

ARTICLE 3

ICONIC CHRISTOLOGY: REIMAGINING SCIENTIFIC THEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

To call theology a “science” is to call to mind a very specific constellation of aims, methods, and characteristics that have come to define modern science. Often, these traits seem to immediately disqualify theology from its ambit. It will be my contention, however, that theology can rightly be considered a science: the study of God in and through Jesus Christ, the Word enfleshed and Icon of the Father. Crucially, for my argument, this should not be understood in the regnant Newtonian sense of science—which not only casts theology in a pseudo-scientific light—but also consists in a posture anti-thetical to divine revelation. I will begin, therefore, by sketching an alternative portrait of modern science, as embodied by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. From Goethe I proceed to Hans Urs von Balthasar, who—deeply formed by the Goethean vision—transposed Goethe’s contemplative science onto the theological plane. For Balthasar, the Crucified Christ is the centre of this revelation, in whom the God of Israel shows forth the majesty of His divine love in a wholly unexpected way. And in the face of His glory, the theologian must fall on his knees and pray. This “Iconic Christology,” as Robert Barron coined it, is precisely the sort of posture that must be taken in a properly scientific theology.

„*Grav, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie, und grün des Lebens goldner Baum.*“ (Gray, dear friend, is all theory, and green the golden tree of life.)¹

To call Christian theology (hereafter, “theology”) a “scientific” endeavour is to call to mind a very specific constellation of aims, methods, and characteristics that have come to define the modern empirical sciences today. Often, these traits seem to immediately disqualify theology from its ambit, pushing the discipline, perhaps along with (continental) philosophy, to the realm of the “subjective.” Theology, in this reading, is a relic of a bygone age, and we simply tolerate its existence in a world that has moved onto greener pastures—quite literally with the study of plants, trees, rocks, animals, human beings, societies, economies, governments, international relations, astronomy, and the history of all of these things—things that we can feel, and touch, and see. At the risk of oversimplification, and for the sake of a convenient academic heuristic, we shall call this notion of science “Newtonian,” after the ingenious trailblazer of the Scientific Revolution.

¹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust I*, in *Goethe's Works*, Weimar Edition (WA), edited by the Grand Duchess Sophie of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1887–1919), vol. III, p. 63.

It will be the contention of this essay, however, that—apart from the oft-neglected philosophical presuppositions that undergird this Newtonian view of science, religion, and truth (which this paper recognizes but does not focus on)—theology might be seriously considered scientific, even empirically robust, when viewed from the important perspective of another 17th-century scientist who lived during the time of the Enlightenment and contributed to it: the German polymath Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832).² Specifically, Goethe’s synthetic and phenomenological approach to *Wissenschaft* (“science”) shall be sketched out in this essay as a means of broadening our conception of science and the scientific method, so as to reimagine the fittingness and validity of “scientific theology” at its roots. No doubt, similar attempts to recast theology in a scientific mould have been done by great modern theologians like Karl Barth (1886–1968), T. F. Torrance (1913–2007), Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928–2014), but it seems to me that their attempts could be bolstered and taken further by a challenge to the regnant Newtonian model of science from *within* the prevailing worldview of the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, rather than from *without*, that is from the theological and post-Enlightenment standpoint. I begin with Goethe, then, retrieving from his *Theory of Colours* a notion of science as a properly contemplative endeavour, one in which the scientist must reverently observe nature without impatience or invasion. But how might this fresh notion of science be applied to theology?

From Goethe, then, I proceed to the prolific twentieth-century Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, who, deeply formed by the Goethean vision, transposed Goethe’s contemplative science onto the theological plane. For Balthasar, theology is the study of God in and through the form (*Gestalt*) of Jesus Christ, the *concretissimum* (“maximally concrete reality”). And just like the scientist must approach nature reverently for true knowledge, Balthasar argues that the theologian must always begin and end by his/her “letting-be” of the phenomenon that is given for study. Balthasar’s conception of theology, I want to argue, is a potent point of departure for the way in which we might seriously theology as a “scientific” discipline, with “science” first retrieved in the manner of Goethe rather than Newton. For it seems to me inevitable that a scientific theology that continues to assume a Newtonian paradigm will not only keep casting theology in a pseudo-scientific light, but also betray a posture anti-thetical to the revelatory nature of Christian theology itself. This is important because for Balthasar, the concrete phenomena of the Christ-form must be kept in mind to ultimately be a divine person, not only an object for study but more importantly a *subject* before whom the theologian is invited to fall on his/her knees and pray. This, then, is what Balthasar’s most outspoken champion

² See for e.g. the excellent discussion by Joseph Ratzinger in ‘The Church and Scientific Theology’, in *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. McCarthy, Mary Frances (Ignatius Press, 1987).

today, Robert Barron, calls an “Iconic Christology,” one in which the study of God, that is theology, is conceived as a study of the phenomenological form of Christ that simultaneously invites worship in and through the reading of the Scriptures in the Church. Like an icon, God-in-Christ condescends to be encountered in a real way through a sacred human phenomenon, and cannot be properly perceived and understood without the contemplative posture of Goethe’s synthetic science.

REDUCTIO AD ABSURDUM: MODERN SCIENCE AND MECHANICAL PHILOSOPHY

In our cultural encyclopaedia³ today, the word “science” is usually associated with the strictly empirical study of nature;⁴ that is, the realm of natural sciences including physics, biology, and chemistry, though this has also expanded to “social sciences” like psychology and anthropology. Such studies are often couched—consciously or sub-consciously—in a naturalistic or even positivistic worldview, and the phenomena therein approached in a manner broadly “mechanistic.”

In the *Encyclopedia of Early Modern Philosophy and the Sciences*, Delphine Bellis defines mechanical philosophy as “a theoretical conception according to which natural phenomena should be accounted for by appealing to the structure of bodies made of chunks of extended matter in motion.”⁵ It was first coined by Robert Boyle in 1666 as a governing framework for the study of natural phenomena, then called “natural philosophy.”⁶ The key figureheads of natural philosophy included Francis Bacon (1561–1626), Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), René Descartes (1596–1650), and later Isaac Newton (1642–1727). All of these figures shared the desire and attempt to present comprehensive explanations of natural phenomena that they believed were far more simple and intelligible than various other explanatory frameworks, especially opposing the Aristotelian-Scholastic notion ofhylomorphism (i.e. the view that substances are made up of the coinherence of form *and* matter). Retrieving the atomism of ancient Epicureanism, these thinkers proposed explanations of nature based completely on the “primary qualities” of size,

³ Concept borrowed from the modern theory of semiotics explained by Stefan Alkier and David M. Moffitt, *New Testament Basics: A Guide for Reading and Interpreting the Text* (Fortress Press, 2022), 182–185.

⁴ Historically, this narrower view of “science” was known as “natural philosophy,” revealing the organic connection between the study of nature and philosophy, or physics and *meta*-physics, before their fateful divorce in late modernity, perhaps owing to the way that nature began to be seen in itself as ultimate reality. For an example of the retrieval of this broader and more traditional view of science, see Alister E. McGrath, *Natural Philosophy: On Retrieving a Lost Disciplinary Imaginary* (Oxford University Press, 2023). That being said, even today “science” carries this more holistic meaning in regions like continental Europe (*Wissenschaft*).

⁵ Delphine Bellis, ‘Mechanical Philosophies’, in *Encyclopedia of Early Modern Philosophy and the Sciences*, ed. Dana Jalobeanu and Charles T. Wolfe (Springer International Publishing, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-31069-5_143, 1.

⁶ Robert Boyle, *The Origin of Forms and Qualities according to the Corpuscular Philosophy* (in the version of Jonathan Bennet at www.earlymoderntexts.com, 2017), 3.

shape, and motion, while eliminating any “obscure” or “abstract” principles like form and attraction. As the French academic Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle (1657–1757) applauded, “only clear ideas (were) admitted, that is figures and motions.”⁷

It is worth noting, however, that the mechanical worldview was and is not a homogenous school of thought, nor one with a clear beginning and pioneer. As Sophie Roux explains in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy of the Scientific Revolution*, historians adopt two broad and different narratives of the rise in mechanical explanations of nature, with one side proposing that the central idea lay in an “ontology of machines,” while others proposing it lay in the “mathematicised science of motion.”⁸ Nevertheless, Roux maintains that the term “mechanical philosophy” is still useful in referring to the works of “anyone who tried to *reduce* physical phenomena to corpuscles of different sizes, shapes, and motions,”⁹ and it is this *reductionistic* understanding of the science and the world that Goethe found objectionable. Notwithstanding the clarity and contributions of mechanistic philosophy (including mechanics, calculus, and optics), Goethe was one of the minority of scientists who were wary of the trailblazers of the Scientific Revolution and their thought.

GREY IS ALL THEORY: GOETHE’S CONTEMPLATIVE SCIENCE

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), widely considered the most influential writer in the German language, is a pivotal yet underappreciated figure in the philosophy of science, bridging as he did the rationalism of the 18th-century and the Romantic movement of the 19th-century that attempted to restore balance, transcendence, and humanity to the modern worldview. Not only was Goethe a world-renowned author, poet, and playwright – with *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, *Elective Affinities*, and especially his magnum opus *Faust*, all celebrated as literary masterpieces – but Goethe was also a seriously capable and dedicated scientist, having also published the *Metamorphosis of Plants* (1790) and his *Theory of Colours* (1810) alongside his more well-known literary works. This latter work of a more scientific character we shall consider in greater detail for the way it sheds light on an alternative conception of science that is at once rigorously empirical and deeply reverent.

Deeply sceptical of the mechanistic reduction of science outlined above, Goethe published his *Theory of Colours* in 1810, in which he sought not only to demolish Newton’s prevailing wave-length theory but also to mount a more paradigmatic challenge to the

⁷ Sophie Roux, ‘What to Do with the Mechanical Philosophy?’, in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy of the Scientific Revolution*, ed. David Marshall Miller and Dana Jalobeanu (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 81, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108333108.006>.

⁸ Roux, ‘What To Do With the Mechanical Philosophy,’ 75.

⁹ Roux, ‘What To Do With the Mechanical Philosophy,’ 83. Emphasis mine.

Newtonian approach to nature.¹⁰ In Goethe's perspective, Newtonian science was invasive and reductionistic. To him, the Newtonian scientist invades the realm of Mother Nature with his pre-conceived formulas in one hand and tools of dissection in the other, and after prying her children apart into dead pieces and fitting them into his infallible axioms—the scientist pronounces her riddles “solved.”¹¹ In essence, Goethe hated this approach to science because it did not approach natural phenomena in a spirit of true observation, which for Goethe is essential to good science. For Goethe, Nature should not be compelled to fit the hypotheses that scientists bring to her, but instead be given the space and time to generate her own questions and answers—answers which often subvert human expectations. Proper science, then, begins with patient and reverent observation of Nature in her *givenness*—which, importantly for Goethe, appears as a whole form (*Gestalt*) instead of dissected parts.

In contrast, Goethe demonstrated an alternative approach in his *Theory of Colours*. Instead of using the analytic method of breaking things into parts and drawing conclusions without reference to the whole, Goethe's method was characteristically qualitative, phenomenological, and synthetic. Goethe first attended closely to the optical phenomena before synthesising these results into a working “theory” (though it must be said that Goethe was highly suspicious of the word.¹²) For Goethe, “theory” at its highest consists in the appreciation of the *factual*—one should not seek to “get behind” the phenomena.

For Goethe, Nature in her living beauty *is* theory, and true understanding must grow organically from her soil—not from the dusty shelves of an ivory tower. It was this unified and contemplative approach that deeply inspired the great twentieth-century Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. Having begun his intellectual formation in *Germanistik* (German language and literature), the young von Balthasar was profoundly formed by his study of Goethe, and so resulted a fateful union of Goethe's contemplative science to the Patristic fire in which Balthasar was set aflame.

THE CRUCIFORM CENTRE: BALTHASAR'S THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS

Formed holistically by both his study of Goethe and the Church Fathers, Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988) was deeply sensitive to the proper disposition that a theologian had to take with reference to the object of his/her study. We begin by understanding what Balthasar took as the object of theology so that we might see its scientific analogies, then we ask the

¹⁰ Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, *Goethe's Theory of Colours: Translated from the German, with Notes*, 1st edn, trans. Charles Lock Eastlake (Cambridge University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107589438>.

¹¹ See discussion in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics. Vol.5, The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 362–63.

¹² See epigraph.

question of how this fits into his understanding of the place of reason and revelation in the theological endeavour so understood.

THE FORM OF CHRIST (1): CONCRETE OBJECT OF THEOLOGY

For Balthasar, the object of Christian theology is God—no doubt—but more fundamentally, it is the God who reveals Himself in *Jesus of Nazareth*, the “stubbornly particular”¹³ first-century Jewish man who died on a cross, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven.¹⁴ For Balthasar, as for the Church Fathers,¹⁵ theology is founded upon the Cross of Christ, the central phenomenon of this science. This factual form of Christian revelation, unique and essential amongst world religions, is what Balthasar calls the *concretissimum* (“the supremely concrete thing/reality”).¹⁶

The theologian, then, must begin by “seeing the form,”¹⁷ that is to start with true observation in the Goethean sense. Just as the scientist should sit and watch the plant in its natural environment instead of ripping it out of its soil and shoving it under the microscope in a lab, so should the theologian first kneel on the factual soil of Calvary and *ecce homo*—behold the (God-)man. In this Goethean spirit, Balthasar writes,

The first desideratum for seeing objectively is the “*letting be*” of God’s self-revelation, even if the latter is also “his eternal love for me.” *This first step is not to master the materials of perception by imposing our own categories on them but an attitude of service to the object.* Theologically this means that the unspeakable mystery of God’s love opens itself to reverence and adoration on the part of the subject.¹⁸ [emphases mine]

Here we see Goethe’s influence on Balthasar clearly, and what it meant to the latter to transpose the former’s contemplative science onto the theological plane. For the first step for the theologian, according to Balthasar, is not for his/her mind to grasp the object under investigation, but to maintain a disciplined detachment – what Balthasar follows Goethe in calling a “*letting be*” – that allows the observer to see clearly at all, and then to “serve” reality rather than attempt to “master” it. There is a certain reverence befitting all *being* that is demanded

¹³ Robert Barron, *The Priority of Christ: Toward a Postliberal Catholicism* (Baker Academic, 2021), 19.

¹⁴ In this way, Balthasar comes closer to the views of scholars like Eleonore Stump, who argued that theology concerns itself with the “concrete particular” in contradistinction from philosophy which concerns itself with the “abstract universal.” See Eleonore Stump, ‘Athens and Jerusalem: The Relationship of Philosophy and Theology’, *Journal of Analytic Theology* 1, no. 1 (2013), p. 50. <https://doi.org/10.12978/jat.2013--1.041104181915a>.

¹⁵ See Robert Louis Wilken, “Founded on the Cross of Christ,” in *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (Yale University Press, 2003), 1–24.

¹⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology I: The Word Made Flesh*, trans. A. V. Littledale (Ignatius Press, 1989), 162. Cited in Barron, *Priority of Christ*, 19.

¹⁷ And so it is no accident that this became the title of the introductory volume to his Dogmatic Trilogy. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol.1, *Seeing the Form*, ed. Joseph Fessio and John Riches, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (T. & T. Clark, 1982).

¹⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *My Work: In Retrospect* (Ignatius Press, 1993), 81.

in even greater measure with reference to *Being Itself* – which is the essential claim of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, that is, to be the ontological bridge to the invisible God, the Icon of the Father (John 1:18; Matt 11:27; Heb 1:3; Col 1:15).

At the beginning (and end) of all theology then, is what Barron sees in Balthasar as the “priority of Christ,” and more specifically, an *Iconic Christology*.¹⁹ “one that takes seriously the dense particularity and spiritual complexity of the picture of Jesus as it emerges in the New Testament narratives.”²⁰ In this, Barron “share[s] Balthasar’s intuition that one must approach Jesus in a *Goethean spirit*, which is to say, in an attitude of contemplative love, allowing the object of one’s contemplation to control the gaze of the mind.”²¹ Here Barron makes explicit for us the connection between a Balthasarian theological method and a Goethean scientific method, so to speak, both of which take reverent observation and loving surrender as the point of departure for true understanding. This disposition, as hinted at with Barron’s use of love,²² is set in the context of the object of theology—the form of Christ—who is at the same time a *personal* subject, not just a *what* but more crucially a *who*, a master who calls the reader or hearer of the Scriptures into a living relationship with him. Crucially, then, Truth refers not (just) to the *idea* of Christ in the abstract, but to the *person* of Christ who beckons to the theologian to not become his observer—but his disciple and friend.

For Balthasar, then, Christ is the concrete and definitive revelation of the Triune God, and his Incarnate form (*Gestalt*) stands at the centre of Christian revelation.²² As the Epistle to the Hebrews put it, “In the past God spoke in many parts and in many ways to our fathers through the prophets, but in these last days God has spoken to us in His Son ... the radiance of His glory and the imprint of His essence” (Heb 1:1–3, translation mine).²³ In *this* Son the fullness of the Godhead was pleased to dwell (Col 1:19); in *this* Son is the new Isaac and the Paschal Lamb who takes away the sins of the world (Gen 22, John 1:29); in *this* Son the apostles saw God’s glory, glory as of the only begotten, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). And so it is from *this* Cruciform centre that the glory of the Lord (the Biblical *kabod-doxa-gloria*²⁴) shows forth, calling the one who believes into communion with the Triune God.

In this way, Balthasar considered “theological aesthetics,” understood in the preceding Goethean sense of a properly contemplative science, to be the indispensable starting point and

¹⁹ This evocative idea of “Iconic Christology,” as well as the Goethean and Balthasarian motifs in this paper, are largely drawn from Barron, *The Priority of Christ*. See esp. pp. 19, 46–47, 157–58. It is to Barron that many of my ideas here must be credited as their source.

²⁰ Barron, *The Priority of Christ*, 19.

²¹ Barron, *The Priority of Christ*, 19. On the contrast that Balthasar drew between a Newtonian and Goethean approach to Christ and theology, see also pp. 46–47, 157–58.

²² Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, 463.

²³ See Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, 435.

²⁴ Balthasar, *My Work*, 82.

centre of all theological reflection.²⁵ Even the macro-structure of Balthasar's Dogmatic Trilogy, which begins with the Beautiful (*The Glory of the Lord*), moves to the Good (*Theo-Drama*), and only then moves to the True (*Theo-Logic*)—was meant to directly invert Kant's critiques of reason, ethics, and aesthetics. By prioritising aesthetics, Balthasar was doing nothing less (and nothing more²⁶) than foregrounding the form of Christ, whom Balthasar saw as the Alpha and Omega of a rightly-ordered theology.

In this light, Balthasar was critical of both ancient and modern theological reflection, which he saw as having lost sight of Christ behind broader cosmological and/or anthropological systems of thought; the former (cosmology) he associated with the Patristic and Middle Ages, while the latter (anthropology) with post-Enlightenment theology.²⁷ Like Karl Barth, Balthasar had an axe to grind against the developments of modern theology, and in particular, against the other towering Karl – Karl Rahner. Just as Goethe saw Newton as emblematic of the way that science had gone awry, Balthasar saw Rahner as emblematic of the way that theology had been thwarted. In Rahner's attempt to reformulate the Christian faith for a new age, Balthasar saw philosophical credibility come at the expense of the domestication of God and the muting of the Biblical drama.

By synthesising classical Christian doctrine with transcendental idealism, it seemed to Balthasar that the German master had thrown the baby out with the bathwater. For instance, in coining the terms “Anonymous Christian” and the “supernatural existential” to account for the universal yearning for the divine that patiently awaits the fulfilment of divine revelation, Balthasar saw the Cross of Christ—“stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles” (1 Cor 1:23)—assimilated into an overly palatable and familiar mould that reduced the primordial offense of the Roman instrument of torture, and so blunted the surprising power of the Cruciform symbol of authentic Christianity.

Similar to Barth's critique, Balthasar saw that many modern theologians like Rahner had “pocketed away”²⁸ the Cross of Christ in the fog of their grand syntheses, “instead of seeing it always before them as a mystery worthy of their worship.”²⁹ Instead, Balthasar was adamant that the theologian had to return again and again to the *front* of the Cross, and by seeing the Christ-form as if for the first time, allow the beauty of her Cruciform Redeemer—that beauty ever ancient and ever new—to shake her to the core once more and forever.³⁰ But what does this

²⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone Is Credible*, trans. D. C. Schindler (Ignatius Press, 2004), 11.

²⁶ If it must be said for those who accuse Balthasar's theology of a sort of “aestheticism.”

²⁷ Balthasar, *Love Alone*, 10. Cf. Balthasar, *My Work*, 81.

²⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Epilogue*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (Ignatius Press, 2004), 16.

²⁹ Balthasar, *Epilogue*, 16.

³⁰ Augustine, *Confessions* 10.27.38.

mean for the actual operation of a scientific theology so conceived? Did Balthasar think that such a theology founded on the Christ-form correspondingly precludes the use of reason, or philosophy, in its domain? How then does theology retain its scientific character? We shall now turn to address this final question.

THE FORM OF CHRIST (2): A YES/NO TO PHILOSOPHY

In his essay “Current Trends in Catholic Theology and the Responsibility of the Christian,” Balthasar articulated his summary critique of Rahnerian theology which helps sharpen our inquiry:

My main argument—not only against Rahner but against the entire transcendental school ... is this: ... It might be true that from the very beginning man was created to be disposed toward God’s revelation, so that with God’s grace even the sinner can accept all Revelation. *Gratia supponit naturam* [“grace [pre]supposes nature”]. But *if* God sends his own living Word to his creatures, he does so, not to instruct them about the mysteries of the world, nor primarily to fulfil their deepest needs and yearnings. Rather he communicates and actively demonstrates such unheard-of things that man feels not satisfied but *awestruck* by a love which he never could have hoped to experience.³¹

Here Balthasar takes up a delicate position between Rahner and Barth on the relationship between nature and grace, and by analogy and extension, reason and revelation, philosophy and theology. On one hand, Balthasar can be seen to agree to a certain extent with Rahner’s stress on the continuity between nature and grace that enables sinful human beings to accept revelation in the first place. Balthasar grants the Thomistic axiom *gratia supposit naturam* (“grace [pre]supposes nature”). As he put it elsewhere, this means that philosophy cannot and must not be denied entry into the realm of Christian reflection, “for the Word of God has expressed itself in human words and concepts, and human speech and thought can be used by it further to bring out all its divine riches.”³² In other words, since the form of Christ is a human one, so the Church necessarily employs human language and concepts (i.e. philosophy) to understand this revelation. For Balthasar, this remains the case even if “the content of faith will itself constantly come to include more than reason apprehends.”³³ As he writes in his essay ‘Characteristics of Christianity’, reason and mystery are not opposed, for “it is just when the logical process is correct that there is present in the conclusion something of the unknown mystery that was latent in one or both of

³¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Current Trends in Catholic Theology and the Responsibility of the Christian”, *Communio International Catholic Review* 5 (1978): 80, <https://doi.org/10.56154/m6>. Emphasis original.

³² Balthasar, *The Word Made Flesh*, 178.

³³ Balthasar, *The Word Made Flesh*, 179.

the premises.”³⁴ Like St Thomas Aquinas, Balthasar holds that reason paves an authentic path that leads to the threshold of mystery—that “luminous darkness,” as the Areopagite called it, before which the theologian must surrender to the Beatrician wings of grace and love if he should wish to go further. As Josef Pieper trenchantly put it, “he who fears the bold light of logic will never penetrate into the region of real mysteries . . . [T]he more intensely we pursue those ways of knowledge, the more is revealed to us—of the *darkness*—but also of the *reality* of mystery.”³⁵ For Balthasar, then, rational inquiry remains the proper mode of inquiry for theology, making it philosophical by nature.

On the other hand, however, we see in the preceding passage that Balthasar was intent to foreground the *in-breaking* character of Christian revelation – the “unheard-of things . . . which [humankind] never could have hoped to experience.”³⁶ As cited before, Balthasar maintained that “the content of faith will itself *constantly* come to include more than reason apprehends,”³⁷ like a fountain that “infinitely overflows the finite vessel into which it is poured, however authentic the [philosophical] vessel.”³⁸ Granted, Balthasar was a generous engager of secular and philosophical thought, working as he did from the aforementioned Thomistic axiom that grace presupposes nature and perfects it. In other words, Balthasar affirmed the *semina verbi* (“seeds of the word”) inherent in all *being*, all thought-forms. In particular, Balthasar saw it as a function of gratitude to the Creator to affirm that non-Christian traditions of transcendence were neither “mere *fabrica idolorum*”³⁹ nor “necessarily blasphemous,”⁴⁰ since God indeed imbued these capacities in mankind. But here Balthasar lays down his hammer.

Deeply influenced by Barth, and contrary to Rahner, Balthasar maintained that this gratitude must not remain at the level of conflating nature and grace but recognising that in God’s revelation there is “something wholly new and other, crowning and perfecting man’s attempts, precisely because it first *shatters* and *overturns* them.”⁴¹ The surprising and absolute nature of God’s love in the Incarnation and Crucifixion, Balthasar thought, can never be taken for granted, and as such must always retain its overarching and condescending position. As Balthasar urged elsewhere,

³⁴ Balthasar, *The Word Made Flesh*, 179.

³⁵ Josef Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas: Three Essays*, trans. John Murray and D. J. O’Connor (St. Augustine’s Press, 1999), 35. Emphasis original.

³⁶ See n21 above.

³⁷ Balthasar, *The Word Made Flesh*, 179. Emphasis mine.

³⁸ Balthasar, *The Word Made Flesh*, 179.

³⁹ Balthasar, *The Word Made Flesh*, 161.

⁴⁰ Balthasar, *The Word Made Flesh*, 161.

⁴¹ Balthasar, *The Word Made Flesh*, 162. Emphasis mine.

The simpler and clearer the fathomless depth of God's love becomes to us, indeed, the more incomprehensible to us the thought becomes that, in the face of such a mystery, man could be capable of something like a correspondence and following at all, the simpler will we be rid of the distorted and simplistic thinking that makes the Christian message so unbelievable today.⁴²

In other words, there is a certain prideful and counter-productive folly, in Balthasar's opinion, when we try to assimilate Christian revelation, especially the incarnation of the Word enfleshed and the redemption of the Cross embraced, into rationally palatable philosophical systems like Kantian idealism. Even though reason is ontologically continuous with revelation, and can and must be used in the theological science, the accent on revelation can never be lost.

Contrary to Rahner, then, such a Balthasarian theology inherently resists becoming morphed into a so-called Christology "from below" which takes philosophical anthropology as its point of departure. As Balthasar insisted in his programmatic book *Love Alone is Credible* (1963), the "most fundamental phenomenon of revelation" is this: "[t]he majesty of absolute love"⁴³—this is where the theologian must begin, and where he must end. As such, the distinction between theology and philosophy must be made clear if categories and conclusions are not to be mixed up in a way that performs disservice to both disciplines.⁴⁴ Equally crucial for Balthasar was this: any and all speculation about fundamental theology (the relationship between God and creation, nature and grace, faith and reason etc.) must never be performed on an abstract plane, but always on the concrete plane of Christology.⁴⁵ Here, then, we return full circle to the *concretissimus*,⁴⁶ the One who Balthasar maintains is the "only [given] synthesis"⁴⁷ between philosophy and theology and "the *analogia entis* in concrete form"—Jesus of Nazareth.⁴⁸

CONCLUSION

Throughout these chapters, I have been insisting on the embodied, the iconic, the incarnational. We know God and ourselves, I have maintained, through a particular first-century Jew who walked the hills of Galilee—and the saints who function as the living icons of Jesus up and down the centuries. Philosophy, ethics, and cultural forms do not position him; he positions them. To understand that reversal is to grasp the nettle of the Christian thing.⁴⁹

⁴² Balthasar, *My Work*, 59–60.

⁴³ Balthasar, *Love Alone*, 56.

⁴⁴ Balthasar, *The Word Made Flesh*, 162.

⁴⁵ Balthasar, *The Word Made Flesh*, 162.

⁴⁶ See n9.

⁴⁷ Balthasar, *The Word Made Flesh*, 177.

⁴⁸ Balthasar, *The Word Made Flesh*, 177.

⁴⁹ Barron, *Priority of Christ*, 341.

I began in this essay by arguing that theology might be properly considered a science, especially when we background the dominant Newtonian sense of the term and retrieve the approach to natural phenomena embodied and championed by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, one that is both robustly empirical and deeply reverent. Drawing on Hans Urs von Balthasar, I went on to show how this Goethean approach might be transfigured into a “scientific theology,” which is most befitting of the proper object of theological science—the God-man Jesus Christ, and the Cross on which he was poured out for the salvation of humankind. In this shattering light, that is the enfleshment of God’s absolute love in Christ, reason and philosophy must necessarily be employed (not least due to the incarnate form of revelation), but by equal necessity get out of the way when it comes to end of itself, since it never has either the first or the last word in the grace-wrought realm of Christian theology. In this way, I have offered an account of what Robert Barron coined as an *Iconic Christology*, as Robert Barron coined, that is a *kneeling science* that takes seriously both the true revelation and the true reverence of its object—an object that is at the same time a *subject* who invites the restless and seeking heart, saying: “Come, follow me.”⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Matt 4:9; Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27 etc.

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AUTHOR’S BIO

Vic Chua is a fourth-year MTheol student graduating from St Mary’s College, University of St Andrews. His time there has been characterised by a wrestle with questions of fundamental theology: what is the relationship between Scripture and Tradition? Theology and Philosophy? Nature and Grace? Reason and Revelation? Science and Religion? This paper bears the mark of one such attempt to reconcile these dualities—aided by great thinkers like Barth and Balthasar who have left a deep mark on Vic during his undergraduate degree. Having finally submitted his dissertation entitled “The Divine Dialogue: The Synthesis of Subjectivity and Objectivity in Joseph Ratzinger’s Theology of Revelation,” Vic is happily catching up on Plato’s dialogues and Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. In his free time, Vic enjoys walking in nature, organising his room, and writing on his substack—“Coffee with Augustine.”

AUTHOR’S NOTE

This paper was inspired by an online lecture series by Bishop Robert Barron on the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, found on the Word on Fire Institute. Therein I was struck deeply by the contrast drawn between a “Newtonian” and “Goethean” approach to science and theology, and this paper bears witness to the inspiration I found there. And so I would like to thank Bishop Barron, first and foremost, for his characteristically simple and engaging presentations of complex and profound ideas, which in this case led me to see radiance and beauty of Balthasar’s thought. Next, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to both the editors of this journal and the peer reviewers of my essay for their invaluable feedback and patience. This attempt has been greatly improved by their comments. Finally, I want to dedicate this piece to the place and the people who have forged my theological foundation with an indelible mark of truth and love—St Mary’s College.

EDITORS’ NOTE

The question of the relation between theology and other knowledge claims, such as those made by philosophy or the natural sciences is a pressing one, particularly for the modern theologian. While in the medieval past theology was seen as not only harmonious with other forms of study, but to be their culmination, as children of the Enlightenment we often assume a natural

antagonism between the two. For many the relationship between science and theology and their respective truth claims is at best troubled, at worst irreconcilable. Is theology, which concerns itself with knowledge gained from God's self-revelation, inherently un-scientific?

In this article, Vic Chua offers a perceptive answer to this question. Challenging the prominent "Newtonian" definition of science, Chua draws upon Goethe's view of science as study of the gestalt and von Balthasar's subsequent development of the idea within the theological realm, to move beyond a view of theology as existing contrary to or apart from other forms of knowledge. In doing, Chua opens a fresh avenue of inquiry into the nature of theology which neither alienates theology from other sorts of knowledge nor compromises its essential grounding upon the revelation of the Cross as the in-breaking of divine love. We are pleased to endorse this paper as valuable reading for the theologian seeking to reflect upon the nature of theology, its object and right end, considerations which may serve as a basis for dialogue within and across the academy.

EDITORS: Kate Wilcox and Arthur Zhang

