THE LIGHT OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE LIGHT OF CHRIST

Meredith Secomb

PEOPLE ARE SUFFERING. Such a commonplace does not need elaboration. We see all around us the pain undergone by those torn apart in conflicts within and between nations, conflicts of race, religion and gender within societies, abuse and exploitation within institutions, and domestic violence within families. In these circumstances people are usually the victims of gross injustice, the inequities of which only systemic change can amend. It is not this form of suffering that I am addressing here.

There are other forms of suffering. We suffer, for instance, when we do not know who we are. For some, this kind of suffering so intrudes on their lives that they seek professional help. I have been privileged to serve such people in my work as a psychologist in private practice. The people who came to me would often speak of feeling 'lost' and of being separated from others in ways that were distressing to them. Their suffering challenged their former 'felt sense' of presence to themselves.[1] It also challenged their relationship with God, who often appeared painfully absent. They had been stripped of previous roles and personas. Their self-concepts had changed and they had no new concepts with which to replace them. Socially, emotionally, cognitionally, somatically and spiritually they were in new and unfamiliar territory. Unable to make sense of who they were, my clients had become strangers to themselves. It was a disconcerting and frightening experience.

One does not, however, have to be so exposed to trouble that visiting a psychologist is warranted. Such suffering is the stuff of life. Hans Urs von Balthasar observes that for all of us there is a discrepancy between our interior experience of ourselves and our exterior experience in

This is a significantly edited version of an article previously published in the *Australian eJournal of Theology*, 22/2 (2015), 66–80.

[1] For the notion of a bodily 'felt sense' see Eugene T. Gendlin, *Focusing* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981).

engagement with others.[2] By mid life the experience of discrepancy can reach breaking point. Dante renders it well in the opening to the *Inferno*: 'Midway in the journey of our life I came to myself in a dark wood, for the straight way was lost'.[3]

Before this time of coming to oneself, of insight and awareness, the suffering is typically managed with distractions—whether work and busyness, or entertainment, drugs or alcohol. However, distractions cannot be a solution. As the philosopher and writer Peter Kreeft insightfully observes, 'Evasion is always temporary, a matter of time. Truth is a matter of eternity, whether it is truth evaded or truth faced.'[4] Kreeft encourages us to look within, to look at the depths of our unhappiness, and he cites Malcolm Muggeridge as an example of someone who found his deepest fulfilment in confronting his deepest distress. For Muggeridge the experience of 'lostness', of 'alienation', of being 'a stranger in a strange land', was the pathway to his true home: heaven. As Kreeft explains:

> … spiritual birth is free, up to us. Even God cannot force our free choice …. But he can and will do anything to 'tempt' us to accept his invitation, especially by making us feel deep dissatisfaction with everything else, by the great gift of unhappiness.[5]

I too encouraged my clients to look within, to be aware of and to accept their interior experience of emotional pain in a non-evaluative manner. Eventually they learnt to sit with the experiences of 'not knowing', of feeling 'empty', and of having a 'vast void' within. Through the prayerful, faith-filled acceptance of their interior pain, my clients discovered that a profound and mysterious dimension existed as their core experience of Self.[6] When they learnt to hold that place open before God in faith, not only did their suffering gain spiritual meaning and value, but a new, albeit inexplicable, sense of Self arose, with a capacity to be attentive to the impact of grace felt at the level of embodied consciousness. Their experience of Self had been transformed and they

[2] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, volume 1, *Prolegomena* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 264.
[3] Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, translated by Robert and Jean Hollander (New York: Anchor, 2002), 3.
[4] Peter Kreeft, *Heaven: The Heart's Deepest Longing* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 62.
[5] Kreeft, *Heaven*, 62–63; and see Malcolm Muggeridge, *Jesus Rediscovered* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 30–31.
[6] Note that I capitalise the term 'Self' in order to distinguish it from the ego, which is merely a managerial component of the Self. In adopting this distinction I follow the work of Carl Jung, for which see Carl Jung, *Aion: Researches in the Phenomenology of the Self* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1959).

had discovered the hidden core of themselves: a deep, indeed infinite, well of silence, of stillness, residing at the centre of their being.

Two major insights can arise from attention to this silence.[7] The first is that the core of our being, our centre, our heart, is *luminous*; a second insight is that this luminous centre leads us to God. When we focus intentionally on the depths of our interiority we find a luminous space that lies below our thoughts and our emotions, yet also penetrates these very thoughts and emotions. This is a dimension that can only be described in the paradoxical terms, typically found in spiritual literature, that draw on the notions of both light and darkness.[8] I give greater emphasis here to the imagery of light, although there is a significant literature that refers also to the darkness experienced as lovers of God pursue their interior journey.[9]

A luminous space that lies below our thoughts

I explore how the discovery of this luminous centre provides an answer to the question 'Who am I?'. It is not a cognitively derived answer. It is an existentially embodied answer that opens into the peaceful, loving silence of God. In so doing I draw on reflections from Christianity and Hinduism. From the Christian tradition I look to the work of the Jesuit philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan (1904–1984). From the Hindu tradition I consider the teaching of the Indian sage Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950). I consider that both the Christian and Hindu traditions can help us to fathom the luminous core of the Self. There are, however, important differences in where its luminousness and the imagery of light can lead us in each tradition.

The Light of Consciousness

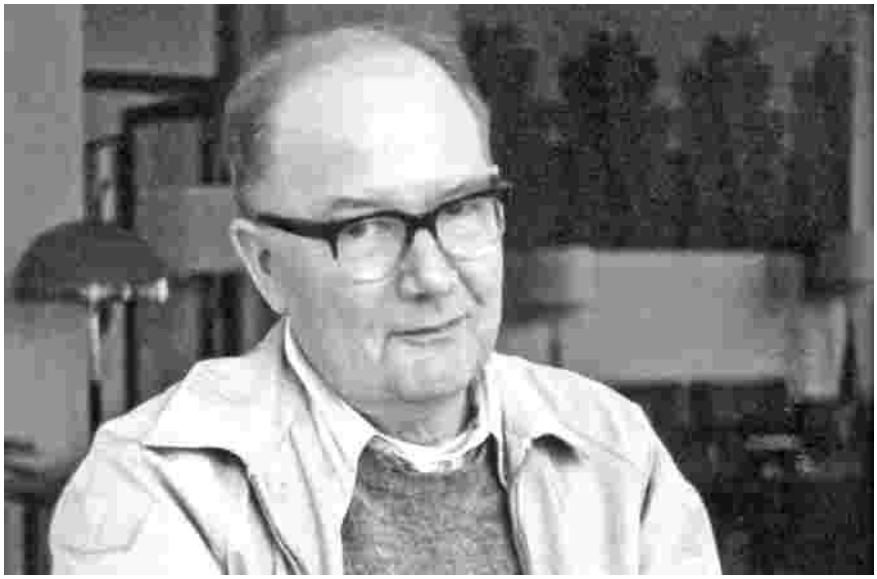
Bernard Lonergan

As well as being a theologian and philosopher, Bernard Lonergan was psychologically astute. He examined the phenomenology of consciousness and demarcated its topography in a way that nicely complements the experiential discoveries of those great explorers of consciousness from

[7] See also Meredith Secomb, 'Being Attentive to Silence', *The Way*, 56/2 (April 2016), 27–42

[8] The contemplative tradition typically distinguishes between 'kataphatic' and 'apophatic' experiences of God, the former using very specific imagery and describing God by way of affirmation and the latter describing God by way of negation. However, while apophatic experiences are typically and simplistically described as having no imagery, they do in fact use imagery, although of a paradoxical nature. Gregory of Nyssa speaks of entering a 'luminous darkness' on his journey into God, for which see *The Life of Moses* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006), 80–81.

[9] See, for example, St John of the Cross, 'The Dark Night', in *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, translated by Kieran Kavanagh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: ICS, 1979), 295–389.



Bernard Lonergan

Eastern traditions of meditation. Like the latter, Lonergan grounded his considerations in the empirical data of consciousness—which are available to all who attend to their own experience of themselves. Lonergan, however, placed these considerations within a systematic context, appreciating the various levels of intentionality in an authentically functioning subject.

Foundational to both Lonergan's work and the Eastern traditions is attentiveness to experience. The essential unity of a person is manifest in a primordially immediate experience of consciousness as presence to Self. It is the core experience of one's Self: 'The *oneself* is the irreducibly individual element whence spring the choices of the decisive person and the drifting or forgetting of the indecisive person. What springs from that source is free; for it one is responsible.'[10] We experience this Self tacitly—in a way which, while remaining in the background, always accompanies our explicit experiencing, knowing and acting; it is that which is most private and intimate within us, the 'unrevealed, hidden core' of our being.[11]

[10] Bernard J. F. Lonergan, 'Subject and Horizon', in *Phenomenology and Logic: The Boston College Lectures on Mathematical Logic and Existentialism*, edited by Philip J. McShane, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, volume 18 (Toronto: U. of Toronto P, 2001), 240 (emphasis original).
[11] Bernard J. F. Lonergan, '*Existenz* and *Aggiornamento*', in *Collection: Papers by Bernard Lonergan*, edited by Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: U. of Toronto P, 1988), volume 4, 229, 222.

To speak of such things is an 'existential speaking' that is difficult to categorise, engaging as it does the whole human person and involving thereby dimensions that are 'psychological, sociological, historical, philosophic, theological, religious, ascetic … even mystical'.[12] Our core is present within ourselves before we know ourselves as intentional and acting subjects. Yet, just as we can be in love before we come to the wonderful realisation of the fact, so this luminous presence can reside within us without our reflecting upon it.

Lonergan teaches us that we *all* have a 'luminous being' within; it is the core of our very Self. It is, however, often difficult to access it. Augustine lamented that God was 'within' while he was 'without'.[13] The present-day contemplative and teacher Martin Laird observes that, while this quiet, luminous centre is the 'most fundamental fact of our spiritual lives, it takes a lifetime to realize it'.[14] Because we tend to identify ourselves with our thoughts and feelings rather than with the stillness at the core, we usually need help to access this centre.

Ramana Maharshi

For thousands of years Hindu practitioners of meditation have been attending to their experience of interiority. One such is the South Indian Hindu sage Sri Ramana Maharshi. There are remarkable parallels between his assured answer to the question, 'Who am I?', and Bernard Lonergan's articulation of what it is to be one's Self. Lonergan and Ramana are both asking an existential question about the nature of the Self. The latter put the explicit question, 'Who am I?'; the former framed the question as 'What is it to be oneself?'[15] Common to both Lonergan and Ramana is an interest in the human subject. Also common to both is the capacity to attend to their experience and reflect intelligently upon it. Each has an authentic subjectivity which is able to communicate insights from interior realms of which most of us are unaware.

Born into an orthodox Hindu family as Venkataraman Iyer, the boy later became known as Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi.[16] He was popular,

[12] Lonergan, '*Existenz* and *Aggiornamento*', 222.
[13] Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 2.
[14] Martin Laird, *A Sunlit Absence: Silence, Awareness, and Contemplation* (New York: OUP, 2011), 2.
[15] See Bernard J. F. Lonergan, 'On Being Oneself', in *Phenomenology and Logic*, 234–246, especially 240; Ramana Maharshi, *The Collected Works of Ramana Maharshi*, edited by Arthur Osborne (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1972). For a historical overview of the question, 'Who am I?', perennially raised by humanity, see Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, volume 1, 481–491.
[16] 'Bhagavan', meaning 'God', was the name with which he was typically addressed; 'Ramana' is a shortened version of his name Venkataraman; 'Maharshi' is a shortened form of Maha-Rishi, which

good at sports and, although intelligent, interested neither in study nor in spiritual matters. His father died when he was twelve and the children were sent to live with their paternal uncle.[17] It is possible that this emotional suffering prepared him for the experience that occurred at the age of sixteen when, for no reason apparent to Venkataraman, he suddenly feared that he was going to die. With no prior training, the boy spontaneously responded to this fear with an exercise in interiority. He describes the experience:

> The shock of the fear of death drove my mind inwards and I said to myself mentally, without actually framing the words: 'Now death has come; what does it mean? What is it that is dying? This body dies …. But with the death of this body am I dead? Is the body I? It is silent and inert but I feel the full force of my personality and even the voice of the "I" within me, apart from it. So I am Spirit transcending the body. The body dies but the Spirit transcending it cannot be touched by death. That means I am the deathless Spirit' …. From that moment onwards the 'I', or Self, focused attention on itself by a powerful fascination …. Whether the body was engaged in talking, reading or anything else, I was still centred on 'I'.

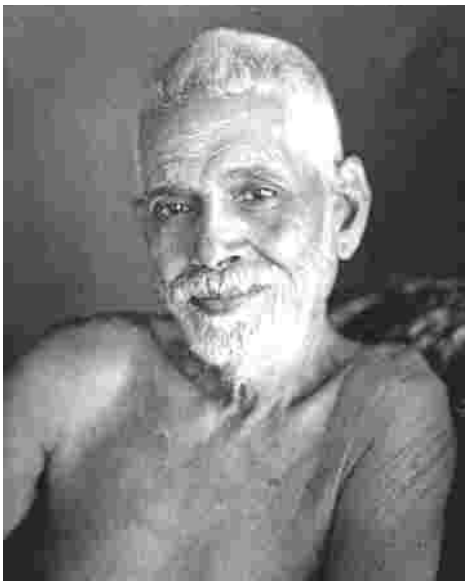
Venkataraman's experience of the 'I' was like a persistent bass note, a *continuo* underlying and blending with all his normal, everyday activities. He describes it as a 'fundamental sruti note', referring to the monotone that persists through a piece of Indian music 'like the thread on which beads are strung', and he identifies the Self with this core experience.[18]

Ramana's fascination with the Self he had discovered transformed him, changing his priorities so that his behaviour began to be, to Indian eyes, recognisably that of a 'sadhu' or holy man. Ramana came to be seen by the Western Christian world as a figure like St Francis of Assisi, the depths of whose love endeared him to humans and animals alike. He spoke little, teaching mostly by his silence. His profound depths of interiority influenced all who came into contact with him, drawing them into their own centre, into silence, into the Self. There they would find that questions would fall away as a deep peace settled upon their spirits. When Ramana did teach, his method was founded on asking the question, 'Who am I?' This method became known as 'Self-enquiry'.

means 'great sage'. See Arthur Osborne, 'Preface', in *Collected Works of Ramana Maharshi*, 10. The title 'Sri' is one of respect.

[17] Arthur Osborne, *Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self-Knowledge* (New Delhi: B. I., 1990 [1954]), 14–15.

[18] Osborne, 'Preface', 8.



Sri Ramana Maharshi in 1948

Those who came to Ramana Maharshi recognised his wisdom, a wisdom derived not from formal education but from attending to and reflecting upon his own experience. It was a wisdom that led him to value all creeds as 'sincere expressions of a great experience'.[19] For Ramana there were two ways to liberation from the confines of egocentricity, a liberation that issued in the freedom of the larger Self. He instructed, 'There are two ways: ask yourself "Who am I?" or submit'.[20] Both Self-enquiry and devotion to God were satisfactory routes. For Ramana accessing the Self, accessing the depths of one's consciousness, led to the same dynamics of ego-abandonment as devout surrender to a beloved Divinity.

The question arises as to what that 'Self' is for Ramana Maharshi. He asks, 'Is not the sense of "I" natural to all beings, expressed in all their feelings as "I came", "I went", "I did", or "I was?"' Initial reflection on the source of this 'I' by those unfamiliar with Self-enquiry might identify it with the body. But Ramana instructs,

> On questioning what this is, we find that the body is identified with 'I', because movements and similar functions pertain to the body. Can the body then be this 'I-consciousness'? … No, it cannot be. This sense of 'I', which arises in the body for the time being, is otherwise called the ego, ignorance, illusion, impurity, or individual self.[21]

We must also surrender all identification with thoughts and emotions to access the Self. Yet Ramana urges his listeners to go even further. He leads them in simple language to identify for themselves what Bernard Lonergan calls the experience of presence to Self:

[19] Paul Brunton, *A Search in Secret India* (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1985), 291.
[20] Maharshi, *Collected Works of Ramana Maharshi*, 17.
[21] Ramana Maharshi, 'Enquiry into the Self', in Maharshi, *Collected Works of Ramana Maharshi*, 18.

> Lay aside this insentient body as though it were truly a corpse. Do not even murmur 'I', but enquire keenly within what it is that now shines within the heart as 'I'. Underlying the ceaseless flow of varied thoughts, there arises the continuous, unbroken awareness, silent and spontaneous as 'I-I' in the heart. If one catches hold of it and remains still, it will completely annihilate the sense of 'I' in the body, and will itself disappear as a fire of burning camphor.[22]

In a section explicitly devoted to the question 'Who am I?' Ramana rejects the notion that the 'gross body' or the various capacities of our being comprise the Self.[23] Our thoughts and our emotions do not constitute the Self. We are to refrain from identifying with them. We are to refrain from pursuing them and instead merely bear witness to them:

> Whatever thoughts arise as obstacles to one's *sadhana* (spiritual discipline), the mind should not be allowed to go in their direction, but should be made to rest in one's Self … one should remain as witness to whatever happens, adopting the attitude, 'Let whatever strange things happen, happen; let us see!'.[24]

Ramana gives the same advice as Teresa of Ávila concerning the management of thoughts during meditation; she similarly recommended patience and endurance when confronted by unwanted distractions: 'it isn't good for us to be disturbed by our thoughts, nor should we be concerned …. let us be patient and endure them for the love of God'.[25]

If we refrain from identifying with the processes of consciousness, then all that remains is pure Consciousness itself: 'the ego or 'I', which is the centre of the multitude of thoughts, finally vanishes and pure Consciousness or Self, which subsists during all the states of the mind, alone remains resplendent'.[26] When through perseverance we arrive at a

[22] Maharshi, 'Enquiry into the Self', 19. See Jim Marion, *Putting on the Mind of Christ: The Inner Work of Christian Spirituality* (Charlottesville: Hampton Roads, 2011), 203; Ken Wilber, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution* (Boston: Shambhala, 1995), 302. Ramana contrasts the self-conscious ego or 'I' with 'I-I', used to describe a nondual consciousness wherein the experience of pure subjectivity lacks the reflexive moment of being present to oneself as an object.

[23] Maharshi, *Collected Works of Ramana Maharshi*, 39–47.

[24] This passage was omitted from earlier editions of the *Collected Works*. See Ramana Maharshi, 'Self-inquiry', translated by T. M. P. Mahadevan, in Ramana Maharshi, *The Collected Works of Ramana Maharshi*, edited by Arthur Osborne, 9th edn (San Rafael: Sophia Perennials, 2006), 11.

[25] Teresa of Ávila, 'The Interior Castle', 4. 1. 11, in *The Collected Works of St Teresa of Ávila*, translated by Kieran Kavanagh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: ICS, 1976–1985), volume 2, 321.

[26] Ramana uses words such as 'resplendent' and 'luminous' over a hundred times.

state wherein 'there is not the slightest trace of the "I"-thought', then we have found 'the true Being of oneself'. To experience this 'I-consciousness' is to experience the core of the Self.

For Ramana, a Hindu, there too we access God: to know oneself is to know God.[27] A Christian cannot, however, say the same thing: that to plumb the depths of one's own consciousness, of pure awareness, is also to experience Jesus Christ. The light inherent in the Self is profoundly different from the radiant light of Jesus Christ, as it was manifested at the transfiguration.

The Light of Consciousness and the Light of Christ

Certainly the pursuit of the luminous core of the Self brings death to our attachments to the things that preoccupy the ego, and thereby enables us to transcend it. If we then exercise a focused intentionality towards, or abandonment of ourselves to, the depths thus revealed, we will find ourselves immersed in the profoundly peaceful and joyous experience of the Self. Martin Laird comments on the luminosity of such prayerful silence: 'The interior silence that all contemplative practices cultivate finally blossoms as luminous flowing awareness'.[28]

We may well ask how much this experience differs for Christians and for Hindus, since their two traditions do appear to have much in common from a purely phenomenological point of view. A constant theme in both Christian and Hindu mysticism is that the depths of Self-awareness generate an apophatic experience of simplicity and light. Words such as 'radiance', 'luminosity', 'flame' and many others associated with light abound in writings that reflect on the nature of the Self and of awareness or consciousness. For Christians this discovery of the light of the Self is not surprising: we are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27), and 'God is light and in him there is no darkness at all' (1 John 1:5). But the question therefore arises for them as to whether the light at the core of the Self differs from the light of God, revealed in Jesus Christ.

The disciples experienced the radiance of Christ at the transfiguration. Christ's clothes became 'dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them (Mark 9:3) and his 'face shone like the sun' (Matthew 17:2). For Gregory Palamas (1296–1357), a significant theologian and saint

[27] Maharshi, *Collected Works of Ramana Maharshi*, 42, 36.
[28] Laird, *Sunlit Absence*, 14.

The Transfiguration, *by Titian*, c.1560

within the Eastern Orthodox tradition, this radiance was a revelation of Christ's divinity, totally other than that which he possessed in his humanity. On Mount Tabor Christ manifested 'the splendour of the divine nature hidden under His flesh'. For those whose 'eyes of their hearts' had been purified—such as the disciples, the Virgin Mary, Simeon and Anna—'the power of God shone out visibly as if through thin glass' in the flesh of Jesus Christ.[29] Palamas argued that a life of prayer and ascesis offers the possibility of a similar vision to Christians who pursue the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ.

If this is so, then the light available to those who plumb the depths of the Self must be of a different order from that which is revealed by the divinity of Jesus Christ. 'How', as Palamas asks, 'could ordinary light be the glory and the kingdom of the Father and the Spirit?'[30] Hans Urs

[29] Gregory Palamas, *Saint Gregory Palamas: The Homilies*, edited and translated by Christopher Veniamin (Waymart: Mount Thabor, 2009), 34. 13.
[30] Palamas, *Homilies*, 34. 14, 34. 15.

von Balthasar would support this position. He insists that 'the measure which Christ represents and embodies is *qualitatively different* from every other measure'. The 'phenomenon' of Christ 'is unique of its kind' and hence 'its interior constitution cannot be known by being compared to other phenomena'.[31] Moreover the experience of the light of Christ carries within it its own intrinsic evidence. For there is an 'objective and radiant rightness' about the God-given form, which demonstrates 'how emphatically that light derives from the object and indwells it' and hence distinguishes it from all other objects.[32] While acknowledging that the 'interior realities' of all religions are present within Christ, Balthasar nevertheless insists that the form of Christ is distinguished from all other 'religious forms'.[33]

Both Hans Urs von Balthasar and Bernard Lonergan call for a further step beyond discovering the luminosity of the depths of the Self. They call for a conversion. Conversion opens up a transcendent dimension which reveals the light of Christ in its glorious uniqueness. The radiant light of Tabor is available for those prepared to abandon themselves in prayerful surrender to Christ, with its accompanying ascetic demands for purification and transformation. Yet for both Balthasar and Lonergan the grounding of an authentic Self provides a sure starting point for this journey.

Thinkers from both Christianity and Hinduism call us to attend to our experience of the Self, an experience known apart from our bodily awareness and apart from our thoughts and emotions. It is the awareness of pure consciousness, our simple presence to the Self. When in the depths of silence we learn to focus on this simple awareness, we discover ourselves. We find an embodied, existential answer in the core of our being to the question 'Who am I?'. For the Hindu Ramana Maharshi to ask the question 'Who am I?' in the depths of simple presence to Self is synonymous with finding the revelation of God within. Either way leads to freedom from the bondage and confines of egocentricity. For the Christian Bernard Lonergan to attend to the data of consciousness yields the discovery of the luminosity of the Self. Lonergan, however, calls us to go further into the realm of transcendence through conversion

[31] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, volume 1, *Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982), 481 (emphasis added).
[32] Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, volume 1, 481.
[33] Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, volume 1, 481–482, 502, 507.

and so to discover Jesus Christ. There we find a radiant luminosity that transcends that of the Self, a luminosity witnessed by saints such as Gregory Palamas and scholars such as Hans Urs von Balthasar.

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