



## Christianity and art

We have looked at the subjects of Christianity and Culture (in general terms), Christianity and Philosophy, and Christianity and Science. Now we attempt to look at the subject of Christianity and Art, a subject which is too much neglected by Christians in our day, but which demands our attention, by its importance and by its far-reaching consequences for the whole of life.

### The humanness of art

Wherever we look, in the present or the past, in highly developed cultures or in very "primitive" cultures, we discover man's art. Music, written or spoken poetry and drama, clothes design, painting, architecture — all cultures almost without exception reveal examples of these kinds of art. Just as man is innately religious, directing worship to what he conceives of as ultimate, so man is also innately artistic, embroidering and mirroring his life with his art forms.

These art forms are, of course, tremendously varied. They range from highly skilled techniques down to very simple ones, from monumental temples to doll's clothes. Art touches and is expressed by all people, rich and poor, young and old, educated and ignorant, and is as such a vivid picture of mankind as a totality. What are man's dreams, his fears, his hopes, his despairs, his loves, his hates? All of these are portrayed in his art. Man's art reveals his soul.

So art is pervasive; it is found everywhere man has existed. And art is profoundly expressive, testifying to the wide range of man's experience, beliefs, and aspirations. But art is also a troubling, disturbing thing, for it reveals not only man's greatness, made in God's image to rule the world, but also man's current alienation from God, man's greed, egoism, and sinfulness. The great pyramids of Egypt were built on the backs of terribly exploited slaves and are monuments to the fanatical despotism of Pharaohs who wished to live forever in their accustomed luxury. And in European painting, much of the art produced has been commissioned by the rich aristocracy to decorate their palaces and mansions. The portraits of kings, queens, nobility, and, in the twentieth century, the super-rich patrons of the avant-garde, are often superb art for the sake of dismal purposes.

Art has often been used to confirm men's prejudices, sanctify sensualism, affirm idolatry, and destroy God's moral order. And not only the use, but also the *content* of art is often two-sided. In art the real world can be distorted, twisted into a lie. False religions and philosophies can be propagated. Art has been the means by which cultures have deluded themselves into believing untruth and making their delusions their traditions. Art, so very human, reveals the glory and the squalor of being human.

### What makes art good?

The ambivalence, the two-sidedness, of being human also attaches to the word "good." Paganini was a "good" violinist, meaning he was "good at it," but he was not a "good" man, for morally he was a philanderer and a scoundrel. The distinction between skill and technique on the one hand, and the moral dimension of art on the other hand, though sometimes difficult to make, is nevertheless an important distinction. The Aztec sacrificial knife may be a thing of beauty, and recognized as such, although we must also fully realize its brutal use: to cut the living hearts out of thousands of human sacrifices to the Aztec gods.

When we talk about whether art is "good" or not, we must therefore distinguish between more or less purely aesthetic qualities on the one hand, and the ever-present moral dimension on the other. If culture is the interplay between God's gifts and man's use of these gifts, then we must always be

sensitive to the beauty or authenticity of art, reflecting God's good gifts, as well as be sensitive to the religious-moral aspects of art, often reflecting man's fallenness. In the fulness of life, we cannot reduce art to merely moral statements, but on the other hand we cannot ignore the moral and religious implications — the depth, as it were — of all art. In Korea, for example, the shamanist folk painting, the Buddhist temple, the Confucian musical ceremony, the modern T.V. drama — all of these ought to be judged by aesthetic norms, in the first place. We must make aesthetic judgments in order to evaluate their "goodness." But then we must always go on to consider the deeper questions of the religious and moral content and uses of these art forms, in order to determine their "goodness." Art demands this kind of two-fold approach to do it justice.

What are the possible aesthetic norms, then? What qualifies art as good aesthetically? We may first say that this area is a difficult one, because aesthetic norms seem so subjective and vague. Nevertheless, it does seem possible to formulate the following questions in approaching art objects:

- Is a high degree of skill displayed or is a technique well expressed? (The norm of technique.)
- Is imagination or depth of perception present? (The norm of feeling.)
- Is there vividness in communication or in transfer of emotion? (The norm of eloquence.)
- Is innovation or a unique sense present? (The norm of uniqueness.)

While there are undoubtedly other factors to be considered, depending upon the art form, these four at least give us a way of beginning to evaluate most art fairly. Art is good aesthetically if it is skilled and not sloppy, if it is imaginative and not routine, if it is vivid and not dull, and if it is innovative and not mere imitation or plagiarism. Good art makes use of God's gifts in this way.

But then we move on to the religious-moral content and use of a particular art work. Here the Bible itself gives us specific norms. Here God's revelation and Law become crucial in determining the "goodness" of works of art. Here we must raise the questions of truth and validity of art, we must analyze the path a work of art takes, toward or away from the living God revealed in Jesus Christ. What is the fundamental framework, what is the view of reality displayed in the art object under investigation or being encountered? The Buddhist temple may be a beautiful, imaginative structure, but its fundamental "meaning" is twisted, preaching a religion of negation and the annihilation of all desire and personality in the journey toward nirvana.

We must add to this fundamental moral-religious analysis the need for awareness about the complexity of art, embedded as it is in the human condition. For there are, on the one hand, non-Christian art forms, techniques, traditions, which have been and can be used in a Christian way. And then there are Christian ideas, themes, and motifs which have been used in an aesthetically very poor way by well-meaning Christians. Art is good, finally, only if it is good both aesthetically and religiously.

## **Revelation and art**

We are part of the true story of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation. True art, art that is true to the revelation God has given us, must in some way reflect this true story. While some art is directly "iconological," directly communicating a specific message, other art, such as most crafts and clothes and instrumental music, often less specifically communicates a message. Still, even non-iconological art is called upon by God to reflect His world and His plan for the world. Taking music as an example, we notice in the instrumental music of the great Christian composer, J.S. Bach (1685-1750), that he runs through the full range of emotions. Awe, tenderness, sadness, playfulness, joy, ecstasy are communicated by his music. Yet, unlike many of the later Romantic composers, Bach does not confuse or merge the feelings into a chaos of emotion. Melancholy, for the Romantics, is a holy, sublime ecstasy. Sadness, for Bach, is a real moment on the path to its abolishment in eternal joy. Satan is the Romantic hero. Satan, to Bach, is the absolute enemy. A Largo movement, in Bach, is slow and quiet, either sad or tender, always reflective. An Allegro movement, in Bach, is always spirited and lively, the fast tempo aligning with emotions of joy, exhilaration, or gaiety. This distinctiveness of emotion is indirectly a reflection of the Christian story, where there is awe for God's Creation, sadness and regret for the Fall, and the need for the

Messiah's suffering, joy for redemption, and hope for the Consummation (Christ's Second Coming). The basic Baroque instrumental musical form of fast-slow-fast (Allegro-Andante-Allegro) might even be seen as the musical counterpart to Creation (Fast), Fall (Slow), and Redemption in Christ (Fast). In Bach, music reflects reality, the story we know from revelation, and of which we are a part.

In the paintings of the great Dutch artist, Rembrandt (1606-69), we see another example of authentic, revelation-inspired art. In Rembrandt we notice certain qualities which distinguish his work from that of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Themes and emphases of the Protestant Reformation emerge in his work. We notice first of all his reverence for ordinary life. In Rembrandt, people are ordinary human beings, in contrast to the superhuman saints of the Middle Ages. Luther and Calvin's emphasis on the goodness of human life, as originally created by God (marriage, for example!), is evident. Home life, business, and especially Biblical scenes are seen against the background of the tangible creative and redemptive activity of God. Christ Himself is seen as authentically, truly human, both in His life and in His suffering on the cross. Then we notice the peculiar glow of a Rembrandt painting, the center suffused with a yellow-white light, the rest of the painting gradually darkening in brown and black tones toward the edges. This is an indirect reflection on the significance of redemption in the midst of the darkness of the Fall. Light has come into the center of human history; that is, Christ has become incarnate, and though darkness still persists around us, we, in Christ's light, know the illumination and warmth of God's love.

All of truly Christian art, in different ways, by different techniques, is called upon to reflect the reality of God's revelation in Christ, the underlying movement of God in history, the world in which we live, taking inspiration from such great Christian artists as J.S. Bach and Rembrandt.

### **Authentic Christian art**

Let us list some of the activities and objects which we call art;

- music (Western classical, Eastern classical, popular);
- literature (poetry, novels, even some theology and philosophy);
- painting and sculpture (Western realistic and abstract, Eastern, calligraphy);
- drama (tragedy, comedy, historical, classical and popular);
- architecture and landscaping (Western, Eastern, monumental, home);
- dance (Western classical and modern, Eastern, folk);
- design (clothes, furniture, interiors, graphics, etc.);
- crafts (utensils, weaving, decoration, etc.).

As we can see even from this partial list, art ranges from "high" to "low," from group endeavor to purely individual activity. In all these artistic forms, or at least in many of them, I believe that Christians are called to use the gifts God has given them (and their environment and historical situation) to work at producing authentic Christian art.

For many reasons, down through history this has not been done or not been done well. In the first place, Christians suffered from the "isolation and retreat" syndrome. Under the impression that artistic work was inherently unspiritual, Christians contented themselves with their isolation and their cultic activities of Church services and prayer. And when Christians did make conscious efforts at Christian art, it was often aesthetically poor, since aesthetic qualities had never come to be valued and appreciated as such.

In the second place, Christians, suffering from the "assimilation and capitulation" syndrome, assumed that Christian art simply meant to copy the art of their surrounding culture. Under the impression that Christian faith had little to do with art as such, Christians sought to be integrated totally into the various aesthetic movements of their time, not realizing (or perhaps in fact realizing) that they were abandoning their Lord at key points. The art so produced may even occasionally have treated Christian themes, but the aesthetic forms were generally untransformed by the Biblical message. It was good art (in the first sense of good!), but not particularly Christian.

Authentic Christian art seeks to avoid both of these mistakes. It seeks to be genuine art, true to the aesthetic norms of technique, feeling, eloquence, and uniqueness, and also true to the Biblical Gospel of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation.

Let us look at the hymns used in the Korean Church services as a case in point. Since these hymns are all from American revivalist sources, we are examining American hymnody as well. It seems to me that many of these hymns are in fact poor Christian art. The creators of these songs and "Gospel choruses" were themselves products of the isolation-and-retreat form of Christianity popular among American Christians at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. The musicians who played the instruments, sang in the choirs, wrote the hymns, were generally poorly trained and lacked musical skills. As a result, the hymns they wrote are of poor quality. They reflect more the bathetic, sentimentalized romanticism of the period than they do Christian sensitivity. What is more, the hymn-writers, being theologically illiterate, focussed unhealthily on certain aspects of redemptive experience (dramatic conversions, tearful repentance) to the exclusion of the full Biblical picture. In short, many of the "old favorites" we still sing have yet to be transformed by authentic Christian art.

### **Art and transformation**

As Christians seek to transform their cultural products by the light of the Gospel, as Christian artists seek to transform their specialties by God's revelation and by attention to authentic aesthetic norms, there is one more area that needs to be examined if our aesthetic efforts are to be fruitful. That is the relation between our particular cultural setting (and its particular artistic forms), and the aspirations for an authentic Christian art. To put it concretely in the Korean situation: How or to what extent can we make use of the non-Christian arts around us? Can we make use of Buddhist architecture, shamanist dance movements, Confucian ceremonial music? In America we might equally ask: Can we make use of Parisian dressing fashion, Hollywood film techniques, rock 'n' roll music styles, in striving to create Christian art?

This is a difficult area, and easy answers betray ignorance and insensitivity. It seems clear, at any rate, that if culture is the interplay between God's gifts and man's use of these gifts, then non-Christian cultures and art forms *can be the way* God gives gifts to us, for our use. Not always, and not always in the same way, but perhaps in many cases this has been true in the past, is now, and will be in the future. For transformation takes *material at hand* and performs a metamorphosis upon it. Christian culture and art do not take place in a total vacuum, but in the context of a providentially formed situation in which God calls us to obey Him and to apply the Gospel to all the aspects of that situation. The common Greek dialect of the Mediterranean Sea at the time of our Lord Jesus was taken up by the human writers of the New Testament and made the instrument of communicating the Gospel, through the direct influence of the Holy Spirit. In a somewhat analogous way, Christian transformative art takes the artistic materials and forms of its present historical situation and seeks to make them serviceable for the Gospel. Buddhist temple architecture is not intrinsically evil because of its negative use. Shamanist dancing movements are not of themselves corrupt because they are performed to appease imaginary spirits. Confucian ceremonial musical forms are not *per se* tainted by ancestor worship. In my opinion, these artistic elements are open to Christian use, conformed to the norm of God's Word, subject to substantial inner and outer transformation.

In fact, it seems to me that Korean Christians, instead of *imitating* the mostly decadent Western styles of dress, music, painting, architecture, etc., could far better work at *transforming* the rich cultural traditions of Korea itself, in their artistic endeavor. For God has put you here, speaking Korean, with a full artistic history behind you. The gifts God gave the Korean people over the centuries (and which they so often turned against Him) ought to be your mineral mine, from which you can extract that raw material which, in your hands, can become those art objects and forms which authentically reflect the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Korea of the twentieth and (soon) twenty-first centuries.

And, naturally enough, this applies to all Christians wherever they are. It is sinful to turn one's back on the gifts God gives the world, in the name of some kind of "superspirituality," or even out of some kind of lethargic pragmatism ("no time"). It is sinful to misuse these gifts in a sacrilegious syncretism with the enemies of God. What God calls us to is a life of holiness, that is the dedication to Him of our whole being, including our artistic being. And this means the discovery, appropriation, and development of those artistic elements of our own cultures which are susceptible to genuine transformation in God's Name.

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