

# Beauty as the Point of Connection between Theology and Ethics

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## SUMMARY

What role, if any, does God play in understanding a modern western society, particularly that of human flourishing, creativity and civic activeness? Are we to agree with Karl Marx that religion is nothing more than 'the opiate of the people' designed to console humanity's miserable lives? Or even with the American philosopher, William James, that our notions of God are a function of our choices such that God is created in accordance with our own tastes to suit our desires?

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## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Welche Rolle spielt Gott – wenn überhaupt – beim Verständnis einer modernen westlichen Gesellschaft, insbesondere jener, bei der es um menschliche Entfaltung, Kreativität und gesellschaftliche Aktivität geht? Sollen wir Karl Marx in seiner Behauptung zustimmen, dass Religion nichts anderes ist als 'Opium für das Volk' mit dem Zweck, über das elende Leben der Menschheit hinwegzuträsten? Oder sollen wir gar dem amerikanischen Philosophen William James darin beipflichten, dass unsere Gottesvorstellungen durch unsere Neigungen dahingehend bedingt sind, dass wir uns einen Gott je nach Geschmack erschaffen, der unseren Wünschen entspricht?

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## RÉSUMÉ

Quel rôle peut-on attribuer à Dieu pour comprendre une société occidentale moderne, caractérisée en particulier par la productivité des hommes, leur créativité et leur implication dans la vie de la cité ? Devons-nous suivre Karl Marx qui considérerait la religion comme l'opium des peuples destiné à consoler les humains d'une vie misérable ? Ou faut-il, avec le philosophe américain William James, considérer notre notion de Dieu comme une fonction de nos choix de telle sorte que nous nous forçons un dieu qui s'accorde avec nos propres goûts et désirs ?

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Both approaches lead to a loss of wonder and to despair. What, then, might inspire hope? From a Christian perspective the twentieth century Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar points us to the One who bridges the heavenly and the earthly, namely Jesus Christ, who reinvigorates that childlike wonder and curiosity that draws us away from ourselves toward God and our fellow human beings. In doing so, God's beauty shapes and forms our imaginations, enabling human beings to flourish within society in creative ways for the common good of humanity.

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Beide Ansätze führen dazu, dass Staunen verloren geht und Verzweiflung sich einstellt. Was kann dann noch Hoffnung beflügeln? Von einer christlichen Perspektive ausgehend, weist Hans Urs von Balthasar, ein Schweizer katholischer Theologe aus dem 20. Jahrhundert, auf den Einen hin, der die Brücke zwischen Himmel und Erde schlägt: Jesus Christus, der dieses kindliche Staunen und diese Neugier wieder belebt, die uns weg von uns selbst und hin zu Gott und unseren Mitmenschen zieht. Dabei gestaltet und prägt die Schönheit Gottes unsere Vorstellungskraft und befähigt Menschen dazu, sich in der Gesellschaft auf kreative Weise zu entfalten und dies zum gemeinschaftlichen Nutzen aller.

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Ces deux approches aboutissent à une perte du sens du merveilleux et au désespoir. Car alors, qu'est-ce qui peut nous donner une espérance ? D'un point de vue chrétien, le théologien catholique suisse Hans Urs von Balthasar nous a orientés au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle vers celui qui relie le céleste au terrestre, vers Jésus-Christ. C'est Christ qui ranime ce sens du merveilleux caractéristique de l'enfant et cette curiosité qui nous détournent de nous-mêmes pour nous tourner vers Dieu et vers notre prochain. La beauté de Dieu façonne notre imagination et rend des êtres humains capables d'une créativité utile au sein de la société pour le bien commun de l'humanité.

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## Introduction

In their recent book *God is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World*, the journalists John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge attempt to ascertain what they believe to be a global phenomenon occurring in religion. Although they evade various complexities and inappropriately frame the discussion in a dualistic manner, Micklethwait and Wooldridge surmise that two primary models for relating religion and modernity have emerged since the Enlightenment – a European and American model.

The European model, in general, has ‘assumed that modernity would marginalize religion’ while the American model has ‘assumed that the two things can thrive together’.<sup>1</sup> Drawing their conclusions from numerous anecdotal stories from around the globe and research statistics that document the rise of religion, particularly Christianity, in Asia and the global South, they reason that God is back, in large part, because the American model has ‘put modernity, or at least choice and competition, back into God’.<sup>2</sup>

Though both of these models are inherently flawed, I believe they beg a common question: ‘What role, if any, does God play in our understanding of a modern society, particularly our understanding of human flourishing, creativity and civic activeness?’<sup>3</sup>

### A loss of wonder leading to despair?

Micklethwait and Wooldridge argue that, in the American model, God is not at odds with modernisation because of the ideals found in free market capitalism. Applying this American capitalist model, they deduce that ‘the surge of religion is being driven by the same two things that have driven the success of market capitalism: competition and choice’.<sup>4</sup> This sociological and economic interpretation concludes that the so-called global revival of faith is more about a multiplicity of religious options than an authentic religious encounter. Thus, religions of all types are free to market themselves as they compete for converts.

If we take this American model to its logical end, though, God becomes a commodity to be consumed since choice and competition become a part of his being. Thus, if I do not like the way a particular religion tastes or if a god expects too much of me, I can simply choose another variety that suits me. Such notions are predicated, in part,

on pragmatism, that uniquely American philosophy espoused by William James. In *The Will to Believe* James asserts truth as a function of one’s choice whereby ‘truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, and is *made* true by events’.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, conceptions of God are constructed by human hands, leading to the creation of false realities and living ‘quiet lives of desperation’.<sup>6</sup> This god of our own making fails to satisfy our deep inner longing for meaning and purpose, leaving many disillusioned when their choice of religion never seems to work for them.

With regard to the European model, Micklethwait and Wooldridge argue that God is at odds with modernisation and is unnecessary for human flourishing. Humanity possesses a superior human reason and it must throw off the shackles of religion because religion inhibits and constrains human flourishing. After all, it was Immanuel Kant who ‘dared [us] to know’.<sup>7</sup> Thus, with the onset of the Enlightenment and the earth shattering effects brought about by Charles Darwin and the rise of modern science in the mid-nineteenth century, religion became the bane of human existence.

When we examine the European model a bit closer, three key thinkers among others push these antagonistic views of religion forward toward the establishment of a secularist state, namely Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche.<sup>8</sup> Feuerbach, in his *The Essence of Christianity*, argues for the elimination of God-talk since our understanding of God is nothing more than the projection of our human conceptions constructed to console our miserable human lives.<sup>9</sup> Marx builds upon Feuerbach’s critique of religion with his notions of dialectical materialism and alienation, offering a teleological view of history that culminates in communism.<sup>10</sup> God is no longer needed in the formation of a society or a personal ethic since, as the madman declares in Nietzsche’s *Gay Science*, ‘God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.’<sup>11</sup> Perhaps, to fill this ‘God-shaped hole’, this is why many modern Europeans have turned to secular faith in science, culture, the nation-state and socialism.<sup>12</sup>

Both models, though they diverge in their understanding of the relationship between God and society, seem to have a common ending – *a loss of wonder that leads to despair*. But why do these two divergent views end at the same place? The Swiss Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988) surmised that when ‘Being becomes identical with the necessity to be, and



when this identity has been taken up by reason, then there is *no longer any space for wonder* at the fact that there is something rather than nothing.<sup>13</sup>

### Defunct views of reality

Balthasar attributed this lack of wonder about the mystery of being to the cosmological and the anthropological reductions. The *cosmological reduction* comes about at the hands of a metaphysical shift away from the supernatural (not necessarily a Christian understanding of it) to a natural one, reducing reality to merely the material. The *anthropological reduction* makes human beings the measure of all things whereby they give the world its structure and are able to transcend the world via human reason.<sup>14</sup> Following Balthasar's insights, we see that the so-called American model fails since humanity becomes the measure of God while the so-called European model reduces reality to merely the material. Is there perhaps, though, another way to construe the relationship between God and society without importing free market capitalism into God or eliminating him altogether from our discourse?

Elaine Scarry suggests an approach in *On Beauty and Being Just*. In part one of that work she tries 'to set forth the view that beauty really is allied with truth'. The 'two are not identical' such that beauty 'ignites the desire for truth by giving us... the experience of conviction and the experience, as well, of error'.<sup>15</sup> Yet, beauty's association with error in that it 'brings us into contact with our own capacity for making errors' has led many to disassociate beauty and truth. This is perhaps why many have exiled beauty from the field of humanities.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, Scarry attempts to redeem beauty, in part two of her book, by refuting the political complaints which insist that beauty distracts us from social injustices and even leads us to prolonged stares and gazes that are 'destructive to the object'. In the end, our experience of beauty 'radically decenters' us: it turns our attention to correcting injustices and so leads to a fair and just society.<sup>17</sup>

Nicholas Wolterstorff, in an essay entitled 'Beauty and Justice', critiques Scarry's notion of beauty and how she relates it to justice.<sup>18</sup> He rightly surmises that Scarry's conception of beauty as 'unity, equality and symmetry' echoes the Romantic ideals of a bygone era that championed the 'inherent salvific power' of art to reshape society. Such notions, Wolterstorff contends, 'are patently false' because of the numerous instances

of those who may very well be enamoured with beauty but have little regard for justice, not unlike 'the Germans who supervised the concentration camps during the day [and] attended concerts during the evening and expanded their art collections with paintings plundered from the occupied countries'.<sup>19</sup>

### The way of beauty

Scarry may very well be on to something, though, in that she has brought beauty into the conversation. She argues forcefully that it is somehow bound up with truth and justice. Wolterstorff seems to concur, although he does not accept the analogies that Scarry sees between beauty and justice. Instead, beauty and justice are 'two modes of acknowledging worth, two modes of acknowledging excellence'.<sup>20</sup> Both authors seem to recognise some version of objective realism in which beauty and justice are connected. Both seem to recognise an ontological distinction within the created order that does not collapse into an egocentric subjectivity, thereby rendering value and worth to the other. But how do these insights enable us to answer our question regarding God and our understanding of a modern society?

In his *Notebooks, 1914-1916* Ludwig Wittgenstein makes a perceptive observation regarding the relationship between art and ethics that seems to show a possible way forward: 'The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*; and the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. This is the connection between art and ethics'.<sup>21</sup> In other words, Wittgenstein connects aesthetics and ethics through the lens of eternity, similar to Scarry's tacit acknowledgement when she says that 'what is beautiful is in league with what is true because truth abides in the immortal sphere'.<sup>22</sup> Herein lie the rudiments for addressing how to understand the relationship between God and society, between theology and ethics, namely *sub specie aeternitatis*.<sup>23</sup> Where, then, is this nexus for articulating the relationship between theology and ethics?

From a Christian perspective Jesus Christ, who brings together the heavenly and the earthly, illumines the way between theology and ethics, namely God's beauty, because as Karl Barth remarks, 'he takes up a place, and a very specific place at that, and makes himself the object of human contemplation, human experience, human thought, and human speech'.<sup>24</sup> *How* God reveals himself, then, is as important as *what* God reveals about himself.



Thus, if we are to understand anything regarding the identity of God, we must privilege his self-revelation – God’s revealing of himself through himself, which presumes that God speaks (i.e., divine triune discourse) – amidst the polyphonic voices of the biblical authors. If God has freely revealed himself in a particular manner to communicate a particular message, what does God have to say about his beauty?

### Christ as *Herrlichkeit* and *Übergestalt*

Balthasar provides us with two important theological concepts for explicating the essence of God’s beauty important to human flourishing. Both of these presuppose Christ’s singularity, God’s divine freedom and trinitarian nature, and the inherent connections between creation and redemption. First, he identifies Christ as *Herrlichkeit* or the Lord of Glory.<sup>25</sup> This christological designation acknowledges that God ‘is the infinitely free agent who, in his freedom, invents a world and, also in his freedom, creates that world’.<sup>26</sup> As Lord of the world, God is wholly other than his creation. Such an understanding underscores the utter dissimilarity between God and his creation (i.e., the Creator – creature distinction) such that our existence is to be understood as a gift. We owe our existence to someone other than ourselves. This christological designation also emphasises the fact that God’s glory shines in and through the form of creation such that it can be seen by his creatures. The beauty of creation, then, is *not* God but points to God’s glory. It anticipates and foreshadows the manifestation of God’s glory in the incarnation when the Word of God comes in the form of a human being (Phil 2:6).

Second, Balthasar identifies Jesus Christ as *Übergestalt* or the form above all forms such that Christ is his own measure. Christ, says Balthasar, is the ‘reality which lends the form its total coherence and comprehensibility’ and the form ‘to which all particular aspects have to be referred if they are to be understood’.<sup>27</sup> In other words, God’s communication of himself is clearest in Jesus Christ, attested to in Scripture and the Church, whereby Christ is the centre (*Mitte*) of the form of revelation. This does not mean that there are other things needed to complete this form as if more could be added to Christ. Rather, the reality of human being, for example, has no meaning or purpose in isolation as if we could understand what it means to be human

or what it means for a society to flourish apart from God.<sup>28</sup>

When we critically appropriate, via the Scriptures, Balthasar’s christological terms they become two important christological loci for discerning, in part, the essence of God’s beauty.<sup>29</sup> Jesus Christ as *Herrlichkeit* and *Übergestalt* – the distinct speaking and doing form of God’s beauty – is the magnificent form of divine communicative action that radiates God’s triune love for us. Such actions require a response, as Balthasar insists:

For God’s revelation is not simply an object to be looked at: it is his action in and upon the world, and the world can only respond, and hence ‘understand’, through action on *its* part.<sup>30</sup>

Yet, action on our part requires understanding such that we know whom we serve and what part we are to perform. Through the eyes of faith, then, ‘death turns into life’ so that we are ‘drawn into the action [and] can look toward the centre in which all things are transformed’ for ‘we have been appointed to play our part’ in God’s drama of redemption.<sup>31</sup> Where, then, in the life of Christ do we see his glory most prominently revealed – in his miracles, in his teachings, in creation?

### God’s beauty-in-act

The author of Hebrews indicates that Christ’s glory is revealed in his death and suffering when he was ‘crowned with glory and honour’ and by implication in his resurrection and ascension (Heb 2:9; cf. Rom 6:4; 1 Pet 1:21). That being the case, Christ’s death and resurrection become necessary for discerning God’s beauty because it is fitting (*prepō*) that God, in bringing his people to glory, should perfect (*teleiōō*) the author of their salvation through suffering (Heb 2:10).

The Gospels, particularly the Gospel of John (John 12:27–28; 17), recall Christ’s instructions to his disciples shortly after Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Son of the living God. Christ admonishes them *not* to make his divinity known (Matt 16:20; cf. 17:9). Why? The time had not yet come for the Son of God to be glorified. Although throughout Christ’s life and ministry we see glimpses of his glory through his miracles, when is the appropriate, fitting or right time (*hōra*) for God to reveal his glory? Jesus says in his high priestly prayer, ‘Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son so that he may glorify you.’ And, ‘Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory that I



had with you before the beginning of the world' (John 17:2, 5). That hour (*hōra*) is none other than the appointed hour of his death and resurrection (John 13:1).<sup>32</sup>

What is it, though, about the nature of God that he should bring about peace through pain? What is so beautiful about that? Is God sadistic because he accomplishes his purposes in this manner? Augustine provides us with some helpful insight:

What is it we love in Christ – his crucified limbs, his pierced side or his love? When we hear that He suffered for us, what do we love? Love is loved. He loved us, that we might in turn love Him; and that we might return His love He has given us His Spirit.<sup>33</sup>

Three things are evident in Augustine's response: 1) The beauty of the cross is not the suffering, brutality or cruelty but the *act* of self-giving love revealed through suffering; 2) Christ's suffering is for our benefit; and 3) Such beauty perceived in and through the cross by faith is understood only in light of the whole of God's drama of redemption. This is the counterintuitive nature of the Gospel – *of God's suffering glory* – such that God's beauty-in-act radiates in weakness (2 Cor 12:9).<sup>34</sup>

I contend, then, that God's beauty-in-act is *the attunement or fittingness of the incarnate Son's actions in the Spirit to the Father's will that radiates the splendour of God's triune love*. In other words, it is fitting for the Father to glorify the Son because the Son does all that the Father plans for him to do. He leaves nothing undone. The Son's obedience to the Father is not one of duty or compulsion but one of love, self-giving love that takes him to the point of death (Phil 2:8), for the Son does not desire to do his own will but the will of the Father (Matt 26:39; John 4:34; 6:38). The Father delights in the Son because of his perfect obedience which illuminates the beauty of God's holiness and wisdom.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, the Spirit glorifies Christ by disclosing the 'words and deeds of Jesus that the disciples experienced, but which only now are disclosed to them in their inner depth', says Balthasar. This process of the glorification of Christ through the Spirit 'is nothing other than the bringing to light of the love that lies in obedience'.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, there is an attunement, concordance or fittingness between both Christ's and the Spirit's mission and their existence where the Son is the *expression* of while the Spirit is the *impression* of God's beauty.<sup>37</sup>

## The way of incarnate beauty between theology and ethics

Many contemporary Protestants note the perils of incorporating God's beauty into theological discourse because of its common association with human eros and its troubled history with the iconoclastic controversies. Upon closer inspection of the Protestant tradition, though, we find several important historical links which help us to articulate a theology of beauty.

Although he was adamantly opposed to the 'dead images' that were typical of the iconoclastic debates, John Calvin does point us to 'living images of God' that we see when we hear the Word of God. His theology attended to God's beauty in that 'we need the truth of God to be able to discern the beauty of God in God's works'. Yet God's beauty is also needed to allure and invite us to the Father 'so that we might be ravished with admiration for the beauty of God's goodness, and seek God from the innermost affection of our hearts', as Randall Zachman notes.<sup>38</sup> Jonathan Edwards often spoke of God's beauty, identifying God as 'the foundation and fountain of all being and beauty'<sup>39</sup> while Karl Barth recognised that 'the beauty of Jesus Christ is not just any beauty. It is the beauty of God. Or more concretely, it is the beauty of what God is and does in Him'.<sup>40</sup> If, then, 'all truth is God's truth', as Reformed theology so often remarks, echoing John Calvin, *is not all beauty God's beauty?*<sup>41</sup>

It seems that beauty has a role to play between theology and ethics as Graham Ward suggests when he reasons for 'the inseparability of a Christian aesthetics from a Christian epistemology, and both from a theological ethics'.<sup>42</sup> To ignore the beauty of God in his triunity is to '... have a God without radiance and without joy (and without humour!)', as Barth fittingly remarks.<sup>43</sup>

The contemporary reticence among Protestants toward beauty is unwarranted so long as we understand our inclination to fashion God's beauty into golden images and avoid sentimental, nostalgic and hedonistic motifs. Failing to do so inhibits beauty from conveying meaning beyond the realm of personal taste; it relegates beauty to the ornamental and innocuous pleasant. Any notion of God's beauty apt for theological discourse must privilege, then, God's divine triune discourse which is attested to in the polyphonic voices of Holy Scripture. That being the case, what are the implications



of God's beauty for human flourishing, creativity and civic activeness?

At the outset of this essay, we saw how the so-called American and European models for relating God and society led to a loss of wonder and the deterioration of human flourishing. If we advocate, though, a communicative relationship between God and the world, as I suggested previously, then the living God of the universe has something to say about human flourishing. In other words, since God communicates himself to human beings most clearly in his Son, Jesus Christ, we come to understand our existence as a gift such that we owe our very being to someone other than ourselves. Moreover, God's self-giving love, and hence hope and faith, become the essential social values for a society. Hope and faith become essential for understanding how human beings can prosper within a society.

This leads us to ponder the metaphysical question of why there is something rather than nothing. The beauty within the created order heightens our awareness of this distinction. Beauty points us to something, better said, someone other than ourselves – Jesus Christ as *Herrlichkeit* and *Übergestalt*, who is Incarnate Beauty. God's beauty in its peculiarity and particularity reinvigorates the childlike wonder and curiosity that attracts us, persuades us, convinces us and draws us away from ourselves toward God and our fellow human beings. This contemplation, though, is not merely introspection or reflection; rather it 'is a stimulus to something further' and 'is always measured by whether it bears fruit in an existence that is an appropriately active response to that revelation' such that 'contemplation flows into action'.<sup>44</sup> How does such contemplation flow into action? In other words, how does our passive reception of God's communication of himself move us to performance, namely to ethics?

### Beauty and the ethical imagination

Instrumental to such movement is the unique human cognitive ability called the imagination, what the nineteenth century Scottish literary giant George MacDonald understood as that 'which gives form to thought'.<sup>45</sup> And what the venerable nineteenth century Catholic Cardinal John Henry Newman identified as 'an intellectual act... [which] has the means... of stimulating those powers of the mind from which action proceeds'.<sup>46</sup> Newman continues noting that 'what the imagination does for

us is to find a means of stimulating those motive powers; and it does so by providing a supply of objects strong enough to stimulate them'. In this sense, 'the imagination may be said... to be of a practical nature, inasmuch as it leads to practice indirectly by the action of its object upon the affections'.<sup>47</sup> The imagination, then, is a 'holistic faculty... that relates specifically to the thinking or feeling or willing faculties'. It seems to possess a 'heuristic power [that] enables the imagination to see the end from the beginning and to anticipate what it will be like to arrive at our destination'.<sup>48</sup>

By privileging objective reality as that which educates, forms, shapes or develops our imaginations, God's beauty transforms our imaginations in such a way that, as America's eighteenth century theologian Jonathan Edwards remarked, 'it is as if a new world opens to its view' such that 'when a person has this sense knowledge given him, he will view nothing as he did before'.<sup>49</sup> Christ, as the Lord of Glory, has taken away the veil that shrouds our imaginations, for he is 'the ideal, the "Pattern", [which] quickens the imagination and directs the will to imitation and obedience in renewed ethical passion'.<sup>50</sup> Such an encounter with God's beauty captivates our imaginations with the authentic life of faith in Christ lived in the Spirit. Thus, as we behold (*katoptrizō*) God's beauty, we are transformed (*metamorphoō*) by the Holy Spirit into Christ's likeness with an ever-increasing beauty (2 Cor 3:18) such that an artful renewal of the imagination ensues.<sup>51</sup>

### Conclusions

Human imagining can lead to human flourishing as human beings employ their imaginations to envision the numerous possibilities for cultivating the common good of a society, which should ultimately lead to action. As MacDonald exhorts, 'a wise imagination... is the best guide that man or woman can have, for it is not the things we see the most clearly that influence us the most powerfully'.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, the imagination enables the church to envision her part in society, witnessing to the glory of God through her worship and the manifestation of God's wisdom as she participates fittingly in God's drama of redemption.

Therefore, if we are to promote the common good of a society and the human flourishing of its citizens, it seems that beauty, more specifically God's beauty-in-act, has an important role to play. God's beauty leads us to wonder. It leads away



from despair so that we do not give up hope. More importantly, it forms our imaginations to envision how to live fittingly in an unjust world, giving us purpose along the way. Such conclusions and suggestions for relating God and society are no small matter. They should challenge and inspire us to speak with boldness and to act courageously in society, in the face of injustices, such that we promote human flourishing and perform our part for the common good of all humanity and the glory of God.<sup>53</sup>

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### Notes

- 1 J. Micklethwait and A. Wooldridge, *God is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009) 9.
- 2 Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *God is Back*, 25 and 356.
- 3 I presented a shorter version of this essay at an international conference hosted by the Social Communications Institute of Vilnius Pedagogical University in Vilnius, Lithuania entitled 'Challenges for Academic Youth in the 21st Century: Courage to Speak, Freedom to Live'. It was sponsored by the student organization called 'Drauge Kelyje', which means 'friends together along the way'. As I thought about what their motto means in light of the conference topic, I found myself asking several questions: Where are these students and colleagues going? What might they see along the way? Why is it important to move together and not alone? Many of the conference papers spoke of the social ills facing Lithuania, yet each seemed to assume several fundamental questions like: Which values or virtues are important to any society in order for its citizens to flourish? What is truth and how can we know it? What does it mean to be human?, etc. Yet the fundamental question I sought to raise and address with this paper was, 'What role, if any, does God play in our understanding of a modern society, particularly our understanding of human flourishing, creativity and civic activeness?'
- 4 Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *God is Back*, 21.
- 5 W. James, *Pragmatism: The Works of William James* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975) 97; see also W. James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longman, Green, and Co., 1896) 1-31.
- 6 H.D. Thoreau, *Walden, Or Life in the Woods* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) 7.
- 7 I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (trans. M. Weigelt; London: Penguin Classics, 2007).
- 8 I am aware of secularism's contested meaning as well as its nuanced connotations dependent in large part on the socio-political and economic context in which it occurs. Secularism in France, for example, may have familial resemblances to secularism in the Czech Republic but by no means are they identical nor are they manifested for the same reasons. For further reading see D. Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).
- 9 L. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (trans. G. Eliot; New York: Harper & Row, 1957) 38.
- 10 K. Marx, *Economic & Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (trans. M. Mulligan; Progress Publisher: Moscow, 1959) and *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (trans. N.I. Stone; Chicago: Charles H. Kerr and Company, 1904).
- 11 F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (trans. G. Colli and M. Montinari; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 120. The madman's proclamation of the death of God is not to indicate that God is literally dead but that the Christian idea of God is now 'unbelievable', that the metaphysical basis for explaining the world is no longer viable. Although this notion was only beginning to dawn upon Europe at the time, according to Nietzsche, it has grave consequences when people fully recognise such events, particularly for European morality.
- 12 Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *God is Back*, 40, 44-47.
- 13 H.U. von Balthasar, *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, trans. O. Davies, A. Louth, J. Saward, and M. Simon, vol. 5 of *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, ed. J. Fessio and J. Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991) 613. Subsequent references to *The Glory of the Lord* will be abbreviated as *GL*.
- 14 H.U. von Balthasar, *Love Alone Is Credible* (trans. D.C. Schindler; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004) 15-30, 31-50. Balthasar rooted the reduction of being in the *esse univocum* of Duns Scotus (being as a concept) and Meister Eckhart (being as God). Duns Scotus's notion of *esse univocum*, according to Balthasar, turned being into a concept whereby all reality rests on 'an undifferentiated and neutral sphere of "existence"', laying the groundwork for modern science (*GL* V, 18). Meister Eckhart's notion of *esse univocum*, according to Balthasar, subsumed all of being into God such that 'the absolute point of identity with the divine' was found within 'the subject' (*GL* V, 46). These roots bear fruit as this reductionism takes shape in the thought of René Descartes and Immanuel Kant when 'the turning from Being to mental concepts, from things (and



- God) existing in themselves to things conceived as existing "for me" and "from me". From now on, the subject can regard itself as legislative reason' (GL V, 28).
- 15 E. Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) 52.
  - 16 Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 31, 52-57.
  - 17 Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 58, 109-124.
  - 18 N. Wolterstorff, 'Beauty and Justice', lecture at The National Lilly Fellows Conference, Seattle, WA, October 10-12, 2008. I am grateful to Joice Pang for providing Kevin Vanhoozer with a copy of this lecture who graciously forwarded it to me.
  - 19 Wolterstorff, 'Beauty and Justice', 6.
  - 20 Wolterstorff, 'Beauty and Justice', 19.
  - 21 L. Wittgenstein, *Notebooks, 1914-1916* (ed. G.H. von Wright, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 2nd ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 82.
  - 22 Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 31. She maintains, though, that acquiescing to 'the existence of an immortal realm' is not necessary because beauty's enthralling self-showing 'incites in us the longing for truth' as it 'brings us into contact with our own capacity for making errors' (31).
  - 23 Wittgenstein appropriated the phrase *sub specie aeternitatis* – under the form of eternity – from Baruch Spinoza who understood human reason as the ability to ascertain not only that something is but also how and why something exists. In doing so, human reason produces 'adequate ideas' by determining the causal linkages to other objects, particularly to God's attributes: 'It is in the nature of reason to regard things, not as contingent, but as necessary. Reason perceives this necessity of things truly, that is, as it is in itself. But this necessity of things is the very necessity of the eternal nature of God; therefore, it is in the nature of reason to regard things under this form of eternity' (B. Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes in *Wadsworth Philosophy Source 3.0*, CD-ROM, ed. Daniel Kolak; New York: Wadsworth Publishing, II.44).
  - 24 K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, vol. I/1, *The Word of God*, trans. T.H.L. Parker, W.B. Johnston, H. Knight, and J.L.M. Haire (New York: T & T Clark, 1956; New York: T & T Clark, 2004) 315-316.
  - 25 *Herrlichkeit* means splendour, glory or magnificence, yet Balthasar intends here two different plays on words. The first occurs with the German *Herr* meaning lord or master and *Herrsein* meaning lordliness, rendering the term, what English translators of his *magnum opus* attempt to capture as 'The Glory of the Lord'. The second play on words is with *Hehrsein* meaning sublimeness, identifying God's glory with the sublime; see Balthasar, *GL I*, 116 and his *Theology: The Old Covenant* (trans. E. Leiva-Merikakis and B. McNeil, vol. 6 of *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, ed. J. Fessio and John Riches; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991) 10.
  - 26 Balthasar, *GL I*, 429.
  - 27 Balthasar, *GL I*, 463.
  - 28 Balthasar, in light of this particular understanding of Christ, argues that Christ is also the Lord of history in that all history is salvation history in the sense that history only has meaning in relation to Jesus Christ, the concrete universal; see *A Theology of History* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963) 79-107. There is thus no attempt on Balthasar's part to divide the Christ of history from the Christ of faith (*GL I*, 466-467). He endeavours to combine the two, often chastising historic critics who dissect and distort the *Gestalt Christi* with their methodology, which renders them blind to perceiving the *Gestalt* of revelation (*GL I*, 466).
  - 29 My critical appropriation of Balthasar begins with his doctrine of sin and prevenient grace that seems to undermine the efficacy of God's glory he espouses in *Herrlichkeit* and *Übergestalt*. Balthasar understands sin to be disruptive and corruptive rather than destructive such that humanity's faculties posses the *real possibility* of knowing God although the *telos* for those faculties remains a *moral impossibility*. How are we to overcome this moral impossibility in order to know God in the deepest recesses of his being? Balthasar presumes that sin has brought humanity spiritual sickness rather than death (Eph 2:1) such that humanity has the ability to cooperate with God (synergism) or to resist him, for 'prevenient grace certainly is not lacking to man even in a single moment of his life'; see H.U. von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation* (trans. E.T. Oakes; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992) 323; referred to henceforth as *KB*. Balthasar is correct in noting that the Fall does not erase or remove the image of God in human beings, for it is the *imago Dei* that gives worth and value to all human beings. Natural acts of morality are possible but as a consequence of the Fall, they remain off the mark (i.e. in an Augustinian sense) because the depravity of humanity inhibits such actions from reaching their supernatural end, namely the glory of God (Gen 6:5; Ecc 9:3; John 8:34; Rom 1:24; 2 Cor 4:4). That being the case, if prevenient grace operates in the manner Balthasar suggests, allowing humanity a kind of autonomous freedom to say yes or no to the light of God's divine revelation, why do some reject God and others do not? Is God's glory not efficacious to transform the deformed heart of humanity such that humanity responds in faith (Eph 2:8-10; Heb 11)? The crux of the matter, for Balthasar, hinges on humanity not on God, for God has done his part and humanity has failed to do its part. Consequently, Balthasar's views of sin and grace seem to debase the efficacy and supremacy of God's beauty intimated in the christological terms



- he espouses, namely *Herrlichkeit* and *Übergestalt*.
- 30 H.U. von Balthasar, *Prolegomena* (trans. G. Harrison, vol. 1 of *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990) 15.
- 31 Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* 1, 16.
- 32 It is important to note that underneath the suffering of Christ and his resurrection is the Old Testament thematic pattern of the Suffering Servant, which is important for fleshing out God's beauty-in-act. Space constraints prevent us from doing so here.
- 33 Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, quoted in C. Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of St. Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 235.
- 34 There is an important connection between God's glory and his beauty that necessitates further explanation. In brief, we see in 2 Pet 1:16-21 that 'from the Excellent Glory' a voice says 'This is my beloved Son in whom I delight (*eudokeō*). Listen to him!' (Matt 17:5). Sublime Glory speaks! As such, a communicative relationship between God and the world emerges such that 'God's glory is His overflowing self-communicating joy' that 'speaks and conquers, persuades and convinces' (K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, vol. II/1, *The Doctrine of God*, trans. T.H.L. Parker, W.B. Johnston, H. Knight, and J.L.M. Haire; New York: T & T Clark, 1956; New York: T & T Clark, 2004) 653. As such, God's sublime glory is not formless but finds its beautiful expression in the Son in whom the Father delights. God's beauty, then, is the form of his sublime glory that attracts us, persuades us, convinces us and draws us unto himself, demanding a response.
- 35 Jonathan Edwards speaks aptly of the beauty of God's holiness in his work, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, vol. 2 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. J.E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959) 258-259. Yet, by linking the spiritual beauty of Christ's holiness to the human soul as the most proper image of Christ's beauty, I wonder if, by implication, he renders to us a docetic Christ. More, though, would need to be said to substantiate this claim.
- 36 By emphasizing the coming of the Spirit by the Father at the behest of the Son, I do not intend to imply that the Spirit was not operative prior to this moment as if he only now appears on the stage of God's drama of redemption. Rather, the Spirit of God was operative throughout the Old Testament: in creation (Gen 1:2), the construction of the tabernacle (Ex 31:3) and prophetic tradition (Num 11:29 etc.). He was also at work in the life and ministry of Christ: his birth (Luke 1:14-17), baptism (Luke 2:39-53) and ministry (Luke 4:14-19). Christ is the 'Bearer of the Spirit' as well as the 'Bestower of the Spirit' as Graham Cole aptly notes in *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007) 149-208.
- 37 H.U. von Balthasar, *Studies in Theological Style: Clerical Styles* (trans. A. Louth, F. McDonagh and B. McNeil, vol. 2 of *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, ed. John Riches; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984) 348.
- 38 R. Zachman, *Word and Image in the Theology of John Calvin* (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2007) 3, 7-9.
- 39 J. Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 15; cf. J. Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960) 15.
- 40 Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 665.
- 41 John Calvin remarks: 'If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God' (*The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. F.L. Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) II.2.15.
- 42 G. Ward, 'The Beauty of God' in *Theological Perspectives on Beauty* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003) 64.
- 43 Barth, CD II/1, 661.
- 44 B. Quash, 'The Theo-drama' in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar* (ed. D. Moss and E. Oakes; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 143-144.
- 45 G. MacDonald, 'The Imagination: Its Function and Its Culture' in *A Dish of Orts* (London: Edwin Dalton, 1908; repr. BiblioBazaar Reproductions, 2007) 12. For an introductory survey of the imagination see T. Hart, 'Imagination' in *Dictionary for the Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005). For a historical survey see R. Kearney, *The Wake of the Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1998) and F.B. Brown, *Religious Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) 29-124.
- 46 J.H. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2006) 86. J. Bronowski, *The Origins of Knowledge and Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978) 109-112, speaks of a similar notion when describing the imagination as that innate ability to detect the hidden likeness in things that connects various parts together, producing a new likeness.
- 47 Newman, *Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 82.
- 48 P. Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999) 79. Similarly, Mary Warnock identifies the imagination as that which 'brings ideas together, and which is at work to create the forms of things which seem to speak to us of the universal, and which at the same time necessarily cause in us feelings of love and awe'; see M. Warnock, *Imagination* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976) 83-84.



- 49 Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 275.
- 50 D.J. Gouwens, 'Kierkegaard on the Ethical Imagination' in *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 10 (1982) 217.
- 51 Balthasar redefines *Einbildungskraft* in terms of *Ausbildungskraft*. With his redefinition of *Einbildungskraft*, he seems to counter the Kantian notion of *Einbildungskraft* that emphasises the subjective human power of making images but not entirely; see Warnock, *Imagination*, 26 for a summary of Kant's use of *Einbildungskraft*. Balthasar does think that Kant's description of the creative power of the imagination is appropriate so long as it is prepared by the Spirit in its obedient orientation to Christ, for 'in the Gospel, the strength of the disciples' belief is wholly borne and affected by the person of Jesus. Here we no longer detect the slightest trace of a creative, myth-projecting capacity on the part of man. The discoverability of the objective, synthetic point

is reduced to nil, while Jesus' non-inventability, his overwhelming originality has become infinite and of itself demands assent and effects submission' (GL I, 177). Thus, Balthasar does not negate the power of imagination but argues for its fulfillment in Christ (cf. GL I, 179), for 'the theological imagination (*Einbildungskraft* = "power to shape an image") lies with Christ, who is at once the image (*Bild*) and the power (*Kraft*) of God' (GL I, 490). In my estimation, it seems apropos to combine these notions such that God's self-presentation of his beauty in Christ possesses the *Ausbildungskraft* to transform our *Einbildungskraft* through the *Gestaltungskraft* of the Holy Spirit.

- 52 MacDonald, *A Dish of Orts*, 32-33, 38.
- 53 Many thanks to the reviewer who provided helpful criticisms that sharpened my rhetoric and argumentation. Any errors in judgment or mischaracterizations, though, are solely my own.