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How Art Contributes to Faith

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Introduction

Theological aesthetics seeks to uncover and scrutinize the connections between the religious belief and sensory experience, including those associated with the arts. Aidan Nichols succinctly defines the discipline as exploring "the part played by the senses – with their associated powers of memory and imagination – in the awareness of God,"[1] or, as Timothy Gorringe puts it, "How does art contribute to faith?"[2] It is this particular aspect of theological aesthetics that this essay focuses on.

New comers to and even seasoned practitioners of theological aesthetics may benefit from a kind of mapping of the different accents and emphases found among those currently writing on art and religion. This essay will identify and describe four contemporary approaches. It will do so with particular reference to recent publications which are widely available and would assist in the development of a library of resources for further research and pleasure.

Proposing the question of how art can contribute to faith presupposes that it *can*. The question then is *how*. It is to that question that that this consideration of four approaches aims to address.

[1] Aidan Nichols, *A Key to Balthasar* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 13.

[2] T.J. Gorringe, *Earthly Visions: Theology and the Challenges of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 14.

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I. The Ecstatic Draw of Beauty

A book which addresses this perspective on beauty and its place in Christian theology is L. Clifton Edwards' *Creation's Beauty as Revelation*. Edwards argues for the transcendental nature of beauty as an attribute of God and how beauty can therefore draw one toward the divine:

> …an experience of…perceptual beauty could orient one to God's nature: that is, by focusing our attention on what is perceptually desirable, valuable, and interesting for its own sake, we would also be orienting ourselves to what is ultimately most desirable, valuable, and interesting for its own sake, namely God.[3]

Effectively accessing and responding to beauty, according to Edwards, requires an expansion of daily, prosaic epistemological assumptions. This is advanced as we develop what Edwards calls "symbolic epistemic practices," which involves an openness to analogies between the experience of the world and the existence of God, as well as a heightened trust in the imagination to make such connections. Edwards makes recourse to such figures as Thomas Aquinas, Michael Polanyi and others to argue for a renewed natural theology that validates experiences of beauty as actual bridges to the knowledge of and contact with God.

II. The Existential Dimension of Aesthetic Experience

Theological aesthetics received renewed attention in the late 1960's into the 1970s' from members of what is sometimes referred to as the Yale School or neo-liberalism, a primary source of what became known as narrative theology. These writers sought to reinstate the normative role of Christian Scripture and the tenets of classical Christian doctrine within Protestantism when the liberalism that had funded much of twentieth-century mainline church life had seemed exhausted. A young Stanley Hauerwas at that time announced what would become a primary aspect of his whole career. In a critique of the kind of Kantian ethics mainstream Protestantism had absorbed, Hauerwas wrote:

> Modern moral philosophers have failed to understand that moral behavior is an affair not primarily of choice but of *vision*…When we assess other people, we do not consider just their solutions to particular problems; we feel something much

[3] L. Clifton Edwards, *Creation's Beauty as Revelation: Toward a Creational Theology of Natural Beauty* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 69. Another book that explores similar themes but with greater focus on art is Richard Harries *Art and the Beauty of God* (New York: Mowbray, 2000).

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> more elusive which may be called their total vision of life…Our morality is more than adherence to universalizable rules; it also encompasses our experiences, fables, beliefs, images, concepts, and inner monologues.[4]

Because Christian morality has more to do with vision as occasioned by indwelling "fables, beliefs, images, concepts and inner monologues," Hauerwas proposed that the moral life is "better understood on the analogy of the aesthetic mode of seeing and beholding than in terms of action and decision," and that art can catalyze such growth because "great art show[s] us our world with a clarity which startles us because we are not used to looking at the real world at all."

III. The Sacramental Nature of Aesthetic Phenomenon

How does art contribute to religious faith? For David Brown, the arts and culture provide experiences of contact with God Himself because they actually impart the presence of the divine to the perceptive recipient. That is, Brown proposes that meaningful aesthetic experiences have an inherently sacramental quality to them. In them and through them, Brown claims, God actually makes Himself available and accessible. This in part reiterates a theology of beauty, but Brown goes further. He urges a move beyond the instrumental impulse of evaluating things – like church buildings or hymns or books, gardens, even sports events – toward a more intrinsic consideration. Church architecture, for example, not only facilitates worship and provides useful space, but may actually communicate something about God and through which God makes Himself available for experience.[5] Brown's understanding of the sacramental, "the symbolic mediation of the divine in and through the material," is intentionally broad enough to encompass the breadth of his application and of the intrinsic analysis of aesthetic phenomenon that he advocates for:

> In a proper sense of the sacramental, the mediation is not purely instrumental; instead the material symbol says something about God in its own right, and so it is an indispensable element in assessing both the immediate experience and any further significance it may have.[6]

[4]4 Stanley Hauerwas, "The Significance of Vision: Toward an Aesthetic Ethic" *Sciences Religieuses/Studies in Religion 2* (1972), 36-49; 38. Emphasis added.

[5]Brown provides a theology of church architecture in "Competing Styles: Architectural Aims and Wider Setting, *God and Enchantment of Place*, (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 245-307. For a study on Gothic architecture for a general readership see Jon M. Sweeney, *Beauty Awakening Belief: How the Medieval Worldview Inspires Faith Today* (London: SPCK, 2009).

[6]Brown, *God and Enchantment*, 30.

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IV. The Phenomenological Character of Aesthetic Experience

Phenomenology invests a sense of autonomous "presence" in an artwork, one that meets the subjectivity of the viewer with its own objectivity. Art in this perspective is rescued from being merely the mirror for the viewer's own subjective play and seen as something that "talks back," as it were, in its own voice. Another term associated with phenomenological analysis is "horizon." Horizon refers to the perspective or commitment of a given person or object. A viewers' horizon meets with that of the artwork, and the viewers' horizon in then expanded, confirmed, challenged or changed.

As Aidan Nichols writes:

> Art requires and releases an *askesis* or discipline of vision so that we learn how to look with a purity of insight into the heart of human life. Such looking shifts our whole way of reading the significance of the world. In its wake we find our own existence reshaped from the experience of what we have seen.[7]

A phenomenological approach to the question of art and faith places emphasis on the "intentionality of consciousness," the *purging* of prejudices and presuppositions that so often cloud and obscure one's encounter with and submission to an artwork's potential impact. A person coming to an artwork can bring the virtues of attentiveness, hospitality, and contemplation that they've learned from piety and re-learn these skills through encounters with art that can then be applied in their own religious development.

V. Conclusion

The procedural order of this essay is not in any way meant to suggest an ascent toward the right or better account of how art can contribute to faith. The purpose rather has been to identify four approaches to the question of how art can contribute to faith and alert the reader to some of the most recent representative writings on the subject. They are best characterized as approaches, not schools, as none of them are institutionalized in any way. Moreover, each approach has laudable and legitimate light to shed on the relation of art and spirituality and applicable as a prism of consideration or an emphasis in a particular context. The approach emphasizing the ecstatic potential of beauty, for example, may serve when healing or contemplative spirituality is desired. The existential approach, highlighting ethics and social responsibility, could help audiences recognize the effects of advertising and media with which they are surrounded and

[7] Aidan Nichols, *The Art of God Incarnate*, (Wipf & Stock, 2016 [1980]), 100

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how faith can be both *formed* and *deformed* by the material, visual and media culture around them. David Brown's analysis of a sacramental dynamic inherent in art might go a long way in helping people broaden their awareness of God's presence in things and reconcile the frequent exclusion of the sacred from the secular. The phenomenological emphasis helps people take artworks seriously as a "kind of address" that deserves attention and which can help develop the kind of "eyes that see and ears that hear" that faith places such priority upon.

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