

Paper Response: "The Spirit of Truth"  
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Dr. Nussberger has given us a picture of multi-religious dialogue from a Balthasarian point of view. Within this perspective, she has highlighted Christ's kenotic obedience, itself an economic expression of an immanent Trinitarian reality, and also highlighted the necessary imitation of that obedience in the Church through the Holy Spirit. Through this "pneumatically-driven" obedience, Nussberger argues that it is both possible and necessary to respect the otherness of non-Christian religions. In other words, Christian kenosis helps to facilitate genuine dialogue because it is supported by the genuine otherness preserved in the Trinity. I would like to take up this point regarding "otherness" in Balthasar's thought for a moment and ask some further questions about it, as a way of forwarding the topic of this colloquium.

Otherness in Balthasar is a multifaceted concept, multifaceted because of the many contexts in which he will employ the term. There is the otherness of the Father, Son, and Spirit with respect to one other, by which Balthasar means to discuss the distinction between the Persons in the Trinity.<sup>1</sup> There is the otherness of Christ, which is an expression of his unique identity as the divine Son, a uniqueness expressed not only in his divinity but also through his humanity.<sup>2</sup> (I will say more on this in a moment.) There is the otherness of the Church, which is bi-polar: the Church bears *the otherness of Christ* in virtue of her *union* with him, and the Church

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<sup>1</sup> See much of *Theo-Drama V* for a discussion of this distinction, and the term in particular to note is the "distance" between the Persons. This is Balthasar's proposed dramatic term for expressing the distinction between the Persons.

<sup>2</sup> Much of this receives attention in *Theo-Logic II*.

is *other than* Christ by virtue of *not being him* – standing vis-à-vis Christ as both his Body (emphasizing their union) and his Bride (emphasizing their distinction).<sup>3</sup> Finally, there is the otherness of nature and of grace – that is, their distinction from one another. While grace perfects nature, it cannot be mistaken as the same reality, and indeed its perfection cannot be anticipated by nature. Balthasar will emphasize this unanticipated quality in a number of respects, most especially in his discussions of philosophy – which can rightly perceive being, and yet cannot anticipate the fulfillment of created being without the irradiation of grace in theology.<sup>4</sup>

There are two related and vital principles to understand about Balthasar’s concept of otherness. The first is that otherness simply for the sake of otherness is not an authentic good. Difference can be affirmed only inasmuch as it resembles the unity-in-difference of the Trinity. Not all otherness is good, such as the alienating otherness of sin. Second, Balthasar has what might be called a hierarchy of otherness, in imitation of the Catholic hierarchy of truth and – more pertinently – following the principles of the analogy of being. This means that while kinds of otherness I listed share a likeness to one another, conceptually linking them, they are nevertheless distinguished from one another by a simultaneous dissimilarity. To be clear, the likeness and dissimilarity that characterize Balthasar’s typically hierarchical thinking does *not* describe a simple scale from “most” to “least” *other*. The *dissimilarity*, particularly in the case of God with respect to the world, is greater than what is similar. Dissimilarity breaks apart the hierarchy into a series of relations not simply of “more” or “less,” but of a series of qualitatively different

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<sup>3</sup> See *Theo-Drama III*.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, *Epilogue* and *Theo-Logic I*.

relations. In other words, even the way in which God is distinguished from the world is qualitatively and ontologically different than the way we are different than each other. We can see this active most of all in the Incarnation. Christ expresses the unsurpassable otherness of God in his own humanity, so that Balthasar will argue that Jesus' "total otherness" is "a total otherness *within* a perfect equality of human nature" he shares with human beings in general. It is this total otherness (the otherness of God, and not simply otherness for the sake of being different) that the Christian must imitate and can imitate only through the work of the Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

If all this is so, then when we come to discuss respecting the otherness of religions for the sake of multi-religious dialogue, we must take care to specify what we mean. Many of these questions remain at the moment answered. I would like to press that we must work to recall the peculiar otherness of Christ, which escapes the grasp of the Church that nevertheless expresses his otherness. With respect to the Church, this must at the very least force us to remember that we ourselves stand at a peculiar distance in regard to other religions. Because the Church cleaves to Christ, the Church operates on a different horizon than all other religions. When we acknowledge the otherness of other religions, our very ability to do so immediately affirms our unique otherness with respect to other religions. In other words, what makes us capable – at all – of respecting the religions of the world as other is God's unique self-revelation in Christ, which the Church alone expresses with fullness. Our generosity of its nature must also reveal our peculiarity. These are two sides of the same coin, and both must be acknowledged in honest multi-religious dialogue.

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<sup>5</sup> *Theo-Logic II*, 70.

The otherness of the Church is founded on the Cross and at Pentecost, when Christ uniquely gives himself to the Church in the Spirit – and forms the Church out of his own self-offering to the Father. This is what both humbles and exalts the Christian, and for Balthasar humility and exaltation are simultaneously achieved.<sup>6</sup> I am not, in other words, asking for Christian arrogance. I ask only that, if we are to employ Balthasar’s understanding of otherness in multi-religious dialogue, we must understand that otherness with the nuance proper to the concept. Christ is other, and the Church is other through him. This makes dialogue possible, *and* sets Christ and his Bride (the Church) apart.

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<sup>6</sup> See especially *Mysterium Paschale* and *Theo-Drama V*.