

Should Christian Worship be an Aesthetic Experience?

A level of clarification is required when considering the virtues of aesthetics in the context of worship. For example, what is meant by 'aesthetic'? Contemporary use of the word makes it synonymous with 'beauty', and as such, the question implies a correlation between Christian worship and an experience of beauty. (The words aesthetic, beauty, image and art are used interchangeably in this essay.) Secondly, who or what is the subject of the experience isolated in the question – the worshipper or the object of worship? Whilst worship is seen by many as an offering (often aesthetic in quality) of value to God, I shall limit this essay to a consideration of the experience of the worshipper as to do otherwise would require knowledge of God's appreciation of worship! Finally, the controlling word in the question, 'should', deserves some attention. To equate it with 'must' would be problematic, and therefore it is read as implying a preference or presumption¹, but not a closed fact.

The 'use' of the aesthetic in Christian worship has long been an issue of debate. The apologist Lactantius (c.240-c.320) questioned the practice of making images, saying; "the likeness of God is not that which is made by the hands of man from stone or bronze or any material whatever..."² Conversely the use of art and image "relating to the Christian story of salvation"³ is as old as the story itself. The issue has nearly always been one of opposing views with little by means of middle ground;

¹ New Penguin English Dictionary

² **Lactantius**, 'The Fathers of the Church', *The Divine Institutes*, cited in **Thiessen, G.E.**, *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, p. 45

³ **Dawtry, A. & Irvine, C.**, *Art & Worship*, p. 1

"...should Christian art, much of which has been figurative, be encouraged because it enhances our understanding of the God head, or be discouraged on the grounds that, since we can never know what God looks like, then we should not try to represent him lest we mislead the worshipper?"⁴

This is not the only question about worship and the aesthetic, but it has formed a large part of the debate through Christian history.

Considering first the opinion that beauty can be a negative influence in the worship of the Church, it is impossible to ignore the iconoclasm of the 8th & 9th Centuries CE and the Reformations of the 16th & 17th Centuries CE. The iconoclasm, which predominantly affected the Church in the east, called for the destruction of icons "on the grounds that they were barriers to the conversion of Jews and Moslems."⁵, but was also fuelled by a fervently held opinion that veneration of icons was idolatry. John Damascene was a strong defender of icon veneration, claiming it as a distinct act, not identical to worship. This was based on his understanding that to "'venerate' means literally 'to embrace and to kiss lovingly'"⁶. Yet the most common New Testament word used for worship, *proskunevw*, primarily means to do reverence or homage by kissing the hand,⁷ and the similarity cannot be ignored. The question was whether veneration was an act that drew the worshipper to Christ (*cf.* Isaiah 53:2) or to the image. Much of the debate centred on the incarnation and the concept of man as the *imago Dei*. Christ's coming as a man was seen by some as validating the physical as 'good', thus also

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ **McGrath, A.E.**, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, p. 55

⁶ **Dawtry, A. & Irvine, C.**, *op. cit.*, p. 4

⁷ **Mounce, W.D.**, *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*

validating the use of iconography as representation of the human form of the Divine. This was unacceptable to the iconoclasts, as it suggested that it was possible to define God, which they saw as limiting him.⁸

In the west, the issue did not really gain any significance until the time of the Reformations. Iconography found opposition in the work of Luther, Zwingli and Calvin, yet perhaps unsurprisingly, there was even severe disagreement between these three on the issue, as each took varying stances of severity. In the Catechism of the Church of Geneva, the second Commandment is expounded to forbid making images to represent God for the purpose of worship.

Minister: You think then that injury is done his majesty, when he is represented in this way?

Child: I think so.

M: What kind of worship is here condemned?

C: When we turn for prayer to a statue or image ... as if God represented himself to us in it.

M: We are not then to understand that these words simply condemn every picture or sculpture whatever. Rather we are forbidden to make images for the purpose of seeking or worshipping God in them...

C: Quiet right.⁹

The destruction of all imagery in numerous churches that occurred as a result of this re-interpretation of the Scriptures went far further than the actual wording of this and other similar documents would suggest. Calvin (and Luther) thought that images in and of themselves were not bad (and presumably therefore acceptable in worship and worship spaces), but that attempts at 'imaging' God were not acceptable.

In both ages of the Church, one of the primary fears was of superstition

⁸ **McGrath, A.E.**, *op. cit.*, p. 376

⁹ **Calvin, J.**, 'Theological Treatises', in *Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. XXII, SCM, p.109.

rising on the part of the laity regarding the icons and their nature.¹⁰ This was the repeated undoing of the people of Israel in their Baal-worship, and explains in part the New Testament emphasis on “the truth of the one God whose only perfect image – or *eikon* – is that of Christ...”¹¹ Sherry notes how Augustine, in his consideration of aesthetics, contemplates the possibility of earthly beauty being a trap for mankind, guiding them away from the true Beauty that is God and towards something that “provides only a transitory satisfaction.”¹² Augustine eventually considers the risk of earthly beauty to be too great for humankind to overcome. The condemnation of Assyria in Ezekiel 31:7-11 is relevant here, as the beauty that God ascribed to it led naturally to pride that was the cause of its ruin.

This remains a contemporary objection. Despite the recent engagement of the Reformed churches to the positive discussion of aesthetics,¹³ there are many for whom iconography holds particular theological problems based around the historical objections outlined above. Nor is it the only aspect of the use of aesthetics in worship that is criticised today. Many *genres* of ‘art’ are still very seldom utilized by a number of churches in the west. Music may have become a mainstay of the majority of denominations’ approaches to worship, but dance, poetry, film and multi-media (to name a select few) are used much less frequently. This may well be a particularity of Protestantism, as noticed by R.S. Thomas:

Protestantism – the adroit castrator
Of art; the bitter negation
Of song and dance and the heart's innocent joy –

¹⁰ **Nichols, A., (O.P.)**, *Redeeming Beauty: Soundings in Sacral Aesthetics*, p. 32

¹¹ **Thiessen, G.E.**, *op. cit.*, p. 11

¹² **Sherry, P.**, *Spirit and Beauty*, p. 8

¹³ **Thiessen, G.E.**, *op. cit.*, p. 3

You have botched our flesh and left us only the soul's
Terrible impotence in a warm world.¹⁴

What Thomas sees as “the heart's innocent joy” is not, of course, universally understood in the same positive way.

In contrast with the sporadic outbursts of protest at the use of aesthetics in worship, the concept of beauty as a positive influence has been voiced consistently throughout the Church's history. Farley, in assessing “[T]wenty-five hundred years of texts (that) constitute a Western ‘story of beauty’”¹⁵ begins a summary of this story by using the concept of chaos and order. For Farley, all “forms and actualities”¹⁶ have an element of order to them, and order is understood to be beautiful (cf. Genesis 1:1-2; God – beauty itself – bringing order out of chaos). This perfect beauty is something that turns “self-preoccupation into self-transcendence.”¹⁷

Self-transcendence was something that Evelyn Underhill understood well in the context of beauty and worship.¹⁸ With unapologetic repetition Underhill speaks of the beauty to be found in liturgical worship, and the effect of elevating the self into the very Presence of God. Christians of many traditions are able to speak of moments of astounding beauty in worship where the worshipper experiences something of the Divine. John's vision of heaven in Revelation 4 onwards is almost incomprehensible in the majesty and splendour that it portrays. The awesome beauty of God demands a

¹⁴ **Thomas, R.S.**, ‘The Minister’ in *Song at the Year's Turning*, cited in **Harries, R.**, *Art and the Beauty of God: A Christian Understanding*, p. 7

¹⁵ **Farley, E.**, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic*, p. 118

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ **Underhill, E.**, *Worship*

response of worship. The Psalms offer further testimony to this fact with a slightly different slant; beauty itself, as found in creation and in the wonder of God is a trigger of worship in the heart of the believer. Psalm 8 directs our eye to the remarkable nature of humankind and God's favour to it, and to the created order that surrounds us and surmises:

O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!¹⁹

Sherry argues that it is God's very being as Beauty that determines this response. Through creation and inspiration (both of God), beauty is found on earth, speaking of God and revealing something of him to humankind.

The experience[s] of ... beholding something of great beauty might ... be described as sacramental, in the sense that for many people [they are] signs of God's presence and activity ... and also occasions for wonder and awe.²⁰

Further still, beauty can be worship in itself. Much is made²¹ of the passage in Exodus where God identifies Bezalel and Oholiab as having been gifted "in every kind of craft,"²² in order that they would be able to make the Ark of the Covenant and the tent of meeting in all their finery. That these skills and abilities are God-given is significant, yet of particular interest is that they are picked out as examples of using things of beauty and the craft of them in the worship of God. In a more contemporary setting, Kavanagh suggests that the worship that the church offers, coming from the reality of life to meet with God, is an artistic act.²³ There has been much study on the form (or *Ordo*) of liturgical worship, seeking to find inner structure and evaluating it

¹⁹ Psalm 8:9 (NRSV)

²⁰ **Sherry, P.**, *op. cit.*, p. 3

²¹ e.g. **Sherry, P.**, *ibid.*, p. 6

²² Exodus 31:2-7 (NRSV)

²³ **Kavanagh, A.**, *On Liturgical Theology*, p. 139

aesthetically.²⁴ Liturgy can be, at its best, poetry of the highest kind. Yet it is particularly in the use of it in worship that this becomes evident. As words on a page there can be little or no sense of beauty to them, but when the words are read in a direction towards the Maker of the reader(s) they seem to come alive.

Returning to the Eastern Church, where there is a “strong, overriding sense of the beauty of God”²⁵ there is also perhaps the greatest proliferation of artistic expression as worship. Churches are adorned far more elaborately in the Orthodox tradition than is likely to be found anywhere else. In this medium, the artistic item can act in three ways: being a piece of work inspired and enabled by God; being a form of worship to God; and speaking of God's beauty in such a way that others are in turn inspired to worship.

The experience of beauty in and as worship has been an historically contentious issue for the Church, and remains so in some way. The shadow of perceived idolatry still hangs over the use of image to represent God in some denominations, and the ‘trap’ of being drawn to an image rather than drawn to Christ that Augustine feared may have caught some in the years that have passed. Yet, in the Western Tradition, the sticking point now appears to be on issues of practice rather than theology. Many have noticed a “depreciation of beauty”²⁶ in modern society based on the subjective nature of its acceptance. This is likely a result of modern and postmodern approaches to individualism and the elevation of personal opinion. However, the nature of

²⁴ **Dawtry, A. & Irvine, C.**, *op. cit.*, pp. 52ff

²⁵ **Harries, R.**, *op. cit.*, p. 7

²⁶ **Sherry, P.**, *op. cit.*, p. 22

God is unchanging, and he is still Beauty in himself. The order that he brings, the experience of his Presence that is available to the worshipper and the skills that he gives are the same as ever. Beauty, when it is experienced, is still (as it was for the Psalmist) a cause to praise. That music has been so accepted into the life of the Church is a cause for joy. The second Vatican Council, for example, calls the “musical tradition of the universal church ... a treasure of inestimable value.”²⁷ As Sherry suggests, there is more joy for the church to experience with a wider acceptance and utilization of the full range of God’s creative gifts of beauty.²⁸

²⁷ **Vatican Council II**, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, cited in **Thiessen, G.E.**, *op. cit.*, p. 227

²⁸ **Sherry, P.**, *op. cit.*, pp. 170-1

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