temporal achievements and new historical situations." To bring about this new order in the postwar world, the American experiment was pivotal. "If we want civilization to survive," he wrote during the darkest period of World War II, the "American spirit" must help lead the way in creating "a world of free men penetrated in its secular substance by a real and vital Christianity, a world in which the inspiration of the gospel will direct the common life of man toward an heroic humanism."

Maritain recognized that his proposition would be mocked by pro-socialist, anti-American voices in postwar Europe and obscured in America by unsavory forms of patriotism. He also candidly recognized that the religious element in American civilization could degenerate into impermissible forms of civil religion, instrumentalizing Christianity for "national or temporal interests." He adamantly opposed this, insisting that Christianity was essentially otherworldly; when it touched the realm of Caesar, it did so as a salutary leaven, not as a fundamental substance.

But he also worried about Europe's secularist drift, a growing animus toward any religious leaven. "Europe's problem is to recover the vivifying power of Christianity in temporal existence," Maritain had presciently written in the 1940s, for without this power the machinery of democracy might go on, but the individuals in it will be stripped of the transcendental justification of their dignity.

In light of his assessment of Europe, it is telling that Maritain worried about the obsequiousness with which American intellectuals looked to the Continent for intellectual direction. The "cultivated American," who is "anxious to have America criticized," listens with "special care and sorrowful appreciation" to "any [European] writer who bitterly denounces the vices of this country." This did not augur well for his ideas. Still, to American audiences, he pled for "the need for an explicit philosophy" that would extrapolate American political arrangements and sensibilities into a philosophical ideal, the centerpiece of which was the inviolability of human dignity.

To be sure, those concerned about the life of the mind on these shores might justifiably ask whether taking Maritain at his word, once again, risks indulging our craving for continental tutelage. But why not make a virtue of our national docility? The reign of Marx, Sartre, and Foucault has passed. Derrida is dead. The age of Maritain—has its hour come round at last?

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More on Balthasar, Hell, and Heresy

Alyssa Lyra Pitstick writes:

In his reply in last month's issue of FIRST THINGS to my investigations of Hans Urs von Balthasar, Fr. Edward Oakes says his "chief worry" is that, in the traditional doctrine of Christ's descent into hell, I have offered "an alternative vision of the gospel," in which Christ has not atoned for mortal sin. Oakes argues that if justification is not to be merely forensic, Christ needed to suffer hell, the punishment for sin. Oakes thinks this logic is the proper interpretation of St. Paul, implicit in St. Anselm and explicit in Karl Barth, and he considers the *Catechism* open to it.

If Oakes is right, Christ's death on the cross was insufficient for redemption. All doctrine linked to the cross as the locus of redemption is then also nonsense. Why then does St. Paul glory in Christ crucified, rather than Christ in hell? Did Christ establish a Church to preach his Word, only to have her preach falsely for most of her history?

Oakes' first argument lacks the force of necessity. One may hold forensic justification to be false without having to hold that Christ suffered the hell of eternal punishment, as any number of patristic, medieval, and Catholic Reformation soteriologies prove—and without a resultant futile gospel or neglect of St. Paul.

Meanwhile, Oakes' second argument proceeds from authority: As evidence for Balthasar's "theological warrant," he cites the admiration of John Paul II and Cardinal Ratzinger, now Benedict XVI. But surely it is fallacious to suggest that appreciation for aspects of a person and his work means approbation of all, much less a *nihil obstat.* Take the most extreme case: Even those regarded as heresiarchs in the great controversies might be commended for holding fast to what they retained of the communion of faith; still, it did not take the rejection of all common beliefs to sunder that communion—only one. Add the fact that papal utterances have varying degrees of authority, and some nuance emerges.

So what did our two authorities think of Balthasar's doctrine of Christ's descent? Despite some differences, Ratzinger's *descensus* theology more often resembles Balthasar's than it recalls the Catholic tradition's. Nonetheless, Ratzinger has deliberately refused to venture what exactly occurred in Christ's descent. He was

philanthropic spirit of average Americans—something that might help explain what Arthur C. Brooks of Syracuse University has called "the huge transatlantic charity gap," with Americans giving away, per capita, considerably more than do their European counterparts.

In his political thought, Maritain esteemed modern democracy for its potential to express the Judeo-Christian belief in the dignity of the individual. For him, the United States added something significantly to the theological underpinnings of democracy: immigration, a nation conjured up by peoples once persecuted, rejected, and humiliated. The cultural memory of past suffering coupled with a chance to make good in a New World had deposited "a reminiscence of the gospel in the inner attitude of people" and a resolve that misery and want need not be the accepted lot. "Here lies a distinctive privilege of this country, and a deep human mystery concealed behind its power and prosperity. The tears and suffering of the persecuted and unfortunate are transmuted into a perpetual effort to improve human destiny. . . . [T]hey are transfigured into optimism and creativity."

Maritain championed the American experiment in "voluntary" religion: a new thing in history, he believed, and distinct from many European church-state arrangements. In *Integral Humanism* (1936), he had argued for a secular polity in which people of diverse religious backgrounds worked for the common good, albeit in a constitutional framework inspired by an implicitly theological sense of natural law and the dignity of the individual. He felt this to be a proximate reality in the United States.

As he expressed it in *Man and the State* (1951): "A European who comes to America is struck by the fact that the expression 'separation between Church and State' . . . does not have the same meaning here and in Europe. In Europe it means . . . complete isolation which derives from century-old misunderstandings and struggles, and which has produced most unfortunate results. Here it means . . . a distinction between the state and the churches which is compatible with good feeling and mutual cooperation. . . . There's a historical treasure, the value of which a European is perhaps more prepared to appreciate, because of his own bitter experiences. Please to God that you keep it carefully, and do not let your concept of separation veer round to the European one."

While America's religious settlement represented a dramatic departure from the Old World, Maritain regarded the whole of its constitutional order truly as a *novus ordo seclorum*. But he did not locate its origins strictly in English common law or Enlightenment thought. It reflected the older classical and medieval conceptions of natural law and a flourishing polity. His line of reasoning here strikingly parallels that of John Courtney Murray's in *We Hold These Truths* (1960). Not bonds of necessity, but the decisions of free men, Maritain maintained, characterized the good state for Aristotle and Aquinas. Theirs is a community based on virtue and reason, and "implies a will or consent to live together. . . . Nowhere in the world has this notion of the essence of political activity been brought into existence more truly than in America." Since he located his own political thought in the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, the United States appeared as the fortuitous historical approximation of realities that he had long theorized about.

Accordingly, he felt that the United States had a special role to play in the postwar world. Nowadays, when many educated American Christians are inclined to equate political theology with prophetic jeremiads against liberal democracy, the language of America's historical role might appear dangerously providentialist. And due caution is in order, given the abuse of providentialist claims in American history. But, as an outsider to America and a trenchant observer of Europe's political convulsions, Maritain cannot be easily brushed aside.

He insisted on the "the obvious fact" of America's uniqueness. This was not a nation based on race, language, and geography but on a proposition that diverse peoples could live in freedom and preserve, in a modern secular order, a vital residuum of the classical-Christian natural-law tradition as a guarantor of human dignity. Upholding this dignity—the dignity of the least among us—constituted America's historic vocation, even if this meant, as in the civil rights movement, "a perpetual process of self-examination and self-criticism." This might not constitute a high calling, understood as producing great culture or art. Chicago is not Paris, Maritain admitted, but "there is one thing that America knows well": "the value and dignity of the man of common humanity. . . . In forms so simply human that the pretentious and pedantic are at pains to perceive it, we find a spiritual conquest of immeasurable value."

Maritain connected this "spiritual conquest" to what he had earlier called a "new Christendom"—not the coercive medieval order, but a progressive world system of democratic states, appreciative of the historical influence of the gospel on modern freedoms. At pains to make clear he was advocating a way forward, not the restoration of the deservedly obsolete, Maritain reiterated that he was "far from saying that today's American civilization is a new Christendom, even in outline. It is rather a combination of certain continuing elements of ancient Christian civilization with new

partly hindered by his methodology but perhaps also by an unresolved tension between his friend's proposal and what he knows of Catholic doctrine: In *The Sabbath of History*, Ratzinger reveals strong hesitations about Balthasar's views.

Now, unless one mistakenly ascribes retroactive infallibility to Ratzinger's work, Ratzinger's theology remains his private theological opinion. It thus bears authority only insofar as it communicates the Church's faith. So, until time proves a theologian has expressed that faith better than the apostolic tradition, tradition trumps the theologian.

The popes' situation is different, since their duty is to confirm the faith. Then it matters not how many in highest office Balthasar has influenced but only what they teach authoritatively, as, for example, the explicit reiteration of the traditional doctrine by John Paul II in his promulgation of the *Catechism* and in his January 11, 1989, catechesis: His nomination of Balthasar as cardinal did not stop him from clearly affirming a doctrine antithetical to Balthasar's. As for Benedict XVI, let us wait and see. His address to the Balthasar symposium said nothing with sufficient specificity or dogmatic authority to justify much anxiety or rejoicing.

Oakes' final argument is to call into doubt the traditional doctrine by implying that I misrepresented it. Thus the contrast between Balthasar's doctrine and the tradition's is merely my reading and my tradition. In fact, it is the consensus of historians of *descensus* theologies. My understanding of the tradition is purportedly "monochromatic." Yet the sources of Catholic theology consistently paint the same picture. My inadequate reading of the tradition allegedly "forces" me to hunt for influences on Balthasar outside the tradition and not to grant him due "theological warrant." In fact, the man himself forces me to this search, since his claims to support within the Catholic tradition do not bear up under scrutiny. Oakes does my work for me by highlighting the proximate influence of Barth, a man who neither regarded himself as a Catholic ecclesial theologian nor has been assimilated as such.

Additionally, owing to certain misreadings, Oakes ascribes to me untenable positions that taint the traditional doctrine by association. He claims, for instance, that I identify the limbo of the fathers with purgatory. Rather, in my book I say it is reasonable to think purgatory was preparatory for the limbo of the fathers so long as heaven was closed. With this erroneous identification in mind, Oakes argues that a descent by Christ into purgatory, where only venial sins are purged, would not atone for mortal sin. Neither the Catholic tradition nor I hold that Christ went to purgatory to expiate sin. Instead, I believe what the tradition reiterates: that after atoning for all sin through his death upon the cross, Christ descended in his soul to the limbo of the fathers to confer heaven on the holy souls there, who were other than those in purgatory.

Oakes is also concerned that the existence of any holy souls prior to Christ's descent implies that some were justified without Christ, which contradicts the Letter to the Romans. I hold that some were justified before Christ, though only by virtue of him who was to come. This doctrine of prevenient grace accounts for the Old Testament's calling some the friends of God—no one in a state of mortal sin is such—and for St. Paul saying, also in Romans, that Abraham was justified by his faith. No Catholic who believes in the sinlessness of Christ's mother can deny this doctrine. Both Oakes and Balthasar draw an ontological conclusion from an epistemological premise: If pre-Christian descriptions of the afterlife lacked structure, the afterlife itself must have lacked structure. This cornerstone of Balthasarian theology also rests on an overly selective use of Scripture, as I argue elsewhere. The basis in revelation for a differentiated afterlife cannot here be demonstrated.

Meanwhile, of my use of Scripture, Oakes suggests I am negligent of St. Paul, the Magisterium's duty to Scripture, and the inspired human authors. He adduces the Barth-Balthasar-Oakes interpretation of Romans and one quotation from my dissertation. Let us provide some context to that quotation. In brief, as my dissertation is not a work of historical-critical exegesis, I properly used the methods appropriate to other forms of theology. In one chapter, I examine how those who believed in the traditional doctrine saw it grounded in Scripture; thus, my search for "clarity and orthodoxy" concerned non-scriptural writers. The historical-critical approach is not the only way to interpret Scripture or even the most influential in the history of exegesis. Consequently, above all I found typological interpretations—a form of exegesis employed also by the inspired authors themselves. While not inattentive to questions of linguistics and anthropology, this approach focuses on discerning the Divine Author's intention more than that of the human authors—first, because these latter are of interest only insofar as the Divine Author is speaking through his Word; and, second, because God alone is the author of typology through his creative power and providence.

In using this and other exegetical methods, the tradition does not trump Scripture but draws out its salvific significance and embodies it in Christian life, even as Scripture originated within an already living tradition. By authoritatively interpreting Scripture and guiding tradition, the Magisterium thus serves both Scripture and tradition—which in their mutual interdependence, and not one without the other, are acknowledged as

God's revelation by Vatican II's Decree on Revelation. Oakes follows Balthasar in setting tradition against Scripture. Likewise, both begin by acknowledging what the traditional Catholic doctrine is but end by holding it to be erroneous.

Then, too, Oakes claims I dismiss Luther and Calvin "just for being Protestant" and that I consider the genealogy from Nicholas of Cusa to Balthasar via these two "probative merely by mentioning" it. I highlighted this lineage first to indicate that the doctrine of Christ suffering in hell has relatively recent origins; from its beginnings to the Reformation, the Church believed quite the opposite. But this genealogy is also important to the question of Balthasar's status as a *Catholic* ecclesial theologian: The Catholic tradition rejected Nicholas' proposal, while the idea was deliberately developed *against* the Catholic doctrine in the Protestant ambience. If Balthasar takes up what Catholics rejected and what Protestants used to distinguish themselves, one may legitimately question Balthasar's Catholicity on these grounds—for it is not what we share that separates us but precisely our differences. It is fallacious for Oakes to suggest I think non-Catholics speak no truth simply because I argue that some of them are mistaken on one point.

Perhaps Oakes might now address my original difficulties: Can one doctrine truly be the development of another if the two are contradictory? Does the tradition's material profession (the content of belief) have as much authority as the formal profession? And since Balthasar's theology of Christ's descent entails a de facto rejection of Catholic tradition and its authority, what must we conclude about Balthasar's service as a Catholic ecclesial theologian? Perhaps in the end we must say, however reluctantly, that after Luther, Calvin, and Barth, Balthasar has made a real contribution to *Protestant* ecclesial theology.

Edward T. Oakes, S.J., replies:

I too wish to express my gratitude for this exchange, and above all for Alyssa Lyra Pitstick's services to theology in airing these important issues. I doubt, however, that she will much appreciate my nod of thanks in her direction, for I hold that her real service has been to argue against Balthasar so disagreeably that she will end up midwifing his theology into the mainstream of Church thinking far more than my own poor efforts have so far managed to do. Because my objections to her prosecutorial brief against Balthasar focus above all on the three issues of Protestantism, papacy, and purgatory, I shall take advantage of this accidental alliteration and cluster my response accordingly.

Let us begin with Pitstick and Protestantism. I chose the quotation from Karl Barth on the nonnecessity of hell deliberately. Knowing of her curt dismissal of the Reformers in her dissertation and book, I expected she would fall into the trap I set for her, and fall she did. But if she objects to Barth here, does that mean she holds with St. Augustine's theory of double predestination—that some go to hell by necessity? Maybe yes, but presumably no. In which case she then *agrees* with Barth that no one goes to hell by necessity but only by free choice. Then why object to the statement? Just because a Protestant said it? But as Vatican II teaches, "Catholics must gladly acknowledge and esteem the truly Christian endowments in our common heritage which are to be found among our separated brethren."

At all events, if Pitstick is looking for an official statement from the Catholic Magisterium affirming Barth on the single predestination of all human beings in the predestined status of Christ as the New Adam, she may find it in John Paul II's encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*: "Connected with the mystery of creation is the mystery of election, which in a special way shaped the history of the people whose spiritual father is Abraham by virtue of his faith. Nevertheless, . . . that mystery of election refers to every man and woman, to the whole great human family." This same anti-Augustinian (and, ironically, anti-Reformed) denial of limited atonement and double predestination was reaffirmed by Cardinal Ratzinger in his book *God Is Near Us*, where he says, "Jesus died, not just for a part of mankind, but for everyone. . . . [God] does not make any distinction between people he dislikes, people he does not want to be saved, and others whom he prefers," a position which he, of course, reiterated in his first papal encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*.

Which brings me to the next point: Pitstick and the popes. Pitstick tries manfully to put some light both between Balthasar's cardinalatial status and his orthodoxy, and between Ratzinger's "private theological opinions" as a professor and his new responsibilities in the Chair of Peter to defend church tradition. In her attempt to find such light, she mentions his book *The Sabbath in History*. Unfortunately, I could find no such book by that title in *Books in Print* or in any online source, either in English or in German. So let me cite, in turn, a more accessible quotation, from Cardinal Ratzinger's homily at Balthasar's funeral Mass in Lucerne, Switzerland, on July 1, 1988 (printed as an appendix to David Schindler's *Hans Urs von Balthasar: Life and Work*). Explaining why Balthasar had earlier "thrice thrust aside" the proffered red hat, and yet why John Paul II insisted under holy obedience that he accept the honor, the cardinal-homilist said: "This [refusal] was not motivated by a coquettish desire to act

the great one, but by the Ignatian spirit which characterized his life.... But what the pope intended to express by this mark of distinctive honor remains valid: no longer only private individuals but the Church herself, in her official responsibility, tells us that he is right in what he teaches of the Faith, that he points the way to the sources of living water—a witness to the word which teaches us Christ."

This is precisely the same point Pope Benedict made in his address before the Lateran University in October 2005, where, without knowing of her work, he ended up directly refuting Pitstick's claim that Balthasar was dissembling when he assumed the mantle of an ecclesial theologian: "On an occasion such as this, it would be easy to fall into the temptation to return to personal memories, based on the sincere friendship that united us and on the numerous works that we undertook together, addressing many of the challenges of those years.... However, I do not wish to make reference to memories, but rather to the richness of von Balthasar's theology," said the pontiff. "Hans Urs von Balthasar was a theologian who put research at the service of the Church, as he was convinced that theology could only be theology when it is ecclesial."

Finally, there is the matter of Pitstick and purgatory. Another reason I am grateful for this exchange comes from Pitstick's clarification of her views on pre-Christian purgatory. I admit I initially thought she had identified the limbo of the fathers with purgatory (in her book, the point is obscurely made). But now I find out that purgatory is but the pre-Christian *antechamber* to limbo, a conclusion she calls "reasonable," which it no doubt is, given her monophysite presuppositions. For I now see that, on her account, Jesus *could not* descend into purgatory, lest his radiant divinity come into contact with even trivial sin.

No, the only souls Jesus can meet are those already completely purged of sin (and prior to his death, to boot!), lest he extend his table fellowship with sinners in the underworld. No wonder for her Christ's glorious entrance into hell began at 3:01 p.m. on Good Friday, since there was only an already glorious and sinless region for him to descend into. Exactly why so trivial a work of rescuing the already redeemed required a three-day sojourn (or why the Church's liturgical tradition never celebrates Christ's victory over death until the darkness of Holy Saturday is about to give way to the light of Easter Sunday) is never explained. But the whole point of Balthasar's development of doctrine here rests on the fact that only Jesus' *human* soul, still hypostatically united to his divine person, descended into hell. In other words, when Paul says (drawing on the earliest formulation of the Church's kerygma) that Christ died "according to the Scriptures" and "on the third day" rose again, that duration must itself be theologically significant.

Once more we come up against Pitstick's aversion to anything Protestantism has touched. As Stephen Greenblatt showed in his brilliant *Hamlet in Purgatory*, no doctrine proved more church-dividing in the sixteenth century than that of purgatory. Perhaps ecumenical agreement (however conceived) will finally reach consensus on this issue in the twenty-first century. But what will happen if the discussants then find out that they now have one more hurdle to scale: assent to Pitstick's pre-Christian purgatory?

None of my objections to Pitstick's innovations will of course mitigate the anxiety Balthasar causes, both among the hostile and the friendly. Personally, I would never assert an empty hell, and not just because Origenism is a heresy, but more because I cannot make the iniquity on display in the daily headlines jibe with the idea of universal salvation.

So how then do I reconcile that position with my enthusiasm for Balthasar? By citing the French anthropologist René Girard's recent book *Celui par Qui le Scandale Arrive* (the title alludes to Jesus' saying that "scandals will come, but woe to him by whom they come"). In that book, Girard speaks retrospectively of his work in a way that uncannily mimics Balthasar's voice: "We have no choice but to go back and forth, from alpha to omega. And these constant back-and-forth movements force us to phrase matters in a convoluted, spiraling fashion, which eventually runs the risk of being unsettling and even incomprehensible for the reader.... I think one needs to read [my work] like a thriller. All the elements are given at the beginning, but it is necessary to read to the very end for the meaning to become completely apparent."

One other thing. Pitstick concludes her argument in last month's issue of FIRST THINGS by claiming that Balthasar stands not only in "a *de facto* [but] sometimes even conscious rejection of Catholic tradition." By using the word *conscious*, Pitstick clearly means that Balthasar is lying when he professes to be a Catholic theologian. This is no mere innuendo; it is defamation, which has no place in theological disputation.

Alyssa Lyra Pitstick received her doctorate in theology from the Angelicum in Rome. Her book, Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell, *is forthcoming from W.B. Eerdmans. Edward T. Oakes, S.J., teaches theology at the University of St. Mary of the Lake in Mundelein, Illinois, and is the author of* Pattern of Redemption *and many other studies of Balthasar.*