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SEARCHING FOR GOD: THEOLOGY, IMAGINATION, BEAUTY AND THE ARTS

ABSTRACT

This article offers a brief introduction on the development of, and key themes in the dialogue and interdisciplinary subject of faith, theology and the arts. It includes an outline of how the arts have become a central focus in contemporary theology as well as a historical review of how art is no longer viewed as ancilla theologiae but has its own and equal place regarding theology. Some reflections on the rendering of suffering and the cross in modern art as well as an examination of how the imagination and beauty are vital in the life of faith and in the arts conclude the article.

Karl Rahner (1967:316) once asked with some urgency: “Has theology become more perfect because theologians have become more pro-saic?”, and he added: “What has become of the times when the great theologians also wrote hymns?”.

Rahner asserted that theology can only be regarded as complete if it includes all the arts as an integral part in its discipline. Indeed, the arts ought to be nothing less than an intrinsic moment of theology. This integration he considered essential, since art can be a deep, authentic expression of the human person and because theology and the arts both refer to the transcendental nature of the human being. Significantly, in relation to the visual arts, Rahner (1982:25) concluded:



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If theology is simply and arbitrarily defined as being identical with verbal theology ... we would have to ask whether such a reduction of theology to verbal theology does justice to the value and uniqueness of these arts, and whether it does not unjustifiably limit the capacity of these arts to be used by God in his revelation.

Since the 1980s, faith and the arts has become an important and widely recognised subject in theology. The numerous publications on the interdisciplinary relationship of theology and visual art, literature, music, film, and so on, and the setting up of special MA and PhD programmes and even subdepartments in theological faculties, such as in Berkeley, Yale, St Andrews, Marburg and Münster, witness to the unprecedented development of this field of study. When I began my own studies on this subject, there were few books available. Nowadays, students find extensive bibliographies, offering an ever-increasing number of interdisciplinary publications, some of which are quite specific studies, including theoretical and practical issues relating to contemporary arts, as well as artists and themes in history, and increasingly also the arts in relation to other world religions. The overall aim in these studies is to investigate how the arts are sources of theological expression that can play an active role in stimulating, challenging, and expanding theological insight.

As we know, up to the late medieval times, the church was, of course, *the* patron of the arts, employing leading architects for the design of magnificent places of worship and artists who would furnish churches with paintings and sculptures. And maybe not unlike nowadays, in general, the more prestigious the respective chapel, church or cathedral, the more prestigious the selected artists and their commissions.

Until the High Renaissance and Reformation, works of art revealed predominantly Christian subject matter. As the vast majority of Christ's followers were illiterate, art would function as the *biblia pauperum*. Luther valued art as a means of educating the faithful on theological matters and allowed for the presence of works of art in places of worship, while Zwingli and Calvin would strongly oppose these. This, in turn, led to the second major wave of iconoclasm in church history. Since the 16th century, partly influenced by the Reformation and thus the onset of modernity, with its turn to the human subject, and the Enlightenment, religious iconography has receded, whereas history, landscape and genre subjects as well as portraiture became central foci among artists.

Our present situation is entirely changed; art no longer has the primary function to teach the uneducated in their knowledge of the Christian faith, and, in modern art, Christian subject matter is on the periphery rather than

at the centre. Yet, when it does appear, it can be significant and interesting, due to the fact that the artists, out of their own desire and choice, engage with this theme. Naturally, the artist has greater freedom in self-expression if s/he is working on a project not commissioned by the church. Of course, such commissions are currently much rarer than they once were. However, it has to be said that church leaders who employ artists nowadays will usually try to respect artistic freedom as much as possible, even if there are limits, not only through different tastes and views, but often simply through financial and other practical constraints. Every now and then instances become known where artistic freedom clashes with the sensibility of what is and what is not considered appropriate for a sacred space by the clergy and/or the parish council. And it has to be conceded that there are works of art that are inappropriate, due to imagery, which will merely shock and repulse rather than truly challenge or inspire. Members of parish councils have occasionally quarrelled or even fallen out on the question about which artworks should be included in their places of worship.

However, such discussions do not only take place nowadays, but already occurred centuries ago. One of the most famous examples is Michelangelo's *Last judgement*, with its originally countless nude figures, which, in the wake of the Counter-Reformation and the Council of Trent's condemnation of nudity in religious art, was regarded as objectionable to decorum and improper for a papal chapel. After Michelangelo's death, the Mannerist artist Daniele da Volterra was commissioned to paint drapery over the genitalia of the figures. During the 1980s, the *Last judgement*, along with other frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, was restored and roughly half of the figures, which had come under the fig-leaf censor, were restored to their original.

In our age, then, art is often associated with intellectual elites and, more often than not, with those who are not regular churchgoers or who have given up allegiance to the institutional churches altogether. For a wide public, sport has become a quasi-religion, while for others – not as many – the concert hall or the gallery functions in a way as the “modern temple”; oases where subjective experiences of the transcendent are arrived at through the contemplation of visual and aural beauty.

Further, pluralism and specialisation are now encountered in all spheres of life, including theology. It is no different with contemporary art. While, up to approximately the late 19th century, we have a more or less linear development in artistic styles, from that time onwards various styles develop simultaneously. Modern and post-modern art have many “isms”. We are currently faced with an enormous variety of media, styles and theories, including conceptualism and computer technology. It has

to be said also that, frequently, contemporary artworks are considered incomprehensible, which, in turn, makes people shy away from looking at these works out of fear of appearing ignorant. While, on a Sunday afternoon, thousands will watch sport in the local stadium or on television, only a dozen or so may enter the local gallery of contemporary art.

However, despite these developments of art and aesthetics into numerous directions, the question of God, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the life of Mary and other saints, and the quest for faith, hope, love and meaning in an age of fragmentation and frequently felt isolation and hopelessness continue to occupy artists, even those such as Picasso, who might consider themselves agnostics or atheists. Picasso painted a few images with religious subject matter, and some verge on the blasphemous. In 1930, he focused on the crucifixion in a small, dense and colourful image with his typical distorted figures. However, Jesus and the Cross in the centre are indicated through a few lines against a white background, the traditional colour for purity and innocence. It has been suggested that this image may have foreshadowed his masterpiece *Guernica*, a painting which Paul Tillich called “the greatest Protestant picture” since 1900, as it shows human estrangement with such force that the desire for reunion, wholeness and peace are clearly anticipated and implied.

For Tillich (2004:209-217), Expressionism, more than other styles, was specifically religious as in it, he maintained, human estrangement as well as the hope for salvation are manifested. Indeed, in its depiction of human estrangement, violence and suffering, *Guernica* continues to be strikingly iconic into our own times. The 20th and 21st century would be marked by suffering on a universal scale, with two world wars, the holocaust, the Hiroshima bomb, ongoing wars and unprecedented famines in the southern hemisphere, as well as tsunamis and other environmental catastrophes.

Although in different media and expression, art, like theology, focuses on issues relevant to the individual, society, religion, and culture. War, violence, injustice, suffering (including the oppression of women), homophobia, climate change, and so on are frequently reflected upon in modern and contemporary art. It, therefore, does not come as a surprise that, with regard to religious subject matter, the crucifixion, the supreme suffering of Christ on the cross, constitutes the most central theme in modern art with Christian subject matter. Theological aspects in modern and contemporary art thus often range from Christological, subjective-existentialist preoccupations to visions of eschatological hope and redemption. In some works such as, for example, in Van Gogh or Gauguin, the artist him-/herself may even identify with the person of Jesus

as the one who is the outsider, the misunderstood, and who is prepared to die for his/her beliefs rather than compromise. While many artists such as Georges Rouault, Barnett Newman, and Arnulf Rainer focus on the suffering and death of Jesus, we do, nevertheless, find glimpses of the Christ of faith, the risen Christ who brings salvation into a fragmented world, in, for example, *Doubting Thomas* by Emil Nolde, *Noli me tangere* by Graham Sutherland, and *The risen Christ* by Elisabeth Frink, to name but a few.¹

Often, the Christological and soteriological aspects may be merely hinted at through the choice of sombre or bright colours, light, or the title in an abstract painting (Newman's *Stations of the cross*). In other instances, Christian iconography is rendered in more obvious symbolical and figurative terms such as through the cross, halos, and so on.

Creation, revelation and faith, the role of the imagination and the search for meaning are at the heart of a theology engaging with art. The creation and re-creation of images and their revelatory power form a vital link between artistic imagination and religious faith, theology, and the arts. The creative imagination is, of course, central to the work of the artist as well as in the expressions of religious faith such as, for instance, in sacred writings, theology, liturgy and worship, music, liturgical art, sacred dance, and so on. The power of the imagination enables us to perceive *something* of the transcendent, to deal with and transform reality, to pray, and to disclose and discover glimpses of ultimate reality. While the imagination and images have concerned Christian theologians since the early church, in recent years – with the rapid expansion of the field of theology and the arts – their role has been considered by a number of theologians such as Paul Tillich, who was the pioneer of engaging with modern art from a theological perspective, as well as Jane and John Dillenberger, Horst Schwebel, George Pattison, Richard Harries, Frank Burch Brown, and others.

Since Plato through history, the imagination would be viewed with suspicion. Scholars, poets and artists have been well aware that the imagination inspires and is indispensable to making art, to science and scholarship; yet the imagination could be viewed as dangerous, even demonic, when misused for instigating the most appalling atrocities in human history. At any rate, we are often slow to acknowledge that the imagination is essential in any form of human living, knowledge, art, culture and technological developments. The symphonic interplay of experience, intelligence, knowledge, skill, empathy, and the imagination are

1 Harries (2013) discusses modern and contemporary images of Christ in his *The image of Christ in modern art*. His emphasis is on British art.

essential to the creative, artistic process as well as to the life of faith and to doing theology.

Without acts of the imagination, without vision, hope for transformation is unthinkable.² The imagination is urgently needed in a postmodern world deprived of all certainties and in which the experience of immense human suffering is brought to mind daily. The power of the imagination as a creative faculty enables us to perceive anew – whether in human relationships, politics, economics, religion, theology, or the arts. Or, as Jean-Paul Sartre put it succinctly, the imagination is the ability to think of what is not. This act of imagining happens predominantly through symbols and metaphors both in the artistic realm and in relation to faith.

Transformed being, glimpses of the eschatological kingdom of God realised through liberation, justice, peace and the care of creation, as well as eternity's ultimate transcendence and fulfilment need to be imagined. This can happen in the more systematic, conceptual work of the theologian, or in the immediacy of the sensuous, composed work of art. In this context, Tracy's (1990:17-26) observation that religious language occurs basically in two forms, the prophetic (proclamation) and the mystical (manifestation), is crucial. In fact, one would suggest that it is in both their mystical and prophetic expression that artistic imagination and religious faith seem most obviously connected. Brown (1989:111) points out:

The art that has the greatest religious significance is not necessarily the art of institutional religion but rather that art which happens to discern what religion in its institutional or personal forms needs most to see.

In such recognition, we need to bear in mind, however, that art and theology are not the same. While visual art is immediate, sensuous, metaphorical, and fictive, theology, as an academic subject, bears the scientific traits of clarity, systematic method, and consistency. Art cannot be translated into another mode, otherwise its whole *raison d'être* precisely as art would cease. Yet, Brown, like Rahner, comments that art in its own way can be theology, as it expresses something of the divine – in its own specific power and fashion. It is precisely in the tension, sometimes in the opposition that occurs between the work of art and the norms of theology and Christian faith that art may be of relevance and contribute, not as an *ancilla theologiae*, but as an equal partner, to the work of theology. For example, it is one thing to write a theological exposition on the meaning of the incarnation in the history of salvation; it is another to be confronted with

2 See Lane (1996:123-131).

a striking visual image of Jesus of Nazareth nailed to the Cross. Both media capture something of the same event; yet the immediacy of a painting or sculpture may reveal in a more experiential, concrete, even shocking, mode the significance of the incarnate God through its sensuous materiality and visual impact. However, it also has to be said that the meaning of a work of art with Christian iconography can only be understood by those who have some prior knowledge of the Christian story.

Art then has the capacity to expand our sense of truth and our understanding of theological issues. Indeed, in this way, artistic imagination can reveal to religious faith something about transcendent reality. It shows reality as it is *and* as transformed and thus may transform a person's view who encounters it. In this instance, art can attain an eschatological dimension, and may become a source of challenge and truth, hope and consolation, anticipating salvation.

Finally, in the context of theology, imagination and the arts – their links and their ways of opening up glimpses of the divine – it seems appropriate to conclude with some thoughts on the notion of beauty. Beauty was a central category in early Christian and medieval theology, as it was considered intrinsic to the perception of God – of the true, the good, and the beautiful. However, ethics and aesthetics became increasingly separate categories during the Enlightenment and the early 19th century notion of *l'art pour l'art*. Beauty, indeed, has been of less concern in modern art and aesthetics. In fact, in the 20th century, an aesthetics of the ugly developed and was fostered by some artists and art critics, while lamented by others. In a way, this development is not surprising in the face of nuclear power, world wars, Auschwitz, nihilism and horrendous acts of racist, sectarian and sexist violence daily worldwide. In the context of an increasingly fragmented and cynical age, an interest in beauty thus receded into the background among a self-conscious postmodern art world with its frequent promotion of irony and pastiche.

Yet, it is true that beauty is more than what is simply pleasant to the eye or to the ear or gives us mere pleasure. Beauty is not prettiness; it is more profound, and maybe it is time to examine it anew. Interestingly, a few years ago, an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Dublin had beauty as its theme. Some younger artists engaged with the subject. Yet, except for one or two pieces, I and others who saw the exhibition found hardly any inspiration, intellectual stimulus or aesthetic significance in the works. One would hope for another, more extensive, attempt in the future.

Looking back into history, the early Christians perceived the universals beauty, truth and goodness as belonging together and as signs of the

revelation of the perfect, immeasurable beauty, truth, and goodness of the divine. Beauty was viewed as objective, intelligible and always having to do with spiritual and moral purification. Beauty attracts and can instil love. The good, the true and the beautiful could not be thought of as apart from one another, as God in Godself is supreme beauty, goodness and truth. In Platonic fashion, Augustine and Aquinas would emphasise how beauty includes symmetry, proportion, and clarity. Chaos cannot be beautiful. Beauty thus relates to the cosmos; the individual parts of the cosmos are deemed beautiful and make up its total beauty.

Influenced by both Neo-Platonism and Gnosticism, Pseudo-Dionysius, in his apophatic, mystical theology, would develop the symbolism of light, whereby the supreme light is the good itself that radiates in every mind. Beauty is the source of everything that is beautiful, and it unites everything. In turn, all creatures must yearn for God who is absolute beauty and goodness. Pseudo-Dionysius achieved a synthesis on the idea of beauty in early Christian thought, as he integrated Neo-Platonist, biblical and patristic writings. To this day, these fundamental ideas on beauty – originating in Greek philosophy and developing in patristic and medieval times – continue to inspire theologians to greater or lesser extents.

Moving into contemporary theological aesthetics, the Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart points out – with reference to Hans Urs von Balthasar whose whole *oeuvre* was perceived in terms of a theological aesthetics – how beauty always has the power to cross boundaries: between the transcendent and the immanent, the ideal and the real, the natural and the supernatural. Echoing the early church fathers, Hart notes how beauty evokes desire and is known through desire. Thus, he (2003:18-21) asserts that the trinitarian love of God, and the love God asks of us, is eros and agape at once – “a desire for the other that delights in the distance of otherness”, in other words, which values the goodness and being of the other.

If beauty, in its myriad appearances, is able to cross boundaries and is known through desire, while respecting the other at the same time, it becomes clear how closely it is linked to the realm of the imagination, which has the power to do something similar in its ability to create, to envisage and to yearn for new possibilities and transformations in all spheres of life, including eternal life in the eschaton and salvation. And so, both the artistic and the theological imagination may provide us with possibilities of facing and reflecting on *this* world with its relentless challenges, and, in so doing, they may reveal to us glimpses of beauty which remind us that life has worth and ultimate meaning and thus that our faith in, and desire for God who is ultimate beauty is not in vain.

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