

Notes Toward a Theology of the Arts, through the Arts

(or, amusing things to do when watching the tennis on television)

INTRODUCTION

- **Theology is an art.** Theology's engagement with the Arts is at least as old as the Bible itself. For the Bible, theology's norm for both the 'what' and 'how' of theology, is itself an artefact, a collection of literary works created in the whirling crucible of God's encounter with human beings. Theology not only reflects upon art, but is itself an art. The Gospels, for example, are at once the very act of *making* the 'body of Christ,' but also a subsequent act of *reflection* upon that making. It is important to understand that both the making and the reflection-on-making are theological acts.
- **Art is making.** This implies a particular definition of the arts. Following Aristotle and Heidegger, I am content to say that art is simply 'making' (*poiēsis* in Greek). That definition, I suggest, is wide enough to include the productions of technology and technical know-how (*technē* in Greek) along with those of painters, sculptors, writers, performers and musicians.
- **Human art is *not* creative.** You will have noticed that I didn't use the word 'creation' or 'creativity' to define the artistic process. I have my reasons for that, and I'll talk about them later in more detail (if there is time!) For now, let me say only this: I am in agreement with Rowan Williams and Emmanuel Lévinas, amongst others, in believing that the really *new* (*novum*) only comes into being by an act of God. What we human beings do, by contrast, is work upon, and with, a reality already given, a reality which both precedes and exceeds our intentionality. What human beings can do (and in this is their dignity) is to receive what is given gratefully, and then to discern the shape and form of its eschatological becoming, working and moulding what is given in a profoundly mystical co-operation with the creative intention of the divine Spirit. Only the Spirit knows the mind of God. By participating in the Spirit's creative power (*dunamis*), we are able to become partners and co-labourers with God toward the completion of God's artistry.
- **God's art *is* creative.** God's art, by contrast, is really new (*novum*). The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* expresses exactly this fact. In an act of primal hospitality, God makes room within the divine being for that which is wholly other than Godself. Similarly, in the doctrine of Christ, the Father 'others' himself in the Son, a Son declared to be both the word (*logos*) and image (*ikōn*) of the Father. With the arrival of this word and image something entirely new and undreamt of comes to be. In is a new being, as Tillich properly says—so new that it is 'an event without analogy' (Moltmann). The doctrine of the Spirit also speaks of the *new*: the new creation in grace by faith, the new heavens and the new earth, a new community, the new commandment, new names, identities and futures for those baptised 'into Christ.'

TWO DOMINANT THEOLOGIES OF THE ARTS

Two theological traditions have dominated Christian thinking about the arts. Both continue to operate in our churches, seminaries, and art-circles. Please note that I am claiming that they are *dominant*. I am not claiming that they are *absolute*. Other models have operated since New Testament times, but beyond the fourth century they were rarely influential.

1. The first is what I would like to call the ***Platonic Model***.
 - Its model of reality is *hierarchical* and *dualistic*: there is the Real (a hidden God) and the unreal (the sensible world). The spiritual is of far greater value than the material.

- Art's role in this model is one of *representation*: to represent the higher realm of the absent or unseen (God, the spiritual) in sensible ways (painting, music, drama, etc.)
- This model tends to be *logocentric*, valuing the word (and onto-theology in particular) as a more faithful representation of the spiritual than other kinds of art. The visual arts tend to be used as illustration.
- In this model, representation works by *analogy*: the material is said to be *like* the spiritual, but not exactly like. Every image of the unseen world ultimately needs to be negated in favour of more accurate images. The doctrine of analogy came to dominate theological thinking in the Scholastic period, and still dominates much Roman Catholic thought today. Key writers in this tradition are Pseudo-Dionysius, Bonaventure, and Aquinas.
- This model grounds the possibility of artistic representation in a *natural theology*. God has left his imprint in the natural world, so that even those who have not heard the specific revelation of Christ are nonetheless able to reach toward the truth. There is a 'divine spark' in everyone, which enables them to represent something of the spiritual realm.
- Some versions of this model are highly *iconoclastic*. Iconoclasm can take several forms. It can be the suspicion (but appreciation) of *all* art characteristic of negative theology. Or it can be the suspicion of music and visual images in particular, as with many of the Reformers. Calvin permitted only the liturgical and bodily art of preaching, baptism, and the Lord's Supper.

2. The second is what I will call the ***Enlightenment Model***. It begins, roughly, with Descarte.

- Its model of reality is still *dualistic* and *hierarchical*, but now human beings themselves become the 'measure of all things': there is the *inner* world of human soul and consciousness, and the *outer* world of things. In the modern period, there have been many pendulum swings between the two as to which is the more essential or 'real' reality. The overall tendency, however, has been toward the privileging of the inner world.
- Art's role in this model is still to *represent*, but now its primary subject is the thoughts and feelings of human beings. Both impressionism and expressionism took human subjectivity as their object. Art now becomes a psychological or cultural *projection* of the inner truth or spirit of a people, time or individual.
- *Logocentrism* continued to a large extent, i.e. analytical discourse was valued over the visual and symbolical arts. In late modernity, however, there was a reversal of that hierarchy. Some of the Romantics began to believe that thought was a poor and secondary mode of representation for what they saw as the primal realities of *lived experience*. For them, the visual and symbolic arts were closer in being to experience, and therefore more capable of representing it's claims. Existentialism, particularly in its French modes, took up the cause.
- *Analogy* continued as the preferred understanding of the way in which the primary subject of art, human beings themselves, are represented. It was still understood that the spiritual was hard to represent in material terms.
- This model also grounds the possibility of artistic representation in a *natural theology*. But now it has become a thoroughly *anthropological theology*. God, if he or she exists, is co-extensive with the world, and particularly with the spiritual experience of human beings. The 'divine spark' has become the human spirit *per se*, which means that anyone (not only Christians and Jews) can speak, write, paint, compose or perform something of God. The theology of Don Cupit is the most frank presentation of this tendency in much contemporary theology. See his book, *What is a Story?*
- *Iconoclasm* continues to be influential in modern theological theories of art, but now it refers mainly to the capacity of artists to represent the death of God or, indeed, in late modern art, the death of the human subject. Duchamp, for example, gave up the labour of painting and sculptor in favour of hanging toilet seats on the wall. This kind of *iconoclasm* is supposed to be about the abyss opening under the human project now that God is dead. If God is dead, so

are the moral and aesthetic values. All that is left is the conflict of arbitrary notions of taste. There can now be no ‘higher art,’ because there are no longer any transcendent criteria.

FURTHER REMARKS TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF AND THROUGH ART

- **Begin with Christ.** In my view it was always a mistake to theologise about the arts beginning with a doctrine of creation. Biblically, what we may know about God is that which is revealed to us in a specific address from God, an address which comes (always) in a material and therefore bodily form. Christ is the fullness of that address. He is named, biblically, as the Word and Image of God—God’s art, in other words. In Christ, God traverses the very great distance between the divine and the human. In Christ, God reveals that it is in the very nature of God to become material and human. It is also revealed that human beings are destined to share in the divine communion of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- **Human art as a participation in the divine art.** In this view, there is an artwork which both precedes and exceeds us. It also infuses our very life as human beings. It is the art of God. The *Epistle to the Hebrews* speaks of the Father as the *technitēs*, the architect or builder of a heavenly city which is the *telos* or destination towards which all the saints are journeying by their faith (Heb 11.10). In a parallel passage from *Ephesians*, human beings are called *poiēma* or artefacts of God, created in Christ Jesus to do the works of good (Eph 2.10). That phrase ‘in Christ Jesus’ is crucial for my understanding of the artistic vocation of Christians (note that I do not say ‘the vocation of Christian artists’). Christians are those who are putting off the project of self-expression and self-fulfillment in favour of their formation by God into the image of Christ. Christians are those who vow themselves for deconstruction by the Spirit of Christ in their inner beings, and reconstruction after the gloriously transfigured selfhood of Christ. Christians are those who allow themselves to actually become Christ, God’s masterpiece, and so participate in all that God is making of the cosmos, which is itself traversed and held together ‘in Christ’. Christian art is that which participates, willingly and vulnerably, in this work of God’s grace, which is a work of eschatological form/ation.
- **Christian art is iconic.** You will remember I said earlier that Christ himself is a work of *human* art. His portraits, even in the gospel, vary according to the genius of each evangelist, do they not? Yes, but he is also an artefact whose form and meaning continually escape our genius and intention. Christ is, if you like, transcendent to our projective genius and intention. The resurrection is the strongest statement of that fact in Christian theology. As Marinanne Sawicki says, the resurrection is a generic disruption of every schema human beings might use to domesticate Christ to our ideological agendas. In that sense, Christ is indeed iconic. For the icon is painted, prayerfully, by a human artist. Yet this apparently human artefact seems to become, in its making, a site of interruption by which Christ escapes our intention, returning to undo the objectifying gaze of the human eye, thus re-making that person’s subjectivity after his *own* inscrutable intention. The point about icons, as Jean-Luc Marion notes, is exactly this: that in gazing we see nothing we may objectify, but are rather fixed in the gaze of a love entirely excessive to our human capacity to know or encompass. Thus it is that human art and artifice can become the occasion by which God does the work of an artist upon the material of our human selves.
- **The liturgy as the criteria of Christian art.** The story of the gospel, as told in the embodied form of liturgy, is the school of Christian art. It is the place and time in which we learn to form ourselves and our world in concert with the eschatological art of the Spirit. The sequence of the liturgy is incarnational and missional. Having praised God, and invoked the divine presence, we listen for the Word which will become flesh in the eucharistic celebration. In the offertory, it is our world, our cosmos, and our own bodies which we offer as the material for this embodiment. Christ becomes

these things, that they, in turn, might become Christ. “Let us receive what we are, let us become what we receive: the body of Christ”. Then we are sent, in the power of the Spirit, to participate in God’s formation of the world, God’s making of justice, peace, beauty and joy. In the liturgy we make a story which has already made us, and in doing so we offer ourselves to be re-made anew so that we might remake our world according to the vision of God. The liturgy is, therefore, a school for artists who are also disciples. It teaches us both the purpose and form of Christian art, which is not a specialist vocation, but rather a vocation and calling that belongs to all Christians by virtue of our baptism. By participating in the liturgy, we are trained to live, labour, love and make after the way of Christ with things. It is the liturgy which teaches us to discern the becoming of the creative Spirit, and so join with Christ in treating life itself as a liturgy, a work of art in which we participate with God.

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Ordinary Time, 2004.