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Editorial

Why God Created the World: For J.S. Bach

It was W. H. Auden, I believe, who once observed: "You do not read a poem. A poem reads you."

During Lent this year, I discovered that *I* had been read by a midday series of solo cello suites by Johann Sebastian Bach, offered in the gorgeous neo-gothic Lady Chapel of Emmanuel Episcopal Church, Boston. Defined by its towering, golden altarpiece, which features large representations of Mary the Mother of God and other biblical women, not only that holy vision, but also the acoustics of that sacred place over which that altarpiece presides, were stunning. And thanks to the excellence of the individual cellists, the mysterious sonorities and complexities of Bach's creativity charged that Lady Chapel with an almost tangible power.

This is how Michael Beattie, a conductor and keyboardist in Boston, instructively described this music in the program notes:

> The Suites for Unaccompanied Cello by Johann Sebastian Bach are some of the most remarkable and mysterious compositions of the Baroque master. Like the Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin, they are musically complete in that they achieve—through string crossing and arpeggiation—a sense of fully realized counterpoint on a single instrument. While most movements in the Suites have standard Baroque dance titles, they far exceed mere dance pieces in sophistication.

Astounding in themselves, these suites, in that spiritually charged setting, drove me into deep thought, theologically.

Why did God create the world? I had been preoccupied with this question my whole adult life. At that very moment, the answer was given to me: God created the world so that these very suites by Bach could be invented and performed and celebrated. Let me explain.

I have had a love-hate relationship with the theological visions of the great Jesuit paleontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, for a long time. I have been particularly taken by his vision of cosmic evolution and his construct of "the law of complexity-consciousness." That principle affirms that as the creatures of the cosmos become more complex, particularly on planet Earth, the intensity of their consciousness also increases. Thus a stone has a minimal, indiscernible kind of consciousness, a cat has some consciousness, and humans have an intense kind of consciousness in the form of self-consciousness.

In this sense, for Teilhard, every creature, however miniscule, however immense, has its own spiritual interiority, along with its own material exteriority. That interiority comes to its most concentrated expression, in Teilhard's view, in the human creature. Humans, according to Teilhard—here joining with Aldous Huxley—are "evolution conscious of itself." Humans are cosmic interiority overflowing cosmic exteriority.

Teilhard thus gave expression to an ancient metaphysical principle in a new, evolutionary form: the human creature is the middle of all things. The human creature is a kind of microcosm. Unfortunately, Teilhard pushed that theme in a dramatically anthropocentric direction. For him, matter

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mattered, but chiefly insofar as it was permeated with and gave birth to spirit. Teilhard believed that the goal *(telos)* of cosmic evolution—a goal which, for him, only can be identified retrospectively, once evolution has become conscious of itself—is precisely the human creature, generally, and the God-human, in particular, Jesus Christ, who, for Teilhard, is the particular *telos* toward which the whole of cosmic evolution has been tending, with nearly infinite complexities and durations and distances, from the very beginning. Teilhard believed, finally, that as cosmic evolution meandered steadily toward its eternal resting place and fulfilment, which he called the Omega Point, the world of spirit that emerged intensely in the human creatures generally, and was completed and fulfilled in the emergence of the Spirit in the God-human in particular, would slough off all the accoutrements of matter—except in the case of glorified human bodies—and would become a world of pure spirit, the eternal Spirit of God. Eschatologically, interiority would triumph finally over exteriority.

I believe, instead, that matter matters not just temporally, as a kind of staging for the emergence of humanity, finally centered in the God-human. I believe that matter matters eternally. I affirm the faith of my forebears, exemplified by I, II, and III Isaiah, by Paul in his letter to the Colossians, and by the testimony of St. Francis. This is my vision, as one pedestrian along the way, walking with countless others, of all ages and of all gifts and in all ages. In faith and with hope, we pilgrims await a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells, a time when the lamb will lie down with the lion, a time when all creatures will live *in harmony*—in all the senses of that word—as brothers and sisters, eternally.

Matter matters eternally. This is why those Bach suites moved me so deeply. This is a reason why God created the world, I believe—so that the universal orchestra of all creatures, of near-infinite diversity, from quarks to black holes, might flourish in praise of God, now and forever, each according to the mysterious energies of its own interiority.

Consider further this theme, which has preoccupied my thoughts and meditations in recent years, the two voices of nature: the groaning and the praising, highlighted in Romans 8 and Psalm 148. Since matter is imbued with spirit in all of its configurations, from the very least to the very greatest, from the simplest to the most complex, every creature has its own particular expressivity—call this its song—which sometimes gives voice to the destructivity of the cosmic process and sometimes gives voice the creativity of the cosmic process. This is nature's universal groaning to God and nature's universal praising of God. And the Creator mysteriously hears each song as a voice in its own right—the atonal along with the tonal—contributing to the symphony of the whole creation. I describe this universal and highly particularized chorus of songs in a forthcoming essay.[1]

Here I want to affirm only this single idea: God created the universe, among other reasons, so that a rich and universal diversity of music, flowing from the interiority of all creatures, might be heard, above all by God, but also by many creatures themselves, not only humans but also creatures like the gibbons of Indonesia, bonded in pairs, lifting up songs at sunrise, with "elaborately developed vocal exchanges unique to each couple..."[2] And God engages with the creation immediately so that such songs can be magnified for God and all creatures, now and forever. As matter matters not only temporally, but also eternally, so the music of matter matters both temporally and eternally.

Among the nearly infinite number of these cosmic voices, we humans are blessed to be able to hear the amazingly intense voice of Bach. With countless souls from many walks of life, past and present, I am awestruck when I hear Bach. Like many others, too, I have my favorites, among them these cello suites, the Double Violin Concerto, the Brandenberg Concertos, and the St. John's Passion. I wonder, indeed, whether Bach's voice is first among equals *(prima inter pares)*, first among *all* the creatures of God. The great Karl Barth once observed that when the angels of God gather before the throne of God, they play Bach, but when they are by themselves, for themselves, they play Mozart—and then God listens all the more. Be that as it may, Barth may well have been right on

the first account. God's first choice is to listen to Bach.

But Bach, be he *prima inter pares* or not, is a font of musical power and delights only as one among a nearly infinite variety of musical voices in our cosmos, all of which God hears and celebrates. This, among other reasons, as I have said, is why God created the world: to hear the music of Bach—and to hear all the other songs of all the other creatures in our wondrously multifaceted and multi-tonal universe, from first things to last, from alpha to omega, and then on into the symphonic glories of the New Creation.

This is how those grand Bach cello suites, offered so excellently in that sacred place, read me.

H. Paul

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Endnotes

1. H. Paul Santmire, "The Two Voices of Nature: Further Encounters with the Integrity of Nature," in *Eco-Reformation: Grace and Hope for a Planet in Peril,* ed. Lisa E. Dahill, James B. Martin-Schramm (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2016), forthcoming.

2. Bernie Krauss, *The Great American Orchestra: Finding the Origins of Music in the World's Wild Places* (New York: Little, Brown, 2012), 92.