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# Theological Education

Sacred Imagination:  
The Arts and Theological Education

Volume XXXI  
Number 1  
Autumn 1994

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**Volume XXXI, Number 1**

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# Introduction

*Wilson Yates*

*United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities*

Over the past 15 years, more attention has been given to the place and role of the arts in North American theological education than at any previous time in its history. This is a cause for celebration for those who seek an integration of the arts within the theological curriculum, but it is also a cause for sober reflection regarding how far we have yet to go. For a careful assessment of where we are indicates that while a serious dialogue between theology and the arts has begun and a movement toward integration of the arts within theological education is underway, the road we must travel remains long and full of theological, political, and, no doubt, budgetary detours of the first order.

This double-sided experience of recognizing the strides that we have made while seeing the major task before us is important to keep in mind. On the positive side, we have seen more than a dozen schools launch programs in the arts in which the schools have not only developed course work but engaged the larger question of why the arts should be a part of the theological enterprise and what the implications of their inclusion are for the theological curriculum as a whole. We have also seen a rather large number of schools institute courses in religion and the arts and, more generally, entertain and experiment with what the integration of the arts in traditional course work and the theological disciplines would look like.<sup>1</sup>

The Association of Theological Schools has also been involved in this effort, including the arts in theological education as one of its themes for the 1988 Biennial Meeting in San Francisco. Its growing interest in this area, under the leadership of executive director James L. Waits, has led also to the selection of theology and the arts as one of the areas of research of the new Henry Luce III Fellows in Theology program as well as the publication of these essays in *Theological Education*.

Beyond specific programmatic efforts of individual schools and the supportive work of ATS, publications such as *ARTS—the Arts in Religious and Theological Studies* and the recently created journal, *Images*, have further highlighted the religion and arts conversation and, in the case of *ARTS* the discussion has had a specific focus on theological education. International, national, and local conferences have also made their contributions. In 1985 Lilly

Endowment sponsored a conference at Candler School of Theology that focused on two Endowment-funded reports, later published as books: John Dillenberger's *A Theology of Aesthetic Sensibilities* and Wilson Yates's *The Arts in Theological Education*. With the Candler conference as a foundational gathering, a series of important events have occurred since, often, again, with Lilly Endowment support. The Arts and Christianity Enquiry group, created in 1990 and made up of persons working in the field from several different countries, has held meetings in London and Dresden with a summer meeting and large international conference scheduled for Berkeley, California, in 1995. (The conference will be the largest and most ambitious public event that has yet been held for theology and the arts.) Various symposia and forums have occurred for national and local audiences including the 1993 Image Conference in Berkeley and the yearly symposium of the Yale Institute of Sacred Music, Worship, and the Arts.

Of all the ventures in this field, the 1991-93 Lilly Endowment-sponsored Consultations of the Yale Institute of Sacred Music, Worship, and the Arts provided the most intensive and far-reaching discussion of the arts and theological education. The collection of essays that make up this volume came out of the consultations and is presented here as a source for continuing discussion for the schools of ATS. A word about the Yale project, therefore, is in order before turning to the papers themselves.<sup>2</sup>

In 1986 John Cook, Director of the Institute of Sacred Music, working with Robert Lynn of Lilly Endowment, received a grant from the Endowment to undertake a major investigation of the relationship of the arts and theological education. The grant funded two national conferences. The first in 1988 involved both seminary faculty and administrators and was focused on raising major issues for theological schools to consider in approaching the arts. The second conference in 1989 was smaller and involved mostly seminary faculty charged with the exploration of certain of those issues together with their implications for teaching. In 1990 Lilly Endowment enabled Yale to continue its work by providing funding for smaller consultations on the visual arts, literature, and music. A final consultation focused on the findings of the previous meetings and their implications for the nature and role of the arts within theological education.

The approach for this investigation was: (1) topical, organized by artistic medium; (2) pedagogical, with presenters giving lectures just as they do in their seminary classes; and (3) analytical, with participants observing and assessing the particular mode and substance of "classroom" presentations. The guiding question that informed all of the sessions was: What is theological about



the inclusion of the arts in the curricula and programs of seminaries and divinity schools?

The consultations were made up of persons primarily from theological schools who were working with the arts. They came from schools of different theological orientations, so that their assessment of what the future of the arts in a theological setting should be was of necessity varied.

The presentations that have been chosen for this volume were selected in light of their insights for ongoing debate and conversation regarding the theological significance, place, and purpose of the arts within theological schools. Certain of the essays were edited so as to focus the issues for the larger conversation that needs to take place among theological faculty and administrators who make up the ATS community. But the essays also reflect the specific discussions that took place in the Yale consultations; accordingly, they invite the reader to see the unfolding development and interplay of ideas and issues that became the central concerns of the participants in those settings. Overall, I think we can say that the essays provide a good case study of what a relatively small but representative group of theological educators raised as issues that must be dealt with by us all if we are to define in a significant and lasting way the role and place of the arts for the theological enterprise.

The format for this collection draws on the general format of the consultations with a division of the material into four sets of essays. The first set treats in broad stroke the role and place of the arts in theological schools by considering a range of larger questions of concern including: Why should the arts be integrated into the theological curriculum? What is theological about the treatment of the arts in theological study? How might the integration of the arts relate to other major educational initiatives such as those in multicultural and globalization work? Are there parallels with the experience of other disciplines (such as the social sciences) when attempting to integrate the arts within theological education? What is the relationship of the arts to theological disciplines and what must they do if they take seriously the arts in their own approach to knowledge? In what sense can works of art become themselves theological statements? What impact would a significant engagement of the arts have for the way we do theological education as a whole?

The other sets of essays treat, respectively, the visual arts, literature, and music around such questions as those we have just noted, but with a focus on specific arts forms. Thus the material that focuses on literature explores how the study of the literary arts is appropriate to theological education, asks what questions the study of literature poses for how we do theology, and holds up for

discussion the approaches of theological disciplines to the literary arts. The fruit of these essays is an opportunity to engage those questions that must be answered if the arts are truly to be allowed to inform theological study and our approaches to theological education.

Instrumental in the publishing of these essays was James L. Waits, executive director of ATS, who suggested the idea of this publication, and Nancy Merrill, managing editor of *Theological Education*, who provided editorial supervision of this issue. Dianne Witte, administrator for the Yale project, and Peter Hawkins of the Yale faculty, joined the contributing editor in shaping the idea of the collection and have offered invaluable suggestions and assistance. The oversight committee for the consultations included Peter Hawkins, David Kelsey, James L. Waits, Barbara Wheeler, and Wilson Yates with the administrative support of Dianne Witte.

#### ENDNOTES

1. See Wilson Yates, *The Arts in Theological Education* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987) for a study of theological schools' work with the arts during the two-year period of 1984-86. The number and range of courses and art forms present in the curricula are identified, the rationales schools give for the treatment of the arts are examined, specific programs are discussed, and a case is made for a greater integration of the arts in theological education. The study makes the argument that we are at a time when interest and the need for the arts are intersecting in such a way that we have a rare opportunity to create a significant inclusion of the arts in the work of theological schools.
2. The summary in this discussion of the history of the Yale project draws on a paper by Dianne Witte, the administrator for the Yale Consultations, that was prepared for presentation at the wrap-up consultation held in September of 1993.

# Characteristics of Art and the Character of Theological Education

*Frank Burch Brown*  
*Christian Theological Seminary*

Within the house of theological education there are many rooms. Where is the room for art—for the practice of art and for the study of art, whether music or poetry, architecture or dance? Does art have a separate room at all? And what kind of art really deserves space in the house that theology built? For that matter, how should art act in a room frequented by theologians?

We can hardly begin to answer such questions unless we have some picture of the shape and function of theological education. Following Edward Farley's lead,<sup>1</sup> David Kelsey in his book *To Understand God Truly* observes that much of theological education has been concerned with the formation of persons' lives in accordance with Christian traditions. In other words, it has been a kind of *paideia*. Yet, as Kelsey points out, theological education has also aimed at excellence in understanding of the sort acquired through critical, orderly, disciplined research, and so has aspired to constitute itself as a kind of *Wissenschaft*. Moreover, theology schools have gone on to link academic excellence of this sort with the further goal of professional training. These enterprises don't all fit together neatly. But they all belong in the house of theological education. And they are all genuinely theological, Kelsey says, insofar as their purpose, in the broadest sense is to understand God truly.

Kelsey realizes, of course, that what one studies in theological education is something specific, such as the Bible or church history or systematic theology. One does not scrutinize God directly, so to speak. This is not just because it is hard to look straight at God for very long, the way it is hard, as La Rochefoucauld once said, to look straight at either the sun or at death. The problem is, rather, that God is not anything or anyone in the ordinary sense of those terms, and thus God cannot be isolated and objectified for immediate inspection. Accordingly, the process of understanding God truly cannot be separated from the process of understanding other things, such as communities and acts of worship. Indeed Kelsey's own proposal is for theological schooling to seek to understand God truly by focusing in particular on study about,

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against, and for congregations.<sup>3</sup> This focus on congregations would bring to light, among other things, what is specifically Christian about certain theological understandings of God.

Kelsey's account of theological schooling may not elicit universal agreement. In fact, as we will see, it seems important to recognize that a congregational focus needs to be supplemented with other foci. But Kelsey's thesis—even in the sketchy form in which we have had to present it here—may help us begin to locate the study and practice of the arts within the house of theological education.

Assuming, with Kelsey, that education in theology is rooted somehow in communal life, history, and practices, we quickly come within view of one basic reason why the house of theological education should have room for arts and artistry. And the reason is simply that the arts are vital to understanding congregational communities, and to the church itself as community. There is reason to believe, for example, that the life of congregations is substantially shaped by architectural space. The change from house church to Constantinian basilica was hardly incidental to fourth-century transformations in Christian identity and practice. Likewise congregational prayer and praise cannot well be understood without attending to song and poetry, to gesture and movement. The very creation of congregational music and art often becomes an act of meditation or prayer—and a kind of prayer with its own “vocation,” so to speak. Involving the senses and imagination, the prayer that is shaped musically, poetically, or in movement, constitutes a special sort of spiritual exercise even for individuals lacking professional expertise in the arts. It can also be said that the aesthetic features of sermons—their pace and tone and manner of delivery—affect how their message is heard. Similarly, the way sacraments are displayed and distributed influences how they are perceived and received. As for the Scriptures, which are undeniably central in the self-understanding of congregations, biblical scholarship has amply demonstrated the large extent to which they are imbued with the artistry of story, poetry, parable, and myth. Thus there can no longer be any question as to whether the arts should be baptized into the mainstream of congregational life. Historically speaking, they are part of the baptistry itself, so to speak—and irreplaceably so.

All of this is so obvious at one level that we might wonder why there has been any question about housing the arts in theological education. In large part the explanation must have to do with the fact that, in their formal theologies, Christian leaders and theorists have treated the sensory and imaginative side of worship and prayer as peripheral or secondary. Thus, if I may put it this way, Christian thinkers have commonly associated the arts with religious foreplay or

afterglow; they have rarely viewed what is artistic as climactic or focal. Only in exceptional cases have theologians themselves singled out particular works or kinds of art as privileged among the languages of faith—Luther praising music as next to theology, for instance, or Eastern Orthodox theologians upholding the sacramentality of icons. To tell the truth, theology has a long history of becoming alarmed by art—by the fact that artistry typically appeals to the senses, veils as it reveals, plays with what it displays, craftily surprises and delights us. This means, of course, that the theological marginalization of the arts has not been unintentional. For much of Christian history, educators and theologians have expressed a deep suspicion of the arts precisely *because* of art's connection with the senses and emotions. For example, Augustine in his *Confessions* worries that the music of the hymns he sings in church, though moving him to tears, may distract him from the truth of what is sung—a truth that he regards as disembodied and purely intellectual.<sup>4</sup>

Augustine's point, like various other theological worries about art, cannot simply be dismissed. The way that art acts inside and outside church can indeed serve to distract from reflection, to smother reason, to bathe one in sheer sentiment. Art is no substitute for analytical, rational discernment. But Christianity was not founded on the idea that rationality should have the only or final word—God being described as transcending human reason. In any case, the church at worship has at times more fully recognized the spiritual gifts of art than have the formal theologians. While it may have mostly forgotten David's dancing, the church has remembered and reenacted his singing. In architecture, it has built artistically and memorably, emulating Solomon. And when it has encouraged the theatrical, the church has seemed to recall how Ezekiel, the ancient "performance artist," ate a scroll and lay siege to a miniature brick model of Jerusalem. Certainly in its artfully ordered liturgy, the church has demonstrated what Augustine himself knew very well—that art in the life of the gathered people need not be primarily disruptive and confusing; it can also serve to bring order and discipline, bringing heart and mind into unity. Thus, whatever the theologian's theories of art may have been, it is clear that in Christian communities various artistic acts and works have had enormous value. Not infrequently they have attained quasi-canonical status, even without being recognized as such by theologians and educators. In short, artworks have functioned as largely unacknowledged Christian classics.<sup>5</sup>

The mere fact that art has embedded itself in the heart of Christian practice does not prove that this location is legitimate. We cannot forget that, in the house where one seeks "to understand God truly," truth, and not only tradition, is a relevant consideration. We must now ask, therefore, whether one

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can say “art” and “truth” in the same breath—realizing that to do so makes many thinkers nervous, whether they be ancient Platonists or postmodern skeptics.

If one parts company with classical and Augustinian assumptions about truth and reason, the special worries about art *per se* appear illegitimate. Today many philosophers and theologians have moved away from foundational epistemologies that conceive of truth-claims as being anchored in unquestionable authority, plain empirical observation, clear-cut facts, or clear and distinct ideas. From our present perspective the boundaries between art and formal theology seem flexible and permeable. Even formal religious reflection bears the mark of metaphorical origins, and so is akin to the arts, while the openly aesthetic fabrication of what we call artistry transforms mind and imagination in a thoughtful way that feeds into theological reflection. The true import and impact of Bach’s St. Anne fugue played at the conclusion of a Christian funeral is not gathered up or exhausted in treatises on the trustworthiness of God; yet this music in its context shares and helps interpret the faith articulated in theological texts.

If it is the case that figures and fissures, myths and metaphors, inevitably work their way into the very fabric of thought—and if it is also true that what we assent to as true for Christian faith is related to the persuasive yet elusive quality of music, movement, story, and image—then artistry in the broadest sense surely belongs in the house of those who seek to understand God truly. In saying this, however, we have gone beyond an exclusive focus on congregations, because the question of truth cannot be entirely provincial. Understanding the character and possible truth of a given tradition ultimately entails understanding the character and possible truth of other traditions, including secular traditions in their most characteristic modes. What most needs to be recognized in relating arts to the context of inter-traditional encounter is that, when traditions and their truths fully engage each other, aesthetic and artistic mediums come into play. Certainly any study of Hinduism that neglected dance would be a distortion, as would a study of contemporary American culture that neglected the cinema. The room for art in theological education is thus a space for both appreciative discernment and critique, including the disciplined study of competing artistic traditions, in practice and in theory.

Up to this point we have attempted to sketch out briefly the character of theological education and to suggest the relevance of art by pointing to its role in the life of the church and in the broader effort to understand truly. What art has to offer to theological education may become more evident, however, if we

go on to consider more explicitly the characteristics of art. In particular I want to point out that, although art is extremely diverse, all of the above claims regarding the place and power of art within theological education are grounded in the following four characteristic capacities shared by much of what we call art.

1. As already indicated, there is the artistic capacity to move and mobilize. The endeavor to understand God truly is wedded to love and the practice of love. And the native language of love has always been preeminently artistic and aesthetic, moving the self and will to envision that which is to be desired, to discern how to reach toward it, and to want to reach and to be reached. Augustine and Calvin were quite aware of this connection between art, love, and the will, and students of social movements regularly document this potential. One thinks of the moving and binding power of the songs associated with the civil rights movement, for instance, or the more frightening power of Hitler's highly organized festivals and marches.

2. There is the artistic capacity to imagine possibilities not clearly conceived in society at large. It is fascinating that a high percentage of art produced by both the avant-garde and the folk cultures of communist Europe was and is distinctly spiritual in orientation, and usually Christian. These arts have nurtured a vision of possibilities that formerly seemed impossible to imagine in other terms. Regardless of whether such religious imagining dwindles under the present social and economic hardships, it plainly has thrived by means of artistic culture within a larger, often hostile, cultural context.

3. There is also the artistic capacity to enliven one's often anesthetized sense of the particular, of that which resists easy dogmatism and totalizing generalization, bringing such particular awareness to bear precisely on unseen dimensions of ideas and doctrines. One significant example of this is Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in which received ideas are reconsidered and reconceived in the light of poignant and powerful stories and similes that create unexpected tensions in the system of thought even as they stretch to encompass a whole world.

4. Finally, there is the artistic capacity to elicit and elucidate a sense of realities that either rupture or transcend ordinary sense. At times these perceptions are negative in nature, as one knows from the best holocaust literature. Indeed, theology cannot be truly educational in understandings of God without confronting terrors in a manner available to artistic expression.

In addition there is a more positive kind of artistic revelation which, as I have already suggested, must be acknowledged even if at present we are ill-equipped intellectually to assess or account for its validity. It cannot be denied

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that one runs into serious problems in trying to support the idea that art can potentially reveal what cannot otherwise be known or seen. But this idea is no less persistent than it is venerable, being found in some fashion not just in Romantic thinkers but also in parts of Plato, in Aristotle, Dante, Spenser, Handel, Haydn, Kant, Jaspers, Ricoeur, Whitehead, Dewey, Heidegger, and countless others. That art has special powers of disclosure is a claim, moreover that I myself have tried in a limited way to support elsewhere. For the sake of both brevity and wit, however, I want in this context to draw on Iris Murdoch, whose words make it plain why theological education, wanting to understand God truly, would best take the arts into account.

In her dialogue called *Acastos*, which is patterned on the Platonic dialogues, Murdoch depicts a conversation between Plato, Socrates, Callistos, and Acastos. Plato objects to art as offering seductive half-truths that are second-best, stopping short of the highest, and as gratifying one prematurely. Near the end of the dialogue, Socrates gives his response, speaking more directly than one would normally expect. Addressing Plato, he says:

It may be that human beings can only achieve a second best, that second best is our best. Perhaps not only art but all our highest speculations, the highest achievements of our spirit are second best. Homer is imperfect. Science is imperfect. Any high thinking of which we are capable is faulty. Not everything connects, my dear Plato. We are not gods. What you call the whole truth is only for them. So our truth must include, must *embrace* the idea of the second best, that all our thought will be incomplete and all our art tainted by selfishness. . . . It may even be that, as Acastos says, good art tells us more truth about our lives and our world than any other kind of thinking or speculation .... We are mixed beings, as you said yourself, mixed of darkness and light, sense and intellect, flesh and spirit—the language of art is the highest native natural language of that condition.... We are all artists, we are all story-tellers. We all have to live by art; it's our daily bread.... And we should thank the gods for great artists who draw away the veil of anxiety and selfishness and show us, even for a moment another world . . . and tell us a little bit of truth.<sup>6</sup>

The practice of art employs skill, know-how, and something like inspiration in order to produce works that speak in a uniquely particular yet encompassing way to our fallible, mixed, spiritually embodied condition. Consequently, within the house of theology—a place that would serve no purpose if it were unable to accommodate and shape this very condition—art is pertinent not only to the adornment but also the structure of virtually every room, and so to the study of every area. In addition, art merits separate



attention—a room of its own within the larger curriculum. Otherwise the peculiar traits of the aesthetic and the artistic can be overlooked too readily or assimilated to something else, whether abstract theological ideas or specific moral agendas. Although art has a bearing on these things, it actually can address something like the full range of our lives as selves and communities, which is also to say that it moves beyond bare concepts or principles and imperatives. It is no wonder that Murdoch calls art potentially “the highest native natural language” of our strangely and wonderfully mixed condition. In the house of theological education it would be good to hear such language studied and spoken more often.

### ENDNOTES

1. See Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).
2. David H. Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological About a Theological School* (Westminster/John Knox, 1992).
3. *Ibid*, p.64
4. Augustine's profound ambivalence regarding the spiritual merits of singing hymns is expressed in the *Confessions*, Book IX, Chapters 6-7, Book X, Chapter 33.
5. For fuller treatment of this topic, see Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 153-84.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 77-111 and *Transfiguration: Poetic Metaphor and the Languages of Religious Belief* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), esp. pp 123-81
7. Iris Murdoch, *Acostos: Two Platonic Dialogues* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), pp. 62, 63.



# Theology, the Arts, and Theological Education

*Gordon D. Kaufman*  
*Harvard Divinity School*

This short paper consists of some notes, from three different angles concerning certain important connections that obtain (and should be developed further) between theology, the arts, and theological education. In these notes I: (1) urge that theologians take it upon themselves to engage in some fresh thinking about the arts, their place in culture generally and in religion in particular, and that they work out explicitly theological criteria for making judgments about religious and other uses of the arts; (2) point out the importance of seriously exploring the sorts of theological insight that may be manifest in (some) works of art; and (3) propose a paradigm change in our thinking about theological education, suggesting that the arts can provide us with a suggestive model for re-thinking theological education. I regard everything I say here as quite tentative and preliminary, but I hope it will serve to stimulate further discussion on these issues.

The modern idea that art is a fully autonomous region of culture, with its own values, standards, modes of activity, and criteria for judgment has been a barrier to attempts to develop theologies of art that invoke specifically theological criteria and standards: (a) for assessing the meaning and importance of particular works of art and (b) for interpreting the significance of the various arts for human life generally as well as for particular forms of religious life. Paul Tillich's influential ideas about the arts,<sup>1</sup> according to which great art simply by virtue of its being great art is always spiritually significant, reinforced (and thus further complicated) within the theological community this idea of the autonomy of art if all great art is a medium enabling human encounter with "the unconditioned" and is thus a revelation of "the divine," works of art simply *qua* their being works of art have religious and /or theological significance, and the theologian's task is to bring this out; to introduce "external" religious or theological standards of judgment in assessing works of art would be heteronomous. A view such as this—though itself clearly a theological interpretation of art—precisely because of its presumptions about the nature of art-as-such, militates against the freedom of theologians to make independent assessments, on strictly theological grounds, about the religious or theological significance of particular works of art (or, indeed, of the arts generally).

A number of questions may be asked about this sort of interpretation of the arts: What is “art as such” anyhow? Is there really any such thing at all? Is it not the case that what is regarded as beautiful (or meaningful, or sublime, or an appropriate object for meditation, or religious, or the presence of the divine within the human world) in one culture or sub-culture may have entirely different meanings and significance in another? Is not our very notion of *art*—as something that can and should be done and enjoyed “for its own sake”—essentially a modern idea, found in few if any other societies (most of which have produced, nonetheless, what we moderns regard as “great art”)? Is it not the case, thus, that the patterns of expectation and appreciation and sensitivity that have been developed in the artist and the viewer or hearer in and through complex processes of socialization, enculturation, and training, have at least as much to do with the way in which an “art object” is viewed and appreciated as does the object itself? So it is not so clear, perhaps (unless we suppose that modernity has achieved a breakthrough on what art *really is* in some metaphysical sense, putting us in a position to make absolutistic judgments that were impossible before our time), that we (or anyone else) is really in a position to declaim loudly about just what “art for art’s sake” might entail, or about what it might mean to “let the art object just be what it is”—as we contemplate and experience what *we* take to be “the divine” that is manifest in and through it.

An art object, no more than any other object, has its “meaning” simply *in and for itself*.<sup>2</sup> It gains its meaning, rather (in the first instance), in and through complex interactions—and the meanings of those interactions as the artist creates the work—between the artist and his or her world; and (in many successor events) in the complex interactions—and the meanings of those interactions—between the art object and its many appreciators on subsequent occasions, and all the complexes of meaning specific to each of those interactions. The question of the religious (or theological) meaning of a particular work of art cannot, therefore, be ascertained and specified apart from (at least) these two sets of *contextual* factors. Moreover, these two sets of factors may themselves, if taken up independently of each other, lead to rather different conclusions about the meaning of a particular art object. If we emphasize the first set, we will be led to move toward an interpretation of religious and artistic meaning that emphasizes the artist’s own intention in creating the work, and the personal experiences that called forth that intention and later followed upon the actual production of the art object. If we focus on the second set of contextual factors, however, we will be led toward an interpretation of artistic and religious meaning which—far from focusing on the art object *as such*—attends rather to

the way in which the art object is received (apprehended, interpreted, appreciated) in a particular socio-cultural and religious context, and the way(s) it can be appropriated by those who encounter it in this setting. We are not, then, so much in need of a “theology of art” which explains what art “really is” in some metaphysical sense as one which makes available to us criteria that can enable us to identify and to assess—as we focus on the art object in certain relevant contexts—what can appropriately be regarded as of religious (or, perhaps, of specifically Christian) import.<sup>3</sup> In our framing of basic definitions and understandings of the arts, we theologians dare not rely on the views of others (who may well be working with quite different agendas from ours); we must be willing to take upon ourselves the responsibility for developing criteria for making normative judgments about both particular works of art and the arts in general.

A commonly held view (though one not very highly regarded in some sophisticated circles) is that it is the subject-matter of an art object that determines whether it should be regarded as of “religious” or “Christian” significance, or is to be seen as purely “secular” or “pagan.” As usually stated, this view is overly simplistic, but it should be clear that, from the point of view of the contextual conception of art that I have just briefly sketched, there is something to it. For precisely the subject-matter (of, for example, at least some pieces of representational art) is a principal feature that affects in important respects the ways in which many viewers respond to it; and the absence of any specific “subject-matter” in a piece of abstract art, or the presence of a “revolting” or “obscene” subject-matter, is (as we know very well) quite distressing to many viewers who do not know how to “read” it properly. If the “meaning” of a work of art is not simply in the art object itself, but is a function (at least in some respects) of that object in its relations to those experiencing it, the significance of subject-matter for artistic meaning may not be casually disallowed. This is not to say, of course, that highly abstract subject-matters, as seen, for example, in Malevich’s *Black Square* or *White Square on a White Background* are to be regarded as meaningless.<sup>4</sup>

I want now to explore, from a somewhat different angle, an important connection between theology and art that emerges if we ask whether and how works of art may themselves be regarded as sometimes making theological “statements,” thus contributing directly to theological understanding and to the ongoing theological conversation, perhaps contributing unique or novel theological insights.

In the discussion following her lecture (at the Conference on the Visual Arts in Theological Education held at Yale in November 1991 and published in this volume), Margaret Miles showed in a beautiful way the respects in which Signorelli's depiction of human bodies in his painting *Resurrection of the Flesh*—although heavily dependent on Augustine's attempt to imagine speculatively how the idea of a "resurrected body" or a "spiritual body" was to be conceived—in fact moved significantly beyond Augustine's insights in its theological understanding of the human body. Even though Signorelli's insights were not articulated in language, they marked an advance in theological understanding, an advance that professional theologians, perhaps, have not been in a position to appreciate until the (quite recent) rise of feminist theologies. Miles pointed out that Signorelli was able to portray the human body in a way that did not display it as subject to the corruption induced by sin and lust (which puritanical figures like Savonarola seemed to regard as intrinsically connected with human nakedness); thus the naked body could be seen as not only beautiful but also as good, and it was to be regarded (from a Christian standpoint) as a proper object for viewing and for meditation. Furthermore, Miles suggested that in this painting Signorelli was able to remove the differences of posture, stance, and gesture which were thought to distinguish females from males and which were regarded as seductive and thus an expression of sinfulness; thus he portrayed a significant equality of the sexes in the resurrection, an equality that was innocent of the gender distinctions inculcated by the socialization practices of his time. These are quite interesting claims, suggesting that Signorelli in fact went considerably beyond Augustine in his theological insight into human bodiliness and its potential for redemption, and that he was able to articulate and communicate this in his painting. Even though his insights were not expressed verbally, they marked a significant advance in theological understanding.

Miles's observations suggest that the question of the extent to which the several arts can express and help to induce advances in theological insight and understanding ought to be taken up as an important issue for theological reflection, and, of course, in theological education as well. Is this potentiality for new and distinctive theological insight always open in the arts, or only in certain cases? Is it perhaps the case that new theological insights or understandings frequently appear earlier in artistic expressions than in the reflective thinking of theologians? (Such a view would be consonant with Hegel's contention that reflective activity, including careful conceptual work, can occur only after certain insights have already appeared in the form of religious intuitions or

myths, i.e., only after they have already become accessible in the culture in an artistic representation which then becomes material on which philosophers and theologians can reflect. These questions pose, in a somewhat different way than discussed above, the issue of when, and in what ways and in what respects, the arts are to be regarded as properly “theological.” Do all “Christian” works of art belong to the history of *theology* as well as the history of art? It probably has been a mistake to have thought of the history of theology as confined to the verbal productions of the guild of theologians. Properly understood it should, perhaps, include all forms of human expressiveness, and the interaction of these various forms with each other, as well as the influence they have had on each other, should be regarded as important subjects for historians of theology to investigate. All of these questions are well worth pursuing, not only for the sake of understanding better what is theology but also for grasping what in fact goes on in the arts. Such studies might help us to get at the further question of when and in what respects works of art should be regarded as of not only “religious” but of special “theological” significance as well.

These questions re-open in a new and somewhat different way, I think, some of the points that Tillich may have been reaching for but was unable to express with sufficient precision in his theology of the arts. Here, however, I am not formulating these questions on the basis of an assumption that all “great art” is *ipso facto* religious or theological, but rather in terms of the necessity to understand works of art in relation to the specific concrete history (theological as well as artistic) in which they emerged, and I am suggesting that we understand theology as well in relation to the concrete historical developments (artistic and socio-cultural as well as specifically “theological”) within which it has emerged. As a result, the connection between the arts and theology now appears to be considerably more intimate than has often been supposed (one of the major points, no doubt, to which Tillich was also attempting to call our attention). Clearly there is much here for further exploration and reflection.

I want now, lastly, to make one or two further observations about the importance for theological education of this intimate interconnection and interdependence of the arts and theology.

If the issues mentioned in my remarks on Margaret Miles’s lecture are taken seriously, it will be clear that the conventional understanding of theology found in many seminaries today—as dealing largely, if not exclusively, with doctrinal and conceptual matters—must be re-examined and should probably be rather drastically revised. Theological insight, innovation, and reflection are apparently closely bound up with a wider range of modalities of human

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expressiveness than is often recognized, and theological work cannot, therefore, be properly understood or pursued in abstraction from these connections. This means that theologians need to learn how to “read” works of art as well as classical theological tomes (seldom a part of their education as theologians today!), and they must come to see these as in intimate interconnection with each other. And they will need to teach their students in correspondingly new ways. This does not mean that theology will become less technical and more popular; rather the reverse: new skills and practices now need to be learned and integrated with the older ones, and students need to be taught to do their reading and reflecting in ways that connect their intellectual activities much more directly with aesthetic and religious sensitivities that have often been neglected in the teaching of theology. With such a more “holistic” understanding of theology, however, it might well become more attractive and interesting to some who in the past have found it boring and too exclusively “intellectual.”

Some of our difficulties in effectively integrating the arts into theological education may derive from a profound tension, indeed a basic conflict, between the arts and the pedagogical model on which most theological education is based. What we are attempting to do in our theological schools, for the most part, is transmit to our students received “bodies of knowledge”—biblical, historical, theological, ethical, perhaps sociological or psychological, and so on. This didactic model (encouraged by analogies with much other teaching in our colleges and universities) is, it should be noted, significantly different from that which is cultivated in the arts. In the latter, certain traditions of insight, skill, and practice are transmitted and appropriated to help equip budding artists to create *the new*. Our tendency in theological education has been to think of the arts as providing us with illustrations of certain historical points we are making, or with source material for historical knowledge or knowledge of the contemporary world. We have seldom, as far as I can see, thought of them as presenting us with a quite different paradigm of education, one that might be of considerable help to us. However, if we think of the arts primarily as traditions that are produced and carried on by artists/creators rather than traditions produced primarily *for consumers* (viewers, hearers), a somewhat different perspective comes into view. Instead of drawing on literature, painting, and music largely for illustrations to enhance our historical and theological teaching, what we would seek to learn from the history and practice of these and other arts would be the ways in which traditions can be appropriated for the purpose of acting creatively in the world.



Christian theological education, considered from this angle, would be conceived as not simply a matter of transmitting bodies of knowledge to students but rather as preparing them to help transform our world—searching out new insights, seeking to develop new sensitivities, working out new practices, new ways of thinking. We would seek to appropriate Scripture and tradition, not simply to know something we did not know before, but for the redemptive purpose of creating the new, enabling a new *praxis*. Theology and ethics, in this mode, would be understood as the imaginative / reflective dimension of our (Christian) *praxis*, with which we are working toward the creation of a new world, and so-called practical theology would take up some of the real problems in today's public world and attempt to address them. Keeping in mind this overall model drawn from the arts might enable us to develop conceptions of education that would integrate *praxis* and reflection much more effectively than has been possible heretofore—our thinking having been grounded so heavily in the notion of the didactic transmission of various knowledges. When conceived on this model, theological education would be understood as induction into certain particular (artistic) practices, rather than as the passing on of various sorts of historical and theoretical knowledge, though historical and theoretical study would, of course, also be indispensable. Theology, ethics, biblical exegesis, church history, and all the rest would be presented in ways emphasizing their contributions to these practices. Because the arts would actually provide the central model for this change of perspective, the difficulties in “integrating” them into theological education might then dissolve away.

## END NOTES

1. For a convenient collection of many of Paul Tillich's writings on the arts, see *On Art and Architecture*, eds., Jane and John Dillenberger (New York: Crossroad, 1987).

2. Frank Burch Brown, in *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), develops a full critique of such "purist" notions of art and presents a well-articulated "neo-aesthetics" quite compatible (in my view) with the main positions sketched in this paper.

3. A contextual theory of aesthetic meaning (of this sort) has definite *practical* advantages over an essentialist theory when dealing with such problems as the impasse arising from the attempt to hang a deKooning painting in St. Peter's Lutheran Church in New York City. In my response paper, "Reflections on Lectures by Margaret Miles and John Cook," prepared after the November 1991 Yale Conference on the Visual Arts in Theological Education, I refer to the de Kooning controversy and argue for the advantage of a contextual theory. (The Miles and Cook papers are reprinted in this volume). In that discussion I observe the following:

If we had had in our minds the sort of contextual theory of art that I am suggesting here, we might have been in a better position to assess and address more directly the practical questions raised by the unfortunate events connected with the attempt to hang this painting in the church. And if the pastor and the various committees of the church involved in this matter had been reflecting along lines suggested by this sort of understanding, they might have been able to avoid some of the impossible problems into which they so easily (apparently almost unconsciously) slid, and could perhaps have addressed the problems that did arise with a kind of educated sensitivity and intelligence that might have opened a way through the dilemma. For with a contextual understanding of this sort the questions about how the art object would be appropriated within the church congregation itself would, from the very beginning, have been considered an important issue to keep in mind, as the committee sought for an appropriate contemporary painting for the church; and the question about the artist's own self-understanding and intentions in accepting the commission to produce the painting might also have been seen to have some import for this venture. It was, I suspect, because the committee thought too much in terms of the Tillichian conception of art and its religious meaning (mentioned earlier in this paper)—a theory according to which art objects are apparently taken to have religious meaning *in and for themselves* simply as they are, rather than in relation to complex contextual factors—that they fell into the virtually insoluble difficulties in which they came to find themselves. And it was because the pastor and others did not have suitable alternative theological approaches to art available to guide them, that they found it virtually impossible to find a way to mediate the intense dispute between different factions in the church.

John Cook's analysis of the painting and the controversy it created did not, in my opinion, clarify much further the actual issues involved. I thought it was interesting that he found it necessary to teach us a "code," so that we could properly "read" the de Kooning painting. And it was also interesting that this code did in fact help to illuminate the significance of the painting. Moreover with the aid of his code, and some comments de Kooning himself had made, he found himself able to deduce some things about de Kooning's own motivations and interests in creating the painting under consideration. This led him ultimately to conclude (if I understood him correctly) that to make a work like this the focal center for devotion or worship (as was intended in this case) would be to displace such traditional figures as the crucified Christ from the consciousness of worshippers, offering instead what would have amounted to essentially a kind of

narcissistic self-display (by de Kooning)—hardly a theologically or religiously justifiable move. All of this was in its own way quite illuminating, but what did it imply about the theory that all great art speaks for itself? The procedure John followed suggests, rather, that even—perhaps especially!—as abstract a work as this one must be understood in light of certain conventions which enable us to read it properly, i.e., that the contextual situation of the viewer is very important for understanding what is at stake—both aesthetically and theologically—in a controversy of this sort

I may have misunderstood the point John Cook was making, but it seems to me that he was not very clear about what sort of critical analysis should be undertaken in attempting to assess the appropriateness of this painting for the use to which it was to be put in the church. He was led to make his (highly subjective) criticism of this very abstract work, I think, because, despite his great admiration for the painting, he seemed to feel that he must find some sort of religious or quasi-religious content in it in order to make a theological assessment. But the hidden subjectivity of the artist is surely not to be confused with the content or meaning of a painting; it is rather, as I suggested above, one of the contextual factors important for interpreting the artist's own self-understanding. In this way it may throw some light on what the painting can mean for us viewers, but much more important for that question are the contextual factors that are actually operative in our own viewing of the painting—precisely the factors that seem to have been least attended to in the actual hanging of this piece. Neither focusing on this sort of art simply *qua* its being a great work of art, nor examining the subjectivity of the artist to see if it supplies us with some sort of secular or pagan "content" which now displaces the image of Christ, is of much help with the kind of questions that St. Peter's Church had to deal. Perhaps John found it difficult to decide just how the issues confronting St. Peter's Church were to be analyzed because these sorts of distinctions were not entirely clear to him.

4. For a thoughtful discussion of this last point, and an attempt to interpret its theological significance see Mark Taylor's recent book *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). Taylor's discussion of Malevich is found on pp. 77-85.



# Theological Education and the Arts: Four Comments

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I shall make four comments for our deliberation. With the exception of the first one, which summarizes several themes of my two essays that appear later in this volume, the comments strike a distance from the conference to ask what brought the conference into being, what consensus if any operated, and what might the future be.

## Comment One

My two essays or replies, one on music and one on poetics, develop certain themes that may be applicable beyond the particular art in question. These themes arise when we would relate any art to theological education. The three themes are the power of the art in affecting certain sensibilities, the ambiguity and deconstructibility of any art, and the metaphor of a path to be traversed when we would relate theological education to an art.

As to the first, an art, at least in its ideal form, can be a powerful corrective to certain things a society and even a religion can do to its members and to certain kinds of abstracted and objectified ways human beings can exist in the world. Something about poetic arts, and maybe other arts too, turns the human being to concrete things, launches the human being into the interhuman world, repaints experience with the tones of emotion. And it is these things—retreat from the concrete, the interhuman, and emotion—that an advanced industrialized, consumer-oriented society works on its members. If this is so, one would think arts have a crucial place in the life of the church and in the education of church leaders insofar as the church and the schools are concerned with the negative fall-out of this sort of society. In other words, an art can have the effect of intensifying, shaping, embodying the whole transformation toward freedom with which religious faith is concerned. Such a transformation toward freedom is a matter both of individuals and their relations and institutions. An art can also intensify the experience of beauty and the pathos of real things, and that too seems to be a part of the transformation toward freedom.

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As to the second, it seems to me that any attempt to relate theological education and an art cannot avoid the ambiguity of any art as an art. I mean by this ambiguity both the possibility that an art can be co-opted by a consumer industry, in which case it is social causality, a product to be sold, part of a communication network, and, the possibility that an art can be co-opted by centuries-long oppressive agendas and symbolisms. Thus, an art does not offer itself as a clean and unpolluted apple to be picked off a tree. It offers itself to a critical, one could say deconstructive procedure.

As to the third, if we would discover the place or possible contributions of arts to theological education, we would find ourselves inevitably assuming things about what theological education is, what arts are, what faith is and the place of arts in faith, what the church is and the place of arts in the church and so on. If an art is A and we would relate it to theological education, which is X, we can do so only when we find how A is part of B, the life of faith; C, theology; D, the church, etc. The problem of relating an art to theological education is thus a kind of path we must traverse, if we would ground our proposals in any sort of rationale.

### Comment Two

My second comment concerns our discussion of the place of the arts in theological education. When I reviewed the various lectures and responses of these gatherings, I realized that something was not quite clear to me. What is it that prompted the gathering in the first place? What sort of situation, “crisis,” or discerned problem in theological education prompted this theme of the arts? The lectures and responses do not voice any consensus about such a problem. This absence of consensus is not necessarily disagreement. But we do have at least three quite different ways of construing the subject going on in the papers. According to the first, the arts should be rendered thematic in theological education, themselves an object of explicit pedagogy, and this would have the character of reflection on the practices of art and on art as a datum in religion—a position Nicholas Wolterstorff has taken. According to the second, arts are not so much a discrete theme in the curriculum as something employed to heighten certain sensibilities, to bring pedagogy alive, to dramatize emancipative transformation as Rebecca Chopp, Max Stackhouse, and this author maintain. According to the third, the arts need to be a part of theological education because they are already part of the life, setting, and cultus of congregations with which church leaders are ever engaged. These three construals, however, do not appear to be prompted by a problem or crisis in theological education.

Possible ways of construing how the arts and theological education are related are multiple. Is the question a matter of disciplines, something parallel to relating theological education to economics, politics, philosophy, sociology? Is it primarily a view of professional practice, the need of church leaders to be artistically savvy? Is it a discerned lack of some sort, an impoverishment of theological education because of the absence of arts? Accordingly, we would then fill in the lack with new fields, new courses, new strategies of teaching in courses. Is it a broader sort of problem, the correction of a whole paradigm of faith and education that has more or less suppressed the aesthetic dimension?

I sense at this point two quite different ways the discussion could go. First, the fact that some central and dramatic problem of theological education was not the route to our theme may suggest a kind of consensus beneath the different approaches. We may be silently agreeing that there is no explicit and glaring problem, no outrageous failure in theological education that pertains to the arts. We may at this point acknowledge severe problems of theological education that properly evoke criticism, false professionalism and its anti-intellectualism, false intellectualism and irrelevant scholarship, disciplines that have lost their unity and rationale, the suppression of emancipatory agendas. The arts, then, enter the picture as one of the ways of making theological education berate- in relation to these problems. Thus, the issue of theological education and the arts arises in connection with certain problems already identified, and the query is, how might the arts contribute to reform?

In a second way the discussion could develop, the reform of theological education takes a back seat. What sets the problem are the perennial functions and motifs of theological education. The issue becomes, what role do the arts play in these perennial concerns: in field education, in preaching, in each of the main disciplines? The context here is theological education as it is concerned with the activities of ministry and the needs of the church, thus practical theology in its traditional meaning. The discerned problem then is a lack in current theological education, a gap to be filled.

### **Comment Three**

There is another reason why a lack of consensus about some dramatic problem that concerns the arts and theological education did not emerge into a clear consensus. "The arts" is not a concrete reality, nor is it susceptible to a clear definition. Various genres and other differences undercut the general category: differences as to what art itself is, different genres of art, differences within any and all arts, differences of East and West, high, folk and popular arts that cut

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across all arts, and the ambiguities I spoke about previously. These things come together under a single term only as institutional undertakings, such as a school with a degree in fine arts. But that is an administrative umbrella in which actual study and work immediately divide into the various differences. Or, the aggregate term is established by some sort of aesthetic theory that has discovered a rubric under which to place all arts and which is constructed by and relative to the constructor. Given this situation, we do not anticipate much success in relating theological education to something called “the arts.” To embrace such a task would force either an institutional or theoretical construction.

It is clear that individuals, churches, congregations, and schools do not experience, use, or embody “the arts.” Arts, so-called, are present always in specific forms: music, poetics, sculpture, and of this or that period and style. Historically what we call “the arts” have quite different institutional histories. Each one relates to folk culture, to aristocracies, to religious traditions in different ways. And this continues to be the case. One finds music in a religious tradition in certain ongoing events in the lives of congregations. One finds poetics and literature distributed in a very different fashion. This suggests that the problem will ever elude us if we try to track relations between theological education and “the arts.” Our discussions confirm this. They were fruitful as we heard quite specific examples of particular poetry or the music of Mozart.

### **Comment Four**

We are at the end of a series of discussions and papers. Have these conferences done something that calls for something else now to be done, a next stage? Has anything happened that suggests a task now to be taken up? I raise this question not because I think there is an obvious answer but because it is an issue worth discussing. The answer will be shaped by how we resolve or identify the problem that convened the conferences in the first place. Consider the following questions.

Does one of the areas or arts we considered have priority? Does the situation of theological education call for making a priority of one of these more than others? Does the lack we discern, the reform we would effect, concern all arts in some equal way? Is it preferable to conduct future explorations on all fronts, all arts?

Does the discussion of arts and theological education require discussions of issues along the path from arts to education, issues such as arts and religious life, or arts and congregational life?



An emphasis of the conferences has been on specific instances of teaching and how an art properly contributes to that. Does the next step lie in that direction, the teaching process?

Would the theme best be pursued by eliciting the cooperation of one or more theological schools that, with Foundation help, would be willing to explore some theme identified in the conference, for instance, Nicholas Wolterstorff's "training in appropriation?"

Would it be desirable to propose the theme of the arts to The Association of Theological Schools for one of its conferences of deans and presidents of theological schools?

These are questions I think worth pursuing.



# Arguments and Allies: The Yale Consultations and Recent Writings about Theological Education

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One of my interests in the Yale Consultations on Theological Education and the Arts has been to connect them, if possible, to other discussion and writing about the nature and purpose of theological education, especially to the bibliography and series of seminars that have been sponsored by Lilly Endowment and The Association of Theological Schools under the rubric of “basic issues.” From time to time I have noticed what seem to be natural alliances between some of the positions taken in these talks and the claim staked out by the participants in the other conversations. My purpose here is to sketch what some of those connections might be

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In order to do this, I have reviewed certain presentations from two of the consultations in order to identify the claims that were made or implied for the value of the arts for theological education. I have found four such claims or arguments. Let me hasten to say that I do not offer them as an inclusive or a definitive typology—I am sure that others would find other arguments or arrange mine differently. I then try to identify what picture of theology is in play in each of these arguments and how the arts are related to it. Finally I suggest, also tentatively, the resonances in the arguments with several proposals to reconceive theological education that have recently been advanced.

*The first argument is that the arts should have a place in theological education because they are useful; they help theological educators do their work better.* Three versions of this instrumental argument dominated the earlier Yale conferences on the arts in theological education. Such arguments have not been advanced often in these discussions, though I want to mention them as a backdrop for the positions that have been taken more recently.

One version of the instrumental argument emphasizes pedagogy: the arts have value as illustrations of theological ideas and historical periods and events.

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Although theological and historical subjects can and frequently are taught without much reference to the arts, using them helps some students to see or hear better what more expository presentations mean and may give all students a sense or flavor of what is being talked about that the talk often does not convey. Though no one explicitly set forth this version of the instrumental argument in these meetings, the first comments on Margaret Miles's presentation seemed—as Gordon Kaufman notes—to assume that her principal purpose had been to show how Signorelli illustrates Augustine, putting forth the same ideas in a different form to enable an audience of Signorelli's contemporaries and now Miles's contemporaries as well to visualize what Augustine meant. (See Kaufman, p. 16ff in this volume).

A second version of the instrumental argument goes like this: contemporary culture, especially mass or popular culture, is dominated by more or less artistic ways of expressing things. In order to translate theological ideas and judgments from the abstract, propositional, verbal forms they often take to the modes of expression that most people understand, the communicators, who are often professional ministers, need to understand those modes of expression and the messages they carry. Therefore they should learn to analyze popular culture, as an aid to better communication in the midst of it. Gregor Goethals advances this argument among others as she emphasizes the importance of learning to “read” television and other media of mass culture. In our discussions the nature of contemporary culture has come up, but Gordon Kaufman and others have posed that as a challenge to theological discernment rather than a matter of translation or communication. A third kind of instrumental argument—also common in other discussions but absent here—is often advanced in favor of extracurricular programs that bring art to the campus, offering students exposure and often the opportunity to perform or even produce works of art. The claim for these programs is that they enrich; they make our life as an intellectual community better. We could survive as theological schools without the arts—that is an assumption of all three instrumental arguments, but with the arts as a sort of fertilizer, our intellectual and interpersonal relationships are likely to be more productive.

In addition to regarding the arts as optional, the instrumental arguments share a view of theology. Theology in this picture is an academic enterprise, the theological subject matters and methods as we have them, organized into fields that form the theory base for ministry. The role of the arts in relation to theology construed this way is, as I have noted, pedagogical: they can make theological teaching more effective, so that theological theory may

more readily be applied to the tasks of leadership in religious communities. Help in that application is also available from the side of the arts, in the form of an understanding of popular culture. Though it is not central to this theory-to-practice picture of theology, some shaping of students' capacities or sensibilities is certainly desirable, and the arts have a role to play in that, but such activities are firmly located outside the curriculum and often they take place outside the school as well.

*A second argument for the arts in theological education is that they should have a place because they are the principal means by which some persons and groups have expressed their theological and religious ideas.* In the earlier conferences, Margaret Miles and others argued this point forcefully with respect to social groups that are not highly literate—that they often express their deepest religious emotions and insights in works of visual art. Rebecca Chopp extended the argument: some groups that have the background and training to express theological ideas in more conventional forms—groups such as educated women becoming aware of their own oppression—may choose poetry or narrative as their means of describing experiences theology should take seriously or even perhaps of “doing theology.”<sup>1</sup> Peter Hawkins, in a presentation on poetry and in his paper on Dante (reprinted in this volume), also seemed to align with the argument that literary modes of expression are some people's first religious language, though he makes the argument not for groups that have had social and cultural experiences in common but for a particular type of person, one who has emerged as a poet.

The image of theology here is certainly not the formal activities of the established academic disciplines. Rather, theology in this picture is what Robert Schreiter calls a tradition of local or particular traditions. In such a view, a larger theological tradition that excludes some particular traditions and privileges others is less adequate, and one that is more inclusive is more adequate for both critical and constructive purposes. If the arts are indeed the primary religious and perhaps theological means of expression of some classes, cultures, or types of people, then they are essential, not optional, and their inclusion in the theological curriculum in some very central position can help to correct the biases and inadequacies of academic theology as we have it.

*A third argument for the arts in theological education is that they should have a place because they are a pervasive and inextricable element of religious practice.* As Edward Farley observed in his paper on poetics, across the span of religions and cultures the aesthetic and the sacred are found in tandem. Nicholas Wolterstorff noted that the arts, entangled in the Judeo-Christian traditions and communi-

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ties are often the explicit focus of controversies, and, as John Cook's presentation reminded us, they continue to be. Works of art are widely produced as more or less explicit religious or spiritual testimonies; those works are sometimes commissioned and often purchased by religious communities, which use them in worship rituals—themselves a sort of dramatic art that most often take place in space designed and built for that specific purpose. Preaching is also a performance of a kind; music certainly is. And almost all of Scripture takes literary forms. Art is simply there in religious practice, and it is—as this argument emphasizes in contrast to the previous one that portrays art as some people's metier—part of the life and experience of every person and community of faith.

Theology in this argument is reflection on practices—their history, structure, context, explicit and imbedded truth claims, and relation to other practices. Because the arts are inseparably a part of most religious practices, they function, as Wolterstorff says, as data for theological reflection. Those who advocate a practice-focused theology generally judge the current battery of theological studies to be truncated and incomplete, a series of theories, ideas and techniques that have been abstracted and severed from the communities of practice that gave rise to them. The arts, they would say are generally absent because they are entwined with practices. The omission has to be corrected. If theological education seeks to prepare people to lead practicing religious communities by teaching them to interpret those communities' characteristic ways of celebrating their faith and working out its consequences, then it entails the arts.

*The fourth argument is that the arts should have a place in theological education because they are a medium for doing theology.* Paintings, sculpture, poems, music, plays, dance, films are not just data about which theological judgments are made but more or less directly convey theological insights themselves. This, says Gordon Kaufman, is what Miles credits Signorelli with accomplishing: making a theological point by painting it. The exact relationship between artistic activity and theological activity is difficult to specify: Kaufman says only that “theological insight, innovation, and reflection are apparently closely bound up with a wider range of modalities of human expressiveness than is often recognized” (Kaufman, p. 17). Farley in his paper on “The Place of Poetics in Theological Education: A Heuristic Inquiry” is more specific: he delves into the reasons that the arts may be intrinsic to Christian existence, reasons that have to do with paradoxical relationships—between the concrete and the universal, and between presence and absence, and he then suggests that the arts have an essential role to play in our attempts to solve the “reality problem” from which theology suffers in its current form in theological schools.

Theology, in this argument, is a personal wisdom, personal not in the sense that it cannot be communicated or shared, but in the sense that it deeply shapes the person who comes to it. Such theology may have a critical edge as well. Miles argues that Signorelli was not only making a “constructive” point but also refuting Savanarola’s view of things. But as Farley, Kaufman, Wolterstorff, and others point out, this kind of theology has more to do with sensibilities than with the kind of conceptual capacities usually associated with critical analysis. Sensibilities must be developed for someone to do this kind of theology—to express theological insights in artistic forms—and they must also be developed for someone to understand theology done this way. The current theological curriculum not only excludes such formation of sensibilities and the arts as part of that exclusion, but is actually hostile to it because of its “field-academic” and “professionalist” biases as Farley observes. Those who mount this argument conclude that the arts are essential to any profound reform of the current curricular structure

### **Some Connections**

By now it may be obvious how these arguments are aligned with positions that have been taken in the recent literature on theological education. Those who view the arts instrumentally line up with what is still, undoubtedly, the majority of theological educators: those who do not see fundamental flaws in the four-field division and the theory-to-practice movement that arranges them in relation to each other. Though there is widespread discontent with the “effectiveness” of theological education as we have it, the general opinion is that it can be improved by finding better techniques for teaching “theory” and preparing students for “practice.”<sup>2</sup> Those who see the arts as a handy and effective tool fit easily into this pedagogical approach to reform.

Those who mount the second argument for the arts—that they are essential because they are the natural or preferred religious and theological “language” of some groups and persons—also have allies in the current literature, in critical and constructive proposals such as *God’s Fierce Whimsy*, written by a group of feminists called the Mud Flower Collective. In an earlier sorting of the recent literature, David Kelsey and I divided it into two categories, those works that argue that theological education needs a new principle of “unity” and those that seek to remake it by extending its “scope.” The second argument for the arts places the emphasis on inclusiveness and scope: the arts belong in theological education because they are the primary modes of expression of some social and religious traditions—traditions without which theological education

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is inadequate to the full range of human and religious experiences in different places and times.

The third argument—that the arts are central in the practices of all religious communities and therefore are essential data for theological studies of those practices—finds much support in the significant number of proposals to view theological education as essentially practical. These writers, who include Craig Dykstra, Don Browning, Hough and Cobb, many of the contributors to a collection called *Shifting Boundaries* that Edward Farley and I edited, and others, explicitly reject the prevailing individualist and functionalist view of practice in favor of a perspective in which all theology is grounded in and flows from the patterned activities (practices) of communities. Since the arts are inextricable from such practices, one could conclude that they must be centrally present in any educational program that, by helping students to interpret, criticize, and appropriate practices, prepares them to lead practicing ecclesial communities. This implication has not been much explored: proposals for reconceiving theological education as practical have given the arts only scant attention.

Finally, the fourth argument—that the arts are themselves theological because they are “bound up with” theology viewed as a wisdom that requires the shaping of sensibilities—has strong resonances with constructive proposals like those of Farley and Charles Wood, who argue that theological education must be reconceived as a *paideia*, a process of deep formation that produces a *habitus* (Farley) or the capacities for “vision” and “discernment” essential to “theological judgment” (Wood). In their books, neither Farley nor Wood specifies the role of the arts in the kind of theological education they advocate, although Wood’s core metaphors (vision and discernment) seems to entail the ways of perceiving and knowing that the arts entail, and Farley proceeds to make his specific case for the arts in his essays in this volume, especially at the end of “Place of Poetics” where he makes clear how radical and difficult the shift would be to theological education as a *paideia*, with the arts playing their part in sensibility-shaping.

One final comment. A notable feature of the best writing on theological education in the last 15 years has been its audacity. The books that provoked the most searching conversations have contained proposals that are, to be sure, built on solid critical and historical foundations, but these works also each take a chance on a central metaphor for reconception of the whole. Theological education should be reunified, various proposals have urged, by the concept of *habitus*, or as a thoroughly practical theological undertaking, as systematic theology (as Wood redefines it), or as a process of understanding God more



truly through the lens of Christian congregations (as Kelsey suggests). These central metaphors gain their power partly by illumination and partly, I think, because they make people anxious: if the whole thing is so reconceived, what might be slighted or left out?

So far, the conversation about theological education and the arts has produced much careful commentary, but no such bold proposal. Is it possible that art, or education in the arts, might in some way provide a new shaping metaphor for what theological education should be? The fourth type of argument seems to verge on such a proposal, but to date it has been advanced only as a sketch. I cannot even begin to imagine what a full-blown proposal with a notion of art at the center (in place of science and *techne*, the notions that currently dominate thinking about theological education) might look like. But I do have the sense that, for all the insightful critical analysis and creative suggestions in these conversations, there remains something more provocative and daring to be said about how the arts might infuse theological education with the power and coherence that so many of us are now convinced it has lost

#### ENDNOTES

1. The uncertainty here about how literature functions in relation to theology is mine. Rebecca Chopp made clear that she intended to widen the range of acceptable theological methods. Looking back, I realize that I am not clear about precisely what she meant—whether it is the reflection on and analysis of poetry or the poetry itself that is, in her view, the innovation in theological method.
2. I gathered the evidence on which this statement is based by reading a tall stack of the self-studies prepared by theological schools in preparation for accreditation reviews. All but one of the more than 20 I reviewed assumed the adequacy of the field divisions and the categories of theory and practice. From this I concluded that the critique of the assumptions and deep structure of present-day theological education, that writers since 1980 have laid out in great detail, has not invaded the consciousness of most theological educators.



# Art and Multiculturalism: Competitors or Allies in Theological Education

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With the recent attention that has been given to art in theological education, hot on the heels of the push to “globalize” theological education, the temptation is very strong for some among us to wonder: Have we found another fad that will distract us from the serious business of theological reflection and biblical exegesis? Those at the farther end of the political spectrum may wonder whether art and theology may not be distractions from the political struggles of minorities. At the very least the question arises for even an impartial observer whether there is any clear or important relationship between these two interests?

I would like to argue here that not only are these two interests related but their relationship is crucial not only to their success, but to the health of theological education. There are a number of levels at which art and multicultural issues converge. I would like to take note of three namely, those related to issues of spirituality, epistemology, and ontology, and then finish with what I believe to be the compelling way in which this relationship impinges on important theological questions.

One argument might be made along these lines: the theological community is an increasingly multicultural community and therefore any reflection we do on theology and art, if it is representative, will perforce be multicultural. Our seminary is surely not unique in the fact that more than 40 percent of our student body is ethnically non-European. This is representative of a more important reality: the number of Christians in Africa, Asia, and Latin America is now greater than those in Europe and North America.<sup>1</sup>

What are we to make of this? At the very least this means that the kinds of art we will need to reflect on will be much wider-ranging from the Wayan Kulit shadow plays in Indonesia to wooden masks of Africa. This will make the study of art and theology far richer and perhaps more interesting. But the mere mention of this variety plunges us into a level of complexity that is bewildering: how is the Christian to understand, let alone make use of, artistic traditions that have developed in very different religious contexts? What are we to make of the

fact that most Christians in these settings were specifically trained to have nothing to do with these pagan traditions (and interestingly my studies have shown that it is not primarily the missionaries who have argued this way.)<sup>2</sup> When we turn our attention to North America, different questions arise: How do the minorities here understand and incorporate the artistic traditions of their traditional settings? How do we deal with their systematic exclusion from the dominant artistic establishment in America?

It is not simply the reality of the multicultural nature of the church that is significant, but the implications of this fact for the way theology is done, or I should say for the *ways* theology is done. Anyone who has done any reading in Black or Hispanic or Asian theology is immediately struck with the fact that these theologians seem naturally to gravitate to stories and images as central to theological method. C. S. Song's use of poetry and stories in Asia is well known,<sup>3</sup> as are the images collected by Ernesto Cardenal.<sup>4</sup> An example closer to home comes from the important discussion of African-American biblical interpretation by Thomas Hyot, Jr. He points out how the historical-critical method can be enriched by an imaginative study of the images of a text. When the women approached the tomb while it was still dark, he notes, the symbolic and imaginative associations of the images used becomes critical. Black theologians, he notes, have been called pastoral theologians. This is because they use imagination in a way that, he believes, corresponds to the "fulfillment of the purpose of Scripture, which is not to give information, but to form the church and even person in it."<sup>5</sup>

In a discussion of the lectures of John Cook and Margaret Miles at the Yale Consultations on Theological Education and the Arts and reprinted in this volume, participants treated the level of spirituality as an important dimension of interaction between art and theology. It appeared that though this could be the most vital area of approach for our students, it was the least developed in the literature. Thomas Hoyt's treatment of this is illuminating because it suggests ways in which minority traditions might give image and imagination a more natural and central place in theological method. "Images," he claims, "address the person in the concreteness of life, putting one in touch with the senses in a holistic manner."<sup>6</sup> He goes on to note in *The Gospel in Art by the Peasants of Solentiname* the imaginative mode of biblical interpretation by those we consider "poor."

All of this reflects a very significant turn in our recent history that we might call "cultural decolonization." As Thomas McEvilley has recently argued, the art-world at present has drastically shifted. We are not simply post-

colonial but we are now decolonizing. People everywhere are struggling to “reclaim and reconstruct their ravaged cultural identities.”<sup>8</sup>

While I think this level of argument is important, I do not think it stands on its own. Indeed there is a danger here that must be honestly faced, especially when it is urged with enthusiasm by those of us who are only “tourists” in the land of these other traditions. Of course there is a sense that various cultures are mutually instructive, one illuminating what another leaves dark. But there is always the danger that these tourists are really seeking something in their travels that no other culture can ever provide. As Clifford Geertz wisely put it, one should not see foreign wisdom as a “prosthetic for a damaged spirituality.”<sup>9</sup> A similar caution is needed for proponents of the use of art in theological education.

One should not of course underestimate the importance of cultural tourism, much as one should not belittle gallery hopping. I suppose one could even argue for the “triumph of the tourist” (with apologies to Philip Rieff. I am constantly amazed at where our students have ended up during various breaks from classes. But there is a common temptation present in the study both of art and other cultures, that by collecting these treasures, or these exotic experiences, we are discovering the secular equivalent of the transcendent; we are perhaps even “saving our souls.”

Why does this temptation to idolatry exist? Perhaps this suggests another more fundamental way in which our argument might proceed, by turning to epistemological matters. This line of approach, in seeking the connection between the aesthetic and the multicultural, is provided by Margaret Miles. She has argued that a rethinking of the way history is constituted for us has to take place at the level of our fundamental assumptions about what is important. She asks: Is the normative activity, by which the “self” is organized, subjective consciousness, and therefore the texts that express this consciousness? Or would most people not find “belonging to a family or a social or national community, the struggle for physical necessities, or their position in the life cycle of the body, perhaps, to precede and determine their thought and activity?”<sup>10</sup> If it is the latter, then the images that reflect this level of reality are a better gauge of what is important. In the 14th century, Giotto’s emotional augmentation of the Gospels may have been more important for many than the treatises of Saint Thomas.

Whatever one makes of her critique of intellectual and political history, there can be no doubt that those she calls the “non-language users” have been systematically excluded from the usual readings of history. I still remember the

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shock of recognition when I read John Ferguson's *Religions of the Roman Empire*<sup>11</sup> while preparing to teach Patristics to my students in Asia. Ferguson makes it clear that the average person in the early centuries of the church had almost the whole of their theological learning via the images, architecture, and dramatic liturgies of their faiths. As I looked out over my classes in Manila (and later in Nairobi), I realized that what was true of that early period was still true for vast segments of the Christian community, for whom texts and writing are secondary to the communal life of practices and the stories and images that evoke that life. Interestingly, Miles frequently quotes the anthropologists to make her case, as when she approves of Clifford Geertz dictum that "it is not necessary to be theologically self-conscious to be religiously sophisticated."<sup>12</sup>

Here, it seems to me, the cultural and aesthetic merge in an important way. If it is true, as Miles argues, that unlike texts which can be abstracted from their setting and "universalized," images are inextricably bound up with their life settings. Understanding them depends on "the capacity of the viewer to grasp in the concrete particularity of the image a universal affectivity."<sup>13</sup> Images (and the practices they express) are embodied in the cultural and social logic that gives rise to them.

If understanding must be viewed in an aesthetic and ethnographic context, theology will of course be similarly reconceived, as Miles own work demonstrates. Interestingly, it is the biblical scholars with their hands deep in the cultural soil of the Bible who have been the first to notice this. Parable studies by Dominic Crossan and Dan Via have taught us about multivalence; those focusing on the social setting like Bruce Malina or Mary Douglas have made the ethnographic perspective important. And it is no accident that Amos Wilder's pioneering book on *Theopoetics* is written by a New Testament scholar whose brother is a novelist.<sup>14</sup> African-American hermeneutics has already picked up this convergence, as we noted above, and so have feminist and liberation theologians.

While these approaches have enriched our understanding of biblical interpretation, it cannot be said to have made the same inroads in theological or historical studies, or indeed on our theological curriculum as a whole. How might an aesthetic and ethnographic perspective enrich the way theology is done? Or the way theological education is conceived?

This brings me to my third and final level at which the convergence of art and multicultural issues occurs. If the first level was the level of spirituality, and the second that of understanding or epistemology, this level we might say is that of ontology. If the other levels ask how it is people orient themselves in

reality, this asks, especially for theology students, what it is we are coming to know? David Kelsey has described the goal as the true knowledge of God in all its dimensions, through the lens of actual Christian communities.<sup>15</sup> What is especially helpful in his treatment is the way he defines the arena in which this understanding emerges as the entire life of Christian communities. “Since *praxis* comprises our entire human life,” he notes, “it can be so shaped that it is itself the way to an understanding of God which may then flower into that love for God in which we are one with God.”<sup>16</sup>

I would like to argue that essential dimensions of this understanding are equally aesthetic and multicultural.<sup>17</sup> A clue to this way of arguing for the connection between these questions is provided by George Steiner. In his book *Real Presences*, Steiner argues that an encounter with a work of art or music is fundamentally an encounter with the other. On the most immediate level, of course, any encounter with art is a meeting with the human artist of the work, but Steiner’s claim is deeper and more far-reaching than this. He argues that “any coherent account of the capacity of human speech to communicate meaning and feeling is . . . underwritten by the assumption of God’s presence.”<sup>18</sup> To dare to encounter a work of art, a poem, or a symphony, he insists, is to “wager on transcendence.”<sup>19</sup>

He notes throughout the entire first section of his book that modern people have ordinarily only a second-hand experience of art or, I would add, other people. We live in what he calls a journalistic society. We study about art or people; we do research (which he calls fundamentally “parasitic”); we deconstruct. Too infrequently do we respond to the other in works of art. What would it be like, he wonders, to encounter the other in an immediate and unmediated way? Here the aesthetic and ethnographic come together in a most compelling way. Steiner argues that both encounters call forth engagement and answerability.<sup>20</sup>

Returning to the original notion of hermeneutics in Greek thought where Hermes brings messages from the gods, Steiner argues that all of us, as hermeneuts, stand between the image and others. We must respond by “answering” what we see; we are called to responsible action. That is why, he says, the best reading of a work of art is art which always enacts previous work. By elaboration we might argue that the best response to practices in others that embody goodness, are further acts of goodness. Research, or journalism, by contrast is parasitic; it feeds on the secondary, reflecting those chained in Plato’s cave watching shadows.<sup>21</sup>

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What would it be like to face others immediately, as they present themselves, not as our culture or history has presented them? Finally, what would it be like to see students as those who stand between these worlds and translate? As Howard Gardner puts this question, what would it be like to see our students not as little scientists in training, but little artists in training—better yet, to use Luther’s terminology, little Christs in training?<sup>22</sup>

Building on an important tradition represented by Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel, Steiner seems to be making the indubitable point that reality, especially for the believer in God, is irreducibly personal. This personal character makes theological study both social and aesthetic in its fundamental nature. This is a far-reaching claim and it is not possible to defend it adequately in this context, perhaps not in any context. But it is possible to show that this reading of things is consistent with recent discussions of Christian aesthetics.

Nicholas Wolterstorff in his book *Art in Action* has argued that an artist is projecting a world rather than asserting something.<sup>23</sup> Growing out of our creation in God’s image, human creatures are made to envisage a world in which we invite “outsiders” to consider the world of the work that we are making. In expressing (and confirming) a community’s conviction, the world projected by the artists may also indict this world, as Marcuse argues, while invoking a liberating alternative.<sup>24</sup> While not using Steiner’s terminology of the “other,” Wolterstorff has argued that the artist primarily communicates by projecting his/her world, opening up a possible world for us to see and respond to. While for many—Marcuse is only one example—art becomes a surrogate gospel of redemption, for the Christian it can become an instrument that reflects the fact of our redemption in Christ, and an anticipation of the shalom God is working out.<sup>25</sup> World projection, I would argue, is irreducibly multicultural as it is inevitably aesthetic.

Frank Burch Brown similarly seeks to define religious aesthetics in a dynamic and interrelated way. Rather than speaking of the art object, he prefers to speak of an aesthetic milieu, a rather wide territory with shifting boundaries. Art is critical for religious experience precisely because of its emphasis on the surplus of sense and meaning. Moreover we respond deeply and holistically to these sensory qualities, what he calls (after Mary Warnock) these “thought imbued perceptions.” As in Steiner’s notion of “encounter,” these perceptions engage us body, soul, and mind in ways reflective of our life before God. Moreover this encounter reflects a deeply human need to come to grips with a world in its goodness and evil.<sup>26</sup> So there is a fundamental dimension of our experience in the world that is both an engagement with the aesthetic “surplus”



and an engagement with the human reality of the world. Indeed, these meetings cannot be separated.

In a recent article Miroslav Volf, a Croatian and professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, has argued that the horror and the ugliness of the Balkan struggle consists in the pernicious exclusion of the other. “The hate that gives rise to stories (of soldiers making necklaces of fingers of little children) . . . is the driving force behind the ruthless and relentless pursuit of exclusion known as ‘ethnic cleansing’.”<sup>27</sup> But the horror does not stop here, because the exclusion of the other is ultimately the exclusion of God. This, Volf reminds us, is what we read between the lines of the parable of the prodigal son. The younger son wanted the father, and probably the older brother, out of his world. But somewhere in their heart, what they both wanted was not exclusion, but embrace. They wanted to be loved.

How can we embrace the other who is not only different from me, but has damaged something deep in my soul? Only by discovering, Volf argues, that the other is part of my own identity—indeed that I am created to reflect the triune character of God. As Jesus put this: “The Father is in me and I am in the Father” (John 10:38). The other I embrace is ultimately “the waiting father.”

The way to real encounter is also the way from ugliness to peace, via forgiveness. The relevant categories are both social and aesthetic, because they are finally theological. We are bound up with one another, even in our otherness, a fact even our inevitable tourism underlines. Aesthetically we act, excluding or embracing.

The use of the Balkan conflict is not incidental to our purposes. Miroslav Volf has understandably used this anguish as an occasion for deep theological reflection. How can he not? How can we not? And it is the images of the war—the vignettes he tells us of the Moslem refugee with his children explaining with dignity and grace how he has lost everything, including some of his family—that provide the occasion and the impetus for theological understanding. Texts will need to be written, but they are reflective of the bedrock truth of their lives. As Margaret Miles reminded us, belonging to a family or a social or national community, the struggle for physical necessities determines their reality.

Perhaps what we are arguing is very simple. Like the simplicity of Mark Schwehn’s recent argument about the academy.<sup>28</sup> His claim is that the entire academic project rests on values of community, humility and ultimately love (of the subject and of others around). If this is arguably true for the secular academy, it is indisputable for those of us in theological education. This argument is strengthened for those of us who seek to prepare women and men for ministry—

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that personal values lie at the foundation of all that we do. These values suggest that images and stories—and not only texts and abstract thinking—provide an arena for the fundamental encounter with the other that Jesus has called us to when he says to Love the Lord our God and our neighbor as ourselves.

### ENDNOTES

1. In 1988 the figures were 826.6 million to 594.7 million. See Andrew Walls's excellent discussion of this in "Toward an Understanding of Africa's Place in Christian History," in *Religion in a Pluralistic Society*, J. S. Pobee, ed., (Leiden: Brill, 1976), pp. 180-89.
2. See W. A. Dyrness, *Christian Art in Asia*, (Amsterdam: Rolopi, 1979).
3. See among other things *Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology from an Asian Perspective*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984)
4. Ernesto Cardenal, ed., *The Gospel in Solentiname* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1976 82).
5. "Interpreting Biblical Scholarship" in *Stony the Road We Trod*, Cain Hope Felder, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 36, 37.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
7. Philip Sharper and Sally Sharper eds., *The Gospel in Art by the Peasants of Solentiname* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984).
8. Thomas McEvelley, "Enormous Changes at the Last Minute," *Art Forum*, October, 1991, p. 87.
9. Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), p. 44.
10. Margaret Miles, *Image as Insight* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), p. 1, .
11. John Ferguson, *Religions of the Roman Empire*, 1970.
12. *Op. cit.*, p. 27 quoting Geertz's *Interpretation of Cultures*, 1974, p. 106.
13. *Ibid.*, p.30. There is of course no reason why texts may not similarly be placed in their cultural and historical contexts. The best historical study increasingly is doing both. But the traditional practice of theological education involves all too often texts responding to other texts in a bloodless intellectual history.
14. See Amos Niven Wilder, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976).
15. David Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological About a Theological School* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).
16. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

17. Kelsey specifically argues for the latter, but, as far as I could tell in this work, not the former. See, e.g., pp. 50-53 and 116-24.
18. George Steiner, *Real Presences*, (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 3.
19. *Ibid.*, p.4.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 137-39 and 226.
21. In Plato's allegory the image is parasitic on reality. The latter, in his view, can only be apprehended by thought. See the Republic, 510 (OUP, 1945, p. 225). The influence of this in Western education has been immense. The modern version of this is the proponent of the purely conventional nature of reality. This is represented by Bernard McGraw who argues that the other is always "constructed" from our own experience. It is pure projection, so, contrary to Steiner, art is not about something it is something. See *Beyond Anthropology: Society and the Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).
22. See Howard Gardner, *To Open Minds* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), p. 68.
23. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 131-54.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 79-84.
26. Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 86-109.
27. William Dyrness, "Exclusion and Embrace," in his forthcoming volume *Emerging Voices in Non-Western Theology* to be published by Zondervan Press.
28. See Mark Schwehn, *Exiles from Eden: Religion in the Academic Setting* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).



# Theology and the Arts Dialogue: Tasks for Theological Education

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A great deal of creative work is underway in defining and responding to issues that must be tended to if the dialogue between theology and the arts is to have lasting significance. To some extent, there is a parallel with the earlier and still ongoing conversations between theology and psychology, and ethics and sociology. As with these latter conversations, there remains much work to be done. In this discussion, I want to highlight several issues that I think should be given primary consideration. The agenda is selective, not exhaustive, but it does reflect major issues that are pressing. For the purposes of this discussion, I have translated these issues into tasks that I see before us.

*The first task is to engage and respond to the ambivalence of the church and the seminary regarding the power and role of the arts in the religious life.* In certain respects, this is prolegomenon to the other tasks. It is ongoing and multifaceted in focus for it means working at the theological level as well as at the institutional level; it means working with the curriculum as well as extra-curricular areas; it means working with the church as well as theological schools. It is not insignificant that the Yale program has had, as a part of its own effort, the creation of educational materials for the local church that show the significance of art as theology—one example of what the task involves.

This undertaking is not easy, for we still live with a legacy of guardedness regarding the arts and the power they have in the religious life. Such guardedness seldom takes the form of overt censorship or rejection, though such does happen, as much as a failure to claim the arts as central to the life of the church and crucial to the doing of theology. Finally, the seminary remains ambivalent and in its ambivalence cannot quite decide whether the arts should be invited into the center of activity or kept on the margins.

This ambivalence was present in the early periods of the church; indeed, even more so. The arts were very much a part of church life, but the iconoclastic spirit was equally alive and the church's early official actions—such as the Council of Nicea in 787 A.D. and the Edict of Empress Theodora in 843 A.D.—thwarted but did not stymie that iconoclastic spirit. The continental Reforma-

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tion with its fear that art would yield graven images created its own sharp tension with pictorial images as did the Council of Trent with its own peculiar form of censorship. In England and America, the Puritan spirit maintained that uneasiness with the visual arts, if not with literature. And while the 19th century saw greater openness, the iconoclastic impulse has remained alive and well down to the present. Karl Barth's statement that "images and symbols do not have any place in a Protestant church building" is not idiosyncratic to Barth's own thinking, and many theologians simply ignore the arts which is its own form of ambivalence, if not genteel iconoclasm.

There are many reasons for the church's ambivalent responses. John Dillenberger has observed that "... the impulse toward iconoclasm arises when art objects are conspicuous enough to challenge other values, when they appear to get in the way of competing claims." In this process, he says, "... art objects are singled out as having extraordinary power." It is this extraordinary power that the church has recognized and been ambivalent about—an ambivalence that has led it to embrace the arts and to censor them, to draw upon their power and to fear them all while being informed by them, dependent upon them, indeed wedded to them in a marriage that is irrevocable but not always easy.

Perhaps the beginning place in our effort to educate students and ourselves to the significance of art in the religious and theological life is to educate us to its significance in our everyday happenings. Art is not peripheral; it is central. Indeed, it impacts our lives at every turn. Expressed in high, popular, and folk forms, artistic expression is manifest by the buildings we inhabit, the stories we read, the dances we dance, the music we sing, by the films we see, the knickknacks we place on our shelves, the photographs we take, by the landscapes of our parks, and the choreography of our work and play. It may be judged good or bad. It may express the banality of our lives or the depths of our spiritual yearnings. But it is there, mirroring our own aesthetic and inviting us to explore our sense of the artful; it is there pointing to what we judge to be right and what we judge to be wrong. The beginning point, then, is to appreciate that art is an ever-present and powerful part of our everyday life. It surrounds us, informs us, angers us, confronts us, and lives within us. It is our ongoing companion.

Moreover, students need to understand that we are not only surrounded by art but are creatures who depend on our own aesthetic mode of knowing in making sense of the world. In the apprehension of everyday reality, we continually draw upon the elements of artistic form, for in the process of knowing we use artistic elements to appropriate and open up the meaning of that which we seek to understand. Perhaps aesthetic sensibility is better honed

in some than in others, but all of us are quite dependent upon our aesthetic capacity. To appreciate this, we only need to think of how dependent we are on metaphor, image, story, song, and gesture to formulate and express what we want to communicate, be it a deep feeling of romantic love when we draw upon a poem, or an understanding of God when we use narrative and metaphor to form our image of the Holy.

The conclusion from such an understanding is that art and our aesthetic sensibilities play their own role in our experience of God. I am not convinced that students would necessarily agree or that they have even considered this proposition in their own reflections. The link between the aesthetic and the spiritual, between art and the religious, is infrequently charted territory, left to the few who concern themselves with the idea of a religious aesthetic such as Frank Burch Brown in his study *Religious Aesthetics*. But if we are to take seriously one of the central questions in theological education today—the question of how we are “to understand God truly,” then we would do well to explore the link with care.

If such a case with students could be made, we could well focus on worship as the pivotal moment for both church and seminary in appreciating the significance and power of the arts. It would be difficult to find a place or time where we are more informed by and dependent upon the arts than in church on Sunday morning or chapel in a theological school. We enter a building—a structure of *architecture*—whose form is designed to invite us to worship. We move into the building down its aisle into our seats where we prepare for a *drama* of worship—an epic drama that liturgically unfolds the Christian story. In the drama we stand, sit, kneel, fold our hands, giving movement and gesture to our thoughts and words; we participate in the choreographed movement of the body; we participate in the rudiments of *dance*. We sing and listen to *music*, giving ear and voice to one of the most powerful of art forms. We listen to the *poetry* of psalms, to the *story* of parables, to the *narrative* of sermon. We are surrounded by the work of the glassmaker in the *stained glass*, by the fabric artist in *banners, vestments, and paraments*, by the work of the *silversmith, the potter, and the woodcarver* in the communion ware, candleholders, cross, in the communion rail, pews, and table. We respond to *paintings* on the wall and *pictures* on the front of the bulletin. We see *sculpture*, freestanding and carved in pulpits and baptismal fountains. In effect, we are surrounded by the arts and finally depend upon them to communicate the holiness of the moment, to point to the Holy in the moment. If we could enable students to see their dependence on art in the worship of God, they might understand the issue, at least in a preliminary way.

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Finally, however, these are only beginning points of departure, for the task requires a continuing process of conversion before we truly claim the arts, the power they have, the significance they play, the pervasiveness they manifest in what is still a context in which there is a deeply abiding ambivalence about precisely their power, significance, and pervasiveness.

*The second task is to reconstruct the history of the dialogue.* Only limited attention has been given to the theology and the arts relationship, and much of the work that has been done is relatively inaccessible. There is a need to know that history—to know who the individual and institutional actors were, what issues they dealt with, and the implications of their work for our own time. Indeed, to press the matter further, I would suggest that we need to reconstruct the dialogue's own history with these particular concerns in mind:

1. How might we construct the historical timeframe of theology's work with the arts?
2. What were the theological and cultural contexts that encouraged earlier work with the arts?
3. Which institutions were most involved: theological schools, denominations, religious publications, ecumenical bodies?
4. What were the fields represented among those who were most concerned with this endeavor: theology, religious education, worship, biblical studies, history, philosophy of religion, homiletics?
5. Who were the dominant figures?
6. What were the pivotal writings, conferences, events that shaped the work?
7. What were the theological assumptions that informed work with the arts?
8. What were the fundamental theories and ideas used in the analysis of the arts including the theoretical and empirical material from non-theological disciplines that were used in such analysis?
9. To what extent was the work institutionalized within theological schools and the church?

Answers to these questions would help us get at a historical understanding of the interplay of the cultural ethos, institutions, individuals, and specific events in the development of theological education's interest in the arts. The dialogue has its history, but our public understanding of it is limited, and



consequently, our appreciation of its breakthroughs and pitfalls are ill-appropriated for our present work. This need not be the case, but much work needs to be done.

*The third task for the theology and the arts agenda is to claim and analyze our own theological legacy.* There is a need to appropriate more adequately the work of theologians of the last generation who were a lively part of the dialogue between theology and the arts and, for the most part, were involved in the lives of theological schools and their curricula. This task is obviously related to the task of historical reconstruction, for their work constitutes a part of the history. But understanding their work is a task that can also be given its own focus and, for our own needs, should be given a certain priority.

Regarding the question of our theological legacy, I find it puzzling that the theological architects of the past generation's work with the arts—with the possible exception of Paul Tillich—have received such limited attention. The figures represent strange bedfellows at points, but they are no less important references for understanding who we are and what we are about in our own generation. From the theology side of things, we need only to think of Jacques Maritain, Gabriel Marcel, Nicholas Berdyaev, Gerardus van der Leeuw, Walter Ong, S.J., Nathan Scott, Jr., Roger Hazelton, James Luther Adams, Stanley Romaine Hopper, Marie-Alain Couturier, Tom Driver, Joseph Sittler, Amos Wilder, Hans Georg Gadamer, Marvin Halvorsen, Francis Schaeffer, H. R. Rookmaaker—to begin the list. (From the arts and aesthetics side a host of figures played their own unique roles including Alfred Barr, Robert Penn Warren, Pamela Illott, Ruth Love, Margaret Rigg, Herbert Read, Jacques Lipchitz, E. Martin Browne, Harold Ehrensperger, Peter Fuller, Suzanne Langer—to mention a few.) Paul Tillich was, perhaps, the giant among them, but without the work of Jane Daggett Dillenberger and John Dillenberger—the most important figures who bridge the two generations and whose work has so greatly influenced the current conversation—Tillich's own treatment of the arts might well remain at the mercy of those who so readily generalize his shortcomings without appreciating his contributions.

The task, it seems to me, is to identify the theologians' works and the approaches they used. To summarize the focus of that undertaking, I would suggest that we need to keep in mind the following types of concerns in our examination:

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1. What were the basic theological presuppositions that informed their interest in the arts?
2. What were the art forms that concerned them?
3. What did they seek from the arts?
4. Were they concerned primarily with theoretical issues regarding the interface of theology and the arts, with the arts as source and document for making sense of religious faith and culture, or with the arts as a part of the practice of ministry and worship?
5. What were the methodological approaches they used?
6. What was the nature of the interdisciplinary work undertaken in their own analysis?

*The fourth task is to treat the methodological questions that have arisen in the dialogue.* We need to focus on the methodological issues that are emerging out of the current discussions. Studies by Doug Adams, Frank Burch Brown, John Cook, Jane Daggett Dillenberger, John Dillenberger, John Dixon, Edward Farley, Gregor Goethals, Giles Gunn, Peter Hawkins, Gordon Kaufman, James Martin, Margaret Miles, Mary Charles Murray, Aiden Nichols, O.P., George Pattison, Nicholas Wolterstorff—to mention important contributors—have raised major issues regarding methodological approaches to the arts and the role of the arts in the religious life. I want to lift up a number of them and particularly ones that these several consultations indicated to be important ones.

1. *The power and significance of the arts.* How do we enable students to appropriate the power and significance of the arts in the church and in theological education? (I have commented on this concern above.)

2. *Theological disciplines' treatment of the arts.* How do the various theological disciplines define the importance of art for the exploration of their subject matter? Are artworks significant or necessary documents, or are they supplementary or peripheral in the disciplines' own assumptions about the role the arts can play? (I comment on this matter below.)

3. *The interdisciplinary nature of theological work with the arts.* What are the roles that arts-related disciplines such as aesthetics, art history, literary criticism, musicology, and film criticism do play and should play in the theological analysis of a work of art; in effect what theoretical insights and data from these disciplines are needed for responsible interpretation? It is this issue that introduces the question of interdisciplinary work and how serious we are in considering the dialogue a genuinely interdisciplinary venture.

4. *Protecting the integrity of the artwork.* Methodologically, how do we protect the integrity of the artwork against a deductive imposition of theological judgment when engaging in theological reflection?

5. *Art as theology.* In what fashion can we speak of a theology that relies fundamentally on vision or sound or spatial relations rather than words—a crucial question to ask when we begin to speak of “art as theology” or “art as theological statement.”

6. *The revelatory character of art.* In what sense can we speak of art as revelatory, prophetic, sacramental, incarnational? These theological rubrics are used rather easily in the literature often without defining the possibilities and limitations of their use in reflecting on artworks.

7. *A Theology of Image and/or Symbol.* In the interpretation of a work’s meaning, do we need a theology of image or a theology of symbol or both in approaching our task?

8. *The matter of “high” and popular art.* How do we move beyond the dualistic treatment of art as high and low, elite and popular, to identify their common grounding.

9. *What makes a work of art religious.* In what way is a work of art religious art? Is this defined by its iconography, or its content, or both?

10. *The encounter of the religious in the arts.* Is the “religious meaning” we “find” in a work of art the fruit of a dialogue between the work and the one encountering it, or the fruit of our discovering what is intrinsic in the work itself?

11. *The relationship of the aesthetic to the spiritual.* What is the relationship between the aesthetic experience and the spiritual experience? Is there necessarily an aesthetic dimension to the religious experience?

12. *The construction of art and theology.* How do the processes of artistic imagination and creation inform the construction of theology? How might our study of the artistic process contribute to our construction of theology?

13. *The reconstruction of theological education.* How might the full integration of the arts contribute to a new way of structuring theological education?

My hope is that this list pinpoints areas of work that we have indicated as important. We could add others to the list, but I trust that this list is at least representative of the sorts of issues we need to continue treating.

*The fifth task is that of integrating the arts within major theological disciplines.* To undertake this task we need to identify the links, the points of interdependence, the relationships among the arts and the disciplines that already exist and

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build upon those relationships. I want to deal briefly with several major disciplines to suggest the type of relationships to the arts that they might build upon.

The most obvious case where an academic discipline has concrete points of connection to the arts is that of *liturgical studies*. For the study of worship, like the practice of worship—which I noted above—involves us in the exploration of a range of art forms: with church architecture which has to do with worship and spatial relationships; with choreographed movement expressed in ritualized ways of walking, sitting, standing, bowing, kneeling in worship; with drama, which the liturgy and sermon express in their reenactment of the Christian story; with narrative and poetry that the biblical stories and psalms call us to; with music which is expressed through musical instruments, the choir, and congregational singing; with the visual arts manifest through paintings, stained glass, sculpture; with the craft arts expressed through carvings and communion ware; with the fabric arts in needlework, vestments, and banners. In the discipline of liturgies, the meaning and role of the arts in worship is a subject that the discipline itself must address if it considers in any significant fashion the form and content of worship itself. Given the fact that the arts are intrinsic to worship and liturgy, this should come as no surprise.

A related discipline where a fruitful relationship with art exists is that of *homiletics*. Perhaps the point of interaction is greatest when the homiletician considers how the creation of a sermon necessarily involves the preacher in the making and shaping, in the crafting of images, metaphors, symbols, gestures, sounds which are the elements of form central to the literary and performing arts. The link between certain art forms and preaching, therefore, is an intrinsic one, and the teaching of preaching engages one necessarily in the teaching of an arts-related activity.

In speaking of *theology*, we are dealing with a discipline whose practitioners have long drawn upon works of art in talking about the human situation—a poem, a novel, a painting, a film, a play is often used to explore the meaning of human sinfulness and the presence of God's grace. In effect, theological reflection on faith and culture has often turned to the arts and particularly the literary arts as a significant source of insight. But there is a larger issue when we speak of an integral relationship existing between theology as a discipline and the artistic process. This issue has to do with the role of the arts and creative imagination. It is most often identified with the aesthetic dimension of our lives, and the construction (the making) of theology, because the making of a work of art and the constructing of theology share important parallels. Indeed, art provides a model for creating theology insofar as art's

structural elements of form, subject matter, and meaning are also the structural elements of theology, and insofar as the artistic image—icon, narrative, metaphor, gesture, dramatic movement, symbol, mythic language—is central in the theologian’s effort to appropriate the experience of the Holy and give it expression.

To press the point, theology is artful. Its dependence on acts of imagination, processes of creation, modes of knowing and interpreting reality are similar if not, at points, the same as those of art. To see this issue more fully, we need only to look at the biblical theologians who provide us with our first theological constructions. In their writings, their subject matter is presented as image that embodies and reveals the form and meaning of a particular figure or community or event in its relationship to God. The reality of which they speak is God, and it is a reality that they express through the use of artistic image. In this process, discursive treatments of the image, i.e., rational reflection on the reality imaged only comes secondarily, only comes as a response to the image. The biblical writers, therefore, call upon image—upon gesture, metaphor, narrative, symbol—to disclose the meaning of the divine /human relationship. This priority given to image in the disclosure of Ultimate Reality suggests one of the foundational points in understanding the aesthetic dimension of theology: image is not only necessary but is prior to reflection in the apprehension of the Holy.

What is being suggested here is that theology relies foremost on artistic form in attempting to understand and “image” the holy. This does not deny that a discursive mode is also necessary, but such discursive considerations are a response, an elaboration of the core expression which is, otherwise, aesthetic in character.

One could press the exploration of this relationship of theology and art further by elaborating on the revelatory and sacramental power of art; the power of art to reveal reality, to make visible the invisible, to express through its own symbolic forms and images the reality we can know through participation in the work itself. Such power is what theology is concerned with—making the invisible, visible. Or we could explore the incarnational character of art in terms of the way art “incarnates” meaning, which is again at the heart of theology’s concern. The intersections of art and theology, the dependence of theology on aesthetic expression, the parallels between the way we make art and make theology, all invite greater examination than has been given to their relationship.

Those engaged in the discipline of *history* have focused much more in recent times on how the arts serve as texts in understanding Christian history.

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Sculpted pieces on early church sarcophagi, Orthodox icons, stories of the saints, stained glass windows, medieval drama, gothic cathedrals, renaissance paintings, neo-classical architecture, Puritan poetry, gospel hymns, liturgical dances, clerical vestments, carved crucifixes are not simply interesting artifacts for photographically or literarily embellishing textbooks. They are, themselves, “images,” “texts,” “sources,” “documents,” “symbols” of the Christian faith that are essential keys to unlocking the faith of the people, the church that proclaims that faith, and the cultural forces that interact with the church and its faith. Indeed, the study of such images gives us a fuller understanding of the contours of historical faith and how it was received by the faithful, for it gives us insight into the non-verbal, affective dimensions of the faith which we must have if we are to have the whole. These dimensions are not conveyed in the well-honed, but abstract ideas of a particular period’s academic theology. Put more boldly, the study of Giotto’s frescoes, the Book of Hours, the Bach B Minor Mass, the medieval mystery plays, Rouault’s Christ figures, the popular Catholic images of the Virgin Mary, and the popular Protestant depictions of Jesus may lead to as subtle insights into the actual faith of Christians as many of the theological tracts exegeted with such extraordinary care from similar times and groups—a point well made in Margaret Miles’s work. Certainly the study of such works serves as an excellent complement to the more traditional theological materials. To use the arts as a source in the historical interpretation of the Christian faith, therefore, invites a rich and more substantive interpretation than we have had.

I want to comment on a final discipline, that of *ethics* or *moral theology*. Ethics is highly analytical and the major non-theological disciplines that have been related to it have been those of social theory and the social sciences. It was not too surprising, therefore, in a study on the arts and theological education, that less attention was given to the arts of all the theological disciplines. A follow-up survey of members of the Society of Christian Ethics regarding their own incorporation of the arts into their work revealed a somewhat more hopeful picture. In that survey, 63 respondents from the Society judged the arts to be important to the teaching of ethics. In their responses they saw art serving in the following ways: as a source that identifies religious and moral questions individuals and societies raise; as a force that can shape our moral sensibilities and inform the development of our own moral consciousness; as a means by which our imagination can be enriched and our way of knowing developed; as a window through which we can see the complexity of the moral life; and as a prophetic voice speaking against the idolatries and injustices in the world. The most frequently used art forms were those from the literary and performing

arts, including the novel, drama, film, and video documentaries, though there appeared to be a solid interest in the visual arts, particularly when treating prophetic themes. If most in the disciplines have given limited attention to the arts, there is, nevertheless, interest enough to create a significant conversation.

We could consider other theological disciplines. These examples are sufficient, however, to suggest that complex points of contact exist between the arts and the theological disciplines, and the possibility of integrating the arts within these disciplines is a realistic one. It is, however, an item on the agenda that demands a great deal of work.

*The sixth task is that of defining and utilizing strategies that will institutionalize work with the arts on a more permanent basis.* John Dillenberger in an article entitled “Theological Education and the Visual Arts: the Situation and Strategies for Change” (*ARTS* 5/1 Fall 1992), observes that “. . . it is clear the arts do not have the place in theological education that other modalities do, such as psychology, sociology, ethics, spirituality, and other reigning theological perspectives.” But, he continues, “these too were once outside the center.” He proceeds in that article to lay out certain strategies that we might use to help bring the arts into the center. His strategies will not be foreign to us, for we have discussed several of them. I shall leave the specifics of his ideas for you to read, but here are the recommendations he makes

1. Create several chairs in theology and the visual arts in selected institutions.
2. Utilize various avenues to provide faculty members with the interest and resources in the arts as they relate to their own fields.
3. Hold conferences that relate specific topics to the visual arts and the other arts.
4. Support journals and other publications such as *ARTS*, *Image*, and books in the field.
5. Encourage the development of exhibitions of quality in theological schools.
6. Develop artists-in-residence programs.
7. Develop educational videos.
8. Create opportunities for networking among those working in the field.

I think that these strategies speak directly to what is needed if we are to institutionalize work with the arts in any significant and lasting fashion. These

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tasks are not new ones to any of us. I hope that by lifting them up, we can see something of what we need to be about. There is a great deal of work to do. Let us bend well to the tasks and support each other in the venture.



# A Willem de Kooning Triptych and St. Peter's Church

*John Cook*  
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The following account illustrates how, in one setting, under one set of circumstances in a contemporary Christian church, theological education not only has something to look at, but has a role to play in a church's ministry. St. Peter's Lutheran Church in New York City has been struggling with the repercussions of a commissioned work of art that, upon arrival, stirred the concerns of the congregation to its roots. Given the sensitive role that contemporary arts and architecture have played in the ministry of this church, the nature of this work's impact seems surprising. An analysis of the struggle suggests something about the nature of theological education today in its academic setting and in the parish.

I had followed the progress of this church since the early 1970s when its old structure was dismantled to make way for a new one and its plan included an architectural arrangement in the proximity of the Citicorp Tower at the corner of Lexington Avenue and 54th Street in Manhattan. One of our graduates, the Reverend Kenneth Reichley, had become one of the assistant ministers.

When I answered the telephone in my office one afternoon in 1984, I was not surprised to hear Rev. Reichley at the other end of the line asking me if I would send four or five color prints of altarpieces to the artist, Willem de Kooning. The artist had accepted an invitation from the Art and Architecture Review Committee of the church to create a triptych for St. Peter's. The inspiration to invite de Kooning to create an altarpiece had come to the church committee after reading an interview with the artist that appeared in the New York Times Sunday Magazine on November 20, 1983. Reichley had reached de Kooning through his New York agent and gallery owner, Xavier Fourcade, in January of 1984.

Kenneth Reichley had studied with me and knew of my interest in the history of Christian art. Clearly, the artist knew perfectly well what sort of invitation he had received and knew a great deal about altarpieces; however, he had indicated that it would be helpful to have a few selections from the history of the church's art sent to him in order to quicken his imagination.

Within a week I had put in the mail prints of paintings by Hieronymous Bosch, Mathias Gruenewald, Lucas Cranach the Elder, Emil Nolde, and Mark

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Rothko. I was becoming part of a sequence of events that continues to be intriguing to this day. It was interesting to have contact with the commissioning of a work of art for a church, especially because the church was St. Peter's Lutheran, a project I had followed with great interest from its days of planning for a new structure under the pastoral leadership of The Reverend Ralph Peterson. There had been fascinating discussions about the selection of the architect, then ongoing planning for appropriate works of art to be included in the church's decoration. There had been a seriously structured dedication liturgy for the opening of the new church building, a ceremony some of us at the Divinity School had helped to plan.

There had been the dream to create a chapel outfitted in contemporary sculpture and the commissioning of Louise Nevelson was a result. The ongoing jazz ministry and full life of the church's theater complemented the special liturgies and lecture series. There had been previous phone calls about guidelines for commissioning a cross for the building and the eventual installation of Arnolfo Pomodoro's stark and poignant sculpture that stands next to the church at the edge of the sidewalk. Exhibitions in the Narthex and other uses of the arts of many media within the ministry of St. Peter's made it seem natural and timely that a triptych should be next. I felt certain that within a short time there would be a liturgical installation and a joyful celebration. I was wrong.

"How did you finally decide to select Willem de Kooning to create a triptych for the church?" I asked Reichley. He recounted the interview in the New York Times, in which the artist said that he hoped some day to get a commission to do a religious piece. It seemed to Reichley and to the committee a natural part of their duties to invite de Kooning to do something for St Peter's. In the enthusiasm of the moment the invitation was communicated, the artist visited the sanctuary of the church in order to see where the work might be placed, and work in the artist's studio on Long Island began.

Apparently no one else in the church, or at least very few others, were brought into the process at that time. As a matter of fact, the commission was well under way and, to some, well out of hand, before all lines of communication were open and before all levels of approval had been gained. In any event, something was going wrong at the same time that an enthusiastic Committee was eagerly awaiting the results from the artist. The results of the communications and the lack of communications were going to come into view at about the same time. In a steady sequence, many meetings of many committees were called and the de Kooning affair was to take on many attitudes and many faces.

The Art and Architecture Review Committee began to feel under siege because parishioners asked questions about the committee's authority to give a commission, to select an artist, and to determine the parameters of such an important issue. The committee began to identify those who were for them and those who were against them. Reichley was identified as a self-starter and self-aggrandizing chairman. Criticisms mounted as the committee saw itself as "us against them." Quickly, those who raised questions about the wisdom of such a commission were seen to be Philistines. Sincere opponents saw the committee as the aesthetes. Rigid lines were drawn and angry words were exchanged.

At this point in the controversy the arguments were between points of view rather than about a specific work of art, because nothing from the artist had been seen. The conflict was about ideas and process, not about an object of art. The process had caught a number of the members of the church by surprise. They had not been informed about what was going on, and they felt as though something was being forced upon them. The committee had not acted on behalf of a fully informed constituency, with the approval and interest of that constituency. It allowed itself to appear as though it was doing something for the others, something that would be good for them. This unfortunately left the impression that they had an elevated level of good taste and aesthetic advantage, and should do what they were doing regardless of parish opinion. If they did not intend to be seen in this light, they did little to avoid it. And if they did do something about it, it came too late.

Process was only part of the problem. The idea of the commission was repugnant to some. The most outspoken and extreme position in this camp was voiced by the person who was chair of the Worship Committee of the church at that time, Gail Ramshaw. A scholar, professor of liturgical studies, and well-published in her field, she spoke with authority and had respect and influence in the parish. Whether she intended to be or not, she was the person to whom the harshest judgments concerning the commissioning were attributed. In the midst of the turmoil and many conversations, Ramshaw decided to communicate her position to the Art and Architecture Review Committee and Kenneth Reichley, in writing. She wrote:

**We in the Worship Committee agree with most liturgists that seldom in the history of Christendom has a church been improved as worship space by the addition of a great piece of art. In fact, the finer the art piece, the less likely that the art can serve the assembly in its attention to the liturgy.**

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The letter appears to support the removal of all works of art from public worship settings in order to avoid the presence of objects that would distract the worshiper from appropriate prayer and to avoid having anything in the worship space that would compete with the service of the word. The spirit of the letter is in agreement with some of the early reformers of the church in the 16th century who encouraged the removal and, in some instances, the destruction of works of art in churches. The letter also reflects the spirit of those who, throughout the history of Christianity, have sought to reform and purify the worship life of the church by removing visually significant materials in order to serve the spiritual well-being of the faithful. Gail Ramshaw's letter is not unusual, out of order, or shocking. It is almost predictable, given the circumstances. However, rather than working as a means toward a resolution of the conflict, the letter served as a wedge between the parties and contributed to the problem.

By this time, the two dominant positions in the debate emerged in a pattern that has been familiar throughout the history of Christianity when the role of the arts in worship has been debated. In listening to some of the claims that were being made on both sides, one could discern similarities with ancient discussions within the church; for instance, the arguments offered in the iconoclastic controversy within the Byzantine churches in the eighth century, the famous exchanges between Bernard of Clairvaux and Abbot Suger of St. Denis in the 12th century, and those heated assertions that flew between Martin Luther and Andreas Karlstadt in Wittenberg, Germany in the 16th century. In our own time, M. A. Couturier came up against resistance to a piece of modern sculpture that was created for the contemporary church at Assy, France. The work of art was a crucifix by the artist Germaine Richier.

The church in New York did not appear to have benefited one way or another from many of these previous events and heated exchanges. In some ways, it seemed to be bereft of resources and without the theological and historical perspective to deal with the problem.

At this moment in the conflict, the artist announced that the triptych was finished and ready for delivery. The Art and Architecture Review Committee decided that the painting should be brought to St. Peter's for a viewing. With some care for all parties involved, it was made clear that the de Kooning triptych would be on view temporarily in the sanctuary and that, after a given period of time, it would be removed. The painting was to be on view in order for the members to get to know it and to decide, in the process, if it should be accepted by the church should a donor who could afford to purchase it be found.

The members of the committee who felt strongly about the importance of the work, and others who supported them, made an effort to point out how important the artist was in the world of the arts, how respected he was, the level of his mastery as an artist, and how noteworthy it would be in New York City for the church to own a de Kooning. It was this last point that most irritated some of the opposition.

By now, it seemed unlikely that the painting could get a decent and honest viewing from either camp.

It was at this time that my telephone rang again, and I was invited by the pastor, The Reverend John Damm, to speak to the Church in its educational hour on a Sunday morning. I was asked to discuss Christian art, generally, and to speak specifically to the de Kooning triptych in terms of its appropriateness or lack thereof. I was made aware of the controversy that the commission had created and was warned to expect outspoken points of view.

When I arrived at St. Peter's to give the lecture, I found an audience made up of articulate representatives from each camp. After my presentation, which was received with attention and respect, a heated discussion took place. The various positions being taken were based specifically on the work of art and how it looked. To some it was ugly, "like graffiti," had no content, and seemed out of place. To others it was a thing of great beauty, "a masterpiece," and a painting of the spirit.

Following the discussion, I invited them to move from the lecture room into the sanctuary in order to view the original work in its intended setting. I was aware that my audience was listening with intense interest and critical attitudes.

I gave the following reading of the painting.

The three-panel composition carries in itself something of the symbolic force of the triptych in the Christian tradition. The shape and scale of the work signal to the viewer that this painting, in this setting, is intended to be seen in the context of the Christian tradition. At the same time, there is a new and different content to the triptych that demands another kind of reading that one would not find in previous centuries of the church. The new content is rendered in color rather than in human figures, colors that provide content, but not images that narrate a story, episode, or set of symbols out of a sacred text. Therefore, for some people, there seemed to be literally nothing to look at or to see in a religious sense. Within the context of modern art, however, the thing to see is the color composition itself, within the three panels. The congregation sitting with me in front of the panels at that moment was encouraged to find the pattern in the color combinations and the movement within the composition that appeared to be doing something.

A Willem de Kooning Triptych



The Willem de Kooning Triptych

As a first step, I asked them to notice that the triptych seemed to be composed in such a way that it could be read from left to right. If we were to follow that possibility, on the left side of the left panel there were parallel lines of red that seemed to enter the scene. As they protrude into the plane of the canvas, the red encounters areas or lines of yellow and blue. Already the careful reader of this work notices that the canvas is left blank around the colors and the colors move and swirl in thick irregular lines with varying width and intensity. The range of color is narrow, and nowhere will the painting introduce any colors other than red, yellow, and blue. And the colors will not mix or blur together. They will remain distinct and yet appear to move in relation to each other and the blank canvas. The narrative of the left panel finds red entering a field in which it meets yellow and then blue and they begin to swirl.

In the central panel, the composition is centered on a vacant space that is created by the movement of the three independent colors. Red, yellow, and blue appear to dart, flow, and encircle, as if in a modern dance around the center.

The right panel is the continuation and the end of the color narrative. From the dance-like configuration of the central panel, the three colors approach the right side of the right panel and suggest a tentative resolution of form. That is to say, the red coils in toward the center of the right panel and disappears or evaporates. Red seems to be the least important of the color values in the right panel, as opposed to the dominant role it had played in the left panel. Yellow is stronger in the right but becomes quickly transparent, and it too disappears. Only blue remains in the drift to the right. Blue endures to the right edge, and then, in some reluctant and yet decisive manner, comes close to the edge and curls back, not ready to exit, not ready to leave the composition. The painting comes to a silent void on the far right edge where the empty canvas extends beyond the ethereal wisps of blue.

If such a reading of the color progression is appropriate to the artist's intentions, then it should be seen in relation to the colors of paint that de Kooning has been preoccupied with most of his life, and in relation to the way red, yellow, and blue have been treated in 20th-century art. In this regard, de Kooning stands in a long line of master artists like Mondrian, Kandinsky, Nolde, Newman, and Rothko, who attributed certain values and references to certain colors, especially these. Red is associated with earth, blood, and life. Yellow is associated with light, energy, and time. And blue is associated with sky, air, and spirit. If one respects the associations attributed to these colors while reading the de Kooning triptych, the three panels narrate an attitude with these colors. It seems to be fair to suggest that the life element (red) entering on the left of the

## A Willem de Kooning Triptych

triptych is engaged by and engages light (yellow) and the spirit (blue) in a three-way dance. The central panel is a fixed moment in the interrelation of these elements and denotes a moment in life, centered and hovering in time. The right panel is the eventual movement of life and light into the realm of the spirit, and the spirit remains. One could say that the ethereal blue that turns back on the right is the artist's own spirit, reluctant to leave, to die.

The earthly elements enter the picture and interact with the spirit. Eventually, all is dematerialized, with only a blank edge remaining. Theologically, one can suggest that the composition reflects aspects of reality. In the beginning, the "subject" of the painting is primarily of the earth. In the end, the "subject" is only of the spirit. Translated into a life and death dialogue, the painting suggests the endurance of the life of the spirit, and in the right panel, it never ends. While nothing within the composition can be named as specifically Christian in referent, the painting appears to be about mortality and immortality. This reading may seem naive and sentimental at first glance; however, there is evidence that it is close to being correct. This evidence is based on a visit with the artist, and on two lengthy conversations with the artist's wife, Elaine de Kooning, herself an established artist.

The visit with Mr. de Kooning came on the same afternoon of the day I visited St. Peter's Church in New York and spoke to the parish about the painting. However, before relating the experience of the visit, let me say that the conclusion of the time with the parish members that Sunday morning seemed to add a dimension to the discussions, but did not diminish the intensity of the feelings around the issue. The most significant thing that happened that morning, for me, was the response of the pastor. Pastor Damm had been a patient and respectful listener to all the points of view that encircled the painting. He insisted on being available to everyone and remaining open. After my presentation and the discussion that followed, he told me that my interpretation had been extremely helpful, and he left me with the impression that I had been the first person who had given him a handle on the significance of the work and perhaps some of the reasons that feelings had been so heart-felt on all sides.

I underscore this moment in the process because it, finally, has a great deal to do with the conclusions one can draw from this scenario.

After church that Sunday, Kenneth Reichley, two members of the church, and I were picked up on 53rd Street in Manhattan by a car provided by Mr. Fourcade and driven to the far end of Long Island to the home and studio of Willem de Kooning. We were joined there by Mr. Fourcade and Elaine de Kooning. Reichley recorded the conversations and took many photographs.



The discussion was centered on Willem de Kooning's recent work, especially the triptych. I was impressed that Mrs. de Kooning and Mr. Fourcade tended to answer most of the questions we asked de Kooning, partly because his English was not entirely clear and partly because he may not have been keenly alert. It was difficult to tell which was the greater factor. In any case, when the artist was told that some viewers had not cared for his triptych, he insisted that they should come to see him, and when asked what the painting was about, he recounted his youthful years as an artist in Rome where access to the churches had impressed him, especially the world of colors that Roman churches represented to him. When asked what he would entitle the painting he said, "Hallelujah." It was clear that he valued the opportunity to do a religious commission, and that he had been sincere about hoping to do one. He did not attempt to explain his work, of course, but he was interested in our questions and seemed to enjoy the visit.

He showed us around his studio and I was immediately struck with the visual fact that the triptych was similar to a number of panels he was working on at the time. That is to say, the triptych was not different significantly in style from everything else he was working on in that year. Line composition of the triptych was, however, distinctive from the works that were in his studio. When I asked about the composition of the triptych, he recounted his experience of churches in Rome, and when I asked him about his dominant colors and their narrative force, he acknowledged that they were intentional.

This visit confirmed that de Kooning was being treated like a great artist who was in the last years of a brilliant career, and many hovered around him as though to make things clear that were unclear, or to answer questions posed to him if he failed to respond. We had come that day to convey a sense of gratitude, and if he knew the strong objections to the triptych, he did not appear to pay it much attention. Based on the visit, I felt that I had given the painting a fair reading, and as far as I could tell at the time, had not misrepresented him.

Later, I had the opportunity to repeat my lecture on the work to a meeting of the Society for the Arts, Religion, and Contemporary Culture. Elaine de Kooning attended and heard my presentation. Afterward she commented on the lecture and said that she found my interpretation to be consistent with her own, and with what she understood her husband's intentions to be.

I have recounted the visit with the artist and the conversation with Elaine de Kooning, not simply to persuade the reader, but in order to suggest the importance of taking a work of art seriously, on its own terms, long enough to be informed about it. Then, one should test one's own interpretation. The work

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that the work of art is doing needs careful attention in order to make an informed response about the appropriateness of the work for a worship setting.

As promised, the painting stayed on view in the sanctuary of St. Peter's for a number of weeks before it was removed. During those weeks, on Sunday during worship, there were those who refused to come to church as long as it was in place in the sanctuary. Some came only because it was there and only paid attention to it as they worshiped. When it was removed it was put in storage.

The cost of the painting was not a major factor in the discussions as far as I could determine. At one point, the dealer, Mr. Fourcade, had made it clear that the value of the painting on the art market was set at one million dollars. Those in the church who wanted to get the approval to install it were eager to find someone who would be willing to buy it at that price and donate it to the church. A search for a wealthy donor was underway at the same time that the criticisms and counter-criticisms were being exchanged. In the end, and as a part of the final agreement that was reached, the artist and his wife contacted the committee and announced that the family had decided to donate the work to the church. St. Peter's was free now to decide on the issue of whether to accept or reject the painting on the basis of the issue at hand rather than on the basis of cost.

But what, now, is "the issue at hand?" Recent history complicated the outcome of the work. Two dates had been set, and passed, when the triptych was to be consecrated and installed. Later circumstances also clouded the issue. Elaine de Kooning met a sudden and unexpected death. Willem de Kooning's estate was turned over to his daughter and her legal counsel. In the summer of 1990, it was not clear that the estate accepted the fact that the artist had at one time decided to contribute the triptych to the church. Also, at that time, there was public concern about de Kooning's well-being and physical condition. He was not being visited by his friends and was not being seen in public. Curiosity about his condition had been reported in the press and the status of his works as an artist at the end of his career had raised many questions that remain unanswered. In any case, the triptych remained in storage.

If, eventually, the painting were installed and standing in the sanctuary for all the world to see, there would be some sense that one side had won and one side had lost. However, at this moment, no one has won or lost. The church did announce that it would accept the painting. Therefore, for all practical purposes, those who wanted to have this painting for the church achieved their goal. However, if we were to imagine that it had been delivered and awaited installation, there would be other issues to solve. For instance, it is not clear where in the church the painting would have finally rested had it been delivered. .

Some wanted it permanently and rigidly fixed in the sanctuary, open and in full view at all times. Others wanted it set up like a moveable triptych whose panels could be opened and shut. Then the three panels could be on view on special occasions or during special sessions, but not all the time. Others wanted to hang it in a stairwell, a favorite location in the church for the exhibition of large works of art that are installed primarily for decorative purposes. Still others suggested that it might be put away in storage and brought out for special occasions. The final use and viewing of the triptych, therefore, remained to be negotiated, and there was no guarantee that the process would be easy or decisive.

Speculation is all that one can bring to the questions about where it would have ended up. But “the issue at hand” would not be resolved even if it were installed in the sanctuary permanently on view, or, as it is now, out of sight in a storage bin.

The issue at hand is defined by two facts. First, this work of art became a radically important object for the life of this Lutheran church. This scenario alone suggests the importance that a work of art or works of art have for a community of faith, whether they are supported out of a sense of aesthetic passion or are opposed out of a sense of violated piety. It is not our concern here to pose questions of why it is that works of art are important to communities of faith. It is merely necessary to repeat, on the basis of this experience, that objects of art, in relation to the spirituality of communities of faith, have life-and-death properties and are never to be taken lightly. It is also the case that a work of art is not reserved for those Christian traditions that are accustomed to having works of art as ubiquitous aspects of their corporate lives. The power of a work of art may be felt with more intensity by communities that have officially rejected the role of the arts than by others. In either case, works of art are not passive to the life of Christian communities, especially when they enter their precincts of worship.

Second, there is a disturbing lack of clarity that emerged at the outset from those who supported the commission and those who opposed it. In the entire process, there were never those who spoke directly to the work of art as the basis of their position. For instance, as I queried the committee members, I was astonished at how little attention they had paid to what the painting was actually about. The strongest supporters fell back on clichés about great art, great artists, the importance of having a de Kooning and being culturally authentic. Many of the supporters of the triptych had little to say about what it is that the painting, in itself, actually does. If more attention had been paid to what the painting is about rather than to the importance of the name of the one

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who created it, the supporters may have been more resourceful to the church that needed their intelligence, spirit, and leadership.

The opposition seldom articulated a clear negative position concerning the painting. They resorted too often to name calling and negative phrases in order to discredit the work. In an overwhelming sense, the supporters and those who opposed the work dealt with issues other than the work of art itself. Neither side gave the content of the work the attention that it deserved in order to reach a decision. As a matter of fact, the work has not yet been given the attention it deserves in order to make a responsible decision.

The conflict has yet to allow the work to speak, has yet to remain silently before the work in order to see it and to raise the serious and unanswered question about whether it is appropriate for public worship. There is no question that it is a work that is appropriate for a great museum space in the world. But, of course, to admit that a work of art is good enough for a museum is not to admit that it is appropriate for worship. Lovers of art might very well feel that if a masterpiece is a masterpiece then it is appropriate for display in a place of worship. Such a conclusion does not admit to the conflict.

The de Kooning piece must be evaluated on both sides of the issue as a piece of material culture, called a work of art, that signals a range of associations, values, and meanings. It was created to radiate an attitude. The artist created it for a worship space from his own point of view. The point of view takes into account the artist's experience as a young man in Rome. It emerges out of his memory of religiously meaningful experiences, and its source is his personal religious orientation as an artist. Its style is consistent with the other works he was creating at the same time. The triptych's shape is a universal symbol of liturgical art, and its content is a radically private world of a single artist who, through the language of color—a highly abstract language—expresses his memory. The viewer is brought into the presence of private, individual experience that, upon investigation, has religious roots and spiritual references. The turf on which we are treading when we try to come to terms with this painting is one of radical individuality, a turf that is well trodden by modern artists, and especially those modern artists we know as the Abstract Expressionists, those with whom de Kooning has been associated. In this triptych we are invited into the private vision, the individuality of an artist who has accepted a commission to do a triptych for public worship that is essentially the interior world of one individual.

The nature of the work is authentic to the concerns of modern art and those authentic concerns are laid, literally, at the altar of the Christian experi-

ence. The nature of the work is authentic to the concerns of modern art and those authentic concerns are laid, literally, at the altar of the Christian experience. The difficulty for the modern church looking at some of the best of modern art arises precisely at this kind of intersection. Art in the 20th century has celebrated what the interior world of the artist can reveal on canvas. When that self-revelation is made in a triptych, the corporate world of worship, the Christian community, is asked to take seriously the depths of one person's private vision for the welfare of the community. And that vision is narrated in strokes of color. There is no way that that can be an easy or self-evident task.

Contemporary worship, according to some traditions, seeks way to include and to celebrate the personal experiences of others for the welfare of the community. For instance, personal experiences of faith are often given a primary place in worship services. Sermons are celebrated when they include the personal experiences of the preacher. Place for private experiences of a religious sort are not discouraged in modern worship in some traditions; therefore, those who would deny a place for the de Kooning in worship on the basis of its experiential or private nature are contradicting part of what is said to be authentic to public worship in other forms.

If we were to decide that the painting would be acceptable as a form of private witness, we would still be faced with the problem of discerning what it was about. If the triptych were hanging in the Museum of Modern Art, it would be appreciated, but it would not have the advantage of the context of the church for its interpretation. To take it away from the church, therefore, is to dislocate it from its proper context of meaning. It cannot be the same in the museum as the artist intended for it to be in St. Peter's sanctuary. The church is not ready for it and the museum is not its intended home. It appears as though there is a theology at work in the work of art that challenges the church and the society to pay attention.

It must be admitted that, in this process of artistic interpretation, we are part of a culture that elevates the individual and the value of individual personal experience to the level of the holy. That part of Christian ministry that affirms persons and their experiences as authentic to faith simply has not embraced the visualization of these depths of experience by the artist. There is nothing illegitimate about de Kooning's memory, and nothing inauthentic in his artistic, painterly effort to render that in color and form. The church has simply not allowed itself to embrace this witness and to give it its proper place. I am not suggesting that we must worship works of art that emerge from the artist's

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personal experience. But there is a legitimate place in the life of faith for the artist's manifestation of his or her faith along with all the other manifestations that are embraced and celebrated by the church. Why censor the artist's memory? If it happens to be read out in color rather than in prose or piety, it is nevertheless a legitimate language. The language of form is a language of faith and it always has been. The fact that we in the church do not know how to read the language of form, that is, visual artistic form, is our problem, and it is a problem for theological education in the churches and the schools.

When our preachers bare their souls in terms of their private experiences within the context of the proclamation or the gospel, we tend to listen with interest. When the soprano soloist renders the melody and text as a personal expression of faith, we are led to worship in spirit and in truth. When the prayers of the faithful name the personal names of those who are healed of specific illnesses and named diseases, we rejoice. The faithful material language of the visual artist has a legitimate place in the annals of worship, carefully to be selected and carefully to be displayed. And the decisions about what is appropriate and when and how it is appropriate are a process of faithful understanding and ministering to be extended to those who are invited to tell, and those who feel compelled to tell, and to those who are invited to paint, sing, and preach.

It is not clear that, initially, the Art and Architecture Review Committee bothered itself with the deep and abiding questions about Christian memory and witness in the arts. But, it does seem to me, at least, that they got something better than they expected from an artist who appears to have given them a piece of his artistic soul. Those who opposed it, for some reason, did not get the point, and in the final analysis, the tragedy is that there is not sufficient evidence yet to guarantee that the artist's point was sufficiently seen or ever will be.

The pastor was surprised to note that a careful discussion of the painting gave him a handle on which to hang some decisions. The handle consisted of an artist's personal theology, as rough, abstract, and difficult as it may have been that was emerging from a canvas in three parts.

If the de Kooning triptych is ever installed in the sanctuary of St. Peter's Church in New York, it is possible that it might serve, on certain occasions, as a window to the insight of one gifted artist who had found in his youth a world of churches that was manifest in material, light, and color. If that were the case, then the work of art would not be there in the midst of the worshipping public to be worshiped as art, or as only a thing of beauty, but it would be one among many human expressions of the spirit that attempt in an attitude of worship to

point beyond all manifestations—literary, musical and visual—to the foundation and source of all our worship.

It is my hope that the triptych will be delivered to the church and that it will be given a proper place. Not the place that the Museum of Modern Art would give it, and not the place that those frightened of abstract color meanings would give it, but that it would be given a place that would allow it, on occasion, to be viewed as a statement from a Christian culture that values religious memory, suggestions of mortality and immortality, and trusts a commission genuinely offered and genuinely received.

The church cannot properly afford to ignore the contribution of a culture's genuine artists. Their spirit is not the same as or exactly equivalent to any other type of human spirituality one could name. Artists are not necessarily any better than anyone else, but it is a matter of common observation that there are those artists who, with their medium, bring to bear in a world of material culture marvelous things that inform and enrich our lives and give us sources for life. And what it is that they have to offer us cannot be gained by any other measures. God's gift to artists is a range of gifts available to the world through artists. When the church, theological, liturgical, pastoral, and evangelical, ignores the best of what artists can show us, it ignores an essential aspect of the human spirit that is known best in and through artistic imaginations, objects, and forms. When we discover those moments when the life of the arts intersects divine revelation, and we see it for what it is, we shall understand when it is that art is theology.





# The Revelatory Body: Signorelli's *Resurrection of the Flesh* at Orvieto

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Giorgio Vasari, in his *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters*, began his description of Signorelli and his work in this way:

The excellent painter, Luca Signorelli, of whom . . . we are now to speak, was, in his day, most highly renowned through all Italy, and his works were held in more esteem than those of any other master have been at any time, seeing that in his paintings he showed the true mode of depicting the nude form, and proved that it can be made, although not without consummate art and much difficulty, to appear as does the actual life.<sup>1</sup>

Signorelli's *Resurrection of the Flesh*, painted in the Chapel of the Madonna of San Brizio in Orvieto as part of a series on the events predicted to occur at the end of the world, is one of the most vivid depictions of the resurrection of the body ever painted in the Christian West.<sup>2</sup> This painting appeared as a response to an intense contemporary conflict over the appropriateness of depicting naked bodies in religious paintings. In the context of this debate, Signorelli's *Resurrection of the Flesh* presents a visual proposal for the appropriateness of including naked bodies in religious painting, a powerful visual statement which, as Vasari notes, was not missed by his contemporaries.

Consider first some religious reasons for visual depictions of the Last Judgment and the Day of Resurrection in the dominantly Christian West. I will then sketch the political, social, and religious situation in fin-de-siecle Tuscany in order to identify the context of the San Brizio Chapel Last Judgment cycle; I will also suggest that Signorelli's personal experience contributed to his treatment of the topic of resurrection of the flesh. My primary interest, however, is in the visual strategies by which Signorelli marked naked bodies as religious, the site and symbol of religious achievement, thus purposely and aggressively countering an ancient and, at the end of the 15th century, still-contemporary religious interpretation of naked bodies as signal of fallen sexuality.

Why did people of the past paint the Last Judgment at all? Why did almost every Christian church contain a depiction of the Last Judgment? This is

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a difficult question and one that can perhaps be best approached obliquely. Most Christian doctrines claim some appeal to common human experience—at least as human experience is rhetorically constructed in the societies of the Christian West. What doubter was never tempted to belief in a Creator God by an unbearably beautiful scene in the natural world? And the doctrine of original sin claimed to be the best documented of the Christian dogmas, requiring nothing more than everyday experience of human fallibility, weakness, and meanness in order to commend itself as a viable explanatory thesis. Who never—however temporarily—felt the need for a redemption so powerfully visualized and verbalized in Christian societies? And an incarnated God has seemed, to many Western people, intuitively necessary if human pains and fears were to be divinely alleviated. Resurrection of the body, however, was anomalous among Christian beliefs in having no experiential basis. What experience do human beings have of bodies and psyches that are not at risk and thus intimately and continuously oriented to self-preservation?

Given the lack of experiential models of the resurrected body, historical religious leaders seem to have found it especially important to provide people with a vision of the resurrection in order to incite and inspire them to live the kind of life that they believed would result in resurrection to bliss. Augustine had written: “Because you do not think that you *can* be immortal, you do not live so that you *will* be.” Paintings of the Last Judgment were not, for 15th-century viewers, trained in the religious use of visual images, merely a voyeuristic or an aesthetic experience. Rather, these paintings forcefully directed viewers to imagine and to begin to incorporate the blissful body of the redeemed, to weave the resurrected body into the present fragile and moribund body. Constructing, in imagination, the resurrection body was the first step toward *inhabiting* that body, however briefly and proleptically.

Moreover, the horrifying figures of the damned were not intended to shock and titillate; they were meant to create in the viewer a physical and emotional recoil from those tormented and terrifying bodies. The figures of the damned were rendered as horrible as the painter’s imagination could possibly picture them *so that* the viewer could simply *not* imagine herself inhabiting one of those grotesque bodies. The immediate contrast of the blessed and the damned was also crucial. While the postures, gestures, and healthy bodies of the elect invited, even seduced, the viewer’s identification—in longing if not in present reality—figures of the damned blocked such identification. By imagination and imitation, the resurrected bodies of the elect could become—at least to a degree—experiential. These religious interests, as well as religious and civic

leaders' distinctly this-worldly interest in maintaining what they recognized as orderly societies, made the Last Judgment an especially important visual and verbal text.

## The Historical Setting

We turn now from historical people's general interest in scenes of the Last Judgment to some of the most relevant features of the particular historical situation in which Signorelli painted the San Brizio Chapel. The years immediately preceding Signorelli's San Brizio paintings were years of religious, social, and political upheaval in Florence and the Italian city-states influenced by the cultural and political hegemony of Florence. In the last decade of the 15th century, the fiery and flamboyant Dominican priest and preacher, Savonarola, had established the theocratic Republic of Florence with the support of Lorenzo deMedici. It was Lorenzo "the Magnificent" who, in 1492, invited both Savonarola and Signorelli to Florence.

Savonarola was a reformer of doctrine and especially of morals; he has been called "the first northern European Protestant" reformer.<sup>3</sup> We will not consider here Savonarola's political program or his apocalyptic preaching, except to note that his threats of divine punishment against sinners were dramatically and substantially supported by the simultaneous appearance of plague, famine, and war which had been absent from Florence for about a generation. Savonarola's sermons of the years immediately before his arrest, torture, and execution in May of 1498 evoke terror by their violent and vivid imagery of destruction and devastation.

These sermons instigated, in 1496 and 1497, massive bonfires of "vanities" which included such items as "cosmetics, playing cards, dice, games, wigs, jewelry, perfume, mirrors, dolls"; also paintings and statuary, tapestries, and bronze ornaments. So-called "lewd books"—volumes of Tetrarch and Boccaccio—were also among the items "displayed on an eight-sided pyramid in the Piazza delta Signoria and then burned."<sup>4</sup> Savonarola also considered paintings of nudes injurious to morality, and the bonfires included, as Vasari reports, some of the most beautiful paintings of Renaissance Florence. Savonarola's harangues and arguments were apparently so persuasive that some painters—like Fra Bartolomeo and Lorenzo di Credi—even brought their own paintings to the bonfires.

But the end of Savonarola's influence came quickly. In 1497 a plot to overthrow him was discovered and five prominent Florentines were executed,

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but public feeling against him was gathering momentum. When Savonarola defied the pope's interdict against his preaching and writing, he fell from popularity as quickly as he had risen to it. His apocalyptic ideas and his vigorous effort to reform the morals of Florentines were probably less instrumental in his demise, however, than the threat he posed to the rule of the great old families of Florence. From his prison cell only weeks before he was burned at the stake, he continued to advocate a democratic government ruled by a Great Council.

The political struggle and social upheaval of fin-de-siecle Florence is important for interpretation of Signorelli's San Brizio program not only because various aspects of Savonarola's career informed particular frescoes,<sup>5</sup> but also because of Savonarola's condemnation of nudity in painting. In this context, Signorelli's Orvieto paintings represent one side of a fundamental disagreement over the capacity of human bodies to carry religious meaning. Against Savonarola, who represented an ancient Christian—largely monastic—feeling of distrust and fear of the sexual seductiveness of naked bodies, Signorelli insisted that bodies are a perfect form for religious meaning, and he demonstrated that nakedness need not signal the narrowly erotic meaning Savonarola assumed was inevitable.

Where did Signorelli gather his confidence that naked bodies belong in paintings that endeavor to stimulate specifically religious—not primarily aesthetic—emotion? He certainly was attracted to painting nudes by the Renaissance interest in classical form, established more than a century earlier by a single piece of sculpture, Donatello's *David*. But by the last decade of the 15th century, there was also a conservative reaction to the claim made by Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, and others for the compatibility of classical and Christian ideas and images.

There were, however, at least two other reasons for Signorelli's conviction that naked bodies can convey religious meaning. It is important not to disregard the religious interests of Renaissance artists in our fascination with their humanism. Concerned as artists like Signorelli were to supplement medieval Christianity with the wealth of classical thought and art, they remained primarily religious in their subject matter as well as in their personal lives. Even those who were most critical of medieval Christianity reconciled with the church on their deathbeds. And there was also a tradition of naked male figures in religious paintings, figures that signified what Colin Eisler has called "athletes of virtue."<sup>6</sup> Among others before and after him, Signorelli's teacher, Piero della Francesca, often used nude male figures to signify spiritual commitment and achievement, for example in his *Baptism of Christ*.<sup>7</sup> In any case, several

of Signorelli's own works—his *Flagellation* at the Brera in Milan, *Portrait of a Jurist* in Berlin, and the *Volterra Altar*—contain such figures, making it evident that he was familiar with the traditional depiction of spiritual power as physical *ascsis* (asceticism).

## St. Augustine's Theology of the Body

Both Renaissance humanists and Christian—especially monastic—tradition used naked figures. But there was also another source for Signorelli's insistence that naked figures have a place in religious art. Renaissance interest in the "classics" included the Christian classics. One of the Christian authors thus rediscovered in the Italian Renaissance was Augustine, not the authoritative Augustine cited by medieval authors, but a more personal Augustine—as William Bouwsma has put it, "a human being whose spiritual experience, as an individual, might be a source of nourishment."<sup>8</sup> Augustine was an important figure for Renaissance humanists precisely because, as in Petrarch's *Secretum*, he could be made to quote "Cicero, Seneca, and other Latin writers and the Scriptures hardly at all, . . . yet he was a Christian, a saint and still the most venerated source of religious wisdom in the West outside of Scripture itself."<sup>9</sup> The evidence for Signorelli's knowledge of Augustine is not documentary; it is, however, not unlikely, given his knowledge of the theology, his profound commitment to Renaissance humanism, and, as I will endeavor to demonstrate, his discussion of naked bodies in his *Resurrection of the Flesh*.

Augustine's great saga of the human race, the *City of God*, presents human beings as journeying on a long and arduous pilgrimage across the vicissitudes of present experience to the culmination and perfection of humanity in an otherworldly resurrection of the body. His frankly imaginative fantasy in Book XXII includes both the horrible damnation of those who cling to objects in the transitory world and the reward of those who fix their concentrated love on God. Although theological accounts from the Apostle Paul forward emphasized that resurrection would be to a spiritual body, Augustine initiated a tradition of speculation about the physical attributes of the resurrection body. Not one to shirk graphic description of the damned body, Augustine nevertheless reserved the final chapters of the *City of God* for a detailed discussion of the resurrection of the flesh to perfection and bliss, examining minutely the age of the resurrected body (30 years),<sup>10</sup> the power of its senses—especially vision, which will, Augustine says, be able, concretely and materially, to see God—and its sexual attributes.

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For Augustine, the resurrection body was a perfect body, a body without mortality, vulnerability, lack, or defect. Because in his society women's bodies were considered defective male bodies, it was women's bodies whose perfection in the resurrection Augustine felt he needed to explain. His discussion in Book XXII, then, begins by dealing with the allegation that because the resurrected body, according to Scripture, will "reach the perfection of manhood . . . women will become men in the resurrection." Against this opinion, Augustine argues that although "all defects will be removed from those bodies, yet their essential nature will be preserved." And, he asserts, "a woman's sex is not a defect; it is natural."<sup>11</sup>

The present female body, Augustine says, is defined by whether its reproductive organs are "used" or not for conception and reproduction. Women whose reproductive bodies are not used—who remain virgins—can "become male" by cultivating the male prerogatives of rationality and spirituality. "Becoming male" was the common expression across the religions of late-Roman antiquity of a society that could not imagine spiritual aspiration as a female prerogative. In the resurrection, however, Augustine wrote, "we shall enjoy one another's beauty for itself alone," without any need for "use." It is woman's body which is the troubling instance that Augustine must discuss in this context because, from the male perspective, it is the "use" of women, always accompanied by sexual lust (*concupiscentia*) that will be altered in the resurrection so that female perfection of body can occur.

After a detailed and frankly imaginative discussion of the size and shape of resurrected bodies, Augustine cites evidence that the human body was specifically designed as the partner of "spouse" (*sponsa*) of the soul. And, he said, it is primarily the body's beauty that reflects the soul. He distinguished between beauty and functionality. Some body parts, he wrote, have both utility and aesthetic value; some, however, have only an aesthetic purpose. Augustine's examples of physical "parts" that have only aesthetic value and no practical purpose or "use"—beards and men's nipples—reveal his predilection for the male body as a paradigm of beauty. In the perfection of the resurrection, the female body will be also defined by beauty rather than by "use." However, because it is the male body that he associates with beauty in the present, Augustine was able to picture a continuity between present male experience and the resurrection body that he did not posit for women.

Augustine's use of a male model of physical beauty interrupts a text in which he has explicitly specified that sex—male and female bodies—will be maintained in resurrection bodies. However, *gender*, the asymmetrical valuing

of male and female bodies, will be overcome in the perfection of the human race. Nevertheless, his explicit affirmation of the female body is subverted by textual strategies—example and illustration—they deny it. Given the normative male perspective assumed by Augustine and by his society, it is difficult to imagine how he might have done otherwise. I will shortly compare Augustine's textual account of the resurrection with Signorelli's visual representation of resurrection bodies, noticing some striking similarities and at least one fundamental difference.

### **Signorelli's Orvieto Program**

The Cathedral at Orvieto was begun 13 November 1290, though the facade was not completed until the 17th century and the bronze door of the main portal—depicting the seven works of mercy—was made in 1964 and put in place in 1970. The cathedral facade, begun in 1320 by Maitani and completed by Orcagna in the mid-14th century, presents an encyclopedia of Christian history and theology from creation to the Last Judgment.

Inside, the San Brizio Chapel, in which Signorelli painted, is the first chapel on the right facing the altar. Its decoration was commissioned in 1397. In 1447 Fra Angelico and Benozzo Gozzoli were commissioned to paint the eight vaults and the walls of the chapel, but they finished only two of the vaults, leaving cartoons for two others. These vaults contain depictions of *Christ in Judgment*, *Prophets*, *Martyrs*, *Patriarchs*, *Doctors of the Church*, and *Virgins*. On 5 April 1499, Signorelli, who by then had been a master painter for almost 30 years, was paid—partly in wine and wheat—the equivalent of 575 ducats to complete the design program begun 50 years earlier. On 27 April of the following year, Signorelli was commissioned to paint the walls of the chapel also. Here he painted scenes of the appearance of the Antichrist, the Last Judgment, Purgatory, and resurrections of the blessed and the damned. At the base, he painted figures of famous men admired by contemporary humanists and illustrations of ancient poems and of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

On socles at the base of the wall appear six authors—Ovid, Horace, Lucan, Homer, Virgil, and Dante—and the philosopher, Empedocles, leans out of his socle to watch the destruction of the world. These portraits illustrate well Signorelli's integration of Christianity and humanism: the subjects of the large frescoes reflect traditional fascination with the resurrection of the flesh, the Day of Judgment, and the fate of the blessed in heaven and the damned in hell.<sup>13</sup> Although the inclusion of secular philosophers, poets, and authors in this

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eschatological holocaust was startling and unprecedented, their ancillary role as witnesses is clearly designated by their positioning as passive witnesses. Only portraits of Dante—anthropologist of Purgatory—and Virgil, the poet venerated by Dante, are given visual emphasis by reiteration; nineteen portraits of Dante and Virgil appear in the illustrations of the *Purgatorio* on the socle.

On the entrance arch, scenes from the end of the world show the Antichrist thrown head-over-heels from heaven, a sign of the approaching end of the world. Rust-colored rays sweep the scene, representing God's angry judgment. Andre Chastel has demonstrated convincingly that Savonarola recently over-thrown and executed in Florence—was the immediate referent of this fresco.<sup>14</sup> Ironically, Savonarola had foretold the reign and ultimate defeat of Antichrist, but Marsilio Ficino, in an address to the cardinals shortly after Savonarola's execution, decisively identified Savonarola himself as Antichrist.<sup>15</sup>

Straight ahead of the entrance on the altar wall at left, angels lead the elect to heaven, while on the right, sinners are led by a demon with a white banner to hell. Other damned act out their despair as they see Charon's boat drawing near to ferry them also to hell. Above, two angels watch the pitiful scene impassively.

The Antichrist scene on the right wall of the San Brizio Chapel features Savonarola himself, surrounded by contemporary scenes, enumerated in detail by Chastel—executions, murders, and armed fights, incidents that happened in Florence in living memory, peopled with figures recognizable to contemporaries. Signorelli painted himself with Fra Angelico in this fresco; he and Fra Angelico observe the reign of the Antichrist from the left border of the fresco.

Next to the Antichrist on the right wall is the Crowning of the Elect. This fresco, the earliest Signorelli executed in the San Brizio chapel, reveals Signorelli's two major influences. The first is that of his teacher, Piero della Francesca, from whom he learned perspective foreshortening and solidity of form. The second, Antonio Pollaiuolo, was the first Italian artist to dissect human bodies in order to learn anatomy. The artistic result of what Antonio learned from these dissections was naked male bodies characterized by "severe modelling, strong, sharp outline, and muscular movement." The naked figures of this earliest fresco in the San Brizio Chapel, as Andrew Martindale has observed, are of "a rather stereotyped kind ....The poses were frequently dependent on antique example and their variety is severely limited."<sup>16</sup> We will notice a difference in the treatment of bodies in his *Resurrection of the Flesh*, a difference that amounts to what Martindale calls "a new canon of expression" when compared to the *Crowning of the Elect*.



Signorelli's fresco of *The Damned in Hell* has received the most attention of the San Brizio paintings for its energy and violence, its perennially fascinating brutality. Devils and damned, in spite of their grotesqueness, are still recognizably human—some of them identifiable by contemporaries. One 19th-century art historian wrote, without documentation, that the woman carried on the back of the flying devil at the center of the painting was "a noted courtesan of the time, with lust glowing in every feature."<sup>17</sup> The same art historian saw "licentiousness" in a woman at the bottom center of the fresco who is being strangled by a demon who holds her to the ground by a foot on her head. Evidently, even in hell these women are not spared scholars' projections—or, perhaps, as Sartre suggested centuries later, others' projections are part of the definition of hell!

Signorelli's *Resurrection of the Flesh* is on the left wall of the chapel. For Augustine, as noted, the resurrection body was a perfect body, a body whose primary characteristic is beauty. For Signorelli, resurrection bodies are ideal bodies, inviting conventions associated with the classical nude. Yet neither the "athletes of virtue" he painted in the background of altarpieces and portraits nor nudes with their stylized postures and gestures that he painted a year or so earlier in his *Coronation of the Blessed* satisfied his vision of the *Resurrection of the Flesh*.

I have described some political and theological reasons why Signorelli might have felt an intense interest in his subject that prompted him to paint such a novel, passionate and urgent treatment of the Resurrection. However, the sudden death of his son shortly before 1502 while Signorelli was painting at Orvieto was certainly more pressing than conflicts over politics and religion. Signorelli's son Antonio, a painter like his father, died sometime shortly before 1502<sup>18</sup> while Signorelli was painting at Orvieto. Again, Vasari tells the story:

It is related of Luca Signorelli that he had a son killed in Cortons, a youth of singular beauty in face and person [bellissimo di volto e di persona], whom he had tenderly loved. In his deep grief, the father had his body stripped naked [così addolorato lo fece spogliare ignudo], and with great self-control, without complaint or tears, he painted the portrait of his dead child so that he might still be able to meditate, by means of the work of his own hands, that which nature had given him but which an evil fortune had taken away.<sup>19</sup>

Signorelli's painting of his dead and naked son is not extant. Yet he is known to have made a practice of incorporating portraits of his friends—"multi amici suoi"—in his paintings and frescoes.<sup>20</sup> Does it not seem possible, perhaps

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even likely, that one of the figures in the *Resurrection of the Flesh* is that of his son? Unless Signorelli's painting of his dead son is found, this can never be more than conjecture, but the new sensuous tenderness of these figures supports the suggestion that Signorelli felt an increment of emotional investment in this fresco that he did not feel when he began to paint the chapel.<sup>21</sup>

Let us now examine Signorelli's artistic agenda as it is revealed in his treatment of resurrected bodies. I will begin by suggesting that Signorelli knew, or knew of, Augustine's discussion of resurrection bodies. Signorelli was a highly literate and knowledgeable "renaissance man," but it is ultimately his painting of the *Resurrection of the Flesh* itself that suggests his knowledge of Book XXII of the *City of God*. Signorelli's resurrected bodies, so like the most beautiful of mortal bodies in appearance, are nevertheless distinct from mortal bodies, marked in three ways—each of them discussed by Augustine—to specify their difference from mortal bodies. First, they are weightless bodies, freed from the earthward pull of gravity; second, they display affection for one another without the urgency of sexual lust; third, in refutation of Savonarola's denunciation of naked figures as necessarily sexually seductive, the resurrected flesh of these figures is innocent of the markings of gender socialization. How has Signorelli achieved these effects?

The *Resurrection of the Flesh* focuses on the moment just after the horns of trumpeting angels have called the blessed to resurrection. Bodies in various stages of enfleshment appear, climbing out of the graves where they have slumbered, awaiting the day of resurrection. Figures emerging from the earth are pulled by their eyes which, according to Augustine, are now capable of a corporal vision of God. Some figures have not yet put on flesh; on some—like the figure on the right standing next to the skeletons—one can still see through the flesh to the backbone, hip sockets, and thigh bone. Even the hair of these emerging figures is short, though more fully fleshed figures sport the shoulder-length hair of Renaissance fashion. The naked figures have a fully muscled body, a *real* body as Augustine had insisted, even though it is a spiritual body and thus, like the angels' bodies, weightless. Several of the figures are experimenting with their new weightlessness as they stretch out their arms to test the lightness of the air or to hug each other gently, without pressure. Here are bodies "risen and glorious," in Augustine's phrase.

Signorelli's dissociation of sexual lust from resurrected bodies is even more interesting. In order to demonstrate the visual strategies by which he had blocked Renaissance viewers' erotic interest in naked female bodies, I need to sketch briefly a method suggested by Ann Hollander for reconstructing the



Luca Signorelli  
*Resurrection of the Flesh,*  
detail



Luca Signorelli, *Resurrection of the Flesh,*

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period erotic eye. "Erotic" is not, after all, a self-evident, universal category; rather, it is a culturally defined concept that differs markedly from culture to culture. Did Signorelli's female nudes appear erotic in the Italian Renaissance?

In her book, *Seeing Through Clothes*, Hollander argues that fashions exist to specify and produce erotic attraction; thus, the "implied absent clothing" in depictions of nudes is still associated with the body. We therefore need to look at clothed fashionable figures of the Italian Renaissance in order to see what kind of a body was valued. Most Renaissance nudes, for example, exhibit the small high breasts, short waist and rounded belly that one sees on clothed figures of the time. Stylish dress featured "long, heavy skirts spreading out from below a tiny rib cage, encased in a meagerly cut bodice with high, confining armholes." Moreover, Hollander writes, "in the erotic imagination of Europe, it was apparently impossible until the late 17th century for a woman to have too big a belly."<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, heavy breasts were characteristic of witches and women considered ugly.

Signorelli's female nudes are not the erotic Renaissance female body. They exhibit neither the small high breasts nor the exaggerated belly that counted as erotic. Moreover, male and female nudes touch each other with infinite tenderness but without passion; they demonstrate neither homophobia nor heterosexuality. They clearly "enjoy one another's beauty for its own sake," as Augustine had described.

In his *Resurrection of the Flesh*, according to Augustine's instructions, Signorelli has erased gender differences from bodies that retain their sex differences. Augustine, of course, did not use the 20th-century term "gender socialization," but he did specifically identify the assignment of subordinate roles to women as evidence of a fallen condition that would be overcome in the resurrection. Equality and mutuality between women and men, he wrote, will mark the perfection of the human race.<sup>23</sup>

And gender socialization shows in the body. According to the biologist Ruth Hubbard, gender socialization, by prescribing differentiated masculine and feminine behaviors, marks bodies, creating "bones, muscles, sense organs, nerves, brain, lungs, and circulation" that are distinctively masculine or feminine. "We cannot sort out biology from social being," Hubbard writes, "because they are inextricable and transform each other."<sup>24</sup>

In order to eliminate the marks of gender socialization from his resurrected bodies, Signorelli has removed differences of posture, gesture, stance, and musculature so that female and male bodies appear equally strong, flexible, and expressive. This treatment of female bodies is unprecedented in Christian

tradition in which, as I have shown elsewhere, female nakedness symbolized sex, sin, and death; only male nakedness had signified spiritual aspiration and achievement.<sup>25</sup>

Signorelli's treatment of both male and female bodies as symbol and site of religious achievement and reward was unique in his time. The visual medium in which he worked, in fact, forced him to imagine concretely the specific resurrection beauty of female bodies. In any case, he went beyond Augustine in representing a positive female perfection of body that Augustine did not envision—as his examples of the perfect body show.

## Conclusion

Almost 40 years after Signorelli finished painting at Orvieto, Michelangelo incorporated much that he had learned from Signorelli in his own *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel, unveiled on 31 October 1541. Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* was the largest fresco in Rome, and full of naked figures. Yet despite the fact that Signorelli's visual argument for the use of naked bodies in religious painting impressed and influenced Michelangelo, it would not withstand the conservative—we might say anachronistically “puritan”—reaction of the century that began while he was working at Orvieto. In December of 1563, the Council of Trent banned “unsuitable subjects” from religious images, an order that was immediately interpreted as proscribing nudity. Michelangelo's masterpiece was overpainted to clothe naked figures; first in his lifetime by one of his own pupils; again in 1572, in 1625, 1712, and 1762.<sup>26</sup>

We can only speculate about how the Christian and post-Christian West might have been different if Signorelli's *Resurrection of the Flesh* had retained its temporary influence, if the monastic interpretation of nakedness as dangerously seductive had not triumphed in 16th-century Italy. In any event, the result of the Council of Trent's decision to proscribe nudity from religious painting meant that henceforth secular—primarily erotic—rather than religious meanings would govern the representation of naked bodies. Ironically, Savonarola's interpretation of nakedness as erotically seductive has dominated the representation of female bodies from the 16th century to the media culture of 20th-century North America and Western Europe.

Finally, did Signorelli paint what I see in his *Resurrection of the Flesh*? I have certainly used one language that was very foreign to him in discussing the painting—namely, the language of gender analysis. I have, however, also used another language—religious language—that he not only recognized but to

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which he contributed a visual idiom so rich that it was adopted by a painter of the genius of Michelangelo for the most comprehensive and compelling *Last Judgment* ever painted in the Christian West. Signorelli's agenda at Orvieto was not primarily that of a secular humanist; it was a religious agenda, the visualization of a scenario far more personally and collectively "interesting," in the strong sense of the word, than any other in his time. Signorelli's agenda in the San Brizio Chapel entailed refutation of Savonarola's interpretation of nakedness, and his treatment of female nakedness is too unusual not to have involved his conscious attention, but his own primary commitment was to the communication of the most urgent message conceivable in his society, namely, that of human beings' eternal destiny of reward or punishment. For this communication, Signorelli insisted that human bodies—female and male bodies—both are, and can be represented as, the site and symbol of religious subjectivity, aspiration, and achievement.

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ENDNOTES

1. Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of Seventy of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, Vol. II, eds. E.H. and E.W. Blashfield and A.A. Hopkins (London: George Bell and Sons, 1897), pp. 351-2.
2. Signorelli was born between 1445 and 1450 in Cortona; he died October 16, 1523, at about age 82. Although he was apprenticed at the age of 11 with Piero della Francesca at Borgo San Sepolcro, his earliest known works appeared only when he was 32. He was 60 years old when he painted the Orvieto *Last Judgment* cycle.
3. Stanley Meltzoff, *Botticelli, Signorelli, and Savonarola: theologia poetica and Painting from Boccaccio to Poliziano*. (Firenze: L.S. Olschki, 1987), p. 294.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 292.
5. As Andre Chastel argued in "L'Apocalypse, en 1500," *Humanisme et Renaissance*XIV (1952), pp. 124-40.
6. Colin Eisler, "The Athlete of Virtue: The Iconography of Asceticism," *De Artibus Opuscula. Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky*, Millard Meiss, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1961). Contrast Luba Freedman's specious assumption that nudity in renaissance paintings "denotes their pagan origin"; "Once More Luca Signorelli's *Pan Deus Arcadiae*," *Kunsthistorisk tidskrift*, LIV (1985), p. 157.
7. Without citing his source for this information—it may be gathered from the paintings themselves—Raimond van Marle says that Signorelli was familiar with "arduous theological subjects"; *The Development of the Italian Schools of Painting XVI* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1937), p. 115.
8. William J. Bouwsma, The Two Faces of Humanism: Stoicism and Augustinianism in RenaissanceThought," *Itinerarium Italicum: The Profile of the Italian Renaissance in the Mirror of its European Transformations* (Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought XIV, 1975), pp. 3~5.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Augustine, *City of God* XXII. 15: ed. David Knowles (Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1972).
11. *City of God* XXII. 17.
12. Stanley Meltzoffwrites: "Precise directions for this amplification were given Signorelli by the theologians of the Cathedral, based on episodes from the Apocalypse and the gospels of Matthew and Mark"; Meltzoff, p. 87.
13. Two of these scenes were quite unusual in the history of Italian religious painting—the appearance of the Antichrist, and Purgatory, here shown for the first time in a major church.
14. Chastel, pp. 124-40.

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15. Ibid., p. 344.
16. Andrew Martindale, "Luca Signorelli and the Drawing Connected with the Orvieto Frescoes," *Burlington Magazine* CIII, #699 June 1961): 219.
17. James Jackson Jarves, *The Old Masters of Italy* (New York: Derby and Jackson, 1861), p. 275.
18. Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite dei piu eccellenti pittori...*, ed. Carlo Ragghianti (Rome: Rizzoli, 1945), p. 966.
19. The date of Antonio's death is deduced from the fact that on 23 July 1502, Signorelli gave his daughter Francesca two acres of ground which he had inherited from his son Antonio. These acres, at Rio di Loreto, had belonged to Antonio as part of the dowry of Signorelli's first wife, Nannina, Antonio's mother; Maud Cruttwell, *Luca Signorelli* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1899), p. 124.
20. Vasari, *Le Vite*, p. 966.
21. Only two of Signorelli's life drawings from the period 1499-1505 are known to exist. Both are clothed figures: *Study of a Young Man*, since 1981 in the Walker Art Gallery at Liverpool, and *Study of a Youth* in the Uffizi. The Liverpool drawing is "both pricked for transfer and squared up for enlargement," indicating that it was used as a model for other works; Mark Evans, "A Signorelli Drawing for Liverpool," *Burlington Magazine* CXXIII July 1981): 66.
22. Ann Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (New York: Viking, 1980), pp. 98-99.
23. *City of God* XIX. 13-15.
24. Ruth Hubbard, "Constructing Sex Difference," *New Literary History* 19:1 (Autumn 1987): 131.
25. Margaret R. Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), *passim*.
26. The recent rehabilitation and cleaning of Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel did not restore the original nakedness of his figures because the plaster on which he painted was chipped away and fresh plaster laid for the overprinting.



# Sharpening Our Vision as a Mode of Theological Education

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In the preceding essays by Margaret Miles and John Cook, we are invited to consider the struggles of two very different communities as they make use of visual art in their life and worship. In Margaret Miles's discussion of an early 15th-century Renaissance parish, she enables us to see in the parish's Signorelli painting, *The Resurrection of the Flesh*, not only an image of the last judgment but a profound commentary on Augustine's views of body and sexuality. In John Cook's lecture on Willem de Kooning's triptych, we learn of a contemporary Lutheran parish in midtown Manhattan where questions arise as to how or whether a large scale piece of "great" modern art can contribute to the experience of worship in that parish. Both presentations integrate different areas of theological education in their treatment of theology, ministry, and spirituality and in their treatment of a symbolism with deep contemporary significance—the human body on the one hand and the spiritual pilgrimage of the soul on the other.

Our concern in this conference is to explore how these and similar materials can be treated in theological education. It is appropriate, therefore, to begin with a brief comment on the goals of theological education. In the group's discussion of the papers, it became clear that we were working with two conceptions of its primary aim: that of helping people do theology and that of training clergy. It would be tempting to see the former as a concern more appropriate to university, pastoral divinity programs and the latter the preoccupation of theological seminaries. While there is some truth in this judgment, it is also an oversimplification. It would be better to want both aims present in an overarching desire to see men and women develop a Christian maturity that includes a theological awareness on the one hand and sensitivity and skills in ministry on the other. In both cases we would probably agree with the medieval theologian that truth is in order to godliness. While my evangelical tradition would link godliness more closely with the call to ministry and mission, it would not want to narrow the goals of theological education to the development of ministry skills. We will return to this question at the conclusion of these comments.

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Our two case studies, it seems to me, suggest three levels at which theological education can take place in the treatment of such works of art. I am going to argue that all three levels are theological, but that each involves a different practice that is essential to theological education as we have provisionally defined it. The first level is the theological reality of the work itself. As David Kelsey in his closing statement put it: "This level attends to the data of theology as though it is present in the artifact." Again tension surfaced among the participants as to whether theology was to be conceived more narrowly as intellectual reflection on theological issues or more broadly as experiences of theological realities that may or may not include reflection. I think it is possible to specify how these works of art are theological by asking how they embody and express the desire for salvation that contemporary observers desire.

In the case of Signorelli, worshippers in the San Brizio Chapel are brought face to face with the reality of the last judgment in the context of their worship experience. But more than that, they are confronted, according to Margaret Miles, with the resurrection of the *flesh*. So, apparently influenced by Augustine's *City of God* (book XXII), the painting portrays a non-erotic, weightless but very social and mutual *bodily* existence after the resurrection. It is important that this work provides the backdrop for the Mass and Eucharist, for this heavenly tool can be said to provide a proleptic experience of this heavenly reality. As Miles argues in another place, this vision supplied images that "articulated and supported spiritual life and that directed religious affections in fundamental ways understood as essential for salvation."<sup>1</sup>

But Signorelli's painting makes a particularly emphatic statement about the nature of that salvation: it was bodily against Savonarola's proscription of nudity and the experience these believers had frequently of putrefying bodies after the plague. Rather, Signorelli reclaims Augustine's affirmation of the resurrection of the *flesh*. That is life with God in heaven—involving a non-erotic and joyous bodily state. The tradition of last things is taken much further by this visual statement.

But this is not argued discursively; it is shown, as Signorelli captures the moment when the last trumpet will sound and the dead in Christ will rise first. Margaret Miles argues that this statement influenced Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* painted 25 years later. But afterward, because of Trent and the counter-reformation, nudity was again proscribed and the religious meaning of nudity lost out to the secular. In the case of de Kooning's triptych, we are confronted with the quest for salvation in a modern mode. As Nicholas Wolterstorff argues, modern high art often fulfills a religious function even when it is not made for

a church, for many educated people “see their immersion in high art as salvific from the ills of their own ordinary experience.”<sup>2</sup>

John Cook gives support for this in his linear reading of the triptych. Beginning with the meandering red and yellow lines on the left panel (symbolizing the red of earth and yellow of light) through the tensions of the enigmatic first and second panels to resolution of the third. There the blue lines, signifying the sky, as Cook aptly notes, break out into a whisper. According to de Kooning’s own testimony, these panels are an alleluia that recalls his experiences of the churches of Rome early in his life.

But is the resolution of this painting identical with the salvation that is promised in the gospel and preached and enacted in St. Peter’s Church? Unlike Signorelli’s, this work has no causal link with the biblical and theological tradition. It would reflect the protest of those against Dizglaning’s panel who regarded, as Wolterstorff puts the protest, “this quasi-mystical ‘religion’ of high art as an illusion. Art cannot take us from the root of evil; it is not the Absolute.”<sup>3</sup> Granted the ambiguity of life is expressed in de Kooning—as it is clear that God has bracketed this despair by his grace. In any case, a consideration of the question is forced upon us as we hear about the controversy surrounding the triptych and attend carefully to what the work presents.

We cannot take this question further without moving to the second sort of practice implied by these lectures: the practice of worship associated with these works. While in the first level we were concerned with attending to the work itself, and the theology it presented, here we are concerned with the way the work may have affected the worship of the community, the way the people may have responded to the work in question.

Here we are working with supposition for we do not know exactly where the Signorelli work was placed and how it fell into the milieu of which it was a part. And the de Kooning never was in place during actual worship. But the issues are nonetheless important. For both must relate to the liturgy and play some role in embodying and supporting that liturgy. Clearly, in the Renaissance, the church had a concrete sense of the last judgment, an earthly anticipation of that consummation. Charles Scribner argues that the figures of Christ in Caravaggio’s *London Supper at Emmaus* recalls Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment* and serves as a “metaphor for the Christian promises of new life, both in the final Resurrection of all flesh and in the sacramental form of the Eucharist.”<sup>4</sup> Thus Signorelli’s painting would serve to elaborate the hope that was celebrated in the Mass. It would become a concrete elongation of that hope amidst the ever-present experiences of death and decay.

## Sharpening Our Vision

But does the triptych of de Kooning also specify the reality celebrated in the Lutheran liturgy in St. Peter's? A hint is given in the slides John Cook showed of the stylized wall and then the minister with arms raised. In both instances the symbol and gestures are lost in the design of the picture.

The larger question is whether such a personal statement can support the word and sacrament of worship. It is not simply that de Kooning put himself in the picture. As Cook pointed out, Rembrandt often did this. Nor simply that his experience is brought into the worship experience; some of the most personal preaching is also the most universal, Henri Nouwen contends. Nor does the problem lie with the fact that great art is inappropriate in a church, as the liturgy committee of St. Peter's argued. Some of the greatest art has been made for and used successfully in worship. At the very least, there does not seem to be the congruence between art and liturgy that existed in Signorelli. Is it the case, then, that art so strictly expressive of personal and subjective vision has difficulty expressing the objective witness of truly Christian art?

This question leads to our third level of practice; art can be used as a means of developing the student's own spiritual sensitivity as a part of the student's spiritual discipline. I would not want to go so far as to say that it is necessarily a means of grace. Nor am I satisfied to say that it simply develops our sensibilities, though it certainly does this. What I have in mind here is that art can make us reflect upon and can challenge or affirm our own values and presuppositions. Just as going across cultural boundaries often throws in sharp relief the unique values that differentiate us from others, so an encounter with a richly elaborated artwork can elicit deep feelings and set up resonance with many dimensions of our experience.

How might these two pictures affect one's spirituality? Signorelli's treatment of the human body comprises a tender though non-erotic treatment of nudity. This touches one of the most troublesome and deeply contested issues of the modern Western world. As the controversies associated with Mapplethorpe and the obsession with sexuality generally show, we have not built on the project that Signorelli suggested. Could the feelings Signorelli might evoke be used to explore some of the fears and presuppositions of students who confront the work?

In his lecture on de Kooning, John Cook in an aside referred to a sermon at Willow Creek Church in Chicago. There the pastor had used his own relation to his father as a basis for some of his reflections. Clearly North American Christianity exhibits an extreme preoccupation with the personal and the quest for personal fulfillment. De Kooning's work points in a powerful way to the

centrality of this quest inviting us to raise questions about its significance in our own spiritual pilgrimage as well as in our community worship. Indeed, it presses us to the question of what role does our search for God play in worship?

We can not answer these questions here, but we can suggest that raising them is central to theological education—and moreover, that art in various forms can play a role in both raising and answering them.

Both Margaret Miles and John Cook do us a service by showing in their studies how artworks can inform multiple levels of theological concern and, in so doing, become important to the tasks of theological education.

### ENDNOTES

1. Margaret Miles, "Nudity, Gender and Religious Meaning" in Doug Adams and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, eds., *Art as Religious Studies*. (New York: Crossroads, 1987), p. 110.
2. Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Art, Religion and the Elites" in Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, ed., *Art, Creativity and the Sacred*, (New York: Crossroads, 1986), p. 271.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 272.
4. Charles Scribner III, "In Alia Effigie: Caravaggio's London *Supper at Emmaus*," Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 73.



# Three Functions of Arts in Theological Education

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Throughout the discussion of Margaret Miles's paper on Signorelli's Resurrection of the Flesh and John Cook's treatment of Willem de Kooning's triptych, a second-order question has surfaced repeatedly; what is the role of the arts in theological education? In these remarks I want to explore that question particularly.

In the course of our discussion it has become clear to me that there are (at least) three distinct ways in which the arts can function, and in my judgment ought to function, within theological education. I think the way forward will become more clear to us if we keep in mind the difference among these three. As my parenthetical "at least" in the preceding sentence indicates, I do not at all wish to suggest that these three exhaust the usefully distinguishable ways in which the arts can and should function within the theological context.

One thing which might well occur in theological education, and which in my judgment ought to occur, is what might be called "training in appropriation." I think of the fundamental reality of the arts as consisting not in discriminable works of art but rather in three interlocking, long-enduring, much-contested practices of art. There is, for one thing, the practice of *producing* works of art. There is, secondly, the practice of *performing* or otherwise *presenting* works of art. And there is, thirdly, the practice of *appropriating* works of art.

These practices are, as I have suggested, heavily contested: There are raging disputes about the creation of works of art, about the performance and presentation of works of art, and about the appropriation of works of art. Furthermore, these practices change over time. The Dutch painters of the 17th century were aiming at very different things than were Duccio and Giotto. And never does a young person begin creation or performance or appropriation *de novo*; always the novice is inducted into a tradition, or into competing traditions. The novice may resist various features of the tradition into which he or she is being inducted, but that, of course, is different from not being inducted into a tradition at all. The disputes that rage are disputes about the goals of the practice—and correlatively, about the criteria for evaluating the practice and its outcomes.

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All this is a preface to saying that I think one thing eminently appropriate in theological education is the induction of students into the practice of appropriation, but not the practice of appropriating works of art in general; rather, induction into the practice of appropriating those works of humanity's art which are of special religious and theological significance. (I realize that Tillich thinks all of them are of great religious and theological significance; I am not convinced! But even if he is right, that by no means negates the need for what I am arguing for, but rather expands, alarmingly, its scope.) There is aboard the Romantic notion that one can set a work of art in front of persons and, provided they have not been inhibited, they will respond appropriately. That is nonsense. Naturally all of us, or most of us, have the appropriate indigenous capacities, but always these are tutored, schooled. An appropriate part of theological education—to say it once again—is schooling in the practice of appropriating works of art of great religious and theological significance.

I say this because we live in a society where such schooling, if it occurs at all, occurs in a most haphazard fashion. Secular art education tutors us in looking at van Gogh as representing a stunning and influential episode in the history of stylistics. What is totally missed—the point comes through vividly in Vincent's letters to his brother Theo—is the sacramental sensibility which lies behind van Gogh's paintings. Secular art education programs will not school viewers on how to look at van Gogh's paintings so as to discern this dimension; where else is such tutoring to occur, at a sophisticated level, but in Christian colleges and theological schools? There is a "calling" here, waiting to be acknowledged.

Secondly, I think it is appropriate in theological education to stand back and *reflect on* the three practices of creating, performing, and appropriating religiously and theologically significant works of art. One would want here both to understand where these practices have been historically and what they should be for us. This could be a tremendously rich part of theological education.

Here, for example, one might discuss the iconoclast/iconodule controversy that devastated the Orthodox Church in the 700s. In part this was a controversy over what it was appropriate for the (Christian) artist to create—the iconoclasts claiming that icons of Jesus were inherently heretical, the iconodules insisting that they were eminently orthodox. In part it was a controversy over modes of appropriation—the iconodules saying that it was appropriate to venerate icons of Jesus and the saints, the iconoclasts insisting that veneration should be offered only to items that had been consecrated in an official act of the church through its clergy.



Here is another example: Deep in the spirituality of both Judaism and Christianity is the phenomenon of doing something as a memorial (*eis anamnesin*) or bringing it about that some object functions as a *memorial*. I have come to think that a great deal of the art of the church that is normally thought of either in purely representational or purely symbolic terms is in fact memorial art—art designed to honor and keep before us events and persons from biblical and church history. A painting of Mary and Joseph entering Bethlehem for the census is fundamentally anamnestic art—as, obviously, is the Orthodox liturgical lament of the fall of the great city of Constantinople.

Here also one will discuss the role and function of liturgical art, for of the many ways in which art gets appropriated, this for the church is among the most important. The dominant “moral” of John Cook’s lecture on de Kooning’s triptych was that the conflict between de Kooning and St. Peter’s was one more sad episode in the long history of sad episodes of conflict between great artists and the church. It was that, indeed. But to my mind the more interesting question it raised was this: What is liturgical art? Was de Kooning’s masterpiece a work of liturgical art?

Thirdly, it is eminently appropriate in a theological curriculum to use the arts as “data” for the theological enterprise, strictly speaking. They function as data in various ways. For one thing, what was vividly demonstrated in Margaret Miles’s lecture is that in many works of art there is a theological sensibility that is coming to expression. Sometimes when we look into the genesis of this phenomenon we will find that a theory-expression model fits what was going on. The artist was aware of certain dogmas, and he or she gave visual expression to those dogmas. Probably that was true in Signorelli’s case—he was giving visual expression to Augustinian dogma. But the genesis need not always be like that. I doubt that van Gogh had read or thought out sacramental theology and was now painting the sun in a way that would express his dogmatic conviction that God was in/behind the sun. There had simply welled-up in him a Hopkins-like sacramental sensibility. If one wishes to teach one’s students in a theology course what a sacramental sensibility is like, there will no doubt be some “dogmatic” essay which one can require them to read; but just as appropriate, and probably more effective, would be having them look at some van Gogh paintings and read some Hopkins’s poems. Similarly, if I wanted to teach students what archangels are like, I would sit them all down and have them listen to Olivier Messiaen’s “Les Anges” from his suite on the nativity. Once you’ve listened to that, you know what an archangel is like. You’ll

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recognize one when you meet one! And if theologians undertake to talk about archangels, you'll know whether they're getting it right or wrong.

In summary, then, I am suggesting that there are three ways in which the arts can and should function in theological education. In such education we should induct students into the practice of appropriating art works of great religious and theological significance—and into the controversies which shape that practice. Secondly, we should engage with them in historical and critical reflections on the three interlocking practices of creating, performing, and appropriating art works of special religious and theological significance. And thirdly, in a variety of ways, we should allow works of art to serve as “data” for the theological enterprise, strictly speaking. There may well be important ways in addition to these three in which art can and should function in the theological setting. And within each of these, a number of important divisions and distinctions can be made. In my own thinking about these matters, distinguishing and keeping these three modes in mind has served to bring some clarity into what often seems a hopelessly chaotic, albeit compellingly important, domain.

# “What is Truth?": The Question of Art and Theological Education

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Discussions of art and theology inevitably run toward the abstract: to epistemology or language theory, to the nature of metaphor, to ideas about the thing rather than the thing itself. But for someone like myself who teaches literature at a theological school, it is the particular that always stands at the door and knocks. My favorite case in point occurred in my year-long seminar on Dante, when a bright but exasperated Yale Divinity School student posed a question that cut me to the quick. The interrogation came at the end of a class session on the 29th canto of the *Purgatorio*, where we saw Dante poised before an elaborate allegorical representation of the Bible, on the brink of his reunion with Beatrice. At this crossroad within the text, a third-year M.Div. student brought me painfully to the heart of my matter when she asked (herself more than me) why in the world we were spending so much time and effort on a poem when—let’s face it—we could all be studying medieval theologians or the scriptures that inform both Dante and them.

The question took me utterly by surprise. If it had arisen in one of my courses on contemporary fiction or modern poetry, where the connection between literature and the Christian tradition is less certain (or even down right tenuous), I might have been prepared. But here she was, one of my ablest students, in effect raising Tertullian’s doubt about the relationship between Athens and Jerusalem—and raising it against the one work of literary art I should have thought above reproach. Had I just finished an exposition of Yeats’s visionary cosmology, with its grab bag of Neo-Platonism, Theosophy, and Hindu lore; if we were considering Raymond Carver’s substitution of human for divine miracles in *Cathedral*; if I had just done an explication of Wallace Stevens’s “Evening Without Angels,” with its vatic assertion that “bare night is best. Bare earth is best, best”—in every one of these cases I would have been ready to allow that a theological student at the tail end of February, and in the midst of 20th-century literature’s exceedingly strange land, might well want to sing the Lord’s song instead. But while studying the *Divine Comedy*?

Despite my surprise, together with whatever hurt a professor might sustain upon having his entire vocation called into question, I was at least glad

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that the lines had been drawn so radically, and in a way that I could not dismiss as frivolous or Philistine. My student was not asking, as had others before her, that literature should pick up the tempo of a tired liturgy, or provide a fund of striking sermon illustrations, or somehow spark interest in traditional fare by introducing what was “different” and “interesting.” Hers was not a protest that Dante was insufficiently useful or decorative. No, she was uneasy with the very notion that poetry and theology could be so lawfully yoked, impatient with spending so much time and attention on something that wasn’t true. After all, why immerse herself in a fiction when she could be studying more of Aquinas’s *Summa* or even the Bible itself?

The objection that poets are liars has had a venerable (and sometimes violent) history. My student, however, was not banning poets from her republic of letters, nor suggesting that a year of Dante study would doom her to wander in Error’s endless train. She did not complain that the *Divine Comedy* wasn’t Christian, only that it was not—well, the Bible or theology. It was neither the Word of God nor the product of the schools. And yet here she was, enrolled in a seminar that asked her week by week to perform something very like exegesis: to use concordances and commentaries, to work her way through yet another unknown tongue, to pay attention to assertions of truth and authority—all of it in the service of a text that had been made up, from start to finish, by a poet.

Any serious response to such a quandary amounts to a defense and illustration of the arts not only in theological education but as theology. That I take the first step toward such a response by turning to Dante, and quite specifically to that particular moment in the *Purgatorio* that proved to be the last straw for my student, is not intended as an easy out, the choice of a text that might well be considered the “safest” addition to the divinity school curriculum. On the contrary, it is precisely because the *Comedy* has long been revered (or reverently ignored) as a “Christian classic” that objections to studying it are so telling.

To turn now to the text that proved the stumbling-block.<sup>1</sup> By the 29th canto of the *Purgatorio*, Dante-pilgrim has completed roughly two-thirds of his journey through the afterlife. Having confronted the wages of sin in hell, and then participated in their renunciation throughout the ascent of Mount Purgatory, he comes at last to the Garden that crowns the summit—the Garden of Eden. Allowed a brief time to savor its natural beauties, his attention is suddenly caught by an elaborate allegorical procession: 24 elderly men, walking two by two; then four six-winged animals, and in the space described between them, a splendid chariot drawn by a griffin (half lion, half eagle). Behind that group

comes another retinue: first a pair of old men, then a quartet of elders “of lowly aspect,” followed by a single ancient figure walking with eyes shut, but with a “keen look” upon his face. When the griffin-drawn chariot is directly across from Dante—that is, when the procession has centered itself on him—all motion stops and the canto comes to an end.

The poem does not tell us what this array of figures signifies; instead it relies on our knowledge of the Scripture and the Fathers to provide an interpretation. From the beginning of Dante criticism, there has been disagreement over specific identifications, but on the whole commentators have seen it as a vision of the Bible itself: a representation of the entire canon, from the alpha of Genesis to Revelation’s omega. Staged, we assume, by the same divine author whose Holy Spirit inspired the sacred text, the procession is given to us as an unfolding script that reenacts the Bible’s own temporal composition. Here we see configured in poetic space what was spelled out in time and history, book by book, testament by testament. To begin, the 24 elders stand for the books of the Hebrew Scriptures, as enumerated by St. Jerome in his prologue to the Vulgate. The four winged animals who come next in line are a traditional representation of the Gospels, while the company that follows upon the griffin’s chariot symbolize the rest of the New Testament: the Pauline epistles and the Acts of the Apostles paired together, the four catholic epistles (Peter, James, John, and Jude) walking behind them, and the Revelation to St. John the Divine at the very end, as the full stop of the canonical line.

With the script of God’s Book thus written out over the course of the canto (thereby presenting us with the entire “corpus” of Scripture), *Purgatorio* 29 leaves us with Dante positioned directly before the two-nature griffin and his apparently empty chariot. That ensemble provides the focus for the poem’s next, and perhaps most brilliant, act: the appearance of Beatrice stepping forward from the empty stage of the chariot—that is, from the heart of the biblical procession—in order to summon Dante to join Scripture’s witness. Affording him one revelation after another, she calls him into the prophetic lineage of John the Divine (whose apocalypse in so many ways underwrites these cantos); she commissions him, in fact, to take up his pen and write. For the sake of a world that lives in evil, he is called to record all that he sees, “to teach those who live the life that is a race to death” (33. 53-54). The entire *Comedy* is meant to be a prophetic utterance.

But, of course, it is also a poem, a work of literature, and one that draws attention to its status as a literary text precisely at the moment when it is locating itself “scripturally” as prophetic call and vision. This literary self-referencing

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occurs at several points in *Purgatorio* 29, where Dante brings into the foreground his vocation and activity as an artist. But there is one moment that is particularly telling. In the midst of describing the pageant’s four living creatures that stand for the gospels, Dante notes that each of them was “plumed with six wings, the plumes full of eyes.” After briefly mentioning a resemblance between their myriad eyes and those of Argus—a patently mythological figure from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*—he continues as follows:

A descriver for forme piu non spargo  
rime, lettor: ch’altra spesa mi strigne,  
tanto ch’a questa non posso esser largo;  
ma leggi Ezechiel, che li dipigne  
come li vide de la fredda parte  
venir con vento e con nube e con igne;  
e quaili troverai ne le sue carte,  
tali eran quivi, salvo ch’a le penne  
Giovanni e meco, e da lui si diparte. (97-105)<sup>2</sup>

To describe their forms, reader, I do not lay  
out more rhymes, for other spending constrains  
me so that I cannot be lavish in this; but read  
Ezekiel who depicts them as he saw them come  
from the cold parts, with wind and cloud and fire;  
and such as you shall find them on his pages, such  
were they here, except that, as to the wings, John  
is with me, and differs from him.

The effect of this passage is to place distance between us and the immediacy of the biblical pageant by making us primarily aware both of the poem’s literary status and of its author. Stepping back from the illusion of presence, from the starkly prophetic assertions of “I saw” that throughout the *Comedy* insist on the actuality of the vision, the poet forces us instead to concentrate on ourselves as readers, on himself as the writer of these rhymes, and on the act of description in its own right. Indeed, “a descriver” opens the digression, which then moves on to a triple (and highly self-conscious) word play on the poet’s decision to save rather than spend his rhymes. By way of economy he points us to other descriptions, first to Ezekiel and then to John the Divine. Ostensibly this appeal to other familiar (not to say sacred) texts is meant to help us imagine the exact form of the four living creatures surrounding the chariot. But rather than simply conjuring them up, the command to “read Ezekiel” has less the effect of visualization than it does of immersing us in a sea of textuality so deep and wide that it includes the wildly fantastic *Metamorphoses*

along with the Old and New Testaments It is almost as if Dante were telling us that the creatures he holds off “spending” with the coin of his language exist less as things seen than as description on paper. Calling to the reader as if across a writing table—discussing the exigencies of his rhymes, pointing us first to Ezekiel’s page and then to John’s—he forces us, if only for the moment, to forget the scene he supposedly saw in order to attend instead to the complications of his telling. Even a straightforward word like “here” refuses to stay within bounds, for the “quivi” of line 104—“such were they here”—refers as easily to the page before us as it does to the Garden of Eden where the procession “occurred.”

My emphasis on the conspicuously literary atmosphere of this passage, on the way the poet’s writing momentarily supersedes the remembered vision, is not a customary reading. The poet’s appeal to Ezekiel and to John is usually seen as a squaring of his vision with that of Scripture, so that one takes his words as trustworthy and true. If you want to know how to understand this poem, and how truthful to esteem its witness, then, reader, you have only to consider its prophetic lineage. Just as the vision of Ezekiel was reborn and fulfilled in that of John, so this seeing and this telling constitute a rebirth of the whole scriptural tradition. Even as the figure of the Apocalypse brings up the rear of the allegorical procession, so too Dante presents his vision—presents himself—as a postscript to Scripture. He is the author of a poem that is, so to speak, a third testament.

But at the same time that Dante makes these claims—maintaining throughout (as Charles Singleton has said) that “the fiction of the *Divine Comedy* is that it is not a fiction”<sup>3</sup>—so too does he make his whole prophetic enterprise intensely (and I think intentionally) problematic. He habituates us to the literary form of the Bible, which seldom if ever draws attention to its “art,” and then from time to time abjures his scriptural spell (as in *Purgatorio* 29) by emphasizing his poem’s literary status: its invocations to the Muses, its addresses to the reader, its “shop talk” about rhymes.

Nor is the problematic nature of this text limited to its mixture of writerly discourse and biblical apocalypse. For when in *Purgatorio* 29 the connection between Dante and John is first being forged, what are we to do with the poet’s observations that, while in general Ezekiel’s description of the four living creatures is to be taken as what he saw in Eden, when it comes to the exact number of their wings, then “Giovanni e meco, e da lui si diparte”(105)? Throughout the commentary tradition this line has been glossed simply with a paraphrase of its obvious meaning, as indicating a special reliance on John’s account when it comes to the number of wings. But what the line actually says

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is far more audacious. It is not, as one would expect, “I am with John,” but “Giovanni e meco”—John is *with me*. If Ezekiel’s vision of four wings has been supplanted by John’s of six, then the truth of the count is Dante’s vision in Eden. The burden of the line is that John agrees with Dante in his departure from the Old Testament prophet. What the assertion does is privilege Dante and present him as one who not only can harmonize Scripture, but can also choose between one witness and another in order to clarify what *he* saw. Authority lies with him.

How are we meant to take such claims? Standing face to face with a representation of the Bible, and aligning his own vision with that of John the Divine, the poet presents himself not only as heir to a tradition of biblical prophecy but as one who is called to reveal an apocalypse of his own. Yet, as the very order of the procession reminds us when we see the end-stopped position of the Book of Revelation, the Bible itself is a completed testimony (even if the Middle Ages continued to debate the extent of the canon). Despite the divine inspiration freely accorded the Fathers, not to mention the Joachimite expectation of a “Living Evangel” still to be revealed, Dante’s pageant suggests that for him, at least, the last word of the Bible itself had been spoken. What then is his position vis-a-vis that closed Book?

What was he doing? I know of no one who actually takes Dante at his word, as the poem asks us to, and indeed as did the naive ladies of Verona described by Boccaccio, who scurried across the street to avoid the man who had been to hell. There have been some (T.S. Eliot among them) who believe that the poet had visions and that he then translated them into the fictional framework of a hundred canto poem. But all we really have to go on is the sustained claim of the *Comedy* itself—and the dedicatory epistle sent to his patron, Can Grande della Scala, in which (with astounding ease) he proclaims that his work should be read on the literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical levels, that is, read according to a well-established fourfold exegesis that everyone held to be the exclusive prerogative of Scripture, including no less powerful an authority than Thomas Aquinas.

In fact, facing a strong Dominican attack against the claims of poetry to possess cognitive value—it was Thomas, after all, who considered poetry *infirma doctrina*—Dante responded with a work he called a “poema sacro” (Paradise 25. 1), a fiction that is so sure of the truth it has to tell that it claimed for itself, a work of art, the authority not of human imagination alone but of divine revelation. Prophets, of course, have always used the language of poetry to deliver the word of the Lord; but here was one who claimed that poetry itself could take on that task, and precisely as poetry.<sup>4</sup>



What then shall we say to this? Did Dante enter the Garden of Eden, witness an allegorical representation of the Scripture, and receive from the beatified soul of his earthly love a heavenly commission to write the *Comedy*? No, I think, he did not. But because Dante believed that what he had in fact received from God was none other than God's Word, a vision meant to convert those "who live the life that is a race to death" (*Purgatorio* 33.54), he would dare to claim that the whole of his imagined journey was a historical account. He would dare, even as he drew attention to his poetic process and achievement, to stage his own prophetic call, to initiate himself into that blessed company of witnesses that stretches from Moses to Paul to John the Divine—all in order to offer a fiction that presents itself, as fiction, to be nothing less than the gospel truth.

What is truth? The history of Dante criticism suggests that one must choose between the poet or the theologian, between literary fiction or biblical verity. It presents us with an Either/Or that Kierkegaard, in another context, examines with such clarity. In his essay "On the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle," Kierkegaard launches a spectacular attack on those aesthetes who would commend St. Paul for the beauty of his prose, warning them that when an apostle became aestheticized, "then—good night, Christianity! *Esprit* and the Spirit, revelation and originality, a call from God and genius, all end by meaning more or less the same thing."<sup>5</sup> Kierkegaard, of course, refuses this merger. A genius is born, an apostle called; the genius creates his authority by talent and charm, the apostle quite simply receives it; the poet writes without an "in order that," while the apostle is driven by a sense of mission that has nothing to do with art or imagination. Having drawn the lines, Kierkegaard then assumes the voice of the apostle Paul in an imagined response to the celebration of his literary style:

You must realize that what I say was entrusted to me  
by a revelation, so that it is God Himself or the Lord  
Jesus Christ who speaks, and you must not presumptuously  
set about criticizing the form. I cannot compel you to  
obey, but through your relation to God in your conscience  
I make you eternally responsible to God, eternally  
responsible for your relation to this doctrine, by having  
proclaimed it as revealed to me, and consequently pro-  
claimed it with divine authority.<sup>6</sup>

To the pious or compliant reader of the *Comedy*, Kierkegaard's "Pauline" protest is the voice of Dante the theologian, the scribe of God who tenders his sacred poem to the world as having been commissioned by heaven—a work not

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only to be read, but to be proclaimed with something like divine authority. To the sophisticated literary critic, this same voice is a ploy, a strategic convention used by the poet to construct what eye had not seen nor ear heard in verse, and in a newly invented Italian that in some sense was Dante’s own creation. To the one reader, the poet is an apostle; to the other, a genius.

And yet it strikes me that what is so distinctively problematic about the author of the *Comedy* is the impossibility of judging him or his work according to an Either/Or. For rather like Kierkegaard himself—an apostolic genius *malgre lui*—Dante resists a settling of his accounts either as theology or as literature. Apostolic truth is proclaimed at the same time that genius draws attention to its maneuvers, while the Word of the Lord is delivered by one who expects the reader not only to note but to admire his style. Revelation and originality refuse to be separated, thereby giving rise to a sustained tension that the poet never manages (and perhaps never intended) to resolve. It is as if Dante had placed us within the powerful field of force generated by his double identity as genius and apostle, thereby demanding of us a reevaluation of what art can do and be. And it is for this reason that, despite the monumental stability of his massive poetic achievement, we see the poet best when we imagine him balanced precariously on a tight rope of his own making. Yes, Dante *Theologus-Poeta*: a tight rope walker standing neither here nor there, but instead negotiating the precarious air between Either and Or—a brinksman aware both of the high calling of the gospel and of the spellbinding power of his poetic art.

In the end, however, I must return to the still small voice of a divinity school student, who asks why she should read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest a *poem* when her time might better be spent searching the Word of God or its theological expositors. If I were answering this question in terms of 20th-century literature, which includes some works conceived deeply within the biblical tradition but which is largely an exploration of its afterglow, I might want to make a case for how the arts reveal the temper of the present age: its refusal of faith, its substitutions for it, its longing to plumb the depths of human mystery for which there no longer seem to be adequate words or symbols.

I might also argue that biblical studies and theology, although inevitably touched by the larger cultural climate in which we live, are nonetheless caught up in what is primarily an academic (and coterie) discourse that has little to do with the way believers read Scripture or how they understand their experience theologically; that such study (like literary criticism) is largely cut off from what Wallace Stevens speaks of “the finding of a satisfaction ... finding/What will suffice.”<sup>7</sup>

More could be explored along these lines, which might well serve as a literature professor's *apologia pro vita qua*. But what I am concerned with here is the problem posed quite specifically by Dante: the problem of what biblically-minded people do, on the one hand, with a closed canon, and, on the other, with the ongoing experience, the ongoing revelation, of God. By and large we seem to have accepted a quasi-canonical and inspired status for liturgical texts, for some hymns (often quoted in sermons as if they were Scripture), and for certain theological writers (the Fathers for most Christians, Aquinas for Roman Catholics, Luther and Calvin for Protestants of those persuasions, the Book of Common Prayer for Anglicans). I have never heard a student balk at the time and attention paid to those texts, even though I do not think any would claim them as the Word of God. And yet when it comes to fiction, the eyebrow is raised.

Why? In the case of Dante's "sacred poem," with its contamination of biblical and secular literature, its confusion of poetic "fiction" and theological "truth," it may be that what the *Comedy* offers is the unacceptable assertion that human art can be nothing less than sacred theology. For Dante offers us a fiction that not only risks continuing the Bible's own work, but does so with a self-conscious attention to literary medium and technique that invariably distinguishes poetry and fiction from other kinds of language. Although the poem makes use of theological modes that place it squarely in the handmaidenly line of medieval didactic verse exegesis of biblical text, exposition of doctrine, even the adjudication of one doctrinal position over another; nonetheless, its primary strategy is that of literary narrative: the telling of story, the making of metaphor, the reinvention of a received tradition in new configurations that are as allusive to literary history as they are to Scripture and tradition.

For Dante, this meant the reinterpretation of the sacred text in a poem at once sacred and secular: a hundred-canto Midrash of the imagination that asks to be taken as seriously as the holy Book which it is not. Blurring the distinctions between his own literary work and that of the inspired writers, Dante places himself in a typological succession of testaments, taking (for instance) the Exodus of Israel and the resurrection of Christ as subtexts for his own epic narrative of liberation, and showing them fulfilled in a personal story that is uniquely his own and, at the same time, a Christian narrative of salvation set squarely in the middle of the journey of our life.

Such claims are disturbing, but what may make them especially so in the context of a seminary education? Indeed, what may cause a divinity school student to stumble? It is the possibility that Dante's construction of a prophetic

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poem, a fictional scripture, raises so many questions about the Bible itself, at least for a post-Enlightenment reader with a certain education. For how much of the Scripture is verifiably true in terms of what did or did not happen as described? How extensively is the New Testament shaped not by actual events but by Old Testament texts? How much closer can we get to Jesus of Nazareth than to the “historical Beatrice”? How is the truth of any narrative to be ascertained? What constitutes the Holy Spirit’s inspiration? How is a canon formed, and what makes the Song of Songs or the Apocalypse sacred texts and the *Comedy*, for instance, not?<sup>8</sup>

Or to turn from script to scribe, how does any voice crying in the wilderness, be it outside Jerusalem or before the locked gates of Florence, become a true prophet? And if it could ever be conceded that a poet might fill that bill, how is it determined that a prophet is true or false, God’s witness or a singer of the self, an authority worth following or a merely edifying diversion finally left on a shelf marked Fiction? Furthermore, allowing for a moment the possibility of a *Theologus-Poeta*, might it be that as many laypeople have been led to know God (and in that sense to have received a theological education) from reading Dante’s poem as by study of the *Summa*? And if, for the sake of argument, the *Comedy* were considered to have proved as “evangelical” as the work of Aquinas, might that make Dante as important a theologian in his way as the angelic doctor? Might not narrative fiction even be more responsive (and in that sense more responsible) to the legacy of Scripture than, say, the *quodlibets* of scholastic theology? The point of such hypothetical questions is not to glorify poets at the expense of Schoolmen, nor is it to choose between them. Dante, of course, did neither. Rather, it is to wonder why the study of poetry should remain outside the theological curriculum, as if it were not itself (among other things) a theological discourse.

It may well be, of course, that Dante is a limit case with respect to the slippage between sacred and secular scriptures. Not even Milton, who writes another Genesis, approaches the audacity of Dante’s claims or the eschatological fervor of his appeals to the reader. Nonetheless, Dante’s extreme and possibly unique achievement can point more generally to what David Tracy has called “the fact of the need for fiction”: the need for inventions of the imagination to “redescribe our human reality in such disclosive terms that we return to the ‘everyday’ reoriented to life’s real—if forgotten or sometimes never even imagined—possibilities.”<sup>9</sup> The idea of voyages to hell or purgatory, like visions of God, were far more a part of “everyday” reality in 1300 than they are for us; so too was the power of the church and the urgency of theological controversy.

But what has remained stable is the need for fiction to question the truth and (as Emily Dickinson said) to tell its “slant.” There is a need, that is, for some inventive space in which theology can exercise more than its analytic mind; in which the biblical legacy can be allowed to breathe more freely; in which the tradition can continue to live and move and have its being all renewed. For theological education to cut itself off from this earnest and sublime play is not only to neglect ways in which Christians have done theology in the past—in image, architecture, and sound, as well as in poetry—it is also to inhibit the whole enterprise for the future by keeping it within its present in intellectual strictures, either entirely discursive or narrowly pastoral.

What then is truth? We think it is our mission in seminary education to train students to do exegesis on the tradition, which so often means teaching them to do an academic divinity that renders them intelligible (and interesting) only to one another. What we have yet to ask them to do is imagine the tradition anew, for the age to come, and in terms that make sense to people who neither search the Scriptures nor follow trends in theology, but who read novels and go to films and visit museums and listen to music. This is not to suggest that the church’s proclamation of the gospel be confused with, or given over to, the endeavors of art. Nor will the arts close the gap in communication that increasingly stretches between church and world, academy and marketplace. Art offers theological education no solution. On the contrary, if a picture or a poem is worth its salt, it will create rather than solve problems; it will disturb the peace. In so doing, it will bring us closer to the daring that the Scriptures themselves do not shrink from and that (if we allow) they may also inspire in us.

This is to say that what the arts may offer theological education is what they have always offered Christian culture: a way of telling the canon’s truth, an apocrypha of the imagination that at once shows the health of the received tradition and demonstrates its need to render a new account of even thing old. As apocrypha, its authority will always be a matter of debate and its legitimacy a bone of contention. But along with such uncertainty of status comes a freedom to question, a license to explore and discover, an openness to change, a sense of the danger of the entire enterprise. The “third testament” of the arts presents us not with a rival gospel, but with an opportunity for the Word to be made flesh again and again; not with an invasion of a closed canon, but with the chance to keep the canon alive and fecund, continually open to interpretive revision and continually facing the challenge to discover a new vernacular—the language of its time.

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It may well be argued that classical theology sets out to do the same task: to offer its own Midrash on the sacred text, and in so doing to discover a new way to render the old and discover the new. If so, then what the arts stand to offer is another way to interpret and express the divine mystery that can never be fully disclosed; a rich diversity of ways, in fact, that call upon more dimensions of our humanity than theological education has so far called into play.

**Editor’s Note:** This essay is reprinted with permission of the *Anglican Theological Review* where it appeared in the summer 1994 issue.

### ENDNOTES

1. An earlier treatment of this passage can be found in my essay, “Scripts for the Pageant: Dante and the Bible,” *Stanford Literature Review*, vol. 5, nos. 102 (1988): 75-92.
2. All citations of Dante’s poem are from *The Divine Comedy*, translated, with a commentary, by Charles S. Singleton, Bollingen Series 80 (3 vols., in 6); (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970-75).
3. Charles S. Singleton, “The Irreducible Dove,” *Comparative Literature*, 9 (1957): 129.
4. See Robert Hollander, “Dante *Theologus Poeta*,” *Studies in Dante* (Ravenna: Longo, 1980).
5. *The Present Age and the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), F 89.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
7. “Of Modern Poetry,” *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), pp. 239-40.
8. I value the discussion on the “sacred character of the Bible” offered by Sandra Schneiders in *The Revelatory Text, Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), pp. 43-58.
9. *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 207.

# “Writing for God After All”— Scripture, Poetry, and Proclamation

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**F**or several years I have kept posted on my office door a quotation from Thomas Merton on the subject of writing well:

Dylan Thomas’s integrity as a poet makes me very ashamed of the verse I have been writing. We who say we love God: why are we not as anxious to be perfect in our art as we pretend we want to be in our service of God? If we do not try to be perfect in what we write, perhaps it is because we are not writing for God after all. In any case it is depressing that those who serve God and love Him sometimes write so badly, when those who do not believe in Him take pains to write so well. I am not talking about grammar and syntax, but about having something to say and saying it in sentences that are not half dead. Saint Paul and Saint Ignatius Martyr did not bother about grammar but they certainly knew how to write .... A bad book about the love of God remains a bad book, even though it may be about the love of God. There are many who think that because they have written about God, they have written good books. Then men pick up these books and say: If the ones who say they believe in God cannot find anything better than this to say about it, their religion cannot be worth much.<sup>1</sup>

I have posted this on my door to remind myself and my students how urgent a matter is the integrity of our language. If God is made known to us through the word, if indeed—as the Gospel of John declares—the Word is the agent of creation and the embodiment of grace and truth, then surely our own language ought to echo the beauty, the concreteness, and the power of the One who has spoken us into being. The integrity of our language matters urgently, as a matter of discipleship. As Merton suggests, the credibility of our witness may depend upon it. Are we writing for God after all?

Merton’s question has important implications for theological education: are we training our students to be “anxious to be perfect in [their]art” of writing, as an expression or service to God? How might we undertake such a task? I am not talking about remedial writing tutors and pedestrian tips on how to organize an essay. I am talking about kindling a love of language that will

continue to burn and to illumine our students' preaching and writing and conversation.

As a teacher of the New Testament, I have found myself repeatedly drawing upon *poetry* as a resource that deepens my own reading of Scripture and opens the biblical text up to students in useful and surprising ways. Thus, I thought it might be useful to reflect critically with you on the ways in which poetry has informed my own reading and teaching of Scripture, as I seek to inculcate—in myself and in others—habits of expression that are responsive to the Word. I have no global aesthetic theories to promulgate; rather, what I have to offer is a word of testimony, offered in the hope that it will facilitate our conversation about theology and the arts.

### Reading New Testament Authors as Poets

First of all, as Merton remarks with disarming understatement, Saint Paul and Saint Ignatius “certainly knew how to write.” The same thing can be said of other biblical authors. (Ignatius, of course, is not a biblical author, but I am happy to allow Merton to include him within our purview.) Even Mark the evangelist, whose syntax is clumsy and plain, is a remarkable storyteller who employs irony and allusion, along with structural devices such as intercalation of narrative units, to stunning effect. If we read these witnesses with a close attention to literary nuance, our efforts will be richly rewarded.

In the recent past, much teaching of the Bible in seminaries was governed by a *historical* concern to reconstruct events “behind” the text or the processes of composition and editing that produced the text. Of late, there has been a movement—partly stimulated by the work of Hans Frei<sup>2</sup>—to recover the narrative sense and literary dynamics of the biblical texts. The work of critics such as Robert Alter and Frank Kermode has demonstrated the potential value of such readings.<sup>3</sup>

Such disciplines of literary attention need not be confined to narrative texts. My own work has focused on the Pauline letters, seeking to trace the hermeneutical effects of “intertextual echo” in Paul, examining how his allusions to and echoes of Israel's Scripture contribute to the rhetorical and semantic effect of his letters.<sup>4</sup> My finding: attention to the poetic functions of Paul's language yields insights that are not only aesthetically interesting but also theologically significant. In particular, through attending to Paul's intertextual wrestling with Scripture, I have come to see the center of gravity in his theology in a completely different way: his pervasive concern is to show how the gentile mission is the fulfillment, not the negation, of God's promises to Israel.



## Reading Poets as Interpreters of Scripture

Poetry also can serve in another way to sharpen our reading of Scripture. The canon of Western poetry is full of astute and startling “readings” of biblical texts. (I refer here not only to poems that retell biblical stories but also to poetry that refracts the biblical images in various ways.) Thus, poetry belongs to the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the New Testament texts. Often the history of interpretation of the New Testament can be taught with greater economy and impact through a few lines of poetry than through volumes of commentary. Even where the poet’s angle of vision seems oddly skewed, the oddity can break through the surface of the text, encrusted in familiarity, and enable us to ask fresh questions. For example, when I’m teaching on the story of the raising of Lazarus (John 11), I like to have students read a passage from W. B. Yeats’s verse drama “Calvary,” in which the resuscitated Lazarus comes to the scene of the crucifixion and rails against Jesus on the cross for dragging him back to the light, away from the comfortable darkness that he had inhabited for four days of peace.

*Christ.* Seeing that you died,  
Lay in the tomb four days and were raised up,  
You will not mock at me.

*Lazarus.* For four whole days  
I had been dead and I was lying still  
In an old comfortable mountain cavern  
When you came climbing there with a great crowd  
And dragged me to the light.

*Christ.* I called your name:  
‘Lazarus, come out,’ I said, and you came out  
Bound up in cloths, your face bound in a cloth.

*Lazarus.* You took my death, give me your death instead.

*Christ.* I gave you life.

*Lazarus.* But death is what I ask.  
Alive, I never could escape your love,  
And when I sickened towards my death I thought,  
‘I’ll to the desert, or chuckle in a corner,  
Mere ghost, a solitary thing.’ I died  
And saw not more until I saw you stand  
In opening of the tomb; ‘Come out!’ you called;  
You dragged me to the light as boys drag out

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A rabbit when they have dug its hole away;  
And now with all the shouting at your heels  
You travel towards the death I am denied.  
And that is why I have hurried to this road  
And claimed your death.

*Christ.* But I have conquered death,  
And all the dead shall be raised up again.

*Lazarus.* Then what I heard is true. I thought to die  
When my allotted years ran out again;  
And that being done, you could not hinder it;  
But now you will blind with light the solitude  
That death has made; you will disturb that corner  
Where I had thought I might lie safe forever.<sup>5</sup>

Sometimes the poem will shine a shaft of light that illuminates a facet of the biblical text previously invisible; sometimes the poem will serve as a foil to help us see what Scripture doesn't say. An instance of the latter is offered by the juxtaposition of George Herbert's poem, "The bunch of grapes" with I Corinthians 10:1-11.

In I Corinthians 10, Paul engages in an interpretative *tour de force*, reading the story of Israel's wandering in the wilderness in light of an ecclesiocentric hermeneutic: he makes the biblical text pass through the filter of his experience of God's action of forming the church.<sup>6</sup> For Paul, the full meaning of God's eschatological redemptive purpose is now definitively enacted in the Christian community. Consequently, the Christian sacraments provide the categories with which the Exodus narrative is interpreted: the extraordinary metaphor "baptized into Moses" reveals where the hermeneutical center of gravity lies.

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them (and the rock was Christ). But God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness. Now these things happened as types of us, in order that we might not desire bad things as they did. Do not grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the Destroyer. These things happened to them typologically, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the end of the age have met.<sup>7</sup>

Paul's distinctive hermeneutic may be highlighted by comparison to a much later text that echoes Paul's typology: Herbert's poem employs the same exodus metaphor that Paul did, but elaborates the conceit differently:

The bunch of grapes

Joy, I did lock thee up: but some bad man  
Hath let thee out again:  
And now, me think, I am where I began  
Sev'n years ago: one vogue and vein,  
One aire of thoughts usurps my brain.  
I did toward Canaan draw: but now I am  
Brought back to the Red Sea, the sea of shame.

For as the Jews of old by God's command  
Travell'd, and saw no town:  
So now each Christian hath his journeys spann'd:  
Their storie pennes and sets us down.  
A single deed is small renown.  
God's works are wide and let in future times;  
His ancient justice overflows our crimes.

Then have we too our guardian fires and clouds;  
Our Scripture-dew drops fast:  
We have our sands and serpents, tents and shrowds;  
Alas! our murmurings come not last.  
But where's the cluster? where's the taste  
Of mine inheritance? Lord, if I must borrow  
Let me as well take up their joy as sorrow.

But can he want the grape, who hath the wine?  
I have their fruit and more.  
Blessed be God, who prosper'd Noah's vine,  
And made it bring forth grapes good store.  
But much more him I must adore,  
Who of the laws, sowre, juice sweet wine cloth make,  
Ev'n God himself, being pressed for my sake.<sup>8</sup>

Let us take note of three key differences between these two readings of the story.

1. Paul relates the Exodus story to the *corporate* experience of the church; Herbert employs it as a metaphor for his individual spiritual journey. In this regard, Herbert follows the example of allegorists from Philo to Bunyan who have construed biblical narrative as a coded account of individual spiritual formation.

2. While Paul treats the church's experience as the grounding pole of the typology, the second and third stanzas of Herbert's poem treat the Exodus narrative as the foundational paradigm for the church. Paul describes Israel as "baptized into Moses"; by contrast, Herbert says of Christians, "Then have we too our guardian fires and clouds." In these stanzas, the logic of the typology is "Israel-centric" rather than ecclesiocentric. Herbert even complains that he, the Christian believer, lacks the joy that Israel experienced in the sign of the cluster of grapes brought back by the scouts from Canaan (Numbers 13:17-24). Thus Herbert works a reversal on Christian theological convention, portraying Israel's experience of grace as enviably palpable.

3. The final stanza of the poem, however, negates this reversal. The poet who has the "wine" of Christ can suddenly declare, "I have their wine and more." The logic of supersession takes over, in Herbert's reference to "the laws sower juice," and the poem culminates with a christological affirmation, which becomes the hermeneutical center of the text. Paul, on the other hand, does not allow a christological allegory to dominate his typological reading of the exodus story. Instead, he maintains a focus on the continuity between the situation of the church and the situation of "our fathers" in the wilderness: the church is tempted in just the same way they were and stands in exactly the same danger of falling.

Thus, reading Herbert in counterpoint with Paul drives us back into a closer and more sensitive exegesis of I Corinthians 10.

### **Poetry Shapes the Language of Proclamation**

Finally, by having students read and ponder poetry in counterpoint with the New Testament, we offer them models of potent language, focusing on the particularity of experience. (Cf. Edward Farley's point about the "poetics of the concrete" in his essay on poetics in this volume.) Thus, we encourage them to aspire to forms of proclamation that will emulate the force and excellence of these models, just as Merton was both shamed and inspired by the example of Dylan Thomas. If the Word encounters them through the imagery and metaphors of great poetry, they can never again make the error of supposing that their task as preachers is to flatten and demythologize the Bible into lowest-common-denominator prose. Instead, just as Scripture's metaphorical language inspires an answering imaginative discourse in the poetic tradition, so this discourse can and should be extended into preaching that is rich in metaphor and image. Only when our proclamation has this character will it be

adequate to its subject. The task of preaching the gospel is the task of finding words that rightly *perform* the text anew. As George Steiner has suggested “The best readings of art are art.”<sup>9</sup>

Of course, this kind of poetic proclamation will be dramatically countercultural in a time when the “dumbing-down” of public discourse is the norm. Precisely such countercultural activity is integral to the task of the post-Christendom church at the end of the 20th century. We maintain the integrity of our discipleship in part through maintaining the integrity and freshness of our language. (This, I take it is an instance of what Farley means when he speaks of the task of theological education as “the stimulation of sensibilities.”) As Merton suggests, we must find ways to speak of the love of God in “sentences that are not [like Lazarus] half dead.” Only if we can do that, will be writing for God after all.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (London: Hollis and Carter, 19;3), pp. 56-57.
2. Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).
3. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979). Less successful than these two seminal works of Alter and Kermode is their jointly-edited venture, *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987).
4. Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).
5. William Butler Yeats, “Calvary,” in M. L. Rosenthal (ed.) *Selected Poems and Two Plays of William Butler Yeats* (New York: Collier, 1962), pp. 196-97.
6. On the term “ecclesiocentric,” see Hays, *Echoes*, 84-87. The following contrast between Paul and Herbert is adapted from *Echoes*, Z01-04.
7. I Corinthian 10:1-11, my translation.
8. George Herbert, “The bunch of grapes,” in Louis L. Martz (ed.) *The Anchor Anthology of Seventeenth Century Verse*, Vol. 1 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969), pp. 185-6.
9. George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p.17. See Steiner’s provocative discussion of performative hermeneutics on pp. 4-21.



# Literature and Theological Education: Notes on a Resurrected Romance

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In theological circles a new (yet familiar) conversation is being carried on. This conversation concerns the relation between theology and literature. What makes this conversation familiar is the fact that in the first six decades of the 20th century theologians and teachers of literature often found themselves attending to the same subject matter albeit for different reasons. Theologians like Augustus Hopkins Strong found no internal inconsistency between the work of writing lengthy treatises on systematic theology and writing on the relation between theology and poetry.<sup>1</sup> Literary scholars like T. S. Eliot were not reluctant to call literature and artists to Christian orthodoxy.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, throughout the major portion of the century a significant body of research and writing emerged to define the field of theology or religion and literature. The basic assumption of this conversation was the conviction that there was a relation between the fideistic and aesthetic sensibilities.

This conversation, however, was abruptly halted because the certainties underlying both faith and art were assaulted by a wide array of cultural forces. In the 1960s the "Death of God" theology proclaimed that traditional theistic understandings of God were no longer adequate for a brave new world in which contemporary Christians were called to live.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, a similar phenomenon was taking place in the realm of the arts. Here, as one scholar has noted, the path of modern art has led to "the bleak wasteland of aesthetic nihilism...[culminating in] the 'death of art,' epitomized in the (predictably) short-lived vogue in the 1960s for so-called 'auto-destructive' art."<sup>4</sup> As both literature and theology emerged from the excesses of modernism, interest in the rapprochement between them has been rekindled. Theology and the arts find themselves engaged in the common search for intrinsic purpose and extrinsic relationality, as well as new ways of conceptualizing their essence. Amos Wilder suggested that:

Those concerned with religion and the arts should not, therefore, confine themselves to a descriptive, sociological, or comparative scrutiny of the creativities of the age or to however appreciative a reconnoitering of its aesthetic expressions. The

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task is diachronic as well as synchronic. It involves the visions of the past as well as those of today. It calls for diverse initiations and competencies, for sensitivities on a scale which is dissatisfied with academic categories, and therefore for criteria searching enough for such an extended purview.<sup>5</sup>

There are potent new possibilities in the reemerging romance between theology and literature for the discipline of theology, and, ultimately for theological schooling. In an essay written in the 1960s, Nathan Scott advises against the pursuit of a Christian philosophy of art. "So, then, rather than attempting to put forward anything that might be called a 'Christian philosophy of art,' it may well be that the more important task for a Christian philosophy of culture at the present time is, first of all, that of clearly discerning what in fact the function of art truly is and how it may co-operate with the kind of imagination of reality that is authentically Christian."<sup>6</sup> There is also within this encounter between theology and the literary imagination, the possibility for the renewal of theology. Stanley Romaine Hopper observed that:

What we are confronted with today is the problematic of the radical revisioning of our way of seeing and thinking.... It is not even a question as to whether we can come up with a theology 'in a new key'; it is a question rather as to whether theology, insofar as it retains methodological fealty to traditional modes, is any longer viable at all. For the doing of theology implies *not* one more sortie into the bushes of some manorial *Dogmatik* accompanied by the hounds of the Reformation and the still resonant horns of the medieval *Summas*; the *doing*, of theology has to do with evoking the *logos*, with bringing the god of presence.... Thus theology ... must be reconsidered as the poetry of Being.<sup>7</sup>

Although the inherent limitations in the scope of this essay prohibit the detailed exploration of the reinvigorated romance between theology and literature, the pages that follow will address briefly literary study and the theological curriculum, the relation of literary study to the two regnant models of theological schooling, and the contribution of literary study to compelling issues in contemporary theological education.



## Literature and the Theological Curriculum

Over the centuries, the study of theology has developed a fourfold pattern of organization. Edward Farley, in his book, *Theologia: The Unity and Fragmentation of Theology*, has recounted the rather haphazard manner in which this pattern took shape, consisting of biblical studies, historical studies, systematic/dogmatic/moral theology, and practical theology. The study of literature has, both before and after what Amos Wilder has referred to as “the great divorce” between the church and the arts, found a place in all four areas.

In the first half of the 20th century, both college campuses and seminaries were home to courses titled “The Bible as Literature.” Although teachers of literature and teachers of Scripture may have had different motives in highlighting the aesthetic beauty of the sacred writings, they generally agreed that the Bible and its meaning were accessible to the learned and genteel mind. More recently, advanced theories of interpretation have rendered the reading of the Bible from both the theological and the literary perspective much more technical. Structuralist, womanist, and materialist readings of Scripture proposed by Edgar V. McKnight in *Meaning in Texts*, Renita Weems-Espinosa in *Just a Sister Away*, and Norman Gottwald in *The Bible and Liberation* have been matched by *avant garde* readings of the Bible as Literature by Robert Alter in *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Frank Kermode in *The Genesis of Secrecy*, and Northrop Frye in *The Great Code*.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the rise of historical consciousness had been accompanied by the rise of narrative literature—especially the novel. Literary history became the privileged mode of discourse replacing more humanistic discourse about the nature of literature. Likewise, discourse about the life of faith gradually became historical discourse. The study of various cultures became the historical study of the texts of those cultures. The study of the life of faith became the historical study of the texts and practices of the institutional church. The range and scope of those texts often blurred the boundaries between literary and non-literary writings. Both church historians and literary historians claimed the writings of Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, Rebecca Jackson, and Frederick Douglass. Neither literature nor the life of faith could be adequately understood outside of their respective histories.

Both systematic/doctrinal theology and classical literature during the first half of the 20th century had—at least in one view—a decidedly dogmatic slant. Theology was believed to have as its primary purpose the teaching and preservation of orthodoxy, thereby providing a reliable guide to correct belief

and behavior. Likewise, for a number of teachers of literature, literature itself had a moral purpose. Often the purposes of literature and the purposes of theology were thought to cohere. Randall Stewart introduces his book, *American Literature and Christian Doctrine*, with these words: "For this treatise is quite frankly partisan. I have, for the nonce, abandoned the so-highly prized, the so-strenuously-inculcated academic neutrality.... I have insisted upon certain tests of Christian orthodoxy—the chief test being a recognition of Original Sin—and I have tried to make it clear that while certain great writers meet these tests sufficiently to be called 'orthodox,' others—and among them, some of our most famous, influential and 'democratic' writers—have unmistakably strayed beyond the bounds of Christian orthodoxy."<sup>8</sup> In the more recent past, both systematic theology and literature have found a common methodology in understanding themselves as narrative. The emerging variety of reader-response criticism has emphasized the interactive dimension of literature. Stanley Hauerwas and Michael Goldberg, among others, have written on theology as narrative. This approach has been even more fruitful for African-American and womanist theologians like James Cone and Delores Williams who have woven together the folk stories of African-American men and women with the canonical stories of the Bible. In the case of both theology and literature, the moral or doctrinal content of various texts cannot be separated from their expressive form.

Practical theology is not as much a field as it is a conglomerate of different methodologies that have been applied to a hodge-podge of tasks not covered by the first three theological fields. There are at least three of these methods that have found cognates in the study of literature.

Psychology has been useful in those theological studies that focus on counseling and the psychology of religion. In the latter instance, William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* has been a widely-used text. Likewise, various psychological approaches to literature have enjoyed popularity from time to time. Sigmund Freud's ideas, especially as found in his work *Interpretation of Dreams*, were quite influential in this kind of literary criticism. Psychological tools allowed the critic to probe the inner recesses of the creative process, to study the lives of authors as a way of understanding their works, and gave the critic a way of portraying various fictional characters as manifestations of the unconscious.<sup>9</sup> For example, the characters in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* have been described as representative of the id, the ego, and the superego. Augustine's *Confessions* is often cited in psychological studies of literature, as well as in psychology of religion courses. Psychological and

psychoanalytical methods were employed to probe the unconscious landscape of both the artist and the believer.

A second method involves rhetorical analysis. The use of this method in theological study is most clearly seen in the area of homiletics. It is often the case that effective preaching is thought to require the same sensibilities required of the writer or dramatist. Evidence of this is in the use of the great works of European literature in the sermons of famous preachers. The rhetorical rhythms of the literature serve to enhance the preacher's search for the right word or phrase for the moment. In this same vein, one might note the rhetorical origins of much European, African and African-American literature, all three of which can be traced to the public, cultural practices of storytelling which, in turn, gave rise to literature in its written form. Indeed, one possible criterion of good literature or good preaching is that good literature is best read aloud, and that the well-done sermon is a rhetorically crafted work of art.

The third method is that of sociology. Sociological studies of religion have been a part of practical theology since at least the middle of the 19th century. German sociological analyses influenced most subsequent German theology, including that of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. In the United States, the discipline of sociology did not gain its academic foothold until the beginning of the 20th century. However, its methodologies were soon applied to the churches and worshiping communities. The result of these studies showed that churches or worshiping communities were not totally shaped by the pure interests of the faith, but were, as are all institutions, the product of a variety of social forces, including race, class, and culture. The study of literature has also been affected by the methods of sociology. As Wilbur Scott put it, "sociological criticism starts with a conviction that art's relations to society are vitally important, and that the investigation of these relationships may organize and deepen one's aesthetic response to a work of art."<sup>10</sup> The perspective of most sociological criticism of literature was socialist during the early part of this century. This was especially true during the depression years when economic factors in literary production were largely set within a Marxist framework. The sociological studies of religion of this period were not as attentive to the economic factors in congregational and ecclesial life because, ideologically, many writers moved poetically to the left, while sociologists of religion—especially those who still found transcendent meaning in the church—were more conservative. The fundamental insight of this methodology is that both literature and the life of faith are very much, if not totally, the product of social forces.

## Literature and Two Models of Theological Schooling

In his groundbreaking work, *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological About a Theological School*, David Kelsey situates the theological school between two models of education. The first model understands schooling as *paideia*. Kelsey notes that “the Greek word *paideia* meant at once *schooling*, *culturing*, and *character formation*. . . . Its aim was to form in the souls of the young the virtue or *arete* they needed to function as responsible citizens.<sup>11</sup> The four major themes of *paideia* are (1) to instill in the young the essence of virtue, (2) to attain a knowledge of the Good, (3) the teacher as the midwife to the birth of wisdom in the student, and (4) the student as convert from an unenlightened state to the state of wisdom. Kelsey’s point here is that Greek *paideia* was not centered on the education of the professional class, but of the citizen in general. Likewise, when the early Christians adapted it to their own educational purposes this broadly democratic purpose remained. Christian *paideia* “ provided schooling, not principally for future clergy, but first of all for those who wished to be baptized, and even for those who wished to merely inquire into Christianity.” One of the more interesting facets of the *paideia* model of education is that of the role of the teacher. The teacher in this model is not just the transmitter of information, but has an integral role in the character formation of the student. Because the essence of the Good in Greek *paideia*, and the essence of Christianity in Christian *paideia*, cannot be taught, the teacher had to model/midwife the subject matter for the student.

The notion of *paideia* was, of course, a significant factor in the early Greek system of literary education. The function of literature, in this instance, was to reveal the essence of life. Thus, Wimsatt and Brooks noted, in their classic work, *Literary Criticism: A Short History*, that “when Homer begins his epics with an invocation to the muse, he is uttering a theory about his poems—namely, that they are written, or had better be written, with the help of divine inspiration—and this is an idea which has played a considerable role in the subsequent history of poetics.”<sup>12</sup> What is particularly illuminating is the description of the role of the teacher/artist found in the portrayal of the rhapsode in Plato’s *Ion*. “A rhapsode. . . was a person who might be described, in terms of our own culture, as a sort of combined actor and college teacher of literature. He gave public recitations from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, especially of the more exciting passages; and he undertook to deliver critical and moral lectures. He must have drawn large audiences, . . . and he sometimes succeeded in moving those audiences very deeply, even to tears. He appeared in rich attire, perhaps

wearing a golden crown, and he received a handsome pecuniary reward. He is representative of the older, literary, and unsystematic Greek education (*paideia*)."<sup>13</sup> The early church adapted this model of education for its own purposes and, as Kelsey notes, even called for "a distinctively Christian literature in the broad sense" written "in the finest literary fashion of the age"<sup>14</sup> *Paideia* represented a way of approaching both literary and theological education that emphasized the nurture of *sapientia*, or wisdom.

The second model of schooling is that of *Wissenschaft*. This model is associated with the founding of the University of Berlin, the first modern research university. The emergence of the research university coincided with several important cultural shifts in Europe. The Enlightenment set into motion the process of the liberation of the university from the dogmatic mandates of the church, the shift from Latin to German as the language of instruction, the emergence of historical-critical methods of inquiry, the ascendancy of the faculties of Law and Philosophy, and the establishment of "reason as the final arbiter of all questions about truth." These changes were accompanied by changes within the self-understanding of theology. Because in this model the teacher trains the student to do research, to weigh and evaluate facts, to construct intellectual argument, the focus of education shifted from the process of character formation to the goal of attaining certain professional skills. The university was the site of the training of professionals, and the gymnasium, or lower school, was the site of character formation. The essence of the *Wissenschaft* model of education was mastery of certain critical disciplines and methods.

Critical research is 'orderly' when it attempts to locate its subject in the largest possible context of relations to other things. Inquiry in the research university shows an extraordinarily intense passion for building theories that are all-encompassing. The ideal goal is to develop and validate one unified theory that can outline the interconnections among all things. This is not simply a matter of exhibiting relationships among concepts. Ancient and medieval school engaged in inquiry that was orderly in that sense. Rather, two other kinds of relations are crucial here: natural or physical relations and historical relations. Consequently, "understanding" a subject consists in mastering how it is related to other matter, that is, how it may be located in the web of physical and historical relationships that make it what it is.<sup>15</sup>

It is not surprising that the spirit of *Wissenschaft* was at the center of the development of German literary theory in the 18th century. Led by Gotthold

Lessing and I. G. Herder, this movement sought to categorize literature according to an overarching theoretical framework and to set it within the context of various social forces. Here “we find a group of radically new concerns centering in the relations of poetry to race, geography, and history, and in the creative and symbolic powers of verbal expression. These were germinal and explosive ideas.”<sup>16</sup> Goethe, for example, went to great lengths to describe the differences between *classical* art and *romantic* art. Hegel described three separate stages of art: symbolic, classic, and romantic. Kant rendered a categorization of human perception and intuition with a proper place for everything, including aesthetic creativity. The key feature of this movement is the rigorous, disciplined criticism of literature as privileged discourse. In time, this type of criticism rivaled the actual production of the literary work itself.<sup>17</sup> In both the literary and the theological manifestations of *Wissenschaft*, there developed a professional class devoted exclusively to critical activity: the professional literary critic and the professional theologian. In both manifestations of *Wissenschaft* we find the tendency of systematic theology to triumph over *unsystematic* religious practice, and *scholarly* literary theory over the undisciplined creativity of the artist.

### **The Contribution of Literary Study to Contemporary Theological Education**

The relation between theology and literature has again become a topic of conversation in academic circles. It is interesting to note that this conversation is taking place in the context of theology’s search for intrinsic purpose. Theologians are beginning to define their work as distinct from but not inferior to the area of religious studies. The research in this area suggests that there is a way—in *what* way is still the question—that theology functions as normative discourse. There may also be a way—again in *what* way is the question—that literary art is more than a collection of expressive symbols or self-referential signs.

One of the crucial issues facing the study of theology and theological education in North America is the role of art and artists in defining and resolving the internal questions. As the study of theology grapples with the need to transcend parochialism, literature can provide a window on the world that casts into sharp relief both global and local issues. However, in all too many Protestant worshipping communities, the prohibition against icons has left little room for any art that is not seen as being first and foremost in the service of the faith. The fact is that art, by definition, resists utility. Its misuse can lead to occasions of atheism on one hand, and idolatry on the other.

There is one persistent tendency in the study of theology and art that will need to be overcome if it is to reach its full potential. When theology and the arts are discussed, the conversation is almost always limited to works of European art, Gothic architecture, Italian painting, British literature, etc. There is often a tendency to associate *high* culture with imperial religion. There is almost never an inclusion of the art of African people or Asian people as truly indicative of a living and vital Christian faith.<sup>18</sup> Of course, the art of such groups is normally described as *folk* art rather than classic art, and their devotions as *pagan* rather than authentic faith. As the issues of diversity and inclusivity move to the forefront of theological education, scholars in the area of theology and the arts need to search for a more democratic definition of art.

If theological schools are to take seriously the proposal to include artistic studies in their curricula, they will need to determine whether that calls for the addition of artists as artists to theological faculties, or whether that calls for the inclusion of artistic methods in the teaching of all courses. There are a number of implications that each institution must consider in answering this question. The addition of artists as artists to the faculty will put the burden of integration of insights of artistic studies on the shoulders of the student. The student will have to figure out the relation between Dante's *Paradiso* and the *Summa Theologica* of Aquinas. The inclusion of artistic methodologies across the curriculum will put the burden of new knowledge and reintegration on the shoulders of the faculty member. Biblical scholars will need to be as conversant in deconstructionist readings of secular texts as they are with form-critical readings of Scripture. Of course, much of this very thing is going on in the field of theology. However, this kind of inclusion and integration is not widespread, and this kind of interdisciplinary discourse often takes place at professional academic conferences and rarely finds its way into the seminary classroom. Whether one opts for adding an artist to the faculty or retooling current faculty to use artistic methodologies in their teaching and research, taking theology and the arts seriously will require a fundamental change in the way the study of theology is conceptualized.

The prospects for the renewal of the relationship between theology and literature is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the possible role of poetry in theological education. In addresses given at the Yale Conference on Literature and Theological Education, Professor Peter Hawkins of Yale Divinity School and Professor Rebecca Chopp of the Candler School of Theology, Emory University, described the contribution of poetry to the contemporary study of theology.<sup>19</sup> Hawkins examined the poetry of the poet/priest George Herbert. He

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noted that the work of Herbert suggests that “art presents a way to make malleable again the tradition which is primarily in the custody of institutions.” Certainly, the recovery of the *psalmic voice* will highlight the proximity of poetry to prayer. Chopp examined the role of poetry in the context of women’s description of their religious experience. She identified three functions of poetry: (1) to name and reconstruct experience, (2) to illumine the structure of experience itself, and (3) to open up the process of theological language. In essence, poetry can be the expressive vehicle of the “emancipatory transformation” that is central to women’s religious experience. While the full scope of the potential relationship between theology and literature must await a wider and more extensive discussion, Wallace Stevens’s comment on the function of poetry, is particularly instructive. “Poetry addresses the utterly concrete,” says Stevens, and that is precisely what good theological education must do.



END NOTES

1. See A. H. Strong's *Systematic Theology* and his *Theology of the Poets*.
2. See T.S. Eliot "Theology and Literature" in G. B. Tennyson and E. E. Erickson, *Religion and Modern Literature* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1975).
3. See the writings of William Hamilton, (Gabriel Vahanian, and T. Thomas Altizer.
4. George Pattison, *Art, Modernity and Faith: Towards a Theology of Art* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 2.
5. Amos N. Wilder, *The Bible and the Literary Critic* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p.41.
6. Nathan A. Scott, Jr., "Faith and Art in World Awry" in *The Climate of Faith in Modern Literature*, ed., Nathan A. Scott, Jr. (New York: Seabury Press, 1964), p. 6.
7. Stanley Romaine Hopper, *The Way of Transfiguration: Religious Imagination as Theopoesis*, eds., R. Melvin Keiser and Tony Stoneburner (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), p. 207-8.
8. Randall Stewart, *American Literature and Christian Doctrine* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958), p. viii.
9. Wilbur Scott, *Five Approaches of Literary Criticism* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 69-73.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
11. David H. Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological About a Theological School* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), p. 64.
12. William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), p. 3.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
14. Kelsey, *Op. cit.*, p. 71.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
16. Wimsatt and Brooks, *op. cit.*, p. 365.
17. See Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).
18. One exception is James H. Evans, Jr.'s *Spiritual Empowerment in Afro-American Literature* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1987).
19. This volume does not include the presentations of Peter Hawkins or Rebecca Chopp referred to in this discussion that were given at the Yale Conference on Literature and Theological Education held at Auburn Theological Seminary in November of 1992 because they were presentations focused on engaging the audience in response to specific poems. In this section there is an essay by Peter Hawkins that does reflect his own approach to literature and its place in theological study.



# The Place of Poetics in Theological Education: A Heuristic Inquiry

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The conference lectures of Peter Hawkins and Rebecca Chopp exemplified the way poetry is able to provoke certain sensibilities.<sup>1</sup> Hawkins cited English poets (Herbert, Hopkins, and R. S. Thomas) who sounded out the space (rift?) ever present between the conventional, functional, and traditioning side of religious faith and the dark, poetic side. Chopp gave voice to poetry's power to provoke a new creative and emancipatory habitus in which experience is reconstituted and theological language is opened up. The power, beauty, and insightfulness of both lectures reminded me once again of my life-long inability to successfully incorporate the arts—in this case, poetry—into my own teaching. The lectures prompted in me not so much a point-by-point response as a re-thinking of various issues that arise when we would trace the relation between the arts and theological education. I pose then five issues: the character of the (literary) arts in their ideality; the intrinsic aesthetic element in religions and/or faith; the anti-poetics or aesthetics of the religious tradition; the vulgarization of the arts in current consumer cultures; and the route from these issues to theological education. In interrogatory form, the issues are the following: (1) What are we talking about when we say the (literary) arts? (2) Are there senses in which poetics (i.e., the literary arts) are intrinsic to faith or theology? (3) Do anti-poetic elements in the religious traditions of Christianity serve as obstacles to any proposed poetics in theological pedagogy? (4) Do anti-poetic elements in the general culture serve as obstacles to any proposed poetics in theological pedagogy? (5) How do we formulate the relation of the arts to theological education? My elaboration of these issues will be neither tightly argued, systematic, nor thorough, but rather heuristic, that is, aimed to assist further discussion and inquiry. The first four issues are my version of issues that arise when we would traverse the road from the arts to theological education.

## The Poetics of the Concrete

What are we talking about when we suggest that the literary arts may have a place in theology or theological education? I do not construe this question as simply a call for a definition. The disputes of our predecessors over art, beauty, aesthetic experience, poetic criticism, and the like will not be resolved in our discussions. Rather, by means of the question, we can pose to ourselves some things about the literary arts, especially poetry and fiction, that prompt us to locate them in or relate them to theological education. I hope that this question does not promote a mere idealization of the arts, an idealization that sometimes dominates attempts to relate theology to what may be important or useful to it. I shall discuss later the corruptible side of poetics. In this section I shall stay with the ideality side.

We have in poetics or the literary arts a distinctive version of what may attend any and all art—a distinctive embodiment of the paradox of the universal and the concrete. It would, I think, be a mistake to characterize poets as *intending* to perpetuate this paradox. If I understand them correctly, what poets are up to is the mediation and expression of the concrete. In spite of the language of facts and data in the sciences and the preoccupation with texts in humanities, the fare of scientists, mathematicians, philosophers (even existentialists and empiricists), and even historians is the restatable law, the principle, the criterion, the structure, the pattern, and so forth. This is why these undertakings—each perpetrating its distinctive kind of abstraction—necessarily falsify the world. The world of these efforts of understanding is the world brought to a stop—summarized, featured, evidenced, generalized. The literary artist also brings the world to a stop, not by featuring it, but by writing it. But what is written is the concrete. This concrete is not necessarily the concreteness of the artist's ego, experience, or perspective, though of course these things are never absent. It is the concreteness of whatever is written: thus, praised, lamented, remembered, regretted. The fare of poetic texts is the "jar in Tennessee" (Wallace Stevens), the stony face of a Welsh farmer (R.S. Thomas), the rain at night (Vassar Miller). Poets are not good at ontology, didactics, or moralizing, and they risk their poetizing when they give their efforts primarily to such things. The poets, one might say, "historicize" the world by their attention to concreteness, ever breaking up stable knowledge, experiential sedimentations, the deposits of tradition, the prevailing sociology of knowledge practically necessary in human communities. The concrete of the poetic is neither the merely physical nor the momentary. An anguished experience is concrete but not a physical entity. An event (the holocaust, a wedding) is concrete but has temporal duration.

As literary arts, poetry and fiction have to do with both creativity and beauty, but both arise with the poets being seized by the concrete. The literary arts call for a rigorously creative labor because the concrete is always an instance of the new and because the poetic entity itself is a created concrete. Beauty is an ontological feature of any and all actual existents, since to exist at all requires a synthesizing or gathering up of a great variety of components into some minimal internal order of relations that obtains a kind of balance, the outcome being a fit of form and function or beauty. This fit is instanced in the concrete, not the general. Hence, to articulate the concrete is to some extent also to articulate beauty.

The concreteness of the arts and of literary arts has a paradoxical character. Concreteness is what grasps the poet. But concreteness is never the merely private, the hidden, the esoteric, or idiosyncratic. As we approach the concrete, we draw near to reality itself. This is why the poetizing of the concrete is not and cannot be a solipsistic act. The articulated concrete is what the artist's others recognize. An ancient story depicting a birth evokes a recognition that survives the ages and the journey between radically different cultures in a way that a study of ancient birthing practices may not. Somehow we feel closer to the reality of the 1930s Big Scrub country and culture of Florida when we read Marjorie Rawlings's *Cross Creek* than when we puzzle through natural and social histories of this region. Paradoxically, the concrete is what is most universal.

Poetics and the arts are paradoxical in another way. Because they are ever tuned to and seized by the concrete, poetry necessarily differentiates, draws out of what has been rendered into the general and the same. A poem is always a specification. The human character, town, or landscape of a novel is never a mere type, attribute, or statistical generalization. When the specific is related to time, it is always what interrupts, rather than what endures. This is why the articulation of the concrete destabilizes the enduring. But, paradoxically, it also does the opposite. Possibly as the effect of the universal side of poetics, the poetic contributes to the enduring. If this were not so, poetics would be simply an iconoclasm, a nihilation of all content, a mere emissary of difference, and as such could never find its way into a culture's memory. Yet the poetic is present in individual lives and in whole societies in memorial ways. The poets are cultural monuments as well as cultural destructions. When a poetic writing obtains some sort of "classic" status, it renders the concrete into a mode of enduring or, to put it differently, the society endures with continual reference to that concrete. The poetic not only transforms, but its historical expression (the poem, the novel) can become a continuing resource for societal

transformation. Poets, thus, both destabilize—by historicizing the general, the sedimented, the enduring—and stabilize—by becoming an enduring part of the community's (or individual's) *anamnesis*. Through that, poetics contribute to the traditioning and remembering the community needs simply to exist as that community.

### Poetics in Religion: Historicizing and Remembering

In what way might the (poetic) arts, as recoveries of the concrete, have an intrinsic presence of religion, faith, or theology? If not identical, the concrete and the real are closely related. We have a sense of being seized by what is real when we read Elie Wiesel's *Night*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, or stand before Michelangelo's *Pieta*. Is there anything about religious faith and aesthetic experience that pushes them toward each other, that promotes an intrinsic connection between them? Massive historical evidence indicates that they are in fact connected. Wherever we dip into the history of religions from tribal to the so-called axial religions of modern times, we find them drawing on or engaging in the arts to express what has seized them and brought them into being and evoked their deep postures and ritual behaviors. They invariably use, and even transform themselves into, arts. Thus, there seems to be a close connection between the aesthetic and the sacred: hence, the dances, totems, masks, and sand paintings of North American tribal religions, the sculptures and architectures of Chinese and Southeast Asian Buddhism, the poetic character of virtually all the world's Scriptures.

What brings about this historically apparent connection is not easy to discover. It seems to have something to do with the paradox that constitutes a religion, the paradox of the concreteness of acts, beliefs, traditions, symbols and the like, and the necessary absence of the sacred. The sacred as the transcendent (the awesome mystery of things, the through-which of things, the accusing voice, or unambiguous love) is always elsewhere—in the past, the heavens, the future. It is the elsewhere of the source of things, the elsewhere of the stricken conscience. Religions lay claim, of course, to the divine presence, to the sacred revealing itself, to the experience of God, but none of these things is ever simply here, in the discrete form of an apprehended entity. Even in the burning bush, the immediate theophany, the ecstasy of conversion, God is never simply a here-and-now. In spite of the perennial human lust for presence (certainty?), what human beings get is absence. The sacred that is not absent is always the false god. How then can the sacred as the absent be worshiped, spoken, celebrated? Strangely, the discourse of the general will not do. Believers do not worship

“features,” attributes, or linguistic stratifications. Their worship, their relation to the sacred, can only take place in the experience that preserves the absence, that refuses to reduce the mystery or tame the transcendence. And, paradoxically, this is what we have in poetics and the concrete. For it is the concrete, the specific person before us (the face of that person in the specific event of grief, malice, or affection) that poses the sharpest mystery and absence, the unexplainable particular. Explanations work best as we remove from the concrete, absence, mystery, and the refusal of explanation are just what we have in the aesthetic mediation of the concrete. Absence and the concrete, absence (mystery) and reality itself are correlates. This is why it is not accidental that religious faiths not simply *use* but *are* a kind of aesthetics as they move to expression

### **Anti-Poetics in the Religious Tradition**

The conviction that the (literary) arts have a positive role to play in theology and its educating acts is inevitably based on the ideal account of these arts, thus their historicizing of reality through the concrete. This orientation to ideality overwhelms the shadow side of the arts. Assuming this version of the ideal of poetics, can we simply propose to theology a usage or an appropriation? Is the use of poetry and fiction a simple possibility? It seems not. Here we must acknowledge that not only are the arts themselves always historically situated but their deployment, likewise, must take place in specific historical and cultural times and places. In the present historical situation, two powerful movements or features of movements undermine any simple appropriation of the arts to theology; the anti-poetic strand of Christianity itself, and the anti-poetics and anti-aesthetics that vulgarize the arts in an advanced industrial and consumer-oriented society.

I sense but have difficulty formulating in a precise way the anti-poetics that seems to hide deep in the Christian (and especially the Protestant) soul. Perhaps, that is a sign that such a suspicion is without warrant. The external evidence points the other way. To be sure, the Protestant movement was initially receptive to an iconoclasm that swept away many of the visual arts of Catholic Christianity. Yet, most of the branches of Protestantism have embraced the arts as they build church buildings, decorate them, sing hymns, and engage in rituals and preaching. Rhetoric, visual symbolism, and music are very much present in the Protestant form of Christendom. Whence the suspicion? It is simply that the Protestant appropriation of the arts is just that, an appropriation—something taken more because of cultural locations than arising from

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within the dynamics and convictions of faith and piety. *Theological* aesthetics is not highly present in Protestant ethics, dogmatics, self-interpretations, or theological encyclopedias. Forensics, not aesthetics, provides the root metaphor for the Protestant understanding of salvation. Aesthetic themes of wonder, beauty, ugliness, and the like are missing from the Protestant *ordo salutis*. (Jonathan Edwards, the theologian of beauty, seems thus to be something of an anomaly in the history of Protestant thinkers.) The Ten Commandments, not Plato and the aesthetic dimension of the good, dominate Protestant rigorism and ethics. Hence, it still would not occur to most Protestants that salvation has something to do with a sensibility to beauty or to understanding the loss of freedom as a curtailing of aesthetic relations to others or to nature. Perhaps I am wrong in seeing poetics and aesthetics as a kind of external skin the Protestant wears. But if there is any truth in this suspicion, then the external skin will have to be exchanged for something more intrinsic if the arts are somehow to assist in the reforming of theological education.

While there are always reasons for specific forms of faith, (e.g. Protestantism, to embody an anti-poetics) there is also an intrinsic reason why an anti-poetics resides along with the poetic element in religious faiths as such. We recall that the element of absence, non-presence, and futurity, even the absence created by the distance between the present and the traditioned past prompt modes of expression in both worship and theology that preserve absence and with that the mystery of God. Why then would a religious faith embrace and preserve an anti-poetics? That they harden the poetic, aesthetic, prophetic, mystery elements into presences, casuistries, and certainties goes without saying. Why the hardening? We could at this point recall the idolatrous (absolutizing) element in all religious communities, but in so doing we would miss the tragic element that originates the anti-poetics of religious faiths. Religious faiths develop anti-poetics in order to survive over time as communities. To survive over time, they must develop generation-bridging institutions: thus, leadership structures, ways of remembering the past, ways of defining and monitoring the community's boundaries and differences from other communities. Thus, beliefs must be defined, behaviors regulated, literatures given official authoritative status. The postures that arise with this traditionalization and institutionalization are postures of certainty about what is to be believed, confessed, and taught, and about what practices are forbidden or required. The thrust of institutionalization is toward the definition, the linguistic sedimentation, the universal, the for-all--time-valid practice. Institutionalization may not be an idolatry as such, but it is surely one of the primary occasions of absolutizing.



Survival over time (institutionalizing and traditioning) are not simply to be repudiated. They are tragically necessarily fixations of the historical for the purpose of being a community at all. Hence, I do not make this point from the perspective of romanticizing the creative, the new, the spiritual. Such complaints about creeds, institutions, and casuistries are ever with us, but it is illusory to think that religious communities can exist in sheer immediacy and creativity. So we have then an intrinsic conflict between the needs for survival and postures that fixate the historical and the poetic element that de-historicizes what is fixed, ever exposing the mysteries and differences of the concrete.

### **The Vulgarization of the Poetics in the Technocracy**

Proposals about the arts in theological education face a second powerful anti-poetics at work in the present culture of Europe and the United States. This anti-poetics arises as an effect of industrialized, bureaucratized technocracy on what Talcott Parsons calls “normative culture” and on the arts within that culture. The normative culture of a social system defines that system’s values, and it finds enduring expression in the institutions of religion, family, education, and the arts. In an advanced industrial society, what dominates the mediation—if not determination—of values is consumerism, a process in which very large corporations package entertainment and leisure activities on the basis of mass demand. The presupposition and effect of this packaging is the “pop culture” of the “mass culture.” When the “arts” delivery systems of mass culture constitute the normative culture, the effect is a homogenization of religion, education, and the arts along the lines of the packaging of these things for consumers. Phrases like “the therapeutic” (Rieff) and “culture of narcissism” (Lasch) are summary terms for this homogenization.

It seems to be the case that consumer-based homogeneity of the arts is at the same time a profanization. The 20th century has seen many ways of interpreting profanization as in the writings of Rieff, Jaspers, Marcel, Eliade, Levinas, and Unamuno. Overall, profanization seems to be a loss or diminishment of human sensibilities to dimensionality and mystery, the absence which in some way is the sacred or infinite. In the profanized culture, the limitations intrinsic to the sciences and other human cognitive endeavors seem removed. We now (in principle) know everything to be known. Reduced is the sense of the eerie, the hidden, the uncontrollable. The sense of the uncontrollable thus persists in the profane society but tends to be transformed to the immediate environment—thus, the uncontrollable kids in the family, the uncontrollable

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anxious self. Such profanization cannot but contribute to or be part of an anti-poetics that domesticates the eyes, ears, and sensibilities of both artists and their patrons. It cannot but show up in the prevailing music, pop literature, and visual entertainment of the society.

When the homogenization of packaged arts takes place, both folk art and the so-called high arts may survive, but only as perceived elitist and marginal phenomena of the society. Paradoxically, even folk arts and crafts are assigned the elite margins of mass culture. Mass arts have the character of vulgarization, not because of class connotations, but because they are prepared and distributed as primarily economic entities. Hence, it is important not to permit charges of elitism and classism to bully churches, schools, and individuals into a mere passive and uncritical acceptance of vulgarized (prepared-for-consumers) art as somehow “authentic,” “just as good” as any art, or as the arts of “real people.” Consumerization, homogenization, and vulgarization of the arts is a modern form of victimization. The new victim is not the culturally impoverished “man with the hoe” of Millet’s painting and Markham’s poem but the culturally impoverished 40-hour-a-week television addict. It is important not to reduce the question of the arts in theological education to a project of retrieving the now marginalized survivors of the classical literary or musical tradition of the West. My point is, however, that the new spectrum of “arts” is not a span from classical to folk art but includes the anti-poetics of vulgarized, homogenized art. Insofar as vulgarized art is, in fact, profane art, it loses its ideality, its power to articulate the concrete, thus its power to enter a world of transcendence into the merely sedimented, breaking the powerful hold of the obvious

Throughout this essay, I have attended primarily to the ideal side of poetics. Insofar as poetics in its ideality—the service of the concrete—is dominant, reality has a certain hold over the literary artist. A case could be made that this hold cannot have the character of a mere indifference to suffering, evil, and oppression because the concrete other is never present in the form of a mere object or datum but as a need, a fragility, and a likeness. Even if true, this point would extend the ideal analysis of poetics. But ideality is just that, ever an aim, a normativity, a possible destiny of poetics. The poetics we know is always historical, participating in the ambiguities of history. Thus, poetics ever enters in collusions with prevailing epistemes (Foucault), with centuries-old structures of social oppression. Poetics can serve one class against another and articulate the agendas of oppressive power. Poetics then is ambiguous—not synonymous—with its own ideality. Accordingly, the moral ambiguity of poetics is not merely its capacity to take on vulgarized forms but its collusion with corrupted and corrupting strands of human society.

## Theological Education

The four previous sections add up to a thesis. It is difficult to traverse the road from the poetic arts to theological education without crossing the bridges of three issues: what (ideally) poetic arts are, why they have an intrinsic place in religious faith, and what powerful anti-poetic elements are at work in the situation. But now that theological education is in the picture, we face another road that leads back in another direction, and on that road are some more bridges to be crossed. Theological education comes into being as part of a larger reality, a religious community. And the arts are already present in that community in three distinguishable locations: the life of individual believers, congregations and other forms and events of ecclesiastical life, and educational institutions and undertakings. In all three of these locations arts and poetics are present in their ambiguity, that is, both their ideal and corrupted forms. In what follows I shall be concerned only with the ideal side of poetics. A number of questions arise when we ask about the arts and poetics in the life of the believer. Most of the ways any 20th-century human being experiences the arts have little to do with religion. They concern "high arts," folk art, and, mostly, the popular arts of the mass society. That problem aside, we must ask whether there is anything about the life of faith (thus, about individual human transformation, the displacement of evil into freedom, the powers and postures of love and hope) that intrinsically involves the arts. Is there anything about the life of faith itself that calls for an aesthetic mediation of the concrete? Is salvation and all it entails totally empty of or inclusive of beauty, wonder, and creativity?

A second set of questions arises when we consider the gathered community of faith in its corporate acts of remembering, traditioning, worshiping, and acting responsibly and compassionately in its world. What is the place of the arts as mediations of the concrete in the community's traditioning events and their recollection or interpretation, in current struggles with grief, joy, or social oppression? Obviously, the question pertains to the whole spectrum of arts including folk arts, and, possibly even the packaged arts, and the question becomes more specific when the literary or poetic arts are in view. That is, literary arts arise in special ways in acts of remembering, translating, interpreting written texts, especially as they are remembered in the form of Scriptures.

It is the third location, the institutions and undertakings of education, that constitutes the general sphere of the concern of these consultations. Education in the religious community spans both institutions attached to congregations, and other instances of the gathered community, and the institutions of formal or degree-oriented education. In all of these settings "education" can

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mean both *paideia*, a stimulus and rigorization of certain sensibilities, and “learning,” the pursuit of academic and critical modes of inquiry and thinking. And questions of the arts and poetics arise both generally, in connection with the over-all curricula of these programs (church school curricula and clergy education curricula), and specifically, in connection with particular strategies of teaching

“Theology” is not so much one of the locations of the arts and poetics as a possible dimension or activity in all three locations. It is present in the life of the believer when spontaneous and responsive acts and attitudes become self-consciously self-critical under criteria proper to faith and when world or reality interpretation becomes oriented to considerations of evidence and truth. The introduction of critical and rigorous elements into the thinking and interpreting life of the believer need not but may take the form of learning. Insofar as the critical dimension effects a habitus or way of being disposed toward things, theology effects ever new sensibilities that in an ideal sense, serve the freedoms and postures of faith itself. In the life of the gathered community, the congregation, and other ecclesiastical bodies, theology is present statically as a sedimented interpretation of tradition and dynamically as the interpreting activities (insofar as they have a normative and critical character) that go on in congregational life.

Theological education arises in this third location as a particular institution of education in the larger religious community. In the sense of a post-B.A. set of studies, theological education, at least in its traditional sense, is concerned to assist in the preparation of a leadership for the church. It is in other words a distinctive type of educational institution. A number of historical strands have brought about this institution and function now to maintain it: the leadership needs of denominations, traditions of scholarly learning, traditions of piety and Christian *paideia*, “theology” as whatever makes this education theological, and the actual life and postures of faith presupposed by all these things. In theological education, various elements in the life of faith and larger church tradition are taken up into the world of learning and into formal pedagogical processes. “Theology” in this setting becomes a curricular, pedagogical, academic, and “scholarly” phenomenon.

Any proposals about the place of poetics in theological education are thus always in some way proposals about how arts are related to these various strands: thus, faith, piety, *paideia*, professional practice, scholarship, and the like. Relating poetics to theological education is not simply discovering a place for such in classroom teaching strategies. For to do that is to posit another connection, thus between what poetics is or what poetics can do and the sort of

emancipative transformations and sensibilities that faith, piety, professional practice, curriculum, and scholarship require.

Furthermore, “theology” as the normative reflection that submits matters to truth questions, is ideally present in all the locations of the religious community and the strands that make up theological education. In other words it pervades and shapes curriculum, pedagogy, and scholarship. Strongly determinative of this shaping is the power (or weakness) of the specific paradigm of the place of theology in the life of the believer, congregation, or institution. Some paradigms can virtually empty the theological schools of theological elements and others strongly promote them.

Relating the poetic arts to theological education involves, at least the following four tasks: (1) How are the arts related to the life of faith as that part of theological education? For instance, does theological education as *paideia* and as “theology” stimulate sensibilities of students as they live a life of faith and prepare for an ecclesial leadership? (2) How are the arts related to congregational life as that is a concern of theological education? (3) How are the arts related to leadership roles (thus, liturgy, preaching, etc.) as they are part of theological education? (4) How do the arts shape the curriculum and pedagogy of theological education as both *paideia* and learning?

Our account of these tasks would surely be an innocent one if we thought of them as automatically merging into a single harmonious and coherent undertaking. A theological school is at best a set of compromised aims. This is due to built-in incompatibilities and tensions between the spontaneities and existentialities of the life of faith; the weight and authority of tradition; the distancing, critical “objectivity” of learning; and the enormous hold of professionalism that hovers over the whole undertaking. These tensions can have the effect of suppressing the poetic element in theological education insofar as professionalist, pietist, or authoritarian elements take on institutional lives of their own and sever their educating acts from poetizing elements of religious faith and from the aesthetic elements already at work in the religious community.

We face at this point the possibility of multiple proposals as to how the *paideia*, learning, pedagogy, and curriculum of theological education might embody the arts. Instead of pursuing such proposals, I shall make one step away from this formal analysis to an issue that pervades all the strands as a problem in the life of faith, in congregations, and in theological education. I shall call this issue the problem of reality and the loss of reality. It is in connection with this question that I would pose the issue of the arts in theological education in a less formal way.

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There is in the current conventional wisdom a way of understanding why religious faith experiences or even promotes reality loss. It goes like this. Genuine piety (spirituality) moves toward the unreal when it becomes “academic,” critical, and subject to the elitisms of learning. Self-evident as this sounds, this interpretation is yet one more masking of faith’s reality problem. Piety actually “turning into” learning is a rare phenomenon. Even as most people do not traverse an academic route *to* faith, they do not take the academic route *out* of it. What this interpretation covers over is that faith itself constitutes a reality problem. It is surely a misunderstanding to think that faith ever lives in the bright light of sheer presences, grasping what it knows in cognitive immediacy and overwhelming evidential clarity. The idolatrous impulse may lay claim to possess immediacy and clarity, but it does so at the expense of faith because the world of faith is a world of aspirations, hopes, doubts, attempts to understand, it is always a world of absences. This absent dimension is not faith’s compromise or failure but the necessary way the divine is the divine for human beings. Hence, if there is a “progress of faith,” a “ladder of perfection,” it is toward the divine absence and negativity. This is not to say that faith and the world of faith lack content. Faith attests to powers and possibilities of human corruption and emancipation in agential and political spheres. In the world of faith are actual events, perduring structures, and types of communities and their memories. It is at this point, this wedding of intrinsic absence and the concrete, that the problem of reality takes on historical forms and becomes intensified. To repeat an earlier point, to survive and endure, religions, as social and historical entities, require historical vehicles of memory and celebration that sediment that to which they attest, the living and transformative power that in an ideal sense constitutes them as faiths. They must in other words intersperse something between the individuals who exist in their communities and the concrete, namely authorities. So powerfully inescapable are these authorities such as Scripture, dogma, canon, ecclesiastical organization, congregations, traditions, that they compete with the concrete and the absent for the status of reality. The authorities would always sit on the right hand of God in the coming Kingdom. In other words the interspersed authorities become themselves the attested realities of faith. This struggle between the authority-realities and the concrete persists in all times and sets the perennial theological task of destabilizing, demystifying the authorities, breaking their magic hold over the religious community and its members. And in historical periods where for whatever reason authorities are seriously threatened, reconstitutive responses arise that attempt to insulate the authorities from criticism, thereby saving the

religious community and faith from destruction. In such times the concrete and the absent, and thus reality, ebb like the tide on *Dover Beach*.

In our own time, that of the secularized, consumer-oriented society, the problem of reality has an even more severe form. We are familiar of course with the celebrations of secularity and the loss of the old cultural religious hegemony by Bonhoeffer and others. But students of religion as far apart as Mircea Eliade and Phillip Rieff see another side to this loss. The pervasive religious culture was displaced not simply by an innocent and neutral secularity but by (in some cases) demonic and powerful collectivisms and by a new professional (managerial and therapeutic) hegemony fostering the "one-dimensional" (Marcuse) human being. Displaced here is not simply "God" (transcendence, the sacred) but the "god-terms": obligation, community, mystery, evil, and the like. When this is the air religious faiths breathe, the problem of reality is no longer simply the interspersal of authorities but a second and much more powerful interspersal that would displace (and not just sediment) the religious concrete.

We return now to theological education, the schools, and degree programs that prepare religious leaders in religious communities. Needless to say, the problem of reality in all three senses is not simply absent in theological education: that is, the intrinsic sense of absence, the historical sense of authority substitutions, and the displacements of religion by a managerial/therapeutic culture. And it is probably the case that the concentration on learning and student (enterprises of distancing) as well as the critical and historical treatments of authorities further exacerbate the problem of reality. It is important not to permit such an insight to obscure the fact that theological education makes its own distinctive contribution to the severity of the problem of reality. Constituting theological education are not just traditions of authority and the ethos of the technocratic culture but traditions of learning and pedagogy. And these traditions promote new interspersals between the human being and the concrete. As entities of actual religious communities, seminaries—some more than others—retain the aims and ethos of piety or spirituality. As professional schools, seminaries must be concerned with the future professional activities of their students. As post-B.A. schools, seminaries must promote the academic paradigm (degrees, courses, grades, standards of scholarship, scholar-teachers). As such they are environments of learning and academic inquiry. The outcome of this merger of aims is a new and severe reality problem. Seminaries inherit from the religious community and from the general culture the reality problem intrinsic to faith itself, the problem of interspersed authorities, and the displacement of both in the larger society. The professionalist side of these schools,

dominated by anticipated functions in social and ecclesiastical environments, and thus by the already professionalized ethos of these environments, incite—however much they intend to be “theological”—a distinctive mind-set and orientation. Coming together to produce this mind-set are the professionalized ecclesiastical environments and denominational paradigms of church leadership and the pedagogies in the schools that mirror such. The academic strand of these schools would draw students into the tradition of learning and promote the ideal of the scholar-interpreter. It does this along lines of discrete academic fields. This interspersal is not the self-image of professional function but a confusing variety of field loyalties and methods. These two often competing mind-sets of the professional and the academic are so paramount in the world of the seminary that they suppress the reality problem intrinsic to faith, and as this is intensified by interspersed authorities and societal displacement. The reality problem in other words is transformed into problems of professional situations or field-academic struggles. Pulled between competing aims and paradigms, the seminary student struggles not with questions of intrinsic absence, displacing authorities, and the therapeutic uses of faith but with specialty field methods and categories.

It is this very situation that prompts some present-day interpreters of theological education to argue that theological education must first of all promote certain sensibilities. Looked at this way, the immediate task is not so much finding a place for poetics in the whole complex of theological education but focusing on the problem of reality, that is, the problem of sensibilities. For it is the problem of reality in its several dimensions that prompts us to view theological education as an environment for the inciting of sensibilities—sensibilities that incorporate the divine absence, that are aware of the perennial displacement by authorities, and current displacements of the professionalized society. And, if sensibilities are reality sensibilities that have to do with the concrete, we are returned again to the issue of poetics.

What place might poetics have insofar as the many strands of theological education, pressed by the problem of reality, come together to incite certain sensibilities? Instead of proposing an answer to the question, I shall simply list what might be involved as theological schools move to incorporate poetics in more deliberate ways than are already at work.

First, if the loss of reality is in some sense a loss of the concrete, then the lust for a content without absence, the insertion of authorities between the believer and that which the believer attests, and the cultural (professionalist) displacement of both all constitute a turn from the concrete. The turn to



interspersals and displacements is necessarily away from the concrete in the sense of the actual, the eventful, the situational, the personal. Critical approaches to learning do correct abstraction in one way, by restoring what is interpreted to relation, contexts, and complexity. But by their inevitable acts of focused analysis, they also promote abstraction, distance, and generality. Accordingly, the scholarly and professional sides of theological education do not as such reverse the reality loss of the contemporary religious situation. After all, they themselves foster interspersals of their own. If it is the case that, at least in its ideal form, poetics mediates and expresses the concrete, would that it would occupy more than simply an occasional or trivial place in theological education. For is it not poetics that so powerfully voices the concrete? And is it not poetics that powerfully captures the “elusive presence” (Terrier) ever present-absent in all matters of faith and gives it such expression that it not only historicizes and differentiates but creates enduring, memorial events in both the life of the believer and the life of the community. And is it not the poetically mediated concrete that can evoke and shape sensibilities to beauty in the midst of reality loss?

Second, even if we have here a general rationale for a poetic element in theological education, we nevertheless confront at least two problems when we consider the actual introduction of poetics into the life of the theological school. First, the use of arts tends to corrupt the arts. This is merely to say the: the arts and the mediation of the concrete begin to weaken as they are made instruments of moralization, religious apologetics, etc. This is probably why over the decades I so vigorously resisted the appropriation of literature on behalf of making religion relevant. On the other hand, this resistance was probably prompted by a utopian stance. Historically, the arts have always arisen in services of what is not simply themselves (in religion, especially) and have existed in contexts of use that made them possible: thus, royal courts, cathedrals, entertainments. Perhaps there is a use of the arts that can be at the same time a subjection to the concrete, that is the preoccupation of the poetic and not simply an “application.”

Second, any persuasive case for a place of the arts in theological education is going to invoke a conventional way of granting or withholding status in theological schools. To have a place in these academic environments means to find a way into the units through which they are schools. It means obtaining a presence by way of courses, fields, and specialties. If the arts have a place in the seminary, they must find their way into courses and fields. “What courses do we need and who will teach them?” is the academic’s response. If the

issue is pressed in this direction, the theological school will be tempted to reproduce for its own purposes the liberal arts curriculum which it supposedly presumes. On the other hand, I find the caution raised by this conventional response not quite satisfying. The caution itself can easily serve another conventionality, the protection of the existing curriculum and pedagogical structure of theological education. Is there a third possibility that is neither an insertion of discrete courses into the present curriculum nor leaving everything in place? Is there a way of so conceiving the field distribution and curricular movement (the course of studies) that poetics is intrinsic to that movement? Minimally, of course, this would require poetics for specific classroom pedagogies. But can a move beyond this be conceived? I suspect that such a move presupposes some revisioning of theological education along lines of *paideia* and the stimulation of sensibilities, a re-visioning that finally would replace the current curricular structures.

### ENDNOTES

1. **Editor's Note:** The papers of Peter Hawkins and Rebecca Chopp referred to here are not reprinted in this volume. They were designed to elicit discussion around particular poems and, while very successful in the conference setting, they would not have worked well as separate essays. The essay by Peter Hawkins that is published in this collection was delivered at one of the earlier Yale conferences and invites the reader into Professor Hawkins's theory and approach to theology and literature.

# Ethical Vision and Musical Imagination

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Each year, in my introductory course on Christian Social Ethics, I draw themes from music and the arts to communicate and illustrate decisive aspects of moral thought and action. In this paper, I want to discuss several points of parallelism and intersection between aesthetics and ethics with a particular concern for the contribution the arts can make to the practice of ethics and the living out of the moral life.

The underlying structure of my argument is quite simple. Ethics may well be an independent discipline, within the range of every person to comprehend, but it is a feeble resource alone. It requires two pillars of support— theology and socio-cultural analysis—to remain stable and to shape the moral fiber of souls and civilizations. Further, like aesthetics, it has a triune structure in its very constitution. The various dimensions of this structure take on their fullest meaning when all three aspects integrate into a whole.<sup>1</sup> I call this the “covenantal” approach, for I am convinced that the Trinitarian structure of Christian thought is the most accurate, philosophical-theological way of grasping the biblical insight that God’s justice, and hence all that is genuinely true and good and beautiful, is the covenantal foundation of all that is worth being and doing.

In the first part of the course, we explore what is today called the contextual dimension of ethics. Ethics, as a discipline that reflects on the nature and character of the moral life, always develops in an ethos, that is, in the midst of a network of values by which people in a society understand one another, order their lives together, and guide personal and social behaviors. The study of ethos or ethology requires a hermeneutic of social existence, an interpretive principle, and a way of perceiving the fabric of values that constitute the social habitat in which people live. These decisive patterns of life are not only built up over centuries of custom and convention as modified by the particularities of the locale and the parties in it, but by the fundamental belief systems that have shaped the basic institutions of daily life.<sup>2</sup> Thus, ethology entails an interpretive account of the history, dynamics, and structures of why this or that group, or we ourselves, do things the way they are done, and why some of these things are considered fitting and others unfitting, some appropriate and others inappropriate.

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James Luther Adams once remarked that ethics really began when the first tad lifted his head out of the swamp and asked, "What's going on here?" To ask that question, of course, implies at least a partial transcendence over the environment that allows us to assess what is going on in the environment of which we are a part.

Understanding our environment, gaining a perspective on it through ethology, connects ethics to the social sciences. Ethics, however, does not simply remain sociological or anthropological or philosophical, for ethics not only wants to know how things really are, it wants to know how things ought to be. And that is part of the ecstatic moment. It is what moves ethics closer to issues of therapy, public policy, or social work, and finally to aesthetics. Insofar as ethics is concerned with how things ought to be, it must be concerned about how they might be other than they are. Thus, ethics becomes preoccupied with things that are not, but could be or might be—and especially with what ought to be.

In this ethological dimension, ethics connects as to particular forms of the arts, most especially the story, the drama, the narrative, the novel, the film and, in their musical forms, the ballad, the ballet, the oratorio, or the opera. These are the "story arts" that, like the social sciences, focus on one or another ethos and the drama of human interactions in them. But these not only describe, they evoke prescriptive response. They demand of those who attend to them more than an acknowledgment that this is the way things are; they portray something of how things ought to be or might be. They express or satirize, they idealize or pillory, they characterize or caricature what is, by producing something that otherwise is not. They select from among existing and possible things and put them together in reconstructed ways that make as much sense as reality itself. In one way or another, they portray or celebrate those paradigmatic events by which some people or culture may come to see life in the context of the whole, ecstatically.

It was the incomparable literary critic and art historian George Steiner who, himself drawing on the social scientists, stated more elegantly than most can aspire to, that the bard was, for many centuries and in many cultures, the center of all this.

It is the singer, anthropologists would say. . . (who invent that world). And we know of no cultures where the poet and the singer are not, at the outset, the same.... (T)he song is held to have come first. The metrics of the poem, the cadences of our prose, are translations out of music. (It . . . declares (our) humanity. It extends from the signifying pitch or rudimentary

cry to what I take to be the single most intricate organization of the interactions of feelings and of meanings known to us [which is that deployed in a string quartet]. In turn, our perceptions, the immediacy of our perceptions of harmony and of discord would seem to correspond not only to our readings of inner states of personal being, but also to that of the social contract and, ultimately, of the cosmos (the “music of the spheres”).<sup>3</sup>

The bard was the composer; the bard told the myths and spoke the epics. This is the one who reminded us of the narratives. This is the composer who established the channels of social interactions. By the use of solemnity, irony, whimsy, or ridicule, legitimate and condemned living were segregated. Whether engaged in birth or death, in war or love, whether noble or peasant, whether aspiring to holiness or ribaldry, the styles of life, the qualities of personality, the fitting responses to situations that become second nature were codified by the arts. What gives this music depth is this: the music of the bard was not only its artistry, but its capacity to frame the moral and spiritual meanings of and for an ethos in a way that is distinct from its closest civilizational relative—the law, which, while it has its own integrity and is necessary to a humane civil order, relies inevitably on the threat of coercion. What the law establishes from the outside in, the arts establish from the inside out. The bard, the musician, and the poet are thus the necessary allies of religious and cultural values.

But who is the bard for us today? The transformations of the patterns in which we live are enormous, and so are the transformations of the arts by which we understand our ethos. For one thing, modern recording and playing equipment make music, including all of that of the bards of many cultures, accessible to all. Music is in the car; it is at work; it is on the ears of those who jog before work and those who take the bus home from work. It is on record, CD, tape, video, or screen at a level of technical quality that surpasses what royalty once heard in person. In fact, music has become one of the greatest export industries of the United States. The music that we hear in our common life today is known and desired by young people around the world, to the considerable chagrin of the elders, for they know that these imports displace where they do not replace the foundational epics of their culture. They know that the music on the boxes is deprogrammed, in the sense that it is no longer sung by the bard who tries to grasp the whole or identify the way things ought to be. This music is non-apical.

Today, music is highly differentiated, and each “kind” of music is a sub-industry. The figures are widely and regularly published. On the whole we can say that today more “country music” is now being played, recorded, and

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broadcast than any other kind (although the definition of what constitutes a “kind” is rather tricky, defined essentially by whether or not a distinct set of producers and consumers exists). “Pop” is second, and “easy listening” comes after that, with “soft rock” and “hard rock” close behind (together they surpass each of the others, but their production and consumer base is distinct). “Rap,” “gospel,” “jazz” and “new age,” “folk,” “big band,” and “classical” follow in descending order, with the latter getting only about two percent of sales and media performance. Many other forms of music (e.g., Indian film music and polka) that have thousands of devotees, do not find their way onto “the charts.” Such patterns have parallels in the visual arts, print media, film and video programming as well.

These facts reflect the complexity of modern society. Economic, political, legal, educational, technological, and business life grow more differentiated, and each sector of society has its own distinctive mode of discourse, its own standards, its own constituency. It may be difficult, but it is not impossible, to identify the distinctive ethological niches of society that treasure these various musical styles. What is more difficult is the question of whether there are any over-arching values in the entire repertoire of artistic resources today—aesthetic or ethical. What, finally, is conveyed by exuberant variety? What holds the whole together? Does it cohere? Does it need to?

Thus we come to the main question that grows out of our ethological explorations: Can a culture survive without a governing set of values? It is not that everyone must sing the same song in the same way, for while there are many moral and artistic advantages to variety, it remains an issue as to whether the variety itself can flourish without a profound and pervasive sense of cohesive pattern that allows, undergirds, and gives cohesion to the parts. Is our culture in moral drift? Does it have discernible common values at its core? Does it cultivate those modes of understanding and, indeed, of ecstasy that allow us to grasp and shape the whole?

It does seem to be the case that religion, ethics, and aesthetics have grown out of touch with each other. Theologians do one thing, ethicists do another, and artists still a third. Not all theologians call on ethics or aesthetics; some artists make a point of opposing ethics and religion, and a few ethicists are contemptuous of theology and of aesthetic niceties, without a sense of crisis at all. But it may be, nevertheless, that something decisive is missing. I am not persuaded, as are many post-modern advocates of deconstruction today, that no normative, integrating, and transcendental possibilities exist.

It is not that the people in specialized fields are less ethical or religious or aesthetically sensitive than anyone else; it is that the meaning of what goes on in these fields is not consciously connected to a sense of the whole and does not have or seek conscious ethical, aesthetic, or theological bases. Some sense of the whole of things, of the ecstatic, wider vision may be missing in these specialized areas. It is not that the modern ethos is necessarily evil by its differentiation, as claim some of the new “communitarians” who are appearing on all sides. But the question can be raised as to whether our complex civilization has, or has lost, or can identify a deep guidance system that can provide a sense of vocation today for the specialists in all these fields, especially the arts.

Several of the artists with whom I am in contact find some forms of Eastern religion, or Jungian archetypes, or certain aspects of New Age thinking much more interesting than what they understand to be classical theology—which seems to be heavy, ponderous, and more a burden than an inspiration. Yet, they tell us, the alternatives are not fully satisfying. They invite them to draw on the deepest inner resources, and yet they do not seem to connect those inner resources to anything reliable in an objective, metaphysical sense. Thus, some of the most gifted artists continue to root their work in classic beliefs, to adhere more or less closely to traditional values, and to cultivate music that was clearly hatched in the hothouse of Christian culture. All of this has Christian roots. This engenders one of the chief topics of conversation: Can the dialogue between theology and the arts, between ethics and aesthetics, help us recover, insofar as it seems necessary, an ecstatic perspective to put our modern ethos in a broader, a deeper, and a more whole context than it now appears to be conscious of?

A second major area of concern for ethics treated in my course is that of normative issues. This concern involves an inquiry into the way things ought to be. In the exploration of this dimension of ethics and aesthetics, we examine what post-modernists, especially since Heidegger, tended to reject, and that is the question: is there an “onto-theological” conception of meaning and is there an “onto-theo-logical”- reality undergirding all meanings? All who believe in God hold that there is in fact a deep and pronounced structure behind all of existence, and that this deep structure has a vitality to it that is the source and the norm of all being, of all meaning, and of all doing. This view implies that in the mind of God, and disclosed in created being, is a “context-invariant” order that in some measure can be known. This is the background stability within which we can discuss the ways in which other aspects of reality, such as those known to ethology, vary accordingly as they are distinctly ancient or modern,

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Eastern or Western, simple or complex, primal or novel, male or female, rich or poor. The idea that such a reality stands behind all metaphysical, ontological, or epistemological insight is the source of deontology. This aspect of ethics emphasizes that dimension of moral life by which we know ourselves to be under universal principles of right and wrong. Some behaviors comport with a given “onto-theo-logical” order and other things do not. This is the kind of thing that Plato was after in his quest for the Forms, that Cicero sought in his concept of *lex*, that Thomas argued for in terms of *ordo*, Calvin saw as the basis of the *institutio*, and Kant wrote about as matters which could be known *a priori*. The human mind has access to a knowable order, even if we cannot experience particular objects. Such views claim awareness of a *logos*, an architectonic pattern that constitutes the deep structure of everything that is. As the social sciences become the allies of ethics in its ethological dimension, so those disciplines, theoretical or practical, that require accuracy in the “right ordering” of things—logic and math, jurisprudence and law, for example—become the allies of ethics and theology.

Especially fascinating for our purposes is the question of math.<sup>4</sup> For one thing, elegance, which is so obviously an aesthetic category, is one of the tests for a “good” solution to a math problem. But more generally, math is one of the key areas that allows us to see the parallels between ethics and aesthetics, especially in regard to music. Ernest McClain, for example, has explored the ancient discoveries of the structured principles of music such as the harmonic third, fourth and fifth. He sees this as one of the contributions of the Pythagoreans and of the ancient, anonymous authors of the *Rig Veda*, for they saw the theoretical connection to the theories of the triangle, the quadrilateral, and so forth, as well as to the practical problem of the tuning of stringed instruments.<sup>5</sup>

In a contemporary world, instruments such as synthesizers, that put a whole orchestra at the hands of a composer or performer, far beyond what even the organ and the piano did, are possible precisely because there is this deep rational structure in the tonality of things. I am personally fascinated by the ways in which some of the “Space” or “New Age” music (as it is often called) explores these possibilities. I have become a fan of the radio program “Music from the Hearts of Space,” not because I find it necessarily compelling, but because it suggests that the world beyond this one has an aesthetic order that can be discovered and expressed by new musical technology. The “Space” or “New Age” music is not a vast emptiness, but a transcending, symbolic locus with a character that can be explored. In the course of exploration, one finds previously undiscovered patterns that allow us to discern defining form in what was



previously thought to be void. The artists who work in this medium are, on the one hand, like sculptors who define space by disclosing structure and, on the other, like painters who found themselves with a whole new palate when acrylics became available. They found that they could discover and express things in a new way, because a wider range of forms was accessible and familiar forms could be portrayed in new ways.

Between the ancient music that McClain has studied and these new experiments, we can find numerous well-known examples of the quest for the basic “onto-theo-logical” order of things in the Western classical tradition. Bach’s “Art of the Fugue” is obviously a gem in terms of exploring possible logics by which rhythm, melody, and harmony can interact. And among the aphorisms that Busoni wrote about Mozart, we find:

His sense of form borders on the superhuman.  
His art is like the sculptor’s—every aspect is perfect in itself.  
His proportions are astonishingly right, but they can be  
measured and verified.  
He is a friend of order: miracle and devilry last their 16 and 32  
bars.  
Architecture is the nearest art to his.<sup>6</sup>

In a quite different way, Schoenberg’s 12-tone method explores how a mathematical model can govern composition. More personally moving to me is the music of Olivier Messaien. When he uses bird calls and combines them with Gamelan patterns from Indonesia and *talas* from India in a composition for Christian worship, or when he structures the chords of a prelude to represent the ontological structure of the cosmos, he approaches, and invites us to approach, the context-invariant, “onto-theo-logical” order of things. These are examples of what we also find in ethics: in spite of the wild undergrowth of variety, novelty, and apparent chaos in every ethos, the universe is governed by a fundamental, deep order. That is what gives a degree of commonality to the world’s religion on certain moral principles; that is what makes it possible for the atheist and the pietist to debate coherently; that is why a Swede can recognize excellence in a raga played by Ravi Shankar, or why a Japanese can discern it in an aria sung by Jessie Norman.

Having tried to identify some of the chief characteristics of the contextual, ethological aspects of ethics and of the universalistic, deontological aspects of ethics, I often end this segment of my course by inviting the school choir director to lead the class in a hymn-sing. Of course, the hymns are selected so

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that the students can easily discover which lyrics and which tunes are most contextual and which most universal, and how ethological and deontological dimensions of both words and music interlock in particular pieces to create distinctive ethical and aesthetic interpretations of life.

It is intriguing, in this connection, that hymn books are the chief repository of tradition for Protestants. One can trace the contexts in which a denomination has flourished and the characteristic ways it treats universal themes by studying its hymnal. For Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican Christians, of course, liturgies are the chief carriers of tradition, but for most Protestants, the hymnal is the most characteristic bearer of norms. One is reminded that Max Wener was convinced that the auditory arts were the most characteristic arts of the Protestant traditions, while the visual arts were more Catholic.<sup>7</sup> This situation, however, is changing, for the more liturgical churches now use more congregational singing in worship than they did a century ago, and the Protestant churches in the more Evangelistic traditions are apparently abandoning hymn books in favor of more fugitive (photocopied or projected) “inspirational lyrics.”

We end the hymn-sing by singing several hymns that speak of heaven and hell, of salvation, the Kingdom, and the New Jerusalem. This is the transition to the third major mode of moral discourse: the teleological. This factor is a dynamic that allows us to anticipate, and moves us toward, a state of reality that is not yet. This factor, with the other two, constitutes the deepest fabric of being, doing, and sensing. As the Trinity theologically represents the inner structure of God’s being (persons in relationship) and the way God is related to the world (as creator, redeemer, and sanctifier), so these triune factors of ethics guide and direct how we ought to act. And, I now suggest, a triune structure of aesthetics allows humans to sense and contribute to ecstatic awareness in a way that also reveals transcendence.

This quest for, the making of, the anticipation of, or recreation of the new—of that which is not yet—is a quite ordinary human experience. Sex, for example, is surely a rather common aesthetic experience, and is deeply intertwined with ethics, theology, and art—perhaps especially with music. It expresses a human desire for an ecstatic possibility that always involves both contextual and universal structures, yet it also often reflects a longing for the whole, the ideal, the complete unity that cannot be fully realized in this life. If ethology most nearly connects ethics and theology with an aesthetic of drama and narrative, and if deontology most nearly connects ethics and theology with the elegance of mathematics and cosmology, this dimension connects ethics and theology with the aesthetics of love and harmony.

We can see this easily in Country music, for all aspects of it are intentionally obvious. Ricky van Shelton sings about the “simple man” on the CD “Country Roads.” What does he want out of life as he drives his 18-wheeler home? He wants:

three square meals in my frying pan,  
a quarter-acre plot on a GI plan,  
a warm bed with you by my side,  
and a little time before I die.  
I’m a simple man.<sup>8</sup>

Not bad. “And every one shall sit under his fig tree....” It is the kind of impulse by which many people live; it keeps us rolling on. We live in hope, out of a need for something that is more perfect than this life, even if we would be satisfied with considerably less than perfection in this life: the intimacy of love, the connection with others, the fulfillment of promise, the actualization of possibility. We can see this in the negative as well as in the positive. An enormous number of songs deal with the tragedy of the incapacity to find even simple things. How many blues treat the profound loneliness that cannot be overcome, how many laments express the sense of failed, flawed, or foiled desire? Tragedy is born of the same impetus that drives hope.

This is the teleological dimension of ethics. Something in us reaches toward goals, purposes, and ends. This evokes our deepest longings and our greatest creativity, it calls us to make things happen and demands that we wait for a future we cannot manufacture out of our own imaginations. It seems that all reach toward an eschatological possibility, modest or grand. One of the most striking, familiar examples of this is in Leonard Bernstein’s *West Side Story*. You will all recognize “Somewhere”:

There’s a place for us  
Somewhere, a place for us;  
Peace and quiet and open air,  
Hope for us, somewhere.  
There’s a time for us  
Someday, a time for us;  
Time together with time to spare,  
Time to look, time to care,  
Someday. Somewhere,  
We’ll find a new way of living,  
We’ll find a way of forgiving.  
Somewhere.  
There’s a place for us,

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A time and place for us.  
Hold my hand and we're half-way there;  
Hold my hand and I'll take you there,  
Somehow. Someday. Somewhere.<sup>9</sup>

This human impulse toward the better, it seems to me, is what has been taken up by the great classical philosophers and has been enormously influential in ethical theory as well as in aesthetics. It is called the teleological impulse, and it can be found in Aristotle's and Thomas's definitions of happiness, and in the Epicureans' and Utilitarians' focus on pleasure.

For the most part, people seem to make their decisions on the basis of a quest for happiness or pleasure. But beyond the natural quest for happiness, the preference for pleasure over pain, and even beyond the protest against these by asceticism or ideological inversion, stands the question of what is the ultimate end of life, the purpose of all that is. It is likely that all teleology involves a kind of ethics and a quality of aesthetics that has utopian or apocalyptic dimensions. Something in this reaches toward the ultimate and seeks the ultimate purpose of it all.

Of course, we can ask whether this or that particular form of teleology finally evokes the deepest commitments and satisfies the deepest longings. At that point, however, it is less philosophical teleology that is the most compelling source of that dynamism that moves souls and civilizations toward the future, than it is the religious vision that transforms our ordinary desires for a better tomorrow. Religion, more often than not, gives us the clues as to what the greatest happiness might be, and why certain kinds of pain and sacrifice might be undertaken. The world's religions envision that which is beyond the realm of the humanly realizable, that toward which people nevertheless orient their whole lives. Indeed, the great religions are distinguished precisely by what they envision as most worth living for and dying for. In religion we find the eschatological clue, a particular rendition of the ultimate *telos*—the final future which is not yet, but which has somehow broken into this world. Signals of it are believed to have arrived, to have been disclosed.

Such a vision transforms the teleological possibilities. The present is renewed. New disciples and new disciplines are evoked that redefine what makes us "happy," and gives us pleasure unto joy. These do not seem to be chosen by us for utilitarian reasons. Indeed, they often demand great sacrifice, and a sense of bliss that cannot be gained by seeking simply one's own fulfillment. The devotional songs of the world reflect this, but I find a particularly appealing rendition of this awareness in Bobby McFerrin's song on discipline based on Colossians 3. Let us listen to it:

no discipline seems pleasant at the time but painful  
later on however it produces a harvest of righteousness  
and peace for those who have been trained by it  
strengthen up your feeble arms, your weak knees . . .  
fix your mind on things above, above where he is king,  
above where we are free  
set your heart on things above where we will be . . .  
make level paths for your feet  
strengthen out your feeble mind, so he can make it heal  
no discipline seems. . .<sup>10</sup>

The world religions all have this element but they do not all agree about the vision of good or evil to which all life is to move. Hinduism speaks of *samsara*, while Buddhism points to the bliss of *nirvana*. Islam speaks of Paradise, while Judaism looks forward to a “messianic age.” Christians, of course, believe that one ultimate end has already broken into time in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is a present promise as well as a future hope, but it is one that both brings a personal completeness and promises a cosmopolitan civilization yet to come.

When we speak of such matters, when we seek to know the ultimate end, the purpose for all that we are and do, art is required. No one has the kind of answer that can be known by contextual analysis or by “onto-theo-logical” reflection. The resources of ethos and of logos are necessary for art, but in this area art is necessary for ethics. This dimension of life can only be captured by imaginative vision, by the kind of rapture that drives gifted people into composition, performance, and communication. They make it possible for others to hear and see and taste glimpses of that which is not and cannot yet be. Music of this kind calls us into a realm that is beyond the ordinary canons of deontological or ethological ethics. That may be the reason why many find artists a little strange. They dwell in a not-yet realm, always creating something that has not been before—or, at the deepest, receiving and communicating from the future, which is not yet, intimations of what might be. Artists are transported by it and into it, and they mediate it to the world with a discipline that allows the world to see itself more whole than it is.

But in one sense, what they have to say is not real and does not lend itself to words. Here is the problem: everything that we know and everything that we can imagine suggests that everything in the world ends in death. Entropy is the most evident fact; everything comes to an end and has no future in existence, even if eternal forms remain in the mind of God. The tomb is our common destiny—unless there is some teleological beyond, some reality of ultimate future that surpasses ordinary expectation.

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Such awareness touches us all. Every believer is something of an artist, and every artist lives on the brink of religious vision. That may well be why so many of the religious traditions become fixated on art. They worship at idols or icons, or forbid the making of images; they use music in worship, or demand silence; they develop liturgical dance, or prohibit dance entirely. Indeed, no few of the cultured of every religious tradition come to doubt the difference between religion and art, and use them both for spiritual encouragement and fulfillment.

We can see this in the life of Gustaf Mahler, who lived constantly on the border of spirituality and who experienced both inspiring and terrifying impulses from the future, although he was not in a conventional sense religious. The story is told that he could not finish his eighth symphony for some time, for he needed an inspiring conclusion that he could not create. Later, he could not think about writing a ninth, because he knew that previous composers had died and left the ninth unfinished. But when he attended the funeral of a friend, he heard a poem that was adapted by Klopstock from Goethe. That poetic idea enabled him to complete the eighth and turn to another major symphony-length effort, which he treated as explicitly non-religious, *Das Lied con der Erde*. Mahler expressed the religious overtones of the beyond, as I think you can hear in the “Chorus Mysticus,” near the end of the eighth.

Alles Vergaengliche	Everything transient
Ist nur ein Gleichnis.	Is but a parable.
Das Unzalaengliche;	Everything inadequate
Heir wird's Ereignis.	Is fulfilled here.
Das Unbescheibliche,	The indescribable
Hier ist's getan;	Becomes actual here;
Das Ewig-Weibliche	The Eternal Receptivity
Zieht uns hinan.	Draws us into itself. <sup>11</sup>

Notice that it is angels who are singing. We find, to be sure, canticles in the Bible, and Psalms, and many other forms of song, but it is intriguing that angels sing where the future breaks in. The fact that angels are portrayed indicates that what is going on is not simply a construction by humans of the future. Angels, as message bearers from the other side, come to us; they are the theological muses, and in that sense, an age that cannot imagine such a thing is impoverished from lack of a transcending future. But if we do believe in the possibility of ultimate future that is mediated to us, and that we can grasp, enjoy, and even repeat or follow with the discipline of song, we have to suspect that the world is open to real possibilities beyond the mere this-sidedness of things.

However, we should notice in Mahler that it is almost an Aristotelian view of teleology which is stated. That is to say, it is the fulfillment of every earthly desire that is made complete. The transformation of natural desires, the deeper teleology, is not captured. For that, a genuinely eschatological vision is required, one that is beyond judgment, beyond death, beyond the break-down of all that seems to be otherwise reliable. Note how differently the classical motifs are that end the Requiem Mass, here as written by Gabriel Faure:

<p>In paradisum deducant angeli,  in tuo adventu suscipiant  te martyrs,  et perducant te in civitatem  sanctam Jerusalem.  Chorus angelorum te suscipiat,  et cum Lazaro quondam paupere  aeternam habeas requiem.</p>	<p>May angels lead you to paradise,  may the martyrs greet you at  your coming,  and lead you into the holy city  of Jerusalem.  May the angels choir receive you  and with Lazarrus, once a beggar,  may you find eternal peace.<sup>12</sup></p>
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Here we see characteristic Christian elements that unite ethical and aesthetic motifs in a whole theological vision. This vision transforms ordinary desires for fulfillment. There is direct personal address, a signal of personal meaning beyond the grave, to be sure; but the restored person is commended to the angels and martyrs, the company of the *communio sanctorum*, as it appears in the holy city. A civilizational fabric parallels personal meaning. And choirs sing—the inspiration and creativity of an ever renewing future continues. Still more, Lazarus, the symbol of the mourned, the outcast, the poor, the stench of death that is among us all without Christ, is drawn into the companionship. And all find a home in the eternal peace.

This completes my review of the three major modes of moral discourse that correlate with artistic imagination. But one more step, in my teaching, is yet to come. I spend the rest of each term trying to encourage the students (in my introductory course in Christian Social Ethics, and, in a different way in the intensive seminar for those who plan to attend our Berkshire Institute for Theology and the Arts events) to discern where and how, in ethics and in aesthetics, these three motifs join. The most profound, the most authentic, ethical judgments, I argue, are covenantal/Trinitarian ones—where the ethical, deontological, and teleological aspects find a unity in God. Most of our efforts do not reach that level, and thus most of our morality is a series of lesser evil compromises on one point or another. That is why even the most moral among us are in need of judgment and forgiveness. Full integrity is extremely

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rare, and where it does occur, it is revealing of all that is holy. It engenders love in persons, and justice in society. It is a gift of grace.

Similarly, I believe, with the arts. The most profound aesthetic creativity occurs precisely where nuanced sensitivity to the actual socio-cultural context is joined to both an architectonic discovery of the deep logic behind all that is, and to an inspired vision of that which is not yet. In the examples I mentioned, all are present, although they are present in different proportions. Their joining touches on revelation.

The ethicist, or the artist—perhaps especially those who are called to leadership in the churches—are called to stretch every nerve, ethically and aesthetically, to evoke, invite, induce, and create, so far as it is given to us, the conditions for the reception of that holy revelation.

### ENDNOTES

1. I draw from, and revise, such diverse works in ethics as H. R. Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (Harper and Bros., 1937), which emphasizes the Sovereignty of God, the Reign of Christ in the Heart, and the Coming Kingdom, and Louis Medes *Choices* (Harper and Rowe, 1990), as can be seen in "Protestantism and Poverty," *This World*, Issue 17 (Spring 1987), pp. 18-42; and "The Trinity as Public Theology: Its Truth and Justice for Free-Church, Non-creedal Communities," in *Faith to Creed: Ecumenical Perspectives on the Affirmation of the Apostolic Faith in the Fourth Century*, Ed., S. Mark Heim (Eerdmans Publishers, 1991), pp. 162-97.
2. This is the sort of thing that has made Robert Bellah, et. al., *Habits of the Heart* (University of California Press, 1985) so widely used.
3. George Steiner, *Real Presences* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 195f.
4. According to John D. Barrow's new work *Pi in the Sky* (Oxford University Press, 1992), the idea that math is as much, if not more, a discovery as it is an invention is currently experiencing a rebirth after several decades in which social construction theories dominated discussion.
5. Ernest McClain, *The Myths of Invariance: of Gods, Math and Music*. I understand that there are parallels also in ancient Chinese music, but have not discovered whether they were taken to China by the Buddhists, or whether they were indigenous.
6. From *Words about Music*, ed. John Amis and Michael Rose (Paragon House, 1992), pp. 198-9.
7. Max Weber, *The Rational and Social Foundations of Music*, (1911) Tr. Dale Mardudale, et. al., (Southern Illinois Press, 1958).
8. Columbia Redores, Inc., 1991.



9. Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. Taken from Original Broadway Cast recording, Columbia Records/CBS, Inc.
10. From "Medicine Music," Capital Records, Inc., 1990, which he recorded with his father. Shortly after this came out, he told me that he sees the musician like himself as a medicine man, as a shaman, as one who has been given the talent to envision what is not yet, and to mediate this in a creative way to the present so that people can become participants in a new vision for life.
11. Symphony No. 8, Klaus Tennstedt conducting the London Philharmonic Orchestra and Choir. EMI Records, Ltd., 1987.
12. Gabriel Faure, *Requiem*, Opus 48, Teldek Recordings, 1985.



# An Exploration of Music as Theology

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The music treated by Frank Burch Brown and Max Stackhouse in their presentations for the Consultation on Music as Theology ranged from the hymn "Wondrous Love" and Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* to Bernstein's "There's a place for us," Bobby McFerrin's "Discipline" and "Twenty-third Psalm," the "Chorus Mysticus" from Mahler's *Symphony No. 8*, and "In paradisum" from the Faure *Requiem*.

In the discussion that followed, Richard Hays pointed out that all the examples used were musical settings of verbal texts. The question of text-based versus absolute music raises the larger issue of whether music is merely a vehicle for theology or whether it can be, in itself, theology. I would like to direct my comments to this latter question.

One way to use the same texted musical examples to open a discussion of the non-verbal aspects of music is to consider our emotional responses to the music, questioning whether the text and music say the same thing. In this kind of presentation, the text would be studied before hearing the music in order to gain a separate impression of it. The questions then become, Does the composer succeed at saying what the text implies? or, What aspect of the text is the composer addressing? This kind of discussion would begin to disclose the various layers of encoded meaning, both verbal and non-verbal, with which we as musicians, theologians, artists, congregations, and audience are dealing.

Take, for example, Bernstein's "There's a place for us." This song in *West Side Story* first represents the hope of new love for an earthly paradise, that comes to be revealed as unattainable. The text allows for a double meaning, however, and after Tony's death the song gains further poignancy by expressing what has now become, as Stackhouse points out, an "eschatological hope." Besides the transfiguring beauty of the music and the superb recording, there were at least two other layers of meaning for me at this particular performance that increased my emotional response.

The first was the memory from two summers ago of Bernstein conducting the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra (he loved to work with students) barely two months before he died. It was evident as he walked on and off stage that he was having difficulty breathing but when he conducted the orchestra, the performance was as vigorous as ever and deeply profound. I found myself

thinking that the eschatological hope expressed in “There’s a place for us” was his as a young man (I was not thinking of the librettist Stephen Sondheim), and reflecting on his tortuous spiritual journey as it has been revealed to us in his music.

At the same time, I was experiencing parental separation anxiety as I remembered that my 15-year-old son was playing the suite from *West Side Story* in a youth orchestra touring Berlin, Prague, and Salzburg even as the conference was meeting (his first trip abroad). At the pre-tour concert at Symphony Hall in Boston, my husband and I both cried when we heard this melody played with deep passion and conviction by talented adolescents of mixed races who have not yet become disillusioned with the imperfections inherent in earthly existence.

I cite these two extra-musical associations which are emotionally charged not because they are unusual, but because, for a great work of art, they are the norm. An emotionally-powerful artistic creation that deals openly with cosmic issues of love and death will attract other extra-musical associations to it. If we had gone around the room sharing the most powerful recollection that one of those pieces represented to us, I think that we would have been surprised at the intensity of response that exists just below the surface and is not often verbalized.

The musicologist Paul Henry Lang stated at the fifth International Church Music Congress in 1966, “Art, like religion, elevates man, and even if he does not understand the immense culture that is encompassed in a masterpiece, he feels it.”<sup>1</sup> It is in the ability to transmit a feeling, an emotion, that music and the arts are unparalleled. Music enables us to experience as a corporate body the same emotion at the same time. Through this, our deepest yearning for community is realized. We literally become “one body.”

Although I did not share my intense emotional response to “There’s a place for us” with anyone at the time, I did not feel embarrassed by the tears welling up in my eyes because I knew that everyone was experiencing a similar stirring of their deepest emotions. Reading the text by itself may or may not have done that for us. Indeed, the text could sound rather shallow and silly if it were read by someone who was not interested in embracing their deepest emotions at that moment. Bernstein’s music is a “reading” of the text that is clear in its attempt to engage the passions and to struggle with cosmic issues. If one is true to the music, one cannot avoid the emotional impact that Bernstein has composed this piece.

Another step toward separating the music from the text without looking at absolute music (which could be seen as clouding the issues because the thematic intention is more abstract) would be to look at two different pieces of music commonly used with the same text. For this discussion, I have chosen to do a musical analysis of two settings of the Christmas carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” which has the advantage of being short, self-contained, and well-known. The text by Phillips Brooks is paired with two different melodies in the Episcopal *Hymnal 1982* (see illustrations of hymns 78 and 79 that follow), both of which have their ardent supporters. Written for a Sunday school Christmas festival in 1868,<sup>2</sup> the text can be sung to the English melody “Forest Green” as adapted and harmonized by Ralph Vaughan Williams, or to “St. Louis” composed for Brooks by his organist Lewis H. Redner. The melodies have different flavors, each emphasizing a different side of the text.

“Forest Green” is in F major, diatonic in nature (no accidentals), and contrasts quarter notes with quicker eighth notes in each phrase, with the third phrase reversing this rhythmic motive. Phrases 1, 2, and 4 are virtually identical, beginning on a low dominant pitch (5 or C) and resolving to the tonic (1 or F) by means of an authentic cadence (V-I). Phrase 3 reverses this process as well, beginning on the tonic pitch and ending on the dominant pitch in a half cadence (vi-IV6-V), thereby requiring the resolution of the last phrase which provides a strong sense of closure (A-A-B-A). A number of secondary triads (ii, vi, iii) are used throughout for contrasting color, but they are strongly resolved by primary triads (I-IV-V).

There are relatively few skips between adjacent pitches in the first, second, and fourth phrases (only 3 out of 16). Phrase 3 employs twice as many (6 out of 18), although the skips are still limited to those within the tonic triad (pitches 1, 3, and 5). This means that the melody moves largely by step, and is relatively easy to sing. The upbeat beginning of the first phrase followed by a thrice-repeated tonic pitch provides the melody with an exuberant folk-tune quality which is reinforced by eighth notes dancing the tune up to its high note.

From a theological standpoint, this music depicts well the joy of the angels and the morning stars proclaiming the “holy birth” in v.2, but it does not really succeed in setting the profound silence of verses 1 and 3. The “world of sin” (v.3) in this musical rendition does not seem at all frightening. There is no conflict between earth and heaven. We are singing with the angels as if we are all happy children. The darkness is already over. Christ is here.

“St. Louis” is quite different. Typical of 19th-century musical composition, it employs chromaticism in both the melody (m.1) and harmony (m.2, 5,9),

78 Christmas

*Unison or Harmony*

1 O lit - tle town of Beth - le - hem, how still we see thee lie!  
 2 Far Christ is born of Ma - ry; and gath - ered all a - bove,  
 3 How si - lent - ly, how si - lent - ly, the won - drous gift is given!  
 4 Where child - ren pure and hap - py pray to the bless - ed Child,  
 5 O ho - ly Child of Beth - le - hem, de - scend to us, we pray;

1 A - bove thy deep and dream - less sleep the si - lent stars go by;  
 2 while mor - tals sleep, the an - gels keep their watch of won - dering love.  
 3 So God im - parts to hu - man hearts the bless - ings of his heaven.  
 4 where mis - er - y cries out to thee, Son of the mo - ther mild;  
 5 cast out our sin and en - ter in, be born in us to - day.

1 yet in thy dark streets shin - eth the ev - er - last - ing Light;  
 2 O morn - ing stars, to - geth - er pro - claim the ho - ly birth!  
 3 No ear may hear his com - ing, but in this world of sin,  
 4 where char - i - ty stands watch - ing and faith holds wide the door,  
 5 We hear the Christ - mas an - gels the great glad tid - ings tell;

1 the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee to - night.  
 2 and prais - es sing to God the King, and peace to men on earth.  
 3 where meek souls will re - ceive him, still the dear Christ en - ters in.  
 4 the dark night wakes, the glo - ry breaks, and Christ - mas comes once more.  
 5 O come to us, a - bide with us, our Lord Em - man - u - ell

Words: Philip Brooks (1835-1895)  
 Music: Faust Green, English melody; adap. and harm. Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) GMD

Hymn 78, The Episcopal Hymnal 1982 (According to the Use of the Episcopal Church)

79

Christmas

1 O lit - tle town of Beth - le - hem, how still we see thee lie!  
 2 For Christ is born of Ma - ry; and gath - ered all a - bove,  
 3 How si - lent - ly, how si - lent - ly, the won - drous gift is given!  
 4 Where child - ren pure and hap - py pray to the bless - ed Child,  
 5 O ho - ly Child of Beth - le - hem, de - scend to us, we pray;

1 A - bove thy deep and dream - less sleep the si - lent stars go by;  
 2 while mor - tals sleep, the an - gels keep their watch of won - dering love.  
 3 So God im - parts to hu - man hearts the bless - ings of his heaven.  
 4 where mis - er - y cries out to thee, Son of the mo - ther mild;  
 5 cast out our sin and en - ter in, be born in us to - day.

1 yet in thy dark streets shin - eth the ev - er - last - ing Light;  
 2 O morn - ing stars, to - geth - er pro - claim the ho - ly birth!  
 3 No ear may hear his com - ing, but in this world of sin,  
 4 where char - i - ty stands watch - ing and faith holds wide the door,  
 5 We hear the Christ - mas an - gels the great glad tid - ings tell;

1 the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee to - night.  
 2 and prais - es sing to God the King, and peace to men on earth.  
 3 where meek souls will re - ceive him, still the dear Christ en - ters in.  
 4 the dark nightwakes, the glo - ry break, and Christ - mas comes oncemore.  
 5 O come to us, a - bide with us, our Lord Em - man - u - el!

Words: Phillips Brooks (1835-1893)  
 Music: St. Louis, Lewis H. Redner (1831-1908)

CMB

non-chord tones than “Forest Green,” and a slower harmonic rhythm (m.1 is simply a repeated tonic triad with two accented lower neighbor notes on beat 3; m.2 is a ii chord in first inversion rather unusually preceded by three non-chord tones on the downbeat [two appoggiaturas and an accented chromatic passing tone]). The melody is bolder and more difficult to sing, employing intervallic skips of both major and minor thirds (4), perfect fourths (3), perfect fifths (2), major and minor sixths (4), as well as an octave.

In this hymn, phrase 3 is contrasting in that it moves to the relative minor key (d minor), and employs only repeated notes and motion by step instead of repeated notes and motion by step and skip as in the other phrases. Soprano and bass move in contrary motion in the first half of this phrase. In the second half, the lack of harmony for three notes (soprano, alto, tenor, and bass sing octaves) emphasizes the minor mode. The half cadence in d (ii6-V) slides back to the f major sonority at the beginning of the fourth phrase by common-tone modulation (the pitch A holds while the alto E moves to C, the tenor C-sharp moves to C natural and the bass A moves to F).

There is an introspective aspect to this melody and harmonization that is dreamier and more mystical, and seems to hold a stronger sense of awe for the divine. One can believe the story surrounding the composition of “St. Louis” that tells of Redner’s frustration with his inability to compose anything worthy of the words. Only at the last minute was he said to have been inspired with this music in a dream.<sup>3</sup> Because of the interesting melodic intervals and change of harmonies, the music requires a different kind of listening in order to sing it well. We become aware of the deep silence of the night, and how we long for God. The slithering chromaticism and many leaps of the first two phrases seem to represent worldly distractions. The “everlasting Light” (v.1), “morning stars” (v.2), and “Christmas angels” (v.5) of the third phrase return us to the basic unadorned line. Now we are ready to take the biggest leap of all (an octave), and request the presence of “our Lord, Emmanuel” (v.5).

The music closely parallels the text and is more successful than “Forest Green” at setting the conflicting human feelings of fear, awe, and yearning that would be present for those actually witnessing the entrance of Christ on earth. The desire for a relationship with Jesus as intimate as that of Mary’s birthing the “holy Child of Bethlehem” is sincerely expressed in v.5. The music of “St. Louis” knows the darkness well, and yet is able to reach out to the light.

I remember having an argument a number of years ago with the interim priest at the church for which I was the musician. The issue was which of these



two tunes we should use at the Christmas service. I felt strongly that “St. Louis” should be used, although at the time I had no theological basis to support my opinion. “St. Louis” was simply the nostalgic tune from my childhood. The priest argued for “Forest Green” for a similar reason. Our compromise was to use one tune on Christmas Eve and the other on Christmas Day.

As I look back at this kind of clergy/organist exchange, I find myself slightly embarrassed that I was not more sensitive to the many layers of meaning that our conversation was uncovering. We were both expressing insecurity, recollecting past Christmas experiences (both good and bad), and feeling the need to be ministered to as we faced the strain of being caregivers to others at a difficult time of year. For me, “Forest Green” was a familiar tune that had no Christmas connotations. For the priest, “St. Louis” appeared to have strong negative connotations (for whatever undisclosed reason). After having analyzed the music in relationship to the text, I am beginning to understand that the concrete confrontation with darkness in “St. Louis (which does not happen in “Forest Green”) may also have been informing our disparate responses

The issue of music as theology cannot be neglected. If the spirit of God resides in the breath, then music is a manifestation of that breath, and of breathing together. Verbal theology is only one modality in which religious truths are revealed to us. In the liturgy, revelation comes through many different modes: through tasting, smelling, seeing, touching, feeling, and hearing. The whole body wants to respond to God’s invitation for intimacy.

Openness to music, to listening for the Spirit, puts us in a more open posture for receiving Divine revelation. The discourse between priests and musicians reflects the inherent tension between the word and music, the spoken and unspoken, or the Word (as in John 1:1) and the Spirit. The Body of Christ requires the use of both spheres of the brain, of the entire dialectic, in order to worship. By balancing and using all of the gifts that have been given to the people of God, we will be brought closer to each other and closer to the Divine mystery.

In the Hellenistic and Greco-Roman ascetical literature of the first to the 11th centuries C.E., the singing of hymns and psalms is a constant feature of an ascetic discipline. The goals of this performance include healing and protection (self-revelation), self-forgetfulness, and becoming one with God. In this third category, singing the psalms gives way to a deep interior singing which is actually silence. A powerful seventh-century Syriac text on prayer attributed to Abraham of Nathpar discusses how exterior singing can lead to the interior singing of “spiritual beings:”

## Music as Theology

For until someone has worshipped for a considerable time in this exterior manner—employing continual fasting, using the voice for psalmody, with repeated periods on his knees, . . . along with a careful watch over the senses, being filled with the remembrance of God, full of due fear and trembling at his name, seeing that he has a firm belief that the rustling movements of his thoughts are not hidden from God's knowledge, humbling himself before everyone, . . . when someone can do all this, and achieve it in himself, he will arrive at singing to God in the psalmody that spiritual beings use to praise him. For God is silence, and in silence is he sung and glorified by means of that psalmody and praise of which he is worthy.<sup>4</sup>

By calming the body, mind and soul the ascetic is no longer affected by angels or demons. The only movement is the reflection of the Divine. Through a deep, interior singing, the ascetic achieves union with God.

In conclusion, music may be a vehicle for theology in "exterior singing" but it is theology in "interior singing." Great works of art are engaged with cosmic issues and eschatological hopes, and are, therefore, in touch with that deep interior singing that is the voice of God. They allow us to know God directly through our senses. We feel the breath of God resonating throughout the corporate body. When we are the closest to each other, we are also the closest to being at one with God.

The non-verbal should not be devalued because it cannot be adequately verbalized. As Edward Farley stated, music can pull us out of ourselves and into community, moving us into the world of "Thou" (Buber). Limiting our conversation to one side of the dialectic is not only unscholarly, but it also limits the revelation. Being open to "other," other people as well as other modes of communication, is being open to the fullness of the creation and, therefore, to the fullness of God.

**Editor's Note:** This article is reprinted, with permission, from *ARTS*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 1993.

ENDNOTES

1. Paul Henry Lang, "The Patrimonium Musicae Sacrae and the Task of Sacred Music Today," *Sacred Music and Liturgy Reform After Vatican II*, Proceedings of the Fifth International Church Music Congress, Chicago-Milwaukee, August 21-28, 1966, ed. Johannes Overath (Rome: Consociatio Internationalis Musicae Sacrae, 1969), p. 248.
2. E.E. Ryden, *The Story of Christian Hymnody* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 549.
3. *Ibid*, pp. 549-50.
4. Abraham of Nathpar, "On prayer: how it is necessary for someone who prays to be eager and vigilant in himself," in *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*, intro. and trans. by Sebashan Brock (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications Inc., 1987), pp. 192-93.



# Music and Human Existence: A Response

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In the consultation on theology and music, Frank Burch Brown and Max Stackhouse set forth two perspectives on the place of music in the Christian life.<sup>1</sup> Frank Burch Brown attempted to correct the traditional Christian privileging of the Word and words and the resultant marginalization of music. He contended that the sense-oriented, embodied, and communal existence of human life alled for music as part of any deep testimonial expression. He illustrated his thesis by comparing how Mozart's *Figaro* conveyed or was the vehicle of forgiveness and grace, to the theme of the forgiveness of mediocrity in the film, *Amadeus*. According to Brown, music is always specific and contextual, hence it can lend itself to perverse human agendas. Yet, like other arts, music can so attend theology and Christian existence that it is an intrinsic element in a graced event. In this sense it can be "the voice of God."

In Max Stackhouse's essay, music is discerned to be an intrinsic aspect or moment of Christian ethics insofar as ethics has to do with ethos and is a hermeneutic of existence. The stuff of ethos includes the events and vicissitudes of everyday life in its march toward death. And human societies have always experienced this stuff of life (marriage, illness, birth, etc.) in connection with music. His particular thesis was that human life is inherently temporal and anticipative, conducted with respect to both penultimate (*West Side Story's* "There's a Time for Us") and ultimate (Faure's *Requiem*) ends. The ultimate end (telos) is not so much known as sung. In his interpretation, music is less a "voice of God" as the voice that sings God, or at least sings human hope facing the prospects of God. This may, however, be a refinement on Brown's notion of music as the "voice of God." The phrase may turn out to mean that God's voice is ever and always a teleological invitation, a telic hope, which thus calls forth the arts, especially music, as expressions of this.

Both perspectives have a similar focus. They do not attempt to relate music and theology but explore deeper reasons why there might be such a relation. Their deeper reasons are that music has some proper and possibly even intrinsic place in (Christian) existence itself, or in human existence as it is lived before God, the sacred, or ultimate ends. Brown and Stackhouse depart from each other only on a point of emphasis. Experience of the divine ("the voice of

God”) is Brown’s emphasis; the singing of the divine promise is Stackhouse’s emphasis. In response to their presentations, I want to make the following comments.

Both “music” and “theology” are, without specification, comprehensive terms, each one susceptible to a variety of definitions and construals and each one inclusive of a vast set of phenomena. As such they have little or no relation. They have relation, or they are brought into relation, only as specific meanings or phenomena are specified. “Theology” and “theological” can be used more or less interchangeably for “religion,” “faith,” or anything concerning religious matters. To relate music and theology in this sense is to relate music to the religious life. Thus, what is the place of music in the religious (faithful, Christian) life? If that is the question, then other meanings of “theology” such as theology as a set of studies, as the wisdom that might attend the life of faith, as critical thinking, as an academic field are set aside. At the same time, exploration of the place of music in the life of faith could be called a theological task, a “theological thinking of music,” or a “theology of music.” It is important to keep these different concerns sorted out.

Music too is an inclusive term which can be thought and related only in specification. Music in the sense of its merely formal definition (Brown speaks of music as the art of sound) was not the subject of the two presentations. Both specified a more determinate sense of music when they selected examples of textual music, music merged with language and its imageries, and even with narrative. (*Figaro*, *Amadeus*, and Faure’s *Requiem* are all narrational.) This move to textualized music may not be simply accidental or arbitrary. Both writers stress a thematization (forgiveness, telic hope) of something quite specific in human existence. Non-textual music can, of course, assist thematic recollection given sufficient association of that music and the theme. But even if one acknowledges apparently universal types of music as to mood (somberness, gaiety), it may not be the case that music, apart from association, can thematize. Accordingly, textual and non-textual music may have distinguishable relations and functions in religious life.

We have seen in recent decades a parade of literature—from the social sciences and history to post-modernist tracts—whose theme is the historicity of everything human. This reminds us of a truism; there is no such thing as music in general. There is music as it is written, performed, interpreted, and heard in specific times and places. And if that is the case, the question of “music” and the Christian life is not simply a trans-historical question. Thus we should not pretend that music can be related to theology or the Christian life as if there were

or as if such a society had not displaced the medieval architectonic of reality. Nietzsche's expression of this displacement was, "The true world has become a fable." According to Philip Rieff, the mark of the "therapeutic society" is the loss of the words of power, the diminishment of the "god-terms"; that is, expressions that connect genuine commands and forbiddings to the sacred. "Thou shalt not kill" is for Rieff a god-term. If anything of the sort has in fact happened, it surely has affected the issue of music as "the voice of God" and the capacity of music to sing human hopes. Is music itself a god-term? Are "theology" and "Christian existence" god-terms whose present power and meaning cannot simply be taken for granted? We have here the issue that confronts any of us who would try to think of music as divinely communicative. Can we sing the Lord's song in a strange (postmodern) land?

My last and longer comment concerns the metaphor at work in such expressions as "music as the voice of God," "I experience God in music," and the like. The metaphor is the metaphor of revelation, communication, disclosure. It prevails in the exilic prophets, and it is the dominant metaphor of the Protestant branch of Christendom. We also find it in ancient and modern gnosticisms. For gnostic Christianity, cognitive (revelational) contents are the foundation of redemption. In non-gnostic interpretations, redemption, salvation, or transformation are the occasions of revealing. In gnostic Christianity, the revealing itself is what saves. I do not suggest here that the two essays fall within the gnostic view. I only raise the question whether the communication or revelation metaphor is the best metaphor for understanding the relation between music and Christian existence. It seems to me that this metaphor carries with it some baggage better left behind on theological journeys. Consider the following.

1. As a claim, the expression, "God speaks through music," invites a number of rather nasty cognitive questions with which we are now familiar. They have to do with the impossibility of ever knowing in advance the claimed speaker behind the speaking in such a way that we know when a speaking is in fact occurring in a given medium (the music event). (In ordinary human conversations, there are all sorts of warrants for identifying a speaker.) In other words, how do we know it is God and not something else (the culture, one's own dispositions and needs) that does the speaking? Also raising its ugly head are the inevitable questions of what in fact was said, what content was passed in the communication, when did it take place, how often, under what conditions, and so on. Our inclination is of course to reject such questions as inappropriate. Asking for a specification of the divine speaker and the spoken content is too literalistic and anthropomorphic. But if that is so, if we are not in fact sure who

or what communicates nor what is communicated, then we become properly suspicious of the metaphor itself. The metaphor may be what is inappropriate.

2. A second unfortunate feature of the revelational metaphor is the abstraction it promotes. When we claim that God speaks through music in itself and as such, we constitute a situation of three elements: ourselves, the medium (music), and God. Music then takes on an oracular function, something we can consult in itself for the divine presence or command. The same abstraction and difficulty attends any claim that a divine presence or communication takes place through some discrete entity; the sunset, the poem, the revival, the sacrament. We would not be entirely wrong if we say that God is “in” these things, or “speaks through” these things. Believers are hesitant to place limits on God, to exclude anything as subject to God’s creativity and grace. But we perpetrate an abstraction when we isolate any one thing as a channel, a special target of a divine act. It is preferable, therefore, to understand the relation between God and the goods that we celebrate and enjoy in metaphors that as much as possible avoid abstraction. I do not want to load too much onto the expression, “music is the voice of God.” One may use such language without intending the revelatory metaphor. I suspect, in fact, that this is what is going on in Brown’s thinking. The alternate metaphor I want now to explore, however, is very much in the spirit of both writers’ positions.

An alternative metaphor to communication and revelation is the metaphor of transformation. If the Christian life, Christian existence, the situation of faith are that to which we would relate music, then it should be clear that much more is going on to effect that life or salvifically transform it than “revelation.” Salvific transformation has to do with new freedoms, forgiveness, political liberation, reconciliation between the alienated, agape, and many other things. When this is what is in view, it becomes very difficult to isolate any one cultural or ecclesial process, event, or institution and say, God speaks or is present (transforms) through this. For if that which is transformed is human individual and social existence, then we are talking about an entanglement of things, of people together in community, working together for justice, engaged in mutual inquiry, sharing their grief. We are talking about the complex experiential life of individual persons with myriad world relations, legacies from the past, pathological leanings, and aesthetic preferences. If this is what gains release, obtains new freedom, in relation to God, then the question of music and the Christian life cannot be simply how God speaks through music. Rather, what is the role and importance of music in this entangled flow of things, this whole web of transforming events? The same thing should be said about formulating the



question of any of the arts in relation to Christian existence and “theology.” Once the question is put this way, we can explore a number of possible ways music is part of the transformative web of historical and personal life and how it might be part of salvific transformation. I illustrate this in the briefest and most tentative way. I suggest that music (and other arts) are aspects of human transformation insofar as transformation unavoidably takes place in connection with the following three elements in the web of existence.

First, human salvific transformation is never simply a matter of some abstracted aspect of personal life. It is not simply a mental alteration or even a political one. It takes place in the mysterious entanglements, the relations, the densities that constitute human reality. If human beings are constituted by organic drives, feelings, and desires, embodiment, language, and self-transcendence, their sin and alienation will take root in and corrupt these things. Likewise, the giving of new freedoms will transform their ways of being linguistic, their feeling life, even their biologically rooted aggressiveness. If evil had to do only with the way human beings think or believe, salvific transformation would be simply a transformation of thinking, a reconstruction of the belief system. It would call for whatever would effect such a change. If freedom is a matter of these entangled elements of human reality in the complex situation of life, then what affects it are all the things through which we live that entanglement, and that includes the arts. For it is in connection with arts, including music, that the embodied, feeling life, the rich and complex engagements with the world and others, are experienced, enjoyed, and in some cases mourned. If there is a “voice of God” in the arts and in music, it is not so much a direct, supernatural communication through a specific musical medium as the power of music to shape, embody, intensify, and in some cases, even thematize the transformation to freedom that is taking place along with other things in the web: thus traditioning, memorial rituals, interpersonal dialogue, teaching, and so on.

A second way the arts and music have a place in salvific transformation concerns the human experience and orientation to beauty. Alfred North Whitehead contended that all actual entities have some sense of beauty, since to exist at all requires some “feeling” and prehending of ordered possibilities. It does appear to be the case that the appreciation of beauty is not simply a matter of individual taste, as if some human beings are able to be absolutely indifferent to the harmonies, surprises, creativities, and gradations of intensity around them. The experience of beauty also appears to have a tragic side, for all beautiful things, events, and processes arise against backgrounds of disorder,

passing away, and vulnerability. The secret grief of the happy clown may be a metaphor for all of the arts. It is difficult to imagine a realized freedom in human beings devoid of the experience and orientation to beauty and the pathos of beauty. Hence, when we reflect on what it means to say that music has some place in Christian existence, we mean that it provides occasions that intensify the experience of beauty and the pathos of beauty in the world and in others. According to Walter de la Mare, "When music sounds, gone is the world I know. And all things lovely even lovelier grow." One indication of the lack and loss of freedom is an alienation from the world that closes the eyes and the ears to beauty and the pathos of beauty. Only an aestheticist thinks that the arts and music simply in themselves can restore that freedom. But it is an anti-aesthetic asceticism that thinks freedom can come about and be full when the eyes and ears remain dosed to beauty and the pathos of beauty. Music may not in itself "save," but it is surely part of the new freedom toward the world.

A third way to understand how music is part of salvific transformation places us in the sphere of the Thou. Common is the philosophical and theological claim (Buber, Levinas, Marcel, *et. al.*) that the other as a Thou is irreducible to things and that the sphere of Thous (the between) is irreducible to impersonal and institutional relations. From this comes the contention that the very root of the sphere of faith is the relation of Thous to each other and to God who is a Thou. The sphere of Thou is the sphere of address, personal response, perduring relation, commitment and obligation, even violation and forgiveness. The relation between music and the sphere of the Thou may be unclear, needing exploration. But it does seem clear that music and other arts are never reducible to the sphere of objectivity, to the phenomenon of production, craft, and technology. It arises from Thous and is launched into the world of Thous. Does this mean that when human beings are caught up in music, they are drawn out of their own natural egocentricity into a world of other Thous, also drawn there by music? Could it be that music is one way we say Thou to each other, not just in acts of composing, interpreting, or performing, but in the very act of listening? Music itself may not be a Thou, but somehow the place where it occurs is what Buber calls the "between," the place where Thous are together. If this is so, we should not be surprised that music so often expresses grief, love, adoration, and even worship. Music in other words promotes and intensifies the interhuman. Here too it is not a matter of a divine communication through a particular musical event. If God's primary place and medium of presence is in the sphere of Thous, then music is intrinsic to Christian existence as it expresses and intensifies what is going on in that sphere.

To say that music is related to faith because of the way it is present in the human entanglement and the sphere of Thous is not to say that music is a mere tool, an instrument by which we accomplish certain things in these spheres. That would reduce music to a *techne*. Music's relation to the constituents and entanglements of human reality is complex. It can express, and in some cases thematize, the feeling and beauty dimensions of life. It can be itself something new and novel to be felt and enjoyed. It can be one of the culture's powers able to shape and influence. As such it can be a vehicle of ideology, escapism, and perhaps even ugliness, perpetuating various flights from freedom. This very complexity follows music into religious communities. We then make too much of music when we expect it to mediate God. We expect too little of it when we (as some religious traditions have done) assume that human transformation is a mere indifference to the entanglements of human feeling, the pathos of beauty, and the sphere of the Thou.

#### ENDNOTE

1. **Editor's Note:** Max Stackhouse's paper is included in this section as one of the essays on theology and music. Frank Burch Brown's paper on music is not included due to its own particular character as a presentation that depended on people listening to the music with which he dealt. Certain of the ideas from that presentation, however, are present in his essay that opens this volume.



# Reflections on Music and Theology

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While participating in the Yale Consultation on music and as theology, a number of issues emerged for me regarding presuppositions and approaches to treating the relationship of music to theology and, more specifically, the notion of music *as* theology. The following discussion deals with certain of the issues that I raised and cautions that I have.

The assignment for this meeting was to consider music as theology. David Kelsey helpfully isolated four senses of the word “theology” that he perceived the presenters and participants were using. Processed through my own filter, these four were the following: (1) Music has to do with the presence of sound. Theology reflects on the presence of all reality. In this sense music, like all else, therefore, becomes the subject of theological reflection. (2) Theology means critical reflection about God, or about what God does or has done. Here one writes a theology of music, or theologies of music, as one might write theologies of anything—with God and God’s activity the central issue. (3) Theology means pedagogy. With this goes the notion that the study of music, like many other things, is a proper element of theological education. (4) Theology is a way of shaping Christian existence, and music is a matrix that brings everything together. Music forms communities then and is perhaps the incarnational flesh that theology takes.

I am not sure it is possible to consider music as theology without making both terms meaningless. One does music as a musician, theology as a theologian, writing as a novelist, and so on. Any of these can be informed by the other—the doing of music by theology, the doing of theology by music—but that is not the same as doing what is by definition *not* theology as if it *were* theology.

Music can be, surely is, a theological subject, as is everything. It is a staple of the Old and New Testaments and of the church’s history. It has been considered at length by the church. That gives it a strong claim on theological education, though in most of our seminaries we have largely neglected that claim (at our peril). But that still is not the same as considering music as if it were theology.

## Reflections on Music and Theology

I suppose this means I want to restrict “theology” to Kelsey’s second definition. The first definition simply means everything is a subject of theological reflection, but not everything is itself theology. The third has to do with pedagogy, but not theology except as one reflects theologically about pedagogy. The fourth is really about faith. Music certainly is incarnational, a forming matrix and outgrowth of a community’s faith, and there can be theological reflection about that reality. But that is different from naming music “theology” or considering it *as* theology.

Discussions of this sort often gravitate to what we considered at the conference: Mozart, popular culture, and music with text. The first two of these considerations are interesting (especially Mozart towards whom people like Barth, Kierkegaard, and Goethe invariably gravitate), but they avoid what concerns the church musician: what the people actually sing or hear in their worship. The third consideration, music with text, avoids discussing the topic; it avoids music by substituting the text of the music for the music itself.

Avoiding what the people sing or hear in their worship may or may not be a problem. Mozart’s operas and popular culture are perfectly legitimate subjects for theological reflection. The danger is that this reflection can be seen as a substitute for theological reflection about music in worship. When that happens there is a problem. Music in worship deserves as much thought as Mozart or popular culture, or relations between worship and Mozart and popular culture.

The substitution of text for music is much more serious. Such a substitution gives the impression of discussing one thing, while discussing another, rather like discussing hymn texts as if they were tunes (which is also done all the time). Music is simply avoided in this process, though the impression is given that it has been discussed.

I think it is possible to speak theologically about music. As I suggested earlier, I think the way to do this is to reflect about music with God or God’s activity as central to the discussion. The church has gone about this in numerous ways. Here are five of them, plus one.

1. *A natural, or teleological, theology of music* Joseph Gelineau. Gelineau, who seeks to summarize the Roman Catholic tradition, presupposes that grace completes nature. The natural cry of the baby leads to prayer and supplication. Prayer and supplication lead to the cross of Christ and its *Kyrie*. This is all musical or at its origin incipiently so—the natural cry, prayer, and the *Kyrie* of the cross. And one thing leads naturally to another.

Conversely, the natural laughter and prattling of the infant lead to praise and thanksgiving. Praise and thanksgiving lead to the resurrection of

Christ and its alleluia. Again, this is all musical or at its origin incipiently so—the natural laughter, the praise, and the Alleluia of the resurrection. And again, one thing leads naturally to another.

The sense here is not only that the natural leads to the supernatural, that is, humanity's natural and incipiently musical crying and laughing lead inevitably and logically to the source of redemption, Christ's cross, and resurrection. The sense is also that pure music, or beneath that its precursors of groaning and laughing, leads to the singing of words.

Everything here is teleological; everything leads beyond itself, ultimately to God. Music is God's daughter, a mystery of faith, and a sign that itself leads to pure love. Music itself points beyond itself: the praise of heaven will be pure love for which there will no longer be the need for sound at all. Music points beyond itself to silent music, pure love.

People who work from the Reformation's perspective will be troubled by this teleology of music, for they will quickly perceive the danger of works righteousness. If there is a logical progression from nature to supernature, from nature to redemption, where is "sin"? Where is the qualitative gap the 16th-century reformers and Barth and Kierkegaard saw between humanity and God? Can one climb into the kingdom of heaven by one's own effort, in this case by a progression of music's innate tendencies?

2. *An ontology of music or a theology of sound: Martin Luther.* For Luther music is next to theology, which we can take to mean that it is second in importance as a discipline of study. On a more profound level, Luther says that music is next to the Word of God. As Oskar Soehngen points out, the Word of God is carried by words and comes from the sphere of "miraculous audible things." Music comes from the same sphere. Music can carry words and can therefore carry the Word of God. Music breaks open the Word of God, just as words do. Music is next to the Word in importance and closely tied to it by its nature.

One notes two things here. First, sound is part of the salvific process. God speaks to us through sound. Second, sound is part of the creation, a remarkable overflowing of God's bounty in the good created order. One does not approach music theoretically, as in Pythagoras, but as sound itself.

This means that sound and its refined music that humanity makes are not regarded as pointing beyond themselves to anything except in the sense that they carry praise and proclamation about God. Music accompanies creation as the morning stars sang together, and it is a central characteristic of the feast around the throne of God at the end of history and, of course, the foretaste of that

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feast now. Here there is no silent music. Rather, this is an ontology of music, a being of sound at the heart of creation, and new creation. Music almost seems like a sign of God's grace.

Luther's high view of music is perilously close to making music almost a natural *anamnesis* of Christ's victory. Luther never says that and never substitutes music for what word and sacraments alone do. But music nevertheless is held in very high regard.

3. *A negative theology of music: Ulrich Zwingli.* For Zwingli, in complete opposition to Luther, music and the Word of God have nothing to do with each other. Zwingli splits the two completely and indeed similarly splits the realms of nature and grace.

Zwingli argues that Scripture nowhere gives us a warrant to sing in worship. Because the realms of nature and grace are not related, the surroundings of worship have to be white, light, and pure; music in worship, which Zwingli regards as clamor before humanity or showing off, has no place. The people have to have an ear for the Word of God alone. Music is therefore taken away from worship altogether.

Zwingli, the best musician of the 16th-century reformers, related music to play. In his leisure he used it as a source of refreshment.

4. *A pastoral theology of music: John Calvin.* Worship for Calvin involves word, sacraments, and prayer. Prayer has two forms, the spoken and the sung. So music is constitutive of public worship.

But Calvin is concerned that music be used rightly. First, one has to have the right texts. These are the psalms which God puts in our mouths to exalt his glory. Then the music has to be right. It cannot be light or frivolous, but has to have weight and majesty, which, for Calvin, turned out to be the unison singing of the French Psalter tunes, like the Old Hundredth, without instruments and without polyphony.

Here there is neither a teleology nor ontology nor negative theology of music. Rather, the concerns are pastoral. Some music is appropriate to a congregation's song, and some is not. Calvin exhibited a nervousness about music's power, so he instituted restrictions. Paradoxically, the music Calvin used, if Oskar Soehngen is correct, leads to the French "Marseillaise" and Ravel's "Bolero," and has the quality of what the Lutherans called a "siren." Whether all that is correct or not, the central issue is clear, that music is important for its effect, its pastoral value.

5. *An Enlightenment theology of music: Robert Shaw.* This point of view was expressed by Robert Shaw in 1960 when he was installed as Minister of Music



at the First Unitarian Church in Cleveland, Ohio. Leaning on J.W.N. Sullivan, Shaw argued that any music, from a Buddhist chant to a Bach cantata to a Beethoven symphony, can be a means of revelation. In this view, revelation comes through art, especially high art done exceptionally well.

When Georg Solti speaks of the symphony hall as his church, he means the same thing. When musicians speak of music as communicating something liminal, they mean the same thing.

This position is probably most characteristic of our post-enlightenment culture. Many church musicians assume it, not because they have consciously thought it out, but because it simply hovers around their rehearsal rooms and conversations as an obvious given. Christians and the Christian church, however, inevitably raise questions about it: what does it suggest about the nature of revelation, what is being “revealed”? Do we have here a kind of works righteousness in which compositional and performing prowess can control “God’s” disclosure?

6. *An Enlightenment reversal.* I was recently explaining these various theological positions to a conference of seminary musicians. In the discussion that followed, one person astutely suggested a sixth position which, as I run it out, might look like this.

There is a tendency among us now to react against the perceived or actual snobbism of artists and musicians, and to react against formalism by means of a neo-left-wing Puritan argument against set forms. These reactions turn the Enlightenment position upside down. Instead of high quality music that is carefully composed and prepared, the argument is made here that the Spirit will somehow inspire us in the moment with music that does not have to be well-crafted or rehearsed.

This position means that revelation may come through a violin or guitar or flute or piano solo which presumably erupts spontaneously and without preparation. One eschews preparation, because, as the left-wing Puritan groups argued, “set forms quench the Spirit.” For our age, however, coupled with this notion of how the Spirit works, there is a conscious denial of “quality” as the secular musical establishment would define that term. Whereas revelation for Shaw is tied to the most carefully crafted and prepared music, for this position it is tied to the opposite, however that opposite may be defined.

In addition to theologies of music, it is also possible to isolate functions to which music is put, in the service of some other end. Here are five.

1. *Music for liturgy.* Music for liturgy views music as a servant or handmaiden of the liturgy. Music carries, articulates, orders the liturgy.

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2. *Music for education.* Here music's role is related to developmental tasks. Music serves to aid the educational process.

3. *Music for evangelism.* When music is used for evangelism, the point is to grab the listener's attention by musical means. Music that is immediately accessible to a large number of people will be chosen.

4. *Music for justice.* Music in the employ of justice may mean choosing accessible music if the point is to whip up the troops to action for a specific cause. But it is also possible to choose music with a dissonant edge to reflect the prophetic nature of justice that stands against society's indifference and callousness.

5. *Music for itself.* Here music is its own reason for being and needs not other justification. One may even argue that using music for reasons other than its own being in and of itself is foreign to the very nature of music. This last function bears an affinity to the Enlightenment theology of music, though it does not have to proceed that far. The other four functions cut across the first five positions on the theological grid: music for liturgy can take any theological posture except the Zwinglian; the other three also exclude the Zwinglian and can take pieces of other theological postures, though they tend to create theologies of education, evangelism, and justice, and then draw music in as one of the elements in their employ. The result is not so much a theology of music as it is a theology of something else to which music is attached.

Different individuals and different portions of the church have chosen among the foregoing and other theologies and functions of music. That is, the church has not only used music; it has reflected on music. The church continues to use music in various ways. The history and continuing practice of music demand that it be part of a seminary curriculum. It needs to be in a seminary curriculum for the same reason anything needs to be there: the church needs to reflect about it theologically. We are much the poorer if we avoid that reflection.

None of that is the same nor does it argue for treating music as theology about which I remain dubious at best. One of the "food for thought" questions that was posed to us before the conference began asked, ". . . how is [music] formative in the Christian life?" Is that not a sociological or anthropological rather than a theological question?

Or, "what is the role of music in the knowledge and love of God?" As soon as you ask that sort of question you are pushed back to a deeper question: what is the role of the creation and our shaping that creation in the knowledge and love of God? The answer will be a theology of the knowledge and love of God or of creation or of human crafting of the creation or music. But in no case does music itself become theology or function as theology.

As long as the words of language mean something, theology remains theology, and music remains music. Theology is a reflective process that demands words, music a performing process that demands sound. Theology reflects on music (and everything else), and music sounds. Let the two be what they are; let us do them both, with vigor, in our seminaries and appropriate graduate programs and everywhere humanity thinks and hears with clarity and perception.