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August 1, 2013: A Theology "As If"

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Title: A Theology "As If"

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8/1/2013—I have been reading in the theology of one of the giants of the 20th century, Hans Urs von Balthasar. Balthasar was a Swiss theologian and priest who died in 1988. He was one of the most important theological figures of the 20th century. Perhaps his most significant work was a three volume theology exploring the good, the true and the beautiful: *The Glory of the Lord*, *Theo-Logic* and *Theo-Drama*. To read Balthasar is to be reminded of the greatness of the Christian message. I read yesterday about the core of the gospel, which is the broken heart of God poured out for humanity. I read today about the radical implications of the incarnation – – how it changes all of our understandings of everything we are and do. Put the matter crudely, now that God is all in, we each must also be all in. In particular, Balthasar uses the image of marriage in his interpretation of St. Paul to explore incarnation. When the Old Testament speaks of marriage, Balthasar believes it is dealing with the juridical and ethical concept. But when marriage is referenced in the New Testament, as in the marriage of Christ and his church, the emphasis is on one flesh. Transferred to incarnation itself, this means that God and creation are now one flesh. The implications of Balthasar's thought are rich and startling. But I don't wish to address them this second. Rather, the question is, what difference does it make if the incarnation is not true? This is the key question for secularists like myself who are plainly in love with Christian theological thought. Somehow, we need to live by the insights of religion even though we cannot accept the premises of our religions. Surprisingly, this matter has actually been thought about in a slightly different context years ago. The work is entitled *The Philosophy of As If: a System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind*. The book was written in 1911 by the German philosopher Hans Vaihinger. Vaihinger's view was that while sensations and feelings are real, the rest of human knowledge consists of fictions that can be held to be true pragmatically but cannot be discovered to be true or not. Vaihinger asked whether it is useful to act "as if" these fictions are true. I wonder if Vaihinger might represent a way out for secularism. It's better to live as if our religions are true even though they are not.