

Art, Christianity and Culture

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When considering the relationship of art to Christianity and culture, care should be taken to avoid structuring a false dichotomy. Christianity, after all, can be a part of the total cultural milieu, or to put it the other way around, Christianity can itself be highly acculturated. A more fruitful approach for our purposes would seem to me to be best achieved by premising our investigation upon a real dichotomy, one that actually exists by virtue of an action of God as set forth in Deuteronomy 30: 15-20, where God said, "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants might live." And even though God is biased in favor of life, we are nevertheless free to choose death if we are that foolish. The dynamics operative on either side of this dichotomy invariably work themselves out to their fruits, and so we pay the price of our choice. God himself assigns the content to these categories, and that content may vary from covenant to covenant, but the choice for life or death still persists to this very day and best accounts for reality as we find it. The surest way to understand life is to ponder the Christ event and then having pondered it, to put it on. To understand death and to avoid it, we must realize that it is controlled by the "father of lies," the god of this passing age, who makes warfare with his seductive arsenal of idolatry, perversion and deceitful distortion.

Since the artist has the power through his so-called creativity to give the appearance of life to vain imagination through his graven images and other forms of fantasy, he becomes a prize catch for the "roaring lion." This is why he is so often found drinking the "cup of the devils." According to Isaiah, he is also sought after by those who are empty toward God and have no oblation, and hence need him to carve the tree that will not

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rot; to form a graven image that will not move. (Isaiah 40:20) However, when the artist is fully conformed to Christ, he can reflect the glory of God as revealed in the face of Jesus Christ, by using his talents as a way of worshipping and serving the Creator rather than the creature. As long as his works are as songs of praise and thanksgiving or as powerful plastic prayers, they can point away from himself and up to God, and by so doing help people to set their affections on things that are above. Therefore, to make a categorical judgment as to which cup he is drinking is difficult, for sometimes a vile and demeaning content may be covered by rhythmic patterns that are aesthetically pleasing. On the other hand, perfectly valid content may be so poorly executed as to offend aesthetic sensibility. For example, the picture of Christ that appears in most churches, can, despite its popularity, have an unpleasant effect upon some people who disdainfully refer to it as the protestant icon. To complicate the problem further, Christ may choose to bless the work of a relatively weak artist in order to confound the proud, or it is even possible for Him to come to us in what may at first appear to be an inordinate work, in a manner equivalent to His coming upon us as a thief in the night. The real danger, however, comes from the side of death, when the devil comes disguised as a child of the light in works of dazzling splendor that carry subtly corrupting hidden agendas. Like pink pork, these art forms may carry deadly aesthetic trichinosis. Little wonder, then, that the artist is found to be alternately praised or profaned, prized or prohibited, in his off-again, on-again relationship with the church. If the problem is difficult for the church, pity the poor Christian artist who is caught up in this dilemma, for he always runs the risk of causing, through his work, one of Christ's little ones to fall, which by Christ's own warning is to be dreaded beyond measure.

Because the risks involved are so great, many churches have turned their backs on the artist and his plight. This is comparable to turning one's back on sex simply because it might end in perversion rather than parenthood. Actually, the church has no need to fear art any more than any other part of creation as long as it exercises its prerogatives in Christ. Christ, after all, has overcome the world. To put it bluntly, when the unclean art went out of the church, the church became aesthetically a dry place as it wandered aimlessly through time, and seven devils of worldly art came in on its members, and the last state of the church was worse than the first. Without a redemptive art of its own, the church has only the works of unfaith to feed on, and as a consequence is bombarded by bizarre images that corrupt its spirit and dissipate its taste. Such counterfeit reality with rituals and sacraments of sickness beguile and bewitch and lead the unsuspecting soul into bondage or unto death.

Even when the church tries to confront the problem, it is confounded, for lacking an expertise of its own, it does not know where to turn and so delivers itself to the expertise of the high priests of wordly aesthetics who foster the theories of art for art's sake or cults of self-expression with their accompanying vanities. But how can their aesthetic norms apply to Christians, who are to seek not their own (self-expression) and who are to separate themselves from idols (art for art's sake, which is an idol by its own definition)? Christians are to center in Christ rather than self and are to worship the Creator rather than the creature. This applies to Christian artists as well, for the artist, too, must pass from death to life along with the rest of mankind.

As we said earlier, one cannot be involved in life or death without paying the respective price. Let us observe, for example, the agenda of death in one prominent artist's work as he marches from meaninglessness to mania under the cheers of the aesthetes. The movement is from distortion, to beguiling abstraction, to the mimicking of death mask imagery of African origin, to the celebration of pornographic eroticism. Or it can be observed again in the distortion of perception through psychodelic and drug cult addiction which produces discontinuity between time and energy and causes disdain for Judeo-Christian moral concepts, leaving existence a drag; and existence that is a drag is not life at all, but death. Death's deadly "mal"-o-drama produces those bewitching thrill syndromes that exhaust the nerve cell as "the beat moves on," – first the blues, then depression, then chronic depression, then hallucination, and finally suicidal despair. Thrill is to death what joy is to life, but joy moves from glory to glory as it feeds on the "Bread of Life;" a feeding that leads to the mansions of the house of the Father where fulfillment is forever.

Unfortunately, in acculturated Christianity, most of us are offered schizophrenic high balls concocted partly from the "cup of the Lord" and partly from the "cup of the devils;" so we cleave and despise and are as often as not found praying in the name of Christ while really desiring the devil's delight for Christmas. To separate these cups is a formidable task and one that we seem disinclined to undertake, for it is more difficult for us to separate ourselves from a consumer culture propagandizing for hedonistic pleasures and opulent new Egypts than it is to separate a savage from his terror gods.

Really, there is no simple solution to the problem. However, I do think it is possible to establish some guide lines. One approach that I find helpful is to act on the premise set forth by Paul when he said that for Christians all things are lawful, but not all things are convenient. The convenient thing for the Christian to do is to avoid exposing his perception to

demeaning works even though it may be lawful for him to do so, for the unconscious mind soaks in everything it sees, and even though value judgments are being made against the garbage, it may still rot in the lower levels of our mind and in our weaker moments come back on us as filthy fumes, thus defiling the temple of the Holy Spirit. The Christian, by discernment, will guard against such exposure and permit into his perception only those things that help him grow up into a perfect man conformed to Christ. Art that would aid this growth should have about it that power of "awe"-ful stillness that bears an affinity to God's rest. "Be still, and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10) Art that produces quiet order, unity, and beauty bears an affinity to God's rest and becomes a pattern of the true tent actually pitched in heaven. For instance, in a small head of Christ in the Metropolitan Museum in New York City, one is almost made to feel Christ's aching spirit within. God, by His holy condescension, permits such works to act in the sense realm as a kind of foretaste of Christ's "all-in-all." Hence, the temporal body is given a foretaste of what the risen body will taste fully.

An artist whose work does not celebrate the Christ event directly can still celebrate and rejoice in God's creation as long as God is worshipped and served rather than the creature. He can also play a prophetic role by using his work to cry out against injustice and the ravages of sin. Yet, his victory in Christ should stimulate him to the higher task of reflecting God's goodness, which is above contradiction, by setting that goodness upon the hill of his work for all the world to see. To merely grovel in brokenness or chaos is to demean Christ's triumph on the cross by implying that evil still has the upper hand. After all, disfigurement, brokenness, and chaos belong to the realm of death. Form-transfigured data with its order and implications of wholeness belongs to life and points to the "all-in-all" where at last the final enemy, death, will be put down. The Holy Spirit, who brings life, is a forming agent even though He is free to blow where He will. There is a seductive counterfeit, however, called "free form," but even the term "free form" is a contradiction since form implies limit, and form that does not limit is not a form. As a helpful generalization it might be noted that God gathers while the enemy scatters.

The Christian, while naturally rejecting vulgarity and bad taste in art, is yet confronted with further dilemmas. For instance, if we take the Biblical position that all that is not of faith is sin, what about those works of art produced outside of faith? Will sin be present in these works even though their effect upon us is one of beauty? Some Christians, in order to rationalize the pleasure they get from such works, try to solve the problem by an appeal to natural grace, but I think natural grace refers to the quality

of God's love rather than to the quality of the works of the unjust upon whom the rain also falls. A tare, after all, is not just wheat that lacked a little love. Its difference is in kind, and only an in-grafting can change it or an act of cleansing by God. "What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common." (Acts 10:15) Perhaps in this area, then, we had better trust the Spirit, who prays in us and let our impulses of conscience be our guide. Here, as in other areas, the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law had best obtain, for there is no safe way to make a judgment outside of right relationship to God.

Two further observations are offered at this point with reference to Christian discernment. One has to do with the qualitative use of time and the other with time vs. eternity. The qualitative use of time is illustrated in the story of the wise and foolish virgins where what is conceived innocently as good by the foolish virgins becomes the enemy of the great. The good times that the foolish virgins were having robbed faith of its redemptive opportunity. The foolish virgins were not said to have been up to any overt hanky panky. They were merely doing what would be comparable to trimming their suburban hedges while the wise virgins were trimming their spiritual wicks. They were wasting the oil that the wise virgins were storing up for the coming of the bridegroom. Can't you just picture the foolish virgins standing at the seashore while the boat called *Redemption* moves on to its port in paradise! Likewise, for Christians, the mere presence of cultural opportunities makes it possible to be innocently fiddling with cultural agendas while the inner city is burning. The possibility of being caught, on the Judgment Day, on the side of Nero rather than on the side of the natives should give us cause to pause and reassess our values. In other words, we, as Christians, may be stringing second rate pearls of cultural pastimes to hang around our upper middle class necks where the more stunning pearl of self-giving would be found more pleasing to the God, who sees in secret and searches the thoughts and intents of the heart. The danger lies in passing by the widow and the prisoner in their need when on the way to the latest cultural event. Therefore, art that becomes a substitute for redemptive activity is misused regardless of all other considerations, good or evil.

The last consideration has to do with what is permanent as over against what is merely passing. Art that puts us in touch with Christ's words by setting forth the Christian miracle or by celebrating God through creation or by making the neighbor aware of God's goodness has served its highest function, for Christ said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away." (Matthew 24:35) To be preoccupied with surface pleasure no matter how dazzling or beguiling causes us to run

the risk of being trivial rather than triumphant. This is also true of the church when it is preoccupied with the *things* of God rather than the life of God. After all, the god of this passing age can give things; what he cannot give is life. Unless the flame of the Spirit burns with more brightness than the flame of lust, it gives the sign to the lost that grace is not really grace-full. Likewise, if the Christian artist cannot incite others to Christ by out-performing the children of darkness, he, too, forfeits the game. Religious pictures that are weakly pious are like whited sepulchres filled with dead men's bones and thus do not appeal to a generation whose veins are surging with passionate blood. The church, when it eats the "Bread of Life" without engaging in redemptive activity, has its arteries clogged with the sludge of spiritual cholesterol, thus weakening its heart and leaving it open to the attack of irrelevancy. Here the Christian artist can help prod the church toward redemptive activity, for the failure to set forth lives transfigured by holy zeal reduces the image of the church and the image of the Christian to that level where God can no longer make His appeal through them. God is left, then, with no recourse but the exercise of His wrath as a way of making a knowledge of His holiness known to a faithless generation.

I would hope that as artists who bear the name of Christ, we would use our work in a self-effacing way so as to permit Christ to stand before men sacramentally. By unashamedly confessing Christ before men, we will in turn be confessed before the Father according to Christ's own promise. (Matthew 10:32-33) (Mark 8:38) In the final analysis, to stand in the presence of the Father is a higher satisfaction than can be realized from any art form, no matter how ingenious.