



## THE INCOMPREHENSIBLE GOD AND ECUMENICAL FAIR PLAY

*Bryce P. Wandrey*

In reaction to a review of his *Philosophical Fragments*, Søren Kierkegaard wrote:

When a man has filled his mouth so full of food that for this reason he cannot eat and it must end with his dying of hunger, does giving food to him consist in stuffing his mouth even more or, instead, in taking a little away that he can eat?... When a communicator takes a portion of the copious knowledge that the very knowledgeable man knows and communicates it to him in a form that makes it strange to him, the communicator is, as it were, taking away his knowledge, at least until the knower manages to assimilate the knowledge by overcoming the resistance of form... When an age in systematic, rote fashion has finished with the understanding of Christianity and all the attendant difficulties and jubilantly proclaims how easy it is to understand the difficulty, then, of course, one must harbor a suspicion. In other words, it is better to understand that something is so difficult that it simply cannot be understood than to understand that a difficulty is so very easy to understand; for if it is so very easy, then perhaps there is no difficulty, since a difficulty is indeed recognizable by its being difficult to understand.<sup>1</sup>

It can be painfully obvious at times that in the church there are some Christians who have filled themselves so full of the knowledge of God that there is no room for any more knowledge at all. In other cases, some Christians have filled themselves so full that even other *forms* of the knowledge of God, expressed in different confessions and with different turns of phrase, can find no room either. For these people, Christianity has become “easy.” It has been completely “figured out.” There is no more room for “new” knowledge or even new conceptions of this knowledge.

As a result dialogue, both between God and us and between us and others, becomes very difficult. When something as difficult as the knowledge of God becomes

“so very easy to understand,” dialogue devolves into trying to “wake up” the other person, to prove how easy the difficulty really is.

Kierkegaard uncovers two symptoms of inauthentic dialogue. First, Christianity appears so “easy” that conformity and coercion are the only tools of communication. And second, knowledge of God attains such apparent fullness and completeness that, instead of nourishing, it chokes and starves.

Kierkegaard’s critique is still relevant in the current ecumenical climate. His solution is still relevant, too. He writes, “When in such an order of things the communication does not aim at making the difficulty even easier, the communication becomes a taking away. The difficulty is invested with a new form and thus actually made difficult. This is communication to the person who has already found the difficulty so very easy to explain.”<sup>2</sup> Sometimes what is needed is not an adding but a retracting of information, not to conceal it but to allow the “digestion” of what’s already there.

Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar was aware of Kierkegaard’s critique and employed Kierkegaard’s solution. The prime example of this is found in his essay, “The Unknown God.” Here von Balthasar deals with the paradox of how the knowledge of God—especially through His revelation in Jesus Christ—comprises a dimension of incomprehensibility, which points to the inexhaustibility of the mystery of God’s revelation.

The implication is, then, that if we are truly to dialogue with each other, if we are willing both to meet and to be met, then we must first wrestle with this paradox: in the face of God’s

revelation, our knowledge of God does not become something easier to grasp. Instead, the inexhaustibility of God becomes more apparent and the difficulty grows.

Von Balthasar begins “The Unknown God” by drawing attention to the ease with which Christians utter the name of God. He juxtaposes this ease with Judaism’s unease. The

*Christians are tempted to think that, with Jesus, God became completely knowable.*

Old Testament witnesses to the fact that the more God revealed Himself, the more “inconceivable he became.”<sup>3</sup> Here already is a major insight into authentic theological dialogue and knowledge of God. If we as Christians have completely lost any feeling of awe before God and His revelation, if knowing God has become “easy” for us, how can we have the humility to enter into theological discussion with others? Are we actually willing to evaluate our statements and confessions in light of the Old Testament approach, recognizing that the more God reveals Himself, the less we are able to conceptualize Him?

Christians in particular are tempted to think that with the advent of Jesus, the climax of God’s self-revelation, God became completely knowable—that the “difficult” became “easy.” On the contrary, von Balthasar argues that “[t]here were, too, times in Christian history, above all at the end of the patristic period, which were epochs marked by an elemental trembling in the face of the total otherness of God, who in his very being transcends every concept and, even more, every statement.”<sup>4</sup> Consequently, God did not cease to be incomprehensible just because He became, in a sense, comprehensible in Jesus Christ.

Von Balthasar adds, concerning the trinitarian and christological formulations of the first councils, that “[e]ven such formulations as these, like any other theological ‘knowledge’ of God, must become dangerous from the very moment when man ceases to know and to be conscious of whom it is he is dealing with.”<sup>5</sup> And so once again, lest we think that the doctrinal statements that we formulate make the difficult knowledge of God easier, we should instead be wary of the ground upon which we tread. In our attempts to embrace and exhaust the mystery of God’s revelation, we might dangerously peel back the curtain, exposing the *Deus absconditus*.

This reality, however, does not leave us with an inability to speak about God altogether, because as the church we

come face-to-face with the incarnate God, the Word of God in our flesh, the climax of God’s self-revelation. We live in the theological tension created by Jesus’ words: “No one has ever

*Some Christians are so full of the knowledge of God that there’s no room for any more knowledge.*

seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, has made Him known” (John 1:18) and “He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’” (John 14:9). Balthasar’s treatment of this revelatory paradox is worth quoting in full.

But at the moment when the mystery of God bears in upon us so overwhelmingly as it does in the Incarnation, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, a highly dangerous situation arises. On the one hand, those who are confronted with this mystery are enjoined to preach it and consequently to put it into intelligible words and concepts and even, in certain circumstances, to translate it into broadly descriptive formulae in order to *protect* his overwhelming greatness, to frustrate men’s attempts to master it with their reason and to fit it into their own forms of thought or to frustrate men’s attempts to bring it down to the level of their philosophies of life... On the other hand, the wire which is set up round the mystery to protect it can only too easily and almost fatally become a snare to trap men. This, either in the sense that it makes the approaches to the mystery difficult or almost impassible for the man who draws near in a sense of awe (by either a literal or figural iconostasis), or in the sense that for

educated and uneducated alike, the impression may be created that it is in the wire itself that the mystery has been captured and tamed, that the unknown God has been made known.<sup>6</sup>

Von Balthasar here echoes Kierkegaard’s critique with great profundity. He hits upon the ease with which some try to master the mystery of God in Jesus Christ with their own reason, bringing it down to their own level, making the difficulty easy. In order to protect against this, the church sets up wires; statements and confessions that attempt to insure the difficulty of the mystery. But our attempts to guard the mystery with our statements and explanations—with our wires—can result in a completely unapproachable, unfathomable knowledge. Or the knowledge of God can be trapped inside the wire itself. Where does that leave us?

Contrary to the “deeds, not creeds” approach, von Balthasar argues that we cannot discard formal or official confessions in an effort to start over. At all times the church should strive to think out the divine truth that has been given in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. While these attempts at opening up the truth through theological and dogmatic work will inevitably remain “children of their age, conditioned by their time,” they can still bring the essentials of the Christian faith “into being in their time.” Such confessions contain truth “which cannot be lost, and which must be taken along with one on one’s way.”<sup>7</sup>

Here von Balthasar is taking up the issue of form, or the means by which the divine truth is expressed. This corresponds to the second dimension of the doctrinal problem that Kierkegaard identifies. In addition to glibly construed easiness, there is the issue of inflexibility, stemming from satedness with God’s revelation. Kierkegaard proposes, as a cure, the removal of the knowledge one already has in order to “re-form” it. An initial resistance will in time give way to better digestion.

Therefore, doctrines are inevitably timebound; they only express what their time is capable of expressing. Yet they contain divine truth all the same. Von Balthasar gives an example: “For modernism, dogmas are but crystal-

*Sometimes what is needed is not an adding but a retracting of information.*

lised forms of the existential faith-relationship to God, forms of vital religious intuitions and needs, valid as long as they foster the existential reality, but harmful once the life has gone out of them and they have stiffened into dead formulae.”<sup>8</sup>

Kierkegaard and von Balthasar both conclude that theology must cling to the essential but at the same time display a willingness to *express* the essential in a different form. For example, von Balthasar asks what the Chalcedonian formula achieved if not a point of departure for theology, “a methodological and heuristic principle for a Christology that must then be developed from it.” He extends this status to a great number of the church’s canons and definitions, on the grounds that they are not so much “themselves theology” but “solid guidelines that point the way for elaborating theology.”<sup>9</sup>

But now we come to another concern. If knowledge of God must remain difficult, what can we ever know for sure? What becomes of the certainty of faith?

Von Balthasar responds, “It might then seem that it would be better to abandon any attempt to speak and think of God if he always remains, even when he reveals himself, wholly and then most truly unknown. But we no longer have authority to do this, for he came to us in an event... of such self-giving, defenseless, inviting power (or powerlessness) that we understand at least so much: he wants to be *for us*, he wants to gather us into

the abyss of his own inner Trinitarian love.”<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, we are not left in a vacuum, unable to express or comprehend the divine. If anything, we have been given a way to comprehend the incomprehensible God, namely the love of God for the world, which is revealed in the sacrifice of His Son upon the cross. The event of Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection is our path toward expressing the comprehensibility of God.

In von Balthasar’s essay “Trinity and Future,” he reflects upon the triune nature of God in relation to three things: His free act of creation, the human ability to go astray in this creation, and the inherent risk that God must assume by gathering the lostness of the human race into Himself. Von Balthasar claims that the only possible way for this lostness to be gath-

*The church sets up wires; confessions that attempt to insure the difficulty of the mystery.*

ered into God is through His ability to share in it through powerlessness, and also through obedience—to Himself. Hence, God must be triune.<sup>11</sup> Why? Because “the divine omnipotence cannot deal with the rebellious powerlessness of creaturely freedom from above and outside.”<sup>12</sup> As a result, von Balthasar contends that we must presuppose an incarnation of God in order to uphold that God is all in all, even in the face of rebellious freedom. The lost creature is saved not through being overwhelmed from above but through “being gathered up into the abyss of absolute love.”<sup>13</sup>

Here is a mysterious dialogue between human freedom and divine freedom. Human freedom is allowed to speak its own last word, while divine freedom’s final word is no longer a word but a deed “which sinks down into total darkness.”<sup>14</sup> In this silence and wordlessness, God reveals Who

and what God is. In the face of God’s deed accomplished in the incarnation, crucifixion, and death of Jesus Christ, our talk even of God’s incomprehensibility is reduced to silence. We have no reply, for we see clearly in Jesus Christ what sin and lostness truly are, and how he bore them in his body and overcame them in his patience.<sup>15</sup>

Von Balthasar’s method, in short, doesn’t leave believers with nothing to say. The incarnation of God reveals His triune nature and His response to human lostness, giving believers plenty to know and confess. In another work, von Balthasar talks of the necessity of God’s self-manifestation remaining incomprehensible. But instead of the divine incomprehensibility being a negative determination of what we don’t know, it is a positive property of the one Whom we *do* know. Analogously, “[t]he more a great work of art is known and grasped, the more concretely we are dazzled by its ‘ungraspable’ genius.”<sup>16</sup> In true Kierkegaardian style, the mystery does not become easy, but instead, in our knowledge of God’s self-revelation, the mystery becomes profoundly more difficult.

Can Kierkegaard and von Balthasar’s common task of making the knowledge of God more difficult in turn make ecumenical theology any easier? Only if the various church bodies are willing to build on, and yet go beyond, their official doctrinal formulations. Ecclesial confessions must

*The incarnation of God upholds that God is all in all, even in the face of rebellious freedom.*

not be discarded, but at the same time they must be recognized for what they are—children of their age. What is essential within them—namely, the expression of the divine truth—must be brought forward into current theological, doctrinal, and ecumenical

work. What binds them to the time in which they were formulated, either culturally or philosophically, must be left behind.

Along with this process of “re-forming” must come the realization that ecclesial confessions, while aiming at the expression of divine truth, can also serve the negative purpose of convincing us that we have become “full” of divine truth, so full that we have no room for any more knowledge. We must realize that we are confronted with a great difficulty every time we speak about God and attempt to make His self-revelation comprehensible. This difficulty should never become easy. “In the end it is all no more than a start, an attempt, an approximation, just as the life shared between two lovers remains to the end a start, an attempt, to find a way to each other, but only as each allows the other his own freedom.”<sup>17</sup>

Ecumenical dialogue is impossible without this willingness to face the never-ending difficulty. Von Balthasar issues us the same note of caution that

he felt himself while wrestling with the theology of Karl Barth.

[N]o one should think he can quickly and offhandedly dispose of the questions posed here. True, the obtuse think they can be done with these questions without prior encounter with them. They are the type who think they already have the answers before they have understood and felt the impact of the questions. One would rather advise such people to keep away. Whoever attempts to dialogue, even if only as a serious book reviewer, should be asked to do so only out of a deep expertise in these issues... Only the patient need apply.<sup>18</sup> *LF*

—  
BRYCE P. WANDREY, a graduate of St. Olaf College and Concordia Theological Seminary—Fort Wayne, served for four years as a pastor in Hickory, North Carolina. He is currently a student at Oxford.

#### Notes

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments, Johannes Climacus*, ed. & trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), xxi–xxii.
2. *Ibid.*, xxii.
3. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Unknown God,” in *Elucidations*, trans. John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1975), 35.
4. *Ibid.*, 35.
5. *Ibid.*, 38.
6. *Ibid.*, 39–40.
7. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Tradition,” in *Elucidations*, 122.
8. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*. Vol. I: *Seeing the Form* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 177.
9. *Ibid.*, 77.
10. “Unknown,” 43–44.
11. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Trinity and Future,” in *Elucidations*, 82–83.
12. *Ibid.*, 83.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, 83–84.
16. *The Glory of the Lord*, 186–89.
17. “Unknown,” 44.
18. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992), xvii–xix.

## Coming Soon from the ALPB

In December:

### ***Rich in Grace: The Bible of the Poor for Twenty-First Century Christians***

Meditations in verse  
on the triptychs of the  
*Biblia Pauperum*  
by Kathryn Ann Hill

In January:

### ***Forced to Pray: God's Chosen under Pressure***

by ALPB bestselling author  
Bishop Richard F. Bansemer

To place your order, call Donna Roche:  
(607) 746-7511