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The Arts and Spirituality

What is the place of art in the Christian life? Is art—especially the fine arts of painting and music—simply a way to bring in worldliness through the back door? We know that poetry may be used to praise God in, say, the psalms and maybe even in modern hymns. But what about sculpture or drama? Do these have any place in the Christian life? Shouldn't a Christian focus his gaze steadily on "religious things" alone and forget about art and culture?¹

Recent Reflections on the Arts and Christianity

The anxieties given expression in the passage above seem one-sided now, even among those who identify with conservative forms of Christian faith. While concerns about worldliness remain, a more confident posture toward matters of art and culture have largely, although not entirely, replaced former feelings of insecurity and alienation. Among Evangelicals in the English-speaking world, the arguments and anxieties have turned toward questions related to what kind of art is beneficial, how art might be effectively deployed for religious purposes, and how the arts might be more meaningfully engaged. But when the influential

1. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, 7.

American Evangelical Francis Schaeffer wrote his tract *Art and the Bible* in 1973, such anxieties and misgivings were very much at the forefront.

Much has happened since Schaeffer in effect gave Evangelicals permission to engage with matters of art and culture. Evangelicals and Christians of all communions have in the ensuing years produced a wealth of studies addressing the relationship between the arts and Christian faith, theology, mission, and imagination. There seems to be no abatement of this trend. Just a few very recent examples might suffice to substantiate this claim.

Nancy Pearcey is a direct intellectual and theological descendent of Francis Schaeffer. In her 2010 book *Saving Leonardo: A Call to Resist the Secular Assault on Mind, Morals, and Meaning*, she extends Schaeffer's cautiously positive regard for the arts, particularly as they serve as both signs and symptoms of trends within Western society. The book is a welcome contribution to otherwise familiar "worldview" analyses of culture that tend to focus almost exclusively on human thinking as opposed to human doing, making, or feeling. Her reflections on the arts as forms of "language" that project ideational content is a perspective shared in this project. But there are disappointing limitations to the scope of her analysis. Her approach to the arts is largely predetermined along a narrow set of criteria, and the manner in which artworks are portrayed as one-dimensionally "true" or "false" tends towards the sense of a lack of depth. A similar narrowness of theological and doctrinal orientation, where a basically neo-Reformed Evangelicalism passes muster as the "Christianity" against which all other forms or faiths are measured, adds to the narrowness of cultural engagement.²

By contrast Timothy J. Gorringer offers a quite different perspective. In *Earthly Visions: Theology and the Challenges of Art*,

2. Daniel Siedell offers an excellent critique from an Evangelical perspective of such facile analyses of art in *God in the Gallery: A Christian Embrace of Modern Art*. Another appreciative but insightfully critical review of recent Evangelical analysis of the arts is found in James Watkin's review of Jerram Barrs' *Echoes of Eden: Reflections on Christianity, Literature, and the Arts*, <http://www.transpositions.co.uk/2014/05/review-echoes-of-eden/>.

Gorringe, like Pearcey, seeks to address the presence and meaning of the “secular” in Western society. Unlike Pearcey, however, Gorringe does not locate changes in perception and orientation in a one-dimensional story of decline. Gorringe sees Western *secularism*—that is, the affirmation of the value and validity of the temporal world—as a logical outcome of Western Christianity, especially its Protestant variety. In support of this thesis, Gorringe refreshingly explores some of the less familiar works of the Dutch School, still life, portraiture, and abstraction, paintings where the things of this world assume center stage. Employing an undeveloped metaphor from Karl Barth, Gorringe suggests that works such as these can be interpreted theologically as “secular parables.” It is a compelling thesis argued in a persuasive manner, with the added virtue of introducing readers to aspects of Western art too often overlooked in such analyses.

The most impressive recent project of theology and the arts, in terms of sheer size and extent of engagement, is David Brown’s three-volume series published by Oxford University Press.³ Brown’s agenda for the entire series is to “widen the range of material thought relevant to constructive theology,” particularly in the realms of cultivated nature, the arts, and human activity.⁴ Brown’s repeated admonition that Christians should first engage in careful “*listening*,” rather than anxiously predetermining potential meanings in art and culture, is a helpful balance to what too often takes place.

My project responds to and seeks to expand on two of Brown’s contributions. One is his thesis on the sacramental potentials of art. Brown bases this thesis on the theological presupposition that God is “generous” and desires to make himself accessible and available for human finding, and that God does so both within and from without the specifically Christian circle of influence. Brown’s

3. The three volumes are *God and Enchantment of Place*, *God and Grace of Body*, and *God and Mystery in Words*. If linked with two previous volumes, *Tradition and Imagination* and *Discipleship and Imagination*, then a project of five volumes in length can be considered.

4. Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place*, 1.

recourse to the sacramental is grounded on the analogy of what God accomplishes in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, which is extended to being perceived as “a major, and perhaps even the primary, way of exploring God’s relationship to our world.”⁵ A sacrament for Brown is both a sign and a real extension of God’s presence in the world made available to human understanding and experience. Like Gorringer’s use of the parabolic, Brown’s analysis of the arts and human culture within a sacramental paradigm has the virtue of placing the “secular” aspects of life within a “sacred” scope of perception. They highlight the efforts of rendering genuinely theological analyses of these natural and human phenomena. My concern with the invocation of the sacramental in an analysis of art, however, is the degree that it implicates God in products of human endeavor, at least when the object under consideration is a work of art. Again, part of the effort of this essay is to allow works of art to have their own integrity as human artifacts. Humans are traditionally understood to be made in God’s image, and operate within a context of God’s creating and redeeming purposes, and even their best and most original works are but derivative of God’s creative properties. But I wish to move slowly on the attribution of these works to God’s intentions.

Drawing on a variety of resources my project advances the paradigm of the *catalyst* as a way to understand the relationship between the arts and spirituality. The paradigm of the catalyst is less metaphysically fraught, less theologically loaded, and yet can address itself to the positive ways the arts might contribute to Christian spirituality. Indeed, even the most “secular” works, which on every other criteria of assessment might be deplorable in intention and disturbing in content, might serve to catalyze meaningful reflections on life with or apart from God, while making no particular claims on divine implication in the work.

Secondly, David Brown’s project focuses on the *experiential*. His whole project centers on “reclaiming human experience” for its theological significance. The thrust of my project seeks to explore the *cumulative* effects of religiously significant experiences,

5. *Ibid.*, 6.

namely those in relation to the aesthetic. Such experiences should result in something yielding lasting effects. I seek to understand those effects in terms of *spiritual formation*.

EXCURSUS

Francis A. Schaeffer (1912–84)

Francis Schaeffer was what might be called a cultural evangelist and apologist, who maintained a high-profile ministry from the late 1960s till his death in 1984. Among his achievements was a series of lectures that were turned into books that highlighted the intersections of cultural and theological matters. Schaeffer identified religious and philosophical implications of art. He received tutorial help in this endeavor from the Dutch art critic and historian Hans Rookmaaker (1922–77), and so advanced among Anglo-American Evangelicals a Reformed “worldview” analysis of art. He is credited with inspiring a greater sense of cultural confidence among conservative Evangelicals.

Art as Communication

Like the projects reviewed above, this one also rests on certain theological convictions. It is assumed, on the basis of a certain reading of Scripture and the Christian tradition, that God’s intentions in relation to humans is for communion: a relationship analogous to friendship, but closer to marriage, mystical in character, practical in output, and which, in the words of one theologian, “requires and releases” capacities commensurate for such a relationship and shared mission in the world. A theology so centered on communion might be expected to raise the category of *communication* to a rather high level, and indeed this project does so. If “In the beginning was the *Logos*,” it can be argued that this issues not only in words, but in intentions of communication ordered to

communio: a communion that Christian theology sees existing in the life of the Trinity and that extends from the Trinity to humanity. In this reading, humanity in God's image is *homo communicator*, humanity the communicator, and in this light "true art" is that which "speaks and receives the world in one integral movement of generosity and gratitude."⁶

Art as *poesis* is, of course, human making. But there are some forms of human making that transcend immediate and practical usage and become, and were intended to be, acts of communication; human doing becomes human saying. The exact liminal point wherein such making becomes saying cannot always be ascertained, but this project advances the thesis that art is best understood as a dynamic of *how* something is done (craft), *what* it renders (content), and *why* it was so conceived and executed (context).

Communication, then, lies at the heart of this project. The arts are, in this report, communicative acts of making and performing with the immediate or cumulative effect of story, *mythos*, "world-projection," "worldmaking," worldview. To learn the "language" of a given work and break through to a meaningful connection with the artwork, the artist or tradition from which the artwork emerges is to encounter the story being projected in it, and it is the dynamic of story that insinuates a truth-claim upon the receiver, a truth-claim that can be accepted, rejected, considered, or "in-dwelt" by the receiver which alters not only one's moral vision of things, but one's very capacity to alter such vision. *Eyesight* (standing here for any form of aesthetic encounter) becomes *insight*, and the arts, as argued in the following pages, are an effective catalyst for this dynamic process.⁷

6. Gorringe, *Earthly Vision: Theology and the Challenges of Art*, 2, quoting Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*.

7. Miles, *Image as Insight*, 2, citing Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception*, 31. For the purposes of this study I am content with an understanding of beauty as a "compelling presence," a "persuasive attraction" that invites attention without coercing it. I am perfectly content with Arnheim's terse definition: "Aesthetic beauty is the isomorphic correspondence between what is said and how it is said." (Arnheim, *Visual Thinking*, 255.)

The reader will note an emphasis on the ideational dimension of the arts in this project. The cognitive aspect of aesthetic experience is emphasized in part because of the way the arts are too often reduced to the emotional or sensual values attached to them. This project contributes to the claim that the arts represent alternate ways of *knowing*, and thereby afford opportunities to grow in *understanding*. The arts also provide opportunities to develop and hone skills analogous to *contemplation*. This project is replete with references to attentiveness, careful observation, open-mindedness, deferral of judgment, and the like, capacities required to engage in and maintain a relationship with a work of art are analogous to and exist, as argued here, in dialectical relationship with those capacities required for progressive development in spirituality. Taking advantage of the alliterative opportunity afforded by two Greek words, an earlier form of this project expressed its reflections on the relationship between the arts and spiritual formation in terms of *aesthesis* and *ascesis*.⁸ *Aesthesis* refers to sensory perception and, by extension, its contribution to the development of the *imagination*. *Ascesis* originated as an athletic term, but was adopted for the disciplines associated with progressive growth in spirituality.⁹ Similarly alliterative but perhaps less obscure, I now employ the terms *sense* and *spirituality*.¹⁰ My agenda remains the same, however; that is, to explore how skills in sensory perception and imaginative engagement exist in a dialectical relationship with those related to ascetical development or spiritual formation, and how this dialectical relationship can be mediated, enhanced, or *catalyzed* through encounters with the arts.

8. McCullough, "Aesthesis and Ascesis: The Relationship between the Arts and Spiritual Formation," PhD dissertation, 2013.

9. 1 Cor 9:24–27. See Allen, *Spiritual Theology*, 67; Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, 52–56; see also Thornton, *English Spirituality*, 35.

10. For the aesthetic meaning of "sense," see Lewis, *Studies in Words*, 133f.

Defining Spirituality and Spiritual Formation

Spirituality is a central concept in this project and deserves to be defined before we proceed further. Scholars seeking to define Christian spirituality typically make recourse to biblical, doctrinal, theological, and more recently, psychological, philosophical, phenomenological, anthropological, and sociological resources.¹¹ Nelson Thayer, for example, writes that “‘spirituality’ is a term whose meaning is at once evident and elusive.”¹² His study focuses on the development of a pastoral theology of spirituality, and in his review relies strongly on the contributions of the psychoanalytic tradition, exegetical studies of relevant biblical terminology, and the phenomenology of religion as experienced by the subject. Drawing from definitions of spirituality in works of pastoral theology, Thayer notes the occurrence of words and phrases such as “transcendent,” “relationship towards,” “integration,” “context.” In an attempt at a synthesis, Thayer issues his own working definition:

Spirituality is the specifically human capacity to experience, be conscious of, and relate to a dimension of power and meaning transcendent to the world of sensory reality expressed in the particularities of a given historical and social context, and leads towards action congruent with its meaning.¹³

In an article exploring recent studies on the relationship between spirituality and healthcare, Philip Sheldrake notes the “deconstruction” of traditional connections between institutional religion and personal development. Spirituality in this context

11. Among the most widely cited in nearly all the subsequent scholarly literature on the concept of “spirituality” and its subsequent reemergence in Western theology in the mid-twentieth century is Walter Principe, “Toward Defining Spirituality”; see also Principe, “Theological Trends: Pluralism in Christian Spirituality.” See also Wiseman, *Spirituality and Mysticism: A Global View*, 1–20, which helpfully incorporates Principe’s scholarship within a framework of more recent research, and also Cunningham and Egan, *Christian Spirituality: Themes from the Tradition*, 9–28.

12. Thayer, *Spirituality and Pastoral Care*, 31.

13. *Ibid.*, 55.

comes to mean anything to anybody.¹⁴ In response to these tendencies Sheldrake writes that while he would not want to reduce spirituality strictly to the content of belief, nonetheless:

“spirituality” does imply a world-view, that is, a vision of the human spirit and what will assist it to achieve its full potential. So, in that sense, some kind of belief is implicit in all forms of spirituality even if it is largely unexamined.¹⁵

The word “spirituality” remains useful for speaking generally about the intersecting dynamics of the cognitive, affective, and even psychomotor dimensions of religious life. “Spiritual formation,” on the other hand, invokes a concept with greater specification and meaning. The phrase is itself a metaphor for the assimilation of qualities and capacities necessary for participation in a life with God.¹⁶ The phrase is useful for its familiarity within the Christian community for communicating a sense of goal-orientation in spirituality. Such language of formation in relation to Christianity finds validation in the text of the New Testament, particularly in Paul’s letters:

14. Sheldrake, “Spirituality and Healthcare,” 368.

15. *Ibid.*, 377. Examples of definitions could be continued at great length.

16. The language employed here is fairly standard. In regards to my usage of “capacity” in relation to spirituality, I see it as related to matters of both cognition and ability, as articulated in the following:

Intelligence is defined as a group of mental abilities. An ability (of any sort), in turn, is a characteristic of an individual when that individual can “successfully complete (i.e. obtain a specific, desired, outcome on) a task of defined difficulty, when testing conditions are favorable.” . . . From this perspective, mental ability is synonymous with mental *capacity*, similar to mental skill (which specifically connotes something learned), and similar to mental competence, which emphasizes the ability to meet a specific standard.

Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso, “Emotional Intelligence as Zeitgeist, as Personality, and as Mental Ability” in Bar-On and Parker, eds., *The Handbook of Emotional Intelligence*, 105. Emphasis added.

GALATIANS 4:19

My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed (*morphothé*) in you . . .

ROMANS 8:29

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed (*summórphous*) to the image of his Son . . .

ROMANS 12:2

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed (*metamorphoústhe*) by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God . . .

2 CORINTHIANS 3:18

And all of us . . . are being transformed (*metamorphoú-metha*) into the same image from one degree of glory to another . . .

All of these passages employ words based on the root *morphé* or “form,” a term used principally in relation to a physical characteristic, but which is here applied to progressive change in character and moral existence.

In the entry for “Spiritual Formation” in a recently published dictionary of Christian spirituality, the article begins by recognizing that the phrase historically has been associated with the preparation of clergy. Spiritual or priestly formation refers to what developed as the period of training that involved religious disciplines and education in biblical studies, preaching, and liturgical leadership. The tradition also developed distinctions between ascetical and mystical theologies, now generally subsumed together under the heading of spiritual theology. The article notes the increasing professionalization and psychologization of these processes over the past hundred years. Towards the conclusion the article addresses the subject matter in its more contemporary context in reference to practices such as retreats, sabbaticals, and catechesis, and provides material for a working definition:

But religious belief cannot be divorced from the context of life experience. Through the power of desire and symbolic imagination, the thoughtful human being is always exercised by the gap between ordinary human capacity and what she or he may feel drawn to achieve. Spiritual formation becomes a strategy, within the religious impulse, for addressing this moral gap and achieving the radical transformation of the self. While the interior journey, in a secular sense, has self-awareness as its goal, the spiritual journey leads to self-awareness in relationship to God, and under the transformative power of grace. It is the regular practice of the spiritual life in prayer and the virtues, as well as education in the insights of the human sciences, that constitute spiritual formation as the solid grounding for the following of Christ.¹⁷

In a similar vein, George Lindbeck offered the following description of spiritual formation:

Looked at non-theologically, spiritual formation may be described as the deep and personally committed appropriation of a comprehensive and coherent outlook on life and the world. From this perspective, those who are maturely humanistic or maturely Marxist, for example, are in their own way spiritually well-formed. The spiritually mature are not simply socialized into behaving under standard conditions as is expected of members of their group, but they have to a significant degree *developed the capacities and dispositions to think, feel, and act in accordance with their world view* no matter what the circumstances. They have, in Aristotelian language, the habits or virtues distinctively emphasised by the encompassing vision which is theirs. In the Christian case, these are traditionally named faith, hope and love, but

17. Simmonds, "Spiritual Formation," in Philip Sheldrake, ed., *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, 330. Diogenes Allen provides an account of how classical ascetical theology, such as found in Evagrius and John Cassian, provide guidelines for the assessment of spiritual progression and "strategies" for formation; *Spiritual Theology*, 64–67. See also Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 98–131.

other religions when internalized may involve quite a different set of virtues.¹⁸

Practically speaking then, the question becomes how the arts might play a role in the cultivation of “the power of desire,” growth in “symbolic imagination,” and the development of “capacities and dispositions to think, feel and act” in ways congruent with spiritual formation. My own work on the relationship between the arts and spiritual formation places an emphasis on sense perception and aesthetic sensitivity. Crucial in this working understanding of formation is the scriptural injunction, occurring several times throughout the Bible, of having *eyes that see and ears that hear*.¹⁹

Building a Theoretical Framework

Much has been written on the theological implications of art, the aesthetic implications of theology, how the arts contribute to religious tradition, and how the arts mediate encounter with the divine. Not enough, perhaps, has directly addressed the relationship between the arts and what this project refers to as spiritual formation.²⁰ Appreciative of the work of scholars in the field of theological aesthetics, such as Gordon Graham, Frank Brown, Jeremy Begbie, and Aidan Nichols, the theological ethics of David Baily Harned, and insights from the practical theology of human development as explored by the late James Loder, this project seeks to advance what it considers a *critically realist* philosophy of art; that is, critically realist *ontologically* in maintaining that things have an objective existence and are related to one another by virtue of the doctrines of creation and redemption; critically realist *epistemologically* in maintaining that we truly encounter a world

18. Lindbeck, “Spiritual Formation and Theological Education,” 287.

19. See Mark 8:17–18, Isa 6:9, Rev 2:7f. For an excellent discussion of spiritual formation and traditional Protestant concerns about the concept, see Porter, “Sanctification in a New Key: Relieving Evangelical Anxieties over Spiritual Formation,” 129–48.

20. A recent exception would be Benner, *Contemplative Vision: A Guide to Christian Art and Prayer*.

of reality outside of ourselves and can gain knowledge of these realities, but that this knowledge is nonetheless culturally and historically conditioned; and a critically realist *hermeneutically* in its approach to art, explored further in the next section.²¹

The argument of this book can be summarized along the following points:

1. Spiritual formation is the result of cumulative religious experiences, including experiences mediated by or in encounter with the arts.
2. The metaphor of the catalyst is adopted as one way of identifying how the arts facilitate spiritual formation. The arts catalyze spiritual formation by mediating the dynamics associated with aesthetical and ascetical practices. Dispositions conducive to meaningful encounters with art are analogous to those associated with religious dispositions associated with progress in spirituality, and vice 4versa.
3. An effective or meaningful encounter with art involves and perhaps requires an experience with art frequently characterized as “reading”; that is, gaining a sense of what an artwork is communicating.²² This characterization further underlines the claim that the arts are conveyers of cognitively valuable content.

21. I am particularly indebted to N. T. Wright’s explication of critical realism in his work in biblical hermeneutics and its applicability to other areas of knowledge. See *The New Testament and the People of God*, 35 ff.

22. Graham Howes articulates this characterization when he writes:

While many can, at least in theory, read scripture, relatively few can “read” paintings or stained-glass windows, and most recent revivals of faith and devotion—for example, Liberation Theology or Charismatic Renewal movements—have tended to be grounded in words rather than pictures. Indeed among many cultural and ecclesiastical elites the presumption is usually that while religious art may have some didactic, even aesthetic, value, it has no cognitive function. . . . Yet the central question remains. It is whether art is a way of seeing and knowing which is as truth-bearing in its way as philosophical and scientific method.

Howes answers his rhetorical question in the affirmative; *The Art of the Sacred*, 19.

4. Associated with the metaphor of “reading” is that of the “languages” of the arts. This project advances the metaphor of language to that of an analogy, and argues that the basic content of art is what this essay calls its *story*, not in the sense of a plotline, but in the sense of a mythic import or a worldview.

The relationship between sense and spirituality is the focus of this book. Exploring *how* these faculties, existing in dialectical relationship, issue in spiritual formation is the task of what follows, and here Francis Schaeffer is again of continuing influence for me. In the same tract cited at the beginning of this chapter, Schaeffer writes:

Art forms add strength to the world view which shows through, no matter what the world view is or whether the world view is true or false. Think, for example, of a side of beef hanging in a butcher shop. It just hangs there. But if you go to the Louvre and look at Rembrandt’s painting, “Side of Beef Hanging in a Butcher Shop,” it’s very different. It’s startling to come upon this particular work because it says a lot more than its title. Rembrandt’s art causes us to see the side of beef in a concentrated way, and, speaking for myself, after looking and looking at his picture, I have never been able to look a side of beef in a butcher shop with the superficiality I did before.²³

Exploring how the arts cause one to see in a “concentrated way” and how by “looking and looking” one can break through “superficiality” towards meaning and change of perspective (and perhaps of life) is the theme we now set out to consider.

23. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, 38. The painting is variously titled “The Slaughtered Ox,” “The Flayed Ox,” or “Carcass of Beef” and dated between 1655 and 1657. It is now in the Louvre collection.

FIGURE 1



Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Slaughtered Ox*, c. 1655, oil on canvas, 94 x 67 cm

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Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69)

Dutch artist of the Baroque period, he belonged to the prosperous Protestant society and many of his early and middle works are dedicated to subject matters which they would have found appealing and theologically acceptable. Many art critics note a more somber, introspective turn in Rembrandt's work following the death of his wife Saskia.