"Balthasar, Globalization, and the Problem of the One and the Many"

William T. Cavanaugh
BALTHASAR, GLOBALIZATION, AND THE PROBLEM OF THE ONE AND THE MANY

- William T. Cavanaugh -

"The Christian is called not to replace one universal system with another, but to attempt to ‘realize’ the universal body of Christ in every particular exchange."

Like many cultural buzzwords, the word “globalization” seems to get less useful the more it gets used. Forgive me, but I am going to use it anyway, even though I hope to show you how one-sided the word is. I am going to treat the problem of globalization as a version of the ancient philosophical conundrum of the one and the many. Along the way, I will argue that the process of globalization is not, as the word implies, merely a process of universalization, the dominance of the one over the many, but a peculiar proliferation of the many, still ultimately absorbed into the one. I will then turn to Hans Urs von Balthasar to argue that only Christ adequately solves the problem of the one and the many. Christ is the key, therefore, to the sustenance of a sane culture in a globalizing world.

I will treat globalization as, in part, an economic and political phenomenon, but more importantly, I will present globalization as a way of seeing, an aesthetics, which configures space and human subjects in peculiar ways. Implicit in my argument is the conviction that culture and economics are not autonomous spheres with no mutual effect. Economic relations do not operate on value-neutral laws, but are rather carriers of specific convictions about the nature of the human person, its origins and its destiny. There is an implicit anthropology and an implicit theology in every economics.

It is possible, for example, to see in globalization a kind of secularized catholicity, a longing for worldwide communion which may have its origins in the Christian desire to bring the good news to the whole world and unite all human beings as one. There is much in this fragmentary longing that a Christian could recognize as the clandestine work of the Holy Spirit. My purpose in this essay, however, is to argue that globalization is a way of configuring space that fails to produce a true catholicity, for it abstracts human relations—economic and otherwise—from their concrete embodiment in the local and the particular. The particular is rendered disposable, and the globalizing subject becomes detached from relations that can render subjectivity possible. Globalization sees the world through homogenizing eyes, in a way that ultimately dissolves all differences into the same. This aesthetic is powerful but not unavoidable; I will show how Balthasar presents an alternative aesthetics of the form of Jesus Christ, which constructs human subjects and communities in a different way.

I. The Triumph of the Universal

The term “globalization” is sometimes used as a rough synonym of “whatever is happening in the world these days.” I will use it in a somewhat more refined sense to speak of the process of worldwide economic, political, and cultural integration that has taken on accelerated force in the last few decades. Even given this broad definition, however, there is no full consensus on what globalization means or even if it really exists. There is a group of skeptics who believe that globalization is a myth. They begin with a thoroughly economistic understanding of globalization as an integrated world market, then argue that there was in fact more integration in the 19th century under the gold standard. Today, they argue, we have more intervention into the market by nation-states...
and increasing fragmentation into regional, ethnic, religious, and national blocs.\(^1\)

I will argue that there is truth to the positions of both the globalization affirmers and the globalization deniers, precisely because universalization and fragmentation are two sides of the same coin. I will begin with universalization. There is no question that significant shifts have occurred in the movement from a “Fordist” to a “post-Fordist” model of production. In the former model, as championed by Henry Ford, the wheels of production were greased by regarding one’s employees as one’s consumers. The factory town was an educative enterprise in civic consumption. The concentration and discipline of labor in the assembly line was accompanied by the cooperation of management, union, and family in the production of consumers who were able and willing to buy the products they produced. The 1970s, however, began the demise of Fordism through the accelerated internationalization of the labor market, and the consequent separation of production from consumption. Under pressure from rising oil prices and general overproduction, First World corporations began moving their operations en masse to countries where cheap labor could be found. The adventures of Nike in Indonesia and Kathy Lee Gifford in Central America are not exactly new under the sun, but the rate at which nationally-based corporations have become transnational has undergone a tremendous increase in the past thirty years.

As a result, the local and the particular has been increasingly integrated into the global market. Locations have become formally interchangeable and measurable according to quantifiable considerations of price of labor, availability of raw materials, and laxity of environmental oversight. As the New York Times declares, “The new order eschews loyalty to workers, products, corporate structures, businesses, factories, communities, even the nation.” The chair of Gulf & Western comments, “All such allegiances are viewed as expendable under the new rules. You cannot be emotionally bound to any particular asset.”\(^2\)

The discipline of labor through assembly line and factory town has thus been changed, but labor is not consequently more free. The discipline of labor now depends less on the surveillance of a particular location, and more on the sheer ability to flee. For example, to meet a recent holiday demand for toys in the U.S., the Kader corporation was forcing its young women workers in China to work fourteen hours a day, seven days a week. Chinese government officials objected, but as Andy Lee, an executive for Kader said to a Business Week reporter, “We told them, this is the toy biz. If you don’t allow us to do things our way, we’ll close down our Chinese factories and move to Thailand.” The Chinese officials backed down.\(^3\) The willingness and ability of capital to abandon any particular location at any time has played a crucial role in subduing wages worldwide and in sapping the ability of unions to gain leverage in negotiations with corporations. Unions have therefore begun attempts to go global and organize across national boundaries, without much success.

This detachment from the local and the particular has been facilitated by a series of international agreements which relativize the sovereignty and oversight of national and local governments. NAFTA and the Uruguay Round of the GATT agreements were approved as the elimination of barriers to “free trade.” What that means in reality is that the decisions of more local forms of government on environmental protections and health and safety regulations can be overridden without their consent. The GATT created the World Trade Organization, centered in Geneva, which has the power to declare a local law a barrier to free trade. Any country which does not conform is subject to trade sanctions. One of the first acts of the WTO in the United States, for example, was to target a law passed by the Massachusetts state legislature barring the state government from purchasing products from Myanmar.

---


(formerly Burma), home of one of the world’s most oppressive military regimes. While the WTO strictly polices local legislation meant to protect workers, local habitats and so on, it has increased the protection of corporate property rights.\(^4\) One result has been an increase in the centralization of corporate power, and a tendency to concentrate corporate power across geographical frontiers through mergers and acquisitions.

What is meant by “free trade,” therefore, is a detachment from the local and a commitment to the hypermobility of capital. This can be seen clearly in the evolution of the financial system. “Banking,” says the Financial Times, “is rapidly becoming indifferent to the constraints of time, place, and currency.”\(^5\) The deregulation of financial activity by the Western nation-states in the 1970s and 1980s has resulted in the formation of a global stock market, a global commodity and debt futures market, and currency and interest rate swaps. As a result there has been an acceleration of what is called “paper entrepreneurialism,” the making of profits by ways other than the production of actual goods and services. Techniques vary from takeovers and raids of rival—or even unrelated—corporations, to creative accounting techniques whereby multinational corporations can make profits from small relative shifts in currency values and interest rates across geographical boundaries. The instability of the current financial system is attributable to the way that capital flows are directed and redirected without restraint of time or space.\(^6\) The most valuable asset is information, specifically the kind that allows for a universalizing gaze which maps the whole of the globe as so many interchangeable localities.

The mobility and universalization of transnational corporations has had a profound effect on culture. This effect is obvious to anyone who has had the eerie experience of traveling hundreds or thousands of miles without a change of scenery. It is possible to drive from one coast of the United States to the other and eat the same food, stay at the same motel, shop at the same mall, hear the same music on the radio (probably the same music you were hearing on the radio twenty-five years ago—“classic rock”), hear the news delivered in the same accent, see the same cars, see the same clothes, and hear the same narrow range of political opinions, all the way from Florida to Oregon, from California to Maine. This phenomenon does not stop at the border, of course. I have heard “Disco Duck” in Yugoslavia and (to my everlasting shame) eaten at Pizza Hut in Chile. We are rapidly approaching utopia which, says the president of Nabisco, will be “one world of homogeneous consumption . . . . [I am] looking forward to the day when Arabs and Americans, Latins and Scandinavians will be munching Ritz crackers as enthusiastically as they already drink Coke or brush their teeth with Colgate.”\(^7\) Sumner Redstone, owner of Viacom and the purveyor of MTV and “Ren and Stimpy” to a waiting world, declares, “Just as teenagers are the same all over the world, children are the same all over the world.”\(^8\) Seeing them that way makes them increasingly so.

II. The Particularization of the Universal

The dominant universalization which I have been discussing, however, is not the whole picture, for globalization has also produced a certain proliferation of the particular, which has taken different forms. One form is a kind of opposite reaction to globalization which seeks a retreat and retrenchment in particular identities; thus the title of Benjamin Barber’s book, *Jihad vs. McWorld.*\(^9\) It is no secret that the globalization of capitalism and Western culture has spawned a host of what are termed “fundamentalisms” sworn to mortal combat against what is usually seen as the Americanization of the world.

---


\(^6\) Harvey, 160–4.


\(^8\) Quoted in Richard Barnet and John Cavanagh, “Homogenization of Global Culture,” in Mander and Goldsmith, ed., 73.

A second form of particularization is the move toward multiculturalism, the celebration of diversity we hear so much about at our universities and schools. Here the explicit attempt is not to replace the hegemony of Western culture in a given location with another hegemony, say Islam, but to affirm the juxtaposition of as many different cultures and faiths as possible within a given space. The idea is not to replace the one in a given space with another one, but to replace it with the many. Where particularities have faded, it is necessary to recover or invent them; thus the title of the Hobsbawn and Ranger volume, The Invention of Tradition.\(^{10}\) The contributors to this volume show how, at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, national symbols, monuments, and histories—for example, state Shinto in Japan—were invented as a way of creating a link to the past in an increasingly deracinated world. The invention of tradition is thus an explicitly modern form of antmodernism. The process continues today in phenomena as diverse as Wicca, Kwanzaa, and Montenegrin nationalism.

A third form of the resurgence of the particular is found in the bewildering variety of products and services offered to the consumer, at least in affluent societies. What sociologist George Ritzer has called the “McDonaldization of Society”\(^{11}\) is not a one-sided process of ever-narrowing choices. McDonald’s itself is engaged in a never-ending process of trying to produce novelty, to reconfigure the sauces and sizes of its products to give at least the appearance of something new to attract the consumer. The post-Fordist economy depends on increasingly high rates of turnover, planned obsolescence, and the creation of new desires to stimulate consumption and stave off the specter of overproduction. The Fordist tendency toward vertical integration is replaced by subcontracting, outsourcing, and “just-in-time” delivery that maximize flexibility. Computer technologies permit small-batch production and rapid re-tooling and re-skilling for a constantly changing array of products. Rapid change in production has been matched by rapid change in consumption. Internet shopping has made literally an entire world of products and services available. Technology and mass saturation marketing have produced an acceleration of changes in fashion and trends. Goods are more disposable than ever. At the same time, there has been a shift toward consumption of services over and above consumption of goods, the former being more ephemeral and having a shorter “lifetime.”\(^{12}\)

In short, the new economy has made a greater variety of goods and services available than ever before.

Are we left to conclude, therefore, that globalization is the realization of both greater universality and greater particularity? In a sense this is accurate; Roland Robertson has coined the term “glocalization” to illustrate how the process simultaneously produces greater sameness and greater difference.\(^{13}\) On closer examination, however, I think that such an apparently happy synthesis of the universal and the particular is misleading. There is no question that the new economy has produced an abundance of goods for those who can afford to purchase them. Difference in globalization, however, is largely a difference of the surface. The sheer abundance of difference, the very variety and speed with which differences are produced, mandates that no difference be sufficiently different to constitute a true departure from the same. Any difference is ultimately dispensable. Things are different, but they are merely different. This applies not only to products but to traditions, cultures, religions, and self-identities of all kinds.

If we examine multiculturalism, for example, it becomes apparent that the true battle lines in this culture war are not the diversity of global cultures versus the sameness and hegemony of Western civilization. Both sides are wrong. Multiculturalism is more accurately described as a rival unity, a rival hegemony. Beyond simple and laudable attempts to include those who are different in our institutions, multiculturalism as an ideology is in fact post-cultural or anti-cultural, for it subjects every culture to the withering

\(^{10}\)Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger, eds., The Invention of Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).


\(^{12}\)Harvey, 284–6.

hegemony of cultural relativism and individual choice. As Christopher Clausen observes, “Twentieth-century America is a graveyard of cultures.” The melting pot is where cultures come to die, where bagpipes and haggis are traded for Britney Spears and Big Macs, unless one chooses consciously to retain elements of the past. To make a tradition the subject of choice, however, is to kill it as a tradition. Any claim that a particular cultural or religious tradition might make on the individual is threatened by the overriding imperative of choice. The result is what Clausen appropriately labels “mass individualism.” The more we celebrate our differences for their own sake, the more similar we become.

This same dynamic is observable in the production and consumption of goods. Awash in the bewildering variety of the supermarket—the 24 different kinds of orange juice, some with pulp, some without, some with pulp and calcium added, some “homestyle,” and so on—it is easy to forget that all the variety tends to fade into the one overriding imperative to consume. The economy, we are told, is driven by demand, and not by any substantive telos of human good. When we are in a recession, we are told to consume, it matters not what. Buying pushpins or pornography will grease the wheels of production in equal measure. To stimulate demand and desire, we are presented with ever different products—clear deodorant and dry beer—that exhibit ever more ephemeral differences. Everything is available but nothing matters. It is not difficult to feel, as Bruce Springsteen sings, that there are “57 Channels and Nothin’ On.”

It thus becomes increasingly necessary to convince us that the products we buy are really, as Dodge’s one word slogan has it, “different.” Plank Road Brewing Company responds to the large national brews with an advertising campaign featuring a couple of downhome folks sitting around the garage-sized warehouse. Linenkugel features the brewmaster, Jacob Linenkugel, whose family has been brewing in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin for generations. Miller responds with an add touting the virtues of good old macrobrew: “It’s time to drink beer made in vats the size of Rhode Island.” What we don’t see is that Plank Road and Linenkugel are owned by Miller, which in turn is owned by the conglomerate Philip Morris. So much for diversity. The surface appearance of diversity in fact masks a stifling homogeneity.

This homogeneity is not just a matter of corporate culture but culture in general. Globalization is an aesthetic, a way of seeing the world, of reading its images and signs. Fredric Jameson is right, I think, to call postmodernism the “cultural logic of late capitalism,” for in both it is the surface image that counts. In globalized capitalism, exchange value has overcome use value, and what is desired is desire itself. Postmodernism as well trumpets the vacuity of signs, such that the signifier refers only to other signifiers, not to the signified. As Jameson says, postmodernism is a leap in what Benjamin called the “aestheticization” of reality, the cutting loose of representations from what they represent. “Postmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process.” This depthlessness of signs is captured by Andy Warhol’s Campbell soup cans. As Jameson comments, Warhol’s art ought to be a powerful political critique of commodity fetishism. That it is not makes it postmodern. Even the critique of commodities has itself become a commodity.

III. The Theological Significance of Globalization

Globalization gets both particularity and universality wrong. The particular is evacuated of its universality in favor of a “universal” that is itself a particular account of the relation between the One and the many, an account that in effect denies the particular any universal significance as such. In Christianity the theme of catholicity captures the aspiration of a divided humanity to be united as a whole. Indeed, the Greek words kath’ holou from which the English word “catholic” is derived indicate a universal reach, a taking in of reality “according (kata) to the whole” or “on the whole.” In English we speak of someone with “catholic” tastes as

---

14Christopher Clausen, Faded Mosaic: The Emergence of Post-Cultural America (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000), 7.

15Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), x.

16Ibid., 9.
someone who ranges broadly, who takes in a little of this and a little of that. In Roman Catholic circles, representatives of universities like to proclaim that their institutions are “catholic with a small ‘c’” to dispel the fear of crabbed dogmatism. “Catholic” is treated as an antonym of “particular,” with the result that “Roman Catholic” seems an oxymoron.

In the Catholic tradition, however, there is a much more subtle interplay between the particular and the universal in the concept of catholicity. As Henri de Lubac pointed out, there is a sense in which, for the Church fathers, catholicity meant a gathering together rather than a spreading out, a cohesion around a center which unites the disparate elements in their very diversity. That center is the Eucharist, in which the universal Christ is mediated in particular form. Each eucharistic community is not a mere part of a whole, as if Christ could be divided into parts, but a microcosm, a mini cosmos in which the cosmic Christ is wholly present. One becomes more united to the universal the closer one is attached to the particular community gathered around one particular altar. For this reason Paul can refer to the local assembly in Rome as *holy he ekklēsia*, the whole Church (Romans 16:23). “Roman Catholic” turns out not to be an oxymoron after all.

Globalization as I have been describing it often takes the form of a parody of true catholicity. The cosmopolitan gaze ranges broadly, such that attachment to the particular is seen as in fundamental tension with universality. The particular is therefore drained of its eternal significance.

This vacuity of the particular image shows up in acute form in attempts to construct a global theology and to deal with the embarrassing particularity of Jesus. The so-called pluralists such as John Hick see globalization as an opportunity to shed the oppressive exclusivity of Christian belief in Jesus Christ as the unique mediator of salvation. As the pluralists tell the story, globalization has awakened Christians to the reality that they share the planet with a majority of people who are not Christian and who do not share their beliefs. Arrogant claims by colonists to the superiority of the Christian way have caused bloodshed and misery for the non-Western world. If we are to co-exist with others on a shrinking planet, we must learn to appreciate the otherness of the other and the legitimacy of other ways of salvation.

The pluralists’ appreciation for the particular is based on an *a priori* assumption that Lessing was right: there is an ugly and uncrossable ditch between the absolute on the one hand and the relativities of history on the other. As Stanley Samartha, one contributor to the Hick and Knitter volume *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* puts it, “Through the incarnation in Jesus Christ, God has relativized God’s self in history. Christian theologians should therefore ask themselves whether they are justified in absolutizing in doctrine him whom God has relativized in history.”

The solution to the problem of many religions is to relativize them all in the face of the absolute. Pluralism appeals to the utter mystery and ineffability of God, though even “God,” according to Hick, is just a particular Christian name for the “ultimate Reality” to which all religions point. Christ, then, just as the Buddha, is a sign of something else, a pointer to the absolute Reality which lurks mysteriously beyond all signs. As Samartha says, the pluralists thus adopt the solution of the Vedas to the problem of the One and the Many: truth (Sat) is One, but has many names.

The pluralists claim to have found a way to celebrate the uniqueness of each particular religion without trying to assert the superiority of one over another. As Hick and Knitter say, Christianity “is unique in the precise and literal sense in which every religious tradition is unique—namely that there is only one of it and there is therefore nothing else exactly like it.” If the criterion of uniqueness is that there is only one of it, however, being precise would mean rephrasing that sentence thus: “Christianity is unique in the sense in which, not only every religious tradition is unique,

---


19Ibid., 73.

but every individual thing is unique: my right shoe, that chair, this piece of lint, that box of cereal, that can of Diet Pepsi . . . .” In this merely quantitative concept of uniqueness, particularities are recognized, but immediately relativized and trivialized by the dominance of the One. Because any path to the One suffices, particularities are interchangeable. Difference is not celebrated but radically effaced. The different religions are just so many different ways of experiencing the exact same thing, the ultimate Reality which swallows all difference whole.\(^{21}\)

In an article subtitled “Religious Pluralism in the Age of the McDonald’s Hamburger,” Kenneth Surin shows how this type of pluralism is linked to the rise of economic and cultural globalization. Far from ending the period of colonization, globalization furthers the expansion of the cosmopolitan gaze over the face of the globe. Although the Malaysian villager finds it impossible to imagine that she and the wealthy landowner from the same village occupy the same space, the pluralist indulge in the fiction of a “global village” in which all people share a common space and a common experience. The pluralist is above and detached from all particular traditions, and is able to situate them all next to each other and compare them. Hick writes of what happens “when one stands back from one’s own tradition to attempt a philosophical interpretation of the fact of religious plurality.”\(^{22}\) As Surin puts it, the “Hicks of this world are seemingly a new kind of subject, one that is ‘universal’ or ‘global’ in the way that the McDonald’s hamburger has become the ‘universal’ or ‘global’ food.”\(^{23}\)

The triumph of the universal and the interchangeability of signs in globalization then produces a peculiar kind of subject. In After Virtue, Alasdair MacIntyre writes of certain “characters” or social roles which provide a particular culture with its moral definitions. The manager, the therapist, and the bureaucrat figure prominently in Maclntyre’s account.\(^{24}\) For our purposes, we might add the consumer and the tourist as especially evocative of the subject under globalization. The tourist stands detached from all particular times and places and surveys them all from above, as it were. The tourist craves what is different and authentic, but when particular locations make themselves available for the tourist, authenticity and difference are lost. Particularities, especially from the past, are invented for the tourist, but the tourist cannot participate in them. The tourist can go anywhere, but is always nowhere. The pluralist theology of religions à la Hick is the consecration of a kind of religious tourism.

The tourist is a type of consumer, a consumer of places. Consumerism is marked by desire with no telos other than consumption itself. Particularities are interchangeable. Above all, the consumer consumes; rather than being drawn ecstatically into a larger drama, the consumer empties things into the self. Both the tourist and the consumer try to transcend their own limits and particularity by adopting a universal stance detached from and consuming particularities. But in so doing, the self becomes a kind of empty shell, itself dependent on the constant novelty of the particular for its being, yet simultaneously destroying the particularity of the many, and therefore negating its own being.

### IV. The Concrete Universal

Resolving this problem of the particular and the universal is a major preoccupation for Balthasar, who proclaims it the fundamental philosophical problem, and a fundamental experience of all human being. The nonbiblical person experiences his or her self as limited and non-absolute, not-one. At the same time this realization engenders a longing to transcend this limitedness and be joined to that which is One and absolute. The person thus simultaneously experiences himself as part of a larger whole, yet

---

\(^{21}\) On a recent bleary-eyed Saturday morning, the public television show I was watching with my three-year-old son treated us to children singing a peppy song that went “We’re all different but we’re all the same.” Another song proclaimed “Everybody’s special.” It made me nostalgic for watching Wile E. Coyote get an anvil dropped on his head.

\(^{22}\) John Hick, in Hick and Knitter, eds., 34.


\(^{24}\) Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 27–32.
realizes that he is other than this whole. The primary way of overcoming this problem is to see the particular, the many, as mere appearance, as ultimately unreal and passing away into the One.\textsuperscript{25}

In philosophy the problem of the One and the many has come down to a struggle between rationalism and empiricism. Empiricism is seen as a necessary corrective to the devaluation of the particular and the concrete, but rationalism, as Balthasar says, has always been looked upon as the higher form of philosophy, because it attempts to overcome the mere brute facticity of the particular by locating the deeper explanation of things in the realm of essence. Thus Hegel’s grand subsumption of all historical fact under universal reason. In one sense this can be read as the highest form of tribute to the particular, in that Hegel sees every individual fact as a meaningful presentation of reason itself. In another sense, however, Hegel is the ultimate devaluation of the particular, leaving no room for the genuinely creative and singular.\textsuperscript{26}

Religious solutions to this problem are equally unsatisfactory, according to Balthasar. They either absorb the One into the many, as in polytheism and pantheism, or, more commonly, absorb the many into the One, as in Vedic and Sufi mysticism.\textsuperscript{27} Any single person who would bring redemption to the estrangement of the many must be some one individual who cannot redeem history as a whole. At best the person could only be a religious founder who points to a universal way of salvation that all may tread. “Any such ‘way’ could be historical only in an external sense: if it is really to have validity for all, to be a universal and valid way, its basis will have to be in essentiality.”\textsuperscript{28} Thus once again, the universal trumps the particular and as such the particular is not allowed to have universal significance.

Only Christianity satisfactorily solves the problem of the One and the many, because Christ is the “concrete universal.” Only in the Incarnation can an individual be universal and the universal be individual. “Christ is neither one individual among others, since he is God and so not susceptible of comparison, nor is he the norm in the sense of a universal, since he is this individual.”\textsuperscript{29} But although Christ is not just one individual among others, Balthasar makes clear that he is also not the mere removal of an individual from the sphere of his fellow-individuals. Christ is a human being; to raise him above human beings is to make Arius’ mistake and thus to eliminate the possibility of our participation in Christ. Christ remains immersed in history, yet, as God, all historical norms are subordinated to Christ. Christ cannot be interpreted in terms of the universal norms of history, since he is unique, so there is no place for abstracting from particular cases or inessential accidents. There are no accidents in God, so Christianity can only display the normative content of history manifest in the irreducible particular fact of Jesus Christ. Christ is the concrete norm for all abstract norms. The norm for history comes not from above it, from the absolute laws of universal reason, but from within it.\textsuperscript{30} Christ thus bridges Lessing’s ditch between the absolute and the particularities of history.

Because Christ is immersed in history and does not merely hover above it, there are some analogies between Christ and some other relatively unique events. A great work of art, for example, is simultaneously universal in its appeal and in its connection to the whole history of art before it, and yet unique and inexplicable in terms of that history, of the influences that preceeded it. In love something of the universal shines forth in one particular individual. Finally, in death, one becomes conscious of one’s uniqueness and loneliness, despite the solidarity of the human race and the social nature of salvation. All these relative singularities, however, fail to escape the dialectical relationship with the universal. Only Christ is

\textsuperscript{28}Balthasar, \textit{A Theology of History}, 10.
\textsuperscript{30}Balthasar, \textit{A Theology of History}, 14–21.
absolutely unique. Christ embraces the course of all history in an ultimate way.31

The arrogant claim of the Incarnation is therefore much more radical than the claim that the one God becomes transparent at particular times and places. The doctrine of the Incarnation, as Balthasar says, is the claim that the “all” has become identical with a tiny “someone.” This runs directly counter to the broadening and universal impulse of other religions, and casts Christianity in the role of a particularity which “demonically questions the unification of the world.”32 We have here the apparent antithesis of the process of globalization. Balthasar admits that “The future belongs to the ‘religious man’ who will ‘tolerate’ the different outward forms religion may take,”33 while Christianity becomes more solitary. In a passage which strikingly parallels my analysis of the homogeneity of globalization, Balthasar writes

For faith, all human religions and philosophical systems seem to approach one another ever more closely on one side, and Christianity seems to become more and more isolated on the other. No matter how variegated the market display of human world views may be, seen from a bit of distance its stalls and attractions soon come to take on a common air, all equally of human provenance and human proportions.34

But of course, Christ is not isolated, not merely a unique “freak of nature,” because Christ is, precisely as unique, the fulfillment of all partial truths contained in the religious myths of the world.35 As the absolutely unique, Christ is the center to which all the relative uniqueness of all the other forms and images of the world are related.36 Christ is the infinitely integrating one who makes room in himself for everything truly human. Other forms are not simply false and therefore excluded; their fragmentary truth is illuminated by the comprehensive truth of Christ, and in Christ they are brought fully to themselves. Their differences are not simply obliterated; in them the whole Christ is revealed.

This integration is very different from the way that globalization makes every particular form dispensable, an empty stand-in for a universal desire. What makes the form of Christ attractive is the perfect harmony between finite form and infinite fullness, the particular and the universal. Christ is the unique hypostatic union between archetype and image. Christ does not point beyond himself to something else, something more universal, but is the fullness of God. For this very reason, Christians reject the Platonist idea that the world of matter is a concealment of the spiritual. To the Platonist conception, according to Balthasar, the sacraments and the Church itself are mere material crutches for the materially minded. Because of the Incarnation, on the other hand, Christians see the universal revealed in even the lowest of the material. The cross remains revelation, and not a mere pointer to something else.37

Nevertheless, the appearance of the One in the many is not the limitation of the One. God remains wholly other, and transcends the many. Even in the natural world, the very existence of that which is not one both reveals and conceals the One. On the one hand, the limitedness of that which is not one points beyond itself to the possibility of unity. On the other hand, there is no way simply to deduce the one from the many for, as Balthasar says, we can never understand how a monad would need to go out of itself into a dyad in order to preserve its unity. “In other words, by its very being creation shows that it is not necessary.”38 So in natural theology the contingency of the many both reveals and conceals God. Only in Christ is the many revealed as “justified” by the very plurality that exists within the triune God himself.39 God is revealed as not a monad. Because the Trinitarian God is both one and not-one, in Christ the One and the many, God and the world, are

32Ibid., 195.
36Ibid., 507.
37Ibid., 432–40.
38Ibid., 448.
39Ibid., 506.
revealed as not-other (*non-aliud*) to each other. But, of course, God is both not-other and yet remains wholly other.  

The Incarnation does not resolve, but brings to perfection, the most complete revelation of God within the most extreme concealment. God is shown immediately in the form of the God-man, and yet he is made manifest in the “hopelessly relativized reality of one individual man in the crowd,” one who dies an ignominious death besides.

In the pluralist conception of God, it is a one-sided emphasis on God’s utter transcendence, his concealment from the many, that licenses the proliferation of particular religious forms, all of which are interchangeable and none of which really reveal the universal. God’s hiddenness reveals only the emptiness of signs. In Balthasar’s much more complex account, it is precisely God’s hiddenness that reveals God. This is especially apparent in the cross, which for Balthasar is the *concretissimum*. Nothing could conceal the God of the universe more completely than a half-naked man being tortured to death. And yet the Christian claim is that it is precisely here, in this self-emptying, that the very fullness of God’s inner life is revealed, for the Father is only the Father in his complete self-giving to the Son, which is returned by the Son as the Gift, which is the Holy Spirit. The ugliness of the cross itself then paradoxically is pure glory.  

The particularity of the cross does not limit God, but opens up the world to participate in the drama enacted on the stage of the Trinity itself.

The *kenosis* of God creates the possibility of a human subject very different from the consumer self. The absolute uniqueness of Christ cannot be subsumed under any more general categories of being. If God is God, then God must be always beyond our comprehension; *si comprehendis non est Deus*. We are, nevertheless, invited to participate in the Trinitarian life through Christ and the work of the Spirit. To do so, however, we cannot grasp, but only submit. We cannot stand back from the world and survey it, but simply take our role in the drama which God is staging and give ourselves to it.

The aesthetics that accompanies the Christ-form thus produces a particular kind of subject. The aesthetics of Heimlichkeit moves necessarily into the dramatics of *Theo-Drama*. Once the person sees the form of Christ, he or she is moved to follow. Unlike the consumer self who consumes, the true self is taken outside itself, enraptured, swept away by the form that is anything but indifferent. Indeed, to speak of a unique human self at all, one must begin outside the self. In living beings, says Balthasar, the problem of the one and the many appears in that every individual member of a species shares in a nature that is identical in every individual, yet each one possesses it in a unique way. As a spiritual being, however, the human person is not content with this merely quantitative distinction of one individual from another. One’s uniqueness is encountered in being addressed by an other who finds one indispensable. But this other cannot be merely another human being, for then the recognition could always be withdrawn. Without God, there is nothing really unique; the temptation will always be to absorb the individual into the universal, the person into an all-encompassing nature.

What constitutes the human person for Balthasar is not merely being recognized as a self by God, but also being sent out of one’s self by God. One’s very identity is discovered in one’s mission.

Outside Christ’s acting area, no one can identify himself, nor can he be conclusively and validly identified by anyone else. . . . Who knows if he really is a particular, unique individual, or not just anybody, someone who just happens to have individual features: “Mann ist Mann”? *En Christio*, in the acting area Christ opens up as the fruit of his Resurrection, each individual is given a personal commission; he is entrusted both with something unique to do and with the freedom to do it. Bound up with this commission is his own, inalienable, personal name; here—and only here—role and person coincide.

---

40 Ibd., 459.
41 Ibd., 457.
42 Ibd., 460.
He adds that this personal commission is "actually constitutive of the person as such."\(^{47}\)

This analysis of the human person is dependent on the analysis in *Theo-Drama* on the person of Christ, who reveals humanity to itself. As God's exhaustive self-communication, Christ's mission is identical with his person. Balthasar's exegesis of New Testament texts, especially from John, shows how Jesus' knowledge of himself coincides with his knowledge of being sent. And this analysis of God's economy in Jesus of Nazareth flows from Balthasar's analysis of the immanent Trinity. Existence as receptivity to being sent out receives its form from the procession of the Son from the Father, and the openness of the Son to being sent in time to the world by the will of the Father.\(^{48}\) What's more, the mission of Christ is also the very form of self-emptying, in which he who is in the form of God is abandoned to the cross. God thus makes room within himself for human freedom, susceptible to temptation, and even death, thus making it possible for human beings to participate in the drama of Christ. "Thus, in the very discipleship in which the Christian 'loses his soul', he can attain his true identity."\(^{49}\)

The true identity of each unique human person is thus founded upon the overcoming of an illusory self-sufficiency through the overcoming of the opposition between the One and the many, God and creatures.

Just as the divine Persons do not confront one another as autonomous beings but, in God's one concrete nature, are forever one divine Being, so too, in Christ, the covenant between God and creature as a covenant of free partners is forever surpassed and indissolubly established, in anticipation, upon the hypostatic union. . . . This becomes most striking for us in the Eucharist: in it the whole substantial Christ offers himself to the world as the gift of the Father, and he establishes

the Christian's total life of faith upon the physico-sacramental "eating and drinking" of his Flesh and Blood.\(^{50}\)

The form of this eating and drinking is established not by human beings but by Christ; in its entirety the event and person of Christ is eucharistic, given and poured out to be consumed by others. If in consuming the eucharist we become the Body of Christ, then we too are called in turn to offer ourselves to be consumed by the world. The eucharist is wholly *kenotic* in its form.\(^{51}\) To consume the eucharist is an act of anti-consumption, for here to consume is to be consumed, to be taken up into participation in something larger than the self, yet in a way in which the identity of the self is paradoxically secured.

Thus Balthasar says that self-giving in the eucharist participates in the very life of the Trinity. The "flowing" of Christ into the eucharist is "the glowing core about which . . . the cosmos crystallizes, or better, from which it radiates."\(^{52}\) Nevertheless, this center is a de-centered center, for the Eucharist "enables him to give himself away so prodigiously that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, he is 'liquified' and rendered accessible to all times and places, without forfeiting his uniqueness."\(^{53}\) This universalization of the Body of Christ, however, is never detached from the local and the particular, for the eucharistic community is essentially local, gathered around the altar in a particular time and place. Furthermore, the particular is of supreme importance because the eucharist is not a mere sign which points to Christ; this particular piece of bread is the body of Christ.

The eucharist is the marvelous means of freeing Christ's historical humanity from the confines of space and time, of multiplying mysteriously its presence without forfeiting its unity and, since it is given to each Christian as his indispensable


\(^{48}\)Ibid., 149–57; also Balthasar, *A Theology of History*, 25.


nourishment (1s 6:53–58), of incorporating all into the body of Christ, making them in Christ one body through which courses the divine life. Through the eucharist the Church comes into being as the body of Christ; and while the one flesh of the Lord is multiplied, mankind divided is unified in it.54

Contrary to the assumption of theological pluralists like John Hick, the particular as such has universal significance. The catholicity of the Church is not sustained by a cosmopolitan detachment from the particular, the (small c) “catholic taste” of the globalized subject. “Catholic” rather means a gathering than a spreading out, a unification of the many through attachment to the local eucharistic community. One becomes more catholic, more universal, the more one is tied to a particular community of Christians gathered around the altar. As Balthasar says,

The Catholic is in fact a region whose middle point is everywhere (where the Eucharist is celebrated); and (structurally) she can theoretically be everywhere: geographically, her periphery extends to “the very ends of the earth” (Rev. 1:8), a periphery that in any case can never be far from the midpoint.55

V. Conclusion

I have argued here that globalization is an aesthetic and a practice that fails satisfactorily to solve the problem of the one and the many. It is a secular parody of the catholicity to which human beings aspire and which is given in the Church. As a result, a consumer subject and a homogenizing culture become increasingly common features of our world. I have suggested that Balthasar’s analysis of the Christian aesthetic and dramatics can provide a way of overcoming the dualism of universal and particular without collapsing the latter into the former. If Christ is the concrete universal, then it suggests an aesthetic in which the particular is given its particularity precisely by incorporation into the universal. The subject becomes a subject by being sent out of the self. The form of human life is then not consumption but kenosis. This kenosis however is not mere altruistic self-emptying, but participation in the infinite fullness of the Trinitarian life. If economic relations are not to be excluded in the drama of divine-human relations, then the form of economic life is shaped in the life of the Trinity, which is mutual self-giving and mutual receiving.

Though Balthasar himself never draws out the economic and social implications of this aspect of his work, the implications are profound. If detachment from particular places and communities has contributed to the depersonalization of the global economy, then a proper aesthetic of the particular would place the human person back at the center of economic relations, as Pope John Paul II has repeatedly insisted. An aesthetic and practice of self-giving mutuality would likewise resist the construction of the subject as consumer, which equally personifies the subject by disrupting the divine eros which marks true human flourishing.

All of this can only be instantiated in concrete, local practices. For it is only in the encounter with other persons that Christ is encountered, in the concrete and not the abstract, and only by attachment to—not detachment from—the concrete that the universal Christ is encountered. The call to Christians is not so much either to embrace or try to replace abstractions such as “capitalism” with other abstractions. It is rather to sustain local forms of economy, community, and culture that recognize the universality of the individual person. The incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ situate the subject in a drama in which it is united to particular others in the body of Christ. This body opens up the possibility of forms of exchange that are based neither on self-interest nor self-sacrifice, but on seeing the concrete other as not-other, as part of the same body. The Christian is called not to replace one universal system with another, but to attempt to “realize” the universal body of Christ in every particular exchange.56

WILLIAM T. CAVANAUGH teaches theology at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota.


56 This essay originated as a talk given at a conference entitled “Balthasar and the Evangelization of Culture” at DeSales University, Allentown, Pennsylvania, April 2001. I would like to thank Larry Chapp and Rodney Howsare for their kind invitation to speak at the conference.