Introduction

The text before you is an effort on my part to advance theological thinking about the arts in human life. In particular it is an effort to bring two different disciplines—theological aesthetics and practical theology—into dialogue around the theme of the relationship between the arts and spiritual formation. If this volume were to find a place on the shelves of practical theology its author would be very gratified, because it is directed toward *praxis* in the Christian life and with Christian laity primarily in mind.

Of the arts, music is the one with which I am most familiar and experienced. I studied music education as an undergraduate in college. At the same time that I was discovering music, which for me was primarily Western classical music, I was discovering life as a Christian. The two went very much hand in hand. A great enthusiasm for Shakespeare was also a part of my adolescent cosmos, as well as what would seem a natural enthusiasm for movies. Interwoven in my Christian experience were familiar features of church life that have aesthetic implications. I immediately think of rhetoric (public speaking, teaching, the liturgical reading of Scripture), church architecture, and hymnody. My primary youth experience being in the Methodist Church, hymns played a particularly strong role. It has become clearer to me over the years how deeply interwoven these dynamics of imaginative and expressive aspects religion and aesthetics were in my own development.

This pattern continued into my college years where I was a member of an evangelical parachurch fellowship. It was through this involvement that I was introduced to the concept of *worldview*, something that then became a central point around which

so much of my developing mind and spirituality coalesced. It remains so for me today. The term is sometimes criticized for lacking philosophical rigor and definitional precision, but it is its very elasticity that makes it practically useful. Worldview as a category is large enough to encompass a collection of enthusiasms: God and theology, classical music and theater, literature and film, ethics and apologetics, politics and evangelism, racial reconciliation and resistance to the "culture of death." The concept of worldview, and the basically Reformed theology that sponsored much of the material that I was digesting during my undergraduate days, taught me that all these things and more found a center of gravity in the claim that God was sovereign over all things by virtue of creation and redemption. This provided me with theological permission to explore these things with a clear conscience, and the style of evangelism in which I was immersed gave permission, as it were, for a cautiously critical, risk-taking approach to the things of culture, art, and society.

Ten years of college campus ministry, followed by seminary training, further encouraged me in the integration of all things around the knowledge of God, and that knowledge of God issued in and called for a life of continuous transformation, and that this transformation again implicated all areas of life, the personal and public, the intellectual and affective, the propositional and the aesthetic. Another ten years of continued college ministry and teaching a variety of courses at the undergraduate level, followed by experience of pursuing a PhD in theology in a program of theological aesthetics has, I hope, prepared me to now give a more coherent and perhaps compelling account of what I believe to be the relationship between at least two aspects of this lifelong kaleidoscope of passions: the arts and spirituality.

It becomes difficult for me to know how, and what, the value of doing so would even be, of separating and labeling these different dynamics in some hermetically sealed manner. Thought and feeling, interior mulling and public expression, doctrine and decorum, poetry and prose, transparent proposition and allusive symbolism, signs and the signified, all converge in the formation

of a spiritual existence, and I know that this is not my experience alone.

This project is an attempt, modest and incomplete as it is, to better understand the involution and mutual informing of these elements and dynamics of Christian spirituality, and perhaps in doing so find ways that might even better harness their potentials.

Professional Accountability

A blind reviewer of a version of this material questioned what academic field this project considers itself accountable to; that is, what area of expertise it reflects and which guild it submits itself to for approval or approbation. My response would be, first and foremost, to the growing body of scholars and practitioners in the field of theological aesthetics. A growing body of publications and academic programs has taken shape over the past twenty years that have advanced what Jeremy Begbie calls the "theology-arts conversation" to which he has contributed so much over this time period.[1] It is to my friends and colleagues who make up this field of study that I make myself primarily accountable. That the reviewer wondered where the project might academically situate itself may reflect the distance still to go in establishing theological aesthetics as a normal field of theological study.

Secondly, I welcome the critical consideration of those in practical theology. I think in particular of friends and colleagues such as Professor Lisa M. Hess at the United Theological Seminary. Two of Lisa's books, *Artisanal Theology* and *Learning in a Musical Key: Insight for Theology in Performative Mode* reflect the growing presence of the aesthetic within practical theology discourse.

1. Jeremy Begbie, "Jeremy Begbie on Beauty," www.transpositions.co.uk/2013/04/jeremy-begbie-on-beauty. The renaissance to which I refer, while not exclusively a Protestant phenomena, is what I am particularly thinking of when I write the above. Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy have had a longer and less fraught relationship with the aesthetic in their respective traditions, while members of the Protestant communion, particularly within its Evangelical wing, have taken matters related to theology and the arts to a whole new level of discourse and consideration.

Thirdly, I welcome comments from my colleagues in the field of public theology. Like theological aesthetics, public theology has come into its professional own over the past thirty years. Represented now by a growing list of publications, an impressive international journal, and practitioners working at various institutions, public theology represents the task of exploring and guiding the mutual accountability of religion and civil society. Part of this mutual interface and influence lies in the area of the arts, and part of my wider arena of research involves the question of how the arts are forms of public theology. That emphasis is not the focus of attention in this project, but it does lie just beneath the surface of nearly all my reflections here.

But let me repeat that above all this is a project of theological aesthetics. Perhaps this appeal both calls for and would benefit from some definitional explication. Aidan Nichols, one of the key figures in the renaissance of aesthetics within Christian theology, succinctly defines theological aesthetics as that area of theological inquiry that "consider[s] the part played by the senses—with their associated powers of memory and imagination—in the awareness of God."[2] Much more can be said, obviously, but Nichols captures what I take to be of the essence of theological aesthetics, namely inquiry into the relationship between the sensory and the spiritual. The issue of beauty has a role to play in this inquiry, and has occupied a central place in both theological and philosophical aesthetics, as well as the practice of aesthetics, for a long time. This project does not contribute anything substantial to questions of beauty, that is, to questions of canon, criteria, presence or absence, etc. The emphasis here is on what might be called the *rhetoric* of the arts; that is, what art is, how it carries meaning, and what all this might have to do with the phenomenon of spiritual formation. Persuasion, analyzed in a particularly narrative mode, is what occupies center stage in this project. The arts are analyzed as modes of communication, and questions of beauty are regulated to a secondary level of consideration.[3]

2. Nichols, *A Key to Balthasar*, 14.

3. There are many valuable texts which address the matter of beauty in art

My account of the persuasiveness of the arts, the rhetorical dynamic on which this project dwells, involves an analysis rendered in a Venn diagram of overlapping circles. As will be explained, this is done for heuristic purposes and inevitably involves the kind of artificial distinctions required for analysis, but hidden in actual practice. The reviewer to whom I referred above wondered if I wasn't engaged in unnecessary generalities and guilty of a kind of confusion of categories in the construction of my theory. I leave it to the reader to be the final judge of these concerns. My theory of what art is, its ontological status if you will, rests on what I identify as its three irreducible elements, or dimensions, without which there is no "art" and the awareness of which assists one in hearing what art is "saying."

I do make a claim in these pages that perhaps should be stated as clearly as possible, to be given elaboration in what follows. I maintain that *the arts are modes of communication, rendered or expressed in distinct types of "languages" which are embedded in time, culture, worldview, and traditions of development*. As I will state in what follows, while works of art cannot and should not be reduced to singular, detachable "messages," artworks always communicate some sense of life, a perspective on things. It is in attending with ever-greater sensitivity and openness to this communicative dynamic at the heart of art that I maintain spiritual formation can really takes place. For that reason, I engage in a heuristic project that includes graphs and diagrams in order to help the inquisitive and intelligent lay reader of these pages, to whom it is primarily addressed, better encounter the world of the arts in all its forms and functions.

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and theology; see Richard Harries, *Art and the Beauty of God*; Edward Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic*; Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty*, 2nd ed. The work of Frank Burch Brown deserves particular mention in regards to recent work within Protestant theology on the relationship of beauty, the arts and religion; see *Religious Aesthetics* and *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life*. A kind of magnum opus in this area of research would be David Bentley Hart's *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*. My regard for this formidable exploration of the question of beauty as a necessary category in theology and Christian life is tempered only by its obscurity of expression.

Theology is an inherently interdisciplinary undertaking. This project reflects that interdisciplinary dynamic. The disciplines that this project makes contact with include aesthetics, in both philosophical and theological forms of inquiry, epistemology, rhetoric, hermeneutics, ethics, practical theology, and spiritual theology. The footnotes accompanying the text and the bibliography will reflect the range of sources used in the writing of this book. In almost every case I reflect these readings in order to provide further sources for the reader and as a commendation of those sources. Moreover the text includes the occasional "excursus" where I highlight some aspect of the argument or concept or personality involved in the argument. These also serve to put things on the reader's "radar" that might lead toward further fruitful reading or research.

This book began its life as a doctoral dissertation, and as happens with most dissertations that are published, this one has undergone extensive editing and rewriting in order to make it readable and indeed palatable for a general audience. One of the happier aspects of that original research for me was the discovery of the work of David Baily Harned. Harned's own career began with his dissertation, entitled *Theology and the Arts*, published in 1966.[4] He went on to make a modest but significant contribution to Christian ethics between the late 1960s into the 1990s, advancing a basically Barthian theology, but inflected with a sensitive awareness of the aesthetic dimensions of ethics and religion and a moral realist concern to interpret the present in light of theological conviction and ethical responsibility. With the recent reissue of his first book that contribution stands to continue.

I was introduced to the name of David Baily Harned with a citation from his book *Faith and Virtue*. Here Harned advanced his conviction that all moral and religious activity revolves around one's capacity to "see." Obviously this is meant in a wholistic, metaphorical sense, as the visually impaired are clearly capable of such moral sight. But the conviction remains and has inherently aesthetic implications, as Harned writes about in nearly all

4. Harned, *Theology and the Arts* (1966, reissued 2014).

his publications. The quotation with which I was first introduced to Harned's work remains central to the development of my own work and the argument of this project:

> Our worldly ways reflect the world as we see it; we are free to act in some purposive fashion only within the world that we can see. Before our decisions, supporting our approach to moral life, distinguishing us from our neighbors, there is our way of seeing. But it is not easy to see, no easier than it is to listen, to hear not what we would like, not what we would expect, not only what the language means, but what intention and anguish and hope are veiled as well as disclosed by the recalcitrance of words. Seeing is never simply a reaction to what passes before our eyes; it is a matter of how well the eye is trained and provisioned to discern the richness and the terror, beauty and banality, of the worlds outside and within the self.[5]

5. Harned, *Faith and Virtue*, 29.