradition, calls for a renewed theological discussion of secularization. How to enter into this existential predicament that is dawning on us After Secularization, not by condemning it but by sharing its joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties (see *GS*, n. 1)?

This book hopes to give a theological contribution to this timely challenge by developing the concept of Radical Secularization. If we manage to imagine complete nonreligion, i.e. such a human way-of-being-in-the-world that does not have any intrinsic relations to what was called “religion” in our tradition, it would at the same time mean a speculative overcoming of that very tradition for something else. The heart of this book is this speculative dynamic between Radical Secularization and After Secularization: Radical Secularization leads us into the hermeneutical opening of After Secularization which most profoundly is defined by the reality of Radical Secularization.

At first glance, this might seem like a vicious circle where the point of departure for thinking is destined to produce its conclusion, too. Yet, is it not true of all authentic thinking that in its movement the origin and the end coincide in the one thing worthy of thinking? Whether this fundamental theological study includes any authentic thinking is for the reader to decide, of course. As much as our hyper-accelerated society would like to condense the hard work of thinking into easily and quickly digestible slogans, this simply cannot be done. What can be done here in this Introduction, however, is to sketch the general outlines of the intellectual movement of this book. This will be done in three stages, corresponding to the three parts of the book’s title.

First, what will follow is a *fundamental theological study*. As the first chapter of the study will explain in detail, Catholic fundamental theology is the intellectual attempt at expressing the Christian Revelation as intelligibly as possible in its particular spatio-temporal context. There is a crucial paradox involved here. On one hand, the Christian Revelation, according to its own self-understanding, is not of this world but comes from elsewhere: the Word of God “came down from heaven,” as the Church professes in the Creed. As such we cannot really understand the Revelation because it infinitely surpasses the human mind. On the other hand, however, it is precisely “for us men and for our salvation” that the Word came into this world. The whole Christian faith centers on the conviction that the mediator

and fullness of all Divine Revelation is a human being just like us, Jesus of Nazareth (see *DV*, n. 2). Hence, the acuteness of a fundamental theology, its spiritual potency, so to speak, is judged by how it succeeds in presenting both dimensions of the Christian Revelation: its utter Otherness with respect to all things human, as well as its radical humanity. This might appear as a paradoxical, even contradictory, attempt, and that is precisely the point.

There is a further methodological point to make concerning Catholic fundamental theology. To be truly *Catholic*, fundamental theology must be universal in its scope. It cannot content itself with addressing only a certain group of human persons, with having only a “parochial” significance. No, the Christian Revelation demands a *civilizational, global* significance. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council already affirmed that contemporary humanity “is involved in a new stage of history,” because it is becoming “all of a piece, where once the various groups of men had a kind of private history of their own” (see *GS*, nn. 4, 5). Pope Francis further elaborates on this hermeneutical line from the Council with his evocative image of the “polyhedron” as a model for the emerging global Church. A polyhedron is intrinsically hyperpluralistic: while forming a single whole it can never be grasped and controlled with a single formula, as if *a priori*, without concrete experience of it, but it constantly reveals new dimensions of itself *a posteriori*. Now the contemporary fundamental theologian must ask how we could meaningfully approach the Christian Revelation in the context of the emerging global Church, in all its paradoxicality and even contradictoriness?

Second, this book is a fundamental theological study of *Radical Secularization*. It might appear surprising or even blatantly *belated* that I have chosen the old category of secularization as the key concept in a fundamental theological attempt to enter the new, hyperpluralistic predicament where the Church now finds herself. Even more *belated* might seem my speculative radicalization of secularization by and in the concept of Radical Secularization to denote a human way-of-being-in-the-world or form-of-life that has become totally emancipated from the metaphysical truth-claims of traditional religion, to the point of not being able to take these seriously in the first place. The ideal concept⁵ of Radical Secularization signifies thus, as the first two chapters of the book will synchronically explain, a completely *post-* or *nonreligious* human form-of-life, so nonreligious in fact that it should not even be named *non-religious* (or *non-religious*), or in any other way as conceptually related to what was known as “religion” in our cultural sphere: a radically secular person is one

⁵ On concepts, and especially their creation, as the main task of speculative thinking, see G. DELEUZE–F. GUATTARI, *What is Philosophy?*, pp. 15-34.

who does not identify themselves with any religious tradition, be it negatively or positively.⁶ A speculative discussion of complete nonreligion might be quite interesting in itself, of course, as a radically new departure for human consciousness in (after?) the long history of human religious evolution. Yet, in concrete reality, is not religion very much thriving in the contemporary globalized world? Is not religion rather making a return after its short secularist oblivion, as the various “post-secular” theorists claimed just some years ago?

Well, everybody tends to see in reality what they want to see there, especially if it concerns actual and personally relevant issues. In the big, civilizational and global perspective adopted in this book, however, secularization as a gradual distancing from traditional religion appears as an undeniable fact. Secularization unfolds in practically all modernizing societies where it is allowed to unfold, according to the specific civilizational dynamics of each cultural sphere. Exceptions are perhaps only the authoritarian societies that violently force their citizens to profess and follow a certain way-of-being-in-the-world. Elsewhere, in the more or less liberal democratic societies of the world, people are freely experiencing and experimenting with a growing variety of different existential alternatives. “Non-religion” or the decision of not confessing any pre-given religious creed is becoming the norm in the younger Generations Y and Z. Only during the last fifteen years or so has academic research been emerging on these secular or non-religious populations which form the fastest-growing existential group in practically all Western societies, and in many non-Western ones, too, as discussed in Chapter 2 of this book.

What the interdisciplinary study of the “nones” more and more clearly shows is that the non-religious people form no uniform group, but they exemplify a staggering variety of different ways of understanding and living human existence. “Secularization” as the name for this epochal process does not, thus, mean any unilinear development towards the absolute disappearance of religion but a hyperpluralistic diversification of various human forms-of-life. Whereas earlier, Before Secularization, people sought meaning and direction to their existence almost exclusively in the official religion of their culture, now After Secularization they seek and find existential significance in all sorts of contexts and traditions. The Church has no existential monopoly anymore. The homogenous culture of Christendom no longer exists, as Pope Francis has often emphasized.

⁶ In his magisterial study of Western secularization—concerning the late “Latin Christendom”—Charles Taylor mentions the idea of a completely nonreligious human way-of-being-in-the-world, but he does not develop it further (see C. TAYLOR, *A Secular Age*, pp. 269, 591-592).

This much should be beyond all doubt, but the question is whether we have acknowledged this fact profoundly enough in the Church, and in society at large. Or do we continue to think according to the old categories, in light of which “religion” forms an unquestioned and unquestionable entity, in relation to which one can be nearer or further away? Yet, if we still think in that way in the Church, there will be no chance of entering into the presently unfolding historical dynamics, the present book claims. The challenge of Catholicism in the ongoing epochal shift is rather to enter courageously into the birth pangs of the emerging global civilization in a prophetic dialogue with the rest of humanity, as envisioned by the latest Ecumenical Council of the Western Church.

The concept of Radical Secularization, a genealogical phenomenology of which will be diachronically developed in the main part of the book (Chapters 3 and 4), is designed to give a speculative contribution to this timely challenge. If we manage to conceptualize absolute nonreligion, i.e. such a human way-of-being-in-the-world that does not have any intrinsic relations to what was defined as “religion” in our tradition, we would at the same time have overcome that very tradition and its “religion” for something else. Whether this “something else” is to be called “religion” is an open question. We are at a “loss of language” in describing a completely nonreligious human form-of-life, the book argues. And this is exactly the point: “religion” has become a question to itself, even concerning its own necessity or not. Nobody knows how its future will present itself. It is into this radically open spiritual horizon that the logic of Radical Secularization leads us, if we decide to follow it.

Rather than dogmas and doctrines, it is about worldviews or temperaments here, about the largely implicit spiritual visions that ground and direct our explicit thinking and action. And there is arguably one influential temperament in the Church that would block the logic of Radical Secularization even before it begins to unfold. I call it the “ontotheological temperament” in the book. It presents a twofold theological criticism against the very concept of Radical Secularization: first, how could complete nonreligion even theoretically exist in a reality that comes from God and returns to him?; and second, how could one even begin to evangelize people who were absolutely nonreligious? Instead of confronting the twofold theological criticism head-on, I let it hover in the air as I work out the logic of Radical Secularization in the central part of the book. As a result, the presumptuous religious criticism and the ontotheological temperament it is based on gradually vanish into thin air and the hermeneutical opening of After Secularization becomes visible, and breathable.

Third, the title of this fundamental theological study of Radical Secularization promises to explore its “aftermath.” The central claim of this book is not that people in secularizing societies would be losing all belief in God or any kind of trans-human intentionality and meaningfulness in reality. On the contrary, completely nonreligious people appear to be relatively few. But they do exist. Even more importantly for the speculative approach in the book, the reality of complete nonreligion as Radical Secularization presents a timely challenge to the ontotheological temperament of our Western tradition. In fact, it deconstructs it from within and ushers us beyond it into contemporary global hyperpluralism now dawning on us After Secularization. The actual theological challenge is to go beyond the sociological surface of secularization into its spiritual depth, and to discern the traces of the Paschal Mystery of Christ even there.

The core of my argument is to be found in Chapter 4 where the historical unfolding of human transcendentality is traced from the various Axial Ages onward, in view of describing how the definitive departure from religion became possible in the modern secular West. Beginning with the last millennium BCE, we can second-orderly follow how the human mind gradually becomes conscious of its infinitely open horizon and struggles forward to take possession of itself. Whereas all the different Axial revolutions, in the West as well as in the East, had postulated some kind of objective, trans-human goal to the movement of human transcendentality, the proprium of modern European modernity and its secularization is the self-conscious suspension of all such objective claimants of human transcendentality: in fact, these are all transcendentially *refused*. In light of secular Western modernity, human transcendentality is to proceed in a radically open horizon, without any pre-given, “metaphysical” limits to its on-wards-movement.

If secularization can be thus understood as human transcendentality’s coming into itself in and through history, Radical Secularization can be regarded as the essence of European secularization, because it makes fully explicit what lies implicit in this historical process. Yet, it is an “essence” that is no *a priori* necessity but an “essence” that can show its meaning only *a posteriori*: we can analyze the movement of human transcendentality only in and through concrete history, even though it is exactly about overcoming this very history for the *semper maius* of reality. In this manner, the logic of Radical Secularization frees us from the Procrustean bed of the Western metaphysical tradition and introduces us into the hyperpluralist opening of After Secularization where no cultural tradition can enjoy a *prima facie* superiority but which every tradition can enter without losing their own particularity and uniqueness—at least this is the pious “dream” that the

concept of Radical Secularization enables us to speculatively entertain for future humanity and the emerging global Church.

In this fashion, the ontotheological temperament and its twofold theological criticism against the very concept of Radical Secularization will be dissipated into nothingness, as the last chapter of the study concludes. First, the logic of Radical Secularization infolds into a kind of inverse ontological argument according to which the objective metaphysical fullness of being denoted by the traditional concept of God *cannot* truly exist given the subjective constitution of human transcendentality. Consequently, such a missionary method that would aspire to transmit the metaphysical God-concept to people from the outside, as it were, is to be absolutely refused as spiritual violence. Radical Secularization appears thus as the full acknowledgment of every human person's inviolable personal freedom in existential decisions (see *DH*, nn. 2, 10).

This can be considered the definitive Death of God, but only of the necessary, metaphysical one. The Christian God, the God with a human face, as the late Pope Benedict loved to call him, might nevertheless return even After Secularization. In a way, he *must* return, certainly not as any *a priori* necessity, but perhaps as an *a posteriori* or "aesthetic" necessity, as this book argues both at its beginning and at its end, in a quasi-Balthasarian fashion. At the same time as the movement of Radical Secularization frees us from the ontotheological mentality of the late Western tradition, it necessarily brings us into a speculative dead-end, a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*. The transcendental constitution of the human mind is infinitely open beyond itself, as the fundamental genealogy of Radical Secularization will bring to the fore. Yet, in itself, human transcendentality is unquestionably not infinite but finite: it has a clear beginning and end in time, and it is essentially limited by its spatial context. This is the paradox, even absurdity, of being human: we exist in a particular spatio-temporal context, but simultaneously aspire beyond it, always beyond it. Nothing less than infinity itself could truly suffice to us, but we cannot give that infinity to ourselves. For that, radical Otherness is needed with respect to the human.

To conclude—which is to begin!—, human religiosity has always had the correct intuition about the *a priori* necessary existence of this radical, trans-human Otherness in reality. The crucial question, the following chapters will argue, is how we are to relate to it *a posteriori*. Earlier in human religious evolution, Before Secularization, it was typically done by sacrificing something of our humanity for a trans-human intentionality in reality (for "Gods," "spirits" or whatever). Now, After Secularization, that is no alternative anymore. Having entered, by and through secularization, into our finite, fragile, and precisely for that reason so beautiful humanity,

we transcendently refuse to sacrifice it anymore. This is the absolute break in human religious evolution that even allows us to speak of its “end,” in Western liberal democracies at least. In this new hermeneutical context, the main challenge for fundamental theology will be to express the Christian Revelation in a style that would not happen outside or at the expense of our humanity but exactly in and through it. This will require, as envisioned at the end of this book, developing a truly Christian, i.e. *Trinitarian* metaphysics in its essential connection with a genuinely Christian theology of history. This, of course, is the always recurring Christian theological challenge of talking about “God” in a way that would not move outside the human but in its very midst, expressing its infinite opening in the Paschal Mystery of Christ. To the anthropological paradox one can respond only with the theological one, in their continuously intensifying intertwining, without either separating or confusing the two.

PART I

AFTER SECULARIZATION: RADICAL SECULARIZATION

CHAPTER I

READING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES AFTER SECULARIZATION: INTRODUCING THE CONCEPT OF RADICAL SECULARIZATION

1. Catholic Fundamental Theology: Accounting for the Christian Hope in the Contemporary World

Catholic fundamental theology has its beginnings in the nineteenth century as a separate academic discipline.⁷ Since then, it has striven to give a scientific “accounting” of the specifically Christian *hope* to anyone who demands it (see 1 Pet 3:15). In the Western world—or in the late Latin Christendom, including its Anglophone offshoots around the Globe—the number of the external inquirers about the Christian faith has been steadily increasing these last two hundred years or so, as the previous existential hegemony of the Church⁸ has gradually disappeared following the societal and existential transformation process of *secularization*.

Consequently, supplementing its earlier, pre-Vatican II and heavily, even violently, apologetic posture, contemporary Catholic fundamental theology has felicitously been characterized as the “ministry of foreign

⁷ The first chair in fundamental theology was founded at the University of Prague in 1856. For concise overviews of the history of the discipline, see C. BÖTTIGHEIMER, *Lehrbuch der Fundamentaltheologie*, pp. 68-76; S. PIÉ-NINOT, *Compendio di teologia fondamentale*, pp. 9-89; F. SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, *Foundational Theology*, pp. 251-264.

⁸ In this book, the term “Church” refers, unless otherwise mentioned, both sociologically to the Roman Catholic Church and theologically (and thus more to the point) to the one Church founded by Jesus Christ (“founded” in the sense of wanted by him and gradually instituted by him through certain words and deeds: see COMMISSIONE TEOLOGICA INTERNAZIONALE, *Temi scelti di ecclesiologia*, n. 1). Additionally, following a long-standing theological tradition, the feminine pronoun is used of the Church, the Bride of Christ.

affairs”⁹ of the post-Vatican II Church that “goes forth,” driven by her “most profound identity.” That identity, as the postconciliar popes from Paul VI to Francis unanimously and constantly emphasize, is that of *evangelization*, or of proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ to all people all over the planet (*EN*, n. 14; *EG*, nn. 19-49; Matt 28:19-20).¹⁰

Yet, if this *outer*, “apologetic-contextual” dimension of the fundamental theological enterprise were to exhaust its true nature, we would be left wondering why the discipline of fundamental theology is equally concerned with its *inner*, “epistemological-gnoseological” dimension (i.e. studying and explicating the Christian Revelation as the fundament of the Christian faith to the believers themselves).¹¹ Why do fundamental theologians not content themselves with trying to construct a dialogue with non-Christians, be they believers of other religious traditions or not religious believers at all? Why the constant fundamental theological repetition of, or turning back to, the fact of the Self-Revelation of the Triune God¹² in Jesus of Nazareth and its consequent transmission in the Church?

Furthermore, if the direction of the fundamental theological movement is characteristically outwards (*Chiesa in uscita!*), why does it equally continue to turn inwards to the heart of the Church (*depositum fidei*)? Could the reason for this paradoxical, not to say self-contradictory, double-movement of fundamental theology be that in relation to the Divine Revelation we are *all* originally, even radically, *outsiders*? Perhaps, finally,

⁹ See C. THEOBALD, “Imaginer la théologie fondamentale”.

¹⁰ Without resorting to any (often ideologically motivated) “hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture,” the great reforming effect of the Second Vatican Council should not be understated either, as can be clearly seen in the paradigmatic change from the classical apologetics to the new (and still developing) fundamental theology (H. FRIES, “Dall’Apologetica alla Teologia Fondamentale”; G. O’COLLINS, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, pp. 7-15, 40-47; C. BÖTTIGHEIMER, *Lehrbuch der Fundamentaltheologie*, pp. 72-76; S. MORRA-F. PATSCH, “‘Rendere ragione della speranza’ in Gregorianum. Dall’Apologetica classica alla Teologia fondamentale”; and on the two hermeneutics of course the already classic discourse of Pope Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia on 22.12.2005).

¹¹ For a description of the two, inner and outer, as it were, dimensions of the fundamental theological discipline, see S. PIÉ-NINOT, *Compendio di teologia fondamentale*, pp. 73-84.

¹² In this book, the call to radically ecumenical “fair play” of the Finnish scholar of early Christianity Heikki Räisänen is adopted in capitalizing the word “God” whenever it appears, irrespective of the religious context (H. RÄISÄNEN, *The Rise of Christian Beliefs*, p. 4). The masculine pronoun is furthermore used to refer to God, according to the age-old Christian tradition, attested by the New Testament Jesus himself.

the missionary movement outwards can be what it should be, and bear good fruit, only when the theological movement inwards has been embraced radically enough, into the very roots (*radices*) of one's personal being?

1.1 The “Radical Objectivity” of the Christian Faith as the Starting Point: A Balthasarian View of the Movement of Jesus Christ

For philosophy, the question of a *starting point* might very well be the decisive one. The point of departure for thinking may determine its successive unfolding to such a degree that “a small mistake in the beginning is a big one in the end.”¹³ In any case, it may seem to be all over already “by the bottom of page one,”¹⁴ the crucial decisions being implicitly taken even before the explicit argumentation gets going. Philosophy would consequently appear as a continuing search for the right kind of starting point—the right kind of *arché*—for thinking.

For Christian theology in its Catholic tradition, by contrast, self-consciously proceeding as it does from the Divine Revelation (cf. 2 Cor 4:1-2; 1 Thess 2:13),¹⁵ the question of the starting point is crucially different, at the same time easier and more difficult. It is easier because the point of departure for theological thinking is already *given in advance*, as a gift is: Christian theology starts from the Self-Revelation of the Triune God given to us in Jesus of Nazareth and transmitted by the Church founded by him. The question of the starting point for theology is more difficult, however, because of the peculiar nature of the Christian Revelation. This Revelation concerns, not any earthly comprehensible and controllable facts, but the mystery of “[w]hat no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:9).

Even when manifesting the whole divine Being in, through, and with the most holy humanity of the Son, the Father remains absolutely hidden, beyond all human attempts at comprehension.¹⁶ The theological difficulty, or challenge is, therefore, not primarily an intellectual one, but is directed to the whole spiritual being of the theologian-to-be. That is, are they able in their particular spatio-temporal context to find and express such an entry

¹³ T. AQUINAS, *De ente et essentia*, c. 1.

¹⁴ As J.L. Austin supposedly used to say (B. STROUD, *The Quest for Reality*, p. ix).

¹⁵ See *ST*, I, q. 1, a. 5, ad 2; *FR*, nn. 7, 44.

¹⁶ *Φαινόμενος κρύπτεται*, as the Eastern tradition of the Church reminds us (cf. the Third Letter of Pseudo-Dionysius), or as St. Augustine famously recorded it for the Western tradition of the Church: *de deo loquimur, quid mirum se non comprehendis? si enim comprehendis, non est deus* (*Sermo* 117, 3, 5).

into the Christian Revelation that both faithfully conserves this in its utter Otherness, as well as creatively allows it be received by the people of their time and place?

A traditional manner of putting the fundamental theological challenge into words has been in terms of the concept pair of “content and form.”¹⁷ While the internal content of the Christian Revelation—the religious truths or dogmas that it is believed to contain—remains always the same, the external way of expressing it can, and shall, change according to the changing cultural circumstances in which the Church finds herself. Here the background assumption seems to be that the Divine Revelation would primarily concern some propositional truths which in themselves are what they are, but which can be variously expressed in different languages (not only in Latin and Greek, but also in German, Hindi, and Swahili), without, however, the content of the Revelation being affected.

This kind of “propositional” answer to the fundamental theological challenge has been very influential during the past two or so centuries of the Church.¹⁸ It succeeds well in capturing the definitive nature of the Christian Revelation, i.e. the theological *factum* that the Triune God really has spoken everything to us in Jesus Christ.¹⁹ Yet, the question is whether it can succeed equally well in expressing the soteriological fact that the Christian Revelation

¹⁷ In his celebrated opening speech of the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII expressed the pressing challenge of the *aggiornamento* (“updating”) of the Christian message in the contemporary world in terms of—at least *prima facie*—content and form: *Est enim aliud ipsum depositum Fidei, seu veritates, quae veneranda doctrina nostra continentur, aliud modus, quo eadem enuntiantur, eodem tamen sensu eademque sententia* (GME, n. 6). But does the traditional terminology of content and form exhaust the intentions of the saintly pope in convoking the latest Ecumenical Council?

¹⁸ For a sharp historical analysis and critique of the propositional (or epistemological) approach to the Christian Revelation, see J.-L. MARION, *Givenness and Revelation*, pp. 8-29; for a more dispassionate treatment, see A. DULLES, *Models of Revelation*, pp. 36-52.

¹⁹ St. John of the Cross put the definitive nature of the Christian Revelation memorably in a comment to Hebrews 1:1-2, referring to God’s self-revelatory act in Jesus Christ: “In giving us his Son, his only Word (for he possesses no other), he spoke everything to us at once in this sole Word [*todo nos lo habló junto y de una vez en esta sola Palabra*].” This is the reason why God has consequently become “mute,” as it were, having no more to say to us, because “he has now spoken all at once by giving us the All Who is his Son [*ya lo ha hablado en el todo, dándonos al Todo, que es su Hijo*]” (JOHN OF THE CROSS, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, pp. 179-180; cited in CCC, n. 65).

was given “for us,”²⁰ who as humans always live and speak in a concrete cultural context. The dualistic or binary concept of content and form can be useful in a certain cultural setting (as it was for many centuries for Latin Christendom, not least in the wake of its internal breakdown following the Protestant Reformation). However, it can hardly be regarded as the prescriptive model for all intellectually possible and theologically faithful expressions of the Christian message.

In fact, no one cultural expression of Christianity can claim precedence over all the others *tout court*, as if it were liberated from all cultural conditionedness. The Christian Revelation did and does not happen in a cultural vacuum (as nothing truly human does). Rather, as Pope Francis has emphasized, “grace supposes culture” (see *EG*, n. 115). This can be interpreted as saying that the outer form of the Christian faith is no secondary issue with respect to its inner content, but that the latter and former are equally dependent on one another in a kind of symbiotic relationship.²¹ Perhaps, then, is the whole dualism of “content and form” in need of being overcome, at least in its naive priority over all other fashions of giving expression to the Christian Revelation?

One alternative and increasingly influential (but still perhaps not yet influential enough²²) way of approaching the fundamental theological challenge was proposed by Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988) in his “theological aesthetics.”²³ For present purposes, its most pertinent feature is its vehement emphasis on the “radically objective” point of departure for Christian theologizing. Through his aesthetic approach to the Christian faith, Balthasar wanted to give expression to his personal impression²⁴ that the content and the form of the Christian Revelation—now perceived aesthetically as its *species* (“form”) and its *lumen* (“light”)—

²⁰ As the Nicene Creed so beautifully expresses the anthropo-logical orientation of the Christian Revelation: “for us humans” (*δι’ ἡμῶν τοῦς ἀνθρώπων*) Christ came down from heaven, and “for our sake” (*ὕπὲρ ἡμῶν*) he suffered the death on the cross.

²¹ See D. ALBARELLO, *La grazia suppone la cultura*.

²² See J. RATZINGER, *Unterwegs zu Jesus Christus*, p. 35.

²³ Here the reference is principally to the first volume (H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *The Glory of the Lord*) of his enormous *Herrlichkeit*. For an excellent presentation of Balthasar’s particular theological style, see A. SCOLA, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, and of his theological aesthetics, in particular, see A. NICHOLS, *The Word Has Been Abroad*.

²⁴ “Strictly speaking, then, a style is only the expression (*expressio*) of the impression (*impressio*)—the terms to which Balthasar refers are Bonaventure’s—which a form makes with its splendor on the beholder, who, in turn, is always in some way enraptured by it” (A. SCOLA, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, p. 2).

belong so intimately and so inseparably together that ignoring this unity in distinction would have only deadening effects on the understanding of the Christian Revelation as a whole.²⁵ An intellectually stultifying objectivism and a spiritually unflattering subjectivism—the ever-present vicious circle of modern European theology—can in Balthasar’s eyes be overcome by acknowledging the radical objectivity of the Christian Revelation, that has both its beginning and its completion in the historically given figure of Jesus Christ.

Not only does the Christian faith have its object in the *species* or form (*Gestalt*) of the Word made flesh, but this also becomes ever-more its subject as the *lumen* or light (*Licht*) of the faith is allowed to enlighten the believer. “The whole mystery of Christianity,” Balthasar writes, “is that the form does not stand in opposition to infinite light, for the reason that God has himself instituted and confirmed such form.”²⁶ The structure of the Christian Revelation appears consequently as the form of Jesus Christ—objectively given in the living tradition of the Church—who through his Paschal Mystery of Death and Resurrection has shown himself to be coextensive with God’s own Light-Word. Balthasar proceeds:

Such a structure calls, in the first place, for a *radical objectivity*: in the subject himself the light of faith is truly a light only if man looks away from himself and, renouncing his own evidence, entrusts himself to the Source that, as a result of grace, stands wide-open before him. But he is capable of achieving such interior self-transcendence perfectly and without a secret mystical identification, only if he recognises the Source of the Light in the form of Jesus Christ, as this form reveals itself to him within the sphere of the Church.²⁷

This is certainly no subjectivism: for the theologically aesthetic perceiver, the objectively-given form of Christ contains in itself the conditions of possibility for seeing it as it really, in itself is—i.e. as the Self-Revelation of the Triune God in and through human history.²⁸ But does not such an objective, even a *radically* objective, starting point for theology risk

²⁵ In Balthasar’s analysis, an elimination of aesthetics has unfortunately been typical for most of the main-stream Western theology in modern times (cf. H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *The Glory of the Lord*, pp. 45-78).

²⁶ H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *The Glory of the Lord*, p. 216.

²⁷ H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *The Glory of the Lord*, p. 216 (italics AP).

²⁸ See H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *The Glory of the Lord*, p. 464: “The form that we encounter historically is convincing in itself because the light by which it illumines us radiates from the form itself and proves itself with compelling force to be just such a light that springs from the object itself.”

letting the already-overcome ontotheological mentality, with its unavoidable spiritual violence, re-enter viciously into the theological discourse through a back-door, as it were?²⁹

A genuinely Christian objectivity, as the one championed by Balthasar, is not, in the last analysis, the objectivity of a static thing (*res*), not even of an existing being (*ousia*). Rather, it is the dynamic movement of the person Jesus Christ, who through his Paschal Mystery has redeemed all of reality back to its original and final relationship with God the Father in the Holy Spirit. The spiritual movement of Christ reveals the movement of the Triune God who is in continual going out from himself in the ecstasy of love. “This objectivism,” Balthasar states, “is the result of taking seriously the *ekstasis* of love, its going out of itself: only in this way can man achieve an act of serious love which corresponds to God’s own act of taking love seriously—the act of divine Eros which goes out of itself in order to become man and die on the Cross for the world.”³⁰ If there is any violence in this divine-human movement of the Triune God, it is the only “violence” that genuine, ek-static love always carries in itself: the self-immolating violence of the movement towards the *semper maius* of unconditional self-giving for the Other.

The radical objectivity of the Christian Revelation, as interpreted by Balthasarian aesthetics, is not, however, a mere inner-Christian idiosyncrasy, but discloses a genuinely Christian, i.e. Trinitarian, approach to reality as a whole.³¹ Trinitarian metaphysics approaches reality “in the light of the third transcendental,”³² as *beautiful*—that is, what precisely in its beauty gives itself in its true being (*aletheia*) and thus shows itself to be good (*bonum diffusivum sui*). In this perspective, everything that exists, every “being,” from the smallest atomic particle to the largest galaxy, even to the universe as a whole (including all the possible parallel universes), is perceived as something that conceals an inner depth or a “ground” (*Grund*) in itself, which it nevertheless is willing to reveal to anyone who approaches it with receptive senses and an open heart. Hence, the deepest meaning of the universe shows itself as Love, i.e. as radically opening up oneself for the Other.³³

Trinitarian metaphysics recognizes appearance not as “mere” appearance anymore (as in the Greek metaphysical tradition), but as the essential

²⁹ See C. DOTOLO, *Dio, sorpresa per la storia*, p. 89.

³⁰ H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *The Glory of the Lord*, pp. 216-217.

³¹ See H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *The Glory of the Lord*, pp. 605-618.

³² H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *The Glory of the Lord*, p. 9.

³³ Such aesthetic, relational metaphysics has backings from contemporary cosmology, too (see B.T. SWIMME–M.E. TUCKER, *Journey of the Universe*).

movement of reality out of itself to encounter the Other. Reality in no way exhausts itself in this outer movement but precisely in and through it shows its true depth, becoming all the more itself as it reaches out of itself. Appearance is the enlightening clearing (the Heideggerian *Lichtung*) of reality which reveals itself in giving itself (as *formosa*, as beautiful). And what is the reason for the cosmic self-revealing movement, Balthasar asks: “Why does the Ground appear at all?”³⁴ The answer remains: for no reason, if one with “reason” wants to have a functional explanation or an ethical motivation to reality’s self-giving nature.

Rather, the beautiful reality rejoices in itself in giving freely and for free of itself, for no other reason than the joy of giving. Thus, there is no violent prescription of an idealistic standard, no bursting demand of “you *must* change your life,”³⁵ but a silent and gentle affirmation of the Other, of you, as you are—and above all of you as you can *become*—, as if reality had opened its arms to embrace you lovingly. What a liberating experience, to come to yourself thanks to reality coming to itself by letting your journey happen through its! An essential *perichoresis* which comprises all of reality and defines reality in its very being, all the way to its deepest ontological roots. Along such lines would a truly Christian, i.e. Trinitarian conception of reality proceed, as envisioned by Balthasar in his theological aesthetics.

Balthasar explicitly notes that this is no philosophical deduction of the central Christian mystery of the Most Holy Trinity—what a theological *contradictio in terminis* that would be! Yet, it must nevertheless be borne in mind when considering the specific modality of the Christian Revelation, namely the “how” of the Son’s revealing the Father.³⁶ Certainly, no one has ever seen or can see him who “dwells in unapproachable light” (1 Tim 6:16). No one knows the Father of all being and reality. But the fact that we can name him as the “Father” already suggest that the Ground of all being and meaning did not want to remain in his unapproachable Otherness, but on the contrary desires to be known as the Father through the Son in the Spirit (see Matt 11:27).

If the Father, then, is the hidden Ground of all reality, the Son is reality’s Self-Revelation: “all things have been created through him and for him” and “in him all things hold together” (Col 1:16-17). The Father shows himself as he really is in himself, as the *Father*, in and through giving us his *Son*, who is “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15). Here, in theology

³⁴ See H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *The Glory of the Lord*, p. 611.

³⁵ As in the last line of Rilke’s *Archaic Torso of Apollo* (cf. R. SCRUTON, *Beauty*, p. 161), which as such, of course, is one of the most perspicuous literary descriptions of what it means to experience reality as beautiful.

³⁶ See H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *The Glory of the Lord*, p. 611.