

Hans Urs von Balthasar, Metaphysics, and the Problem of Onto-Theology

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Preview

Heidegger's question How does the god enter philosophy?, has been echoing and re-echoing in theology so incessantly it may be said to have acquired something like the authority of tradition. The author argues, first, that the terms in which the critique of ontotheology is framed threaten to evacuate the substance and seriousness of theology ironically by absolutizing the reason it seeks to chasten in relation to faith. Second, avoiding the problem of absolutizing human reason requires the reversal of Heidegger's question, which paradoxically turns out to accord a certain kind of primacy to metaphysics. The following paper gives a brief statement of Heidegger's critique, sketches three potential dangers of that critique, and then suggests how Balthasar's metaphysics with a theological point of departure offers a way to avoid those dangers.

Hans Urs von Balthasar, Metaphysics, and the Problem of Ontotheology¹

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The question that Heidegger raises at the end of a seminar on Hegel given in 1957,² namely, “*Wie kommt der Gott in die Philosophie?*” (“How does the god enter philosophy?”), has been echoing and re-echoing in theology, and even more in Continental philosophy of religion, so incessantly it may be said to have acquired something like the authority of tradition.³ To be sure, on its face the question simply asks after the relationship between God and human thinking, or how and to what extent God is accessible to reason, but Heidegger himself raises the question as a problem specifically within the context of his profound and extensive critique of Western metaphysics. The question, “How does the god enter philosophy?” he explains, “leads back to the question, ‘What is the origin of the onto-theological essential constitution of metaphysics?’”⁴ For Heidegger,

¹ This essay is a condensed and substantially re-worked version of an essay published as “Wie kommt der Mensch in die Theologie? Heidegger, Hegel, and the Stakes of Onto-Theo-Logy,” in *Communio* 32 (Winter 2005): 637–68. It was first delivered at the *American Catholic Philosophical Association* meeting at the University of Notre Dame, October 29, 2005.

² The concluding lecture, entitled “The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics” and delivered on February 24, 1957, was published together with a lecture called “The Principle of Identity” in *Identität und Differenz* (Pfullingen: Verlag Günther Neske, 1957). References in this essay will be drawn from the English translation: *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

³ Anthony Godzieba observes that Heidegger’s “analysis of ontotheology marks an epochal shift which has affected not only the intellectual history of the West but the history of the Catholic theology of God as well. It acts as a marker, dividing that history into periods of ‘before’ and ‘after,’” “Prolegomena to a Catholic Theology of God Between Heidegger and Postmodernity,” *Heythrop Journal* 40 (1999): 319–39, here: 320.

⁴ Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 56.

God's entering—or perhaps we ought to say his being dragged—into the ambit of human thinking is the determining event in the Western metaphysical tradition.

Heidegger's charge has provoked a variety of responses: On the one hand, the question has been welcomed by those who wish to be relieved, once and for all, of what has been experienced as the oppressive burden of religion (and specifically Christianity), insofar as it unmasks the "theology" latent in the philosophical tradition and thus opens up the possibility of a more radical, and radically free questioning. On the other hand, those who do not wish to be deprived of their faith by this unmasking tend either to embrace Heidegger's "methodological atheism"⁵ as a way of purifying faith of reason's apparently incorrigible habit of setting up false idols for itself or they attempt to show that Heidegger's critique of ontotheology does not, in fact, apply to certain key figures in the Western tradition (for example, Dionysius,⁶ Bonaventure,⁷ and even Aquinas⁸) however just its judgment may be regarding the conventional reception of these figures. The point of excepting these figures is for the most part to enable a renewed appropriation of the Western tradition, rather than its critical abandonment.

The present essay is addressed principally to those in this latter group, who seek to preserve the integrity of faith, whether it be with the help of Heidegger's critique or in spite of it (i.e., showing the limitation of his critique in relation to particular thinkers). My thesis is, first, that the terms in which the critique of ontotheology is framed threaten to evacuate the substance and seriousness of theology ironically by "absolutizing" the reason it seeks to chasten in relation to faith. Second, avoiding the problem of absolutizing human reason requires the reversal of Heidegger's question, which paradoxically turns out to accord a "certain kind" of primacy to metaphysics. In the following paper, I will give a brief statement of Heidegger's critique, sketch three potential dangers of that critique, and then suggest how Balthasar's "metaphysics with a theological

⁵ See Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Ontotheology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 10, 38–39.

⁶ Merold Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence: On God and the Soul* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2004), 93–141.

⁷ Kevin Hughes, "Remember Bonaventure? (Onto) Theology and Ecstasy," *Modern Theology* 19.4 (2003): 529–45.

⁸ Jean-Luc Marion, "Saint Thomas d'Aquin et l'onto-théo-logie," *Revue Thomiste* 1 (1995): 31–66. See also Marion's preface to the English translation of *Dieu sans l'être*, in which he "recants" what appears to be an initial acceptance of the charge against Aquinas in the original text: *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), esp. xxii–xxiv.

point of departure”⁹ offers a way to avoid those dangers.

Heidegger’s Critique of Onto-Theo-Logy

As is well known, Heidegger identifies metaphysics with ontotheology insofar as the attempt to think being qua being (which Heidegger takes to mean: the *beingness* of beings [*die Seiendheit des Seienden*], i.e., “being” understood specifically on the basis of that which exists) is ultimately an attempt to think being in an absolute sense, therefore as divine. In Heidegger’s view, while Christianity historically embraced the “entry of god into philosophy,” Christians ought to have been the first to repudiate such an event, for it seems to entail a radical kind of blasphemy. On the one hand, it involves God in human thinking wholly as a function and therefore in the service of the all-too-human project of rendering all things accessible to the calculations of reason; and on the other hand it thereby replaces the godly God [*den göttlichen Gott*] with a conceptual idol, i.e., it contents itself, we might say, with deifying simply the best thing reason can come up with.

As an alternative to ontotheology, what Heidegger proposes is a god-less thinking, which understands itself primarily as the methodical exclusion of this blasphemy and therefore as a kind of constant vigilance against the presumption of reason. This notion seems to be inspired by Kant in two respects: first of all, it represents the resolute embrace of the finitude of human reason; second, by the very same token it entails a kind of “setting of limits to reason in order to make room for faith.” When Heidegger insists that philosophy is a-theism, it is in other words not because he wishes to reject God, but rather to refuse the absorption of theology into philosophy—the absorption that constitutes metaphysics—and for that very reason is able to open a sense for the holy, to open space for prayer and for faith, without, that is, deciding anything beforehand about what is to occupy this space. In Heidegger’s own words, “The god-less thinking which must abandon the god of philosophy, god as *causa sui*, is thus perhaps closer to the godly God. Here this means only: god-less thinking is more open to Him than onto-theologic would like to admit.”¹⁰ It is crucial to emphasize that, for Heidegger, this “god-lessness” is not a movement either toward or away from faith, but is rather the clearing of a space which would presumably allow faith to arrive, if and when it does, as

⁹ See Balthasar, “Regagner une philosophie à partir de la théologie,” in *Pour une philosophie chrétienne: Philosophie et théologie* (Namur, Belgium: Culture et Vérité, 1983).

⁸ Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 72. I have altered the translation slightly.

more authentically itself: a more faithful faith.

On an initial hearing, there seems to be very little here to criticize from a Christian perspective. But I submit that deeper reflection brings to light a number of potentially serious problems, of which I can sketch only three in the present context.

(1) The ability to remain vigilantly “god-less” in the sense that Heidegger describes apparently rests on the possibility that thought can remain “neutral” with respect to God. Indeed, in his *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, Heidegger refers to the “peculiar neutrality” of the analytic of Dasein.¹¹ To insist on the neutrality of reason means to affirm that reason is not by its very nature ordered to God, because to be so ordered would mean to be always-already either inclined to God by nature, or to be resisting that natural inclination. In either case, reason could not be justly taken to be neutral. In his best-known critique of onto-theology, Heidegger interprets Hegel as a paradigm, and shows how Hegel’s yoking God to philosophy ultimately smothers any sense for the genuinely holy.¹²

As compelling as Heidegger’s critique of Hegel admittedly is, it is sobering to read Hegel’s own quite powerful account of the destruction of the holy that occurs when one denies—even and particularly on the grounds of the piety of thought—that reason is by nature ordered to God. Hegel argues in his introduction to the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*,¹³ that once we locate the divinity of God specifically beyond the power of reason, we condemn reason to a pure worldliness, which cannot avoid collapsing into the empty formalism of scientific thinking and the total immanence of technological projects. At the very same time we push God precisely outside of the bounds of the worldly, which is now ruled by calculative reason, and into the utter abstraction of either the meaningless concept of “the beyond” (i.e., “the divine”) or into the pure immediacy of feeling. If reason does not in some sense desire God as reason, then ultimately God cannot mean anything to us, because the only things we can understand are banalities. But if reason does desire God, then philosophy can be “god-less,” strictly speaking, only in the negative sense of atheism.

¹¹ Heidegger, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, trans. Michael Heim (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1984), 136.

¹² Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 52–59.

¹³ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Volume 1: *Introduction and the Concept of Religion*, ed. Peter Hodgson (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1984). See especially the lecture of 1824, 257–364.

(2) As Jean-Luc Marion demonstrates in *God Without Being*, the very neutrality that Heidegger would claim for the god-less thinking that rejects onto-theology is in the end forced to impose its own conditions of possibility onto the nature of faith, and through faith, onto the God who reveals himself in that faith.¹⁴

Whether or not Lawrence Hemming is correct in accusing Marion of misunderstanding Heidegger—essentially, Hemming disputes Marion’s claim that Heidegger conceives of God as “a being” insofar as he takes theology to be an ontic science, and therefore occupied with merely a region of the fundamental ontology¹⁵—the upshot of Marion’s critique cannot be denied. If one insists that the nature of man must be determined prior to an encounter with God or that God must be kept “separate” from the finitude of being, which is entailed in the claim that the neutrality of god-less thinking must be affirmed (and traditional metaphysics rejected) in order to clear space for the divine to disclose itself *as* divine, then one is necessarily enclosing the divine within that space, at least to the extent that the divine discloses itself. Let us consider how Heidegger himself frames the issue in his famous response to the question regarding the relation between God and being put to him at a seminar in Zurich in 1951: “I believe that being can never be thought as the ground and essence of God, but that nevertheless the experience and manifestness of God, insofar as they meet with humanity, eventuate in the dimension of being, which in no way signifies that being might be regarded as a possible predicate for God.”¹⁶ Notice: being is determined prior to, and independently of God. To avoid divesting God of his divinity, his essential mystery, we must separate God in his essence from being. But this gesture entails that, if God makes himself known at all, it cannot but be as “a being,” or from within the dimension of being, that is, on the terms of being, which has precisely been determined independently of God. God’s relationship to humanity is thus subordinate to conditions established *prior* to that relationship—and not by God, but by being.

(3) Marion’s response is to begin with God as strictly speaking impossible, that is, a God wholly unbound by any prior conditions of possibility.¹⁷ Heidegger’s solution to the apparently inevitable imposition of those conditions on God is, at least according to Hemming’s reading, to insist on a difference

¹⁴ Marion, *God Without Being*, 37–49.

¹⁵ Lawrence Paul Hemming, *Heidegger’s Atheism: The Refusal of a Theological Voice* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 249–269.

¹⁶ Heidegger cited in Hemming, *Heidegger’s Atheism: The Refusal of a Theological Voice*, 292.

¹⁷ See Marion, *God Without Being*, 82.

between God in himself and God as he is known to us. Unless this difference is qualified further, what we are left with in this case is an idol, on the one side, since what we know is by definition not God himself but only an experience of God, and on the other an utterly unknown and unknowable “ummmph.” Arguably, both Marion’s and Heidegger’s response to the problem of the relation between God and being end in the same place: they make God strictly irrational by juxtaposing the essence of God precisely to what would “count” as rationality, no matter how broadly conceived. The reason for the similarity in outcome, I suggest, is that they are pursuing the same *desideratum*: a non-ontological approach to God. There are two connected presuppositions in this pursuit that will be quite significant for us in a moment. Most obviously, there is the assumption that being receives its essential determination from below (which is therefore why preserving God’s sovereignty is identified with separating God from being); and second, and far more subtly, there is the assumption that human reason itself is an “immanentizing” faculty, in other words, that it operates, as Heidegger puts it in his Hegel seminar, “*von sich aus*,” on the basis of itself.¹⁸ These two assumptions are clearly co-relative. If we grant them, I submit that we are forced to choose between two equally problematic alternatives: either, on the one hand, to follow the critique of onto-theology to the irrationalism it entails (not to mention the inevitable narcissism consequent upon the reduction of God to a kind of immediacy and therefore identity with myself), or to embrace precisely what that critique of ontotheology is criticizing, namely, the enslavement of God, and therefore ultimately of everything, to human rational control.

Balthasar and Ontotheology

The difference between Heidegger and Balthasar on the question of the significance of metaphysics, and in relation to this the “status” of the question of onto-theology, is palpable from the beginning and all the way through. For Heidegger, speaking, admittedly, as an “outsider” of sorts, Christianity ought to be wary of the Western tradition of metaphysics. For Balthasar, by contrast, “the Christian is called to be the guardian of metaphysics of our time,”¹⁹ and that guardianship, indeed, represents one of the Christian’s most precious and urgent tasks. According to Heidegger, “Faith has no need of the thinking of being. If

¹⁸ Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 56.

¹⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, vol. 5: *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, trans. Oliver Davies et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 656.

faith has recourse to it, it is already not faith. Luther understood this.”²⁰ According to Balthasar, philosophy, which is at its heart metaphysical—and that means for him that, at its heart, it is the thinking of being—is never as such an obstacle to faith. Quite the contrary, a faith that simply dispenses with the thinking of being will turn out to be a superficial, and indeed an irrational and arbitrary faith—ultimately, not a faith in God (the God of Jesus Christ) but some form of self-contemplation.²¹ Finally, while Heidegger insists that heeding the question of being, which is the most profound spiritual act, requires the overcoming of metaphysics, for Balthasar, the theological act, which in some respect does indeed transcend the metaphysical act, nevertheless occurs within the heart of the metaphysical act. In this sense, then, the glory of God, which is the final end of all things for Balthasar (who is quite Ignatian in this respect) elevates and intensifies the glory of being.²² It is specifically because of this that Balthasar accords to the Christian the guardianship of metaphysics.

So their respective judgments on metaphysics represents a difference between the two great twentieth-century thinkers. What, then, accounts for the difference? I will attempt to sketch out what seem to be some of the basic principles of the difference in three points: (1) the notion of being in relation to God; (2) the constitution of human reason; and (3) the relation between theology and metaphysics. Obviously, these are all gargantuan topics in themselves; here, I will limit myself to a fairly straightforward observation in regard to each.

(1) In what seems to be the only passage in which Balthasar confronts the question of onto-theology explicitly—namely, the famous footnote 10 of *Theologic* 2²³—Balthasar clarifies that his discussion of God in terms of being is not affected by Heidegger’s critique insofar as that critique takes aim at the identification of God with subsistent being, which would imply that thinking remains within the ontological difference. For Balthasar, the Divine Being is neither simply a being, nor is it the being of beings (i.e., *Seiendheit*), nor is it being itself thought out of the ontological difference. Rather, the Divine Being transcends worldly being altogether. While we might be tempted to interpret this affirmation in

²⁰ Heidegger cited in Hemming, *Heidegger’s Atheism: The Refusal of a Theological Voice*, 291.

²¹ On this, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Forgetfulness of God and Christians,” in idem, *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 3: *Creator Spirit* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 317–33.

²² For an excellent presentation of this point, see Nicholas J. Healy, *The Eschatology of Hans Urs von Balthasar: Being as Communion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), esp. 19–90.

²³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theologic*, vol. 2: *Truth of God*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), n. 10, 134–35.

Heideggerian terms (in a manner analogous to the way Marion re-reads the divine *Esse* in Aquinas as transcendent of *ens commune*), Balthasar says two things in this footnote that ought to keep us from doing so. First, he points out explicitly that the Divine Being that offers itself in mystery to Christian theology manifests an “abiding difference” from being such as Heidegger conceives it in relation to his critique of ontotheology. Second, he judges in this footnote that Marion, in *L’Idole et la distance* and *Dieu sans l’être*, “seems ... to concede too much to the critique of Heidegger.” In other words, when Balthasar distinguishes his interpretation of the Divine Being from what would be called an “ontotheological conception” of God, this is not an acknowledgment of the wholesale legitimacy of that critique. It is important to keep this apparently subtle distinction in mind in order to avoid more general confusions, especially because there is so much in Heidegger’s philosophy that Balthasar embraces with an astonishing warmth.

But we have at this point only insisted that there is a difference; it is important to specify at least in principle how that difference ought to be characterized. We saw above that a governing presupposition in the critique is that onto-theology chains God to being, as it were, and thus identifies God with the best thing reason can think. One way to elude this critique would be simply to affirm that God lies essentially beyond being, understood in this way. Balthasar’s response is more subtle. Explicitly following Gustav Siewerth on this point, Balthasar claims that goodness, which is indeed linked to transcendence (as Marion also affirms), is at the very same time one of the transcendental attributes of being, which means that it gives expression to the intrinsic meaning of being. What this implies is fairly surprising: self-transcendence becomes an intrinsic property of being, so that if goodness is indeed in some sense beyond being, it is because being itself is beyond being. Opening up beyond itself is therefore not a violence that is imposed on worldly being, but is the very essence of being. Thinking God in terms of being, then, is not in the least “restrictive” because, strictly speaking, there is nothing at all restrictive about being.

Now, there is a further point to make regarding the relationship between God and being, which Balthasar doesn’t make explicit in this footnote, but which I believe is implied here and which can be inferred more directly from other places in his work (perhaps especially the masterful presentation of metaphysics in the *Epilogue*²⁴). The point is the connection between the intrinsic self-transcendence of being and the *analogia entis*. The analogy of being is, as we

²⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Epilogue*, trans. Edward Oakes, S. J. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 43–86.

know, a way of affirming an intrinsic relation between the being of God and the being of the world, which does not deny God's absolute transcendence of the world (similarity within an infinite difference). While there can be a tendency to think of the analogy of being as a means of approaching God from below by means of natural reason, as if on a conceptual ladder (which is, I believe, why Barth rejected it so vehemently), for Balthasar, the analogy ought to be understood *katalogically*.²⁵ In other words, being is analogical because it is most fundamentally determined from above even in its natural meaning. There is a certain paradox in this, to be sure, but it is simply another way of stating the point made above, namely, that being is intrinsically self-transcending. Being is always already "out beyond itself"; there is never an instance of being that does not have this ecstatic character. It is for this reason that Balthasar can insist on a radical discontinuity between Divine Being and worldly being (i.e., can say that the being of God cannot be deduced from what we know of creaturely being by, for example, simply affirming creaturely being and eliminating its imperfections), and at the same time never let go of the analogy that makes Divine Being an intelligible mystery. To think being, then, is to participate in its ecstatic movement "beyond." Which brings us to the next point:

(2) The second presupposition that lay behind the critique of onto-theology is what we could call an "egological" view of reason: to conceptualize is to dominate, and so in order to preserve God from human attempts at mastery, we must withhold him, as it were, from human understanding. This position, I submit, unless it is qualified, will be unable to avoid in the end a problematic faith-reason dualism. For Balthasar, reason is not essentially egological, but is rather, as I have argued at length elsewhere,²⁶ essentially dramatic. At the foundation of a dramatic notion of reason is Balthasar's insight that consciousness is "born," i.e., it is constituted in the simultaneously interpersonal and ontological event of the "mother's smile."²⁷ What this means is that consciousness, and therefore the "home," as it were, of all that a person will ever perceive, think, understand, or believe, is not a pre-structured categorializing activity, but is first and foremost given to itself. It arises in and through the initiating gift of self that the mother communicates in her smiling on her child. If this is the case, the

²⁵ See *Theologic* 2, 171–218.

²⁶ D.C. Schindler, *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Dramatic Structure of Truth: A Philosophical Investigation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).

²⁷ The best account of this event can be found in Balthasar, "Movement Toward God," in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 3, 15–55.

conditions of possibility that structure reason do not belong to it prior to its encounter with the real, but are “dramatically” constituted in the gift of its participation in and with the reality the child’s mother lovingly offers. It therefore follows that conditions of possibility are not something that reason establishes first and therefore has no choice but to impose on any encounter it might have (whether with another person, with being, or with God) but instead are simultaneously received and established. Every encounter whatsoever has a certain dramatic quality; every act of reason is, at some level, the coincidence of surprise and resolution, the building up of anticipations, which are then fulfilled even as they are overturned. In other words, if consciousness grows from the beginning out of the generous gift of love, reason never simply operates “*von sich aus*,” but *always*, without exception, at the very same time “*vom Anderen her*.”

The moment we accept this principle as the “heart” of reason, the onto-theological problem appears in a strikingly new light. Reason does not have to impose limits on itself (to make room for faith), which, as we saw above, it cannot do in any event without by necessity imposing limits at the same time on what it is to know, but receives its limits from its other precisely in its extending itself, as it were, to meet the other, and these limits therefore do not arise as a violence that frustrates reason’s essential self-centeredness, as the critique of onto-theology tends to imply. Instead, these limits again and again bring to fulfilment what reason is in its most profound and original form: a generously appropriating encounter with its other. From a dramatic perspective, thinking is not an autonomous activity, but is at its core a “being moved by an other.” There is, then, an ecstatic or generous dimension that forms part of the constitutive structure of reason: to think, in this case, is to pledge oneself, to be brought out of oneself in a way that precisely allows one to give oneself. What gets criticized by the name of “onto-theology,” i.e., the enlisting of God, and therefore of everything else, in reason’s self-serving schemes, is therefore not an expression of reason’s nature, an automatic result of every effort at conceptualization, but represents rather a failure of reason, a failure to understand—indeed, a failure to comprehend. The problem with onto-theology, in other words, is not that it presumptuously attempts to comprehend God, but that it does not attempt to comprehend God.

(3) Finally, these two points, the ecstatic character of being and the dramatic nature of reason, illuminate the reason theology has a priority over metaphysics without supplanting it. They also explain how it can be that man is able to be the hearer of the Word, that is, able to understand God’s revelation, without reducing that revelation to what is simply humanly understandable.

As we have seen, both being and reason are determined in their innermost

nature and from their earliest origins simultaneously by themselves and from above. If this is the case, then the moment of revelation, the advent of faith, will never simply be a violent intrusion that runs counter to nature, even while it remains the case that this advent will always be in a basic respect discontinuous with nature's trajectory and order. Nature is fulfilled as nature precisely by what surprises it, that is, by the gratuity of grace. It follows that, even if faith comes in some sense "later," even if the theological vision follows upon the contemplation of being that is the metaphysical act, it will nevertheless always arrive as prior to it. There are two things to note about this specifically in relation to the issue we have been addressing. In the first place, it implies that there need be no anxiety about the thinking of being for a Christian. One does not have to push impatiently "past" being in order to encounter God in a nihilistic mysticism (or a mysticism of nihilism), in a delirious transcendence, in the impossible. Notice, all of these ways of characterizing the faith-filled encounter with God imply a sort of dialectical relationship between God and being. To the contrary, being is always already his, and we can dwell on it and in it "faith-fully." Balthasar says that the formal object of theology lies within the formal object of philosophy.²⁸ The significance of this way of conceiving the relation between the two bears long reflection.

In the second place, not only can we dwell on and in being as Christians, but in some sense we must. Because theology does not replace metaphysics, because God is not beyond being in a dialectical sense (perhaps we could say: yes, God is beyond being, but being, too, is beyond being), theology can never simply leave being behind. Rather, to paraphrase T. S. Eliot, theology in fact brings us back to the place from which we started and allows us to see it for the first time. As Balthasar puts it, "because of that final securing of reality which the believer who encounters God in Christ experiences, the theological vision makes it possible for the first time for the philosophical act of encounter with being to occur in all its depth."²⁹ If God were simply beyond being, the encounter with God would entail as it were a loss of interest in the world. Faith and metaphysics would be competitors. But as Balthasar conceives it, a genuine faith always deepens one's interest in being, one's sense of responsibility for it. This, I believe, is in part what he means when he says that Christians are called to be the guardians of metaphysics.

²⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1: *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 145.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 146.

The question “*Wie kommt der Gott in die Philosophie?*” ought therefore to be situated within the question “*Wie kommt der Mensch in die Theologie?*” first of all because God’s invitation comes before man’s seeking (even if it is the case that it is only in seeking that one discovers one has already been invited),³⁰ and second of all because the real weight of a philosophical, metaphysical notion of God can be seen and appreciated only by virtue of the absolute primacy of theology. God’s revelation of himself in faith becomes, for Balthasar, not only an invitation, but indeed a responsibility to understand God metaphysically.

³⁰ See Balthasar, “Forgetfulness of God and Christians,” 319–21.