



Beauty Redeems the World: An Introduction to Christian Aesthetics

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“Beauty redeems the world” says the protagonist, Prince Myshkin, in Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s novel *The Idiot*. For many reasons, he sounds like an idiot—today even more than before. Nothing redeems the world anymore; terms like *redemption* or *justification* have disappeared from the public sphere and come to be religious gibberish. Moreover, if there is anything in Christianity that brings hope to this world, it is not beauty. One may suggest justice, human dignity, or peace for the Christian agenda for the world, but not beauty. Even those who consider art the source of meaning in this world find the word *beauty* old-fashioned and inadequate. Aesthetic value has replaced beauty in the philosophy of art. In this article, I nevertheless maintain that Prince Myshkin was right. The Christian faith is an aesthetic view of the world: it perceives beauty even where beauty is not apparent. This is possible because a Christian is a person who is beautiful in God’s sight.

For Protestants, discussion of beauty may seem particularly alien. “Beauty redeems the world” is hardly in accordance with the Reformation slogans “Christ alone, faith alone, the Scripture alone.” Yet, Lutheranism has produced extraordinary beauty in the world through the music of Johann Sebastian Bach and

Beauty is often dismissed in contemporary conversations, even in Christian circles, as merely a matter of individual taste or subjective emotionalism. But for the Christian theological tradition following God’s work in the world, beauty is redemptive, both of the creation (that God saw as good) and human beings.

the paintings of Lucas Cranach, among others. Perhaps the most concise formulation of the Lutheran doctrine of justification is expressed with the notion of beauty: “Sinners are beautiful because they are loved; they are not loved because they are beautiful.”¹

SCRUPLES FOR THE AESTHETIC UNDERSTANDING OF CHRISTIANITY

If the aesthetic dimension of our life would disappear, we would not tell bedtime stories, watch soap operas on television, listen to the car radio (except perhaps for news), or share our photographs on social media. Besides these obvious things, there are other areas in our life that we do not usually think of as aesthetic: our car is designed to please the eye, not just to be technically excellent. Most parts of sporting events serve more the aesthetic pleasure than the game result. Even military actions have a peculiar aesthetic, appalling as it may be. In a word, a life deprived of aesthetic dimension would not be a human life at all, not to mention that most likely even animals enjoy beautiful colors and sing and play games just for fun.

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The foremost playground of aesthetics is art. Art has been suspect in Platonist, Christian, and Marxist orthodoxy. Enjoying art—music or drama, in particular—has been viewed as vulgar, sinful, or bourgeois entertainment. The Puritan view of Christianity, be it medieval monasticism, German pietism, or Anglo-Saxon revivalism, has always thought artistic ambitions if not sinful, at least superfluous. Somewhat paradoxically, Thomas à Kempis speaks eloquently for the futility of the transitory human life in *The Imitation of Christ*, and C. H. Spurgeon is still remembered for his oratory skills. Even the most ascetic Christian thinkers have needed beauty to persuade their followers.

This very persuasion may be the key to the religious suspicion toward beauty. According to Thomas Aquinas, “things that cause pleasure when seeing them are called beautiful.”² Beautiful things cause sensuous pleasure, and that has been problematic for Christian theologians. Augustine discussed widely his sensory temptations in the tenth book of his *Confessions*. Being vulnerable to the power of music, Augustine asked himself whether he more enjoyed the music or the words when he listened to church songs. In the former case, he thought to have

¹ Martin Luther, *The Heidelberg Disputation*, in *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, 121 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–2009), 1:212.10–11 (series hereafter cited WA).

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, quaestio 5, art. 4.

committed a sin, albeit a minor one. Music and arts arouse emotions that have been estimated already in Greek philosophy as something belonging to the lower part of human soul. A wise person is governed by reason, not emotions.

Another important factor in aesthetic experience is its physicality. *Aesthetics* comes from the word *aesthesis*, which literally means “sense-perception, sensation.” Objects of art are always irrevocably physical. A poem or a novel, a piece of music, a sculpture or a painting is a physical object. Beauty is connected to our bodily existence, hence something irrelevant to our spirituality, according to the Platonist reading.

At the same time, one may argue that physicality and affectivity are the theological virtues of beauty. Christianity is an irrevocably bodily religion. Our sacred texts tell about a particular nation in the ancient Near East, the salvation of humankind occurs in the midst of history, and in the center of the Christian service there is not meditation but a meal. Christians don’t escape the bodily existence even in death because they confess to believe in “the resurrection of the flesh.”

As for affectivity, a true Christian is not a Stoic philosopher, undisturbed in hardships. Jesus wept (John 11:35), was deeply distressed and troubled in Gethsemane (Mark 14:33), and cried at the cross, “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (Mark 15:34). The classics of Christian spirituality have always understood that faith is a matter of the heart—which does not refer to sentimentality but includes the affectivity as well as reason. Luther renounces the Stoic view of emotions in his *Lectures of Genesis* when he states that the saints are “the tenderest people,” capable of both mourning and rejoicing. The peculiarity of a Christian’s emotions is not that they are under reason’s control but that they are especially warm and tender.³

Nevertheless, Christianity can be viewed as a nonaesthetic stance, remote from outer appearances and physical phenomena. Søren Kierkegaard was an advocate of this existentialist reading of Christianity that emphasizes the paradox. “To believe that the artistic helps one into actuality is just as mistaken as to believe that the more artistically complete the sermon, the more it must influence the transformation of life—alas, no, the more it influences life esthetically, the more it influences away from the existential.”⁴ This view is discernible in the thinking of modern theologians like Karl Barth or Rudolf Bultmann.

BASIS FOR CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF BEAUTY: CREATION AND INCARNATION

Most of Christian theology can approve the words of John Keats: “A thing of beauty is a joy forever.” Unlike Kierkegaard’s mistrust of the aesthetic, Friedrich Schleiermacher defines religion as an aesthetic endeavor: “Religion’s essence is

³ Miikka E. Anttila, *Luther’s Theology of Music: Spiritual Beauty and Pleasure* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 113–16.

⁴ Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 197.

neither thinking nor acting, but intuition and feeling. It wishes to intuit the universe, wishes devoutly to overhear the universe's own manifestations and actions, longs to be grasped and filled by the universe's immediate influences in childlike passivity."⁵

Neglect of beauty would be—for a Christian—neglect of creation, which would in turn be neglect of God. "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" (Gen 1:31). *Good (tov)* means at this point *aesthetic goodness*, that is, beauty. Of course, one could surmise that everything was morally perfect or technically functioning, but the verb *see (yare')* has to do with aesthetic perception: the world was beautiful in its Creator's eyes. The possibility of perceiving beauty is based on the fact that God has created the world and that it is "very good" in his sight.

On the very next page of the Bible there comes the fall. The reality of sin darkens the beauty of the creation. Nonetheless, sin does not destroy beauty, and God's opinion of the world does not change for it (even though God may have grieved that he had made humans, Gen 6:6). Sin fatally altered the relationship between God and humankind. It equally violated the interhuman relationships and the relationships between humans and nature, but it did not hide the beauty of the creation altogether.

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In Protestant theology, there is often a gap between the first and the second articles of faith (i.e., creation and redemption), as if the work of Christ were something totally different from what God did in creation. To maintain the unity of the Triune God of Christianity, one should agree with the major contemporary aesthetic theologian David Bentley Hart: "The incarnation is the Father's supreme rhetorical gesture, in which all he says in creation is given its perfect emphasis."⁶ That the Word became flesh, that the Son of God was born human, warrants the ultimate beauty of the world, in spite of death, sin, or hell. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). This celebrated verse is often read with reference to faith to the salvation or what it means to be rescued from the eternal damnation. However, its basic statement is that God loves the world—the world we live in, this physical world we inhabit.

The incarnation is the act of God that indeed overrules the ban of images uttered in the Ten Commandments (see Exod 20:4–6). In the iconoclastic controversies of the eighth and ninth centuries, defenders of icons like John of Damascus

⁵ Thiessen, *Theological Aesthetics*, 178–79.

⁶ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 327.

and Theodore of Studios taught that images of the divine should be allowed on the basis of the incarnation. “He who in his own divinity is uncircumscribable accepts the circumscription natural to His body.”⁷ If God has not despised the bodily existence of ours, neither should we. The averseness to body is not a biblical but rather a Platonic trait in Christianity. This incarnation aesthetic has some bearing on other contemporary theological concerns: the hostility toward body has resulted in suspicion toward sexuality, which means (in a male-dominated tradition) suppression of women.

BEAUTY OF THE CROSS

The cross—the token of Christianity—challenges the aesthetic reading of the Bible. The prophecy of Good Friday says precisely that “he had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him . . . like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (Isa 53:2–3). This is the exact opposite of an aesthetic interest! The main artistic problem concerning the image of the crucified Christ is that no artist ventures to depict the ugliness of the crucified body as it is (supposing that the image is visible in a church).

At closer scrutiny, the cross of Christ makes the Christian aesthetics possible in its entirety. Without the Son of God, who has gone through death and suffering, up to the God-abandonment at the cross, all beauty in the world would be vain entertainment, a deceptive surface that hides the cruel reality. In the end, it is the beauty of our life that gives the ultimate meaning to the resurrection. Karl Barth, for all his rejection of the natural theologies, understood this when he said that a person who is not horrified of dying, because they do not rejoice in life sufficiently and thus are not afraid of its ending—in a word, a person who does not perceive the beauty of this life—does not understand the meaning of the word *resurrection*.⁸

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From a Lutheran point of view, one must ask what is “theology of the cross” over against “theology of glory?” Thinking about beauty may seem like the latter one, especially as *glory* (*kabod, doxa*) is the word for divine beauty in the Bible.

⁷ Thiessen, *Theological Aesthetics*, 69.

⁸ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G. T. Thomson (London: SCM Press, 2001), 144.

After all, Luther does state in the *Heidelberg Disputation* that “theologians of glory” tend to understand the invisible qualities of God through his works. On the contrary, “theologian of the cross” recognizes God’s visible “humanity, weakness and madness.” The problem is not that one observes the works of God in creation. Rather, a “theologian of glory” fails to see creation as it is. Perceiving beauty in the imperfect, temporary, and physical world and being grateful for that is the direct opposite of the “theology of glory,” which aspires for higher, spiritual understanding.

PERCEIVING BEAUTY IS THE WORK OF HOLY SPIRIT

What is the theological value of beauty? The most common way of understanding the religious meaning of beauty is to regard the universe as a ladder to God. Through beautiful things, humans rise to the understanding of the true beauty and, ultimately, to God. This view is presented already in Plato’s *Symposium* and subsequently promoted by Augustine and others. According to this view, beauty is a medium for knowing God. It is not definite: Catholic theologians say that it needs the help of grace to be correct; Protestant theologians ask the Bible for guidance. Anyway, God speaks more or less through the beauty that humans sense around them. As such, beauty may also be seductive and lead astray. Therefore, one must be cautious with it.

Is it possible that theologians are not superficial enough to know God? “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse” (Rom 1:20). God does not speak in riddles but communicates himself through the world. This kind of understanding is presented in Bonaventure’s *The Soul’s Journey into God*: “Concerning the mirror of things perceived through sensation, we can see God not only through them as through his vestiges, but also in them as he is in them by his essence, power and presence. This type of consideration is higher than the previous one; therefore it holds second place as the second level of contemplation by which we are led to contemplate God in all creatures which enter our minds through our bodily senses.”⁹ When God has become human and entered into our physical being, this visible and tangible world is the place where we encounter God. As the followers of Christ, we have also an aesthetic obligation: to look at the world with loving eyes as God does in Christ.

According to Luther, perceiving beauty in this sinful and ugly world is not possible without faith. Thus, faith has the connotation of aesthetic contemplation. It is the Holy Spirit who opens our eyes to see nothing but holiness in this world. In a lecture on Isaiah, Luther said:

⁹ Bonaventure, *The Soul’s Journey into God*, trans. E. Cousins, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist, 1978), 69.

Reason cannot sing about the good works of God, because it is the work of the Spirit alone to understand the mercy of God; when it knows it, it begins to praise and give thanks. Reason cannot do this by itself—it observes merely threats and terrors of God and godlessness of the world and begins to groan and reproach. Why? Because reason cannot estimate the blessings, it counts bad and not good things, therefore it cannot but groan. Reason observes an entirely godless world and complains. But the Spirit perceives in the world nothing but God’s blessings and it begins to sing.¹⁰ ⊕

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¹⁰ Luther, *Vorlesung über Jesaias 1537–30*, WA 31:2:536 (translation mine). For a magisterial study on Luther and beauty, see Mark C. Mattes, *Martin Luther’s Theology of Beauty: A Reappraisal* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

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