

Symphonic truth: Von Balthasar and Christian humanism

by [Edgardo Antonio Colon-Emeric](#) in the [May 31, 2005](#) issue

Many people believe that Christian piety entails narrow-mindedness and that the more one affirms Christ in his particularity the more one rejects the world in its plurality. If the true Christian is, as John Wesley said, a person of one book, then it might seem that the worlds of art, literature and music—indeed, the whole realm of human culture—are at best irrelevant and at worst dangerous.

Take, for instance, the case of one of my fellow Hispanic pastors who refuses to lend his guitar to anyone who would play popular songs on it. “It’s a consecrated guitar!” It doesn’t matter that the person who wants to borrow his guitar is also a brother or sister in Christ. It doesn’t matter that the popular music has wholesome lyrics. Once the guitar, like its owner, has been set apart for the service of God, it cannot again be played with or for the world.

There is, however, a way of following Christ that doesn’t flee the world but engages it as the domain of the triune God. There is such a thing as a humanism that is humane precisely because it is Christian. A model and mentor for such a view is the theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. Any person who is referred to by such sobriquets as “the Catholic Barth,” “the most cultured man in Europe,” “a modern church father” and “Pope John Paul II’s favorite theologian” is certainly someone to be reckoned with on many theological fronts. He can also teach us about how to be a Christian in the world.

Born in 1905 to an aristocratic family in Lucerne, Switzerland (hence the honorific “von”), von Balthasar was raised in a household where high culture and simple faith walked hand in hand. In his youth von Balthasar developed an unwavering affection for music, particularly Mozart, and for Romantic literature, particularly Goethe. But his passion for the humanities never diminished his love of God—quite the contrary. His doctoral dissertation (“Apocalypse of the German Soul”) is a theological reading of German literature and its understanding of the soul’s final destiny.

Von Balthasar's desire to understand the world as God's world was no passing fancy. Even throughout his period of theological and philosophical formation, when he produced important translations and studies of works by Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor, among others, he also wrote about drama and dramatists. Von Balthasar often commented that he found more vitality and originality in the writings of literary figures like Georges Bernanos (author of *Diary of a Country Priest*) than in much of the neoscholastic theology he was taught at school. His Christianity was open to the best that the realm of culture has to offer, and he maintained that this realm is itself open to fulfillment in Christianity.

It has been said that von Balthasar wrote more books than most people read in a lifetime. Certainly it is easy to feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume and erudition of his works. The best avenue of approach is not to jump straight into his great trilogy, *Theological Aesthetics* (seven volumes), *Theo-Drama* (five volumes) and *Theo-Logic* (three volumes), but to wade into some of his shorter writings like *Love Alone Is Credible* or *A Theology of History* or the essays in *Explorations in Theology*. Another fruitful approach to von Balthasar is to read him with a particular question or topic in mind. If you are interested in Barth, you might take up Von Balthasar's *Theology of Karl Barth*, the book that Barth himself regarded as the best exposition of his thought. If you are interested in issues of salvation and judgment (can Judas Iscariot enter heaven?), you will not find a better book than *Dare We Hope "That All Men Be Saved"*? To deepen your understanding of the death and resurrection of Christ, read *Mysterium Paschale*. And if you want to inquire into the foundations of von Balthasar's humanism, read *Truth Is Symphonic*. In that volume he writes:

Before the Word of God became man, the world orchestra was "fiddling" about without any plan: world-views, religions, different concepts of the state, each one playing to itself. Somehow there is the feeling that this cacophonous jumble is only "tuning up": the A can be heard through everything, like a kind of promise. . . . Then came the Son, the "heir of all things," for whose sake the whole orchestra was put together. As it performs God's symphony under the Son's direction, the meaning of its variety becomes clear.

Truth is symphonic: this is one of the principal pillars in von Balthasar's humanism. The plurality of cultures with their multiplicity of philosophies, religions and histories is not purposeless. There is a reason for the existence of Platonism, Islam and Buddhism, just as there is a reason for the particular gathering of musicians at a concert hall. The selection of instruments is not random but follows a design known

initially only to the composer and made public only in the performance. This means that there is no way for humans to get a handle on the world's pluralism. We can see the multiplicity of worldviews, just as anyone looking down into the orchestra pit can see a variety of musical instruments. But the theme of the symphony cannot be deduced from an inventory of those instruments. That the A can be heard through it all—call it Augustine's "restless heart"—does not tell us the key of the symphony, the God that the heart seeks. Only as the players submit to the leadership of the conductor do they learn what the composition's theme is.

To put this idea another way: Truth is not something that can be grasped and manipulated. Truth is Jesus Christ, the Word of God, made manifest among us. Because this one Word is infinitely richer than all the words of all the languages of the world, we should not be surprised or puzzled by the plurality of Christologies in the New Testament. Not even the Gospel quartet of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John exhausts the theme, because, as the Gospel of John explains, not even all the books of the world can sum up this Word (21:25). The "depth of the riches of God" that is Jesus Christ can only be heard through symphony.

The polyphony of Christianity can be a scandal to many. The whole thing just seems to have—as Emperor Joseph II said of Mozart—"too many notes." So, hoping to increase the appeal of Christianity, some churchpeople get rid of the embarrassingly high notes and eliminate all dramatic tension and dissonance, making Muzak out of the symphony. Or they turn it into a customized cell phone ring that can be turned on and off at will.

Such an impulse might be said to motivate the quest to find the real Jesus behind the one proclaimed by the four evangelists. It may also explain the tendency to reduce theology to a slogan ("justification by faith" or "the preferential option for the poor"). Such efforts are signs that one section of the orchestra—an indispensable one, no doubt—has hijacked the performance. Yes, there is a tension at the heart of the Christianity between church and world, believing and doing, joy and the cross, prayer and service. But this theological pluralism is not cacophony; indeed, it is essential to the symphony.

Theology may be, as the medieval church called it, the "queen of the sciences," but this queen is not a tyrant. Von Balthasar insists on the need for a genuinely Christian philosophy that serves but is not held in thrall to Christian theology. In other words, not everything Christian belongs in the religion section of the bookstore. Christianity

can affirm the writing of the *Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings*; the Christian can benefit from Mozart's *Magic Flute*.

Can this symphonic unity be sustained? What prevents the different sections from becoming factions? Von Balthasar has an unequivocal answer: what keeps the symphony together, what guides its selection of instruments and orders their performance, is the cross.

Von Balthasar's theology of the cross is complex, but suffice it to say that from the cross we learn that God really is love—a love that is eternal (the son is an eternal offering to the Father) and universal (it was poured out “once for all”). Like the beams of the cross, Jesus' love spans both heaven and earth; it reconciles the vertical and the horizontal, eternity and time. The cross is catholic.

This catholicity of the cross is made concrete for von Balthasar in the way that Jesus' death fulfills the deepest intuitions of the world's religions. On the one hand, paganism and mystical religions seek salvation in a vertical movement of integration with the absolute, either by an ascent into the One or by a descent into the soul. On the other hand, Judaism looks for salvation in the horizontal movement of history, in the advent of a new era. These two forms clash, but they are reconciled at the cross. On Calvary, Jesus' voluntary sacrifice super-fulfills the vertical movement of the religions, and when he breathes the Holy Spirit into the future, he super-fulfills all the horizontal movement toward utopias.

This means, among other things, that the cross safeguards both secularization and religiousness; it leaves room for self-realization at the same time that it invites imitation of Christ. Hence, the pluralism of worldviews does not consign humanity to futility or struggle. Nor does the rise of Christianity render obsolete the diversity of human religions and philosophies. Von Balthasar says that “an entire worldview can be transposed from its native key into another without suffering any harm.”

Look, for example, at Thomas Aquinas's translation of Aristotle's worldview into Augustine's worldview. This translation was a genuine transposition. The original themes are neither discarded nor woodenly repeated, but are heightened and intensified. Similarly, Christianity does not destroy culture. Just as grace perfects nature, Christianity perfects humanism.

Von Balthasar's Christian humanism presupposes, however, a Christian spirituality. The dramatic tensions between church and world are too great to be sustained by

purely human intellectual and moral exertion. Sooner or later, the Christian who engages the world will be tempted to claim the role of first violinist and strike his own A note, or perhaps even climb the podium and take a whirl at conducting his own *New World Symphony*. This is why von Balthasar is convinced that only she who out of a habit of constant prayer has acquired a spirit of Christlike humility will assume her post in the orchestra—the lowest place. For von Balthasar, Mother Teresa of Calcutta is a better exemplar of the Christian humanist than Erasmus of Rotterdam.

Stories are told of how, during the evening after finishing his teaching lessons, von Balthasar would delight his students by sitting at the piano and playing Mozart's *Don Giovanni* from memory. Eventually von Balthasar came to know Mozart's music so well that he actually gave away his record player; the music played better in his head anyway. When toward the end of his life he was awarded the prestigious Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart Prize, von Balthasar referred to Mozart as the "immovable pole star" around which circled Bach and Schubert ("the Great and Little Bears"). High praise indeed.

Von Balthasar did not consider his attraction to Mozart merely a matter of personal taste; for him it reflected a theological judgment. Mozart's music is catholic in the best sense of the word. Mozart "gives the child its first piano piece and sings its favorite song even to the dumbest ear, winds popular melodies like meadow blossoms into the exalted garland and can—like the divine wisdom—satisfy every social class and every rung on the ladder with one single blossom from this bouquet."

Mozart and his music can serve as a "secular example" that illustrates a theological point that von Balthasar seeks to make. "A consummate work of art, Mozart's *Magic Flute* . . . stands before us as the product of an unimaginable creative freedom. Does it make any sense to ask whether this work might have been any more perfect? Obviously, the question can be put in the abstract, but it is impossible to come up with any meaningful, concrete suggestion as to the direction in which this improvement might be made." And here is the clincher: "If a composer like God creates the opera of our world and puts the crucified and risen Son at its center, there must be no faultfinding and wondering if God could not have made it better."

Karl Barth was another theologian who loved Mozart. A portrait of the Austrian composer hung in his office—at the same level as a portrait of Calvin. Barth turns to Mozart for assistance in emphasizing the goodness of creation both in the light and

in the shadows. According to Barth, Mozart “heard the harmony of creation to which the shadows also belong but in which shadow is not darkness, deficiency is not defeat, sadness cannot become despair, trouble cannot degenerate into tragedy and infinite melancholy is not ultimately forced to claim undisputed sway.”

Mozart’s music does not merely inform Barth’s theology; Mozart, says von Balthasar, shapes the style of the *Church Dogmatics* overall. For this reason, he advises that we read the *Dogmatics* with Mozart’s melodies playing in our ear: “It is in this way that one should read, for example, those pieces that seem like the powerful finale of a symphony: the end of Barth’s doctrine of election . . . or the equally radiant conclusion of his doctrine of creation in God’s Yes to the world, or the three chapters on God’s perfections, or that astonishing triple fugue on faith, obedience and prayer that concludes the doctrine of providence. In all these cases one would have to admit that the similarities with Mozart are in no way accidental or external. Indeed, we can even boldly say: whoever is unable to hear Barth with these ears simply has not heard him.”

One can quarrel with von Balthasar’s evaluation of Mozart, but what is beyond dispute is that listening to Mozart sharpens von Balthasar’s theological ear. The same could be shown for his engagement with Shakespeare and the Greek tragedians. In all of these cases von Balthasar reads “secular” sources in a way that shows their natural openness to theology, and in turn he reads theology in a way that probes the deepest questions posed by secular works. This is a way of saying that von Balthasar’s Christian humanism is dialogical; theology and culture really talk and listen to each other. But the conversation is always mediated by Christ. The Christian encounter with the world is precisely *dia-logos*, “through the word.”

It would be easy to protest that von Balthasar’s humanism is too Eurocentric, too Catholic, too elitist. Certainly it is very much his own. But it is not idiosyncratic. Rather, it represents a Christian response to his culture and the crisis of the culture. The profile of this crisis perhaps looks somewhat different if one lives in Mexico instead of Switzerland, but the responsibility for Christian engagement remains.

We can imitate von Balthasar not by retracing his steps—probably an impossible and undesirable task for most of us—but by picking up where he left off. Christian theology has traditionally been expressed in the conceptual categories of Greece and Rome, but it is not bound by these. “God is not committed to Hebrew, or to Greek, or to Latin. God’s language is first and foremost his own: the event of his

incarnate Word, Jesus Christ.” Christian humanism is not Eurocentric but Christocentric. There is every reason to think that our knowledge of this one Word is deepened when the gospel is translated into non-European intellectual traditions.

Truth is symphonic—so play your own part. Expand von Balthasar’s bibliography: Read Toni Morrison and Isabel Allende. Attend a staging of *Evita*. Listen to Duke Ellington. But be forewarned, von Balthasar would say: these intellectual traditions and forms need to stretch and grow in order to make room for Christianity. In the same way that the cellist must allow the score under the direction of the conductor to tell her how to employ her gift and thereby discover depths of expression that she did not know she had, these cultural resources will, in the light of Christ, expand their meaning in surprising ways.