

# Strange Companions? Hans Urs von Balthasar as Resource for Comparative Theology

Theological Studies  
2017, Vol. 78(2) 369–388  
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DOI: 10.1177/0040563917698955  
journals.sagepub.com/home/tsj



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## Abstract

While Hans Urs von Balthasar has been often criticized for a failure to deeply engage cultural and religious diversity, this essay argues his theology proves an excellent resource for comparative theology. After clarifying and explaining Balthasar's own shortcomings in interreligious and intercultural engagement, the article presents his theological aesthetics as a paradigm for forming the comparative theological imagination. The essay demonstrates this utility by examining a passage from the Daoist text *Zhuangzi* in light of Balthasar's theology.

## Keywords

comparative theology, Hans Urs von Balthasar, theological method, theological aesthetics, intercultural hermeneutics

For both critics and champions of Hans Urs von Balthasar, commending the great Swiss spiritual director to the discipline of comparative theology seems to make little sense. The most apparent reason for this is that Balthasar himself showed little interest in either comparative hermeneutics or reading non-Western texts, and certainly no engagement with the traditions of China (my own specialization). When he did show an engagement with Hinduism and Buddhism, Balthasar fundamentally understood these traditions in terms of the dialectic between Eastern apophaticism of

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ultimate meaning and the kataphatic testimony of the Word made flesh in Christianity.<sup>1</sup> For those who hold expertise in Hinduism or Buddhism, it is clear that Balthasar's engagement on this score is decidedly not steeped in a deep reading of these traditions, and tends to see them as equivalents of earlier Christian heresies, such as Gnosticism.

In this essay, I recommend Balthasar's thought to comparative theologians in two respects. First, I show Balthasar's engagement with Eastern traditions is not primarily expressive of his theological style or convictions, but more of his Orientalist historical and cultural milieu. Second, I present Balthasar's theology as immensely fruitful for comparative theological engagement in allowing and nurturing the cultivation of a theological imagination that serves both the reading of non-Christian texts and the theological task of *fides quaerens intellectum*. Here, I focus on Balthasar's theological aesthetics, arguing this work cultivates a theological imagination based on ecstasy: the encounter with divine beauty in revelation draws us out of ourselves, into relation with God. I argue this basic intuition throughout *The Glory of the Lord* allows a highly functional imaginative space to invite non-Christian texts to help the theologian describe, understand, and experience this ecstasy. As my own specialty is with ancient Chinese traditions, I will present an example of how Balthasar's theological aesthetics makes for a helpful context in which to read non-Christian texts theologically, drawing upon the Daoist text, the *Zhuangzi* 莊子.

While I have elected to focus on the "intellectual virtues"<sup>2</sup> that can ground inventive and faithful comparative theology, one could just as well focus on particular themes in his theology ripe for comparative engagement. Francis X. Clooney has already shown Balthasar's conception of divine absence can be put in fruitful dialogue with Hinduism.<sup>3</sup> More recently, I have argued Balthasar makes a complementary conversation partner with early Confucian philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, the field would benefit from a comparative analysis of his concept of revelation as *Gestalt* with the Neo-Confucian *li* 理 in thinkers like Zhu Xi 朱熹, or placing his metaphysical use of masculine–feminine in conversation with the Hindu goddesses. Yet I have not emphasized these avenues precisely because I wish to argue not only that Balthasar is an interesting thinker for comparative theologians to read, but that his broad theological vision is an excellent point from which the comparative task can fruitfully begin. Hence, at heart, I argue that comparative theologians can and should take Balthasar seriously as a formative theological master who can enliven our theologizing.

1. To date, the only monograph focused on this engagement in Balthasar's theology is Raymond Gawronski, *Word and Silence: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Spiritual Encounter Between East and West* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995).

2. See Lee H. Yearley, *Mencius and Aquinas: Conceptions of Courage* (Albany: SUNY, 1990), 2–3. My reference to "intellectual virtues" here is used in the sense used by Yearley rather than the classic Aristotelian–Thomistic taxonomy of virtue. Yearley finds that the comparative disciplines (in his case, comparative ethics) require the cultivation of certain intellectual dispositions and habits that make the comparative endeavor possible.

3. Francis X. Clooney, *His Hiding Place is Darkness: A Hindu–Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2014), 22–31.

4. Joshua R. Brown, "Towards Filial Love: Reconsidering Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theme of Christological Obedience in Light of Early Confucian Philosophy," *The Heythrop Journal* 58 (2014): 132–48, <https://doi.org/10.1111/heyj.12158>.

## Saving Balthasar for Comparative Theology: On Problems in His Thought

In his programmatic book *Faith Among Faiths*, James L. Fredericks offers a picture of comparative theology not as a theory, but “as a process and practice.”<sup>5</sup> Although Fredericks does not use the language, he suggests comparative theology as a form of *fides quaerens intellectum*: “comparative theologians are interested in studying other religions on their own terms and then exploring their own Christian faith using what they have learned about the other religions.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, we might say that at the heart of comparative theology lies the simple conviction that non-Christian traditions contain truth and wisdom useful for helping the Christian theologian to understand and love God.

In many ways, Balthasar’s thought fails this rather broad litmus test. In *Hindu God, Christian God*, Clooney nicely expresses the concern: Balthasar’s conception of Christological *Gestalt* leads him to say that Christ is the unique form of divine self-communication to the world, and to Balthasar, non-Christian religions stand in opposition to this form of self-communication. But, as Clooney observes, underwriting this Christological *Gestalt* is Balthasar’s tendency to reduce non-Christian mysticism to “a rather unimaginative and deracinated version of nondualism... mentioned simply to provide a foil to the richness of the Christian truth.”<sup>7</sup> Because of this, Clooney recognizes the major comparative problem with Balthasar is not his Christology or theological approach per se, but rather his assessment and understanding of non-Christian traditions.

This observation is quite vital: it is not Balthasar’s theological convictions regarding Christ as the unique form of revelation that is problematic for comparative theology. If this were the issue, then comparative theology can have no real purchase on the Christian imagination, since it would erode the central node of all Christian thought since the New Testament: “Formerly, God spoke to our fathers in many ways and by many means through the prophets; in these days, He has spoken to us through his Son” (Heb 1: 1–2 NRSV throughout). Rather, the problem is whether Balthasar sufficiently read and understood the content of non-Christian traditions and how they stand in relation to the Truth revealed in the Form of Christ.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the challenges Balthasar present for comparative theology are not primarily theological convictions, and have more to do with his hermeneutical approach to non-Christian texts and how to understand the truth therein.

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5. James L. Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* (New York: Paulist, 1999), 9.

6. *Ibid.*, 168.

7. Francis X. Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* (New York: Oxford University, 2001), 66.

8. Or, one might challenge whether Balthasar took seriously enough the call in *Nostra Aetate* to “reject nothing that is holy and true of [non-Christian] religions.” *Nostra Aetate* (October 28, 1965), 2, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html). Hence, there might be indeed some need to complement Balthasar’s theology with a hermeneutical transition to hospitality espoused in Leo D. Lefebure, *True and Holy: Christian Scripture and Other Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014).

For example, in *Theo-Logic, Vol. 2*, published three years before his death, Balthasar locates Hinduism and Buddhism alongside a critique of ancient mythology that results in “the regress to an absolute that henceforth can be reached only by the negation of all concepts, themselves unmasked as finite.”<sup>9</sup> After briefly working through why this is the case, Balthasar comes to the conclusion that “Zen’s reciprocal double negation is presumably at the farthest possible remove from what biblical man’s search intends.”<sup>10</sup> Generalizing this, he concludes, “In the East, the search for the living God becomes a technique for finding something that is beyond all searching.”<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, the East is cast in terms of antithesis to the Christian conception of the divine theo-drama with the world:

The primary locus of negative (philosophical) theology remains man’s *extrabiblical* search for God, the search of man, who, weary of a seeking that never arrives at its goal, takes refuge either in a system (even Zen is such) or in a refined agnosticism, which goes on negating even after it has already given up the quest. *This primary negative theology is the strongest bastion against Christianity.*<sup>12</sup>

Apart from the question of evaluating Balthasar’s conclusions, I am most interested in drawing attention to how he presents the Eastern traditions in this brief treatment. As Balthasar develops his point, he adduces support from two principle sources: Hans Waldenfels’s *Absolutes Nichts* and Keiji Nishitani’s *Was ist Religion?*. At no point does Balthasar cite classical texts of the Zen or Mahayana traditions as evidence—there is no mention of texts such as the *Lotus Sutra* at all, let alone a reading of them. Rather, Balthasar’s evidence comes from two scholars who both were primarily educated in German–European theology and philosophy (Nishitani studied under Heidegger), and whose discussion of Buddhism relates to world of existentialist philosophy, although their own concerns are admittedly broader.

Balthasar simply did not have a first-hand scholarly grasp of the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Moreover, his reading of these traditions tends toward locating them within the idiom of Western philosophizing—indeed, for Balthasar, it is almost instinctual to read these traditions in this way, though in our example reading them alongside early Greek philosophies. The great difference, however, is that while Balthasar will often speak quite harshly of the Platonic and Neo-Platonic traditions as reactions against ancient mythology, he also finds much positive in these sources, for example, the account of beauty developed in Platonism, which Balthasar sees as preparing the way for the encounter with God in revelation.<sup>13</sup>

9. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic, vol. 2, Truth of God* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004), 91. Hereafter cited as *Truth of God*.

10. *Ibid.*, 93–94.

11. *Ibid.*, 94.

12. *Ibid.*, 95, emphasis mine.

13. See Markus Enders, “«Alle weltliche Schönheit ist für den antiken Menschen die Epiphonie göttlicher Herrlichkeit»: Zur vorchristlichen Wahrnehmung des Schönen in der heidnischen Antike nach Hans Urs von Balthasar.” In *Logik der Liebe und Herrlichkeit Gottes: Hans Urs von Balthasar im Gespräch*, ed. Walter Kardinal Kasper (Ostdilferrn: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 2006): 26–44.

How can we account for this difference in treatment, apart from the observation that Balthasar did not deeply engage Eastern traditions whereas he did have a sound knowledge about Greek sources? This is actually the best place to begin, for we must ask *why* does Balthasar give a serious and deep reading of Greek sources, seeing positive and negative aspects for theological usage, while he does not turn to Asian sources?<sup>14</sup> Henri de Lubac famously said Balthasar may have been “the most cultured man of our age,”<sup>15</sup> which is quite revealing. The culture in which Balthasar was so deeply steeped was primarily German modernity. Philosophically, this cultural model led him to deep consideration and deep appropriation of Orientalist philosophies such as that of G.W. F. Hegel.<sup>16</sup>

In Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*, history is defined as the unfolding of the ultimate design of the world, or the actualization of Spirit.<sup>17</sup> In this schema, the actualization of Spirit is marked fundamentally by the exercise of subjective intellect and will, the development of morality and freedom.<sup>18</sup> At the outset of his great narrative, Hegel discusses “the Oriental world” including the religious traditions of China and India, as well as Buddhism. Hegel begins with a few general observations, first that the East does possess morality. However, he quickly shows this “morality” is achieved only by external law and is itself external, and not an actualization of subjectivity. Hence, “since spirit has not yet attained subjectivity, it wears the appearance of spirituality still involved in the conditions of nature.”<sup>19</sup>

Because of this, history can only *begin* in the East; the actualization of Spirit is really completed in the movement through Greece, Rome, and Germany. In other words, Hegel means that Eastern traditions are part of a world that seems underdeveloped and intellectually primitive. Because this moral world does not look like the model Hegel has in mind—in which subjective moral reasoning is prized over against “external” sources of moral conduct—it is not only rejected, but it is seen as inferior. The Eastern traditions are thus left to the most introductory steps to the history of Spirit, and are most often used to show contrast with the true historical development of Spirit.

Particularly in Hegel, we see how this Orientalism informed the European imagination and sense of identity, forming the East as alien “other” to the civilized West. Edward Said classically observed:

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14. Apart from the fact that any *ressourcement* of the Christian tradition necessarily involves wading deeply into the waters of Greek philosophy.

15. Henri de Lubac, “A Witness to Christ in the Church: Hans Urs von Balthasar,” *Communio* 2 (Fall 1975): 228–49 at 230.

16. See Karl Josef Wallner, *Gott als Eschaton? Trinitarische Dramatik als Voraussetzung göttlicher Universalität bei Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Vienna: Heiligenkreuz, 1992), 224–69. For example, Wallner describes Balthasar’s trinitarian theology as “wrestling with Hegel.” For a wonderful treatment of Balthasar’s relationship to Hegelian thought, see Brian J. Spence, “The Hegelian Element in Von Balthasar’s and Moltmann’s Understanding of the Suffering of God,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 14 (1998): 45–60, <https://doi.org/10.3138/tjt.14.1.45>.

17. G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History* in *Hegel*, Great Books of the Western World 46 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1984), 153–369 at 160.

18. *Ibid.*, 170–71.

19. *Ibid.*, 207.

Orientalism is never far from...the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying 'us' Europeans as against all 'those' non-Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is...the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures.<sup>20</sup>

This is vital because Orientalism is not merely an intellectual position one chooses to take. It is a markedly *cultural* phenomenon, born out of participation in and inheriting the grand project of European Enlightenment.

In light of this observation, we must keep in mind theologians such as Balthasar, regardless of how brilliant, talented, and committed to critiquing the excesses of modernity, were formed in a world in which they were shaped by Orientalism, either implicitly or explicitly. Generations from now, perhaps theologians in Africa will read current US Catholic theology and see how hamstrung we are by the cultural rhetoric of liberty and personal choice that mark the American experience. Such aspects of culture are in many cases blind spots that cannot be avoided, and can rarely be flatly overcome. That Balthasar's theology suggests a lingering Orientalism is a by-product of the fact that he was indeed deeply cultured, but in a culture formed in no small part by the intellectual paradigms of Orientalism.

The Orientalist presupposition of Balthasar's cultural and intellectual background helps us to see that Balthasar does not reject Eastern traditions outright. Rather, his theology comes out of a world and era (though the end of it, to be sure) in which Hegel's historical assessment of the East makes good sense. Hence, the latent Orientalism of German culture and Hegelian philosophy provides a profoundly good explanation for why Balthasar reads Eastern traditions as he does; or perhaps better, why he does not really read them. Quite simply, Balthasar was deeply formed in a cultural and intellectual milieu that presumed from the outset that these Eastern texts and traditions were not sources of great wisdom or moral insight. Thus, should we be surprised that Balthasar—whose doctorate was in *Germanistik*, or German studies of culture, literature, and philosophy—would take on some of the less than savory cultural presuppositions of those figures he knew so deeply and well?

All important is that while this Orientalist presupposition seems extant in Balthasar's thought, it does not seem an active feature of his theology. It is not at the forefront of his theological imagination, and it does not seem to me fair to label him an Orientalist. Indeed, one can see that Balthasar himself recognized this blind spot. In the first volume of his *magnum opus*, Balthasar writes this revealing paragraph:

The overall scope of the present work naturally remains all too Mediterranean. The inclusion of other cultures, especially that of Asia, would have been important and fruitful. But the author's education has not allowed for such an expansion, and a superficial presentation of such material would have been dilettantism. May those qualified come to complete the present fragment.<sup>21</sup>

20. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 7.

21. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2002), 11. Hereafter cited as *Seeing the Form*.

Here we see both Balthasar's recognition of the fact that his education marginalized Eastern resources, and a desire to move beyond this restriction in some degree. Earlier, I noted that the passage in *Truth of God* above was written three years before Balthasar's death, which is significant. The fact that Balthasar attempts some reading of Eastern traditions in *Truth of God* and the *Epilogue* to his trilogy suggests Balthasar's attempt over a lifetime to attend to the richness of Asia, though modestly. One might justly critique that his reading of Asian sources indeed remains in the sphere of dilettantism, but such a reading is to be expected given his course of preparation. That he attempted to move beyond this limitation speaks volumes about the sort of theologian Balthasar really was, and what his theology might be able to teach us.

## Balthasar and Comparative Theology: Discerning an Opening

It seems just that an attempt to draw Balthasar's theology into a comparative mode with Eastern traditions should begin with the work that he observed was "all too Mediterranean." In this section, my goal is not to summarize Balthasar's theological aesthetics but to argue it can helpfully cultivate desirable dispositions for theologizing comparatively. The key is in understanding Balthasar's theological aesthetic as ecstasy (εκ-στασις), the experience of being drawn out of oneself. In *Seeing the Form*, Balthasar approaches this fundamental concept by describing the relationship and distinction between *Gestalt* (form) and *Glanz* (splendor). In phenomenological terms the *Gestalt* of a thing is the form it takes, that is, what is experienced in the phenomenological encounter.<sup>22</sup> It is the texture, colors and particular depictions on the canvas in Grünewald's *Crucifixion* panel. It is the stone, shape, and negative space in Michelangelo's *Pietà*. It is the sheet music and the performed harmonies of strings, brass, and percussion that is a Mozart symphony.

At this point, the theological aesthetics faces a pivotal question: how is the form related to what it expresses? If Balthasar had been devoted to Kant, for example, he might have proposed a cleavage or obscurity between the form as it is experienced and the reality of the thing expressed in the form. However, Balthasar drank deep from the well of Goethe, who argued against the mechanistic theorizing of his day that encountering the natural is the way to know it: engaging the form of life is the means to understand life. Balthasar evokes the ancient idea that the beauty of a given form testifies to its participation in Being (i.e., Beauty is a transcendental property of Being,

22. Francesca Aran Murphy, *Christ the Form of Beauty: A Study of Theology and Literature* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 134ff. Murphy argues convincingly that Balthasar's notion of *Gestalt* passes through the Austrian *Gestalt* school, especially the thought of Christian von Ehrenfels, who considered *Gestalt* primarily in musical terms. For more on the particulars of *Gestalt* in this school (in contrast to the Berlin school), see Barry Smith, ed. *Foundations of Gestalt Theory* (Munich: Philosophia Verlag, 1988). For a lengthy study of Balthasar's phenomenological conception of *Gestalt*, see Ilkamrina Kuhr, *Gabe und Gestalt: Theologische Phänomenologie bei Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 2013).

alongside Goodness and Truth). This is then, the “splendor” of a particular form: it “radiates” with being. Consequently, Balthasar argues, “form would not be beautiful unless it were fundamentally a sign and appearing of a depth and a fullness that, in themselves and in an abstract sense, remain beyond both our reach and our vision.”<sup>23</sup>

Crucially, the form does not become one sign among others that points to a more ultimate or final reality. That which remains beyond our reach and our vision is mediated by what is given to our reach and vision. Balthasar says, “We ‘behold’ the form; but, if we really behold it, it is not as a detached form, rather in its unity with the depths that make their appearance in it.”<sup>24</sup> Mozart’s symphonies draw us into deep meaning and significance—surely, we do not merely appreciate the arrangement of B-flats and C-sharps upon hearing his work. Yet, we certainly cannot enter into this deep meaning and significance apart from these B-flats and C-sharps and their arrangement: the form and the depths are a phenomenological whole.

Balthasar draws upon this imagery to argue that God’s acts in the world reveal God in his depths. Salvation history is “a genuine self-representation on his part, a genuine unfolding of himself in the worldly stuff of nature, man, and history.”<sup>25</sup> Within this aesthetic schema, we find two constituent features of faith. First, it is a *lumens* by which we are made able to see God as he has revealed himself. Second, a “mediating vision which occasions a ‘rapture’ and a ‘transport’ to an ‘eros-love’ for those ‘things unseen’ which had announced themselves by appearing in the visibility and revelation of the Incarnation.”<sup>26</sup> For Balthasar, when God revealed himself in the act of Jesus Christ, he not only gave us a way to know him notionally, but revealed himself in a form irradiating with the divine splendor (*gloria*), that enraptures and evokes an *eros-love* for God in our hearts.

Yet there is a converse and complement to this principle. Jesus Christ provides this form of revelation evoking the *eros-love* for God, but uniquely. Just as we cannot experience the depths of an aria without hearing that particular aria, so too “we ought never to speak of God’s beauty without reference to the form and manner of appearing which he exhibits in salvation history.”<sup>27</sup> Here we see what I call “dimensionality” in Balthasar’s thought. Jesus is not an object signifying the divine in a particular way amongst other symbols. This gives Jesus height and width, but all the depth lies beyond the image. Balthasar maintains a depth-dimension of the cross. The depths of what Jesus reveals—the Triune love of God, and God’s love for creation—is connected to and part of the form. The mysteries of God *are* the depths of the form, and are not merely suggested by it. Hence, we must not only recognize God’s epiphany in Jesus, but we also must not “leave this epiphany behind.”<sup>28</sup>

23. Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, 115.

24. *Ibid.*, 116. There is, then, often an unacknowledged Aristotelianism that marks Balthasar’s Platonic style.

25. *Ibid.*, 117.

26. *Ibid.*, 117.

27. *Ibid.*, 121.

28. *Ibid.*, 121.



Balthasar does not mean that the historical form of Jesus Christ is the only source of knowledge about God. Jesus's historical singularity also gives life to and encompasses other historical singularities: Jesus is indeed a wave in the sea of existence, but he is also the sea that allows the other waves to be.<sup>29</sup> Thus, Balthasar can say that the various conceptions of the divine that preceded Christ "actually come together on a higher plane" when they are united with Christ, which provides two conclusions.<sup>30</sup> First and foremost, it means these understandings of God—Balthasar cites Plato's idealism and Aristotle's causality as examples—have positive significance for Christianity as authentic testimony to the truth of God. However, since these conceptions of God are united on a higher plane, it is evident that interpreting divine beauty from these traditions is inadequate to their object.

Since we are speaking of Balthasar's role in comparative theology, this is an important position. Balthasar contrasts his approach to that of "aesthetic theology" which he describes as extant in the modern theologies of Hamann and Herder, among others.<sup>31</sup> Most basically, Balthasar sees "aesthetic theology" as a form of thought that takes inner-worldly categories of philosophical aesthetics as the measure of God and meaning. It is the construction of a theory of beauty and then fixing God within this schema.

Balthasar wishes instead to construct a theological aesthetics "which develops its theory of beauty from the data of revelation itself with genuinely theological methods."<sup>32</sup> His emphasis on divine "glory" is central to this tendency: Balthasar evokes *gloria* as the unapproachable expression of God's very self, that nonetheless approaches us and makes itself known to us.<sup>33</sup> Hence, we cannot "grasp" divine glory, but be grasped by it. We must learn to speak of divine beauty from the heart of the encounter with His glory, not through an *a priori* conceptualization of aesthetic reality and experience. While aesthetic preconceptions are not futile for Christian theology, these preconceptions must be relocated *within* the form of revelation.

All emphasis is on aesthetic order and measure. The form of Christ must be the aesthetic measure that allows a grammar of beauty to come into actualization. This does not mean a theological aesthetics can have no space for accounts of beauty or God that fall outside of the biblical and ecclesial arc of salvation history. Rather, the question concerns how such accounts will be folded into this encounter with God. In an important essay, Balthasar gives a description of how the theologian accomplishes this task. Here, I single out two of the images Balthasar provides.

The first is drawn from a consideration of philosophy as love of wisdom. Emphasizing the *philos* element, Balthasar notes that philosophizing contains "an element of decision, because it is not possible for the human person to turn to ultimacy to

29. For the most concise presentation of this idea, see Oakes, "Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–88): The Wave and the Sea," *Theology Today* 62 (2005): 364–74, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004057360506200307>.

30. Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, 120.

31. See Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, 79–114.

32. Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, 114.

33. For the greatest development of this line of his thought, see *Glory of the Lord*, vols. 6 and 7.

the total object, to the Absolute, without a decision.” The philosopher commits herself to an object in an *eros* movement, which demands a total commitment of one’s person to this object. Yet for the Christian, “this decision cannot be cleanly separable from the other total decision which is demanded in a leitmotif that goes through the whole of the gospel: the decision for God which means in concrete terms the decision for Christ and for his Church.”<sup>34</sup> Alluding to Matthew 6: 24 (“No one can serve two masters”), Balthasar concludes:

There is not space in one soul for two ultimate orientations and gifts of self. That love which draws Plotinus to the infinite beauty of the “One” and which makes the knowledge of this “One” possible for him has no other name in the Christian thinker Augustine than love for God the triune. Philosophy and theology in him are nourished from the same *eros*.<sup>35</sup>

And so, the theologian avoids an aesthetic theology and gives life to a theological aesthetic by inviting inner-worldly *eros* into the *eros* for God. In such a case, the theologian takes the form of Christian revelation as its “master” and object of *eros*. Because of this love for God, the Christian thinker can draw upon resources from outside the sphere of Christian thought and “take all thoughts captive unto Christ” (2 Cor 10: 5). Yet this is not a captivity of imperialism, but one of the heart: it is subjecting the *eros* for truth in a non-Christian text and world to the *eros* for God who speaks in the *Verbum caro*. Since the Christian theologian is giving herself to God, she is compelled to offer to God the knowledge of truth gained in the study of non-Christian sources.

This subjective image is not without its objective complement. Balthasar makes the stunning claim (given his reading of Asian traditions above) that if Thomas Aquinas “had known Buddha and Lao-Tse [Laozi], there is no doubt that he would have drawn them too into the *summa* of what can be thought, and would have given them the place appropriate to them.”<sup>36</sup> He attributes this to a genius on the part of Aquinas, Leibniz, and Newman, comparing them to people on a stream bank looking at stones.<sup>37</sup> On its own, any particular stone may appear worthless, “but even the most contemptible stone, if it is hewn correctly and given its place in the totality of the cathedral building, takes on its significance as bearer or as ornament.” Thomas was

34. Balthasar, “On the Tasks of Catholic Philosophy,” trans. Brian McNeil, *Communio* 20 (1993): 147–87 at 152, [http://www.communio-icr.com/files/1993\\_Spring-Balthasar\\_On\\_the\\_Tasks\\_of\\_Catholic\\_Philosophy\\_in\\_Our\\_Time.pdf](http://www.communio-icr.com/files/1993_Spring-Balthasar_On_the_Tasks_of_Catholic_Philosophy_in_Our_Time.pdf).

35. *Ibid.*, 152–53.

36. *Ibid.*, 158–59.

37. The inclusion of Leibniz in the triptych stands out, not least because he is rarely engaged elsewhere in Balthasar’s corpus. Yet we should keep in mind that Leibniz was one of the first modern thinkers to take seriously the philosophical traditions of China in particular, which perhaps suggests to us Balthasar saw the value of Asian engagement, though did not have the resources to practice it himself. Cf. G.W.F. von Leibniz, *Writings on China*, trans. Daniel J. Cook and Harry Rosemont, Jr. (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1994). For a contextualization and assessment of Leibniz’s work on China, see Franklin Perkins, *Leibniz and China: A Commerce of Light* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University, 2004).

able to see that “everything can be used, unless it wishes to exclude itself from the great order, refusing to serve the total truth.” Hence, Thomas, Leibniz, and Newman possessed the capacity to see that even if the stone they pick up may come from the Christian stream or a different one (“a pagan or heretical stream,” Balthasar clarifies), “they know how to cleanse it and polish it until that radiance shines forth which shows that it is a fragment of the total glorification of God.”<sup>38</sup>

The great skill of Thomas was the ability to take those stones that existed on their own and draw them into the construction of a cathedral—a house of ritual *eros* for God in response to his coming to earth. What is profound about this is that Balthasar does not merely value non-Christian traditions as bearing truth, but also sees the Gospel as the light that allows us to see the brilliance of these traditions. The cathedral that houses the worship of God is the ultimate context that makes the stones of other traditions brilliant, allows them to be most what they are.<sup>39</sup> Students of Balthasar are reminded here, of his reflections upon his first encounter with St. Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises*, when he was struck by one thought: “You have nothing to choose, you have been called. You have no plans to make, you are just a little stone in a mosaic which has long been ready.”<sup>40</sup>

Ultimately, Balthasar unites these two insights. The Christian understands the objective teachings and truth of non-Christian traditions as stones to be placed in a mosaic in a cathedral.<sup>41</sup> But this is precisely because the mosaic has been planned from the beginning: the stones themselves exist because God, the great artist and builder, has made them available, and has always planned for the stones to be in his grand mosaic. In other words, the truths of non-Christian traditions are called to their places

38. Balthasar, “On the Tasks of Catholic Philosophy,” 159.

39. Cf. Balthasar, *Epilogue*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 15–18. In the *Epilogue*, Balthasar approaches this insight methodologically in a discussion “integration.” However, this integration concept in the *Epilogue* based upon: (a) various traditions asking questions of ultimate meaning; and (b) finding one tradition which can “integrate” others into its own more comprehensive vision. Consequently, the argument becomes overly formalized to me, and I think the aesthetic ambiguity of Balthasar’s earlier work is more fruitful as a primary metaphor for understanding his approach to non-Christian thought. Though it must be said that his tentative offering of integration is a later exercise of this same insight.

40. Balthasar, “Pourquoi je me suis fait prêtre”, as quoted in Peter Henrici, “Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Sketch of His Life,” trans. John Saward, in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work* (San Francisco: Communio/Ignatius, 1991), 7–43 at 11.

41. This prompts a question: does Balthasar think it is truly possible for non-Christian wisdom (especially Asian wisdom) to be a “load-bearing stone” in the cathedral or mosaic, or must these stones always be consigned to the merely “ornamental?” Due to Balthasar’s Orientalist milieu, I do not think a strong case can be made that Balthasar would have seen how Asian traditions can lend central and formative insights to Christian grammar that complement (rather than replace) traditional, foundational Western concepts. However, the metaphor he provides allows for such an expansion for those who have cultivated the skills to better examine the “stones” of Asian wisdom.

in God's drama with the world. That is why it is only in the *eros* of response to God's call that the Christian can draw these traditions into the mosaic of God's plan rather than construct his own mosaic or build a cathedral to the human intellect. Knowing what serves the truth is not merely cognitive, it is also a sense of the heart: only in love for God and acceptance of his mosaic can we love the stones that compose it. Otherwise, we will surely cast away many stones we find, because they do not fit the picture we have in mind.

### *Benefits of Reading Balthasar for Comparative Theology*

At this point we have reached a position from which we may suggest three main benefits Balthasar's theological aesthetic offers comparative theology. First, Balthasar's theological aesthetics offers an extremely helpful avenue for thinking about non-Christian texts, especially those of South and East Asian lineage. There is no need here to rehearse the various criticisms about the concept of "religion" and how it affects the study of non-Christian traditions; we can here simply point out that viewing traditions such as Islam, Confucianism, and Hinduism as "religions" can easily draw attention to propositional differences with Christianity, or make one so keen to avoid conflict that the propositional content of Christian proclamation is diminished.

The theological aesthetic imagination cultivated in reading Balthasar shifts focus toward the cultural embodiment of religious doctrine and commitment as the idiom of the encounter with God. This is an instinct developed throughout Balthasar's corpus, which as often commends a Cervantes or Claudel as it does Irenaeus or Bonaventure. For the comparative theologian, this sort of focus on aesthetics, cultural embodiment, and practice can allow fuller insight into what aspects of non-Christian religious traditions can be incorporated into the Gospel. This is because the aesthetic perspective allows engagement with the *élan* of a tradition that religious studies models can make difficult or avoid.

For example, in a Christian engagement with Islam, it is tempting to focus on the doctrinal differences between the two religions, such as the iconoclastic Muslim perspective juxtaposed to Christian iconodulism.<sup>42</sup> Yet if we suspend this juxtaposition and take up an aesthetic model, peering into both the aesthetic philosophies of Islam and the ec-static features of the Muslim account of revelation and its receipt, new avenues open for comparative theology. Suddenly, for instance, we can see that while there is a negative aspect to Islamic iconoclasm, there is also a positive movement: Muslim calligraphy is not merely written words, but words written *artfully* in the ecstatic experience of encountering the names of Allah. While the Christian will always maintain an ultimate critique of the Muslim aesthetic, grounded in Christ as the

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42. It is also tempting to consider Islam as a Middle Eastern phenomenon, which often leads to political and doctrinal comparisons of Islam and Christianity. Given the presence of Islam in India, Malaysia, Indonesia, China, etc., one could make the case that an aesthetic engagement broadens our ability to speak of "Islams" in the variety of Islamic contexts.

*eikon* of the invisible God (Col 1: 15),<sup>43</sup> there is space to appreciate and draw aspects of the Muslim aesthetic into Christian reflection.

Very briefly, we can add that in South and East Asia, Balthasar's perspective is fruitful precisely because a theological aesthetics is more similar to the lived practices of Hindu, Buddhist, and Chinese traditions than scholars of religion have typically realized. For example, early Confucians had a fiercely aesthetic imagination.<sup>44</sup> The early Confucians or *Ru* 儒 simply were not literati sitting around reading books, but were engaged in the movements of ritual dance and music, citing the classic poetry of Chinese culture (*Shijing* 詩經) as ways of imagining and engaging the world. For early Confucians, the realities of the divine and the world were understood and participated in aesthetically. We could find similar examples in other religious traditions of Asia such as schools of Hinduism, in which Brahman is approached through *murti* or Tibetan Buddhism's use of mandala art.

A second benefit of Balthasar's theological aesthetics complements the first. If Balthasar occasions an impetus to study non-Christian traditions in an aesthetic and cultural way, he is also an excellent guide in helping such an engagement to remain an act of Christian theology. Recall that for Balthasar, God's revelation in Jesus Christ is the unique and normative epiphany of God that cannot be left behind in consideration of divine glory. The power of Balthasar's theology is that there are aesthetic qualities to God's encounter with the world, because God has taken the form of a servant and died upon a cross for wayward creation. At all points, Balthasar's aesthetic conception of God is Christologically saturated: all genuine moments of truth and ecstatic encounter with God are related to and bound within the *Gestalt* of Christ, though in different ways.

We should not confuse this *gestaltlich* conception with mere formalism. In the tradition of the greatest Patristic thinkers, Balthasar knows the *Gestalt* of Christ expands beyond the explicit scriptural witness, and truly enfolds all non-Christian truth within itself as well. This insight is vivifying for comparative theology because it allows for a Christological impetus and shape to the comparative task. Why does the comparative theologian feel compelled to read non-Christian texts and "take all thoughts captive unto Christ?" Fundamentally, it is because these truths already testify to Christ, and thus we better understand what God has done and is doing through our Savior when we go about the comparative engagement with non-Christian wisdom.<sup>45</sup>

At the same time, this Christologically saturated theological aesthetics allows the comparative theologian to anchor the comparative discipline. When reading non-Christian texts, are we merely attempting to find interesting ideas to "fix" Western

43. Cf. Robert Louis Wilken's discussion of St. John of Damascus in *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2003), 243–49.

44. See Robert Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven: Philosophy and the Defense of Ritual Mastery* (Albany: SUNY, 1990).

45. This sort of impetus is meant as a corollary and complement to the desire for peaceful inter-religious dialogue that drives much comparative theology.

theological notions or trajectories? Or, are we attempting to discern the vestiges of the Cross, to see how God has imprinted his divine love into the world in such ways that all human hearts are prepared to know and love the gift of Golgotha? Balthasar's theological aesthetics encourages the comparative theologian to understand the comparative task as drawing non-Christian texts into the drama of the God who so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son. Or better, Balthasar's approach encourages us to discern how the beautiful and ecstatic engagements of non-Christian traditions participate in Christ, the Form of God, and refuse to settle for vague generalizations of comparative readings that ultimately remain only intellectually interesting, but fail to evoke in our hearts love for God the triune.

This leads to a third benefit for comparative theology in Balthasar's theology. Balthasar's theological aesthetics is not an aesthetic theory, but an aesthetically informed account of the encounter with God and its result in the human heart: that God in Christ draws us out of ourselves and into Him. In any comparative work, there is a particular temptation to see non-Christian traditions as resources for "correcting" certain Western presuppositions or undoing conceptual evils. While this work can be valid and helpful, it also seems to me to eat away at the task of comparative theology and is an intellectual approach that must be grounded in a more essential foundation. For if our aim is merely the rearrangement of conceptual categories or making doctrinal challenges, we have missed the very heart of theological contemplation we find in Augustine, the Cappadocians, or Teresa of Avila: the yearning for God in Christ.

Comparative theology indeed requires hospitality and charity to non-Christian texts and friends, and can offer helpful correctives to a temptation of Western philosophical myopia (especially after the Enlightenment). However, these aspects must be grounded first and foremost in the pursuit of God in order to be fruitful theological contributions and not merely interesting intellectual experiments. The comparative theologian is able to give the same answer as Thomas to the crucifix at San Domenico: "Lord, I want nothing but yourself." Such a dispositional foundation enriches comparative theology, as can be seen in Clooney's book, *His Hiding Place is Darkness*, and indeed in his theology in general. This book does not issue a challenge to Christianity that it has failed in a certain notional or practical aspect that must now be corrected by a heretofore-untasted comparative reading. Rather, Clooney speaks of the experience of the grieved lover striving for the beloved, and seeks to explore this experience in greater fullness. Whereas a deficiency model of comparative theology would draw its power from limiting and critiquing its own tradition, Clooney's model can explore the depths of both Christianity and Hinduism, all in the language of love. Hence, Clooney grounds his expansive comparative work "in the specificity and particularity" of his own enduring love for Jesus Christ.<sup>46</sup> The foundation of love allows to delve deeply into the particularity of his Christian *eros* and draw Hindu wisdom within this *eros*.

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46. Clooney, *His Hiding Place is Darkness*, x.

Comparative theology is at its best when it is an expression of the proper *eros* for God in Christ. According to the language and imagery of Balthasar's theological aesthetics, this means comparative theology has its beginning in the ecstatic encounter with divine glory. God's condescension in Christ has not merely presented us an object of reflection, but has evoked in us a desire to find ourselves and the created order within this salvation history. Or, in Ignatian terms, God has for each of us a state of life in God's drama of salvation, that we can discern, understand, and pursue faithfully.

This means that comparative theology can neither be merely an intellectual effort meant to disabuse others of notional ignorance, nor merely a philanthropic act to attenuate religious misunderstanding and conflict. It can and should involve these things, but the comparative effort begins with the Christian *eros* for the self-revealing God; it is, at its best, an outgrowth of this *eros*. Comparative theology is compelling when we read a Sanskrit or Chinese text out of love for God and service to the Gospel. Comparative theology is its truest self when we read non-Christian texts because we desire to be obedient to God's call to "test everything, and hold fast to what is good" (1 Thess 5: 21). Only within the drama of Christian faithfulness, fidelity, and yearning does the comparative task become a deep, edifying, and enriching theological enterprise.

I do not mean to suggest that it is only through Balthasar's theology that we find the three benefits I have laid out. Rather, I only wish to contend that Balthasar's theological aesthetics is a fruitful "training regimen" for the comparative theologian. The conception of divine Beauty that awakens us to an ecstatic love and shows us the depths of God's life as love is, quite simply, a sound and fertile ground for cultivating the comparative project as a theological *fides quaerens intellectum*. In what is left to us, I will briefly provide an example of this fertility, drawing upon a classic passage in the early Daoist text, the *Zhuangzi*. Here, I show how Balthasar's theological aesthetics encourages a multi-layered, theological reading of our sample passage, and how it draws this Daoist reflection into the proclamation of the Gospel and the *eros* of Christian discipleship, while concurrently not robbing the passage of its Daoist character.

## A Test Case: Reading the *Zhuangzi* in Balthasarian Light

In this section, I merely wish to show that cultivating a theological aesthetic imagination through Balthasar helps train the intellect to recognize theological significance in texts such as the *Zhuangzi*. Thus, my emphasis is limited to demonstrating how Balthasar's perspective serves to form us as readers of non-Christian texts; I am more interested in the fruitfulness of Balthasar's approach than arguing for its necessity as a comparative lens. I have chosen to focus on one classic passage concerning the parable of Cook Ding (*Pao Ding* 庖丁). Because this passage provides aesthetic insight into the Daoist principle of non-action (*wu-wei* 無為), it is ripe for such a reading. Let us first have the passage:

Cook Ding was carving an ox for Lord Wen-hui. As his hand slapped, shoulder lunged, foot stamped, knee crooked, with a hiss! with a thud! the brandished blade as it sliced never

missed the rhythm, now in time with the Mulberry Forest dance, now with an orchestra playing the Ching-shou.

“Oh, excellent!” said Lord Wen-hui. “That skill (*ji* 技) should attain such heights!”

“What your servant loves is the Way (*Dao* 道), I have left skill (*ji*) behind me. When I first began to carve oxen, I saw nothing but oxen wherever I looked. Three years more and I never saw an ox as a whole. Nowadays, I am in touch through a spiritual sense (*yi shen yu* 以神遇), and do not look with the eye. With the senses I know where to stop, and the spirit I desire to run its course (*shen yu xing* 神欲行). I rely on Heaven’s patterns (*tian li* 天理), cleave along the main seams, let myself be guided by the main cavities, go by what is inherently so. A ligament or tendon I never touch, not to mention solid bone. A good cook changes his cleaver once a year, because he hacks. A common cook changes once a month, because he smashes. Now I have had this cleaver for nineteen years, and have taken apart several thousand oxen, but the edge is as though it were fresh from the grindstone. At that joint there is an interval, and the cleaver’s edge has no thickness; if you insert what has no thickness where there is an interval, then, what more could you ask, of course there is ample room to move the edge about. That’s why after nineteen years the edge of my cleaver is as though it were fresh from the grindstone.

“However, whenever I come to something intricate, I see where it will be hard to handle and cautiously prepare myself, my gaze settles on it, action slows down for it, you scarcely see the flick of my cleaver—and at one stroke the tangle has been unraveled, as a clod crumbles to the ground. I stand cleaver in hand, look proudly round at everyone, dawdle to enjoy the triumph, until I’m quite satisfied, then clean the cleaver and put it away.

“Excellent!” said Lord Wen-hui. “Listening to the words of Cook Ding, I have learned from them how to nurture life.”<sup>47</sup>

At the heart of this passage is the juxtaposition between skill and strenuous effort—here represented by the word *ji* 技—and the ability to let loose of such effort and simply perceive how things are. The latter is recognized by two concepts that are meant to work in concert: the *Dao* and the “Heaven’s patterns” (*tian li*). In the Daoist tradition, the term *Dao* functions similarly to the Stoic *Logos*, identifying how things are the way they are, that is, the Way of existence and all things. *Tian* in early China was the name attributed during the Zhou dynasty to an ambiguously divine force responsible for the generation of the cosmos (though in a more Aristotelian than Augustinian sense). Consequently, the “patterns” or “form” of existence are how things are founded in *Tian* and allotted existence in *Tian*—in short, the *li* 理 of things is a formal manifestation of how that thing and its class participate in the Way of existence.

With this, we see more clearly Zhuangzi’s concerns. A common trope of early Chinese philosophy is the presentation of a king asking for advice on how to grow in power and prestige—this very trope is the basic structure of much of the *Mencius*. Zhuangzi here draws upon this trope and teaches that Lord Wen-hui perceives in Cook

47. *Zhuangzi*, 3.2. This translation is taken (with my own emendations) from A.C. Graham, trans., *Chuang-tzu: The Inner Chapters* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2001), 63–64.



Ding a particular form of cultivated skill. The implication is that just as Cook Ding has ostensibly worked very arduously to learn and practice the art of skillful butchering, so too Lord Wen-hui might be able to labor to find the “most effective” political philosophy or approach, and so cultivate excellent ruling as a skill. Cook Ding’s movements work in perfect harmony, all for the purpose of carving the ox, and as a ruler Lord Wen-hui can readily desire such harmonization in his own state of Wei. Since he can imagine Cook Ding’s movements as a rehearsed dance or practiced melody, it leads him to imagine such practices can aid his ruling art, *mutatis mutandis*.

Against this perception of Lord Wen-hui, Cook Ding confesses he only loves the *Dao* and has abandoned skill.<sup>48</sup> What Cook Ding means is that he has given up striving to find the right method or art to flourish in his role. Unlike the Confucians of early China who stressed the cultivation of six forms of skillful art (*shu* 術) in order to flourish as a moral agent, Zhuangzi calls upon Cook Ding to illustrate such cultivation is a futile effort. Such striving can make one competent, or perhaps good; in terms of the cook metaphor, the search of perfect skill will result in changing out one’s cleaver once a month or annually. But to reach true excellence, true mastery of existence, Zhuangzi’s Cook Ding tells us the key is to give up the endeavor for mastery, and take up the path of effortless action (*wu-wei*).

It is striking how central perception is to this metaphor. Cook Ding tells us that he used to observe (*jian* 見) the entire ox, and eventually began to perceive (*jian*) it not as a whole, but in its constituent parts he would have to remove—leg, oxtail, rib, loin, etc. Finally, he stopped “seeing” (*jian*); he began to encounter it “spiritually” (*yi shen yu*), “and not with my eyes (*er bu yi mu shi* 而不以目視). Here, all the terms associated with material perception—*mu* 目, the eyes, and two verbs of physical seeing in *jian* 見 and *shi* 視—are contrasted with a “spiritual” type of perception. Put differently, Zhuangzi establishes a contrast between seeing the physical form of the ox, and instead perceiving its “patterns” in light of Heaven.

In fact, Cook Ding tells Lord Wen-hui that he “depends upon” or “obeys” (*yi* 依) the patterns of Heaven in cutting up the ox. The juxtaposition here is fundamental: he does not hack and smash his cleaver precisely because he is not attempting to exert his learned skill upon the physical form of the ox. Rather, he has learned to be attentive to the fundamental pattern of existence expressed in the ox, and so Cook Ding simply responds to these patterns. This, then, is the image of *wu-wei* and ultimately of human flourishing that Zhuangzi presents to his reader: if we wish to do well in any art, we must go beyond seeing, and begin to perceive. Only by observing and then following

48. The phrase *jin hu ji yi* 進乎技矣 is best literally rendered as “preceding *ji*,” and so Cook Ding means that his love for the *Dao* is more fundamental than any skill. One question is whether this love of the *Dao* can give birth to skill or negates it. James Legge’s translation of this passage suggests the former, while Graham argues for the latter. I agree with Graham here because I believe his translation makes more sense in the wider context of the *Zhuangzi*’s concerns. At the least, we can say it seems Cook Ding means the effort to find *ji* has been abandoned for the sake of following the *Dao*, even though this may result in concrete skills.

the patterns of existence built into the cosmos may we flourish. Hence, in contrast to other philosophical schools of his day, Zhuangzi argues that the flourishing of human life cannot lie in cultivation of skills, of making laws, or learning military strategies. It lies in perceiving and following the way of things; it lies in loving the *Dao*, and abandoning the pursuit of skill.

Balthasar's theological aesthetics provides an exceptionally fruitful theological account to help a Christian engage this passage from the *Zhuangzi*. For Balthasar, the *Gestalt* of God's love *pro nobis* appears to us, bringing its own logic and proclamation. This is precisely why he warns against an "aesthetic theology"—we cannot anticipate the *Gestalt* of God's appearance, but must wait, listen, and learn from it. Or, more precisely, we can only learn to speak intelligently of what this *Gestalt* is by being caught up in it. Only through the ecstatic rapture of meeting the Glorious and Beautiful One do we learn how to testify to the Beautiful and the Glorious.

If we read Zhuangzi's narrative of Cook Ding within this Balthasarian context, a number of illuminations appear. First and foremost, we see that the encounter with God and thus the theological task of discussing who God is requires its own form of seeing. Just as Cook Ding must learn to not see the ox, but rather the Heavenly patterns, so too the theologian must learn to see God not with the "eyes" of isolated human reason, but with the "spiritual" eyes of faith. But, this cannot be just another cultivated skill (*ji*) that we add to our observational repertoire. It must rather be a stripping away, a sort of stepping back from seeing, a simplification of the observation process.

The Scriptures suggest such a process when the Lord teaches, "Blessed are those of clean hearts (*Beati mundo corde*), for they shall see God" (Matt 5:8). As Thomas and the Scholastic tradition saw so well, the Fall has estranged human beings from ourselves. The uncleanness of sin has complicated the human heart, a product of Adam and Eve's striving to know good and evil and become like God. The purification of grace is God's work in us to give ourselves back to us, and to release us from the striving complexity that marks the state of sin. In baptism, we die with Christ and rise to a new state, in which the human heart is now on a trajectory of rest in God (à la Augustine). In this sense, from the Christian perspective, it is only in the process of being enfolded into the divine pattern of life that we can truly see the patterns of Heaven.

This is precisely because seeing the divine pattern of existence requires an attitude of obedience and consent, rather than effort to see for ourselves, under our own steam and authority. Here we reach a second observation to make from reading the *Zhuangzi* in the context of Balthasar's theological aesthetics. For Balthasar, the encounter with the *Gestalt* of God is fundamentally Ignatian in character. Perceiving a work of art cannot be primarily critical in nature, for then we do not see the art, but only whether and the art conforms to our preconceptions about what it ought to be. Rather, experiencing a work of art means opening oneself up to the world as imagined and presented by the work of art, and this requires a heart of openness, a desire to follow rather than command. Similarly, the encounter with God requires a willingness to say, "Yes. Let your will be done." It requires us to recognize we have nothing to choose except the service of God in our *missio*.

Zhuangzi's story of Cook Ding argues that at a fundamental level, such an Ignatian attitude is intrinsic to human flourishing. To make love for the *Dao* primary and to "rely upon" the patterns of Heaven are how humans flourish. Likewise, Ignatius teaches us at the beginning of the *Spiritual Exercises* that "Man has been made for this: to praise God our Lord, and revere Him, and to serve Him, and so save his soul."<sup>49</sup> From the Christian perspective, Zhuangzi's philosophy of *wu-wei* testifies to this purpose for human beings that radiates through every aspect of our souls. To love God and serve Him is the only way to become excellent in the "skill" of discipleship.

Consequently, we find here a fitting point to conclude this brief reflection with a wonderful lesson that resonates with Balthasar's theological aesthetics. In our age, it is popular to find Western post-Christians attempting to find "spiritual fulfillment" in various ways. So many religious or pseudo-religious practices are called upon to find the right way to connect with the ultimate: yoga, meditation, centering prayer, and even stripped down versions of pilgrimage litter the "religious" landscape of the United States. Culturally, we are obsessed with finding the "right" spiritual key to the religious treasure of our hearts, and shift between practices as often as we find it necessary.

American spirituality (among other contexts) might be fittingly compared to the other cooks in Zhuangzi's story. We are collectively searching for the right spiritual skill, often taking what Paul J. Griffiths has criticized as a "consumerist" approach to religions to find a way to spiritual flourishing.<sup>50</sup> Zhuangzi and Balthasar would both call us to recognize that such striving is doomed from the beginning. How will we find spiritual fulfillment? It is not in this or that practice as such, but more fundamentally in loving the *Dao*, in the Christian case the *Dao* who was made flesh for us. Only grounded in this love can the spiritual practices we take up actually resonate with the "patterns of Heaven" and lead us into the flourishing art of spirituality.

Of course, even within the Christian life there are multiform spiritualities, but this is precisely the point. The plurality of the saints and their lives of holiness is a testimony not to the individual arts they practiced (though these are undoubtedly worth of emulation for the Christian). Rather, it is a testimony to the richness of the *Gestalt* of love that approaches us in Christ and calls us to constitute a stone in the grand mosaic of the cosmos and beyond. Hence, spirituality cannot be cultivated in the barest sense of the term: it must be born out in the heart enraptured by divine Beauty.

## Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I have simply endeavored to show how Hans Urs von Balthasar's theology is full of promise for the comparative theologian. Even though Balthasar

49. Ignatius of Loyola, *Die Exerzitien*, trans. Hans Urs von Balthasar (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1965), 15. Translation mine.

50. Paul J. Griffiths, *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* (New York: Oxford University, 1999).

himself was not trained in any comparative method and shows little ability to have done so, his theological perspective inspires deep, rich, and meaningful theological readings of non-Christian traditions. Because Balthasar sees revelation not in terms of propositions, but in terms of the divine *Gestalt* that approaches us, the form is itself infinite and able to accept configurations that seem alien to it at first. Because Balthasar sees the *Gestalt* as founded in and testifying to Christ, it allows the comparative theological task that invaluable central anchor, informing us at all times about what sort of portrait we are composing, and allowing us a way to perceive what gives life to our reading of non-Christian texts. And, because Balthasar sees the encounter with revelation in terms of ecstatic aesthetic experience, it makes room for the loving heart to take up non-Christian testimony in understanding, perceiving, and describing the *Gestalt* of God.

Of course, we cannot say that Balthasar's theological aesthetics is the only proper theological context that gives life to comparative theology—it is not the *ji* to be honed to perfect the craft. However, I have tried to show that Balthasar's account is one way in which the theologian can gain “eyes to see and ears to hear” the fullness of the Gospel and its relationship to all truth as it exists in non-Christian traditions and texts. Hence, a serious study of Balthasar—or better, a serious attempt to read the Gospel as Balthasar does—yields a theological imagination that is ripe and ready for the spiritual practice of comparative theology, grounding it not in learned skill, but in obedient love of God. Consequently, Balthasar is not such a strange companion for the comparative theologian after all. Rather, his is a profoundly fruitful friendship that can help the comparative theologian learn to “see” the heavenly patterns of God's love in the non-Christian traditions of the world, and of course, in the foundational gift of Triune love that endured the cross for us and invites us to find ourselves in this *Gestalt* of love and beauty.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Francis Clooney, James Fredericks, Reid Locklin, and anonymous reviewers from *Theological Studies* for their generosity in reading and commenting on this article.

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