

# Rethinking the Approach to Education by Reversing the Transcendentals and Recalling Another

Stuart Nicolson

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## Abstract:

The three transcendentals of truth, goodness, and beauty, originally being understood as signs of God in our world, have for centuries been an important element in education, providing structure for education. However, through rationalist thinking they became subjectivised, which has led to negative developments in education such as increasing individualisation and disinterest in Christianity, particularly in postmodern society. Based partly on the author's experiences of awe and wonder in teaching children, this paper proposes several changes in educational approach and how we understand the transcendentals partly through the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, including recognising the transcendentals as objective and reinstating unity as a fourth to refocus them as signs of God and a means to know him more. Also, by reversing their order so that beauty leads to goodness and then to truth, which is a more natural way of learning, this enables the least objectionable transcendental – beauty – to call the learner in whichever setting to learn more effectively, including about Christian themes and content. Such approaches can contribute to answering several Vatican II calls for change in education in both schooling and preparing the faithful to engage as Christians in the world.

## Keywords:

Transcendentals, beauty, goodness, truth, unity, Balthasar, Second Vatican Council, education, apologetics, learning.

## Introduction

The three established transcendentals – truth, goodness, beauty, in that order – are an integral part of understanding how a person develops from a young age educationally. Originating in Ancient Greek philosophy, they have been understood in different ways since then. In recent times, however, due to being regarded more and more as a subjective response, awe and wonder has been increasingly abstract in education, which has been becoming more child-centred and functional at the same time.

Beginning with some of the author's own experiences regarding awe and wonder in education, this paper<sup>1</sup> goes on to explore how the transcendentals in education can be refocused on the development of the person in a more complete way – as both a good, functional member of society

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and growing as a person, especially for the faithful developing their Christian understanding – as called for in the Second Vatican Council.<sup>2</sup> To achieve this, this paper calls for several changes in how we approach education: to change how we understand transcendentals, by recognising them as originating in God; by again recognising and including unity as an important property of Being, which points to God as the origin of the transcendentals; and reversing the order of the transcendentals, as proposed by Hans Urs von Balthasar, because beauty calls the person and is most approachable and acceptable, particularly in postmodern times.

Within the teachings of Vatican II, there are a number of references to the faithful being educated in such a way as to be prepared for engaging with others in the world as Christians and responding to others about their faith. This is a refocusing of apologetics and this paper seeks to show how education and apologetics are intertwined in learning through the four transcendentals in Balthasar's order. Therefore, with a new focus on the transcendentals, new approaches can be developed in education beyond schooling as they can be applied in both children's and adults' learning regarding different contexts in today's world.

This paper offers thoughts on changing the approaches that are currently favoured, including considering again, and improving approaches from the – sometimes long distant – past. It proposes consideration of a return to some important lost elements of education, as called for by Stratford Caldecott.<sup>3</sup> It transcends methods and styles, dealing with the fundamental approach to education and therefore does not discuss or consider how to turn the approach into how education is delivered, albeit mentioning such to illustrate some points. Therefore, it does not favour a particular method or style of delivery because different styles naturally are fitted to different teachers, children, topics, and opportunities, and no teacher should ever presume a favoured style or method can or will be suitable for all learners. Nor does it attempt to discuss latest findings or fashions in education. Rather than being a contribution on educational research and theories, it seeks to offer thoughts from a philosophical-theological angle based on the practical experiences of a schoolteacher. Therefore, it seeks to offer thoughts on approaching education in a different – and in some sense much older – way, calling for greater focus and understanding on how to develop learning through appreciation of the transcendentals, and in Christian terms the Creator of the world.

## Awe and Wonder

In the 1990s in England, there was a dreaded likelihood that in an interview for a schoolteacher's job one of the questions would be something like 'What does awe and wonder mean to you?' It was commonly understood that there was no known answer that properly fulfilled what the interviewers were seeking, and it was even suggested that the interviewers themselves did not know how to answer the question properly. Of course, a Christian had the possibility of answering it by explaining the idea of the awe and wonder of God but as most schools were secular and many church schools were increasingly the same in general approach, one had to be careful not to come across as too religious, which it was said could damage one's hopes of gaining employment<sup>4</sup> in an education system increasingly focused on, even obsessed with, functionally churning out children with good test results and placated parents.

2 For example, in *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (AA) 28-32.

3 Stratford Caldecott, *Beauty in the Word* (Tacoma, WA: Angelico Press, 2012); Stratford Caldecott, *Beauty for Truth's Sake* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009).

4 This was confirmed through conversations with several Christian headteachers, teachers, and other educational advisers.

With experience, I developed an understanding of how to answer the question safely, thus in a so-called professional way: when a child's mouth opens, like a baby's does to take in more information, whether in listening to a wonderful story that draws our deepest attention or a mystery of our world calling us to seek more understanding, when the eyes grow bigger and the ears are entirely focused on hearing every word, every nuance of sound... that is awe and wonder. I never had the opportunity to answer this in an interview as the fashion for the question faded, perhaps through becoming clichéd or being too abstract for unembarrassed answers.

The benefit I had was a Christian faith that opened new vistas inconceivable for many of my colleagues, who were mainly atheists or agnostics, as well as seeking to learn more about the mysteries of the Catholic faith. This, and a little contrarian thinking, meant I sought out different approaches and was able to rise to the challenge of, for example, making dreaded fractions lessons one of the more interesting learning experiences for my students. This was confirmed by my own awe and wonder when a volunteer helper in my classroom fascinated the eight-year-olds with six hours of basic geology, which I had previously found to be tedious beyond all hope. I asked her what made it so interesting for her and she gave the classic answer: the teacher who had taught her many years before about rocks and soil had been so enthusiastic that she was inspired to develop a deep interest and thus her own enthusiasm.

But it was my opportunity in different schools as a specialist in religious education – an integral part of the English curriculum, albeit more in theory than in practice in many schools – that granted me many of my most useful educational experiences with awe and wonder. My role meant that I regularly led assemblies, which are required by education law in England, where the whole school (usually) comes together for around 20 minutes daily and sing a hymn or inspiring song, listen to a story with some religious or hopefully thought-provoking content, and say a prayer or have a quiet moment of reflection. Working in a Catholic school allowed me to carry out a more faith-oriented-than-average version of these at least once a week for several years. I can truly say it was a wonderful experience as I grew in my understanding of not only how to lead the children by developing the ability to tell stories and organise dramas and explore Christian ideas but also how very full the Bible is with thought-provoking, inspiring, and deeply interesting stories, and how stories of the saints can inspire us in special ways.<sup>5</sup>

Around halfway through this period of development, I had to attend a diocesan course where the religious education specialist teachers were to learn how to read stories to children. Of course, many attendees including myself – being teachers who, of course, regard storytelling as an expertise of theirs, being a skill used almost daily – were somewhat sceptical of the value of anything the course could offer. However, after a fascinating morning of new ideas and skills enhancement, we all wanted to return to our students to try out our new, improved abilities. Of course, the capacity to share the stories (not to read as such, but to share and tell using a book) took the experience of awe and wonder to a higher level. This enabled me to draw the children into the story, to explore deeper meaning, to touch the transcendentals, but for me it was most evidently seen in a different situation. One summer, when I was a leader in a children's tent (5-7 year-olds) at a Christian conference, information came one evening from the adult's main tent that they were delayed by half an hour and that we were to keep supervising the children for that extra time. In our tent we had more than forty tired but highly energetic children, who were now ready to meet their parents, with only a few helpers available. Emergency resources were sparse and of little inspirational

5 Cf. Helenka Pasztetnik, 'Saints in the Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar: Contemplation, Receptivity and Mission in the Church', Academia.edu, [https://www.academia.edu/36252569/Saints\\_in\\_the\\_Thought\\_of\\_Hans\\_Urs\\_von\\_Balthasar\\_pdf](https://www.academia.edu/36252569/Saints_in_the_Thought_of_Hans_Urs_von_Balthasar_pdf), 7.

value, including several children's books of what seemed the most unexciting Gospel stories, so I fell back entirely on the skills learned during that course, more than ever before. I began 'reading' the short book – which I rarely consulted in telling the story by stretching it out with much embellishment, vocal modulation, regular explorations into the story characters' thoughts and feelings, and plenty of engagement including eye contact with my engaged audience – and after a while the children were one by one collected by their parents. Before I could finish the short book, the final child left and I stopped, leaving the tale unfinished to the vocal disappointment of the three mid-teen girls who had been among the helpers; they had made their way into the listening group as it had dwindled and they too were experiencing the awe and wonder of the story.

I was utterly thankful for that training course, not just for calming many potentially unruly children, for it had taught how invaluable it was to reach the audience, to make the listener part of the story, to engage the recipient of the tale to that which is beyond our mundane lives: in other words, to lead the person into awe and wonder, whether through a story, an image, a new experience, or finding a bug or a flower that fascinates. In turn, the person's response is to reach out to the unknown and desire more because something has touched the soul and called the person to openness; it is to open oneself to something greater and more wondrous; it is to wonder what is more and to do everything in that time to take in more, as much as possible, while losing all focus on the ordinary. Awe and wonder is to partake in something much more than ourselves – something extraordinary in our ordinary world. It is to engage with something deeper, higher, greater. Awe and wonder is to partake and receive a share of the divine through the transcendentals – the signs of God in this world – which are beauty, goodness, and truth. And the teacher's role should be to teach learners how to explore increasingly on their own or with others how to receive, discover, immerse themselves in the transcendentals regularly and in different ways.

However, the reality of modern schooling too often, at least in my own experience in the educational environment of England, is that beauty is a successful test result, goodness is sitting nicely and paying attention, or maybe being kind to another, and truth is admitting that you were the one who had broken a rule. The whole concept and experience of the transcendentals begun in those moments in an assembly, or occasionally in an inspiring lesson, was almost utterly divorced from the reality of needing to please the system by showing progress in tests and keeping headteachers, parents, and inspectors happy. Any more than that was an added and most definitely optional extra.

## Transcendentals and Telos

Consideration of a philosophical-theological approach to education includes the important elements of transcendentals and telos. Understanding of the transcendentals originated in Ancient Greek philosophy, with them being common amongst the properties of being. Plato regarded them as pointing to the highest idea, including unity as one of the transcendentals of being. As they stem from the highest, they inter-relate. The term itself is rooted in them transcending Aristotle's otherwise specific categories of types of properties. They are '*universal*, in the sense of that which is not confined by but goes beyond (*transcends*) all particular categories.'<sup>6</sup> For Aristotle, Augustine, and Boethius, they were being, unity, truth, and goodness.<sup>7</sup> Thomas Aquinas added

6 Aidan Nichols, *A Key to Balthasar* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2011), 1. All italics are in the original here and henceforth.

7 Wouter Goris and Jan Aertsen, 'Medieval Theories of Transcendentals', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/transcendentals-medieval/>.

beauty amongst others to the list as the philosophical exploration developed.<sup>8</sup> But educationally, the approach to transcendentals focuses on the interface between learner and educational input, which is leading, guiding, or supporting the learner to explore the transcendentals and what they mean, thus the focus was narrowed in time to truth, goodness, and beauty.

What is regarded now as the three transcendentals and their traditional order was in many ways for us established by Immanuel Kant through his three *Critiques*.<sup>9</sup> However, for Kant and his theory of knowledge, *transcendental* meant a priori knowledge about something that is learned: 'I call all cognition transcendental that is occupied not so much with objects but rather with our a priori concepts of objects in general.'<sup>10</sup> For him, the transcendental

plays a role in the way in which the mind 'constitutes' objects and makes it possible for us to experience them as objects in the first place. Ordinary knowledge is knowledge of objects; transcendental knowledge is knowledge of how it is possible for us to experience those objects as objects.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, in some way, the Kantian transcendentals are a pre-programming capability for the acquisition of further knowledge from sensory data, thus placing them within the person.

Truth, goodness, and beauty is also the order in Transcendental Thomism.<sup>12</sup> Aidan Nichols explains the approach this shares with Kant: 'These have it in common that they begin their epistemological reflections by examining human subjectivity from within – on the basis of what has been called the "I"-"I" relationship.'<sup>13</sup> This reflects the understanding that truth underpins the development of the person, who learns of the truths of life through education from an early age and, through sufficient training, truth leads us to be able to understand goodness, then beauty. However, such a rationalist subjectivising of the transcendentals, it can be argued,<sup>14</sup> leads to the risk of returning to Plato's Cave, where the world beyond is not perceived properly, or at all.

To some extent it can be considered that the transcendental order co-related with the development of the person in the medieval education system of the Trivium: in a sense we may regard truth as grammar, goodness being argued for with logic, and beauty as the art of rhetoric. A student had to learn how the system of language worked before employing it in a manner of being able to prove something, which then led to developing the ability to argue for one's position with style and creativity. This regarded language-based learning while the Quadrivium was number-based, with its own system of lower/higher levels being theory/applied. This system worked for so long, and still has some merits and can be adapted for our contemporary setting<sup>15</sup> with some effectiveness; in the same way, the transcendentals are taught in the same manner still today in some ways.

8 This is a fair conclusion of Thomas Aquinas, *ST I*, 5.4, ad 1 and *ST I-II*, 27.1, ad 3 as shown in, for example, Travis Cooper, 'Is Beauty a Distinct Transcendental According to St. Thomas Aquinas?', *Thomas Aquinas College*, 2013, <https://www.thomasaquinas.edu/about/beauty-distinct-transcendental-according-st-thomas-aquinas>.

9 This is certainly more recent than Plato's and Aristotle's treatments of what became known as the transcendentals; these were also particularly explored and added to by Augustine, Boethius in regard to education, and Aquinas, who recognised as many as six transcendentals. Kant considered each in turn in the mentioned order as *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781, *Critique of Practical Reason* in 1788, and *Critique of the Power of Judgement* in 1790 as stated in, for example, Robert Barron, "Evangelizing the Nones", *First Things*, January 2018, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2018/01/evangelizing-the-nones>.

10 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), <https://cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/u.osu.edu/dist/5/25851/files/2017/09/kant-first-critique-cambridge-1m89prv.pdf>, 133.

11 New World Encyclopedia, search term: Transcendence (philosophy), 26<sup>th</sup> June 2022, [https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Transcendence\\_\(philosophy\)](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Transcendence_(philosophy)).

12 Nichols, *Key*, 2.

13 Ibid.

14 Peter Kreeft, *Doors in the Walls of the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2018), 13, 15.

15 Martin Robinson, *Trivium 21c* (Carmarthen: Independent Thinking Press, 2013).



The traditional order teaches first the foundational truths of man and his world: spelling and grammar, arithmetic, basic scientific facts, historical and geographical data, etc. Then an exploration of goodness and morals explores the motives and actions of history or of literary characters, or the uses of medications, or how to care for others. Beyond this is an exploration and appreciation of beauty through education in aesthetics, such as art history courses, poetry recitals, or classical music concerts. Traditional education as a whole, that is, before modernisation in the last century, systematically taught the first to all, the second to some, and the last to few. While this became less elitist through universal education and some other changes, this was the general model of education. Of course, different approaches and philosophies were also used in generally isolated instances.

As the modernist period in society was ending, modernist ideas were applied heavily to universal education in some countries, such as the UK. In England, elite schools, such as grammar schools, were almost abolished in favour of comprehensive schools. There, regarding educational approach, there was a move away from memorising dry spelling and grammar systems and arithmetic facts, although these have returned over the last decade or so as their replacements were inadequate: learning grammar mostly disappeared from the curriculum by the 1990s, in at least one area at the close of the 1970s an educational project saw two years of children receive no handwriting lessons in their schooling, and for around two decades teaching children to recite times tables was regarded as antiquated and ineffectual. But while some systems of learning suit some learners, others learn better using other systems. In different learning environments, there are benefits and drawbacks to these also: the strong focus on creativity over learning grammar in the UK has made more children embrace the English language confidently to the detriment of learning foreign languages that have more complex and systematic grammar systems; on the other hand, Czech learners, for example, who spend much curriculum time on complex and systematic grammar arrangements, learn other languages more easily but they would benefit from more exploration of creative writing and word-play.<sup>16</sup> So modernism, having partly Kantian roots, developed in different ways in different educational environments: English in British education quickly loosened its focus on the truths of the language, preferring to focus on explorations of the good and the beautiful, while Czech language requires a lengthier focus on the truth (grammar) element, which reduces time for later development of the good and the beautiful.

Learning covers a large range of facts, skills, capabilities, and methods for the student to learn. There are different ends in different skills and thematic areas in learning: learning to spell or handwrite well has a markedly different purpose to being able to conduct an experiment using the scientific method, or appreciating and developing an artistic style, or understanding more about Christ's life, death, and Resurrection. They can all be generally regarded as learning to do or be things well and properly, which points to the transcendentals – beauty, goodness, truth – in each in different ways. But something of the Trivium model remains even in a more focused way: the typical model of a teaching unit – be it geography, science, language or maths, for example – is basically to present the facts, rules, or input, then to discuss its usage and applicability (thus its goodness) and practice such usage, then to present it in a project or apply it to a problem.

Modern education, as that developed in the UK since the mid-1960s, has seen a fashion of increasingly moving away wherever possible from a dryness and clear hierarchy of learning to more experiential learning. The replacement of the old method – the teacher-led 'chalk and talk' style

16 These can be seen clearly in comparing the curricula of both educational systems and has been the general experience of learners, parents, and teachers in communication with the author in both educational settings.

(although it is still effective at times) along with working through textbooks and programmes starting with Book 1 and continuing until a distant goal is reached (not particularly effective) – with teacher-led input with selective use of resources means a good educator perceives a better route for the learner(s). But not only must the educator be capable of enabling this but also the destination or purpose is often less clear and there is a vagueness regarding where the learner is being led. This loss of structure, in my own experience and in observing other educators as subject leader in various schools, too easily develops into the educator's preferences and interests being imposed on the educational scheme as the 'bigger picture' diminishes. Where the child engages more with nature or concept, and even tries these out through drama or role-play, the deeper question has to be: To what end? Is there a teleological element to the themes, topics, content, experiences? Or is the enlargement of the child's experience – subjective development – simply the end or telos in itself as fashioned by the educator's interests?

This lack of structure, direction, and purpose becomes a serious issue, as can be seen through a discussion I once had with a colleague regarding the books offered to learners for reading. The colleague, who advocated strongly for never limiting which books a child could read and never to dissuade them from any, had no answer when I asked if this also applied to *Mein Kampf*. This is the inverse of Godwin's Law: by using an extreme to show something is not universal, the debate then regards where to draw the line. Once one book is omitted, the question is: Which other books? This leads naturally to a categorisation of certain content such as violence, political extremism, adult themes, etc., and the list becomes a negative list of 'do-not's, which is what the more liberal educationalist seeks to avoid. This applies to experiential learning as well as concepts and the educationalist must decide what is suitable, acceptable, appropriate. As reasons become increasingly political, some content is deemed unsuitable for children's learning, including Christianity in some places.<sup>17</sup>

Decisions on suitability are made for various reasons – some objective, some subjective – but mainly to protect the young mind, and by extension those around him, and thus society as a whole. Such moral judgements are made to censor the reading/education of the young but which morals and standards should be chosen? Should this be arbitrary? Should it be based on the subjective taste and interest of the teacher/parent/whomever? Clearly a teleological moral choice is made and the decision to censor certain books/education for the young stems from the morals of a post-Christian society. But in the move away from overt Christianity, the postmodernist system, with no clear meaning or teleological understanding, has increasingly replaced new ideas, politics, and moral positions into the reading input of children at a younger and younger age in some places, even against the will of the parents.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, as the Christian telos fades, man becomes useful rather than good in himself. In John Dewey's vision the purpose of education is to serve the greater good in society, but this can too easily be reduced to utilitarian economic terms and the person becomes regarded more as a resource. Such a focus means the education of the person is on his ability to be maximised for economic use while maintaining socially acceptable behaviour. Thus, the telos becomes the usefulness man has in the earthly, that is, society's economic sphere: the effective, useful, peaceful

17 Separation of church and state is a widely understood concept but increasing numbers now regard Christianity as toxic, being deemed hierarchical, colonial, etc. Cf., for example, Thomas J. Salerno, "Evangelization Is Colonialism": Are We Sure About That?, Word on Fire, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2021, <https://www.wordonfire.org/articles/evangelization-is-colonialism-are-we-sure-about-that/>.

18 For example, Endia Fontanez and Carrie Watters, 'Scottsdale parents sue district, board member and his dad over dossier', azcentral, accessed 27<sup>th</sup> June 2022, <https://eu.azcentral.com/story/news/local/scottsdale-education/2022/05/10/scottsdale-parents-sue-district-mark-and-jann-michael-greenburg-over-dossier/9662968002/>.

person is now the ideal and the narrative of being successful and wealthy is the carrot on the stick. But while there is good in serving others, participating in society, and doing one's best, the human person is more than an earthly economic resource to be rewarded for his contribution because of a higher calling as described by Caldecott: '[o]ur humanity is bound up in our capacity to realize that Being (and therefore everything that exists, in one degree or another) is one, good, true, and beautiful.'<sup>19</sup>

Peter Kreeft describes three philosophies of life.<sup>20</sup> There is the rationalist position (for example, Hegel) where we perceive what is real and there is nothing more than this, which in many ways regards the modernist position here; the second is that there is less in reality than what we can conceive of mentally, which is reductionism, cynicism, relativism, etc., which fits postmodernism largely; but the one understood through most of history is that more exists than we can perceive, know, understand, which is also the clear understanding of children. C. S. Lewis condemns the results of the Kantian separation of the transcendentals from objects (here, using the sublimeness of a waterfall): by making the response to beauty subjective, the student of such ideas (that the sublimeness is in the person's response, not the waterfall) learns 'firstly, that all sentences containing a predicate of value are statements about the emotional state of the speaker, and secondly, that all such statements are unimportant',<sup>21</sup> which shows that rationalism leads to relativism.

In returning to the transcendentals of Ancient Greece, which included unity stemming from the Platonic oneness and the idea of an origin, it must also be recognised that although truth and goodness were recognised in all things and they were desirable, it was without Christian personalism which is based on the Christian telos. This element, which is fading again today, meant that morals regarding the person, including human dignity, were substantially different in Greek culture and many categories of persons were regarded as inferior and thus the property of specific men; this included children, who lacked status and were treated accordingly. The change from the Greek understanding and moral behaviour to individuals having dignity and rights was for the most part due to the Christianisation of classical civilisation, which has included the development of Christian personalism through the centuries.

Christianity not only integrated Greek culture with a moral system rooted in Judaism, the Decalogue, and the moral Law but it also personified God in a more significant way than the Greek deities of capricious behaviour in their dealings with man. The unformed oneness of Plato became a relationship with the One God in Three Persons, the first of whom sent his only Son, being the second who died for man, and the third who is sent to build up the faithful. This gave a clear teleological meaning and direction to the more vague and subjectively malleable transcendentals of Greek origin.

This means that, in these postmodern times particularly, because '[t]he concept of a "final" cause (goal) or *telos* was secularized',<sup>22</sup> and the effect of Christian culture fades or is usurped by force, the educational experiences of children lose their moral foundations and clear meanings, and the definitions of the transcendentals become more subjective and fragile. From a deconstructionist looking at Chartres Cathedral, to a secular atheist reading the Passion, to an abstract expressionist viewing a Rembrandt, the fundamental differences in not only opinion but also the reason for the opinion show that a consistent and lengthy exposition of an educational way based on rationalist thinking – which has been the generally entropic flow in education – can obscure the transcendentals from their source of oneness.

19 Caldecott, *Beauty in the Word*, 135.

20 Kreeft, *Doors*, 12.

21 C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* in C. S. Lewis Selected Books (London: Harper Collins, 2002), 400.

22 Caldecott, *Beauty for Truth's Sake*, 124.



The lack of teleological clarity in postmodern education leads to the values of the educator being (often enthusiastically) delivered as underpinning the education of the students. While this can be positive in a limited sense – learning maths confidently or exploring good quality literature – this can increasingly become ideological in the shape of problematic, controversial, or even destructive literature or areas of social or moral learning. Without a higher purpose, experience itself becomes the telos, which means an overly child-centred approach can lead to a self-centred child, which develops into egotism and an inability to deal with life's challenges. This arguably is becoming more apparent today.<sup>23</sup>

## A Missing Transcendental?

In the search for better approaches to education that benefit the learner and society, a reconsidering of the transcendentals offers solutions as part of a philosophical-theological approach. Looking beyond the limit of three transcendentals can provide a means to this and a different understanding of their source.

Today's increasing individualism is the opposite of one transcendental that was in the original list but omitted in the Kantian list of three: unity. The pre-Christian origins – predating Christianity which was the foundation of centuries of Christian society and is the foundation of post-Christian society – of both Plato's universal Goodness and Aristotle's and Judaism's differing monotheistic focus on a single, central unity from which the transcendentals stem. Truth, goodness, and beauty are established now as the transcendentals but the inter-relationship between them – being part of the definition of transcendental – points to their commonality in relationship which requires recognition of unity. After all, if they inter-relate properly, there must be a oneness about them; to separate them removes their transcendental aspect: 'The light of the transcendentals, unity, truth, goodness and beauty, a light at one with the light of philosophy, can only shine if it is undivided.'<sup>24</sup> Without unity, a sort of educational transcendental entropy has taken place over time. As Caldecott explains, '*Everything*, in other words, is true, good, and beautiful in some degree or in some respect.'<sup>25</sup>

The key to establishing the transcendentals and their importance in learning is the consistency of presentation and opportunity to explore these, thus to see that not only do they apply to all things but that they complement one another as they always are present in a relationship with each other in all things. For example, in reaching beyond the material fact of the earth's rotation, the beauty of a sunset<sup>26</sup> can lead us to awe and wonder that reminds us of the goodness the light has brought to the day in warmth and light, as well as the truth that life itself comes from the sun's light and heat. And these point to the purpose of the sun in our world and its appropriateness (not too hot or cold) and efficiency (the seasons) of its source of physical life in this world and thus to the One who made it so. By enabling the student to explore the transcendentals consistently, not only can understanding develop of how they work, but also their exploration opens up a growing

23 Katie Bishop, 'Are younger generations truly weaker than older ones?', BBC, 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20220218-are-younger-generations-truly-weaker-than-older-ones>. The article offers many examples of the 'millennial generation' avoiding social expectations they consider as too difficult while defending them because they shouldn't be expected to conform in ways that are too difficult for them.

24 Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'Revelation and the Beautiful' in *Explorations in Theology I: The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 107. Nichols uses this quote, describing the four as 'inseparable', thus unity is embedded in all three of the parts of Balthasar's Trilogy: Nichols, *Key*, 3.

25 Caldecott, *Beauty for Truth's Sake*, 31.

26 This is normally the initial reaction, transcendentially-speaking, which is the focus of the next section.

awareness of God's presence in our lives through his creation, his gifts, blessings, and graces, and even to our being held by him in existence. He is the source of the unity: one God, one creation, one source of the transcendentals.

Thus, by such an approach, a Christian understanding of our lives, our morals, our beliefs, can develop and learners in turn can participate in growing as Christians in the world. The Second Vatican Council, in its purpose of updating – being able to open up to the modern world – opened the doors and windows of the Church not to become more like the world but to engage more with the world, thus enabling the 'Christian formation of the world'.<sup>27</sup> The pastoral Council can be described as a mission council,<sup>28</sup> which means education is a fundamental part of the Council's focus.

Vatican II recognised the two purposes of education and placed them in a Christian context. Over time, education has too easily become reduced to a utilitarian version for some, which ensures compliant citizens who are workforce-capable; this is the ideal vision and aim of a society that seeks to replicate itself, preferably ad infinitum. But this does not properly value the growth of the person, the local community, the larger society, or humanity as a whole. It is not a vision where there is a gamble made that seeks more, higher, risking the status quo, while knowing failure is also a possibility. In Gospel terms, it is the servant who takes the one talent and hides it to preserve it rather than risk it, eventually at the cost of losing even that one without attempting to use it (Mt 25:14-30). The Introduction to the Council's 'Declaration on Christian Education' *Gravissimum Educationis* (GE) recognises education as both that which benefits society, including economically, and also that 'in which truth and love are developed together', for the Church is called by Christ to 'be concerned with the whole of man's life, even the secular part of it insofar as it has a bearing on his heavenly calling'; this has a reference to *Lumen Gentium* (LG) 17 which quotes Christ's sending the apostles out into the world. In GE 2, the Council calls the active faithful to reach beyond the sensible and safe methods of schooling a future compliant workforce and seek to Christianise the young, making them ready, or at least better prepared not to only grow in their God and his ways but to also engage with society and help in the Christianisation of the world.<sup>29</sup> The call of the Council, however, cannot in practical terms be heard by those who do not recognise the highest telos – God – or that there is such a telos, or that there can even be such a telos, never mind pay attention to the teachings of the Church. The understanding of God, Christ, Church in general terms is low today partly because such themes have been mostly removed from secular education and vary in quality in faith schools. Thus, it is often pointless or even problematic today to claim the truth of Christianity, or even that truth is one, against the general understanding that truth is relative and subjective, which is encapsulated in the mantra 'you have your truth and I have mine'. Not only was Christianity reduced to one of many narratives in modernism, it has followed then that postmodernism recognises no truth beyond personal preference, opening the door to trends and ideologies today such as Critical Race Theory and gender politics driving social policy in some societies.<sup>30</sup>

27 *Gravissimum Educationis* (GE) 2.

28 Robert Barron, 'Gaudium et Spes: The Right Reading of Vatican II by Fr. Robert Barron', 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eb6BHP11qCU>.

29 Cf. Stuart Nicolson, 'Theology of Education in the Second Vatican Council's *Gravissimum Educationis*', *Theology and Philosophy of Education* 2022, vol.1, no.1, 32–39, <https://www.tape.academy/index.php/tape/article/view/10/1>.

30 For example, Chris Jewers, "'They've told him that as a black man the world is against him': Single mom of biracial son, 13, sues his school over CRT because "everything that doesn't go his way is racist - including chores", *Daily Mail*, 17<sup>th</sup> May 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10824105/Single-mom-biracial-son-13-sues-school-CRT-curriculum.html>; also, for example, James Hockaday, 'Gender neutral toilets could be put in county's schools to help trans children', *Metro*, 10<sup>th</sup> June 2021, <https://metro.co.uk/2021/06/10/>

However, as stated by, for example, John Paul II,<sup>31</sup> Christians should propose, not impose. The question is then how education can adapt to encourage exploration of the four transcendentals – causing awe and wonder – when their origin is generally unrecognised.

## TGB or BGT

In light of the above, it can be said that since the middle of the last century in particular there has been a movement to break down many of the structures of education, particularly when considered through a philosophical-theological lens. At the same time, Vatican II was proposing better approaches to education, but there was also a proposal being made regarding which direction we should order the transcendentals,<sup>32</sup> which includes educational approach. The changes in society and understanding of education can provide the opportunity for adapting the approach to the transcendentals.

In the more distant past, society was clearly structured and so too was the education process. Everyone knew their position in society and each person's education was decided more through birth than capability, which rewarded position over ability or aptitude. A rigid structure also existed regarding how education was carried out: the order of the transcendentals was truth, goodness, and beauty (TGB) and one had to learn each stage well in order to properly access the next in general terms. Regarding the timing of educational input to learners, this varied in different times, for example, the above-mentioned Trivium saw boys of around 14 years begin their Bachelor studies, after being prepared in a grammar school, whereas more recently universal education brought schooling much earlier with some schooling at 5-11 years of age, with increases in leaving age coming later. The trend to this day has been for a more general focus on more basic skills for longer, which allows a greater number of learners to achieve specific standards.

The transcendentals in whichever educational context retained the general TGB structure: it is widely perceptible, to various extents, that truth was taught first, including some content of theology, philosophy, and the natural sciences, with input focusing mainly on the last at lower levels. After progress, goodness was then explored and learned: the moral life, what it was to be good, and how to conduct oneself properly in one's position was the focus, all based on truth and the learning about God and his creation. And finally, after learning of truth and goodness, the development of one's appreciation of the beauty of God's creation and the liturgy could take place as one took higher religious orders. This pattern was not a strictly observed and demarcated system in all parts of the system but it was applied in this general way in a systematic way – for example, truth in correct letter formation, the goodness of taking care with it, and the beauty of the result takes place far earlier than more abstract areas of learning. And even the university system of studying the sciences to master's level before access proper to philosophy and then to theology<sup>33</sup> captures the structure of truth of our world, the goodness of it in philosophy and the beauty of learning God's ways properly. But truth leading to goodness, which led to beauty, and a fullness in one's overall appreciation of the transcendentals could occur properly only in this way.

However, the world is very different today, with many structures somewhat reduced or demolished,

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gender-neutral-toilets-could-be-put-in-countys-schools-to-help-trans-children-14747392/.

31 John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 7<sup>th</sup> December 1990, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_07121990\\_redemptoris-missio.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html), 39.

32 As touched upon above with the initial perceived transcendental regarding a sunset.

33 Michael H. Shank, 'Myth 2: That the Medieval Christian Church Suppressed the Growth of Science' in *Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths about Science and Religion*, ed. Ronald L. Numbers (Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 2009), 22.

and the means of education are not only practically universally available but also educational resources are available to almost all on the internet. Thus, the teacher is now as much a guide through the resources as a provider and source of learning. The old educational structures cannot effectively be applied then in a standard school setting because, with the ongoing disintegration of old structures of society (for over a century now), the structure of learning has fragmented from a generally clear system (with all of its pros and cons) into an individualised and increasingly relative way of thinking, thus also of learning. While this change has taken place to different extents in different places, the general trend exists.

Today, children are becoming well-developed and grow in their understanding of the functionally important matters in life, learning how to navigate a world that offers delights and dangers, all of them ephemeral but increasingly often not of God. They have experiences of control at a young age, such as with the 'old' cliché that parents should ask their four-year-old to set the timer on the video recorder as he understands how to do it better. The fact is that children are educational sponges and what they learn says more about what they are offered for learning than what they are capable of. One clear example of the constitutive effect of learners generally being able to learn what is put in front of them (with appropriate support if necessary) is that Archbishop Michael Sheehan's book *Apologetics and Catholic Doctrine*,<sup>34</sup> which was recommended when I studied my Master's degree in theology and is useful in even higher studies, was originally written a century ago for high school students (15-17 year-olds),<sup>35</sup> which indicates that the wider range of learning today – broken down into far more topics, applications, explorations – means spreading it thinner. This is not necessarily a condemnation, but it highlights the fact that learners in the past generally were capable of higher-level concepts at an earlier age due to a narrower focus and more repetition earlier, and it is surely that students learn in both breadth and depth. Nowadays, a learner must wait until attending a specialised course in university before accessing subjects such as philosophy or theology, but it is less likely that students will select such courses because they have no experience of them, are given no value, and are certainly not encouraged by universal education in postmodern society. However, a capable child of 10 years can begin to read Aristotle, clearly without a grasp of deeper concepts but he can begin to explore the general ideas with appropriate support. The fact is that the schooling system, and thus education in general, has become heavily focused on the experiential at the cost of the intellectual, despite the fact that different learners have different learning preferences, strengths, and interests. This is the progress of the TGB approach which impedes access to higher learning, restricts access to the beautiful, that is, that which attracts, and leads to a breakdown of the structure into subjective experience; and by excluding unity as seen above, it becomes increasingly secular and fragmented. The opposite of this, being a heavily experiential approach without a telos is favoured by some educationalists nowadays but, as recognised earlier, the restricted telos, or even lack of it, means the education remains heavily subjective and the person develops less of a grasp of wider matters in a more self-centred way.

However, the grand opus of Hans Urs von Balthasar, known as his 'Trilogy', offers a different approach. It focuses in turn on the three Kantian transcendentals but the significant difference is that Balthasar reverses them: beauty, goodness, truth (BGT).<sup>36</sup> Developing his understanding

34 Michael Sheehan, *Apologetics and Catholic Doctrine* (London: Baronius Press, 2009).

35 Peter Mary Joseph, 'Preface' in *ibid.*, 11.

36 Balthasar's 'Trilogy' of 16 books (including *Epilogue*) is vast, having the first seven volumes regard aesthetics, the second five goodness, and the final three truth, and his general style means that a 'succinct' reference from him explaining its overall structure is best found in a later, reflective work of his from 1988: Hans Urs von Balthasar, *My Work: In Retrospect* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 116-117.



before the Council, which he did not attend but was an inspiration for some themes and ideas there,<sup>37</sup> he replaced the Kantian and Transcendental Thomistic approach of 'I'-'I' with an approach that 'puts the human subject – and that by virtue of its created nature – in immediate relation with the truth that lies outside itself',<sup>38</sup> thus being 'I'-'you' or 'I'-'he/she/it'. This approach changes learning of the Christian faith fundamentally:

The order of the trilogy is crucial, he insisted. One must first *perceive* Christian revelation as beautiful and only then would one's soul be prompted to follow Christ in a *dramatic* life of Christian discipleship. Finally, once inside that life of obedience to Christ, one comes to see how and why Christianity is *true*. If one starts with the question of the truth of Christian revelation, one must engage in apologetic arguments. But for Balthasar, argument just gets in the way of the contemplative gaze necessary for the first movement of perception. The spark of delight moves us to seek God.<sup>39</sup>

Oakes's comment refers to Balthasar's position on apologetics in the 1960s when he wrote his aesthetics volumes<sup>40</sup> but Balthasar's understanding and appreciation of apologetics developed beyond this by the mid-1970s, when he perceived apologetics more as theological truth well-presented, thus having more focus on its presentation. He stated that

Nonetheless, the last decade has reinforced this fundamental conviction of mine: You do good apologetics if you do good, central theology; if you expound theology effectively, you have done the best kind of apologetics. The Word of God (which is also and always the activity of God) is self-authenticating proof of its own truth and fecundity [...] <sup>41</sup>

This is a development in educational value and apologetics can be seen as educational – helping the recipient learn about God, Christ, Church. Balthasar's approach can also be applied in child development generally because it is clear that a young child appreciates beauty before good, which is of interest before truth. A child is attracted in different ways to certain things and certain people early in development and this goes on to a more developed level of engagement at a more distant level by two years of age, such as a rainbow in the sky or sheep in a field. Around this time, an early understanding of being good and doing good – learning to please by tidying toys and not to hit others – is developing and which will lead to maturation out of the 'terrible-twos' stage. It is only later that the idea of truth – between four and six years – will develop by learning to be accurate and honest even at a cost to oneself. As the old Jesuit saying goes, 'give me a child until the age of seven and I will show you the man', and this reflects the fundamental development of the person. By educating in the BGT order underpinned by unity in many ways before the age of seven (in appropriate ways, of course), the child receives a foundation that works in concert with his development. And by continuing the development of each transcendental in each educational context, from handwriting to theology, and from the beauty of fractions fitting together to fractals leading

37 Cf. Eduardo Echeverría, "Ressourcement," "Aggiornamento," and Vatican II in Ecumenical Perspective, *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*, 26<sup>th</sup> July 2014, <https://www.hprweb.com/2014/07/ressourcement-aggiornamento-and-vatican-ii-in-ecumenical-perspective/>.

38 Nichols, *Key*, 2.

39 Edward T. Oakes, 'Reason Enraptured', *First Things*, April 2013, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2013/04/reason-enraptured>.

40 His understanding of apologetics then is more that which developed as parallel to dogmatic theology, thus being focused on intellectual argument and proofs, as can be seen, for example, in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord 1: Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 123-124, 167-168, 198.

41 Balthasar, *My Work*, 100.

to the goodness of fitting together to the details of how they work, the learner can access so much more – and even the beauty of simple geology means the goodness of the world's creation and the truth of how it was formed is far more interesting.

This applies to any learning: to learn something effectively, one must have purpose and the most personal purpose is being attracted to something. Barron explains that

Any claim to know objective truth or attempt to propose objective goodness tends to meet now with incredulity at best and defensiveness at worst: 'Who are you to tell me what to think or how to behave?' But there is something less threatening, more winsome, about the beautiful.<sup>42</sup>

He was using this universal truth in the context of evangelisation or apologetics, which have some overlap.<sup>43</sup> An approach that regards the beautiful is potentially the most attracting approach not only in general as it is the foundational subjective transcendental but it is also the least obviously objective, which makes it particularly the most effective transcendental approach when dealing with those brought up and formed in postmodern thinking where truth is personal and morals are fluid. Over a period of time, it is important to present a consistent image (unity) of the transcendentals, not a fragmented one. This is especially important for faith schools, particularly where non-Catholic students attend, which GE 9 encourages, and also with regard to Catholic learners who are being brought up in a variety of more or less Christian environments. A child during pre-school years, and through their schooling, may be brought up on a cultural diet of unhelpful themes, such as cartoons with their – in various ways – skewed version of reality. Such a child may identify in a wonderfully subjective manner that beauty is the perception of power in the strength and/or ability of a hero vanquisher of the villain of the latest episode, but in this there is a sense also of good with clear counter-images of modernist heroes who at least retain the traditional tropes of 'good and evil'. But in postmodern content, most perceptibly literature and entertainment but also in educational content in many other areas, the moral element may be skewed into a grey soup of fallenness, tragedy, weakness which contradict and confuse, meaning that the uncertainty speaks of a lack of clarity, and in a sense therefore a lack of truth. Thus, in education it is important there is a consistency of message, which can be offered by education providers who give a consistently Christian-based meaning and foundation.

By approaching education – learning in any context – with beauty then goodness then truth consistently and appropriately, it is possible to develop and build-up a consistent image, narrative, and thus understanding in the learner – child or adult – allowing a firm foundation in turn for the development of the person and the possibility of responding to God's call in the transcendentals.

## Call of Beauty

The most approachable and personal of the transcendentals can become the starting point of a journey that has a clear telos both for learners in education in general but also beyond this, in the journey of learning about and becoming closer to God,<sup>44</sup> the source of the transcendentals.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Barron, 'Evangelizing the Nones', *First Things*, January 2018, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2018/01/evangelizing-the-nones>.

<sup>43</sup> Stuart Nicolson, 'The Field of Apologetics Today: Responding to the Calls of Scripture and the Second Vatican Council', *The Heythrop Journal* 59, no.3 (May 2018), 410–23, <https://doi.org/10.1111/heyj.12985>, 418–19.

<sup>44</sup> As proposed by Veronika Iňová, 'Beauty as a Way of Communicating the Revelation of God', *Acta Missiologica* No. 2 Vol. 13 (2019), 61–72, 71.

It is said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, the deepest and most touching of the three transcendentals in subjective terms. Balthasar's reversal of the traditional order of the transcendentals – beauty leading to goodness and then to truth, underpinned by unity – provides the clearest direction for the postmodern mind to develop into a Christian soul. The beauty of ancient cathedrals, the soul-touching sound of Gregorian chants, stories that are widely popular such as Tolkien's Middle Earth tales, or Lewis's Narnia adventures: these contain a deeper beauty than that offered by modern or postmodern tales of woe set in an industrial landscape beset by utilitarian themes or fantasies where darkness fights darkness and no one wins, least of all the reader or viewer.

But beauty is not merely a subjective experience for beauty has objective existence also. Things do not require the beholder to recognise their beauty for them to be beautiful; instead, it is for the learner to discover the beauty that is part of who or what they are:

the truly beautiful is an objective value, to be distinguished from what is merely subjectively satisfying. This means that the beautiful does not merely entertain; rather, it invades, chooses, and changes the one to whom it deigns to appear. It is not absorbed into subjectivity; it rearranges and redirects subjectivity, sending it on a trajectory toward the open sea of the beautiful itself.<sup>45</sup>

Beauty is a transcendental so it has objective reality and its origin is not in oneself but is recognised through engagement by the person. Aquinas identified three elements of beauty, that is, that which is 'pleasing to the eye', or other senses or thoughts: *integritas*, that is, integrity as opposed to brokenness or disintegration; *consonantia*, which is proportion or harmony; and *claritas*, being brightness, clarity, radiance.<sup>46</sup> Balthasar recognised two: form and splendour, where form incorporates Aquinas's first two and his splendour is *claritas*. Barron illustrates Aquinas's three with an expert's golf-swing: it has 'wholeness', all parts relate in a 'harmonious' way, and it has 'splendour',<sup>47</sup> while an amateur's swing may lack a good shape and lack finesse and efficiency. How we perceive beauty changes too: the child is more attracted to certain aspects of beauty – the eye-catching, interesting, fascinating – but with maturity this develops so that attractiveness is in form, proportion, clarity, radiance. There is no exclusiveness in these differences but rather a maturing of the subjective appreciation of beauty.

Just as we are created with the predisposition of being open to God our creator, it is beauty that almost literally calls<sup>48</sup> the soul out of the greyness of modernity, or the garish and shallow flash of colour offered by passing fashions. This was shown by Kreeft in his list of 20 arguments for God's existence,<sup>49</sup> with a range of objective, subjective, or mixed approaches. The subjective approaches include goodness and personal or common truth, but his most concise simply names the music of J. S. Bach: calling on the beautiful as proving God's existence – of course, it is not the beauty of Bach's music specifically, but the beauty of music done well which calls the person. Kreeft's apologetics recognises that the postmodern thinker is not necessarily attracted by the idea of truth

45 Barron, 'Evangelifizing'. Here, Barron refers to both Dietrich von Hildebrand and Plato's Diotima speech in his *Symposium* as sources for this understanding.

46 Thomas Aquinas, *ST I*, 39.8, ad 3.

47 Robert Barron, "Catholicism and Beauty" // 2018 LA Religious Congress Talk, 26<sup>th</sup> March 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iUBNTNiqn60>.

48 Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite notes the similarity in the Greek words for beauty (*kalos*) and calling (*kaloun*) in *Divine Names* ch 4, sec 8 in *The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite Part 1*, trans. John Parker (London: James Parker and Co., 1897), <https://ia800305.us.archive.org/30/items/worksofdionysius00pseu/worksofdionysius00pseu.pdf>, 40.

49 Peter Kreeft, 'Twenty Arguments God's Existence', *Peter Kreeft*, [https://www.peterkreeft.com/topics-more/20\\_arguments-gods-existence.htm](https://www.peterkreeft.com/topics-more/20_arguments-gods-existence.htm).

because the common question today asks whose truth, mine or yours? In his *Jacob's Ladder*,<sup>50</sup> he shows chapter-by-chapter a 10-step journey from one speaker's complete scepticism as it transforms into belief in God, Christ, and Church through Socratic dialogue with a faithful speaker. The key to opening the postmodern door (to escape the Cave?) to something more is not in proclaiming truth or declaring one's possession of goodness but in recognising beauty, and the evangelist-apologist does better not to contend and argue with the unbeliever but to walk with the person while being open to listening and to explain new ways of thinking, feeling, understanding.

The journey to God through the transcendentals is best taken with teachers, guides, or companions – in sacramental terms, with a sponsor. In this sense, it is education not just as religious education or catechesis but as a personal journey in life as one explores what is more than we can perceive and know rationally. Any more than a superficial exploration of beauty will inevitably lead to other transcendentals – '[...] Beauty, because of its divine nature, is always linked with the True and the Good. In order for something to be truly beautiful, it must by definition draw one to the True and the Good.'<sup>51</sup> This is true also for Caldecott: 'Beauty is the radiance of the true and the good, and it is what attracts us to both.'<sup>52</sup> Barron uses baseball to show the progression of understanding: the beauty of the uniforms and being good players is linked inextricably with following systems of dress and from excellent play, which is achieved only by following specific requirements and rules for the game to proceed properly.<sup>53</sup> And with the beautiful, the good, and the true comes also the fact that when they are in concert, acting together, there is a oneness about them which in turn points to a oneness in the origin of all:

All creatures bear a certain resemblance to God, most especially man, created in the image and likeness of God. The manifold perfections of creatures – their truth, their goodness, their beauty all reflect the infinite perfection of God. Consequently we can name God by taking his creatures' perfections as our starting point, 'for from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator'. (Wis 13:5)<sup>54</sup>

## New Approaches

With a philosophical-theological approach, the Vatican II documents not only proposed changes with education but also broadened its definition and scope in some ways. These included being properly prepared in order to present the faith, which is a form of education, and this is part of exploring a different approach to education in general for children and adults as Christians.

The Council called for distinctly new approaches both within the Church and also its meeting and integration with the world while firmly retaining its identity and understanding both of what the Church is and who God is.<sup>55</sup> One of the abrupt changes was the Council's complete omission of the word 'apologetics' – widely understood as the defence of the faith – which is understandable because before the Council it had often become a presentation of Christian thinking as better than secular or non-Catholic thinking, thus generally creating both distance and superiority. Such an approach to presenting the faith to others is antithetical to reaching out and joining others,

50 Peter Kreeft, *Jacob's Ladder* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2013).

51 Stephen Turley, *Awakening Wonder* (Camp Hill, PA: Classical Academic Press, 2014), [https://www.rainbowresource.com/pdfs/products/prod059505\\_smpl0.pdf](https://www.rainbowresource.com/pdfs/products/prod059505_smpl0.pdf), 17.

52 Caldecott, *Beauty for Truth's Sake*, 31.

53 Barron, "Catholicism and Beauty".

54 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 41.

55 For example, *Dei Verbum* (DV) 8, LG 8, LG 51.



which means Christianity would not only be another voice in the wind in the then-modern world but, presciently, it would be ignored or directly rejected, including in a polemical fashion, in the fledgling postmodern world.

Balthasar – an important figure in the *Ressourcement* movement, going back to the sources, which contributed to the Council's ideas for change – originally had a somewhat negative view of apologetics but he came to recognise its purpose through the lengthy time of his writing, as Oakes illustrates:

St. Paul serves as a model here. First enraptured by his encounter with Christ and taken up into the third heaven, he launches on a life of evangelization, proclaiming the resurrection of Christ, at which point those who subscribe to other philosophies and worldviews 'began to dispute with him.' For Balthasar, apologetics must come last: Only after one has gazed on revelation and responded by saying 'yes' to the proclamation can real apologetics begin.<sup>56</sup>

In 1975, a decade after the Council, giving his own views on his work, Balthasar explained his deeper understanding of apologetics:

Nonetheless, the last decade has reinforced this fundamental conviction of mine: You do good apologetics if you do good, central theology; if you expound theology effectively, you have done the best kind of apologetics. The Word of God (which is also and always the activity of God) is self-authenticating proof of its own truth and fecundity – and it is precisely in this way that the Church and the believer are inserted into one another.<sup>57</sup>

In educational terms, this can be understood as 'a good teacher is a good learner' and in Christian terms it means a good Christian teacher has learned the faith well and continues to do so.

The Council Fathers in a form of *Ressourcement* seem to have similarly understood apologetics. Without using the term apologetics, they referred to or wrote directly about either the sources of apologetics, how these were to be understood or used with a new focus, or in some way called for apologetical activity in half of the 16 Council documents.<sup>58</sup> They refer to and echo 1 Pt 3:15-16 – widely understood as the source and inspiration for Christian apologetics – a number of times, which defines apologetics as being prepared to explain one's hope (thus faith) and doing so in an appropriate Christian manner. In other words, the active faithful should learn of their faith and explain it in a Christian way when called to do so, which is the educational cycle of learning and teaching. This can be regarded as a foundational element of the Council as it calls on the faithful to open up to the world and engage in it as Christians, and this means certainly not diminishing one's faith in doing so, in oneself or with others. Rather, to be prepared, Catholic schools are called to provide education for Christian learners so that,

aware of their calling, they learn not only how to bear witness to the hope that is in them (cf. Peter 3:15) but also how to help in the Christian formation of the world that takes place when natural powers viewed in the full consideration of man redeemed by Christ contribute to the good of the whole society.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Oakes, 'Reason Enraptured'.

<sup>57</sup> Balthasar, *My Work*, 100.

<sup>58</sup> Examples are in but not limited to: *Ad Gentes* 11, *AA* 27-31, *Christus Dominus* 13, *DV* 8, *Dignitatis Humanae* 14, *Gaudium et Spes* 62, *GE* 2, and *LG* 10.

<sup>59</sup> *GE* 2; the document cites *LG* 36 here, which expands on the theme of learning, including how to be a Christian in society in order to bring Christianity to society. The reference should read '1 Peter 3:15'.

To be a mission Church means to reach out effectively and this has direct bearing on education of the young as well as adults, and several Council documents call for this.<sup>60</sup> Later, in 2010, Levada called for a 'new apologetics', which is particularly seen in his relaying of Pope Benedict XVI's words in 2008:

for him 'art and the Saints are the greatest apologetic for our faith.' He calls the Saints a 'great luminous trail on which God passed through history.' About Christian art and music, he suggests that 'in a certain way they are proof of the truth of Christianity: heart and reason encounter one another, beauty and truth converge ...'.<sup>61</sup>

A new approach in apologetics, using beauty as a call, is clearly seen here. As with Balthasar, there is a recognition, which can be extended into education in general, that in order to bring an understanding of oneness in an increasingly fragmented world it is necessary to reverse the order of the transcendentals. This means beauty can call the person and, by engaging with the transcendental, the soul can be opened up to be formed or reformed to recognise something more in beauty as the first step or a stronger step to God and thus the proper dignity of the *imago dei*, the person. The human person is formed, which is particularly seen in children, in such a way as not to consider the mundane as reality but to reach out beyond the material world to what is beyond through a growing appreciation of beauty, good, true, and one. By forming the child further, and by approaching the postmodern thinker of any age similarly, not initially with truth but beauty, which leads to goodness and thus to truth, educators including 'new apologists' can assist and support the development of the person and open him up to understanding of and hopefully engagement with Christianity. A more interesting and engaging experience of learning using different suitable methods and resources can take place through increasingly participating with the transcendentals. In this way, one does not develop faith through peer-pressure or as a psychological crutch, but as one who seeks God's beauty, grows in his goodness, and seeks the Truth of Christ. This means the faithful can grow in learning and faith to become able to go out into the world as Christians who can help in the Christianisation of the world (GE 2) by being prepared to present the faith in an appropriate manner in a new apologetics, therefore responding to the Council's calls.

Thus, not only are the faithful called by Scripture and the Council to prepare in order to explain our faith, thus connecting education and the transcendentals in BGT order to apologetics, but to recognise that these are interconnected because the prepared apologist becomes an educator, a guide leading another. Equally, the prepared educator, whose approach enables the child to be called by beauty, then to the good and the true in unity, inspires learners to become teachers and guides in whichever form as they will engage with the world while living Christian lives.

## Living Transcendentals

By participating and engaging with the transcendentals and helping others to do the same, the faithful grow as the transcendentals become more infused in their lives. As signs of God in this world, the transcendentals are not merely abstract philosophical-theological ideas or educational

<sup>60</sup> In particular, for example, AA 27-31, DH 14, LG 10.

<sup>61</sup> William Levada, *The Urgency of a New Apologetics for the Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 29<sup>th</sup> April 2010, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20100429\\_levada-new-apologetics\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20100429_levada-new-apologetics_en.html).

fashion. They are what cause the individual person to experience awe and wonder, even to open one's mouth a little like a small child seeking more. This means they are a fundamental part of life and, therefore, of education and the growth of the person because education should not just be the accumulation of facts and skills.

Christ himself called his listeners to engage deeper. He used parables, such as the Sower, which was simply an obvious farming description to his listeners on the basic level; he only revealed the meaning to those who engaged with him and asked for the meaning (Mt 13:10-16), while we can assume that others walked away, perhaps unimpressed. For the faithful today who may read Scripture or theology regularly and consider God's ways, including children learning about the faith, it is easy to become inured to them and disengage from them. But by experiencing them for the first time or with fresh eyes – their innate beauty, intrinsic goodness, and theological truths – one can, by engaging with them, experience awe and wonder. Theology should not become mere information or theory, and the theologian who loses sight of the bigger picture, or loses the ability or desire to pray, quickly loses sight of the beauty and the perception of the goodness that accompanies the truth.<sup>62</sup> In this, the participatory aspect, the practical aspect of the faithful, has to be prayer as well as Christian acts. In living one's faith, everyone, from child to theologian, can then bring together the transcendentals and walk with God in a deeper way and this can be explored in many ways.

We are reminded of the importance of taking new approaches in education by the words of Alexandr Solzhenitsyn in 1974, who recognised the unique durability and irrepressibility of beauty, even when truth and goodness are vanquished by darkness:

So perhaps the old trinity of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty is not simply the decorous and antiquated formula it seemed to us at the time of our self-confident materialistic youth. If the tops of these three trees do converge, as thinkers used to claim, and if the all too obvious and the overly straight sprouts of Truth and Goodness have been crushed, cut down, or not permitted to grow, then perhaps the whimsical, unpredictable, and ever surprising shoots of Beauty will force their way through and soar up to *that very spot*, thereby fulfilling the task of all three.

And then no slip of the tongue but a prophecy would be contained in Dostoyevsky's words: "Beauty will save the world." For it was given to him to see many things; he had astonishing flashes of insight.

Could not then art and literature in a very real way offer succor to the modern world?<sup>63</sup>

Dostoyevsky's quoted words also inspired *The Father's Tale*,<sup>64</sup> the grand opus of Michael D. O'Brien who is both an artist and writer. He paints the story of a prodigal father who through his love for old Russian literature finds in the darkness not only beauty which leads to goodness and truth but in doing so saves the world in a certain way as well as saving himself from personal darkness. For his reader, O'Brien challenges us to travel on our own journey of discovery, self-discovery, and God-discovery, to write our own story. Kreeft, in turn, illustrates the Jewish saying 'save a life, save the world' by exploring the transcendence and interconnectedness that we do not perceive in mundane and reduced perception and understanding.<sup>65</sup>

For educators, it is necessary first that to explore and grow in our understanding of the

62 Cf. Caldecott, *Beauty for Truth's Sake*, 125.

63 Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, 'Nobel Lecture', 1974, <https://www.solzhenitsyncenter.org/nobel-lecture>.

64 Michael D. O'Brien, *The Father's Tale* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011).

65 Kreeft, *Doors*, 33-40.

transcendentals, whether growing as Christians or developing our understanding of what underpins our reality. In turn, we should develop our ability to lead others – as parents, teachers, leaders, friends, persons – to a greater appreciation of the transcendentals, of beauty and goodness and truth, and how they intermingle and relate to one another and to us. Then we can be effective teachers who can present educational content that appreciates and recognises telos, transcendentals, and, for Christians, the One who is both the beginning and the end of all of these.

## Conclusion

Based upon the Kantian structure of the transcendentals, and their subjective development, education has struggled to develop the person, even when the purpose is reduced to utilitarian aims. The rational-subjective approach led in time to increased reductionism and subjectivism since as early as the 1960s in some places, as Caldecott summarises:

While part of the problem with modern education has been an extreme tendency to center everything on the child to the exclusion of actual instruction (the problem of content-free, pupil-centered learning), it is true that education is about the *human person*, and finding ways to enable that person to flourish through a certain quality of attention.<sup>66</sup>

There is a range of directions which can be taken from this point in education, including the aesthetic approach proposed by, for example, Stratford Caldecott in his two books cited in this paper on beauty in education, which reflects Balthasar's order of the transcendentals. This paper calls for developments in the philosophical-theological approaches to education in the spirit of several passages from the Second Vatican Council, which is related in many ways to preparation and explanation of one's faith appropriately (apologetics). In this, the teacher, leader, guide, or companion (depending on context) should seek to develop the learner, the person, in a growing appreciation of and engagement with the transcendentals in the order of beauty, goodness, truth, which are infused with unity. By answering the call of beauty and engaging with the transcendentals, we come closer to God, their origin. He is offering us a taste of what he is and it is not only a Christian duty to raise our young with awe and wonder so they can appreciate this and know God more, but Christians should also develop their understanding and ability to call others out of the generally modern (rationalist) and postmodern (reductionist) ways of approaching, perceiving, and engaging with reality. In doing so, they fulfil the early Christian and recent Conciliar calls to present Christianity as a beautiful, good, and true way in a unity that has been missing from education for so long.

### Contact:

**Stuart Nicolson, MA**

University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice

Faculty of Theology

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies

Kněžská 8, 370 01 České Budějovice

snicolson@tf.jcu.cz

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<sup>66</sup> Caldecott, *Beauty in the Word*, 31.