Prolegomena

A Vacation for Grünewald: On Karl Barth’s Vexed Relationship with Visual Art

Call Forwarding: Improvising the Response to the Call of Beauty

Theology and Church Music

“A Pre-Appearance of the Truth”: Toward a Christological Aesthetics

The Beautiful as a Gateway to the Transcendent: The Contributions of the Decadent Movement in 19th Century Literature and the Theological Aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar

Fighting Troll-Demons in Vaults of the Mind and Heart — Art, Tragedy, and Sacramentality: Some Observations from Ibsen, Forsyth, and Dostoevsky

Reflections

Worship and the Hidden Beauty of Christ

Liturgy and Art

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The Princeton Theological Review

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PROLEGOMENA
D.W. Congdon

In the official response to the iconoclastic conciliabulum of 754 CE, the Seventh Ecumenical Council affirmed the propriety of icons and images in Christian worship in order that “the incarnation of the Word of God is shown forth as real and not merely phantastic.” What all the essays in this issue of the Princeton Theological Review share is a belief in the power of art, in its various ways, to connect us with reality, particularly the reality of the Word made flesh. This issue of the PTR gathers together a wide array of scholarly engagements with the subject of theology and art; some discuss the visual, musical, and literary arts, while others are more straightforwardly philosophical and theological considerations of art and aesthetics. All of the articles in this issue attest to the fact that art has an important theological role in the Christian faith. While the writers represented here differ on what that role looks like, all affirm the importance of art and its power to connect us with the concrete reality of the faith. Thus, while most of the writers are Protestants who descend from a more cautious and occasionally iconoclastic tradition than the Catholic and Orthodox branches of the Church, even so all of the writers represented here share in the common ecumenical spirit of the Seventh Council.

In the first article, “A Vacation for Grünewald,” Matthew Milliner examines Barth’s objection to art that visually depicts Christ. Barth argued that such art leads either to the Docetic heresy or the Ebionite heresy, that is, to an overemphasis on the deity or the humanity of Christ, respectively. While Barth was famously fond of Grünewald’s Isenheim Altarpiece, Milliner contends that the Ghent Altarpiece is a far more suitable fit for Barth’s trinitarian theology.

The following two articles by Bruce Ellis Benson and Gordon Graham focus on music. In “Call Forwarding,” Benson discusses the nature of beauty as a divine call which prompts our human responses in responsible artistry. Relying on the work of Jean-Louis Chrétien and Hans Urs von Balthasar, Benson focuses on the way this call-and-response framework is represented explicitly in black spirituals and jazz improvisation. Graham, on the other hand, discusses the relation between theology and church music. He addresses the role of music, first, as unifying fellowship, and second, as divine service or worship. Graham affirms both roles by suggesting that church music be understood theologically as something that unites the community together and shapes the way people give use the gifts God has given them in the act of giving back in worship.

In my article, I look at beauty in the light of the doctrine of justification by offering a close reading of Eberhard Jüngel’s theology. Jüngel writes about justification and the beautiful in ways that overlap and offer fruitful possibilities for the development of a “christological aesthetics.” The Rev. Walter F. Kedjierski, a Catholic pastor and professor, examines the iconic nature of beauty as a “gateway to the transcendent.” He compares the writings of a few authors associated with the Decadent or Aesthetic Movement of the late 19th century with the
theological aesthetics of von Balthasar in order to argue against the notion of “art for art’s sake.” Kedjierski concludes with some ecumenical implications. In our final article, Jason A. Goroney brings theologian P. T. Forsyth, dramatist Henrik Ibsen, and novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky into a rich conversation over the relation between theology and culture. Goroney argues that, in their differing ways, both Ibsen and Dostoevsky are *ancillae theologiae*, handmaidens of theology, and that Christian theologians need to listen attentively to artists.

Finally, we have three reflections that offer diverse perspectives on theology and art with a common focus on the relation between art and worship. First, Scott Jackson sketches a christological aesthetics of worship in light of both his experience leading a small, “emergent” worship service and Barth’s theology of the cross. Second, Adam Tietje reflects upon the fittingness of art for Christian liturgy by examining the philosophy of Nicholas Wolterstorff. And, lastly, Wes Barry speaks about the experiential process of artmaking as an essential form of Christian worship in response to God’s creativity.

A special addition to this issue are the poems of David Wright, who is a published poet and has been professor of English literature and writing at Wheaton College since 2001. He is the author of *A Liturgy for Stones* (2003) and *Lines from the Provinces* (2000). Wright is especially important in the Mennonite church, where he has been influential in bringing together Christian devotion and artistic appreciation. He is also involved in the local arts scene in Illinois, where he lives with his family.

In a poem entitled, “On Belief in the Physical Resurrection of Jesus,” Denise Levertov writes that belief in such a material and concrete miracle is not for “intricate minds / nourished / on concept” but rather for “literalists of the imagination . . . of whom I am one.” It is through the power of art, symbol, and metaphor that we are able to feel “the pulse in the wound” and “taste / bread at Emmaus / that warm hands / broke and blessed.” Levertov reminds us in this poem that art theologically considered not only follows from creation and the incarnation, but it also, and perhaps most especially, follows from the reconciliation accomplished in Jesus Christ, through whom “God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things . . . by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:20). We must remember that the Word made flesh is the Word who was “found in human form” and “became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:7-8).

When we encounter art, therefore, we come into contact with the material, concrete, and tangible elements of earthly reality—elements which God brought into being in creation, sustains “by his powerful word” (Heb. 1:3), assumed and sanctified in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, destroyed in his crucifixion, glorified in his resurrection and ascension, and promises to consummate in the eschatological reign of God. Thus, our theological engagement with the subject of art and aesthetics absorbs us in the whole scope of the gospel. The PTR has always striven to remain grounded in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and these contributions on theology and art are further examples of our attempt to think deeply and critically about the world—including the world of art and culture—in the light of Christ who proclaims, “See, I am making all things new” (Rev. 21:5).
A VACATION FOR GRÜNEWALD:
ON KARL BARTH’S VEXED RELATIONSHIP
WITH VISUAL ART

Matthew Milliner

Matthias Grünewald could use a break. An illustration can only be used so many times before it loses its effectiveness, and on that score Grünewald’s Isenheim Altarpiece as a visual companion to Karl Barth’s theology has, due to extreme over-employment, been wearing somewhat thin. For Grünewald’s sake, and for Barth’s – it may be time for a change.

Of course, it is not that Grünewald’s position was undeserved. The Isenheim Altarpiece is one of the few visual theological illustrations that was consistently used by Barth himself. Roy Harrisville reminds us of the career-long, and not always positive, presence that the altarpiece had in Barth’s career:

Barth referred to the Isenheim Altarpiece a score of times. A reproduction of it stood next to or above his desk for years. Notes from his confirmation instruction at his parish in Safenwil in 1918-1919 assign the retable a prophetic role. The crucified Christ is a reminder of death ‘with all its horrors and mysteries,’ while the group on the left reflects ‘humanity in face of its fate,’ the hand-wringing Magdalene on the right ‘the weakness of our good will,’ and the hand of the Baptist ‘judgment and grace.’

Barth’s Grünewald references continued in the Letter to the Romans and his lectures on Calvin. And though in the lectures on Schleiermacher we are told to “forget Grünewald, the Middle Ages and the Reformation to let the Berliner speak,” the Isenheim altarpiece reappears in the Church Dogmatics four times, where in one instance Barth asks,

Can anyone point away from himself more impressively and completely (illum oportet crescere me autem nimui)? And can any one point to the thing indicated more impressively and realistically, than is done there?

That famous crooked finger of John the Baptist even serves as an illustration of the theme that is the beating heart of the Church Dogmatics:

This is the place of Christology. It faces the mystery. It does not stand within the mystery. It can and must adore with Mary and point with the Baptist.

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2 Ibid.
It cannot and must not do more than this. But it can and must do this.  

Certainly, therefore, the Isenheim Altarpiece is a well-suited illustration of Barthian themes. But might students of Barth seeking visual companions to his ideas be permitted even a little variety? Furthermore, might there be a piece of visual art that illustrates Barthian themes better than Grünewald can? I think so. But before that question is explored, some remarks are in order as to whether visual art and Barth’s theology can be mixed at all. For it is frequently remarked how odd it is that a theologian so suspicious of the visual arts would find an altarpiece a lifelong partner in theological dialogue.

**BARTH AND ART?**

Was Karl Barth really disapproving of any visual art that depicted Christ? Indeed he was. Barth is often accused of positions he did not hold, and certainly the volume of his output is such that attempts to isolate any single position are suspect, but nevertheless I do not see any way out of the fact that he held this one. Barth’s reflection on the Isenheim Altarpiece is the exception that proves his rule. Although the Grünewald references show he permitted an illustrative role to depictions of Christ, and though Barth himself showed frequent aesthetic sympathies, still his view of depicting Christ in the first place is clear:

It could not and cannot be anything but a sorry story. No human art should try to represent – in their unity – the suffering God and triumphant man, the beauty of God which is the beauty of Jesus Christ. If at this point we have one urgent request to all Christian artists, however well intentioned, gifted or even possessed of genius, it is that they should give up this unholy

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4 Ibid., 125. Yet, later in the same volume he warns, “If we presume to point directly to it, to dream of coming forward ourselves, somewhat in the attitude of Grünewald’s John, as witness to this event, we should be alleging what one should never think of alleging … the word ‘pointer’ would then be merely another word for ‘presupposition’” (ibid., 301).

5 The remarks of John Dillenberger neatly summarize Barth’s overall attitude: “The verbal imagination of Barth is indisputable. His delight in and his writings on Mozart are common knowledge, and Grünewald’s Crucifixion meant much to him. But he opposed placing stained glass in the Basel minister and his theological comments on the visual arts of painting and sculpture in relation to the church were few and mainly negative in character. Images and symbols, he declared, ‘have no place at all in a building designed for Protestant worship.’ And though his correspondence with Carl Zuckmayer ‘shows human and cultural concerns so characteristic of Barth, but for him, theology as a discipline is different from all that.’ (“Contemporary Theologians and the Visual Arts,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53:4 [Dec. 1985]: 602).

6 For example, Barth makes the following strong observation: “The word and command of God demand art, since it is art that sets us under the word of the new heaven and the new earth. Those who, in principle or out of indolence, want to evade the anticipatory creativity of aesthetics are certainly not good. Finally, in the proper sense, to be unaesthetic is to be immoral and disobedient” (*Ethics*, ed. D. Braun [New York: Seabury Press, 1981], 510). Yet, my concern in this essay is visual art representing Christ, for which Barth makes the exact opposite claim.
undertaking – for the sake of God’s beauty.7

Lest one think that this was an early career inclination that Barth somehow out-grew, a similar statement appears towards the end of the *Dogmatics*, where Barth sadly regurgitates arguments deemed Christologically heretical by the 7th ecumenical council:

… even the most excellent of plastic arts does not have the means to display Jesus Christ in His truth, i.e., in His unity as true Son of God and Son of Man. There will necessarily be either on the one side, as in the great Italians, an abstract and docetic over-emphasis on His deity, or on the other, as in Rembrandt, an equally abstract, Ebionite over-emphasis on His humanity, so that even with the best of intentions error will be promoted…. It is better not to allow works of this kind to compete with the ministry of preaching.8

The only conclusion that I am able to draw from these statements is that as much as the Isenheim Altarpiece is helpful in illustrating Barth’s ideas, because it depicts Christ in one of the forbidden manners (in this case the Ebionite over-emphasis on humanity), it would nevertheless have been better, from a strictly Barthian point of view, if the Isenheim Altarpiece had not been made!

Fortunately, there is no reason to be bound to proceed from a strictly Barthian point of view.9 For the sake of Barth’s greater insights, his weaker ones – in this case his iconoclasm - may have to be jettisoned. Doing so enables the discovery of a different piece of medieval visual art that magnificently displays Barth’s greatest theological insight.

**The Ghent Altarpiece**

Proceeding then on a road paved by Barth himself – using altarpieces to il-

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7 Karl Barth, *CD* II/1, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 666.

8 Karl Barth, *CD* IV/3.2, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1962), 868. The iconoclastic Byzantine Emperor Constantine V made similar arguments, prohibiting icons of Christ on the basis that they could depict only Christ’s deity (and thus depict the undepictable and provoke idolatry) or only Christ’s humanity (necessitating a Nestorian separation of Christ from his deity). By limiting the Christ icon to depicting neither the human nor divine nature, but the composite hypostasis of Christ’s *person*, Theodore of Studios overcame Constantine’s arguments, which were in turn themselves deemed heretical at the Triumph of Orthodoxy in 843.

9 Were one nevertheless so inclined, one could proceed on strictly Barthian grounds by taking a cue from recent arguments for the use of embryonic stem cell lines: To *produce* new ones strictly for research is unethical, but one *can* employ the lines that are already available. Likewise, to continue to produce paintings of Christ is (for Barth) an “unholy undertaking,” but this does not preclude gaining insight from art (like the Isenheim or Ghent altarpiece) already in existence. Should one still object that employing visual art to depict Barth’s theology is impermissible in light of his objections, one solid if childish argument remains: He started it.
lustrate theology – I’d like to recommend the justly famous Ghent Altarpiece as a more adequate visual representation of the theology of Karl Barth (Fig. 1). The numerous, erudite, and clearly legible inscriptions on the altarpiece are testimony to its theological precision and didactic intent, making it a unique match to the likewise erudite Barth. But the commonalities between the Ghent Altarpiece and Barth go well beyond mere sophistication.

Though the entire gospel narrative, fall to eschaton, is carefully recounted in the twelve panels of the Ghent Altarpiece, I will limit myself to reflection on the central upper and lower panels. The upper right panel shares with the Isenheim Altarpiece that central motif which so impressed Barth, the pointing finger of John the Baptist.

But to whom is John the Baptist pointing in the Ghent Altarpiece? Who is the central figure in the central upper panel? In seeking to answer this long debated iconographical question, and its relation to the lower panel, we will find just how much promise for Barth’s theology the Ghent Altarpiece contains.

At the considerable risk of weighing down a masterpiece of art with theological jargon, for my purposes the upper central panel and its mysterious central figure will be assumed to correspond to the immanent Trinity (who God is “in Himself”), and the lower to the economic Trinity (who God is “for us”). The intimate connection between the two spheres is a point made as forcefully by this altarpiece as it is by Barth.

Like Barth, the Ghent Altarpiece does not “solve the Christological mystery by juggling it away” with modalist or subordinationist heresy. Instead Barth insists on “the offensive fact that there is in God Himself an above and a below, a prius and a posterius, a superiority and a subordination,” facts beautifully conveyed in the upper and lower central panels of the Ghent Altarpiece. The connection between the two panels preserves the “most offensive fact of all, that there is

10 The literature on the Ghent altarpiece is enormous, and has recently been well compiled in a dissertation by Dana Ruth Goodgal (The Iconography of the Ghent Altarpiece, University of Pennsylvania, 1981). Goodgal makes a convincing case that the altarpiece in its original context proves to be a complicated and rich illustration of medieval Eucharistic theology, as informed by the well studied theological consults equipped by the impressive library of the St. Bavo monastery. I am admittedly stepping far afield from this warranted contextual interpretation by applying a Barthian insight. But by dropping the smokebomb of postmodern hermeneutics, I should invoke enough confusion to enable me to proceed.

11 Goodgal (see note 10) makes a convincing case that the inscriptions reflect the ideas of medieval theologian Oliver de Langhe who must have worked closely with the artists, one or both of the brothers Hubert and Jan van Eyck. Would that contemporary theologians resume their historic role of theological consultation to artists

12 Considering the depth of this altarpiece and length of the Dogmatics, many alternative connections could be fruitfully explored.

13 Karl Barth, CD IV/1, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 200.

14 Ibid., 201.
Figure 1: The Ghent Altarpiece
a below, a posterius, a subordination, that it belongs to the inner life of God...”15 Modalism is avoided by the fact that there is both an upper and a lower panel. God “stays home” even while he ventures into the far country. Subordinationism is avoided by the puzzling unity of the two panels, a unity I will now explore.

In the lower panel (the economic Trinity) all humanity, Christian and non-Christian, has gathered around the lamb. Eucharistic and baptismal imagery abound, and the inscription is straightforward enough: “Ecce agnus Dei qui tollet peccata mundi.” This is what we know of God’s economic activity on behalf of our salvation. Christ speaks to us of God. Making a connection between “the lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world” and Barth’s theology should not be a strain on anyone’s credulity, nor would it be a very remarkable connection to make.

But what of the upper panel, God “in Himself”? We can safely consider one Barthian insight—if not the central insight—to be the elimination of any “God behind God,” and the focusing of all reflection on the divine nature in the person of Jesus Christ. Writes Barth:

Of what value would His deity be to us if – instead of crossing in that deity the very real gulf between Himself and us – He left that deity behind Him in His coming to us, if it came to be outside of Him as He became ours? What would be the value to us of His way into the far country [the lower panel] if in the course of it He lost Himself [the upper panel]?16 Central to Barth’s Trinitarian theology is that God as revealed in Christ is not divorced from who God is in Himself. And central to the Ghent Altarpiece is that God in Christ, depicted as the lamb in the lower panel, is intimately connected to God’s own nature, depicted directly above.

Art historical debate has long contested who the upper figure is. Is it Christ or the Father?17 That the figure is the Father seems to be indicated by the papal tiara, normally connected iconographically to the first person of the Trinity, as well as by the royal scepter in place of Christ’s traditional Gospel book. Furthermore, the word on the sash, “Sabaot” refers to the God as the “Lord of Hosts,” words connected to the Father during the sanctus of the medieval Mass. There also appears initially to be no hand wounds that would belong to Christ. Finally, the words on the back of the throne “Hic est Deus…” though not ruling out the divine Christ, seem nonetheless to invoke the Father.

However, there is also sufficient evidence to support the thesis that the middle figure is Christ. Firstly, that the figure is Christ seems to be indicated by the features. A youthful brown beard replaces the traditional white beard that can be seen in similar figures of the Father. Secondly, the standard medieval Deësis, of

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15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 185.
which this seems to be an obvious example, depicts Mary and John the Baptist flanking not the Father, but Christ. In addition, the evidence that there are no hand-wounds can be mischievously (but fairly) contested by suggesting that the way Christ’s fingers fall perfectly conceal the wounds. Finally, there is inscription evidence to suggest Christ as well. Directly to the left of the figure is a picture of a pelican pecking its chest to feed its young, a clear reference to Christ which is further bolstered by the unmistakable Greek inscription, IHESUS XPS.

So who is this illusive central figure? Christ or the Father? It is perhaps as difficult to answer this question as it is to understand the depths and contours of Barth’s Trinitarian theology. Regarding the illusive figure, art historian Dana Goodgal suggests that,

When all the attributes and inscriptions are understood together … they characterize the united Godhead … the inscription describing his divine nature, the figure, his human nature.18

Above we saw that Barth pointed out that depictions of Christ err towards a “docetic over-emphasis on His deity,” on the one hand, and “an equally abstract, Ebionite over-emphasis on His humanity” on the other. But by dialectically setting the inscription (suggesting deity) against the depiction (suggesting humanity), we may have a case in the Ghent Altarpiece complex enough to avoid Barth’s dilemma.19 Yet, interesting as this avoidance may be, the Ghent connection to Barth’s theology is more significant than the mere fact that this kind of depiction might, by Barthian criteria, be allowed.

Again, who is the figure? Christ or the Father? After summarizing the centuries long debate, the eminent art historian Erwin Panofsky suggested a solution:

From the dogmatic point of view this figure belongs in the same class as its forerunners, its parallels, and its Flemish derivatives: it fuses the three Persons, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost into one image which is dogmatically equivalent to the whole Trinity.20

But Panofsky’s tidy iconographical resolution – that the figure simply represents the Trinity – may be more than the Ghent Altarpiece wants to give. What if the tension between Christ and the Father is not meant to be resolved? Perhaps the aim of the altarpiece is to keep us guessing, and perhaps the point of the guessing is to drive home the idea that we cannot think of God the Father at all apart from the form and figure of Christ.

18 Goodgal, Iconography, 280. The full translation of the inscription surrounding God the throne is “Here is God, most powerful because of his divine majesty and high over all because of his sweet goodness and most generous in giving because of his measureless bounty.”

19 Such gymnastics are hardly necessary however, for the standard Eastern icon, as understood in the reflection of Theodore of Studios and Patriarch Nicephoros, avoids the Barthian dilemma as well (see note 8 above).

In the *Humanity of God*, Barth declares that there can “be no theological visual art. Since it is an event, the humanity of God does not permit itself to be fixed in an image.”²¹ However, the Ghent Altarpiece, with its spring-loaded tension between Father and Son, perhaps avoids Barth’s critique that theological visual art must be static.²² A figure that preserves a holy ambiguity between Christ and the Father illustrates, in a theologically appropriate way, Christ’s statement that “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). And when this mysterious figure is seen in context with the adoration of the Lamb in the panel below, the key Barthian theme emerges: That the God who ventured below into the far country has always been anticipating, by His Trinitarian nature, this very outpouring of love. The crown laid down at the foot of the God above declares that self-emptying kenosis is intrinsic to Christ’s very nature. The Ghent Altarpiece illustrates, better than any work of art that I’m aware of, that “the One who reconciles the world with God is necessarily the one God Himself in His true Godhead.”²³ The difference between the Ghent Altarpiece and Barth’s Trinitarian reflection is that in Ghent the idea can be seen, which after all is something Barth clearly wanted his readers to do:

This concealment, and therefore His condescension as such, is the image and reflection in which we see Him as He is… Everything depends on our seeing it, and in it the true and majestic nature of God: not trying to construct it arbitrarily; but deducing it from its revelation in the divine nature of Jesus Christ.²⁴

**Getting It Wrong**

Perhaps the significance of this kind of medieval visual connection to Barth’s theology can be underscored by another piece of medieval art that makes almost the exact opposite assertion. In the same crucial passage from which I have been quoting, Barth warns that we cannot be disturbed or confused by any pictures of false gods…. not an ontic and inward divine paradox, the postulate of which has its basis only in our own very real contradiction against God and the false ideas of God which correspond to it.²⁵

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²² The Isenheim Altarpiece, I am moved to reassert, does not avoid Barth’s critique.
²³ Karl Barth *CD IV*/1, 193. For another visual example of Christ being in the form of God, one might point to the bizarrely literal depiction of Christ crowning the Virgin, accompanied by the Father who, following the stipulations of the commissioning contract, looks exactly the same (Coronation by Charonton in Avignon, Fig. 2). This would seem to also make the point, but the loss of ambiguity, even the eerie literalness, leads me to conclude it does not do so nearly as well.
²⁴ Karl Barth *CD IV*/1, 188.
²⁵ Ibid.
Figure 2: Coronation by Charonton in Avignon
Figure 3: Henry Suso manual

Bibliothèque nationale de France
We have seen what a visual depiction of the proper Trinitarian concept would look like, but what would the sub-Christian “ontic and inward divine paradox” look like? What would the divorce of the economic and ontological Trinity, contra both Barth and Ghent, look like?

An illustrated devotional manual of the fourteenth century Rhineland Mystic Henry Suso may give us an answer. The manuscript contains an elaborate diagram that charts the mystical path that Suso commends (Fig. 3). Explains Jeffrey Hamburger,

Beginning at the upper right and progressing in clockwise fashion, the drawing traces the progress of the soul, from its origins in the Trinity, through the imitatio Christi, to its ultimate destination, reunion with the Godhead, represented at upper left as a passage through the veil of the tabernacle into the midst of three concentric circles.26

A more blatant illustration of the “God behind God” which Barth found so abhorrent is difficult to conceive. The goal of the mystical path is to get past the Trinity to the uncharted, dark concentric circles of the Godhead. Admittedly, in Suso’s theology “images were considered appropriate to the lower, preliminary stages of the mystical itinerary … but by necessity were abandoned at the highest level of contemplation.”27 Yet provisional or not, there can be no doubt that the images used at the preliminary level convey a troubling and obfuscating message. In contrast we have the Ghent Altarpiece, illustrating Barth’s essential notion that “there is no height or depth in which God can be God in any other way.”28

CONCLUSION

Karl Barth’s relationship to visual art seems not entirely unlike his relationship with Charlotte von Kirschbaum: Stimulating, inspiring, but for a complicated set of reasons, formally unconsummated. Saddled with tensions from an unhappy marriage and his Swiss iconoclasm, Barth proceeded on both the romantic and artistic fronts as he could. But there is no reason we need inherit Barth’s circumstantial tensions either in our private lives or in the realm of visual art.

Art is neutral. It can, perfectly fulfilling Barth’s fears, be a source of theological confusion as with the devotional manual of Henry Suso. It can also, as in the Ghent Altarpiece, express theological truth with unique precision and force.

Hence, I have attempted to show here that there is more than one way to visually illustrate Barth’s theology, and certainly among them is the Ghent Altarpiece. Thanks to the dynamism of the inscrutable upper figure, it avoids Barth’s standard critique of images of Christ. Beyond this, it illustrates that central Barthian insight, recalling the “light from light” of the Nicene Creed, that


27 Ibid.

28 Karl Barth, CD II/1, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 77.
The One who reconciles the world with God [lower panel] is necessarily the one God Himself in His true Godhead [upper panel]. Otherwise the world would not be reconciled with God.29

How remarkable that a depiction of Christ in visual art, a matter on which Barth was wrong, so wonderfully captures Barth’s Trinitarian theology, a much more significant matter on which he was so right.

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29 Karl Barth, CD IV/1, 193.
CALL FORWARDING: IMPROVISING THE RESPONSE TO THE CALL OF BEAUTY

Bruce Benson

Hush! Hush! Somebody’s calling my name
Hush! Hush! Somebody’s calling my name
Hush! Hush! Somebody’s calling my name
O my Lord, O my Lord, what shall I do?

But isn’t this always the case? Somebody’s calling my name. I hear the call and I’m faced with the question “what shall I do?” What shall I do? What shall I do? Who is this I who is being called? What happens to this “I” in being called? And who or what is calling me?

This pattern of call and response goes back at least as far as creation. God calls the world into being, and so the being of all that exists is a response to that call. But, of course, there is no one call, even in the creation narrative. Instead, there are multiple calls—calls upon calls—and thus responses upon responses, an intricate web that is ever being improvised with the result being a ceaseless reverberation of call and response. Yet what structures this relation of call and response? Further, how exactly does it relate to beauty, and thus to the topic of this conference?

In what follows, I examine what I take to be reflections of God’s beauty in creation. If all beauty originates from God, then all beauty found in the world is a reflected beauty. Rather than attempting to define beauty, to provide the “essence” of beauty, or even to reflect on beautiful things per se, I will consider beauty in a roundabout way: by way of the call. Here I am following the call of Jean-Louis Chrétien as laid out in his book The Call and the Response. There Chrétien reminds us just how central this structure of call and response is to creaturely existence, and how intimately connected to goodness and beauty it is. Here I unpack Chrétien’s analysis of the call, likewise calling upon Hans Urs von Balthasar. Then I turn to how we might work out the call and response in black spirituals and jazz and then reflect upon how they likewise provide an example of beauty. It is, I think, appropriate to consider music that originates from the margins of music, from those oppressed and considered the least. For Jesus—whom Paul

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1 This essay is a slightly revised version of a chapter taken from “The Beauty of God,” edited by Daniel J. Treier, Mark Husbands, and Roger Lundin. Copyright (c) 2007 by Daniel J. Treier, Mark Husbands, and Roger Lundin. Used with permission of InterVarsity Press, PO Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515 www.ivpress.com.

2 This paper was originally presented at the 2006 Wheaton Theology Conference.

terms the “icon” of God (II Cor. 4:4)—self-identifies with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, and the naked, saying “just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Mt. 25:40). The beauty that is reflected by the marginalized is a broken beauty, one that reflects a God who not only takes a stand with those oppressed and broken but also becomes oppressed and broken himself. And yet that broken beauty likewise points to the eschatological beauty of the risen, reigning Lord.

I. BEAUTY AS THE CALL

There is absolutely no sense of “beauty for beauty’s sake” in Chrétien: as he says, “things and forms do not beckon us because they are beautiful in themselves, for their own sake, as it were. Rather, we call them beautiful precisely because they call us and recall us” (CR 3, my italics). Here we have a surprising reversal. Chrétien is clear regarding the relation of call, beauty, and goodness. But it is the order of them that he puts into question. “Beautiful, kalon, is what comes from a call, kalein” (CR 7), he says. So the call is what constitutes the beautiful, rather than the other way around. Things are beautiful precisely because they call out to us. Or, we might put this the other way around: God’s call precedes the pronouncement of beauty. In creating the world, God calls various things into being. “Let there be light,” says God, and only after calling it into being does he then reflect on its goodness (Gen. 1:3-4). In this sense, kaleô is more primordial than kalon. Or, as Chrétien puts it: “The word ‘beautiful’ is not primary, but responds and corresponds to the first call, which is the call sent by thought construed as a power to call and to name” (CR 7).

Yet the creation of light lacks the dimension of a human call. Light may “respond” by illuminating, but a person called by God responds both by a readiness to hear and a readiness to act. In this regard, it is remarkable how similar are the responses of Moses and Samuel to God’s call. God calls out from the burning bush, “Moses, ‘Moses’ and Moses responds: “here I am” (Ex. 3:4). This “here I am” is to say “I am at your disposal.” And the formula that Eli gives to Samuel is: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening” (I Sam. 3:3-9). What takes place in these exchanges is a crucial reversal. Emmanuel Levinas puts it as follows: “here I am (me voici)! The accusative here is remarkable: here I am, under your eyes, at your service, your obedient servant.”5 In other words, the subject is now truly subject to the Other, the one who calls, and so stands in the accusative case. Similarly, Balthasar, influenced by the famed writer on acting, Konstantin Stanislavsky, speaks of a disponibilité in which “the whole human system is available.”6

4 All references are to The New Revised Standard Version.


Yet how does beauty call and what is its attraction? While the Hebraic priority of the voice has often been contrasted with the Hellenic priority of sight, the “call” can come in either form, or another form altogether. Relating his enlightenment from Diotima in the Symposium, Socrates speaks of moving from an eros for the body to an eros for the soul to an eros for beauty itself.\(^7\) Ultimately, this eros for—or, we might well say, call to—beauty is disconnected from both sight and sound. So it would seem that the call may be delivered through sight or sound, or even something else. However, Chrétien points out that, even in the Symposium, “vision, at every step, produces speech in response [e.g., the very speech that Socrates is making at the banquet]” and so concludes that “visible beauty calls for spoken beauty” (CR 11). What exactly, though, is beauty’s allure? In commenting on Plato, the neo-Platonist philosopher Proclus makes the insightful etymological observation that beauty calls (kalein) “because it enchants and charms (kelein).”\(^8\) Chrétien concludes that the charm beauty exerts results in “voice, speech, and music” (CR 12). Of course, Chrétien is overstating his case. No doubt beauty often results in speech and music, but it can likewise move us to paint or sculpt.

Yet Proclus does more than define beauty in terms of enchantment and charm, for he likewise connects this enchantment with God. In his Platonic Theology, he writes: “beauty converts all things to itself, sets them in motion, causes them to be possessed by the divine (enthousian poiei), and recalls them (anakaleitai) to itself through the intermediary of love.”\(^9\) We find this same connection of beauty and God in Dionysius—or Pseudo-Dionysius—again by way of the call: “Beauty ‘calls’ all things to itself (whence it is called ‘beauty’),” writes Dionysius, who makes it clear that “Beauty” here is another name for God (in his text titled The Divine Names).\(^10\)

So beauty enchants and this enchantment comes from God. But, once moved, how do we forward the call? The answer to that question can best be found in analyzing the initial call itself. And here I turn to Balthasar. For, although the language of call and response is not central to Balthasar’s thought in the way that it is in Chrétien, his description of how beauty charms us is remarkably in line with Chrétien. Yet Balthasar adds at least three elements (and, no doubt, many more) that help clarify the call. All three of these elements can be found in the following passage from the Theological Aesthetics:

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7 Symposium 210a-e.
The form as it appears to us is beautiful only because the delight that it arouses in us is founded upon the fact that, in it, the truth and goodness of the depths of reality itself are manifested and bestowed, and this manifestation and bestowal reveal themselves to us as being something infinitely and inexhaustibly valuable and fascinating.11

Let me enumerate these elements. First, whereas secular liberalism/modernism (particularly as exemplified by Immanuel Kant) had disconnected the traditional transcendentals of the good, the true, and the beautiful, Balthasar reconnects them and makes them not merely logical operators (as in the thought of Duns Scotus) but truly part of the created order.12 Second, and closely related, in Balthasar “the beauty of the world” and “theological beauty” are once again connected, as they were in Thomas Aquinas (GL 1, 80). This reconnection is why Balthasar insists that his is a “theological aesthetics” rather than an “aesthetic theology.” But this means that God’s call to us is very much connected to the beauty of the earth, even while surpassing and pointing beyond that earthly beauty. Third, the possibility of the call is due to what Balthasar calls a “double and reciprocal ekstasis”—God’s ‘venturing forth’ to man and man’s ‘to God’ (GL 1, 126). Balthasar goes so far as to speak of the “elevation of man to participate in [God’s] glory” (GL 1, 125).

On both Chrétien’s and Balthasar’s accounts of the call, then, participation is central. But how do we participate in the call? In one sense, that participation is possible because God both transcends the world and yet is reflected by it. One can on this point agree with John Milbank, who writes that “participation can be extended also to language, history and culture: the whole realm of human culture” precisely because “human making participates in a God who is infinite poetic utterance.”13 While it seems to me that Milbank here unduly limits participation to poiesis (i.e., artistic making)—and I would want to broaden it to include phronesis (i.e., practical wisdom)—the context for these reflections, music, certainly makes poiesis an appropriate way in which to participate in the divine beauty. Of course, there are different ways of thinking poiesis. The notion of artistic “creation” has been a guiding one in the arts. No doubt, artists are “creators” of a sort. Unfortunately, the term “creation”—at least in the modern period—has come to have rather individualistic connotations and an unhealthy tinge of ex nihilo. Given that the call always precedes us—and is what makes it possible for us to call in response—a significantly better notion would be that of “improvisation,” which (as one dictionary would have it) is simply to “fabricate out of what is conveniently


Improvisation is, I think, a helpful way of conceptualizing the call and the response and a far healthier—not to mention more accurate—way of thinking about what artists do.

Here, in an important sense, I am building off of my previous work on improvisation. In my book The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue, I have argued that improvisation is a key moment in all of music making. Although it is most evident in explicit improvisatory performance practices—such as jazz and Baroque music—there I contend that it is likewise present in all musical discourses, even in classical music. My way of thinking about music making, then, is that composers, performers, and even audience members are part of an improvisatory practice: composers “improvise” upon the conventions of their music genre (not to mention the work of previous composers); performers improvise certain elements of their performances (more or less, depending on prevailing conventions); listeners participate in the improvisatory practice by listening.

II. Improvising the Response

In this section, I turn to black spirituals and jazz—musical practices that are strongly improvisatory—to illuminate what takes place in the call and the response. As will become clear, my principal points are that: 1) the call always precedes me; 2) in responding, I do not speak entirely on my own behalf but on my behalf and the behalf of others; and 3) that the improvised response is always a repetition and an improvisation.

Let us turn to our first characteristic—viz. that the call always precedes me. It is not just that the response is a response to a prior call; it is that even the call in these songs echoes a prior call. That call can be spelled out in terms of the previous performance of these pieces. But it can likewise be traced back to earlier calls. For these songs are, in effect, echoes of echoes—going back to the call from God at the beginning of the world. Or, in the case of spirituals, to Jesus’ call to his disciples. Jesus says to Peter and Andrew: “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people” (Mt. 4:19). That call is, in turn, broadened by the Great Commission, in which the disciples—and, by extension, we—are called to “go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Mt. 28:19). Here we become explicit messengers of God’s call to the world. We do not call in our name, but “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 28:19). This is why Chrétien speaks of it being “always too late for there to be an origin” (CR 5), for the origin of the present call far precedes it. Thus, responding to the call is both a responding to a present call—one here and now—and to the calls that have preceded it.

14 Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 11th ed. (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 2003), s.v. “improvise.” This definition—as I will show—much better reflects actual improvisational practice.

Scripture echoes this kind of echoing of calls: so, for example, when Jesus calls for repentance, he is echoing God’s multiple calls to Israel through Moses and the prophets.

To improvise in jazz, then, is to respond to a call, to join in something that is always already in progress. One becomes an improviser by becoming part of the discourse of jazz. While it would take considerably deeper analysis than we have time for here to explain what is involved in becoming a jazz musician and learning how to improvise, we can briefly summarize what happens as follows. Speaking with Pierre Bourdieu, we might say that one must cultivate a *habitus*, a way of being that is both nurtured by and results in what Bourdieu terms “regulated improvisations.” They are “regulated” precisely by the constraints that make jazz “jazz”—and not something else. One *first* becomes habituated into this *habitus* by *listening*, and learning to listen is the precondition for all future improvisation—especially when one improvises with others. So we can say that each improvisation is like a response to improvisations of the past. To become an improviser, one must have an intimate knowledge of past improvisations and the possibility conditions for those improvisations (i.e., the conventions of improvising). To be able to improvise means one is steeped in the tradition and knows how to respond to the call of other improvisers. Although we tend to think of jazz improvisation in terms of spontaneity, that quality of improvisation—while undoubtedly present—is usually greatly exaggerated. It is also remarkably paradoxical. Not only are many “improvisations” often heavily “scripted” but also spontaneity is only possible when one is well prepared. It takes a great deal of work to be spontaneous. It also takes a significant knowledge of improvisations of the past, for they provide the guidelines for improvisations of the present and future. Consider what Wynton Marsalis says in response to a question of how he achieved his remarkable level of success:

I would listen to records, I would buy all these etude books. Any money I would make on little pop gigs I would buy trumpets or books with it. I would get all the etude books, I would go to different teachers, I would call people, and really seek the knowledge. I would go to music camp in the summer time. Practice, listen to the recordings of Adolph Herseth [the principal trumpet in the CSO for many years], or Clifford Brown, trying to learn the records.17

Further, “being spontaneous” is not something one simply wills. Keith Johnstone notes that it is the “decision not to try and control the future” that allows for spontaneity.18 The implication here is that one opens oneself up to the future to allow something to happen. But, of course, that opening oneself up to the future is only

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possible by being fully prepared. That requires a thorough grounding in the tradition. In jazz, knowing the past is what makes the future possible.

Of course, in realizing the debt to and dependency upon the past, the jazz musician is aware that any response to the call is made possible by a gift. The call is a gift to me, something that comes—like life itself—ultimately unbidden and simply disseminated. Rowan Williams reminds us that art “always approaches the condition of being both recognition and transmission of the gift, gratuity or excess.”\(^{19}\) There is, of course, a long tradition (both inside and outside of the Christian tradition) in which the ability to paint or sculpt or improvise has been seen as a gift, something simply bestowed upon one that calls for responsibility on the part of the receiver to cultivate, nurture, and exercise.\(^{20}\) In this sense, both the ability and the products that arise from that ability are gifts. And such gifts are hardly given simply to Christians or to the religiously faithful. Indeed, they are sometimes—perhaps often—given to people who neither appreciate them nor are thankful for them, and may not even exercise them. Yet, if one takes their gift character seriously, then one senses a kind of responsibility for exercising artistic gifts. Although it is theatrical rather than jazz improvisers who speak in these terms, the call is like an “offer” that can be either “accepted” or “blocked.”\(^{21}\) To “accept” the call is to respond in kind, to say “yes” to what is being offered and thus develop the call.

Second, my response is never mine alone. To be sure, I speak for myself, yet also for others and in their name. To improvise is always to speak to others, with others (even when one improvises alone), and in the name of others. Given that the call precedes me, I do not begin the discourse, nor do I bring it to a conclusion. For instance, if I’m playing one of the perennial standards of jazz, I do so along with so many others—e.g., those playing alongside me, those playing the tune in some other corner of the world, and all of those who have played it before. Jazz musicians typically have a sense of what the author of Hebrews calls a “great cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1). Moreover, when I play a tune, I am never simply improvising on that tune alone. I am improvising on the tradition formed by the improvisations upon that tune—what literary theorists call its “reception history.” Whereas in regard to literature, Harold Bloom has spoken of “the anxiety of influence”—which is the desire to be new, fresh, and original—jazz musicians would rather speak of “the joy of influence.”\(^{22}\) Bloom’s talk of “anxiety” stems

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20 Just as an example, I note that at the Iridium Jazz Club (NYC) website one finds the following regarding the famed jazz guitarist Les Paul: “Les Paul says his greatest God-given gifts are perfect pitch, a love for music with the ability to learn it quickly, and the curiosity and persistence of an inventor who wants to know ‘how things tick’” (http://www.iridiumjazzclub.com/les.shtml).

21 “I call anything that an actor does an ‘offer’. Each offer can either be accepted, or blocked. . . . A block is anything that prevents the action from developing” (Johnstone, *Impro* 97).

22 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press,
from the romantic paradigm of art, with its drive to be “original.” The primary artistic goal in the modern, romantic paradigm is to carve out a place for oneself by overcoming the influence of previous artists. One wants to become (to use Bloom’s language) a “strong poet” who stands out as unique and thus distances oneself from the tradition.

But jazz provides an entirely different model for the artist. It is one far more along the lines of that in T.S. Eliot’s “ Tradition and the Individual Talent,” and one that aptly reinforces the kind of model of artistic participation Balthasar has in mind. As a jazz improviser, one becomes part of a community of improvisers. As improviser, one works with material that already exists rather than creating “ex nihilo.” As improviser, one is aware of being wholly indebted to the past. As improviser, one speaks in the name of others. Although Chrétien almost certainly did not have jazz in mind, he opens The Call and the Response with a quotation from Joseph Joubert that captures these aspects perfectly: “In order for a voice to be beautiful, it must have in it many voices together” (CR 1). My voice is always composed of many voices and so is never simply “my own.” Chrétien goes on to say that “every voice . . . bears many voices within itself” (CR 1). In a beautiful article titled “The Other in Myself,” Rudolf Bernet writes: “Only somebody who must hold a lecture discovers that he or she is continually paraphrasing other authors and speaks as well in the name of colleagues and friends.” Interestingly enough, it so happened that the last time I spoke at the Wheaton Theology Conference there was a student visiting from the University of Leuven—where I did my doctoral work—who was just then taking a course with Professor Bernet, who was my doctoral adviser (my Doktorvater, as the Germans would have it). After my address, she commented: “listening to you was like being in class with Bernet,” which I took as a compliment! So, indeed, we professors are constantly improvising upon what our professors taught us, and they upon their professors. What emerges in this improvisation upon improvisation is an ever-evolving hybridity in which identity and ownership are often stretched to their limits. Is an improvisation “mine” if it is so indebted to other improvisers? Further, even my identity as an improviser is interconnected with those of other improvisers. I may still have an identity, but it is hardly fixed or simple.

This question of identity naturally leads to my third point, which is that my response is always both a repetition and an innovation. Chrétien writes of the strange logic of improvisation (even though he is hardly thinking explicitly of improvisation, let alone jazz): “Our response can only repeat. It starts by repeating. Yet it does not repeat by restating” (CR 25). Chrétien goes on to explain this enigmatic claim by saying that there is kind of space that is opened up in ourselves that gives us a voice so that we are able to pass on the call without mere repetition.


We hear the call and we translate it into an idiom of our own. Yet how should we think this mélange of sameness and difference, a repetition that is not merely a repetition but also a development?

A particularly influential way of thinking about this identity and difference is that of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s notion of “signifyin(g).” It is interesting—and quite instructive for my point here—that Gates admits that he is in effect improvising on Derrida’s notion of “différence.” Gates says that “all texts Signify upon other texts,” but we could modify that by simply saying that “all improvisations improvise upon other improvisations.” On Gates’s view, there are two ways in which one “signifies.” Given that Gates is providing an account of how Africans and African-Americans relate to white culture, one of those ways is “signifyin(g)—i.e. repetition with “a compelling sense of difference based on the black vernacular.” Yet signifyin(g) can also take the form of “homage,” in which one performs the music of another—or improvises upon the improvisations of another—as (and here I quote Gates) “a gesture of admiration and respect.”

Murphy provides a fine example of that homage by analyzing a solo of Joe Henderson that utilizes a theme from Charlie Parker’s improvisation on “Buzzy.”

It is the ‘Buzzy’ theme that tenor-saxophonist Joe Henderson chooses to transform during his improvisations on two performances of a 12-bar blues in F. The first transformation is heard on his “If” . . . One might argue that the appearance of Parker’s motive at the end of Henderson’s third chorus is a coincidence, but the fact that Henderson moves on to construct the entire next chorus on a restatement of the motive in its original form, followed by two transformations, shows it to be a conscious manipulation of Parker’s idea.

Here we have a blend of repetition and transformation, but one that is clearly designed to pay a kind of homage to Charlie Parker. Or, to take a different example, Paul Berliner provides a fascinating genealogy of a particular jazz lick from 1946 to 1992. It starts with Billy Eckstine and Miles Davis and makes its way through Bud Powell, Clifford Brown, Dave Young, Paul Chambers, Red Garland, Ella Fitzgerald, Cannonball Adderly, The Manhattan Transfer, John Scofield, Benny


28 Ibid., xxii.


30 Murphy, “Jazz Improvisation” 10.
Green, and Christian McBride. Anyone familiar with jazz realizes that these 
names cover a rather long and wide sweep in the life of jazz. So a given lick can 
constantly be transformed and yet have enough “sameness” to have a continued 
identity. Yet each of these voices adds something along the way. An example like 
this provides us with a way of conceptualizing differing voices all improvising 
in their own respective ways upon the same basic line. And this, in turn, helps us 
think about how the call of beauty can go forth in so many different ways and be 
continually transformed.

III. Beauty and the Call

It may seem that, in section two, we left beauty in order to focus on improvi-
sation. Yet beauty has been present all along. Since beauty is precisely the call and 
its enchantment, then beauty is part of improvisation. But, in this third section, I 
wish to consider the implications of linking beauty, the call, and improvisation for 
the practicing artist.

If we can rightly say that our artistic creation is a participation in God’s 
poiesis (which I believe we can), then our calls are rightly seen as continuation of 
God’s calls. Of course, I have argued that the beautiful must be taken not merely 
as a logical operator but as a transcendental that is connected to goodness and 
truth. With that in mind, all art that reflects beauty, goodness, and truth is beauti-
ful, good, and true. But this connection of beauty with goodness and truth does not 
simplify but instead complexify the situation. For what is the status of beauty in 
the midst of a fallen world, in which all is not necessarily beautiful, good, or true? 
And what is the artist to do in such a world?

The artist is certainly faced with a difficult situation. The world is still—in 
many ways—as God pronounced it: “good.” And, yet, it is so full of that which is 
“not good.” Traditionally, artists have particularly focused on that which is beau-
tiful in the world, whether the human figure or the natural landscape or pleasing 
harmonies. It has been only more recently (and “recent” here is defined in terms of 
the long history of western art) that artists have turned their attention to subjects 
that are not traditionally thought to be “beautiful.” While there is no question that 
some art created today is shocking just to be shocking and vile just to be vile, it 
is likewise the case that artists who, say, paint that which is not beautiful in some 
traditional sense do so out of a deep commitment to truth. So, for example, Dmit-
tri Schostakovich’s symphonies are not necessarily “pretty,” but they are faithful 
witnesses (the thirteenth, for example) to the horrors of his time. Here we might 
be tempted to say that such music puts greater emphasis on the true rather than 
the beautiful. But it is not that the beautiful has simply been neglected; rather, we 
whiteness a sense of the beautiful that is not that of Kant’s harmonious free play of 
the faculties but what Bruce Herman has called a “broken beauty.”32 To quote Her-
man: “We long for completeness and health and perfection; yet more often than

not we encounter fragmentation, weakness, and at best a tragicomic dignity.”

What unites Christian artists whose work is part of the exhibition “A Broken Beauty” (which was at the Laguna Art Museum in Laguna Beach and then at the Joseph D. Carrier Gallery in Toronto) is that they depict both “suffering and hope,” both “human brokenness and human beauty.” And here we can make a strong connection to both black spirituals and black improvisers. So many of the spirituals speak of both “suffering and hope” with a recognition that they are currently captives but that freedom looms on the horizon. So we have “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” that is “comin’ for to carry me home.” Or “Steal Away,” which ends with the line: “I ain’t got long to stay here.” There is clearly an eschatological hope in these spirituals, both of the more immediate eschaton of escape from slavery and of the ultimate eschaton of being “home.” Likewise, black jazz improvisers have seen their music as a way to “overwrite, resist, and confound both conventional musical practices and the orthodox social structures those practices reflect.” Many black improvisers have seen their work as undermining repressive, white social structures. And, indeed, it was partly due to the respect that black improvisers slowly gained that blacks in general gained dignity. Houston J. Baker says of the blues that they transformed the “economics of slavery” into a “resonant, improvisational, expressive dignity.”

We could likewise say that jazz has helped transform the “economics of oppression” into a similar sort of dignity. Is it the logic of God’s reversal in which the lowly are lifted up that explains why jazz is seen today as arguably the greatest American contribution to music? Or is it that suffering sometimes produces art of poignant beauty? I’m not sure. In any case, both the spirituals and jazz have this sense of suffering tempered by hope.

As fallen, earthly vessels, we receive God’s call and improvise a response that goes back to God and forward out to all of creation. It is indeed incumbent upon us—in light of the Great Commission—to spread that call. And art—which aural or visual—is a powerful way of speaking God’s call. The beauty that results is undoubtedly imperfect and broken. It should come as no surprise that our art reflects the brokenness of ourselves, both of our souls and bodies. Moreover, we are called by God himself to heed the voices that come from the margins, from those whose reality is in many cases far more broken than ours but likewise whose voices are sometimes much more forthright and honest. And here we must connect poiesis to phronesis: for the art that we make as a response to God’s call ought to be in service of a phronesis—that is, a practical acting in the world—that pays heed to the marginalized of the world. Art, as Nicholas Wolterstorff long ago


reminded us, must be connected with action. Through art, we are reminded of the broken beauty that surrounds us and we are summoned to act.

Yet art can also serve as an icon that points us to the glorious beauty of God’s kingdom to come. We stand on this side of the Jordan, able only to catch a glimpse of God’s beauty but knowing that one day we shall see “face to face” (I Cor. 13:12).

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37 Nicholas Wolterstorff, Art in Action (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).
THEOLOGY AND CHURCH MUSIC*

Gordon Graham

Rarely, if ever, have liturgical revisions been as radical and drastic as those introduced in the Book of Common Prayer published by Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, in 1549. This was the most radical of a series of Prayerbooks, culminating in the version of 1662. As a world wide Anglican Communion emerged from the national Church of England, in large part a result of the American Revolution, the 1662 Prayerbook served as one of its unifying factors, and remained unchanged for over 300 years.

Among the orders of service prescribed by the Book of Common Prayer, it was the order for evening prayer, especially as set to music for the purposes of cathedral worship, which became the Anglican Church’s most distinctive and enduring contribution to liturgy. While the radical nature of Cranmer’s original changes to the ancient office of Vespers may initially have met with reluctance and resistance on the part of musicians, over succeeding centuries it attracted an unusually high level of loyalty and enthusiasm from organists, singers and choirmasters. Moreover, it generated a significant number of composers whose principal claim to fame lies in their settings of this service. Many of these settings require the levels of musical skill and careful rehearsal appropriate to a concert performance, and in places such as Westminster Abbey or King’s College Cambridge it is common to see hundreds of tourists waiting in line for Evensong as they would for a concert.

Gratifying though such crowds may be, they are confined to just a few places. Even in some of England’s most magnificent cathedrals and abbey churches, mid-week services of this sort are attended by tiny numbers of people – occasionally none at all. Yet in these places there is nevertheless a continuing commitment to maintain the highest possible musical and liturgical standards, both on the part of the clergy and the musicians. This clearly implies a radical difference between choral evensong and a concert. A concert that fails to attract an audience is a failure, and there is no point in performing it. By contrast, the evident musicianship of choral evensong, it seems, continues to have its point even in the absence of any congregation. How can this be?

The question is often a real one for church musicians, but here it simply provides a specially striking focus to an important question about church music. What is its point? I shall argue that there are at least two competing conceptions which, whatever those who subscribe to them may think, can be seen to reflect important differences about the theological significance of music in church. And I shall further argue that neither is wholly adequate to its satisfactory understanding. But to bring these matters to the fore it is first necessary to describe a wider context.

I

It is interesting that music enjoys a more central and abiding place in Christian worship than the other arts. This is reflected in the fact that music is to be
found in the worship of even the most austere of traditions. In Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican services, it is prominent. So, often, is poetry, painting, and sculpture, as well as ceremony and ritual amounting almost to dance. In the severest Presbyterian tradition, by contrast, imagery and the ‘fine words’ of ‘vain repetition’ have been expunged. So too has choreographed ceremonial. Yet even here music remains significant, most notably in the singing of the metrical psalms highly distinctive of that tradition, as it is in the role of the cantor in Gaelic services. This near universality of music in the absence of the other art forms lends special importance, in my view, to the question of the role of music in worship. Only the Quakers, perhaps, have eliminated it altogether, and even here there is no reason why a Friend should not contribute to ‘the Meeting’ with song.

These brief observations disguise the fact that in many of these traditions (the Orthodox may be an exception) the position of music is unsettled. Visits to Anglican, Presbyterian and Catholic churches uncover striking differences. These differences are not merely historically contingent, but arise from debated opinions, and these debates about the contemporary use of music in church are marked by a number of dichotomies. ‘Traditional hymns’ are set against ‘worship songs,’ ‘choir and organ’ against ‘music bands,’ the ‘popular’ against the ‘classical.’ What do these dichotomies, often embodied in competing hymnbooks, signify? To answer this question we need to record some of their contrasting characteristics. ‘Classical’ church music is complex and hence difficult. It requires skill and practice and is accordingly ‘exclusive,’ or thought to be so. That is to say, those who do not have the necessary skills and have not given the rehearsal time it requires, are excluded from performing, and confined to listening. This is the case with respect to even the most familiar hymns. While it is true that the relatively unmusical can master the tune fairly easily and rapidly, singing the best harmonies is closed to almost everyone present. Still more marked, of course, are the anthem and the voluntary, in which those who do not have the requisite skill cannot directly participate at all.

These facts explain, at least in part, the tendency in many places to prefer the simple ‘chorus’ or song, which is attractively accessible to even a very unmusical worshipper. Its advantage is that it not only permits, but encourages ‘participation.’ Something of the same point applies to the ‘music band.’ Instead of being the exclusive preserve of the highly professional organist, accompaniment is extended to a wide range of instrumentalists of mixed, and not infrequently limited, musical ability. Taizé chant is another good example; short, simple, pseudo-plain-song lines are repeated until everyone is thoroughly familiar with and drawn into the singing of them. Anyone who has taken part in these will confirm that they can generate a powerful sense of ‘the whole people of God.’

Why is participation like this to be welcomed? The answer, I think, is that people are bound together by singing. It is a signal, and important fact, that music is able to co-ordinate a large number of voices in a way that is difficult for speech. Simple experiment shows that to get people to repeat spoken words together is not easy. The spoken choruses in, for instance, T S Eliot’s Murder in the Cathedral are hard to get right, and even the most familiar ‘responses’ to ‘versicles’ ( e.g.
“Lord hear our prayer”/“And let our cry come unto you”) can result in a kind of cacophony of voices. Once they are set to music that is easily learned, however, a unity of sound emerges that is otherwise difficult to achieve.

It is not hard to bring a theological dimension to this observation. Worship should be the worship of ‘the Body of Christ.’ Is there a better way to realise embodied unity than by getting people to sing together and thus joining many voices in one synchronised sound? The answer seems obvious, and once we have entertained it, we are easily drawn into a particular theology of church music. It is, in fact, a theology of the church – in more impressive language, an ‘ecclesiology.’ *With One Voice* is the title of a (relatively) recent hymnbook. The theological aspiration is clear, though in this particular case it has ecumenical overtones also. The central characteristic of the church is fellowship, being part of one Body. Furthermore, this sort of fellowship is demonstrably attractive to many, and accordingly anything that promotes it, especially in the context of worship, can play an important part in mission to the ‘unchurched.’

Though there is evidently much to commend such a theological interpretation of the role of music in worship, it is equally evident that the theology of church it implies runs the danger of being inward looking. The fellowship of the body of Christ can indeed be construed as essentially a matter of ‘belonging,’ of being joined together. But once we are joined ‘with one voice’ we have to ask where, exactly, God fits into the picture. More precisely, where does the *worship* of God fit in? The same issue arises, in my view, with respect to the debate that was prompted by the reforms emanating from Vatican II. Along with a change from the Tridentine Latin mass to mass in the vernacular, Catholic priests were instructed to celebrate the sacrament facing westwards towards the people rather than eastwards with their backs to the people. At the time, and especially in Anglican circles ‘eastward’ versus ‘westward’ celebration of the Eucharist was hotly debated. The debate is now exhausted by and large, because the ‘westward’ tendency has proved to be the dominant one. Yet there is still point in rehearsing the arguments. Westward celebration confirms the unity of priest and people in one way – being in fellowship, but it also turns them towards each other, reaching out for, and receiving strength and confirmation from each other. No doubt this is a good thing. On the other hand it also turns attention *inwards*, and can thus generate what I believe to be a real danger in many cases – the worship of the community by the community – a phenomenon which the founder of sociology, Emile Durkheim, thought to be a defining characteristic of religion, of course. By contrast, eastward celebration unites priest and people in a different way. Collectively they turn themselves to God, away from themselves both individually and communally, and if the priest is at their head, his (or her) role is to enable them to look past that headship, through the cross on the altar, upwards to God.

This ‘God-oriented’ disposition has its counterpart in the theology of church music, whose role, accordingly, is not to bind the faithful, but to provide them with a means of transcendance, transcending, that is to say, not merely their individuality, which the ‘fellowship’ conception can also be said to do, but the limitation of the merely human. How does it work? Wherein could its ability to do this lie?
II

The answer is (in Presbyterian language) ‘Divine Service’ – music as worship. What does this mean precisely?

‘Thou desirest no sacrifice, else would I give it thee: but thou delightest not in burnt offerings.’ So says the Psalmist (Psalm 51:16, BCP). The prophet Isaiah has the same thought, but in a more powerful form.

Your countless sacrifices, what are they to me? says the Lord. I am sated with the whole–offerings of rams and the fat of well fed cattle. I have no desire for the blood of bulls, of sheep and of he-goats when you come into my presence. Who has asked you for all this? (Isa.1:11, REB)

It is worth reflecting on this complaint. The ancient Jews sacrificed the best they had. That is to say, they sought to make an offering to God, and what they chose had to be costly if it were to be truly a sacrifice. Inevitably, these were things both rare and highly valued, things that people living in a poor and harsh environment would be delighted to receive – marrow and fatness, as the Psalmists elsewhere refer to it. Of course, the error, if that is what it is, is that God is a spirit, and hence in no need of food and drink. The sacrifice of the ancient Jews was one-sided; they gave something up, of course, but God received no corresponding benefit. How could He, since He could have no use for that which they gave up? The unblemished sheep burnt on the altar was lost to those who gave it, certainly, but was not thereby gained by God.

This one-sidedness is often reflected in ordinary language. To sacrifice something is commonly taken to mean simply giving something up, and no attention is paid to the side of the recipient. Indeed, sometimes there is no hint of any recipient. The beneficiary of the sacrifice is the sacrificer, who forgoes some (usually relatively mundane) good for the sake of greater one. Clearly, however, this cannot be the case with religious sacrifice, which is standardly offered to God. But if the act of sacrificing is indeed a matter of offering something to God, it is not enough for us to give something up; God must correspondingly receive.

Plato in the dialogue *Euthyphro* identifies a problem here, which we might call the seeming pointlessness of *latria* or divine service. Since God (or ‘the gods’ in Plato’s case) cannot lack anything, there is no deficiency that even the most devoted service can supply. How then can there be any point to *latria*, or worship? It is in my view a good and telling question, and it illuminates one aspect of the theology of the Incarnation and of the Eucharist. Clearly, God does not need the burnt offering of sheep and goats or unblemished pigeons. Yet we should not overlook the fact that there is something important expressed in these and other practices, namely the desire to offer God the best that we have to offer. The standard of ‘best’ in these ancient examples is a decidedly human one, and a rather lowly one at that. The summit of human desires is being taken to be the standard of that by which God will be pleased. Arguably, however, the lowly character of animal sacrifice does not mark it out from other more elevated attempts – gold, frankincense or myrrh, say.

The author of Psalm 51 continues the passage quoted with the thought:
‘the sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit: a broken and contrite heart, O God, shalt thou not despise’. What this indicates is that the properly spiritual is called for. Yet even having accepted this fact we may wonder whether we have reached the theological heart of the matter. Surely, if there is a gulf of inordinate proportions between human imperfection and divine perfection, the truth is that we have nothing to offer God. Even our most heartfelt contrition will not do. The conviction that this is so, to my mind, intensifies the meaning of the Incarnation. Sacrifice is that which bridges this gulf. Nothing of ours is good enough. Hence God replaces the sacrificial lamb, with the Lamb of God – His incarnated self in short -- and henceforth humans are possessed of a fit sacrifice, under the forms of bread and wine, by which the chasm is transcended.

Now this understanding has much to commend it in my view. Yet it still leaves something out of account. If the conception of worship as a form of fellowship is insufficiently focussed on God and runs the constant risk of being a strictly human ‘lovefeast,’ the understanding of Eucharistic worship just sketched runs the opposite risk of leaving no place for human engagement. God sacrifices Himself to Himself in an unending act of self-communion, and we have no part in the affair. How are we to counter this alternative danger?

The answer, I shall suggest, is that in the celebration of sacrifice, there is still the possibility of human participation in the active pursuit of perfection as well as the passive receipt of divine gifts. Celebrations of the Eucharist (as of other liturgies), it should go without saying, have style as well as content. The parallel with human relationships (which Jesus regularly invokes in the Gospels) is instructive here. We can give gifts, compliments, praise and so on, graciously or ungraciously. The content of the given is the same, but the style of giving makes all the difference.

So too with rendering back to God what God has given us. True, bearing in mind the difficulties Plato identifies, we cannot add to the gift, or to its value. But we can give in different ways, with different styles. And we might summarise one possibility as ‘giving beautifully,’ where, following the parallel just alluded to, the beauty of the giving makes all the difference.

These reflections provide us, I think, with some insight into an alternative theology of church music. Its role is, so to speak, to provide us with a fit mode of giving. This may in fact explain something of the singular importance of music in worship that I noted earlier. Although philosophers of music have not infrequently striven to make sense of the idea that music has content and meaning – the familiar candidates are emotion and representation – it is a case hard to make out for what appears to be the most purely formal of the arts. But in the present context, the formal character of music is precisely what there is to commend it; if it can add nothing to content, if its sole contribution is beauty of style or manner, then this is just what we want.

In short, the role of music is to fashion and inform the giving not the gift. If so, it can play this role whether or not a human audience is present. I have focussed on the Eucharist. But something of the same may be said of all acts of prayer. St Paul remarks, with characteristically profound religious insight that
‘the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express’ (Romans 8:26). It is a happy fact that we have music – our music – as a vehicle for those ‘groans.’

III

This account of the matter would not be complete, I think, without some attempt to integrate the two theologies of church music that I have been trying to articulate. Clearly, if there is a ‘high’ role to be given to music in the second of them, there is a no less indispensable role for the first. It is plausible to claim, and certainly I have no desire to deny it, that what I have called the power of music to form and bind the fellowship of Christians into one voice, is highly significant for the important role it can play in worship. Christians do indeed find a striking and compelling mode of unity in the singing of ‘hymns and sacred songs.’ But the two conceptions are not in fact in opposition. The Church as the Body of Christ is not merely a fellowship of the like-minded, but a communion, and while communion narrowly interpreted can be taken to mean a simple matter of ‘being one,’ the communion that matters is not with one another, but with God together. Accordingly, we need to conceive of music as a vital instrument (though not the only one) that at one and the same time unites us in a way that allows us to give back to God the gifts of God in a style appropriate to their giving. There is without question much more to be said before this idea can be said to have been made out convincingly. But for the moment, I hope that enough has been said to make the attempt to do so one worth undertaking.

*This is a slightly revised version of an essay first published in the Scottish Journal of Theology 57(2) 139-145 (2004). The permission of the Editor to reprint it here is gratefully acknowledged.

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“A PRE-APPEARANCE OF THE TRUTH”:
TOWARD A CHRISTOLOGICAL AESTHETICS

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In 1985, Eberhard Jüngel wrote that “the almost wholesale neglect of aesthetics in current theology betrays the fact that things are not at their best with the contemporary theology of hope.” What this statement means will hopefully become clearer in a moment. For now, it is worth noting that in the years since Jüngel made this statement, the field of theological aesthetics has been far from neglected. And yet, apart from the pioneering work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, the subject of theological aesthetics has received scant attention from self-consciously dogmatic theologians—much less Protestant theologians. Whether this is a sign of a general torpor in dogmatic theology or a sign of what has come to be called the “ghettoization of aesthetics” from other disciplines within philosophy and theology, is hard to tell. Most likely, both aspects contribute to the problem.

My thesis is that the subject of theological aesthetics must be approached

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1 This essay is a revised version of a paper given at the American Academy of Religion Mid-Atlantic Regional Meeting in Baltimore, Maryland on March 2, 2007.

2 Eberhard Jüngel, Theological Essays II, trans. Arnold Neufeldt-Fast and John Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 16; hereafter cited as TE II.

3 Perhaps this actually confirms Jüngel’s point. In any case, by “dogmatic theologians” I mean those theologians whose attention is centered on explicating the doctrines of the Christian faith for the church (usually a specific tradition within the church). Most contemporary dogmatic and systematic theologians have shown little sustained interest in the subject of art and aesthetics. I say “sustained” only because most interact with aesthetics on some level, but an interest in devoting any special attention to the matter seems to be lacking, particularly among Protestants. This is made quite evident in the recent collection, Theological Aesthetics: A Reader, edited by Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005). None of this is to devalue or undermine the substantial breakthroughs in the field of theological aesthetics within the past fifteen years. Rather, I am making the observation that those who write on the subject tend not to be theologians who are trained in and concerned about the full range of dogmatic concerns. Instead, theological aesthetics seems to exist in a world unto itself, occasionally drawing upon the insights of other theologians, but rarely making contributions judged to be of value to theologians working in other fields. The only recent counter-example seems to be the highly praised work of David Bentley Hart, The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), which is hopefully a sign of more things to come. His brilliant, if flawed, “dogmatica minora” is a beautiful example of rich theological reflection within an aesthetic framework (or perhaps it is a reflection on aesthetics within a theological framework). The fact that Bentley Hart is an Orthodox theologian only contributes to the long-standing critique by Catholic and Orthodox theologians that Protestants are insufficiently attentive to issues of beauty in their theological work.

4 See, for example, the essay by Roger Seamon, “For the Ghettoization of Aesthetics,” available online here: <http://www.aesthetics-online.org/ideas/ghetto.html>.
from a starting point in christology—that is, from the second article of the creed as opposed to the first or third articles of the creed (e.g., creation, divine perfections, ecclesiology, pneumatology). This does not mean an aesthetics of the first or third articles is not necessary or profitable, only that it cannot be sufficient on its own or in abstraction from christology. Moreover, an aesthetics which only focuses on the person of Christ apart from his work—on the cross apart from reconciliation—will not suffice. A proper christology must hold the person and work, the being and act, of Christ together, and all dogmatic theology in general must begin from this christological unity of person and work. By bringing the two together in this theological exploration of beauty, I argue that Jesus Christ as the mediator, as Deus pro nobis, establishes the parameters for theological aesthetics. To put this another way, theological aesthetics is not interested in God or Jesus as beings in abstraction from becoming, but instead in the God who justifies as the one who raised Jesus from the dead, and in Jesus Christ who interrupts us in the word of the cross as the one who gave himself over to death “for us and our salvation.”

In this paper, I intend to explicate the basic contours of a christological aesthetics which takes its bearings from the divine work of justification as the “heart of the Christian faith.” In other words, rather than argue for my thesis directly, I hope to clarify the inner correspondence between the aesthetic relation and the justifying relation, between the appearance of the beautiful and the appearance of salvation, thus demonstrating indirectly the latent possibilities for a christological aesthetics.

This paper is a sustained reflection on the theology of Eberhard Jüngel and consists of two parts: the first is an overview of Jüngel’s theological ontology of justification, while the second part involves a close reading of his essay on aesthetics with attention given to his definition of the beautiful as the “pre-appearance of the truth.” Finally, I conclude with some remarks about how Jüngel might prompt us to think anew about beauty.

I. JÜNGEL’S RELATIONAL-ACTUALISTIC ONTOLOGY OF JUSTIFICATION

Eberhard Jüngel is a differentiating theologian. As he himself states, “I believe, therefore I differentiate.” This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in his doctrine of justification. Jüngel writes that theology “differentiates first and foremost between God and world, between creator and creature,” which is precisely the case in justification. At its most basic level, the doctrine of justification for Jüngel is the explication of the divine event which the Christian faith proclaims in the gospel—viz., the event of the cross.

This event is twofold in nature in that it concerns God and humanity, and it is ontological in that it concerns the being of the Creator who re-creates and the being of the creature who is re-created by God. As Jüngel states, the doctrine of

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6 *TE II*, 12.
7 *Justification*, 1, 51.
justification is equally relevant to the doctrine of God and anthropology.8 To quote Jüngel:

The doctrine of justification deals equally with God and human beings: with the God who justifies and sinners who are justified. To put it more accurately: it deals with the event of divine justification of unrighteous human beings who are becoming righteous through this event.9

In the justification event, the primal differentiation between God and humanity involves the further distinction between divine activity and human reception. God acts, and humanity receives. More specifically, the triune God acts in Jesus Christ and from this christological event humanity becomes the recipient of a new humanity. Thus, the revelatory movement from God to humanity results in a corresponding justifying movement from old humanity to new humanity.

The event of justification involves an essential threefold distinction between the historical, existential, and eschatological.10 Within each of these three dimensions, the movement from God to humanity and the corresponding movement from old humanity to new humanity occurs. Moreover, each dimension implies the other two in a kind of perichoretic relation. The historical event originates in the event of incarnation, in which God assumes our old humanity in Jesus Christ in order to actualize the being of new humanity, and encompasses Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. The existential event takes place in the event of interruption, in which God disrupts humanity in the proclamation of the kerygmata, the “word of the cross,” and brings humanity into a new existential relation by placing the human person outside herself (extra nos). Finally, the eschatological event takes place in the event of consummation, in which old creation becomes new creation in the light of Jesus Christ’s revelation in Easter glory. All three events—inarnation, interruption, consummation—form the event of reconciliation. In making these distinctions I am merely making explicit what remains implicit in Jüngel’s own theology.11 Finally, it is essential to remember that the three dimensions are

8 Ibid., 147.
9 Ibid.
10 One could just as well speak of these in terms of the christological, anthropological, and eschatological. In the end, I went with the term “historical” to give a sense of the temporal distinctions at work here as well as to refrain from sounding overly redundant. Also, the historical dimension should be read as inclusive of the Hebrew Scriptures and particularly of God’s covenant with Israel.
11 Another way to characterize this threefold event is to adopt what George Hunsinger calls the three tenses of salvation: perfect, present, and future. In examining Jüngel, however, it is more accurate to use the terms historical, existential, and eschatological simply because he is averse to thinking in strictly temporal terms (cf. TE II, 104-106). The eschatological is not simply a future reality but a present one, and the historical event of Jesus Christ is not simply a past reality but is made present in the ongoing proclamation of the gospel. To be fair, Hunsinger’s use of the perfect tense seeks to capture the ongoing nature of the definitive event in Jesus Christ. Even so, while by no means invalid, it is best to avoid speaking in terms of temporal tenses in interpreting Jüngel’s
not parts of a larger whole; but rather each dimension is a whole in itself. The distinctions are *totus-totus*, not *partim-partim*.

In order to emphasize the connection between justification and aesthetics, I will focus upon the present-tense, existential dimension of justification. Humanity exists in what Jüngel calls in one essay a “web of relations”\(^1\) and in another essay a “well-ordered richness of relations.”\(^2\) Human being is relational being. Jüngel understands humanity as essentially constituted by a threefold relation: “a relation to self, a relation to the world, and a relation to God.”\(^3\) A great deal depends on which relation is primary. If the emphasis is on the relation to self, this leads to humanity becoming *incurvatus in se*—curved in upon itself—resulting in relationlessness, which Jüngel defines as the essence of sin.\(^4\) If the emphasis is on the relation to the world, this leads to human beings who are defined by their actions. This is the characteristically modern pursuit of self-realization that eventually falls back into relationlessness.\(^5\) The only proper relations to self and the world come from the primary and definitive relation to God. In this relation, human beings are truly established by God as beings-in-becoming.

Whereas human attempts to realize themselves—to become something new out of their own resources—result in a distorted relationality, in the relation to God human beings are justified and thus made truly human, truly relational. Human ontology is therefore relational in its threefold orientation and actualistic in that it depends upon the divine act of justification. In other words, God is what God does, and likewise humanity is what God does in Jesus Christ; or rather God is what God determines Godself to be, and humanity is what God determines humanity to be. God justifies humanity in that God justifies Godself. Jüngel thus presents us with what I call a relational-actualistic ontology. Both God and humanity exist in a wealth of relations which constitute the being of each: God in gracious activity is *Deus pro nobis* and humanity in passive receptivity is *simul justus et peccator*.\(^6\)

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12 *TE II*, 221.
13 Ibid., 252.
14 Ibid., 60.
15 Ibid., 252.

17 A fuller treatment of Jüngel’s divine-human ontology of justification would need to focus first on how justification illuminates the being of God, because it is only in light of God’s being in Jesus Christ that we comprehend the being of humanity. Because this paper seeks to explain Jüngel’s articulation of the aesthetic relation, the existential being of humanity is central—though throughout I presuppose the primacy of divine ontology. A few reflections on this subject are worth mentioning here. First, God’s being-righteous is not static being, but remains a truly dynamic, relational, and actualistic being-in-becoming. God is ontologically located in the event of God’s becoming human in the person of Jesus Christ [cf. Eberhard Jüngel, *God’s Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. John Webster (Edinburgh: T&T
Within this existential web of relations, the event of justification is an event of interruption. Human beings are not only relational; they are also lingual beings. Jüngel not only presents us with a relational ontology of divine action; he also offers a dialogical ontology of divine address: “Defined theologically, we are those who, having always been addressed by God, are, on the basis of this being-addressed, always newly to be addressed.” The “word of the cross,” according to Jüngel, is the definitive form of divine address. In the gospel proclamation, the historical event of God’s “self-communication, self-disclosure and self-revelation” in Jesus Christ becomes the existential “justifying word from the cross” which “speaks to us creatively” by interrupting sinners in their movement toward relationlessness and thereby establishing an “eschatologically new humanity.” The gospel is a word which disrupts the continuity of human life in order to allow God to establish a new identity—an interruption which is also liberation.

In this moment of interruption, which Jüngel calls the “existential distancing of the ego,” the human person experiences a death of the self. According to Jüngel, “The word of God which addresses man about God has, then, an annihilating effect, for the sake of something new. Evangelical theology may not remain silent about the fact that it is destructive.” Jüngel identifies this destructive, interruptive event of the word as the event of truth. In the revelation of truth, there occurs an interruption of human life which is both deadly and enlivening, both negative and positive, both a No and a Yes. Created life must be interrupted in order to be re-created. God must distance us from ourselves in order for us to become our true selves. Jüngel writes: “Without a fundamental extra nos faith knows of no deus pro nobis and certainly no deus in nobis.” Or to quote Luther,

Clark, 2001), xxv, 102ff.]. Second, in this divine act of incarnation, God relates both to the world and to Godself—to the world as the God who elects and redeems and to Godself as the God who posits Godself as triune. God is relational in that God chooses to relate internally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—or as self-positing, self-posed, and the bond of unity between positing and posited—and God relates externally as Creator to the creation, as Redeemer to the redeemed, as Sustainer to the sustained. In other words, we can speak of a relational-actualistic ontology of humanity only because we can (and must) speak first of a relational-actualistic ontology of God.

18 Eberhard Jüngel, Theological Essays I, ed. J. Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 64; hereafter cited as TE I.
19 Justification, 201.
20 Ibid., 213, 212.
21 TE I, 125.
22 Eberhard Jüngel, God as the Mystery of the World, trans. Darrell Guder (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983), 172; hereafter cited as GMW.
24 GMW, 175.
25 Ibid., 182-83.
as quoted by Barth in his *Epistle to the Romans*: “When God makes alive, He 
kills; when He justifies, He imposes guilt; when He leads us to heaven, He thrusts 
us down into hell.”

The existential dimension of justification is thus highly dialectical in nature. 
As a liberative event, it is both freedom-from and freedom-for, both death and 
life, both No and Yes. To use Jüngel’s terms, justification is a displacement from 
the self and toward God. Out of this dialectical event between God and humanity, 
Jüngel defines the justified human person in correspondingly dialectical terms: old 
and new, outer and inner, sinful and righteous. These particular theological pairs 
are what Jüngel calls “elemental distinctions,” and they correspond to particular 
thematic relations: old/new is an eschatological relation, while inner/outer 
and righteous/sinful are soteriological relations. These elemental distinctions and 
corresponding relations arise out of the event of existential interruption. It is im-
portant to remember that these distinctions are (1) ontological in nature and (2) to-
tus-totus, not partim-partim. Just as justification encompasses three frameworks 
and is wholly in each, so too the human person is constituted dialectically and is 
wholly in each. Lastly, justification is dialectical in another sense as well. Within 
the existential framework, the event of justification is both anamnestic and pro-
leptic: the newly constituted justified person looks backwards and forwards, back 
to the historical framework of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection and forward 
to the eschatological framework of Christ’s consummating revelation in glory. 
The event of justification elementally interrupts in order to fashion ontologically 
new human creatures who are elementally differentiated and thus exist in a new 
existential-relational matrix.

II. “A PRE-APPEARANCE OF THE TRUTH”: 
BEAUTY IN THE LIGHT OF JUSTIFICATION

When we turn to Jüngel’s aesthetics, many of these same soteriological con-
cerns carry over. Jüngel begins his treatment of the beautiful by clarifying his 
relational ontology. After speaking of the threefold relation to self, world, and 
God, he then goes on to differentiate within other elemental distinctions. The 
distinction between good and evil is a moral relation; the distinction between 
holiness and sin is a religious distinction. But the important distinction for our 
purposes is the one between beautiful and not beautiful, which constitutes the 
aesthetic relation. The aesthetic relation speaks of the human person’s “relation 
to the so-called artistically beautiful, that is, to the work of art.” The aesthetic 
relation brings the perceiver of the beautiful and the beautiful itself into relation. 
Before exploring the aesthetic relation in more detail, we need to look at what

University Press, 1933), 39. 
27 TE II, 60. 
29 TE II, 60. 
30 Ibid., 60-61. 
31 Ibid., 61.
A basic ontology of beauty, according to Jüngel, begins by locating the beautiful in its twofold relational matrix. There are always two frameworks at play in the beautiful: the framework “from which [the beautiful] emerges” and the framework of perception “from which the perceiver encounters [the beautiful].”

For the sake of simplicity, I call the former the objective framework and the latter the subjective framework, and together these two frameworks constitute the beautiful appearance. The beautiful is distinguished from the chaotic in that the objective framework arranges life’s diversity into an ordered, perceptible structure. Within this objective “natural framework” the diversity of reality “is concretized into a real perception” in order to allow for the possibility of a “meaningful perception”—i.e., a meaningful subjective relation. Thus, objective beauty-in-itself always includes the subjective-existential dimension of beauty as beauty-in-relation-to-the-other. The subjective “framework of perception” enables the objective “something” in the beautiful to be “perceived as true.”

The objective dimension and subjective dimension together form the essence of beauty.

In the same way that the distinctions in justification are totus-totus—such that the whole is in the part—so too the distinctions in aesthetics are totus-totus. The beautiful is defined by its twofold relation to the objective and subjective framework—respectively, “the historical life-context” from which the work of art arises and “the life-contexts of the potential perceiver”—which is in fact a relation to two “wholes.” Each dimension is itself a whole, and not simply a part. Nevertheless, because there are multiple “wholes” and not simply the totality of being, these various frameworks are finite and penultimate—not the ultimate reality. Consequently, the beautiful does not remain fixed within these frameworks, but instead it “falls outside the frame.” Essentially, Jüngel asserts that the beautiful is not confined wholly within one framework but instead, in a way, transcends

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32 The most recent and impressive ontology of beauty in quite some time is found in David Bentley Hart’s *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003; cf. 15-28), a work which has aroused responses focusing mostly on his doctrine of analogy, his readings of Anselm and Gregory of Nyssa, and his own polemical engagement with postmodern philosophy. However, his discussion of beauty remains largely unaddressed, though it is a highlight of the book.

33 *TE II*, 64.
34 Ibid., 63.
35 Ibid., 62-63; all emphasis in quotes from Jüngel’s writings is original.
36 Ibid., 63.
37 Ibid., 65.
38 A distinction between beauty and justification is evident here. Whereas the former is a finite reality, justification is an eternal reality that becomes existentially present in the kerygma. Beauty is penultimate, while justification is, in a certain sense, an ultimate reality—though, to be sure, justification awaits the future consummation of this reality in the eschaton.
39 *TE II*, 63
each context—not in order to be altogether without a framework (that would be chaos), but in order to produce a “new framework” by establishing a new aesthetic relation.40 Beauty thus “has a semiotic quality”41 in that it represents the objective and subjective frameworks, and thus orients both toward an altogether different framework; beauty looks inward and outward, while looking steadfastly toward the future:

[The beautiful] ‘somehow’ represents for the perceiver both the whole framework from which it emerges and also the framework from which the perceiver encounters it. In the beautiful, a part appears for the whole: it stands pars pro toto. . . . In this way the larger whole can certainly represent the context of a shattered existence, a meaningless life, and thus precisely that missing wholeness of human existence . . . . In any case, when the beautiful is received as such, it allows us to ‘see’ the normal context of life ‘anew’. By interrupting the previous framework of reality and thereby denying it the right to be the final and true reality, the beautiful gives the latter reference to a future, to a future which makes whole, which is represented in an anticipatory way in the beautiful itself.42

In this passage, both the essential similarities and essential differences with justification are present. The similarities include: (1) the twofold reference, objective and subjective, which corresponds with the historical and existential dimensions to justification. Beauty emerges from a particular framework in the same way that justification emerges from the event of the cross, and both beauty and justification include within themselves the existential reference to the one whom beauty grasps and one whom God justifies. (2) The beautiful, like the event of justification, interrupts the “framework of reality.” In the same way that God addresses human beings in the gospel proclamation, so too, Jüngel writes, human existence “is addressed by the beautiful.”43 This being-addressed by the beautiful is an interruption which, like justification, says both No and Yes: it denies the pseudo-wholeness of our present existence and affirms instead a different existence, one which is truly whole. The interruption of beauty thus results in two further similarities to justification. (3) In that the beautiful interrupts, it also “captivates”: “the perceiver is captured for a freedom from his or her natural and moral bondage.”44 There is a close correspondence between Jüngel’s description of what he calls “aesthetic freedom” and Luther’s notion of Christian freedom. Both are a kind of bondage—one to the beautiful and the other to God—which result in a freedom from what Jüngel calls “the kingdom of forces and the kingdom of

40 Ibid., 64.
41 Ibid., 65.
42 Ibid., 64-65.
43 Ibid., 65.
44 Ibid., 66, 67.
laws.”

Aesthetic freedom, like its Christian counterpart, allows its captives to “forget about themselves” and instead rejoice in the fullness of life. Finally, (4) the beautiful “produces a new framework” by orienting reality toward an eschatological future. Beauty interrupts the double wholeness of the historical and existential dimensions not only to bring freedom but also to bring a vision—even a taste here and now—of the eschatological totus in which our fragmented human existence will be made truly whole. This final aspect clarifies Jüngel’s earlier statement that aesthetics and a “theology of hope” are closely related; beauty and eschatology are intrinsically connected. Beauty in Jüngel’s theology thus involves the threefold framework found in his exposition of the doctrine of justification.

When we turn to the differences between aesthetics and justification, we arrive at the heart of the matter. Justification as articulated by Jüngel is an ontological event in which we are existentially interrupted in order that God might create us anew as creatures who correspond to God. Jüngel speaks of this ontologically effective event as the event of truth: the event of God’s self-revelation and self-communication in which God communicates to us a new reconciled identity oriented both historically and eschatologically. In contrast, the beautiful interrupts, but it is not ontologically effective. The beautiful points toward the future, but it cannot make the future a reality in the present. And yet the beautiful is not merely a sign. Jüngel makes the fascinating statement that “the beautiful is—not unlike that which the ancients understood by a sacrament—a signum efficax,” an effective sign. But what does it effect? According to Jüngel, the beautiful “generates an appearance of the whole.” It does not generate the actual whole, but only the appearance. It does not effect the ontologically new, but only offers a vision of the new world that arrived in Jesus Christ. The beautiful is not the direct appearance of the whole; it is not the full coming of truth into the world, which can only be identified with the eschatological revelation of God. Consequently, “the beautiful is only the pre-appearance of the coming truth. In the beautiful, truth establishes itself only indirectly. In this respect the beautiful certainly carries within itself the promise of truth to come, a future direct encounter with the truth.”

The concept of the beautiful as the “pre-appearance of the truth” is essential to Jüngel’s argument and he connects it with the corresponding concept of beauty as pars pro toto—a part for the whole:

The beautiful announces the coming direct encounter with the truth. . . . [As] the pre-appearance of the truth, the beautiful in fact stands—pars pro toto—representatively for the whole context of reality which it interrupts. For the truth pertains to the whole.

45 Ibid., 68.
47 Ibid., 66.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., 76.
50 Ibid., 77.
The last statement is illuminating: the truth pertains to the whole. We might say, justification pertains to the whole. That is, the event of Christ’s death and resurrection is the whole. Jüngel writes elsewhere: “the sacrifice of Christ was not a pars pro toto substitutionary act, but rather in him the whole continuity of life was directly present.” The coming of the truth in Jesus Christ is the coming of the wholeness which is absent or missing in our present existential situation, and what is absent or missing is precisely the ontological wholeness created by the justifying word of the gospel and consummated in the eschatological reign of God. In distinction from the totus in Christ, the beautiful as pars pro toto represents the eschatological wholeness—the coming totality—by interrupting the framework of reality for the one who perceives beauty. To be more precise, the beautiful interrupts the two frameworks—or perhaps the twofold framework—of the objective and subjective. However, the beautiful only interrupts; it cannot liberate. The work of art does not bring about the future reality; at best it can only effect the appearance of this future wholeness. Justification is both a No and a Yes, and this Yes is ontologically effective. The beautiful, however, is only a No, but it is a No which is at the same time the pre-appearance of the Yes. The beautiful makes evident what is absent, but it cannot fill this absence.

At the end of his essay, Jüngel turns to a comparison between revelation and beauty:

According to the self-understanding of Christian faith, there is only one single appearance of truth which—despite all parallels to the beautiful pre-appearance of the truth—follows another law. That is the revelation of God. . . . The revelation of God in Jesus Christ shatters all beautiful appearance. It must shatter the beautiful appearance, because it is not a pre-appearance of the truth, but is the truth itself . . . [and] this truth occurs fundamentally as a crisis.

The difference between revelation and the beautiful is finally the difference between a part and the whole, between sign and reality—but it is also more than that. Revelation as Jüngel speaks of it here is the cosmic transformation in which “nothing more will appear. For then being in glory will replace appearance.” In other words, revelation described here is the eschatological revelation of God. If we think of the three frameworks of justification, the beautiful concerns the historical and existential, or the objective and subjective, while revelation concerns

51 Ibid., 182.
52 Ibid., 79-80.
53 Ibid., 81.
54 As a reminder, when we say justification effects the coming totality of new being, we mean (1) that in Jesus Christ the promised wholeness was ontologically effected as a once-for-all historical event, (2) that this wholeness becomes an existential event in the kerygma, and (3) that the already completed event of wholeness is consummated in the eschaton. Justification is wholly in each dimension. Salvation has three tenses or three frameworks: aorist/perfect, present, and future; or historical, existential, and eschatological.
the eschatological. The beautiful can only represent the eschatological dimension as an effective sign, a pre-appearance, a part for the whole. Since it is only an appearance and not the thing itself, the beautiful remains part of the created totality: “the beautiful, the work of art, is essentially finite and transient.” But revelation is the consummation of creation and therefore the end of all transience. According to Jüngel, revelation

will mean that our life will then be a wholly uninhibited life, a life heightened in its truth; then, together with our being, being as such in totality will itself be present and lucid. Then truth and beauty will be identical. Because the truth will not then need first to interrupt the context of life in order to appear, humanity will be redeemed forever.

Thus far in this paper I have focused on the existential movement in justification and the corresponding aesthetic relation. The existential dimension is anamnestic and proleptic, looking backwards and forwards. The event of revelation, however, concerns the movement from the existential to the eschatological. This involves corresponding movements from appearance to being, from the ephemeral to the eternal, from cross to resurrection. There is also an important movement from indirect revelation to direct revelation. The historical and existential dimensions mediate the presence of God through creaturely forms: the historical dimension of justification includes the indirect revelation of God in the human flesh of Jesus and in the shame of the cross, while the existential dimension mediates revelation through the kerygmatic word of the cross. Something similar can also be said of the beautiful, which is one such creaturely medium, though unlike justification it is the pre-appearance of the truth and not an ontologically effective realization of the truth. Nevertheless, “one can only be more or less close to the truth within our reality: one cannot perceive it directly. Perception . . . is always dependent upon mediation.”

Within our present reality, therefore, revelation is by definition indirect and

55 Cf. TE II, 78-79: “Consequently, the beautiful is always only able to represent one whole, one relativized totality . . . . It is nothing more than a pre-appearance of the truth that shines in it. And even in this respect one must make a further qualification, for the beautiful is, as we have said, the whole point of a whole which it represents pars pro toto . . . . As one point of one whole which it represents pars pro toto, the beautiful, the work of art, is essentially finite and transient.”

56 Ibid., 79. Jüngel goes on to say: “If it [the work of art] wished to remain and be imperishable, it would identify itself with the truth, thereby (ideologically) absolutizing itself, and in this respect it would be diabolical.” Since art, on this account, is essentially transient and perishable, a christological aesthetics would be very much in favor of the kind of environmental art made famous by Christo and Jeanne-Claude. These are art works which intend to be transient; their life-span is intentionally limited. In this temporal limitation, environmental art witnesses to that which is eternal. They are a pre-appearance by way of self-negation.

57 Ibid., 81.

58 Ibid., 77.
mediated; in the *eschaton*, revelation is direct and unmediated. Thus, if Christ is the indirect form of God’s revelation, then the beautiful is the indirect form of Christ—an indirect form which anticipates the coming direct revelation. As Jüngel states, “the beautiful announces the coming direct encounter with the truth,” and likewise, “revelation is by definition an aesthetic event.” Revelation is aesthetic precisely because, apart from the *eschaton*, revelation occurs in time and space, and therefore revelation is not a direct appearance but only an indirect pre-appearance. The beautiful is not an event of revelation in history but instead a *pre-appearance of revelation*: it announces the revelation of Christ’s resurrection, but it does so only by way of the cross (*via crucis*). Beauty anticipates the whole, but only by way of the part—*pars pro toto*.

III. TOWARD A CHRISTOLOGICAL AESTHETICS

In conclusion, how might Jüngel’s theology prompt us to think differently about aesthetics in light of christology? Here I will necessarily be brief. First, a christological aesthetics connects beauty with truth. The beautiful is that which one perceives as true, or as related to the truth. Beauty and truth are related in a way not unlike the ways justification and revelation or cross and resurrection are related. There is a clear distinction—the beautiful is not itself the true—but there is also an important relation of remembrance and anticipation, of *anamnesis* and *prolepsis*, in which the beautiful draws upon the past and orients toward the future while addressing us in the present as the pre-appearance of the truth. Sometimes the beautiful anticipates the truth by way of negation (*via negativa*), so that the beautiful interrupts us in our existential context in order to expose the untruthfulness of our existence.

In relating beauty and truth, I do not mean that the work of art must somehow look back to the incarnation and forward to the *parousia* in any explicit way. The work of art is not “about” christology or eschatology, nor is the value of art in how well a work corresponds to something external to itself; rather, the aesthetic relation functions like the justifying relation in the way the beautiful addresses each person. I also especially want to prevent the reduction of the beautiful into

59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., 76.
61 Whether, in light of the three classical transcendentals, we can speak of the beautiful as a pre-appearance of the good is something that Jüngel would probably roundly deny, as he indicates when he states quite clearly: “the good and the beautiful are two different things. The perception of the beautiful does not make (morally) better people—not in the least” (*TE II*, 69).
62 Cf. Gordon Graham, *Philosophy of The Arts: An introduction to aesthetics*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2005), 52-75. Graham makes the suggestive comment that in evaluating the relation between art and reality, we must move “from art to experience, not from experience to art” (70). He goes on to comment on the character of Mr. Woodhouse from Jane Austen’s novel *Emma*: “Our experience is not summarized in the character, but illuminated, perhaps awakened by it. It is not so much that Mr Woodhouse is ‘true to life’ but that life is true to Mr Woodhouse . . .” If we adapt Graham’s insightful statements, we might say that justification is not summarized but illuminated in the
a mere sign of something else, so that the beautiful becomes a means toward some other end rather than a perfectly valuable end in itself. A work of art is not an instrument or a tool, nor is it a kind of preparation for grace. The identity of the beautiful as a pre-appearance does not mean that the appearance of justification nullifies its value. These are significant concerns against which Christian theology must stand resolute.

In order to bring justification and art into relation without denigrating the intrinsic value of art in itself, it is important to remember (contrary to some traditions within Christianity) that salvation properly understood does not devalue or disaffirm our present worldly existence. Christianity, as Bonhoeffer repeatedly affirmed, is a “this-worldly” faith. Similarly, beauty not only interrupts and anticipates a future whole; it also captivates and brings about “aesthetic pleasure.” The beautiful is the source of both an “elemental interruption” and an “elemental release from inhibition.” The beautiful, according to Jüngel, both fetters and unfetters: “The unfettering effect of the work of art . . . originates precisely in taking the observer captive.” And the nature of this freedom-in-captivation is “an unfettering of delight, admiration, astonishment, [and] dismay.” The beautiful thus affirms the human life-context even as it interrupts this context and opens up a vision of what is missing, hence the unfettering of dismay alongside delight.

Second, a christological aesthetics affirms the necessity of an “aesthetics of the ugly.” Jüngel is quick to point out that ugliness is not the opposite of beauty; beautiful work of art; it is not so much that the beautiful is true to justification, but that justification is true to the beautiful. This is not to suggest that the category of the beautiful is primary, or that we should evaluate soteriology in light of aesthetics. Instead, I merely mean to suggest that the work of art, the beautiful, and the aesthetic relation all stand on their own; they help to elucidate the reality of justification and their value is not confined to their ability to correspond to the event of salvation. There is a kind of dialogical relation between the beautiful and justification, such that christology forms the basis for our theological evaluation of the beautiful and the beautiful itself, in its integrity, illuminates our reality as a pre-appearance of the truth.

According to Jüngel, only the final and unsurpassable eschatological appearance puts an end to all finite and earthly appearances. In the “here and now,” justification and beauty stand together in a non-competitive, if nevertheless asymmetrical, relation. It is worth remembering that Jüngel speaks of the beautiful as a signum efficax. If we wish to affirm the iconic nature of art—pointing beyond itself—we must also affirm its sacramental nature—in which the beyond is present in the thing itself.


63 AD, 67.
64 Ibid., 77, 67.
65 Ibid., 68.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid., 66. A christological aesthetics validates the concern of modern artists to portray the fragmentation and ugliness of modern existence. Having experienced the horrors of war, poverty, famine, apartheid, genocide, AIDS, and other tragedies, art in the 20th century discarded the beautiful for the sake of the ugly. In doing so, it addressed
rather the category of the ugly is a distortion of beauty, and thus it properly belongs to the category of the beautiful.\textsuperscript{70} He also says that the ugly functions as “a partially occurring appearance of the whole”—that is, the ugly indicates what is missing from the present life-context, whereas the self-evidently beautiful gives a more positive anticipation of the eschatological future.\textsuperscript{71} While other theological aesthetics make reference to the crucified Jesus and passages like Isaiah 53 to buttress an aesthetics of the ugly, a christological aesthetics focusing on the reconciling work of Christ establishes an existential frame of reference for the category of ugliness. Rather than appealing to the historical image of the Crucified, a christological aesthetics is capable of existentializing ugliness, thereby bringing the perceiver of beauty into an encounter with the Crucified.

Finally, the beautiful is a \textit{pre-appearance of God’s love}. The beautiful anticipates the coming eschatological revelation which will reveal the death of Christ as in fact the event of God’s love which transforms death into resurrection, ugliness into beauty:

\begin{quote}
God’s love is at work in this death. This love is not a love which (like \textit{amor hominis}) is kindled by the beautiful, but rather a love which \textit{beautifies} that which is ugly, namely the self-defacing \textit{homo peccator}, by loving it. . . . [In] this death there occurs the unity of life and death in favour of life, which deserves to be called love.\textsuperscript{72}
\end{quote}

Revelation is thus the revelation of God’s justifying love. More specifically, it is the revelation of God as the union of death and life for the sake of new life. Similarly, justification is the union of God and humanity in Jesus Christ for the sake of new humanity. In terms of the beautiful, God’s love is the union of divine beauty and human ugliness for the sake of true beauty. In the \textit{assumptio carnis}, itself to the horrors of human existence. Theology and philosophy in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century worked along similar lines. The interest in existentialism in both fields arose out of an attempt to grapple philosophically with the sociopolitical turmoil of the times. Existentialism becomes a concern in light of realities which thrust our existence into contradiction or question. As First World economies began to flourish in the latter-half of the twentieth century, such existentialist thinking faded away. A christological aesthetics reminds us that the revelation of truth in Jesus Christ places all human reality into an existential crisis. The beautiful ought always to include a sense of the No, an existential awareness of the crisis. We need to see the beautiful as inclusive of ugliness, in the same way that God’s assumption of our flesh was an assumption of our fallen condition, so that Christ’s incarnation is an event in which the beautiful enters the very depths of the ugly. As Paul declares: “For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21).


\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 66.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 80.
the God of perfect beauty assumed the ugliness of human flesh; the incarnation of Jesus Christ is the event in which the beautiful entered the very depths of the ugly in order to make the world newly beautiful. We should thus speak of the beautiful not merely as the pre-appearance of God’s love, but even more directly as the pre-appearance of God as love. According to Jüngel, “The love which God is cannot be understood as only a love which radiates into lovelessness. . . . Rather, it makes what is totally unloveworthy into something worthy of love. And it does that by loving it.”

It is on the basis of the “transforming power of the fire of love” that we can say, “God is love.” Even though Jüngel does not make this connection, the same can be said of the classical identification of God and beauty. In the same way that God is love in that God makes unloveworthy humanity into those worthy of love, and God is righteous in that God makes unrighteous humanity to be righteous, so too we can speak of the God who is beautiful in that God makes what is manifestly not-beautiful into objects of true beauty.

73 GMW, 329.

74 Cf. ibid., 330: “The love of man is created by the object of its love,” says Luther aptly, and explains with Aristotle, ‘. . . the object of love is the cause of love.’ But God, by contrast, loves the lost sheep (Matt. 15:24), the unlovable and the sick (Luke 5:31f), the totally unrighteous sinners (Luke 19:10 pars.). He selects what is foolish, weak, ignoble, and contemned by the world, that is, everything which amounts to nothing (I Cor. 1:27f). In contrast to the ‘love of man,’ God’s love, according to Luther, first makes the ‘object of love’ loveworthy: ‘The love of God does not find but creates the object of its love.’"

75 Cf. ibid., 330: “The love of man is created by the object of its love,” says Luther aptly, and explains with Aristotle, ‘. . . the object of love is the cause of love.’ But God, by contrast, loves the lost sheep (Matt. 15:24), the unlovable and the sick (Luke 5:31f), the totally unrighteous sinners (Luke 19:10 pars.). He selects what is foolish, weak, ignoble, and contemned by the world, that is, everything which amounts to nothing (I Cor. 1:27f). In contrast to the ‘love of man,’ God’s love, according to Luther, first makes the ‘object of love’ loveworthy: ‘The love of God does not find but creates the object of its love.’"

76 Cf. Justification, 70-77.

77 Here, finally, is where we can reconsider the nature of beauty in light of the first and third articles of the creed. We must begin with the second article—specifically, the work of Jesus Christ in the event of justification—for the simple reason that theological reflection begins in the self-revelation of God in Jesus—viz., in the work of reconciliation (cf. 2 Cor. 5:19). However, in the light cast by Christ, we are able to see the being of the reconciling God who created the world (first article) and the being of reconciled humanity who exists in this world (third article). Jüngel is a self-consciously post-metaphysical theologian, so he does not speak of the classical transcendentals as does von Balthasar. His starting-point for a doctrine of God is 1 John 4:8: “God is love.” And he starts here because it brings together a christological basis (“for God so loved the world”) with a dynamic, trinitarian ontology of God’s being-in-coming—the Father as the one who loves, the Son as the beloved, and the Spirit as the bond of love between Father and Son (cf. GMW 327-28, 368-76). Beauty in the first article has its ground and origin in the God who is love in that God makes humanity worthy of love. Similarly, God is beautiful in that God makes humanity—and, by extension, all creation—beautiful. It would be well worth reflecting on how the reconciliation accomplished in Jesus Christ might offer a christological basis for thinking through the beauty of the world. See, e.g., Jüngel’s notion of a “more natural theology” in Christ, Justice and Peace, trans. D. Bruce Hamill and Alan J. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 26-27. Beauty in the third article would focus on the Spirit who transforms and beautifies, on the community of those who are made beautiful by God, and on the eschatological hope of consummation in which creation is finally glorified in the full revelation of God’s
But these are ontological events, so what of the beautiful itself as a pre-appearance of ontological transformation? We might say that the beautiful appearance is the union of objective and subjective for the sake of a new future framework. Or we could define the beautiful as the union of the historical totus and the existential totus for the sake of the coming eschatological totus which it can represent as pars pro toto, though never actualize. At best, however, the beautiful offers a taste or a vision of the new world just “for a few moments”; the beautiful is the “glimmer of the truth.” The beautiful is the part, and God’s love is the whole. The beautiful is not the final reality. It is an interruption, a pre-appearance, a captivating moment; but it too must pass away. And in its place, the love of God which makes “all things new” will reign for eternity (Rev. 21:5).

In reflection upon this, I close with a famous selection from 1 Corinthians 13, in which the theme of part and whole is connected with the eschatological vision of God, the visio beatifica. After writing that love “rejoices in the truth” and “never ends,” Paul then writes:

For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. . . . For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. (vv. 9-10, 12-13)

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78 TE II, 81.
THE BEAUTIFUL AS A GATEWAY TO THE TRANSCENDENT: THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE DECADENT MOVEMENT IN 19TH CENTURY LITERATURE AND THE THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS OF HANS URS VON BALTHasar

Walter Kedjierski

For centuries Christians have perceived beauty as a gateway to understanding and experiencing the transcendent. The seductive and enticing nature of beauty can lead one to a fulfilling encounter with the divine beyond the initial symbol experienced, or one can become fixated upon the symbol itself so that a self-consuming and unfulfilling form of idolatry is the result. The following is an exploration of how the Christian tradition has come to appreciate beauty as a gateway to the divine. This essay considers the decadent movement in Western European literature of the 19th century and the writings of the 20th century Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar.

HISTORICAL AND BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Early in the history of Christianity, people came to discover God in the beautiful. When Augustine penned the story of his conversion in the 4th century, he chose to refer to God as the beautiful and to all other beauty as insignificant in comparison yet also an inspiration to seek God:

Too late have I loved you, O Beauty, ancient yet ever new. Too late have I loved you! And behold, you were within, but I was outside, searching for you there—plunging, deformed amid those fair forms which You had made. You were with me, but I was not with you. Things held me far from you, which unless they were in You did not exist at all. You called and shouted and burst my deafness. You gleamed and shone upon me, and chased away my blindness. You breathed fragrant odors on me, and I held back my breath, but now I pant for You. I tasted, and now I hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and now I yearn for your peace.¹

Augustine’s language is a language of yearning, a language that recognizes the innate goodness of the beautiful, not in and of the beautiful itself, but as a result of the author of the beautiful, God. One might make the comparison that just as a husband is initially enamored by the physical beauty of his wife, eventually he should come to recognize that the true beauty of his wife really lies within herself. Beauty is a reality that has the capacity to take one out of oneself and

into a desire for an encounter with the transcendent. There are many biblical and historical foundations for the development of this understanding about the nature and purpose of beauty.

Through a simple examination of the Hebrew Scriptures, one can come to the realization that as it was formed, the Jewish community was not opposed to the use of the beautiful, even in its worship. The temple of Solomon was more than likely one of the most beautiful structures standing during its time. A variety of carved animals and vegetation adorned the temple, which included pomegranates,\(^2\) twelve oxen,\(^3\) panels with lions, oxen, and cherubim,\(^4\) as well as golden altars\(^5\) decorated with flowers and lamps. Even with its great opulence, this was a building that proved to be so pleasing to the LORD that He chose to conferrHis name upon it.\(^6\) This description of the temple might prove to be a bit unsettling, particularly to Christians of the Reformed tradition, because of the fear of idolatry. The Ten Commandments specifically forbid the worship of images, idols, or anything other than the one living God. The Ten Commandments found in Exodus 20 read thus in this regard: “You shall not carve idols for yourselves in the shape of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth; you shall not bow down before them or worship them.”\(^7\) In Deuteronomy 5 the Ten Commandments provide the same prohibition almost verbatim: “You shall not carve idols for yourselves in the shape of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth; you shall not bow down before them or worship them.”\(^8\) Yet along with an acknowledgment of this commandment must come the recognition that later on in the very same text of Exodus God commands Moses to make the ark with “two cherubim of beaten gold.”\(^9\) Where does the balance lie between God’s prohibition of the creation of idols and God’s approval of the use of images of heavenly and earthly realities in worship through prayer with the ark and in the temple?

One of the first questions that needs to be answered is exactly how idolatry was practiced by those religions that surrounded the Holy Land at that time. One of the most prominent religions of the time, which the Israelites would have known very well through their experience of slavery, was the religion of the ancient Egyptian empire. Archeologists have discovered the ways in which the ancient Egyptians honored their gods and their idols: “The priests of each temple cared for the statue of the god as if it were alive.”\(^10\) There is evidence that these

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2 1 Kings 7:18.
3 1 Kings 7:25.
4 1 Kings 7:29.
5 1 Kings 7:48.
6 1 Kings 9:3.
7 Exodus 20:4-5.
8 Deuteronomy 5:8-9.
9 Exodus 25:18.
statues were clothed, fed, and worshipped. As one can observe through a reading of the Decalogue of Exodus and Deuteronomy, idolatry would have no place in the Jewish religion despite its popularity at the time of the ancient Egyptian empire. This prohibition would be carried into Christianity. Yet, as one can observe, this prohibition was not against the use of beautiful objects in worship. Rather, the prohibition was against confusing God with the objects used to aid in worshipping God.

The Bible makes it clear that images can be used not only for worship but can even become vessels through which God transmits His grace. This is clearly true of the bronze serpent from Numbers 21. In this story, the people were growing weary of their long and arduous journey and began to complain to the Lord. The Lord therefore allowed poisonous snakes to attack the people. As they were bitten they became seriously ill, some even to the point of death. Moses cast a serpent out of bronze, and when the people gazed upon the representation of the animal that caused them harm, they were healed. This artistic representation of a serpent was used by God to bring people healing. Christians would later interpret this serpent affixed on a pole as foreshadowing Christ’s redemptive sacrifice on the cross. It is there one can observe the hatred and cruelty of humanity yet also be healed by the salvific merit of Christ’s death. Beauty and artistic expression clearly do have their place in Christianity.

Yet at the same time the Scriptures also indicate that it would be tragic if the artwork, or the beauty, became an end in and of itself. The pole with the bronze serpent eventually had to be destroyed by King Hezekiah because the people began worshipping the image as their god and forgot about the Lord of heaven and earth who used the image to bring about healing. An image is exactly that, an image, a representation of a greater reality, not the reality itself. Once one becomes preoccupied with beauty in and of itself, the result is idolatry that turns one away from the transcendent. The Christian use of art is not about l’art pour l’art (“art for art’s sake”) but rather it is about art as a vehicle, a gateway by which one can encounter the Transcendent One who is the author of the inner life of the particular soul that chose to create the artwork.

Apart from the Bible, there are also clear precedents in the history of the Church concerning this question of idolatry versus the use of the beautiful. The Iconoclast controversy of the 8th and 9th centuries forced the Church to consider seriously the place of artwork in her liturgical life. This question was addressed first by the Second General Council of Nicaea in 787 and again at the Fourth General Council of Constantinople in 870. Notice how the Second General Council of Nicaea encouraged a legitimate use of sacred art in worship, not as an end in itself, but as a means of reaching the transcendent.

The more frequently one contemplates these pictorial representations, the more gladly will he be led to remember the original subject whom they

11 Cf. 2 John 2.
12 Cf. John 3:15.
13 2 Kings 18:14.
represent, the more too will he be drawn to it and inclined to give it...a respectful veneration (proskunέśis, adoratio), which, however, is not true adoration (latreia, latría) which, according to our faith, is due to God alone. But, as is done for the image of the revered and life-giving cross and the holy Gospels and other sacred objects and monuments, let an oblation of incense and light be made to give honor to those images according to the pious customs of the ancients. For “the honor given to an image goes to the original model” (St. Basil, De Spiritu Sancto, 18, 45) and he who venerates an image, venerates in it the person represented by it.  

Therefore, one can observe a consistent trend in the Scripture and tradition of Christianity of a great reverence and respect for sacred images and beauty yet at the same time an understanding that contact with beauty is not in and of itself the goal. Contact with the author of that beauty is the goal.

THE FUTILITY OF L’ART POUR L’ART AS DEMONSTRATED IN 19TH CENTURY DECADENT LITERATURE

Examples of how absorbing the beautiful devoid of its goal of reaching for the transcendent leads to a lack of fulfillment can be observed in the 19th century Decadent movement. This movement, occurring primarily in French and British art and literature, included such geniuses as Andre Raffalovich, Oscar Wilde, J.-K. Huysmans, Aubrey Beardsley, and Charles Baudelaire. These are individuals whom one can safely say chose to remain fixated upon beauty in and of itself and yet in the end found that it was just not enough for them. “The typical Decadent was someone who worshipped beauty, an individual who needed to nourish his senses, who lived for the moods and emotions of life.” Of particular interest in this context would be J.-K. Huysmans’s highly influential novel, A Rebours (translated, Against the Grain). Cyril Connolly in his study The Modern Movement labeled A Rebours as “a key book” to modern literature.

A Rebours is a plotless, seemingly meaningless cacophony of events that surround the life of the ultimate fictional decadent, Duc Jean Floressas Des Esseintes. The religious symbolism present in this novel is abundant and seems to represent Des Esseintes’s acknowledgement of the importance of the spiritual but his failure to recognize that the desire to nourish all of his senses can only be realized through a connection with the author behind all of the beauty he seeks. Ironically, Des Esseintes surrounds himself with the beauty and artwork of the Church. His rooms are adorned with stoles, dalmatics, monstrances, and the like, which are all items used in the worship of the Roman Catholic Church. Des Esseintes enjoys smelling incense, lighting candles, and listening to Gregorian chant.

He even makes himself into a monk of sorts who withdraws from the world and all outside influences in order to focus upon a higher pursuit. Arthur Symons, in fact, referred to *A Rebours* as “the breviary of the Decadence”\(^\text{17}\) (a breviary is a prayer book used by clergy and religious of the Roman Catholic Church). Yet Des Esseintes does not imbue any of the items with which he has surrounded himself with their religious value. As the decadent *par excellence* he only uses them for the sensual experience he can receive from them. The novel ends abruptly in a rather unfulfilling manner to the reader. By chapter fifteen of the novel, Des Esseintes is enduring overwhelming suffering as a result of “nervous dyspepsia.” Huysmans also mentions that Des Esseintes suffers from “nightmares, hallucinations of smell, pains in the eye and deep coughing which recurred with clock-like regularity, after the pounding of his heart and arteries and cold perspiration.”\(^\text{18}\) Perhaps the use of his “mouth organ” (a machine that dispensed alcohol)—along with other decadent pursuits—was a detriment to his good health. At the conclusion of the novel Huysmans makes Des Esseintes’s physician’s opinion clear:

His verdict, (confirmed besides by consultation with all the experts on neurosis) was that distraction, amusement, pleasure alone might make an impression on this malady whose spiritual side eluded all remedy; and made impatient by the recriminations of his patient, he for the last time declared that he would refuse to continue treating him if he did not consent to a change of air, and live under new hygienic conditions.

Therefore Des Esseintes’s singular pursuit of sensual pleasure came to an abrupt, unsuccessful end. Des Esseintes never succeeded in finding what he longed to achieve. He became fixed upon the vehicle that was supposed to lead to something (or, more properly, someone) far greater than the sensual pleasure in and of itself.

Upon a brief examination of J.-K. Huysmans’s life, one can recognize that he eventually came to the personal conclusion that immersion in the arts and the sensual is meant to lead one to an encounter with the Transcendent One. When Huysmans wrote *A Rebours* in 1884, he indicated that he did not have any Christian inclinations. In fact, he even explored “Satanic mysticism.”\(^\text{19}\) In 1891 he entered into a personal conversion, which led him to the Catholic Church as he wrote in his autobiography *En Route.*\(^\text{20}\) He chose to spend time in contemplation at a Trappist monastery. He was first attracted to the Church through curiosity about its hierarchy, then its arts, and later its mystery, and it was this curiosity which brought him to the faith. After his conversion, Huysmans became a Benedictine Oblate, meaning that he chose to live the life of a Benedictine monk while remaining in the world as a lay person.

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\(^\text{18}\) A full text of *A Rebours* from which all quotes in this article are taken can be found at: http://www.hxa7241.org/books/content/Husmans-AgainstTheGrain.html.


\(^\text{20}\) Pearce, 5.
As previously mentioned, *A Rebours* was a highly influential text for the Decadent movement of the 19th century, and its popularity would cross the English Channel.

Following its publication Whistler rushed to congratulate Huysmans on his “marvelous book,” Paul Valéry acclaimed it as his “Bible and bedside book” and Paul Bourget, a close friend at the time of both Huysmans and Wilde, professed himself a great admirer. Yet there were few greater admirers of *A Rebours* than Wilde himself. In an interview with the *Morning Post* he stated that “this last book of Huysmans is one of the best that I have ever seen.”

One of the first British writers to discover *A Rebours* was George Moore. He wrote, “Huysmans goes to my soul like a gold ornament of Byzantine workmanship: there is in his style the yearning charm of arches, a sense of ritual, the passion of the Gothic, of the window.” A number of Moore’s novels reflect the style of *A Rebours*, particularly a novel he wrote in 1889 entitled *Mike Fletcher* (London: Ward & Downey, 1889). George Cevasco provides a fine summary of this novel:

Bequeathed a small fortune by a former mistress, Mike finds every indulgence open to him. He obtains everything he goes after, but remains unsatisfied, always uneasy. Satiation brings with it despair. Ultimately, all he wants is rest and relief from the wariness of his life. “For now I know,” he concludes, “that man cannot live without wife, without child, without God.” Resigned to taste the dark fruit of oblivion, one evening he blows his brains out. “And who,” Moore demands of the reader, “knowing of Mike’s torment is fortunate enough to say: ‘I know nothing of what is written here.’”

Unlike Huysmans, Moore never went through a religious conversion. One can observe his dissatisfaction with the appeasement of the appetite of the senses alone and his recognition that with nothing more, life brings with it despair and weariness.

This brief exploration of 19th century Decadent literature indicates that absorption with the beautiful in and of itself does not satisfy the initial attraction the beautiful sends forth. The worship of anything other than the living God will not bring with it peace or satisfaction. Art and beauty are special tools designed by God to bring one out of oneself and into a special connection with God.

**HANS URS VON BALTHASAR’S THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS**

*The Glory of the Lord* is a seven-volume work written by the 20th century Swiss Jesuit theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar that exhaustively explains his theology. The subtitle of his work is “A Theological Aesthetics,” and he makes it

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21 Ibid.


23 Cevasco, 24.
clear from the very beginning of his writing that the beautiful is a key element to understanding his theology. In fact, it is his starting point.

Beauty is the word that shall be our first. Beauty is the last thing which the thinking intellect dares to approach since only it dances, as an uncontained splendor, around the double constellation of the true and the good and their inseparable relation to one another. . . . No longer loved or fostered by religion, beauty is lifted from its face as a mask, and its absence exposes features on that face which threaten to become incomprehensible to man.  

As one can observe, Balthasar firmly believed that the sole purpose of beauty is in some way to connect one to the transcendent. When robbed of its purpose, beauty becomes deformed. But beauty, when it is imbued with an excellence that contains goodness and truth beyond human language, brings to its observer a sense of wonder and awe which can lead one to a sense of God’s utter transcendence and a desire for adoration and prayer. Yet the beauty that surrounds this sense of wonder and awe, like a frame surrounds a picture, must not be ignored.

The privileged moment will always exist when a person falls to his knees to adore the One who says to him: “I who am speaking with you – I am He!” But the Good news cannot be reduced to such moments, since these would readily absorb all else into themselves. There are also the surfaces, time and space, and all these human factors disseminated within them and which essentially belongs to what John calls “remaining,” the commerce and familiarity with habits and opinions, reaching to what cannot be weighed or measured: a real life form.  

Balthasar used Platonic ideas about matter and form to develop his theological aesthetics. Even the most elementary of philosophy courses would not be complete without an exploration of how Plato understood that all matter is simply an imperfect image of the perfect, the form upon which it is based. This understanding of the material – and material beauty in particular – will aid one in developing a clear distinction between the use of beauty as an idol or as a gateway to the transcendent. For the purposes of this article, one might consider the following observations of Balthasar as a reflection upon the problem of the idolatrous use of the beautiful.

When beauty becomes a form which is no longer understood as being identical with Being, spirit, and freedom, we have again entered an age of aestheticism, and realists will then be right in objecting to this kind of beauty. They go about demolishing what has rotted from within, but they cannot replace the power of Being which resides in the conferring of form.  

26 Ibid, 22.
To understand that there is a form – the ultimate form, Beauty itself – behind all beauty is to be delivered from the temptation of idolatry. Such an understanding actually transforms all beauty, and in fact all of creation, into a gateway through which one can perceive the very presence of God. The 19th century Jesuit poet Gerard Manly Hopkins expressed this sentiment perfectly in his poem, “God’s Grandeur.”

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck His rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.  
And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights of the black West went  
Oh, morning, and the brown brink eastward, springs –  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

The Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church identifies that which is beautiful in creation as one of the ways in which God has chosen to manifest Himself to humanity. “God, who creates and conserves all things by His Word, provides constant evidence of Himself in created realities.” Scripture also makes this sentiment clear in Paul’s letter to the Romans: “Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what he has made.”

All of the above considerations have simply been an elaboration of one of the very first sentiments expressed in Scripture. God evaluated His creation by looking upon “everything He had made, and He found it very good.” An outright refusal to use beauty or any created realities as vehicles through which one can encounter the Transcendent One could possibly lead one to a denial of this basic foundation of the Judeo-Christian tradition. It could very well even lead to a denial of the innate goodness of the material and a development of Gnostic tendencies in Christianity.

29 Romans 1:20
30 Genesis 1:31
ECUMENICAL IMPLICATIONS

As a Catholic priest writing for a journal rooted in Protestantism, it would surely be an oversight not to take into account the ecumenical possibilities this consideration might have for both Christian traditions. First of all, I would cast a critical eye upon my own faith tradition. One could clearly observe instances where expressions of Catholic piety could appear to the outsider to be acts of idolatry. Pilgrimages with the express purpose of venerating a particular image, bowing down before statues or paintings, or kissing icons as is done in the East all appear to be concerned with the vehicles of prayer in and of themselves. Clearly an intense amount of catechesis is necessary for those involved with such rituals. Perhaps in the mindset of some in the Catholic tradition the objects of beauty used in worship take on a life of their own and become “God-like.” It would certainly be wise to attach to all such devotions a clear explanation of how the beautiful is supposed to function in the spiritual life. Attempts, not to rid the Church of beauty, but to purify the motives of individuals who seek out the beautiful, and even to alter rituals that could be misconstrued as idolatrous, would surely clarify the situation.

Protestants have the task of attempting to rediscover the complex realities of the beautiful. Already, Protestants have a tremendous love of beauty in terms of sacred music. Charles Wesley and J.S. Bach are recognized among others across denominational lines as outstanding composers. Yet there is a tremendous reticence among many Protestants to have anything to do with the visually beautiful. There is no need to have this fear. As has been demonstrated above, it is perfectly in line with Scripture to use the visually beautiful in worship, and it can even be used as a vessel of God’s grace. To forsake the use of the visually beautiful in worship is to risk denigrating the worth of the material and to deny the basic assertion that everything God has made is essentially good. Of course, in the Protestant view of the Fall, the world has become essentially “corrupted.” Therefore, a rediscovery of the visually beautiful among Protestants certainly seems to be in order and is quite possible with the use of proper catechesis among Protestants.

Perhaps if Catholics and Protestants both attempted to alter their use and understanding of sacred art, there might be a meeting of the two in the middle. This could very well contribute to the ultimate goal of eventual unity and a removal of the scandal of the divisive divisions within Christianity. Yet of course this would require a great deal of education and mutual collaboration among churches and communions.

CONCLUSION

God has provided to human beings an appreciation for beauty. Beauty is a reality that can take the individual outside of himself or herself and into a deeper appreciation of the form behind the beauty, which ultimately is the Lord God. Yet there is also the danger of falling into absorption with the means to God and forgetting about the end. This danger can lead one into a personal spiritual disaster as in the case of Des Essenties. As Hans Urs von Balthasar would contend, a deeper
reverence for the beautiful, with personal wonder and awe intact, would help one to understand that beauty can deepen and enliven one’s relationship with the author of all that is beautiful. This should be the goal for the use of all that is beautiful, in church buildings and in all created realities that surround humankind.

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Fighting Troll-Demons in Vaults of the Mind and Heart – Art, Tragedy, and Sacramentality: Some Observations from Ibsen, Forsyth and Dostoevsky

Jason Goroncy

By way of an in

One of the more nocent facets of modern society is its treatment of “the arts” as something to be harnessed and exploited, prostituted by the world of marketing. More often than not it is consumerism rather than revelation that sets the agenda for arts’ value and usefulness. There is also a view today that the arts ought to be isolated from the broader texture of our lives. Art belongs in galleries, concert halls and cinemas, and in the invented “world” of a text, those privileged purlieus of our society into which we can escape the “real” world.1 According to this latter view, there is a thing called “life,” and then there is “art.” The real stuff happens in “life.” Art is merely escape from or, even worse, denial of life. Art is what we pursue in our “spare time” or it is what people do who can not “get a real job”! Such notions have not always been with us, however. Renaissance scholar Paul Oskar Kristeller has shown that prior to the eighteenth century, writers and thinkers “though confronted with excellent works of art and quite susceptible to their charm, were neither able nor eager to detach the aesthetic quality of these works of art from their intellectual, moral, religious and practical function or content.”2

My contention in this paper is that the Christian community in general, and its theologians in particular, cannot afford to embrace, consciously or unconsciously, any demarcation between “the arts” and “life.” All we have is of God. All life, therefore, is to be received with thanksgiving, and embraced with an appropriate anticipation of seeing the Giver’s signature not merely in the bottom right corner, but all over – the front and back and sides of life. Moreover, art takes life and does something with it that nothing else does. This paper shall seek to identify something of what that “something” is.

Beginning with a brief exploration of the labyrinthic relationship between art and sacrament, we proceed, with the help of Scottish theologian P. T. Forsyth, to engage some themes in Henrik Ibsen and Fyodor Dostoevsky, who both serve as theologians who illustrate and critique the role of the arts, particularly arts’ tragic elements, and offer valuable voices for a proper understanding of grace – and so of nature and life.


Actionem: The Matrix of Nature and the Sacramentality of Art

Frank Brown befittingly asserts that “the art that has the greatest religious significance is not necessarily the art of institutional religion but rather the art which happens to discern what religion in its institutional or personal forms needs most to see.” Art creates an experience of mind and heart that compares in kind, though not in measure, to the Beyond itself. Insofar as it does this, it is “sacramental,” not unlike prayer or preaching. As Flannery O’Connor penned, “The artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality.” All art is sacramental in its nature. The artist is given, consciously or unconsciously, a certain vision, a truth (true or otherwise), a word (graced or otherwise), which strains to be embodied materially in such a way that that initial givenness is communicated, heard, and known as the creation, in Rowan Williams’ phrase, “moves from and into a depth in the perceptible world that is contained neither in routine perception nor in the artist’s … purposes.” Art is more, therefore, than memorial or symbol. It is icon. It is incarnation. More than ideas or associations of feeling, there is a transsubstantiation that takes place in matter. Flesh is not thrown over the idea like a blanket. Rather, the idea itself finds embodiment and completion, indeed finds itself, in sinews, tendons, steel, oil, clay, semibreves and words. This enfleshment directs us not merely to the creation itself, but through it to its makers.

Human making – “the characteristic common to God and man” – is sacramental insofar as God elects to create graced occasions of encounter between humanity and himself. It is all that Farrow describes of the Church’s twin sacraments: “a movement from absence to presence … from chaos to order, darkness to light, death to life. It is an inventive, ordering event on the same plane as the act of creation, though its actual results are largely withheld from our view.”

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5 Art, at least that art which names itself “Christian,” can have no place for Manichean or semi-Platonic ideas.


7 There is also a sense in which artists themselves are “sacraments,” mediating meaning in their very vocation, its costliness and misunderstanding.


9 God may or may not elect to make himself known though art. Art does not show us God. God alone can do that; but sometimes God uses art, among many other human pursuits and loves, to begin the showing. What art does do is to open up (and sometimes close) the door to Reality/Creation.

As O’Connor notes concerning novelists, the real artist is the one who “knows that he cannot approach the infinite directly, that he must penetrate the natural human world as it is.”

Whilst art can never mediate the gospel itself, grace so works that art may mediate some word about the gospel, a half-gospel (or more), some shadows to a fallen world. To be sure, art cannot “explain” or “prove” the mysteries of God, nor does it usually seek to, but it does re-present, re-make, and re-create those (revealed) mysteries materially. Thus, in the celebrated preface to his 1897 novel, *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*, Joseph Conrad rightly defines art as “a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colours, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter, and in the facts of life what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential – their one illuminating and convincing quality – the very truth of their existence.”

Whether called “bad” or “good,” “high” or “low,” “skeptical” or “faithful,” art is never neutral. It is, in Picasso’s words, “never chaste.” Art is dangerous, risky. It not only demands to be heard, even if mis-heard, but in its “hearing” brings about a new situation. One is, as it were, “changed” by it, even “transported” by it. As Barth describes listening to Mozart: “Whenever I listen to you, I am transported to the threshold of a world which in sunlight and storm, by day and by night, is a good and ordered world.” In arts’ sign-making, its proclamation activity, something “new” happens – the kind of “newness” which is “new” precisely because we have been there before, or were made to be there in the future. In Browning’s oft-quoted words from *Fra Lippo Lippi* (1855):

For, don’t you mark? we’re made so that we love
First when we see them painted, things we have passed
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see;
And so they are better, painted – better to us,
Which is the same thing. Art was given for that.

Browning asserts that the point of painting something is not to reproduce it exact-

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13 By “bad” I mean that art which seeks to debunk, dismantle and deconstruct all that creation speaks to affirm – beauty, goodness, truth, honor, justice, purity, love and commendability (Phil 4:8) – and replace it with shallowness, ugliness, kitsch and ephemerality. In other words, “good” art opens up Reality to us, that is, whatever God wills us to experience in the world.
ly (which is impossible), but rather to re-present it in such a way that others might “see” the reality of that which is represented for the first time. Like death, art interprets and expands life. The Aberdeenshire theologian, Peter Taylor Forsyth (1848–1921), notes that for the Victorian English Symbolist painter and sculptor, George Frederick Watts (1817–1904), “Art is interpretation. It is a branch of sacred hermeneutics.” He goes on: “Let natural beauty be what it may, artistic beauty is higher. And why? Because it is spiritual. Because you have in Art the finished product of which Nature is but the initial stage. Nature runs up into the artist. He crowns Nature with the miracle of living, conscious spirit.” Nature “rises to Art.” Art is nature “born again,” born anew of that “soul which is above Nature.” It is not a question of artists somehow imposing themselves on Nature, or representing Nature. Rather, Art is Nature uttering, completing and coming to itself “through the artist. That is real imagination.” Insofar as art contributes to our participation in God’s perfecting of creation, we can say that art perfects creation.

In our own day, Nicholas Wolterstorff has reminded us that one of the purposes of poetry (“the most spiritual and least sensuous of all the arts,” as Forsyth defines it) is not to impose illusion on reality, but rather to do the opposite. Poetry’s “hazy words” intimate a world, indeed a reality, both within and beyond the life of the poem, functioning not unlike a doorway through which the hopeful sojourner is invited to enter “the path of longing” and explore the land of life as it really is, not simply as it appears. Arthur Miller articulates that “while there are mysteries in life which no amount of analyzing will reduce to reason, it

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18 Peter T. Forsyth, Christ on Parnassus: Lectures on Art, Ethic, and Theology (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1911), 260. Here Forsyth betrays his indebtedness to Hegel, although he does not share Hegel’s belief that art is only the middle stage between the exteriority of nature and the interiority of spirit. See George Pattison, Art, Modernity and Faith (London: SCM Press, 1988), 97. Hegel considers the Reformation as a summit, a triumph, of word over art. It is a summit from which we ought not descend to consider again art as an avenue of truth: “No matter how excellent we find the statues of the Greek gods, no matter how we see God the Father, the Christ and Mary so estimably and perfectly portrayed: it is no help; we bow the knee no longer.” Arts’ time is past: “Art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past” and “the peculiar nature of artistic production and of works of art no longer fills our highest need … thought and reflection have spread their wings above fine art.” Georg W. F. Hegel, Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 1:10-11, 30-1, 102-3.

19 That there is such widespread distrust of art is directly related to widespread distrust of Nature, and of Nature’s God; a distrust that causes human blindness to creation’s true goodness.

20 Forsyth, Parnassus, 60.


is perfectly realistic to admit and even to proclaim that hiatus as a truth.”23 The significance of this truth for the Christian theologian should be obvious: faith lies nearer to the aesthetic and the dramatic than to the intellectual sphere of life. It is a grave crime that Christian theologians should ever demand that artists choose between two worlds – as if the Word is not still flesh, albeit uniquely his flesh – or vice versa. Both the calls to sacrifice or resist human artistry in favor of “belief,” and to sacrifice the imperative scientific discipline of theology in favor of human inventiveness, are invitations to cliché and vacuity and an unmooring from the truth.24

**Introre: the realism of the tragic**

One place where arts’ sacramental nature finds a morally realistic voice is in the amphitheatre of the tragic. To flesh out whether our claim that faith lies nearer to the aesthetic and the dramatic than to the intellectual sphere of life can be defended, we could do little better than to turn to the work of the popular Norwegian poet and dramatist from Stockmannsgården, Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906).25 Ibsen’s contradictory vision of life is fundamentally one of struggle – the “pathos of disillusioned idealism,” as Hermann Weigand put it.26 That said, there remains in Ibsen’s worldview a confession that life, even tragic life, has value. Ibsen identifies this value in life’s struggle itself. Life is but a tragic journey towards the “heart-nook of the hidden.”27 For him, struggle is good, vitalizing and wholesome. “To live is to – fight troll-demons in vaults of the mind and heart.”28 As one reviewer of Ibsen’s Brand put it, “it is not liberty and truth, but rather the


24 Art can never be separated from fideistic concerns, or from other human pursuits such as philosophy or science. There may be a primacy in one, but there can be no independence. See Forsyth, *Parnassus*, 4.


struggle for them that matters. The struggle for ideals is more important to [Ibsen] than ideals themselves … In fact Ibsen believed more in struggle than in any permanent improvements. All development hitherto has been nothing more than a stumbling from one error into another.”

Ibsen has no heroes or villains in his plays. Betraying his commitment to depicting reality, he once wrote, “I do not write roles, but represent human beings.” Characters are portrayed as real, with all their strengths and weaknesses. While abandoning any hope of a graced-finale of life, Ibsen’s affirmation of struggle remains essentially an affirmation of life: life is good because it harbors the possibility of tragedy, and so of growth, process, and maturity. And for Ibsen, it includes a kind of eschatology, a forward momentum in which the entire seemingly apathetic and impotent mass is slowly moving forward. Weigand notes that by conceiving life as “a rhythmical process and pronouncing it good,” Ibsen here deprives himself “of any philosophical basis to fume in indignation against the whole universal process.”

ACT 3: FORSYTH – ASSAYING IBSEN

While some adjudge tragic pessimism as a sign of arts’ moral decadence and faithlessness, Forsyth considers art as not merely part of the “great dialectical movement which is to bring all things into union with God,” but as a truth-teller that holds up a mirror that abets its age to see what it does not want to, calling us to see, hear, feel, smell and touch something of Nature’s moral catastrophe. To be sure, Forsyth identifies the source of this tragedy as humanity’s sin, and the triviality of its sense of sin: “It is not a world out of joint that makes our problem, but the shipwrecked soul in it. It is Hamlet, not his world, that is wrong.” Forsyth’s probing analysis of human personhood, born of intense theological and psychological reflection that twenty-five years in pastoral ministry brings, equals that of Pascal, Bonhoeffer, and particularly Kierkegaard, “in whom he found a kindred spirit.” He maintains that the solution to this problem, the world solution, is in what destroys its guilt, and that nothing can do this except “the very holiness

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32 Weigand, Modern Ibsen, 126.

33 Pattison, Art, 87.


that makes guilt guilt” in the first place.\textsuperscript{36} In Tolkien’s terms, the ring can only be destroyed in the very fires of Mount Doom from which it was forged.\textsuperscript{37} That destruction takes place in the Crucified Man. There in his Cross, and there alone, it finally penetrates into us that, morally, all the great tragedy and history of the world, including our own history, is tied up with its guilt. Forsyth cites Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Goethe, and Ibsen as examples of those who see this.\textsuperscript{38}

Forsyth’s reference to Ibsen is no passing one, for he sees in Ibsen one who painstakingly identifies the problem with humanism as lacking “moral realism.”\textsuperscript{39} Ibsen sees “a different world” from Thomas Hardy’s “impressive unfaith,”\textsuperscript{40} although Hardy, too, in his own way, “does a real service to the Christian.”\textsuperscript{41} In words that seem to suggest that Forsyth sees Ibsen’s work functioning not unlike the “natural” conscience, he writes: “[Ibsen] has not ‘found Christ,’ but he has found what drives us to Christ, the need Christ alone meets. [Ibsen] unveils man’s perdition, and makes a Christ inevitable for any hope of righteousness.”\textsuperscript{42} Here Forsyth sees Ibsen as an ally. Forsyth laments not only that Ibsen never read Kierkegaard more closely, but also that while critics with the judgment such as Ibsen do not grasp the revealed answer to the questions that plague the human heart and conscience, “the Church with the revelation does not critically grasp the problem, nor duly attend to those who do.”\textsuperscript{43} Of the Church he says,

We are unreal, sentimental and impressionist … with our Gospel. We handle the eternities, yet we cannot go to the bottom of things … We do not dwell beside the remorseless reality of God in His saving work, and so we do not reach with the final and conquering word the core of man and his need. We look on the world and say, “Ah! The pity of it.” We do not delve in our own hearts, as Matthew Arnold complained, and say, “Oh! the curse of it.” In a word, we do not grasp the moral tragedy of the race’s suicide, and we do not

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{36} Peter T. Forsyth, \textit{Positive Preaching and Modern Mind: The Lyman Beecher Lecture on Preaching}, Yale University, 1907 (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1907), 228.
\item \textsuperscript{37} I am indebted to Trevor Hart (in private correspondence) for associating this metaphor with the atonement.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Forsyth, \textit{Preaching}, 227-8. To be sure, as Forsyth insisted, neither art nor the Church can prescribe a morality. Only faith can do that. Forsyth, \textit{Parnassus}, 280, 289, 293.
\item \textsuperscript{40} See Peter T. Forsyth, “The Pessimism of Mr Thomas Hardy,” \textit{London Quarterly Review} 118 (October 1912): 193-219; Forsyth, “Treatment,” 105-6.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Forsyth, “Treatment,” 112.
\end{itemize}
grasp the Gospel … So much of our religious teaching betrays no sign that the speaker has descended into hell, been near the everlasting burnings, or been plucked from the awful pit. He has risen with Christ – what right have we to deny it? – but it is out of a shallow grave, with no deepness of earth, with no huge millstone to roll away.44

God’s remedy for creation does not involve a gentle wooing. It is not at all like so much of the Church’s sickeningly sweet cough elixirs. God’s medicine “burns as it goes down.”45 The sickness is too dire, and too much is at stake for anything less potent. Ibsen knows something of this. In Peer Gynt, the old man of the mountain says to the young Peer, “Human nature’s a funny thing. Hard to get rid of. The more you pick at it, the faster it heals … I thought Old Adam was gone for good – but here he is again. It’s no good, son in law. You’ve got chronic human nature. You need the operation.”46 To which the young man replied, “You’re drunk … You’re out of your mind.”47 Too few in Christian history have been able to articulate the severity of the human scene that the old man paints here. Too often, Peer’s words are taken as the final word, even as “good news.” If he does anything, Forsyth joins the old man, but goes even further: “Human Nature is a good fellow enough – when you don’t cross him, or meddle with his bone. Then he is less divine than canine.”48 What God in Christ was up against was to meet head-on “the conscience that resents its easy forgiveness.”49 Hence not only does Forsyth identify the “chronic human nature” and the cruciality of the need for “the operation,” but he announces that we live now in a post-operation world. Like too few others, Forsyth asserts that the locus of this eucatastrophic operation is the human conscience (which needs life more than light50) – that locale in which “we are mastered but not concussed.”51 To be healed here is to be made whole. To leave conscience untouched, uncured, or to hope that the necessary antibiotics might be enough to “do the job” is to be blinded to the veracity of the moral (real) situation. Redemption and regeneration, not schooling in culture or piano tuning for the soul, are what we truly need, and they are secured by God through the crucible of judgment.

Forsyth identifies artists like Wagner, Schopenhauer and Ibsen as those who “get it,” at least in part; those who “distrust the easy optimism of the merely happy

44 Forsyth, Society, 100.
47 Ibid.
48 Peter T. Forsyth, Socialism, the Church and the Poor (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1908), 28.
51 Forsyth, Preaching, 43.
creeds.\textsuperscript{52} To be sure, Christianity is not, as Schopenhauer believed, ultimately pessimistic. But while pessimism may be “foreign to our crowning Christian instincts and our final Christian truth,” it is not alien to Christ, or to his secret or method.\textsuperscript{53} Thus in the face of the Church’s shallowness and obsession with trivialities, Forsyth entreats his North American hearers to “read Ibsen” who, more than most dramatists, carries us “closer to life’s moral realities.”\textsuperscript{54} Forsyth identifies that theology, which when done well is itself theo-dramatic reflection on the drama, has more to do with grasping reality as moral, as tragic, as an answered-problem to be lived in, rather than as a riddle to be solved by human acumen. And he identifies in the tragic poets and dramatists those who seem to understand something like holiness, “something like a sense of sin,”\textsuperscript{55} and that life’s real question, “the psycho-moral dilemma,”\textsuperscript{56} is not “How do I feel about God?” but “What dealings have I with Him?,”\textsuperscript{57} not as a concept but as the lead character in the drama. Forsyth sees in Wagner, for example, one whose “laden heart” cries for “more than a scheme from [a] vigorous mind. It rises from a burdened world, from a disjointed time, from lands where thought is too much divorced from action, and where the pressure of militarism upon industry co-operates with the ecclesiastical destruction of vital faith to reduce the vale, the reasonableness, the sanctity of life.”\textsuperscript{58}

Likewise, Ibsen’s drama is embodied tragedy yearning for a beyond. Like Nietzsche, Ibsen discerns that life culminates in its experiences of tragedy. But just as neither art nor life can have spectators, Ibsen is not a spectator in this tragedy. He is an actor. He is part of the reality. It “unhinge[s] his mind”\textsuperscript{59} and tears at his very being as it does for any who feel the question so deeply but do not know God’s resolve in the tragedy of the Cross. (Is this not why Ibsen’s master builder fears not death but judgment and retribution?) Ibsen must be read, Forsyth says, because of his “unsparing ethical realism” and his sensitivity to life’s fundamental questions. “To save your soul from sunny or silly piety,” Forsyth tells preachers, “to realize the deadly inveteracy of evil, its dereliction by God, its sordid paralysis of all redeeming, self-recuperative power in man, its incurable fatal effect upon the moral order of society, read Ibsen. Yea, to realize how it thereby imports the element of death even into the moral order of the universe read Ibsen.”\textsuperscript{60}

\textit{Continuare: Forsyth – Appraising Ibsen}

Forsyth identifies in Ibsen the cataclysmic despair of the analyst who,

\textsuperscript{52} Forsyth, \textit{Art}, 221; cf. p. 235.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 220.
\textsuperscript{54} Forsyth, \textit{Preaching}, 103.
\textsuperscript{55} Forsyth, \textit{Art}, 221.
\textsuperscript{56} Miller, “Ibsen,” 231.
\textsuperscript{57} Forsyth, “Intellectualism and Faith,” 319.
\textsuperscript{58} Forsyth, \textit{Art}, 220-1.
\textsuperscript{60} Forsyth, \textit{Preaching}, 103.
crushed by the quagmire of the reality he has unearthed, is unable to find his way back to a synthesis. He praises Ibsen (and other “tragic poets”) for his recognition that what lies at the nucleus of the human problem is guilt. But Forsyth is not uncritical of these “apostles” for not recognizing what it is that makes guilt guilt, that is, holiness, and that as unveiled in God’s cross. This analysis leads Forsyth to say to these budding preacher-listeners, “Preach to Ibsen’s world, and there are few that you will miss. Only Mer

Ibsen’s prophetic exposé, his “moral and religious genius,” his ability to unmask the “hypocrisy, self-deception, and sham with which contemporary society clothe[s] itself,” and to identify and ask the right questions, is imperative; even though, in Forsyth’s view, no answer comes. Forsyth contends that Ibsen “has enough conscience to know the nature of the true human burden; but he had not enough to bear it, still less to roll it upon another … He had the conscience to feel the sin of the world, but not the power of remedy … Like his age, he knew what a redemption should be better than he knew the Redeemer that has been … he understood the psychology of Redemption more than its power, the way it should take more than the way it did … He had the moral vision to feel the need of [the Christian Messiah], but not the spiritual power to recognise the gift of him through the hulls of his Church.” What Ibsen lacks is a gospel adequate to meet the cataclysm he so critically sees. His proficiency is that he is ever “aware of the rodent with sharp eyes and teeth, living in fierce terror behind the grubby walls of life,” but he is “never taught by any competent mind to haunt the spot where absolute ethic and infinite mystic meet in Christ.” He grasps life’s fundamental moral realities, but life is not a seductive puzzle to be solved by human acumen, but a “tragic battle for existence, for power, for eternal life.” As we shall see, what Ibsen fails to grasp, the Russian writer Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky (1821–1881) embraces with both hands, as though life depends on it.

61 Ibid., 104.
62 Ibid., 105.
63 Forsyth, “Treatment,” 120.
65 Forsyth, “Treatment,” 121.
66 Ibid., 122.
ARRIVAL: THE MATRIX OF GRACE AND THE ARTISTRY OF THE SACRAMENT

God’s creational mandate involves a lot more than breeding. It involves the Edenization of creation – taking the life of Eden, of grace, to the ends of the earth. As a grace, therefore, art is not an “optional extra” of human being, or of the telling of good news, but it is part of the constraining means of that being and telling. Artists live out the reality of that blessing through adding value to the created order, the “very good” of God. So human artistry is constituted in God’s covenant with creation, but because of the grace of God revealed in the economy of God’s action in Jesus Christ, and notwithstanding that the arts do indeed find theological grounding in the action of divine enfleshment, art finds its final meaning in the cross where the Triune God creatively answers himself from humanity’s side.

The language of “sacramentality” and art must, therefore, be approached with caution. Specifically, it must be approached christologically and christocentrically. For if we seek to understand sacramentality in terms of creation alone, we will inevitably flatten out all sacraments; that is, if everything is sacramental, then nothing is. The uniqueness of the Church’s sacraments, whether one, two, or more, lies in the fact that they are proclamations of specific (divine) historical activities, specifically the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and are to be practised as those activities that “proclaim the Lord’s death (and, presumably, resurrection) until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26). We may, in the absence of another term, speak of arts’ “sacramentality” whilst affirming that art can never be a “sacrament” as such. It has a sacramental nature, but it is not a sacrament. Whilst it can proclaim the truth, it can never proclaim the whole truth and nothing but the truth. It is not art, but Jesus Christ, the truth of God, who is the one Mediator between God and humanity, and who speaks the whole truth – that is, the truth of the Father. Art can never usurp this place and is only being idolatrous when it tries. The Church has one Sacrament, and his name is Jesus Christ.

Thus just where one might be tempted to utilize Natural Theology to bridge the gap between the question and the answer, between sin and redemption, Forsyth introduces something noticeably absent from Ibsen’s corpus – the priority of grace. For while “nature cannot of itself culminate in grace, at least it was not put there without regard to grace. Grace is Nature’s destiny.” Apart from grace, nature becomes abstruse, unreal and inhuman. Apart from nature, the physical stuff of the world too dust-bound to satisfy metaphysical enquiry, grace tends toward despair and absurdity. “Nature, if not the mother, is the matrix of Grace.”

69 Baptism and Holy Communion are sacraments in so far as they “proclaim” the Sacrament (Word) of Jesus Christ. It is also important to note here that the sacraments (and preaching) do not actualise Christ, but are only possible as “real presence” because of the actuality which precedes the possibility. See Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics II/1, trans. T. H. L. Parker, et. al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1985), 55.
70 Peter T. Forsyth, This Life and the Next: The Effect on This Life of Faith in Another (London: Independent Press, 1946), 69; cf. Forsyth, Art, 98.
that grace is bloodied, despised and rejected, crushed for the iniquities of, and laden with punishment for those who hide their faces from it. Grace is never an abstract thing. Nor is it cheap. Grace is a man groaning on a cross, dying, as Gerd confesses, on a “bitter tree,” not only for his friends but also for those who would wish him and his Father dead. Grace is a person redeeming in holy love. Grace is God in eucatastrophic action in the face of Nature’s catastrophe. Grace is God taking seriously the scandalous nature of sin’s offence, and himself going down into the experience of nothingness and dread, into hell, into death, into the furnace of God’s own wrath, into the radical depths of its wound, in order to save. There can be no higher gift. Moreover, such grace alone satisfies the human (and divine) conscience, which requires not merely an explanation of the Cross, but its revelation. This grace alone, the grace of the initiating Father, carries humanity home and brings peace to the human spirit.

God’s love is impotent if it is not holy – and holy is the one thing Ibsen cannot afford his God to be. This is revealed in the final scene of Peer Gynt. After Buttonmoulder’s challenge, the wayward Peer has opportunity to know the gift of repentance, to grow up, to know forgiveness, to come home. Clinging to Solveig and hiding his face in her lap, he squalls, “My mother; my wife; purest of women! Hide me there, hide me in your heart!” But here, pietà-like, in Solveig’s arms, in the one place he might know freedom and come home, she robs him (and he allows himself to be robbed) of his one hope of forgiveness, of redemption, of life, of homecoming. And this is precisely because there is no confession of holiness, and no recognition of guilt. There is not even remorse, even while he was in the far country.

Glossing over the depth of Peer’s tragedy, Solveig offers cheap, although sincere, grace as she softly sings,

Sleep, my boy, my dearest boy!
I will rock you to sleep and guard you.

The boy has sat on his mother’s lap.
The two have played the livelong day.


72 Ibsen, Brand, Peer Gynt, 248. Significantly, these words come out of the mouth not of the priest Brand, but of Gerd, the mad gypsy girl who tries to talk Brand into going with her to the “ice church” in the mountains. But just when the Christian reader might get excited that Ibsen may have perceived something of an answer to the questions he identifies through the mouth of Gerd, she turns around and confesses that the “tree of the cross … this thing [that] was done long years ago” is all a lie taught to her by her father when she was little, and that Brand himself is really “that Man … the Saviour” (ibid.).


74 Ibsen, Brand, Peer Gynt, 421.
The boy has lain on his mother’s breast
The livelong day. God bless you my sweet.
The boy has lain so close to my heart
The livelong day. He is weary now.

Sleep, my boy, my dearest boy!
I will rock you to sleep and guard you.

Here, Solveig functions as a kind of uncertain Natural Theology whose concern is more for aesthetics and harmony than reconciliation. “She may,” Forsyth says of Natural Theology, “hold to her fitful breast her tired child, soothe her fretful sons, kindle her brilliant lovers to cosmic or other emotion, and lend her imagery to magnify the passions of the heart; but for the conscience, stricken or strong, she has no word. Therefore she has no Revelation.” And because she has no revelation, she can neither offer nor bring reconciliation. Indeed, in her eyes, Peer has nothing to repent of, or be forgiven for. He is home now. That is all that matters. Thus Solveig sanctifies Peer in his guilt, leaving him wretched – with Button-moulder having opportunity to again speak, perhaps even have the final word, in spite of Solveig’s final hope that Peer had indeed become a “home-returner.”

A BREVILOQUENT DETOUR: TWO PRODIGALS,
TWO GIRLFRIENDS, AND VARIATIONS ON THE THEME

The cost of Solveig’s relationship with Peer in the play’s final scene can be profitably contrasted with that of another epilogue, Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment, first published in 1866. While Solveig has sacrificially waited for her home-returner to reappear from the grave of lostness, the obsequious and unpretentious prostitute Sonya Semyonovna Marmeladova has followed her beloved and impoverished student-turned-murderer Rodion Raskolnikov to a Siberian prison, his fortress for eight years.

77 Ibsen, Brand, Peer Gynt, 421.
78 Significantly, the German translation is entitled “Guilt and Expiation.” Dostoevsky rates no mention in any of Forsyth’s books.
79 Sonya is the religious daughter of a drunk, Semyon Zakharovich Marmeladov, who Raskolnikov meets in a pub near the beginning of the novel and continuously finds himself drawn to throughout the novel. Raskolnikov enjoys her grace-ful support, even though one of his victims (Lizaveta) is her friend. She encourages him to take up faith and confess. He does, and after his confession she follows him to Siberia where she lives in the same town as the prison; it is here that Raskolnikov begins his “rebirth.”
80 A word play on raskol, meaning a schism, or split. The Raskolniki were members of a sect of “Old Believers” who broke away from the Russian Orthodox Church in the seventeenth century.
81 Dostoevsky himself was sentenced to four years in a Siberian camp (the Peter and
Raskolnikov had once conceived of himself as a great Übermensch, as a Napoleon, who wasn’t bound by the same tired old moral codes that others recognize, if not obey. Nevertheless, after committing his appalling twin murder and robbery, he finds that he cannot evade his punishment; he cannot silence his sentient and over-encumbered conscience and is subsequently submerged into a hell of bedevilment and tormenting madness. Finally, he is driven, most un-Peer like, to full disclosure, to confession — “without distorting the facts, without forgetting the slightest details. He recounted the whole process of the murder to the last trace”82 — and that first to Sonya. To the “great annoyance” of those who wanted to defend him — psychologists, friends, his landlady and maid — Raskolnikov, entirely unlike Peer, “did almost nothing to defend himself.”83 Now in prison, he feels constrained to know why, “what precisely had prompted him to come and confess his guilt.”84

What Dostoevsky’s work betrays is a fascination, even a “divine-demonic-obsession,”85 with the ultimate depths of reality as moral. And like Ibsen, Dostoevsky is concerned to illuminate the value of the tragic in that reality and how this is borne, Macbeth-like, in the human conscience. Thus, after a dream of the flogging to death of an old horse, Raskolnikov asks, “Can it be starting already, can the reckoning come so soon?”86 This is no mere “laceration of the nerves,” however.87 Rather, here Dostoevsky gives voice to the truth that “whoever has a conscience will no doubt suffer ... That’s his punishment – on top of penal servitude.”88 So in The Brothers Karamazov, he writes, “There is nothing more seductive for man than the freedom of his conscience, but there is nothing more

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82 Fyodor Dostoevsky, Crime and Punishment, trans. R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky (London: Vintage, 1992), 535. Raskolnikov was not the first to confess to the murder, of course. That honor goes to the painter and sectarian, Nikolai Dementiev, who belongs to a sect that believes that it is virtuous to suffer for another person’s crime. So he pronounces: “I’m guilty. The sin is mine! I am the murderer!” Ibid., 351.

83 Ibid., 536.

84 Ibid.


86 Dostoevsky, Crime, 91. All references to Crime refer to the Pevear and Volokhonsky translation. Other translations will be referenced in full.


tormenting for him either.”

While later on Raskolnikov briefly attempts to justify his crime to Sonya by asserting that suffering is merely a consequence of extensive intelligence and a feeling heart, he knows that this is merely an eschewal from the truth of things. So when Sonya tells him that atonement is required for redemption, he receives this word as it is – a revelation into the workings of grace – and so confesses his sin and seeks to bear the accompanying punishment. Sonya here does what Solveig fails to do: call sin “sin.” Raskolnikov becomes convinced that not only must he confess his crime, but that he – he himself – must bear suffering as a means of expiation. He recognises the must of repentance – “burning repentance, that breaks the heart, that drives sleep away, such repentance as torments one into dreaming of the noose or the watery deeps!” – and how it might “herald a future break in his life, his future resurrection.” At one point Raskolnikov blamed fate for not sending him such. But now, as a lover of St John’s Gospel, he knows that the grain of wheat must first fall to the ground and die. His fellow prisoners, who had “all come to love Sonya so much,” were right at this point, “You ought to be killed,” they said. Raskolnikov errs, however, in thinking that this dying is an action that he might perform on himself, a notion reflecting Dostoevsky’s own conviction.

Berdyaev asserts that “Dostoevsky believed firmly in the redemptive and

89 Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, trans. C. McDuff (London: Penguin, 1993), 293. “Man in Dostoevsky’s works, as in Genesis, is a tragic, split creature, excluded from paradise but longing for reconciliation.” Leatherbarrow, Dostoevsky, 36.


92 Dostoevsky, Crime, 544.

93 Ibid., 545.

94 Ibid., 546.

95 In his preliminary notes on Crime and Punishment, Dostoevsky writes: “There is no happiness in comfort; happiness is bought by suffering. Man is not born for happiness. Man earns his happiness and always by suffering. There’s no injustice here, because the knowledge of life and consciousness (that is, that which is felt immediately with your body and spirit, that is, through the whole vital process of life) is acquired by experience pro and contra, which one must take upon one’s self. By suffering, such is the law of our planet, but this immediate awareness, felt with the life process, is such a great joy that one gladly pays with years of suffering for it.” Fyodor Dostoevsky, “Appendix, from The Notebooks for Crime and Punishment,” in Crime and Punishment, trans. C. Garnett (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 2000), 467. This notion reappears in the epigraph of The Brothers Karamazov, preceding John 12:24. Cf. Predrag Cicovacki, “Searching for the Abandoned Soul: Dostoyevsky on the Suffering of Humanity,” in The Enigma of Good and Evil: The Moral Sentiment in Literature, ed. A.-T. Tymieniecka (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), 367-98.
regenerative power of suffering: life is the expiation of sin by suffering.”96 Dostoevsky once confessed to his wife: “God gave you to me so that … I might expiate my own great sins.”97 Certainly, he believed that earthly suffering is purgative, regenerative.98 But as the Epilogue draws to a close it becomes increasingly evident to Raskolnikov that it is not our penance that holiness demands, but our death. Here Dostoyevsky betrays an insight into the workings of holy grace only hinted at in Ibsen. Unlike Raskolnikov, Peer refuses to die, to enter his grave. Thus there can be no “renewed future” or “complete resurrection into a new life,” as Raskolnikov and Sonya know and which gives them hopeful resolve to “wait and endure” the time in Siberia.99 Now, “instead of dialectics, there was life, and something completely different had to work itself out” in Raskolnikov’s consciousness.100 Despite Solveig’s sincerity and patience, she never knows the love and concern of a transformed human being – one who was dead but is now alive – as Sonya does. The Lazarus Raskolnikov worries, his heart “beating heavily and painfully,”101 after Sonya when she is ill. Raskolnikov is transformed from tormenter to tormented, to death, to resurrected lover. Forgiven, he can now love Sonya and embrace the future with her.


98 We must demonstrate care here that we do not read Dostoevsky’s own convictions through the leans of Raskolnikov. For while there is enough evidence in Dostoevsky’s writing to suggest that he may have believed in the unique sin-bearing activity of God in Jesus Christ, what Raskolnikov clearly fails to grasp at this point is the truth that the seeking of redemption via self-atonement – what Forsyth calls our “silly notions of making it up” with God – is an act not of repentance but of the greatest pride. Forsyth, Society, 94. Few, if any, have given clearer voice to the sinfulness of human flesh seeking to establish its own dignity than Luther. See Gerhard O. Forde, On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); Roland Bainton, Here I Stand: Martin Luther (Tring: Lion Publishing, 1987), 82-3.


100 Ibid., 550.

101 Ibid., 548.
RE-ENTRY: THE GRACE OF HOLY LOVE

Raskolnikov and Sonya are given to understand that in the face of cosmic defiance and insurgency, grace cannot stop at repentance and suffering. Grace means death. Grace is not about the resuscitation of one in a moral coma, but about the resurrection of a corpse. Unlike Solveig or Peer, what Sonya and Raskolnikov begin, perhaps, to recognize is that their sin threatens the very existence of the moral order, even of God. Atonement, therefore, is not a question of human happiness through agony. That would make it bearable but not necessary. Neither is it a question of equivalent punishment. Rather, atonement is a “must.” In the face of evil, positive holiness – that is, the holy God – must exert and express himself as “creative reaction” in holy judgment. There is no question here of Raskolnikov’s sin being ignored or swept under the carpet or even somehow absorbed into the moral structure of creation. But neither is it a question of balancing the scales via suffering. Sin can be given no value by God, nor redeemed or reconciled by him. As the infernal contradiction of holiness, sin must be judged, condemned, vanquished and made naught. More morally astute than Ibsen, Dostoevsky, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, identifies that there is one who “took everything that was exceptional, enigmatic and indeterminate, took everything that was beyond people’s capacity to bear.” This judging, condemning and vanquishing is borne not in Raskolnikov but in the “God-man, …‘the only sinless one’ and his blood!”

What Solveig entirely fails to grasp, and Sonya perhaps only barely sees, is that it is holiness rather than compassion that redeems. Indeed, only holiness can do. But holiness is not mere process. Nor could it establish itself via such, nor by natural force. It is action, and it is action that God alone can perform, for only God can “answer Himself and meet the demand of His own holiness.” Holiness must find, prove, and establish itself in creation “by its own nature”; that is, by its gospel. In the face of sin, divine holiness and righteousness is in conflict for its life. In this conflict, God is either “secured or lost to the world for ever.” It took the reconciliation of the world to save Raskolnikov and Peer.

Creation’s destiny, therefore, is bound up with whatever, or whoever, does most justice to God’s holiness. It is, therefore, bound up with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Holiness must so die as to put death to death, thus

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102 Forsyth, *Jesus*, 87.

103 Dostoevsky, *Brothers*, 293.

104 Ibid., 283.


robbing sin of “its chief servant”\(^{109}\) and its power to repel. Holiness is then resurrected, a universe reclaimed, in Jesus Christ. There can be no “easy forgiveness,”\(^{110}\) all things considered. The holy nature of divine love is such that “a holy God could not look on sin without acting on it; nor could He do either but to abhor and curse it, even when His Son was beneath it.”\(^{111}\) It was this Son who called to Lazarus, that embodiment of hope for Raskolnikov, “Rise!”\(^{112}\) Sin is smog, Dostoevsky said, “and the smog will disappear when the sun rises in its power.”\(^{113}\)

The comparison of Peer Gynt and Raskolnikov ought to serve as a warning against the temptation to define God’s love in abstraction from God’s holiness or the economy of God’s work. God is love not because God loves, but because, as Forsyth asserts, “He has power to subdue all things to the holiness of His love, and even sin itself to His love as redeeming grace.”\(^{114}\) God’s love is meaningless unless it goes out in judgment to destroy every enemy of love. To love all is to judge all and subdue all into holiness.

The holy love that defines the perichoretic life of the Triune God has, by the grace of the Father in the action of the incarnate Son and by the mission of the Spirit, overflowed freely towards those outside of God’s community in a simultaneous two-fold movement of divine kenosis and human plerosis in which creatures are graced to enter into the holy communion of love that the Triune God has ever known and spoke creation into being for participation in. Every artist works in this reality, and some are given to see it in part now, even as one day all shall know it fully.

Forsyth observes that the “great dramatists of the day,”\(^{115}\) like Wagner and Ibsen, are able to present us with the problem of guilt due at least partly to their denial of any Hegelian optimism. In this they are not only critics but also poets and theologians.\(^{116}\) Indeed, it is the lack of “moral realism” and “indelible spiri-

\(^{109}\) Ibid., 148.

\(^{110}\) Forsyth, Preaching, 201; Forsyth, Theology, 28.

\(^{111}\) Forsyth, Work, 243.

\(^{112}\) The raising of Lazarus is mentioned seven times in Crime and Punishment, the final time in the context of Raskolnikov’s own “restoration to life.” The only book permitted to Dostoevsky in prison was The Gospels which he kept until his death.


\(^{114}\) Forsyth, Cruciality, 205, 60.

\(^{115}\) Ibid., 105.

\(^{116}\) Ibid., 106. Speaking at Aberdeen University in 1906, Forsyth reflected on his student days saying: “Tones from the solemn masks of the Greek dramatists taught us to vibrate with the shock of man’s collision with fate. We begun to acquire the sense of the world’s tragedy. Shakespeare bore in upon us the connection of tragedy and destiny, the moral nature of doom, the interplay of sin and sorrow … We stood before the old anomaly of life, the pity, the terror, the mystery, the enormity of it all … We learned not only the cosmic problem of the savant, but the moral problem of the sage.” Peter T. Forsyth, “Principal Forsyth on Church and University: A Striking Address,” Aberdeen Free Press (24 September 1906), 11.
tual instincts” in the Church that drives artists like Ibsen and Dostoevsky – even makes them – to “create a poetic symbolism” capable of giving voice to the reality of the human scene.\footnote{117 Forsyth, “Treatment,” 106.} They are also able to point us to a truth that some kind of amnesty and deliverance is indispensable if humanity is to enjoy a future, and even that this calls for some sense of sacrifice, perhaps even death. However, in the final analysis, Forsyth insists, Ibsen and his fellow dramatists of pessimism are unable to reveal to us the true nature of our guilt or give us “what we need most, and at bottom most crave”\footnote{118 Ibid., 106-7.}: not self-extenuation or evolution beyond ourselves, but our regeneration, our reconciliation, our home-coming, which is found not in sacrificial death alone, but only in that of an atoning kind. This only comes in One who really stands on the earth (something Ibsen’s redeemer never does), who moves into our Siberian prisons, and who dies as the Holy securing holiness through an act that simultaneously hallows God’s name in all the earth.

As Forsyth notes, many of Ibsen’s “successors and imitators like Galsworthy and Shaw” are capable of showing us our inconsistencies. Indeed, “any moral amateur can do that.”\footnote{119 Forsyth, “Treatment,” 106.}

Their works do not leave us as even the gory close of a Shakespeare tragedy does, with the sense of something far more deeply interfused and dimly rounding all. We have from them the sound in our ears of the frayed surf grinding on the broken shore, and dusted with the driven sand; but we have not the murmur nor scent of the infinite sea, beating upon these ragged rocks, and meeting their hideous cruelty with something higher than the soft, the shining, and the fair – whose cruelty can be worse than theirs.\footnote{120 Ibid., 106-7.}

Forsyth’s challenge to these poets and playwrights is to arrest something final that has taken place by him whose purity we have soiled, whose love we have despised, whose will we have crossed, and whose holiness we have raped. So, Forsyth insists that Christ’s “first purpose was not Shakesperian – to reveal man to man.” It is higher than that. “The relief that He gives the race is not the artist’s relief of self-expression, but the Saviour’s relief of Redemption. He did not release the pent-up soul, but rebuilt its ruins.”\footnote{121 Forsyth, “Revelation,” 112-3.}

It was neither Galahad nor Arthur that drew Christ from heaven; “it was a Lancelot race.”\footnote{122 Forsyth, Society, 102.} And in the final analysis, neither Ibsen nor his imitators “really get beyond the notion of each man being his own atoner, the notion of a kind of atoning suicide, in a death that satisfied his nemesis but not as holy judgment or Redemption (Rosmersholm), and far less as Reconciliation.”\footnote{123 Forsyth, “Treatment,” 111.} In fairness to Ibsen, he himself admits this lack of resolution in a letter to George Brandes in
1875 when he says, “Don’t urge me, friend, to solve these dark equations; I’d rather ask; my job’s not explanations.” Nevertheless, Forsyth refuses to let him off the hook that easily. Ibsen’s tragedy is true, but not tragic enough, not real enough. Peer is no Raskolnikov, nor Solveig a Sonya. This is because Ibsen lacks knowledge of One who can “create in him the repentance which alone must create personality out of such chaotic material as he [finds]. He [has] the conscience to feel the sin of the world, but not the power of remedy.”

His job may not be about explanations, but it could at least partly be. That is Forsyth’s point. Nevertheless, for the sake of identifying and giving voice to the right questions, Ibsen, and those prophets like him, must be read, and re-read. Theology needs them.

IMMIGRATING: LEARNING FROM APOSTLES, MEETING WITH THE WORLD

In his penetrating book, *Grace and Necessity*, Rowan Williams asks, “What is the world that art takes for granted?” It is an important question, and one with which Christian theologians must engage if we are to understand the relationship between art and creation, and indeed creation (or art) at all. What art does is to help us “understand creation,” not just its physicality but its morality serving to identify and unmask humanism’s determination to downplay moral realism. The other thing that art affirms about creation is its inherent value, not as a rung to something better, or as the arena for life’s rehearsals, but in creation’s utter freedom to delightfully be all that God calls, keeps, and rejoices in it to be. Whilst heaven arches over the earth, it never weighs it down, or crushes or devours it. In Barth’s words, “Earth remains earth, with no need to maintain itself in a titanic revolt against heaven. Granted, darkness, chaos, death, and hell do appear, but not for a moment are they allowed to prevail.”

Forsyth challenges us to question whether Christian theologians are not too often reluctant, contemptuous or simply lacking in confidence in the truth of the gospel to authentically engage with secular literature and art, preferring instead the (deceptively) safe ghetto of a self-created sub-culture in which the discourse – its language and questions – is so set from the inside that it threatens to spiral in on itself. In a time when the Christian community is feeling challenged to identify points of contact between the gospel and the culture (to its own sub-cultures as well as to the world’s) to which and in which it is called to articulate its faith, Forsyth reminds us that artists like Ibsen and Dostoevsky are “a gift of


125 Forsyth, “Treatment,” 121.


127 Ibid., 161.


God to us,” and that we ignore them at our peril. They are, at core, theologians! Perhaps they are not theologians of the Church, but they are certainly theologians to the Church:

Their bitter is a tonic to our time. They are the protest of a self-respecting conscience against an idyllic, juvenile, sanguine, and domestic tyranny of Life. It is the great dramatists that are the great questioners, the great challengers, the great and serviceable accusers of current, easy, and fungous sainthood. It is not the learned critics that present the great challenge which draws out the last resources of a Gospel. They are too intellectualist. It is the great moral critics like Ibsen, Carlyle, and their kind. They lay bare not our errors but our shams.

It is true that Ibsen preaches but a half-gospel and, as we shall see, half-gospels ultimately have no future. However, it is a half we need to hear, especially since it is the half that is omitted so often in the Church’s proclamation. To see the revelation of this front half of the gospel seems to require both feet being in the one place, on earth, and that is where Ibsen stands, albeit he is unable (or unwilling) to look up. If human activity and thought, at its best, reflect something of corporate humanity’s participation in the vicarious ministry of a crucified and risen Christ through the Spirit who gathers up all our questions and tragic groans and offers them to the Father through sanctified lips, then it is imperative that we listen to and learn from today’s prophet-artists – the poets, musicians, sculptors, filmmakers and philosophers – who scratch where people itch – and where they should! We need to remember that the New Testament speaks not only of the kingdom of heaven but also of parables of that kingdom. The work of these prophet-artists is parabolic in its adroitness for articulating ancient theological truths in fresh ways, giving articulate voice to the questions that gnaw at us and to our longings for transcendence. Here reason and empirical engagement alone leave us wanting – indeed dislocated. We need the arts to unveil for us moral realism, “real life in all its discord,” and to show us what drives us to the One who alone is the spring of living water who so satisfies our thirst that we will never be thirsty again. People like Woody Allen, George Steiner, Morrissey, David Williamson, Leonard Cohen, Brett Whiteley, Thich Nhat Hanh, a plethora of Sufi poets, and film directors like Ingmar Bergman, Andrei Tarkovsky, and David Fincher all do this well. In this they serve as what older theologians called ancillae theologiae, handmaidens of the knowledge (word) of God. Many theologians have been guilty of theological obscurantism and of arrogantly ignoring the insights of what Forsyth might call our “schoolmasters.”

130 Forsyth, Preaching, 104.
131 Ibid.
132 Barth, Mozart, 57.
133 Ibid., 33.
134 Forsyth once referred to the secular university as “a schoolmaster to bring us to the world’s Christ and to leave us with no other refuge than the cross.” Forsyth, “Princi-
God’s and the fullness thereof, but also that we live in a world already redeemed, and that is being so.\textsuperscript{135} We have been too slow to hear and receive the eucharistic joy of creation.

Trevor Hart is right to suggest that this suspicion of “weavers of fictions and conjurors of illusions . . . can serve only to detract from the truth rather than to illuminate it.”\textsuperscript{136} Indeed, Forsyth notes that faith without imagination is incomplete, and imagination baseless without faith. “Neither can stand for the other, or do its work.”\textsuperscript{137} Great harm has been done to the Christian faith by neglecting artistic imagination, whether inside or outside the Christian community, and in disregarding such \textit{ancillae theologiae}. There are, encouragingly, many examples of where such positive engagement is taking place, where long-held suspicions are dissolving, where dialogue is mutually edifying, and where art is valued for the contribution it makes “as art” and not simply for how it can be harnessed or “baptised” as a lubricant for what is considered to be of “real” substance, or reduced to a “mere cipher for pre-ordained religious meanings.”\textsuperscript{138} In the past, Bach,\textsuperscript{139} Rembrandt, Tolkien, and, perhaps, Mozart served as prodigious examples of believers whose legs seemed long enough to straddle both worlds without dishonoring the dignity of either. Could not the best sermon ever preached on Luke 15:11-32 be that 1668/69 oil on canvas hanging in The Hermitage in St. Petersburg – Rembrandt’s \textit{The Return of the Prodigal Son}? And today, many others are also engaged in this courageous quest and tradition. Alfonse Borysewicz, Robert Cording, Makoto Fujimura, Mark Jarman, Les Murray, and Michael Symmons Roberts serve as admirable exemplars.

\textit{MONITIONEM: HALF-GOSPELS}

To rest here, though, would be to fail to tell the whole story. Worse, merely “listening” to culture would be placing us in danger of selling out the gospel and its “creative, self-organising, and self-recuperative power”\textsuperscript{140} to a culture that “asks but a half-gospel.”\textsuperscript{141} At its worst, it would be a sell-out to a culture that needs not simply improvement or completion, but judgment and redemption; not fulfillment of its perceived needs, but the forgiveness of its sins. At its best, it

\footnotesize{pal Forsyth on Church and University,” 11.

135 Ps. 24:1; Jn. 16:33. This does not mean the cessation of the need for discernment. Cf. 1 Cor. 10:23-31.


138 Pattison, \textit{Art}, 98.


141 Forsyth, \textit{Preaching}, 89.}
would be to sell out to a culture which bears the cross, supping its sorrow, but sees no Resurrection. As Forsyth describes Rossetti, “He was familiar with the Angel of Death; but he did not see the Angel of the Resurrection ever close behind.”

In light of the ugliness, and hidden beauty, of the Christian gospel, Eberhard Jüngel warns that “beauty and art are both welcome and dangerous competitors with the Christian kerygma, for in the beautiful appearance they anticipate that which faith has to declare, without any beautiful appearance and indeed in contrast to it: namely, the hour of truth.” Ibsen too wants to challenge culture. But “the light must come from the fire, not the fire from the light.” We must do more than speak society’s gospel back to itself baptised in Christian patois. “It is only the language of the Age that we must speak, not its Gospel.”

The Christian community must, of course, meet the world. But when we do so we must do more than merely greet it and pose an invitation. A crisis has to be forced, a crisis of the will, a confrontation of will and Will, of conscience and Conscience. And it is a crisis that ends in both the world and the Church being subdued, reconciled and redeemed. More than an invitation, the gospel is a command and an announcement. “We are tempted to forget,” Forsyth says, “that we have not, in the first place, either to impress the world or to save it, but heartily and mightily to confess in word and deed a Saviour who has done both.” “Half-gospels have no dignity, and no future,” Forsyth says. “Like the famous mule, they have neither pride of ancestry nor hope of posterity. We must make it clear that Christianity faces the world with terms, and does not simply suffuse it with a glow; that it crucifies the world, and does not merely consecrate it; that it recreates and does not just soothe or cheer it; that it is life from the dead, and not simply bracing for the weak or comfort for the sad.”

**ACT 10: PURSUED BY A BEAR ... [ENTER] SHEPHERD**

Roy Attwood befittingly reminds us that the Creator of aesthetics calls his image bearers to be busy doing faithful aesthetic acts: “While the world may be busy pursuing ‘art for art’s sake’ or treating aesthetics like it rested on the bottom of the food chain, Christians should adorn their lives, their homes, their worship with humble acts of aesthetic faithfulness because they know the Creator and

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Lord of Aesthetics delights in them.”149 In God’s first act of creation, God gave those who bear his image the capacity to also be creators, to offer back to God – everlasting – faithful, and new, aesthetic acts for God’s glory and for the delight of our fellow creatures. From the very beginning, the Lord of Aesthetics called humanity to be busy aesthetically. This is our sacramental activity. But it awaited the ultimate revelation of God’s creativity, which concerned not the calling forth of creation in an act of creative love but in calling it back as a new creation in grace, to give art its true meaning. In him who is the Sacrament of God, Nature’s sacramentality is given its proper dignity and vocation.

Artists like Ibsen and Dostoevsky matter, not because they point upwards, nor because the creation has been inhabited by God, but because creation has been pursued by him, and redeemed by him, in God’s most creative and tragic act. “The real incarnation is not in Christ’s being made flesh for us, but in His being made sin for us!”150 Only a Cross can make sense of an Incarnation. And only that which, above all, hallows God’s name in the creation, enthrones God’s holy love and “destroys guilt in grace”151 can provide any stable footing for society, for the arts, or for communities of faith.

Forsyth is convinced that the Cross is where “all earth’s hues are not mere tints but jewels – not mere purpureal gleams, but enduring, precious foundation-stones.”152 And he invites us to consider artists like Ibsen and Dostoevsky as such stones. Far from them being external and mechanical products that God could destroy and remake, God has so created that the very existence and certain future of these apostles, their word and their world, is intractably and eternally bound up with God’s own life and joy. The creation is considerably more than merely God’s property. It is God’s eternal delight and the communication partner of God’s redemptive love. It is this loving divine will that forms the basis for the affirmation of creation’s questions, materiality, and cultures, and justifies the Church’s mission in the world.

Art and sacrament, nature and grace, find their proper locus and voice only in the loving will and costly action of the Triune God in whom all creation lives, moves and finds itself. The divine secret, therefore, is neither with the philosopher nor with the poet-prophet.153 And so whereas Ibsen can only identify the problem, Forsyth and Dostoevsky point us to Christ – the one Sacrament and Mediator between God and humanity. We would certainly be fools not to listen to and learn


150 Forsyth, Jesus, 25.

151 Forsyth, Justification, 107.

152 Ibid., 47.

153 Forsyth, Justification, 139. I am not here suggesting that we abandon philosophical enquiry. Nor am I suggesting that we adopt Sallie McFague’s idea that to do theology poetically means that we must conceive of Scripture not as a revelation of historical facts and theo-historical truth, but as mere human metaphor describing the divine-human relationship. Sallie McFague, Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language (London: SCM Press, 1983).
from Ibsen and his ilk. But whereas in Ibsen we see a longing for home, only Forsyth’s gospel of blood-soaked grace can finally carry us there, and there to us.

The practical solution of life by the soul is outside life. The destiny of experience is beyond itself. The lines of life’s moral movement and of thought’s nisus converge in a point beyond life and history. The key is in the Beyond; though not necessarily beyond death, but beyond the world of the obvious, and palpable, and common-sensible. (Yea, beyond the inward it really is.)  

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154 Ibid., 212, 213.
How sweet the taste of wax when it’s blessed with honey. Though we seldom mistake it for God, we speculate. A hive might figure the intricate divine. This you can chew,

and abstraction, too. The exhausting world up there, beyond our petty spaces that buzz with pleasure. High over a cache of nimbus clouds, a spritz of cosmos, we find blanks to fill in.

The grass gets called god. The weather gets named as well, or credited to the faithful who prayed a potluck into sunlight. A well-baked pie can be heavenly (not heaven), divine (not divinity, another sweet).

Once inside the sacred body of another, or having let a lover in, we might say amen. We mean this, too, though not believing our unions last forever, selah. Such undulating gods lapse.

Revive us again from suggestion, a myriad wonders we call and fail to call God. Better work: to laugh or worry, the worry that wears a threadbare spot on the pocket of loved jeans, over time. See now? Worn denim becomes the means to smooth a god into our conversation (true as any considered hive). Laugh and fret at our many-honeyed, blank skies, our pockets falling off, bleached bland and emptied of risk.

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A friend recently made a confession about our ministry that, frankly, startled me. She said she enjoyed the simple, contemporary music of our worship gatherings, but she found the dinginess of our windowless meeting space a bit distracting. My friend had joined our small, motley ecumenical group on occasional Sunday afternoons for informal, “emergent” worship gatherings, featuring low-key choruses and simple hymns, a conversational sermon style and a contemplative communion celebration. We have been meeting in the Flywheel, a non-profit arts collective in a largely working-class town in western Massachusetts where many aspire to be hip.

I don’t mean to criticize my friend’s discomfort. Indeed, even as a music leader who shares responsibility in setting the tone of the worship experience, I have felt a bit disconcerted at times in this non-conventional setting. On Sunday mornings, my wife Leah and I attend Grace Episcopal Church where we have been members for nearly five years. We were married there in a lovely ceremony seasoned with bagpipes and the sublime pipe organ tones of “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring.” Grace Episcopal is the grey gothic church on the town common, with a rich heritage in an historic college town. I grew up in Southern Baptist churches, but fell in love with Anglican liturgy during college. The decisive moment occurred when I took communion in a small church, gazed at the stained glass behind the altar and was buoyed to a spiritual high by a wall of antiphonal choir music enfolding me. My wife and I were both confirmed as Episcopalians in adulthood.

The Flywheel, by contrast, was not designed as the optimal space for celebrating the Eucharist. More typically for this place, teenagers and young adults from various “alternative” cultures ( punks, Goths, anarchists, etc.) congregate in this funky, but quaint, spot to hear local bands or display original artwork. The Flywheel adjoins a chiropractor’s office and more resembles a den attached to a carpeted garage than a typical concert venue. The front room sports some well-worn furniture, a coffee bar, an upright piano with the ivory peeling from the keys, and shelves of books, newspapers, and “zines” covering the gamut of left-wing politics and culture; it was kind of how I would envision a living room for a Green Party commune. The inner room, where we worship, is a performance space with a low ceiling, greenish carpeting, black walls, and silvery tinsel dangling from the ceiling. Volunteers with the collective have worked diligently to create a hospitable and safe space for free expression. Tidiness, however, in a space where various groups come and go, is not the preeminent aesthetic virtue. Moreover, within a culture that is attentive to the bad press some Christians generate today, members of the collective have been extremely hospitable and gracious to us in making us at home and in renting the space to us for a pittance.
When our group worships at the Flywheel, we pull the couches forward and deck a black table—with one precarious leg—with a tablecloth and icons (sorry, no candles allowed). We don’t start or finish on time; people wander in and out; there are occasional false starts in the music (due primarily to my own limitations). I do cherish it, as I believe others do, and know that God has blessed these gatherings. But by any conventional standards, these services are not pretty. You might now expect me to say that these services are beautiful in their quaint, earthy authenticity, especially compared to the more staid and traditional services we attend Sunday morning. Not quite. Rather, I would say, both the traditional morning service in the parish church, with the vestments and full choir, and our Flywheel experience are, in some linked way, both profoundly ugly. In fact, our attempts to praise and thank God in corporate worship are unseemly and inauthentic, not because of their aesthetic qualities or lack thereof, but simply because that is the state of our common human nature after the Fall. Whenever two or three are gathered, whether it be at St. Peter’s Basilica or in some snake-handling Pentecostal revival meeting, human beings are masking their real neediness and depravity with the cloak of piety. And yet, on the other hand, our worship truly is radiant, blessed, and pleasing in heaven, but this profound beauty is hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3).

How might we as theologians, pastors, seminarians, and church leaders sketch a theological aesthetics of worship? In my view, such an aesthetics must be radically christological; that is, our reflections upon the beauty of liturgy must follow an incarnational logic. (I once heard a minister claim that a $16,000 grand piano in an intimate worship space exhibits the “incarnational” spirit of the Anglican heritage. While I crave hearing and playing such instruments, I am most emphatically interpreting the Incarnation a bit differently.) The beauty of worship, I offer, is an alien splendor, closely akin to the alien righteousness we have in Jesus Christ (Luther).

In a provocative discussion of the beauty of God in Christ, Karl Barth issues a stern, perhaps overly harsh warning to Christian artists who would attempt to portray the face of Jesus. As he does in many other places, Barth affirms that Jesus, the eternal Son of God incarnate, is the full manifestation of God’s resplendent beauty, but only under the veil of the fallen nature he has assumed and, preeminently, in the humiliation of the cross.¹ Thus, he writes:

> And this is the crux of every attempt to portray this face, the secret of the sorry story of the representation of Christ. It could not and cannot be anything but a sorry story. No human should try to represent – in their unity – the suffering God and triumphant man, the beauty of God which is the beauty of Jesus Christ.²

From this follows an injunction:

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¹ Barth’s reflections on the beauty of God occur in the context of a broader discussion of the divine glory. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, trans. T.H.L. Parker and W.B. Johnston, H. Knight, and J.L.M. Hare (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 658-666.
² Ibid., 666.
If at the present we have one urgent request to all Christian artists, however well-intentioned, gifted or even possessed of genius, it is that they should give up this unholy undertaking – for the sake of God’s beauty. This picture, the one true picture, both in object and representation, cannot be copied, for the express reason that it speaks for itself, even in its beauty.  

To follow Barth’s logic, God’s beauty is paradoxically revealed and hidden concomitantly in the life, and especially in the death, of the Son. In Christ, God has condescended to embrace fully the brokenness and ambiguity of an alienated human existence. Barth rejects a theology of glory that would seek to perceive Christ’s divine blessedness within human perfections, virtues and beauty. Like Luther, Barth renders a christological interpretation to the description of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53:2: “[H]e had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him” (NRSV). The divine splendor and power of attraction manifest in the broken humanity on the cross is in no way self-evident. Divine beauty embraces not only life, joy and beauty but also death, dread and ugliness.

In my view, Barth’s Reformed iconoclasm, apropos of artistic portraits of Jesus, misses the mark a bit. Still, his central theological claim stands, and it is pertinent to the foregoing reflections upon the subversive aesthetics of worship. Christians inevitably do image the humanity of Christ (indeed, in some sense, everyone does); one of the preeminent realities where we do so is in our faltering attempts to praise and glorify the God who has blessed us so richly. Christian worship, both at its best and at its worst, serves to draw us more deeply into the scandalous communion with the crucified and risen One. For this period between the two advents, the true beauty of our worship remains hidden with the ascended Christ in a glorified and spotless humanity that awaits its full disclosure when Jesus returns. In the meantime, we have to take it on faith that God’s delight and joy radiates secretly and mysteriously under the guise of often joyless noises and dingy houses of worship. Indeed, it is especially crucial today—as many within both the “oldline” and evangelical churches seem to be careening out of control in an increasingly post-Christian age—that we seek to worship the triune God in marginal, uncomfortable, even unbeautiful places. The Holy Spirit promises to greet us afresh in such unexpected locations, for “the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isaiah 6:3, NRSV).

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3 Ibid.

After solving the Gadarene Swine, The Freudian Hermeneuts Attend to the Fig Tree

David Wright

Far from being hungry and disappointed, Jesus merely hated figs. Mary forced them on him—tasteless, unripe, starchy—with boiled water to drink. Bitter he could have handled, but these stuck in his throat for years, though he knew it was merely what the family could afford. So this chance encounter with an order of ficus, trunk thick as a man’s thigh, proved cathartic. No withered kingdom, no fruitless metaphor at all. Just better than an eye put out in blinding rage.

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I recently had the privilege of attending the annual meeting for my local church’s conference. The theme for the weekend was worship and the arts. Throughout the weekend attendees lamented that our reformed tradition has left us impoverished regarding the use of visual arts in worship in particular, but also the arts more broadly understood. We confessed our past constraint of creativity and committed ourselves to the task of developing more artistic liturgies for our churches. Unfortunately, there was no sustained dialogue as to the proper role or function of art within the liturgical context. I think most would concur with Frank Brown’s conclusion that “not all kinds of good art and music are equally good for worship, let alone for every tradition or faith community. In terms of worship, therefore, it is not enough that a work or style of art be likeable; it must also be appropriate.” This calls for serious thinking about what the appropriate and inappropriate uses of art in worship might in fact be. As the quote makes clear, answers to this question may vary in particulars from tradition to tradition. What counts as appropriate will depend in large part upon the traditions of the local faith communities in which the question is asked.

That said, might there not be some common understanding from which the local instantiations are derived? Is there some way of broadly answering the question: how is art used appropriately in worship? In framing the question in this way I have already hinted at my answer. I intend to argue that art (in a liturgical context) should in fact be understood and used in service to the liturgy. This involves, in the main, that art be appropriate not only to the given liturgical act which it supports but indeed to the whole liturgy.

Liturgical art is at its best when it aids in the work or service (the actions) of the liturgy. On a grammatical level this seems obvious. We are talking about liturgical art after all. On a broader scale, however, this notion flies in the face of current Western conventions for thinking about art. I say current because


2 Liturgy here should not be understood narrowly. It is the service. Thus, the comments made in this essay are meant to apply across the entire breadth of the Christian tradition. The word liturgy is simply a transliteration of the Greek word leitourgia, meaning public service. Various acts of the liturgy include confession, praise, thanksgiving, and so forth. See Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Thinking about Church Music,” in Music in Christian Worship: At the Service of Liturgy, ed. Charlotte Kroeker (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), 9.

3 For an extensive treatment of the flaw in this perception as well as the history of the development of the institution of high art see Nicholas Wolterstorff, Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1980), 19-61.
it is only since the Enlightenment in the West that these particular conventions have held sway. Art (good art anyway), we are told, does not have any function except its own contemplation. In contrast to this narrow understanding, Nicholas Wolterstorff suggests an instrumental view of art. Contemplation for its own sake is simply one among many functions of art. He writes: “Thus works of art are what we might call *instruments* in the performance of generated actions; alternatively expressed, they *function in* our performance of generated actions.” To put it simply, art helps us do things.\(^5\) This has been the case in the church since its inception. Through the centuries, it has largely been with the help of music (accompanied and unaccompanied) that the church has performed its liturgy. But this is certainly not the only medium that is or has been used. The art and architecture of the worship space (usually a building) itself functions as the setting of the whole liturgy. As many of us have experienced, liturgical art can either support or detract from the service. It can be appropriate or inappropriate and either to a lesser or greater extent. But what do we mean when we point to something as appropriate or not? What can guide our judgment beyond personal taste?

Wolterstorff develops what I have heretofore mentioned in terms of appropriateness under the term fittingness. The easiest way to get at this concept is through some examples. Consider these lines:

When asked, usually people say the first line fits better with restlessness and the latter line with tranquility. The same results are achieved with a horizontal line (restlessness) and a vertical line (tranquility). Or further, consider the pair stomping/leaping. Which fits better with “Hi diddle diddle?” Which fits with “Fee fi fo fum?” Of course, “Fee fi fo fum” fits with stomping and “Hi diddle diddle” fits with leaping, right?\(^6\) Or for a musical analogy, is it not the case that the interval of an octave (or a fifth) fits better with rest and the interval of a seventh (or second) fits better with tension? Or consider the fittingness of certain colors: making use of the horizontal and vertical lines again, which fits better with the color red and which fits better with the color green? Most would pair red with the vertical line and green with the horizontal line.\(^7\) In all these examples a judgment of fittingness is made between qualities or complexes of qualities. This is a relation that comes in degrees. Thus, something can fit better or worse.\(^8\) The objection can

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\(^4\) Ibid, 14.

\(^5\) It is beyond the purview of this essay to outline these other functions of art. See ibid, 8.

\(^6\) Ibid, 97.

\(^7\) Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Thinking about Church Music,” 13.

\(^8\) Wolterstorff calls this relationship “cross-modal similarity.” A “modality” is his term for the relationship between two poles (usually antonyms, but not necessarily), such that \(x\) is \(\Phi\)-er than \(y\) and \(y\) is \(\Psi\)-er than \(x\). For example, taking large and small as
be raised: to what extent is fittingness the result of enculturation? Wolterstorff’s reply is, very little. While there is not space to supply his argument, he grounds his claim in the research of several modern psychological studies which find that there are three loci of fittingness: preferability, potency, activity. He then goes on to support the further claim that these relations of fittingness are to a great extent objective (except those of preferability). Given the limited nature and scope of this project, we will assume that he succeeds in supporting these claims.

While Wolterstorff draws several different points of application, the relevant one for our purposes is that “there can be fittingness, intentional or otherwise, between the character of works of art and a variety of human actions.” The implication for our context is that fittingness can exist between some work of art, a hymn for example, and a given action performed in the liturgy, for instance praise to God. But what makes this relation a better rather than worse one? To put it directly in our context, how does it serve the liturgy and thereby improve the liturgy rather than detract from it? There are three things we can suggest here. First, a fitting work of art will enable the particular action of the liturgy (or the liturgy as a whole) to be performed with clarity. To put it negatively, a fitting work of art will not obscure the liturgical act. Second, a fitting work of art will not distract from the liturgical action by calling attention to itself or its performance. Third, it should not make the liturgical act difficult or awkward to perform regardless of any other merits it may have. When these three suggestions are fulfilled, we can speak of the art as fitting or appropriate for liturgical use. But this is only to speak of liturgical art and not good liturgical art. I make this distinction for conceptual clarity only because to ask the normative question is outside our current bounds. A further point of clarification is also required. Until now I have spoken of fittingness mainly with respect to singular liturgical acts within the liturgy and only hinted at the concept with respect to the liturgy as a unified whole. It is fittingness with respect to the latter that is of utmost relevance. A work of art may be fitting with an isolated act of the liturgy, but several of these put together may lack a unified fittingness that proves incongruous or jarring. Thus, we can see that it is unified fittingness that we are ultimately seeking with respect to art and the liturgy.

Before closing, I would like to draw out a few practical implications. First, good art does not necessarily make fitting liturgical art, even if it is religious in

our pair, x is larger than y is in an inverse relationship to y is smaller than x. Or, using loud and soft, x₁ is louder than y₁ stands in an inverse relationship to y₁ is softer than x₁. Thus, there is “intra-modal similarity” to the degree x and y are similar. But, as the examples above show, there is also “cross-modal similarity.” Therefore, x’s ‘being larger than’ is more similar to x₁’s ‘being louder than’ than to y₁’s ‘being softer than’ (to which y’s ‘being smaller than’ is more similar). Fittingness, as found in the examples above, thus describes this cross-modal similarity. See Nicholas Wolterstorff, Art in Action, 98-99.

11 Ibid, 185-86.
orientation. Even religious art can draw us away or distract from the liturgy. Second, we can affirm that no medium is *a priori* excluded from use in the liturgy. It is the liturgy itself rather than the medium that constrains our use of art. Third, reflective use of liturgical art should push us to better understand our liturgies. How else will fittingness be determined unless we know what kinds of actions we are performing and why? Furthermore, use of appropriate or fitting art in the liturgy should prod us toward a greater correspondence between word and act throughout the service. Finally, works of liturgical art will be as diverse and varied as the liturgies they serve.

In the end, we have seen that art in worship should be seen as being in service to the liturgy. We found that art appropriate to this task would be art that is fitting. We found this to be art that through its fittingness with an act in the liturgy would in fact be useful in assisting its performance rather than obscuring or distracting from the liturgical act. Ultimately, this fittingness should be considered from the perspective of the liturgy as a whole. Finally, we examined some practical implications that could be drawn from this perspective. In closing, in using a rich diversity of art in worship, we joyfully affirm our vocation of responsible service as fully embodied creatures before God.

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As a Reformed theologian, I agree that all art is frivolous; however, as an artist, I believe that the process of artmaking is never frivolous. Whether or not the artist intentionally creates a religious piece, by creating, the artist is invited to imitate the God of all creation:

In the beginning was creativity,
and the creativity was with God,
and the creativity was God.
All things came into being through the mystery of creativity;
apart from creativity nothing would have come into being.¹

As Kaufman’s retranslation of John 1:1 emphasizes, it is through the creative power of the incarnation that God has chosen to be with humanity, which allows us to become witnesses to God’s creativity through the process of artmaking.² The focus upon artmaking in postmodern and experiential art has emphasized the process instead of the product, allowing art to become worship.

The creation account in Genesis shows that God is involved with creation through artmaking: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” (Genesis 1:1). God also works as a sculptor forming ad’am from clay and breathing energy into him (Genesis 3). Like an artist before a lump of clay or an empty canvas, God began by envisioning creation and ordering the formless void through God’s creative spirit. By breathing life into ad’am, God’s creativity extends even beyond the sixth day, and invites humanity to respond and bear witness to the God of creation through artmaking. By emphasizing the process over the product, I am able to acknowledge that the artwork produced is frivolous, while artmaking becomes an essential aspect of worship.

The Purpose of Artmaking

Postmodern art criticism acknowledges that there is no absolute or universal interpretation, an understanding that has influenced me along with many contemporary artists. This approach frees my artistic expression because it validates the belief that artmaking is not finished when the pencil is set down; the artist’s conceptualization and intention are not the final interpretation. Instead, artmak-

¹ Gordon D. Kaufman, In the Beginning...Creativity (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 71.

² I use artmaking to reference the threefold process of conceptualization, performance and interpretation in the creation of art. It contrasts with artwork, which is the particular product produced during the performance aspect of artmaking.
ing provides artists—and those who enjoy art—with an invitation to worship. Worship is our response of praise for what God has done and will do. Artmaking invites us not to understand but to experience because it emphasizes process over product.

Modern art’s attempt to create unidentifiable subjects, such as Jackson Pollock’s splatter paintings, causes one to wrestle with how to conceive of art’s purpose. In one scene of the movie Pollock, the film director attempts to videotape Pollock in the midst of his artistic performance. Seeking the perfect angle, the director continuously intervenes, which disrupts and distracts Pollock. These unnatural breaks irritate Pollock because it interrupts the intimate dance between him, the paint, and the canvas. He gets lost in the process of artmaking. The value of art is found not in the implicit or explicit messages represented, but in the worshipful experience of the artist and the invitation for individual viewers to discover glimpses of the God of creation who orders chaos.

By viewing the process of artmaking as an ongoing event of interpretation, one is able to approach artwork dynamically in a way that is imitative of God’s dynamism. God is not static and isolated from the world, but has chosen to become human in order to be intimately involved with God’s creation. The process of artmaking, then, becomes our response to this involvement because it demonstrates that art is an imitation of God’s creativity. Idolatry results when the products become the focus of our worship, rather than viewing them as imitation. All artwork, however, is an act of imitation and illusion: pigments upon a two dimensional plane imply a three dimensional subject. Like language, artistic representation is limited by human expression. Therefore, since art cannot fully depict the subject, the purpose is found not in the artwork but in the artist’s pursuit to depict truth.

Often art is labeled “good” if it has an obvious message that is easily accessible to the viewer. This label is insufficient, however, because the objective of art is not didactic but revelatory, by disclosing an imitative witness to God’s creativity. Hazelton writes, “The purpose of art is not to inform or instruct, but to disclose; and this is more, not less, true of the arts of the church.” This is especially true within Christian art, because the artist’s intention is to respond to the fullness of God. It becomes necessary to use allegorical language to express who God is, because implicit in an allegory is not only an affirmation but also a negation. Art has a similar allegorical function. Pablo Picasso says, “Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth.” Therefore, art is not a didactic tool, but a human expression of worship that witnesses to the truth of God’s creativity.

3 It is essential here to reiterate the difference between artmaking and artwork, because this may lead to a misinterpretation. Worship is not directed towards the product; that would be idolatrous. Rather, it is worshipful only as an experiential process of conceptualization, production, and interpretation that points the artist towards God.


5 As quoted in ibid, 16.
THE PROCESS OF ARTMAKING

When I approach a blank canvas, I believe that I am offered an opportunity to worship God through imitating the work of the God of creation. This process is the threefold process that I have called *artmaking*: first, it is the creative conceptualization of an image; second, it is the attempt to create that image; third, it is the resulting interpretation of the *artwork* by the artist and viewers. By viewing all three aspects as the process of *artmaking*, artists are able to experience the richness and freedom of creativity. In third grade an art teacher taught me “there are no mistakes in art.” Even inadvertent lines or tears in the canvas are not mistakes but part of the experience of *artmaking*. These words have helped release me from the unrealistic goal of perfection and have given me the freedom to enjoy *artmaking* as a way for God to connect to humanity, because God transforms imperfections into masterpieces.

While in college, I watched four Tibetan Monks spend a week building an amazingly intricate sand sculpture. After developing an exquisite piece of *artwork*, the monks took the sculpture to a nearby lake and allowed the wind to destroy it. Allowing the wind to redistribute the *artwork* shows that even in the *artwork*’s destruction the process of *artmaking* continues. The priority is placed upon the spiritual aspect, which makes the product inconsequential. The Monks’ process embraced the threefold process, because by scattering their medium, they emphasize the cyclical and endless nature of *artmaking*.

The continuousness of *artmaking* allows for it to become a form of play: “playing has no goal that brings it to an end; rather, it renews itself in constant repetition.” The act of play is an important aspect of humanity that may provide an explanation to George Thompson’s question, “why do poets crave for the impossible?” By diminishing the importance of a finished product, *artmaking* does not seek an end. Rather, it responds to the constant invitation to play that God extends to us. Artists crave for the impossible because *artmaking* is a form of play that allows humanity to worshipfully imitate their Creator.

While all products of art are frivolous, *artmaking* is an essential form of worship. Even the most inconsequential forms of *artmaking*, such as sketching and doodling, provide opportunities for the artist to respond to God. If the doodles never formulate themselves into masterpieces, they are not frivolous. Sketches and doodles help to develop and guide the artist to deeper creative levels, which allow for a richer appreciation of God. In fact, these small expressions are releases of creativity that invite the artist to play. As a result, the playfulness of *artmaking* should be a relaxing release that is not intent upon producing a singular and didactic message. This release points to the freedom of God’s creativity, which encourages us to create, and thereby invites us to worship.

Within my own *artmaking* experiences, it was when I found myself released from the pressure to create formulaic, Christian art that I discovered the freedom

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7 This would result in propaganda art that seeks to deceive the viewer by using an allegorical medium to convey a singular message.
of artmaking as a playful response to God. This has allowed me to experience artmaking as an act of worship. While God is the only creator ex nihilo, God’s intimate involvement with creation through Jesus Christ has given us an opportunity to respond through the playful and worshipful act of artmaking. When I stand before an empty canvas with a charcoal stick in my hand, I am no longer intimidated by the challenge to perform, for I remember that God has freed me to play and create. Therefore, doodle and sketch, paint and sculpt, dance, sing, create, for we have been set free by the God of creation who whispers to us, “there are no mistakes in art.”

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BOOK REVIEWS


“Herder’s significance for those theologians who came after him can scarcely be rated highly enough. . . he was the first to discover in a convincing manner a way of making a theology possible which was able to bypass Kant.” (Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the 19th Century*, New Edition, p. 302.)

Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) is a figure to whom many readers of the PTR most likely need an introduction. Herder is one of the more underappreciated figures in modern philosophy, often receiving only scant coverage in introductory works. A student of the early (pre-critical) Kant, the short list of those upon whom he exerted weighty influence includes Schleiermacher, Hegel, Goethe, and Nietzsche. He made fundamental contributions to the fields of linguistics, hermeneutics, anthropology, and even the study of Hebrew poetry. Any understanding of the shape of German philosophy in the 19th century that does not take account of his influence does so only to its impoverishment.

Herder’s work was eclipsed by the very figures which he influenced and even more so by the later work of his teacher, Kant. It is thus with little surprise that his contributions to the field of aesthetics have attracted little attention outside of the German-speaking world. But Herder’s aesthetic thought represents a key moment in modern aesthetics, coming as it does before the completion of Kant’s project of critical philosophy and his consideration of aesthetics in the Third Critique (1790). Thus consideration of his work is important for students of the history of philosophy and of the interface of theology and philosophy in the modern period.

This translation and compilation of several of Herder’s key texts on aesthetics, by Gregory Moore, Lecturer at the University of St. Andrews, is a welcome addition to the available translations of Herder’s work. Indeed, of the several articles and essays contained in this volume, only one, *Shakespeare*, has appeared previously in English. Most notably, the bulk of this volume consists of the first and the fourth of Herder’s *Critical Forests* [Kritische Wälder], texts that are not only central to Herder’s aesthetic thought, but which can prove rather difficult to find even in the original German.

The selection of texts in this volume, which date from 1766-1787, demonstrate clearly the originality of Herder and his place as a central figure in the transition from Enlightenment to Idealism. Herder’s consideration of phenomenon and judgement in the *First Grove* and its further development in the *Fourth Grove*, prefigure the first edition of Kant’s First Critique by twelve years. And furthermore, his reflection on language throughout this volume, in which he ties language and thought together, is an example of the “turn to language” which
would not be made in Analytic Philosophy for nearly another 150 years in the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein (and Herder does so in an arguably superior fashion). Herder’s philosophy of language is especially important in the development of the hermeneutic thought of Schleiermacher, Dilthey and Gadamer.

In the First Grove, Herder engages in a lengthy dialogue based upon Lessing’s Laocoön, a classic text in the history of German aesthetics. Like Lessing, Herder’s concern is the relationship between painting and poetry, and here he seeks to move beyond Lessing and improve on his differentiation between the two. The text abounds with discussions of classical poetry, theatre, mythology, and their depiction in classical and renaissance art. Herder’s discussions include frequent reference to major aestheticians of his day, whom he both criticises and praises, playing them off each other as he subtly reveals to the reader his own view. The result is a difficult but rewarding read in which one is lead through a series of arguments about the nature of and distinction between the different forms of art – viz. how and what they communicate. He traces the different ways that practitioners of visual and literary arts develop their characters and use signs and symbols to communicate.

Herder revises his semiotic theories in the Fourth Grove (which due to his dissatisfaction was never published in his lifetime). Like the First Grove, this work also takes the form of a dialogue with contemporary texts. This time his major conversation partner is Riedel’s Theory of the Beaux Arts and Belles Lettres. In this work, Herder pays stricter attention to how our senses shape our perception of the world. Herder’s focus is on what he terms the “higher senses,” i.e. sight, touch, and hearing, how these sense experiences are processed and conceptualized, and how judgements are made concerning beauty and truth. Herder begins to develop a theory of art, in which he defines the different mediums; painting, sculpture, music (largely ignored in the First Grove) and poetry are all considered. Poetry, “the music of the soul,” is determined to be the superior form of art with its ability to make alive what a painting or sculpture can only trap in the moment: “whatever is called life and charm and action—this poetry has absorbed; this poetry has intellectually transplanted into its essence, into its expression… Queen of all the ideas raised in all the senses! Meeting place of the magic of all arts!” (p. 287). Students of Romanticism, which appears only a generation later, can clearly see the influence which Herder exhibits upon the work of figures like the Schlegels and Novalis.

The other texts in this volume take up various themes (Language, Literature, Wissenschaft vs. Geisteswissenschaft, Music, etc.) and serve to further illustrate the sources and development of Herder’s thought. Furthermore, Herder’s work abounds with discussions of classical literature and art and will be of interest to readers concerned with the interpretation and reception of Greek and Roman theatre, as well as classical writers such as Homer and Virgil.

The only criticism I have of this volume is its incredibly awkward editorial apparatus. The footnotes in the text are those of Herder himself, or citations of texts he references. The editorial notes, which are excellent in content throughout, come in the form of endnotes, always a negative feature in an academic vol-
ume. But in this case the result is much worse. There is nothing in the text itself which points the reader to the editorial notes (without the table of contents one would not know they exist), and there is no heading referring to the page numbers to which the notes pertain. The reader has to find the section of notes for the text being read, and then search through pages of notes looking for the phrase in question to see if there is perhaps an editorial note – a time consuming and infuriating task. This is hopefully a feature that PUP will not repeat in the future.

This aside, Selected Writings on Aesthetics is a most welcome contribution. It should be read by those concerned with the development of philosophy and/or theology from the mid-18th through the 20th Century.

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Some people may find it difficult to make a connection between theology and the arts. In certain ecclesiastical traditions theology is the “Queen of the Sciences,” and the arts are seen as secular and distant from sacred things. Bridging this perceived gulf and developing an integrated vision of these two essential disciplines requires much effort. In order to help us answer questions like, “How do we think about art theologically?” and “What authentic connections can be made between the two?” Stone and Duke’s book How to Think Theologically comes as a welcome publication. While not a book that deals directly with the issue of art and theology, it offers help in the development of integrated theological thought on a number of topics. In the preface, the authors state, “all Christians are theologians.” If this is the case, then how does one think theologically and go about constructing one’s own theological framework? Indeed, if one is to think theologically about the arts, then this is a question that contains great relevance and one to which this book gives direct consideration.

The second edition of How to Think Theologically offers readers a slightly updated and expanded version of the first edition that professors Stone and Duke of Brite Divinity School released in 1996. The changes are not tremendously significant, although expanding one chapter, honing some of the “diagnostic exercises,” which helps focus theological reflection in several chapters, and adding a “For Further Reading” list along with an expanded bibliography do enhance the book’s overall value.

The greatest value of this slender volume is in its first four chapters where the authors introduce core building blocks for the development of theological thought. In these chapters they help readers discover the difference between embedded theology and deliberative theology. Embedded theology is that we construct in an almost unconscious way through formative experiences and church traditions as opposed to a more conscious consideration of theological concepts.
and their merit. In the following chapters, they help readers to identify resources for doing theology. Here they emphasize the Wesleyan (or Methodist) quadrilateral, which includes four components as key resources for developing a template for theological reflection: scripture, tradition, reason and experience. From here the authors approach a theological method that is rooted in an appropriate starting point. To do this they guide readers toward an understanding of the difference between anthropocentric and theo-centric models. They also emphasize the need for creative as well as critical thinking.

The last three chapters offer a series of diagnostic exercises on core doctrines (the Gospel, the human condition and vocation) that apply the materials in the preceding chapters. These chapters also provide a template for how one can integrate the concepts offered in the first four chapters in the development of a theology of the arts.

If there is a potential short fall in the book it may be in the fact that much is changing in the nature of theological enquiry in today’s church, even in the ten years since the first edition was published. Some will not judge Stone and Duke’s approach to be sensitive to more postmodern sensibilities. They may see in Stone and Duke’s approach a certain kind of foundationalism that, while softer than the foundationalism of previous generations, nonetheless is seeking to develop a theological method that proceeds from a type of epistemological bedrock. For some this smacks of modernity’s penchant for methodologies that can be constructed scientifically and aim at the production of absolute truths. Also, this work may not seem nuanced enough for theological consideration of the various forms of art.

While the book may indeed be open to such charges, the authors certainly emphasize the important place of dialogue in theological reflection and the necessity of time, patience and creativity in theological development. These elements call for community and humility, which helps to mitigate any kind of hard foundationalism.

The book’s primary contribution is as a primer on theological reflection that can be used in introductory college and seminary courses, field education programs or by motivated lay people who want to develop their own ability to think theologically. For situations such as these, this volume will prove to be a helpful contributor to the ongoing development of theological reflection. Thanks to its broad conceptual framework, it would also prove useful as a resource for any consideration of, or dialogue about theology and the arts.

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Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005, pp. xvi + 400. $35.00 (paperback)

Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen has provided a truly impressive collection of texts in her reader for theological aesthetics. She skillfully arranges the materials by historical periods, which delineate the major sections of the book: 1) the Early Church, 2) the Medieval Church, 3) the Reformation, 4) the Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries, and 5) the Twentieth Century (comprising a full half of the volume). Thiessen further subdivides the historical periods by more specific themes characteristic of each age, ranging from such salient topics as divine beauty, the role of the senses, images and iconoclasm, doxology, mystical vision, and imagination and creativity. Each section is prefaced by an introduction elucidating the germane themes and debates of the historical period.

Throughout the volume the usual suspects are well represented (Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Jonathan Edwards) as well as some unlikely thinkers and poets (Paulinus of Nola, John and Charles Wesley, Leonardo Boff), providing a thoroughly ecumenical collection. There are also some unfortunate omissions. For instance, Hans Urs von Balthasar, whose colossal *oeuvre* is arguably the most systematic contribution to the field, is startlingly under-represented, receiving only a six-page excerpt. Likewise, the reader might have benefited from the inclusion of Platonic and Neo-platonic texts that undergird early Christian aesthetics, though Thiessen provides a fine, concise introduction to the Neo-platonic background. Additionally, the historical rather than thematic format of the book necessitates that many themes—such as erotics and religious affections or material and form, and especially the root of aesthetics in *aesthesis*, or perception—must be read from the index.

Even so, *Theological Aesthetics* proves to be an invaluable reference and resource for students and scholars. Although it cannot hope to be an exhaustive encyclopedia, this compendium is an ideal gateway to the vast, scattered literary loci for theological aesthetics, offering copious suggestions for further study. No true student of the subject can afford to ignore the wealth of texts, themes, and perspectives masterfully collated in this one compilation.

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Russell Re Manning, *Theology at the End of Culture. Paul Tillich’s Theology of Culture and Art*. Peeters, 2005, pp. 228. $39.00 (paperback)

Among the things that made Paul Tillich (1886-1965) into a unique theologian is the fact that, along with the philosophy of Shelling and Heidegger, the mysticism of Böhme and the early Franciscans, he counted specific works of art among the influences on his theology. Few, if any, of the great theologians of the 20th century have engaged as deeply as Tillich with the question of the relation-
ship between religion, culture and art. But what is the significance of Tillich’s theology of culture in the 21st century? This is the question Manning addresses in this study.

The first chapter, in which Manning seeks to place Tillich in the theological landscape of the first few decades of the 20th century, is the most problematical of the study. Firstly, the discussion in this chapter does not seem to contribute much to the subsequent discussion. Secondly, it is more confusing than clarifying. Manning proceeds from a distinction made by Tillich himself between the “Schleiermacher – Troeltsch line” and the “Kierkegaard – Barth line.” Manning wants to place Tillich on the “Schleiermacher – Troeltsch line,” despite of Tillich’s own assertion that he had ‘broken rank’ with this line and joined the other. Manning makes his claim based on the assertion that Tillich, like Troeltsch and Schleiermacher before him, tried to mediate between religion and culture. This is then further complicated by Manning’s analysis of Schleiermacher, which reaches the conclusion that Schleiermacher himself does not belong on the “Schleiermacher – Troeltsch line”! In spite of discussing at length Tillich’s criticism of both Schleiermacher and Troeltsch, Manning still maintains that Tillich belongs to their tradition of a “liberal theology of mediation.” He does not ask the question of why Tillich – despite the sharply contrasted view of culture – still felt himself to be more closely aligned with the dialectic theologians. It remains unclear why Manning feels the need to place Tillich within the liberal tradition, and why he uses this very simple division of the theological landscape. It seems to me that Tillich is marked more by an unwillingness to be categorized within any movement, and that he preferred to be free to let himself be influenced by ideas coming from very different directions.

The second chapter focuses on the relationship between Tillich and his philosophical hero, Schelling. Here Manning does a much better job, showing that Tillich is influenced on a very fundamental level by the German Idealist. This in itself is nothing new, Tillich himself asserted as much, but Manning does manage to point out the most important features of Schelling’s philosophy and how these ideas make up the “deep structure” of Tillich’s theology.

In the third chapter, we are presented with Tillich’s project of a Theology of Culture. Manning focuses almost exclusively on Tillich’s early writings. It is probably safe to say that any treatment of Tillich’s theology of culture needs to be based on these writings – it is here, after all, that Tillich is working out his ideas most thoroughly – but it is still a bit difficult to understand why Manning chooses to completely disregard Tillich’s U.S.-era production, especially since Manning wants to address the contemporary relevance of Tillich’s thought and not limit himself to a historical study on the development of Tillich’s thinking. According to Michael Palmer, writing in the introduction to the second volume of Tillich’s Main works (1990), there were some rather significant changes in Tillich’s theology of culture. The young Tillich still believed in the possibility of a synthesis between theology and culture, a theonomous culture, something he distanced himself from later.

Still, Manning’s treatment is clear and presents Tillich’s ideas in a way that
plainly shows the possibility of a postmodern Tillichian Theology of Culture. This is the theme of the last chapter in the study. Again, Manning uses a comparative method, by describing two trends of postmodern theology: the ‘Radical Orthodoxy’ school of John Milbank, Philip Blond and others and the so-called ‘textual nihilism’ of Mark C. Taylor and Don Cupitt. Compared to these two alternatives, Tillich does not really fit in either school, but is, according to Manning, at least closer to textual nihilism than to the supporters of radical orthodoxy, who, like the ‘neo-orthodox’ theologians before them see religion more as an alternative to culture than something closely related to it.

There are, then, some rather serious methodological problems in Manning’s study. He proceeds mostly by comparing and ends up with rather meagre results. Another approach would have been to start with an analysis of our situation, maybe along the lines of postmodern criticism, rather than from various proposed theological answers to this situation. This would at least have been a more Tillichian approach, and could have yielded more satisfying results.

These methodological problems are all the more regrettable because where Manning focuses on his own reading of Tillich there is much of great value to be found. As Manning notes, there have not been many attempts to bring Tillich in contact with postmodern thinkers. This in itself makes Manning’s contribution valuable. Manning describes Tillich’s attitude to what has come to be called the modern as ambivalent, and shows that he in fact rejected many aspects of the thinking of his time that are now considered typically modern, like the traditional metaphysical proofs of God’s existence. For Tillich, the task of theology is to “grasp the ‘breakthrough’ of this unconditioned into the conditioned … and its trace in culture.” This, says Manning, is about a non-original return of the religious. Tillich’s theology offers the possibility of a postmodern theology that is neither concerned with reverting to the pre-modern nor with embracing nihilism. Tillich locates the religious in the depth of culture, whatever form this culture may take. The concept of depth is contested in the postmodern discourse, but it is perhaps a concept that should not be given up so easily.

Manning’s contribution shows the promise of a postmodern reading of Tillich that could make a significant contribution in the current theological discussion.

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“The church cannot ignore the arts, whether they are inside or outside of it. And the arts that the church welcomes must not be merely ‘nice’ and ‘safe,’ unless we want to condemn ourselves to the starvation of the Christian imagination and the dissolution of the Christian conscience” (152).
Robin Jensen’s book is a kind of in-house apologetic for engagement with the arts from within the Christian community. She has written not to contribute to the current scholarly conversation about art within the church but to spell out what is at stake in such a conversation. As both an artist and theologian, Jensen is in a unique position to make a compelling case for the necessity of art in the life of the church. Her basic argument is nothing new, however: “God did not self-reveal in the words of Scripture alone; God also appeared in visible, physical form, with weight and mass, color and texture. The notion that theological insight can come through an artist’s creative expression is justified at the very center of our confession of faith” (12). God is not our God apart from matter, and therefore the church, as the community gathered by God, must necessarily concern itself with matter.

The unique value of Jensen’s book is the force she puts behind this “necessarily.” The gospel, she argues, gives rise to song, art, and spaces of worship. Embodied response to God is the necessary corollary to God’s embodied pursuit of us. Christian discipleship, moreover, is about witness and proclamation, and without tangible mediums the church cannot give full expression to the faith with which it has been entrusted. Because the beauty of God is an embodied beauty, it finds fitting witness in the materials of creation. Jensen also argues that the church is called to be more than a speaking, singing, painting, productive community; it is also called to be a listening, evaluative, and discerning community. This requires that the church school itself in the modes of communication that exist outside the Christian community. Understanding and interacting with secular art is a necessary prerequisite and outcome of making sacred art.

While open to criticism for its brief and incomplete treatment of central theological themes, one should not race to point out all the theological holes in this work. The book is a modest (and for that reason), helpful introduction to the broad themes and issues in a Christian engagement with art. It does not provide many answers, but demonstrates why the ongoing search for answers is a task the church cannot ignore.

Peter Kline; MDiv Junior, Princeton Theological Seminary


Pattison sets out in this volume - an augmented version of her doctoral dissertation at Princeton Theological Seminary - to understand the place of poverty in Calvin’s thought from both a historical and a systematic perspective. Her discussion and citation of various un-translated primary sources, along with her engagement with the rather vast secondary literature of Calvin studies, provide a breadth and depth of vision that rewards attention. Unfortunately, these laudable qualities are offset by marked deficiencies of style and editing. The lack of an
This study is divided into two parts. First, Pattison leads readers on a whirlwind tour of poverty in the Christian tradition beginning with Clement of Alexandria, Cyprian, Chrysostom and Augustine. She then takes some care in explaining the intricacies of this issue in the Medieval church before moving on to a survey of Luther, Zwingli, Melanchthon and Bucer. Of particular interest is her short history of the Franciscan order. Calvin’s thought takes center stage in the second part, where we are shown that Calvin’s understanding of poverty is based in his Christology. Fundamental to this point is Calvin’s appropriation of Luther’s theologia crucis. As Pattison explains, “Christ’s poverty is the visible sign in the divine revelation of Christ’s royal position as King, and thus the identifying mark of his kingdom” (160).

The following chapters explore the place of this insight in Calvin’s treatment of the Christian life and ecclesiology, with special attention paid to its ramifications in worship. Calvin’s connection of poverty with Christ and the kingdom of God leads him to the conviction that worship should be conducted with simplicity and without undue expenditure. “God is worshiped in spirit and in truth which has nothing to do with inordinate embellishment” (296). Furthermore, providing for the poor, argues Calvin, is an indispensable aspect of corporate worship whereby the character of Christian faith is manifest.

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In Musik und Religion, a recent addition to Hans Küng’s already prolific output,1 Küng shapes some of his previous writings and lectures on music into an artful defense of the validity of wordless or “secular” music as a source of religious experience. Küng, hoping that his book “can help bring the reader to a better understanding of both music and religion,”2 organizes his defense in the form of a “symphony” or “harmony”: it begins with an “overture” on the relationship of music and religion, presents three major “movements” on Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Richard Wagner, and Anton Bruckner, and concludes with a “finale” addressing the potential of art to communicate religious meaning.

In the overture, Küng characterizes music and religion as ambivalent hu-
man phenomena: religion can make humans more humane and it can be used to justify inhuman actions; music can inspire feelings of beauty and bliss or be the inspiration that sends soldiers to war and death. Ambivalence also characterizes religious attitudes toward music, especially instrumental music, which vary from affirming instrumental music as the highest expression of religious ardor to banning it from worship services and even secular life. Music therefore can, but does not always, serve as an expression of religious faith. Whether it does depends on what use humans choose to make of music, which in turn depends on their spiritual attitudes. Wordless music itself has an emotional and expressive power that can, in a person of faith, point to the otherworldly, and even the Other. In the ear of the believer, even a humble bell can proclaim God’s glory and grace.

In the first “movement” of Musik und Religion, entitled “Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Traces of Transcendence,” Küng portrays Mozart as a believer whose lack of ostentation, often misinterpreted as an indication of insincerity, should point all the more to authenticity of faith. Mozart’s music leaves the listener with traces of the transcendent in that it is intensely human but denies human frailty the last or most powerful word. Whether a listener experiences this transcendence depends on “how one hears Mozart” (49). In the latter half of the first movement, Küng provides a case study of the relationship between music and religion featuring his discovery, in Mozart’s Coronation Mass, of food for reflection on the viability of Christian belief in the contemporary world. Amidst this apologetic meditation, Küng notes that Mozart’s music, “really does not require words” (54) to create a spiritual impact and that the distinction between sacred and secular music is historically artificial and naïve.

Küng finds the music of Richard Wagner to be much neglected by “professional theology.” In the second “movement” of Musik und Religion he sets about correcting this lacuna, beginning with a theological interpretation of Twilight of the Gods, the last opera in Wagner’s Ring cycle. Küng interprets the enigmatic conclusion of Twilight of the Gods, which depicts Valhalla and its divine inhabitants going up in flames, not as signifying Wagner’s opposition to religion per se, but as Wagner’s diagnosis of bourgeois Ersatzreligion. This false religion of the acquisition of wealth has ironically self-destructed. Like bourgeois society, it has ended up imposing the very oppressive systems of power and duty that bourgeois revolution sought to escape. As a parable of modernity, Twilight of the Gods powerfully depicts the modern person’s predicament and demonstrates modern society’s need for redemption.

Wagner’s last opera, Parsifal, presents the redemptive antidote to the modern malaise he portrays in Twilight of the Gods. Küng concludes that the central theme of Parsifal, the possibility of human redemption through Mitleid, compassion for others, is consistent with both Christianity and Buddhism. Further, he finds Wagner’s affirmation of both a passive and a presently realized active aspect of redemption to be consistent with true Christianity; redemption is through God’s

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grace, but leads to charity and service here and now.

The third “movement” of Musik und Religion centers on the work of the Austrian composer Anton Bruckner. Bruckner’s works, which he dedicated to the glory of God, were the expression of his religious experience and religious world, works that bound together the sacred and the profane in an expression of his child-like faith. While Bruckner technically functioned within the Romantic paradigm, he laid the groundwork, along with Brahms and Wagner, for Schönberg’s invention of a new musical language that was to leave Romanticism behind.

Whereas Schönberg and his generation of atonal innovators were immersed in the musical tradition, his contemporary heirs have little acquaintance with the musical past. Assuming the incompatibility of the esoteric and the enjoyable, contemporary atonal composers are writing music that is inaccessible to the untaught listener. Küng sees Bruckner’s music as offering a sign pointing the way forward in this crisis: “as an avant-garde composer, Bruckner has shown that without bonds of some kind there is no freedom, without historical consciousness, no good new music” (195). Bruckner’s symphonies, which synthesize seemingly incompatible opposites: old and modern, dramatic and lyrical, dance and choral, give hope that today’s composers might find a new musical synthesis and overcome their alienation from the average listener.

In the “finale,” Küng addresses the topic of “Art and Meaning.” Küng is skeptical of the contemporary art scene: “so many provocations that fail to be provocative; so many protests with no one to listen; so much publicity with so little public interest; so many enemies of the academy at academic posts; so many revolutionaries financed by the establishment; so many artists living comfortably off the self proclaimed ‘death of art’” (202). Art reflects the contemporary crisis of meaning like a “delicate seismograph” (211). Yet art has the potential to help us overcome this crisis.

Küng challenges his readers to cultivate an artistic sensibility that is open to religion, historically conscious, oriented towards the future and cognizant of the relation of the present moment to both past and future. Art can be meaningful, even today, as an act of service to humankind. The highest norm of such art is neither tradition, nor novelty, but humanity, a humanity grounded, protected and hidden in divinity, a humanity expressed and realized in relation to one’s fellow human beings and nature. Even today, art can be a meaningful symbol that helps us to anticipate a better world, a new heaven, a new earth; perhaps art can even grant us a presentiment of the ground of all meaning.

Musik und Religion may disappoint those looking for an abstract treatise on the relation between music and religion or a formal theology of music. For such readers, the highlight of the book will be the introduction; they may be impatient with Küng’s lengthy historical and biographical discussions and frustrated that the finale on art and meaning hardly refers to music as distinct from art in general. Those committed to a Reformed perspective on revelation will also find cause for concern, as Küng seems to imply that human encounters with the transcendent are determined at least in part, if not primarily, by human attitude and action towards the created world.
Küng would address the first concern by asking that the reader experience *Musik und Religion* according to its own terms, as itself a symphony eliciting her imaginative attention. According to Küng’s perspective on music expressed in the introduction, whether the reader derives any religious significance from Küng’s symphonic meditations will depend on her own attitude. Whether or not Küng’s perspective on the religious experience of music convinces the reader, at least this much can be said: Küng practices what he preaches. *Musik und Religion* not only calls for but itself exemplifies the kind of artistic sensibility Küng advocates. Küng strives in every major section to connect his present artistic efforts with an historical consciousness of the past, an eye towards the future, and an openness to the divine ground of both.

*Han-luen Kantzer Komline; MDiv Middler, Princeton Theological Seminary, General Editor, Princeton Theological Review*


It has often been said that the best indicator of a people’s theology is the contents of their hymnbook. One hymnwriter whose work appears in the hymnals of most Christian denominations is Fanny Crosby (1820-1915). Edith Blumhofer presents perhaps the first detailed, scholarly examination of Crosby’s life—a monumental undertaking, considering both the many years of devotional writing about Crosby and, due to Crosby’s blindness, the dearth of personal papers to examine.

Blumhofer takes a generally chronological approach to Crosby’s life. She is exceptionally thorough in ascertaining Crosby’s historical context, beginning with her family history that is traced back to Boston Harbor, 1635. In this first chapter about Crosby’s family, Blumhofer details Crosby’s upbringing in the town Southeast, New York, establishing the Calvinist background of the Crosby family, which Crosby described as “serious without being dour, joyous without being frivolous” (16). Crosby was infused with the language of the Authorized Version of the Bible, by her grandmother and by the Presbyterian Church in which her family assembled.

From these early notes on Crosby’s familial and theological background, Blumhofer moves quickly into a lengthy historical examination of the next phase of Crosby’s life at the New York Institute for the Blind as well as her life in New York afterwards. Blumhofer shows the milieu into which Crosby was thrust in Protestant New York, spending several chapters discussing Crosby’s own story as well as a great deal of the story of the burgeoning city itself. While much of this section is purely historical, glimpses of Crosby’s spiritual life are provided throughout, as well as her reactions to major historical events and her responses to meeting many famous people - political, musical, and others.
This section is vitally important for understanding Crosby’s hymns, because it is here that Blumhofer outlines Crosby’s move into the Methodist holiness movement, from her 1850 “anxious bench” experience at the Thirtieth Street Methodist Church, to her later years as a friend of Phoebe Knapp and other holiness figures. It is also here that some of Crosby’s hymns are presented, with commentary ranging from Crosby’s contemporaries to present-day commentators. Of note is a friend’s statement on the theological content of her hymns: “She engages in no doctrinal controversies, but speaks the language of Zion with saints of every name” (169). This lack of controversy helps explain her popularity and her successful collaborations with Methodists, Anglicans, Baptists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians. Further, the work of Moody and Sankey among Protestants helped to broadcast Crosby’s hymns, for they used many of her lyrics in the famous Gospel Hymns 1-6. In addition, the Sunday School advanced her texts as well, with such composers as William Howard Doane, Robert Lowry, Hubert Main, and several others collaborating with Crosby to produce hymns for their popular Sunday School hymnals. Blumhofer’s most beneficial chapter in her survey is probably “Gospel Hymns: Crosby’s ‘Creed in Meter,’” a detailed examination of Crosby’s hymns themselves, and the beliefs which motivated them. However, in addition to its insight into Crosby herself, this chapter is also helpful in understanding the development of evangelical Protestantism, for Crosby’s hymns reached an amount of popularity not only in her own day but also afterwards such that “they offered defining metaphors of evangelical piety” (251). Blumhofer divides this chapter into four main sections, drawing out themes of Crosby’s hymns in each: salvation, consecration, service and heaven. She shows at length the pictures of Christ as “dear,” “precious,” “lovely,” “gentle,” and “kind” (254), and shows the growing picture of the spiritually needy as lost, wandering, wounded or broken.

This latter portrayal is in contrast to texts such as Isaac Watts’, where the unregenerate were damned, corrupt, and considered “worms” (255). In further contrast with Watts, Crosby’s hymns focused on what the cross gave believers, while Watts’ texts often focused on what the cross demanded of believers. Crosby’s texts focused on the emotions of the moment of “coming to the cross,” giving singers an opportunity to corporately express in song emotions felt as an individual (258). Further, these texts also showed a growing sense of evangelical purpose in personal holiness and aggressive evangelism that corresponded to the growing pessimism about ushering in the millennium (261). Crosby’s hymns reflected her involvement with the holiness movement, in which emotions were seen as most important, and submission to Christ as the way in which true Christian activities were accomplished (263). Some of Crosby’s texts also focused on the need for Christians to help those for whom many cared little—the most famous of these being “Rescue the Perishing,” written with William Howard Doane (271). Her hymns provided pictures of Christians as soldiers, as pilgrims, as defenders of the Bible, as called into mission service, and, especially, as arriving in heaven to see Jesus. Even though (or perhaps because) Crosby herself was blind, many of her hymns about heaven involved the moment of seeing Christ, and the joy that
would follow (277).

Blumhofer concludes her study by looking at the end of Crosby’s life, providing more biographical information as well as showing the immense popularity her hymns and she herself received. Here she examines Crosby’s work among the missions of New York and her popularity with groups such as the YMCA and other mission organizations. Blumhofer’s final chapter recounts the deaths of many of Crosby’s friends and family, and finally of Crosby herself.

Blumhofer, while incredibly thorough, has left out some events and trends of evangelical Protestantism during Crosby’s life that would appear important. The first would be the absence of the Social Gospel, a movement that, while flourishing late in Crosby’s life, seemingly had some bearing on Crosby’s hymns such as “Rescue the Perishing,” “To the Work,” and others. Walter Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel receive one fleeting reference, in which Rauschenbusch’s translation of Crosby’s hymns into German is mentioned (248). Further, Crosby herself was a tireless worker in the missions and slums of New York City, both in efforts of evangelization and in addressing the physical needs of its tenants.

Secondly, the ideas that have come to be known as Muscular Christianity receive almost no mention in Blumhofer’s book. Crosby’s life was spent ministering to men and encouraging their participation in the church, and many of her hymns seem to point towards some of this movement’s ideals - especially in her hymns of “soldiering,” and those that were written for the hymnals of the YMCA. Even though many in the Muscular Christianity movement had derogatory things to say about many of Crosby’s hymns, still this engagement would seem worthy of mention.

The aforementioned YMCA is another area that receives little attention in Blumhofer’s study. While she does note Crosby’s many speaking engagements at various YMCA meetings and some of her hymns that were produced for YMCA hymnals, she does not provide any examination of what function the YMCA served in evangelical Protestantism.

However, these lacunae would not be noticeable except for the intensity of Blumhofer’s study of the milieu in which Crosby lived and worked. This is the first study of Crosby that includes such a detailed historical context, and for this reason, some things were naturally omitted due to the sheer size of such an undertaking. Besides the historical details, Blumhofer does also address many of the beliefs and theological ideas that drove Crosby, even while noting that her hymns lack a detailed theology. Blumhofer gives a much-needed look at the life and works of Crosby, a person whose life has assumed a hagiographical status, and, thereby, been afforded little scholarly study.

_Lance Peeler;
PhD candidate in Liturgical Studies at Drew University_
Over the course of the year, many publishers have graciously sent copies of their newly published books to the *Princeton Theological Review* in hopes that we will publish reviews. Such is their generosity that we receive more books than we could possibly review. Still, in order to thank these publishers for thinking of us, we would like to call your attention to the following titles:


CONFESSION VII: SILENT READINGS
David Wright

I. Billy Graham Reads Augustine

Just as he is, one plea
after another—trope
and aporia of sympathy,
paradox, a helpless lamb—
all the address you’ll need.

II. Teresa of Avila Reads about Sin

Reminded of her own garden,
what pears she has opened
her hands toward—outside
the convent walls—habitual
woman who knows ostinato
echoed by ostinato—other
habits. Oh, fruit of the garden within.

III. Langston Hughes Speaks of Augustine

I too have been translated badly—
    Swing Mikado, lively blues.
I too have swum the viscous stream—
    oh river, divine African river—
I too want to remain, to forget—
    explosion of speech into hope.

David Wright is a professor of writing and literature
at Wheaton College, IL, and the author of A Liturgy for Stones
**Call for Papers: Fall 2007 Issue**

You are invited to submit an article, reflection, or book review for publication in the Fall 2007 issue of the Princeton Theological Review! This issue’s theme will be *On the Atonement*. If you would like to submit an article, reflection, or book review that is pertinent to the PTR’s Fall 2007 theme, please visit www.princetontheologicalreview.org for more information.

**All submissions are due by September 15th, 2007.**

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You are invited to submit an article, reflection, or book review for publication in the Spring 2008 issue of the Princeton Theological Review! This issue’s theme will be *Theological Exegesis*. If you would like to submit an article, reflection, or book review that is pertinent to the PTR’s Spring 2008 theme, please visit www.princetontheologicalreview.org for more information.

**All submissions are due by January 21st, 2008.**
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