

HOLY BEAUTY
A Reformed Perspective on Aesthetics within a World
of Unjust Ugliness

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Much of my theological endeavour over the years has focussed on the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. During the past decade my focus has shifted to the relationship between Christianity and democratic transformation and, more recently to theological aesthetics and to the role of art in transformation. This latter interest has clearly not meant a lessening of concern for theological engagement with public life. That remains constant both out of the conviction that theology and ethics cannot be separated, and the fact that the struggle against the legacy of apartheid and injustice more generally remains. The transition to democracy requires an ongoing struggle for social transformation. My interest in theological aesthetics, then, is not an opting out of a commitment for social justice but an attempt to address a set of issues that have previously been neglected by those of us who were engaged as theologians in the struggle against apartheid. To emphasise this point let me say that I wrote these words in the midst of a workshop of 'Christianity, art and healing' where the focus was on the new holocaust facing sub-Saharan Africa, the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Nadine Gordimer, the celebrated South African novelist, has noted that art is 'at the heart of liberation.'¹ The struggle against apartheid certainly produced an artistic creativity of a remarkable kind and intensity.² It is remarkable, then, that theologians engaged in the struggle did not take this into account in doing theology.

Some Preliminary Issues

Traditionally, beauty has been the key category for aesthetics. For much of the twentieth century, however, beauty was largely banished from aesthetics discourse. Aesthetics, it was rightly recognised, has a much broader focus. It has to do with the experience and perception of reality that we associate with the imagination and creativity, with metaphor and symbol, with games, playfulness, and friendship. The arts, whether fine or popular in all their manifold forms are central to aesthetics because they embody and express this dimension of experience, they evoke memories and suggest possibilities, thereby enabling us to see reality differently. As such aesthetics is about the arts, but it is about more than the arts. It is about perceiving reality in ways other than through rational enquiry and moral endeavour. It is about more

¹ The Introduction to Culture in Another South Africa, ed. William Campschreur and Joost Divendal (London: Zed Books, 1989), 12.

² Sue Williamson. Resistance Art in South Africa (Cape Town: David Philip, 1989). 8.

than beauty -- yet it is also about beauty. Indeed, as long as we recognise the broader contours of aesthetics, beauty remains the key category.

One reason why, for much of the twentieth century, beauty was banished from aesthetic discourse was in reaction to the aestheticism of those who pursued beauty for its own sake, a Romantic escapism oblivious to the ugly realities of a world gripped by oppression. In more recent times, precisely because of the ugliness of injustice, there has been a concerted attempt to recover beauty as the key category for aesthetic theory and praxis.³ As Elaine Scarry has argued, the political complaints against beauty are incoherent, indeed, a commitment to beauty may well enhance our capacity to seek justice.⁴ But, of course, beauty like justice is a contested term. 'Whose beauty' is as much a matter of contention as the question 'whose justice'? And the two are not unrelated.

One way to approach that question is through a consideration of its opposite, namely ugliness, and the way in which ugliness is represented in art. Not all art is what we would normally call beautiful. Much art protests the debasement of beauty in, for example, the advertising industry by producing works that are often shocking in their ugliness. It is often the case, Theodore Adorno observed, that 'art has to make use of the ugly in order to denounce the world which creates and recreates ugliness in its own image.'⁵ But it is precisely this protest against unjust ugliness that reinforces the value and significance of beauty as something potentially redemptive. Indeed, if aesthetics were just about the beautiful we would never really understand 'the dynamic life inherent in the concept of beauty.'⁶

My own exploration of aesthetics began through a growing awareness that apartheid was not only unjust but also ugly and that this was reflected in the architectural landscape of our country. In this regard we may recall D.H. Lawrence's essay, "Nottingham and the Mining Country" (1929) in which he wrote:

The great crime which the moneyed classes and promoters of industry committed in the palmy Victorian days was the condemning of the workers to ugliness, ugliness, ugliness: meanness and formless and ugly surroundings, ugly ideals, ugly religion, ugly hope, ugly love, ugly furniture, ugly houses, ugly relationship between workers and employers. The human soul needs actual beauty even more than bread...⁷

³ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

⁴ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 57.

⁵ Theodore Adorno, W., *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 72.

⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 75.

⁷ quoted by Margaret Drabble, *A Writer's Britain: Landscape in Literature* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979) 224

If ugliness has the capacity to destroy life, so beauty, as Dostoyevsky so eloquently suggested, has the power to save the world.⁸

Like aesthetics more generally, theological aesthetics is about imagination and creativity. In pursuing this course of enquiry, theology enters into dialogue with the arts, just as it does with philosophy or the social sciences in its concern for truth and justice. But at its heart, theological aesthetics is about faith seeking to understand reality, not least the ugliness of injustice, from the perspective of the beauty of God revealed in creation and redemption. From this perspective, the reality of ugliness is subsumed within God's beauty which, as Karl Barth insisted, 'embraces death as well as life, fear as well as joy, what we might call the ugly as well as what we might call the beautiful.'⁹

Theological aesthetics is thus grounded in our knowledge of God and of ourselves, as Calvin would have wanted, and as such it is not an optional extra for theology, something that might only attract the interest or satisfy the needs of aesthetically inclined Christians. Indeed, a failure to engage in theological aesthetics has dire consequences both for theology itself (that 'beautiful science') and the life and witness of the church. A concern for truth without goodness and beauty lacks the power to attract and convince those whose critical sensitivities repelled by such dogmatism. A concern for goodness without truth or beauty -- that is, without what Hans Urs von Balthasar called 'graced form' -- degenerates into barren moralism and misguided iconoclasm. In short, truth and goodness without beauty lack the power to convince and therefore to save.

Notwithstanding some notable exceptions, Jonathan Edwards being one of them, Reformed theology has been far more concerned historically about dogmatic truth and moral striving than it has been about aesthetic appreciation. Moreover, artistic creativity, especially through the visual and plastic arts, has often been regarded with reservation and suspicion rather than encouraged and celebrated as both a source of delight and of insight. This has not been universally so, and the Reformed tradition has too often been maligned by the uninformed. But there is enough truth in the criticism for us to take it seriously. The Reformed ethos has been chiefly one of truth and goodness rather than beauty, and of hearing and listening rather than of seeing and imagining. This being so, let me hasten to comment that theological aesthetics is not about giving priority to beauty over truth or goodness, nor does it imply the denigration of the word in favour of the image. Our concern is the Word of life whom we have 'seen with our eyes ... and our hands have touched.' (1 John 1:1)

In this area as in any other, Reformed theology must be located within a broader ecumenical framework. Yet there is undoubtedly a Reformed theological perspective on aesthetics which needs to be considered within this

⁸ See Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (London: Heinemann, 1968), 103.

⁹ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton, & foreword by (New York: Harner and Row, 1957), 665.

framework, one shaped by our diverse yet coherent history of confession, worship, and witness. This has to do, firstly, with a commitment to the testimony of Scripture as witness to the triune God, creator and redeemer, confessed concretely within particular historical contexts. Such a witness, in secondly, refuses to separate faith and public responsibility and is committed to the struggle for social transformation within particular historical contexts. Thirdly, a Reformed approach to aesthetics recognises the distinctions between dogmatics, ethics and aesthetics, but refuses to separate them into independent spheres. This means, fourthly, that while the arts have a necessary freedom in order to express their creativity, they are also called to be responsible.

There has long been an interest in aesthetics amongst neo-Calvinists and there is a growing interest today in theology and the arts within the life of Reformed churches and seminaries, especially in the United States. This is to be welcomed, affirmed, and more widely encouraged in those areas of Reformed presence where, perhaps for historical and missiological reasons, the arts have been neglected or opposed. But it is of vital importance that this interest be grounded in critical theological reflection. Otherwise there is a danger of losing theological integrity and coherence, degenerating on the one hand into an uncritical ecclesial kitsch or, on the other hand, conforming to the dictates of 'high culture'. My paper is an attempt to encourage such critical reflection and help overcome these dangers, at least in theory, not in order to curtail imagination and creativity, but to set them free in the search for and service of truth, goodness and beauty.

The juxtaposing of holiness and beauty in the title of my paper goes to the heart of Reformed theological aesthetics. Taken together they refer to the righteous demand of God's reign and yet the gracious attraction of God's love; the wholly otherness of God's mystery, and yet the redemptive splendour of that which has been revealed. This provides the distinct framework within which Reformed Christianity should consider its appropriation and appreciation of the arts. With this in mind, we shall explore three interconnected themes. The first is the nature of and the relationship between beauty and holiness; the second, that of the relationship between the Holy Spirit and human creativity; and the third, the relationship between sanctification, good taste, and social transformation.

The Beauty of Holiness

Isaiah's call to be a prophet of social justice (Isaiah 6) was an 'aesthetic moment' of intense vision and audition, of seeing and hearing. The awesome glory of Yahweh's holiness was revealed to the startled worshipper with such power that it led directly to his own personal transformation. When he later recounted the happening, Isaiah could only tell of what he had seen and heard in symbols and metaphors which stretch the imagination to breaking point. His vision of God's holy beauty enabled him to perceive reality in a totally new way, the reality of God, of himself, and of an unjust world. By contrast, he soon discovered in pursuing his new vocation as prophet of social righteousness that most of his hearers could neither see nor hear what God

had commanded him to declare. They might have been able to appreciate the splendour of the temple with aesthetic delight, but their eyes and ears were closed to the awesome beauty of God's holiness and the cries of the poor and oppressed.

There is an undoubted tension in the Old Testament between hearing God's call and God's command to do justice in the world,¹⁰ and seeing and worshipping Yahweh amidst the splendour of the Temple.¹¹ Yet it is a creative tension, well expressed in the phrase 'the beauty of holiness'. The expression comes from Psalm 96:9 (KJV) which was sung during the ceremony of enthronement celebrating the New Year in the temple in post-exilic Jerusalem. It invites those who are worshipping to sing a new song to Yahweh and so declare 'his glory among the nations.'¹² It reminds them that Yahweh is 'the Lord most worthy of praise' unlike the idols of the nations, for Yahweh is the creator of all things, and 'might and beauty are in his sanctuary.' It calls the worshipping throng to enter the Temple to bring an offering and worship Yahweh in 'the beauty of holiness.' And it speaks of the Lord who reigns as the one who 'judges the people with equity' and who, when 'he comes to judge the earth' will do so 'with justice.'

But what precisely does 'the beauty of holiness' mean? The Hebrew is ambiguous as can be discerned from the various renditions in English translations.¹³ One reading stresses that the liturgical encounter between Yahweh and Isaiah occurred, in Walter Brueggemann's words, 'in an environment of beauty, which makes communion possible and reflects Yahweh's own character.'¹⁴ But evangelical translators, who have been wary of any ritualistic aestheticism, place the emphasis not on holy place or vestments but on 'the splendour of God's holiness.' This echoes the KJV rendering, and finds expression in John Monsell's well-known nineteenth century hymn in which the offerings we are to bring are the 'gold of obedience', 'truth in its beauty', 'love in its tenderness' and the 'incense of lowliness'.

The Reformed tradition has invariably drawn a distinction between worship in the temple and worship in the Christian sanctuary on the assumption that church worship is based on the synagogue rather than the temple and is therefore quite different. While the prophetic word and its summation in the Decalogue has been strongly affirmed and often represented in decorative form, instructions regarding the temple cultus have

¹⁰ See Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 429.

¹¹ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 425. See also Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978).

¹² The translation used here is that of the New Revised English Bible.

¹³ Following the Septuagint, the Jerusalem Bible has 'worship Yahweh in his sacred court', thus referring to the holiness of the temple itself. The New Revised English Bible translates the verse with reference to the holiness of the priestly vestments, echoing the Levitical requirement that temple priests should wear garments ritually clean and appropriate for the occasion (Numbers 9:1-14; Leviticus 11:24-28).

¹⁴ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 425.

been disregarded or treated as matters of indifference (*adiaphora*). The temple is the body in whom the Spirit dwells (I Corinthians 3:16; 6:19). True worship () has to do with the 'living sacrifice' of a holy life (Romans 12:1-2) not the right performance of a ritual, the design and furnishing of the sanctuary, or the splendour of priestly vestments. But we must be careful of positing a false dichotomy between temple and church worship, or assuming that the prophetic tradition regarded temple worship and its splendour as unimportant.

What the prophetic tradition opposed was the hypocrisy of worship that basked in the splendour of the temple but failed to recognise the beauty of God's holiness and its call to oppose unjust ugliness, an aestheticism and piety unrelated to mercy and justice.¹⁵ Beauty and holiness in the Hebrew scriptures are taken together, so that the beauty of a holy life and the beauty of the holy place are both reflections of the beauty of the holy God. This is fundamental. Neither the sanctuary nor the priestly vestments, neither decorative art nor worshippers, have intrinsic holiness. Holiness is derived from God's holiness, and it is the beauty of God's holiness that makes them beautiful. God's beauty is uniquely God's. It is holy beauty. For this reason, as Karl Barth insisted, we cannot describe God's beauty on the basis of our own definition of what beauty might be, but only with reference to the form in which God's beauty is revealed both in creation and redemption.¹⁶ Even then, Barth insisted, we dare not visually *represent* the mystery of God's beauty revealed in Jesus Christ.¹⁷ There can be no analogy! Not only would such images freeze our understanding of Christ within a particular context,¹⁸ but even more, the beauty of God revealed in Christ is an alien beauty which judges all other forms of beauty. Hence Barth's plea to all Christian artists to 'give up this unholy undertaking – for the sake of God's beauty.'

This Barthian admonition is obviously related to the Second Commandment. If truth can be perverted into ideological dogmatism and goodness into self-righteous moralism, beauty is even more susceptible to idolatry because of its fascinating appeal and its apparent ability to satisfy human longing. Such Romantic aestheticism explains in part the Reformed reluctance to engage in theological aesthetics -- but it also makes it imperative that we do so. Dogmatic systems and ethical codes cannot easily compete with the power of beauty in touching the heart and affections. But precisely for this reason, many who think they possess beauty are deluded into assuming that they have grasped the holy.¹⁹ Augustine recognised this when he wrote of the power of beauty to allure and unite us to the things we

¹⁵ It is noteworthy that a conservative evangelical author like Francis Schaeffer was very critical of the evangelical tendency to exclude visual art from the life of the church, and based much of his argument on the use of art in the Temple. Francis A. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1973).

¹⁶ Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, p. 656.

¹⁷ Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, p. 666.

¹⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/3: The Doctrine of Creation* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1984), 295f. Karl Barth, 'An die Basler Nachrichten' (1952) *Offene Briefe, 1945-68*, Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1984.

¹⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Human Culture and the Holy: Essays on the True, the Good, and the Beautiful* (London: SCM, 1959), 124.

love.²⁰ For just as beauty has the power to attract us to the worship of God, so too it has the power to seduce us into fashioning and worshipping false gods.

In this regard, there is an important connection between Reformed theology and those engaged in cultural studies today who are concerned with the production and manipulation of mass-media images and icons. We need no reminding that we are daily bombarded with such images and of their power to obfuscate reality. We look and look but, as both Jesus and Isaiah observed, we do not really see. The motivation of genuine iconoclasm is precisely to break down these images, made more tantalising by their apparent beauty, so that we can see again. The prophetic cry against injustice sometimes implies or even promotes the destruction of national icons, as for example, in the burning of a national flag. Indeed, art in its endeavour to help us see differently, is often iconoclastic, reacting against images and symbols associated with dehumanising ideologies and powers.

As necessary as iconoclasm sometimes is in a world saturated by false images, ill-informed iconoclasm, the iconoclasm of book burners and art destroyers, can also prove destructive and disastrous for society, contributing to its oppressive ugliness rather than redeeming it. The motives of iconoclasts are often shaped by greed and a lust for power. Moreover, the destruction of idols does not prevent the children of iconoclasts from creating new images that may be just as idolatrous. In that great citadel of Prussian Protestantism, the Berliner Dom, the massive sanctuary is surrounded, not by images of the apostles as in St. Peter's Square, but by images of the Protestant Reformers and Princes! Barth's radical critique of such cultural Protestantism is an authentic part of our Reformed heritage.

Yet it was none other than Barth, whose `No' to the of Hellenism was at times almost as loud as his `Yes' to the gospel, who warned us against the dangers of disparaging Hellenism in the name of biblical religion.²¹ In this, as in other matters, the `No' of negation was to be followed at the appropriate moment by the `Yes' of affirmation. In Barth's words:

The imagination which created the Homeric Olympus and its inhabitants is one of the strongest proofs of the fact that the heart of man is evil from his youth. Yet for all that the Greeks were able to reveal the human heart, to show what humanity is in itself...²²

In Barth's discussion of Hellenism and biblical revelation, of eros and agape, we face the question of the relationship between the Christ of faith and the muse of Mount Parnassus, between the Holy Spirit and the spirit of human

²⁰ Saint Augustine, Confessions and Enchiridion, The Library of Christian Classics, VII (London: SCM, 1955), 88, Bk.4 chap. xiii.

²¹ Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation, Church Dogmatics, III/2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), 282ff.

²² Barth, Church Dogmatics III/2 p. 283.

creativity. For is it not true that the artists are often those who show us 'what humanity is in itself' and thereby help us in knowing ourselves and therefore knowing God?

Holy Spirit and human creativity

God, Calvin argued, is far greater than human thought can imagine or human beings can represent through their image making. Seeing that 'God has no similarity to those shapes by means of which people attempt to represent him'... 'all attempts to depict him are an impudent affront ... to his majesty and glory.'²³ On this all Christians would surely agree. But does this apply also to representations of Jesus Christ as well, as Barth and other Reformed theologians have argued?

The issue must surely be approached dialectically. There is always the need for an iconoclastic 'no' to certain images of Christ, whether these be images communicated through the words of a preacher or the art of a painter or sculptor. The Aryan Christ of the Nazi apologists, for example, must be resisted however presented. So the iconoclasts of the eighth century were exercising a necessary critical theological responsibility. But they were also wrong in rejecting icons in principle. In this regard the iconophiles rightly defended their position on the basis of the incarnation. 'The Word became flesh' and therefore became an image. There is no other way whereby we can truly know something of the mystery of God incarnate in Christ other than in terms of images that relate to our present reality and experience. God, as Calvin stressed, accommodates himself to our ability to grasp and understand.

If artists through the centuries had taken Barth's advice, some of the greatest artistic and profoundly Christian masterpieces, from Russian icons through the murals in the Sistine chapel, to Pasolini's film *The Gospel according to St. Matthew*, would never have been created. Neither would so much art in contemporary Asia or sub-saharan Africa, through which Christ has become enculturally represented.²⁴ This would undoubtedly be to the impoverishment of the human spirit as well as to the detriment of the life and witness of the church. Despite Barth's categorical 'no' to representations of Christ, a 'yes' sneaks in as, for example, in his deep appreciation for Grünewald's *Crucifixion* (the Isenheim altarpiece) which so profoundly portrays the redemptive suffering of Christ? Can we deny that the Spirit is at work in such works of art, pointing us, with John the Baptist, to the Lamb of God? The issue is surely whether or not the Word and the Spirit agree that this, indeed, is Jesus the Christ.

²³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I-III.19, The Library of Christian Classics, XX (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), II.ii.15-16.

²⁴ See examples in Hans-Ruedi Weber, *Immanuel: The Coming of Jesus in Art and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984). and Takenaka Masao and Ron O'Grady, *The Bible Through Asian Eyes* (Auckland, New Zealand: Pace, 1991). It is noteworthy that both Weber (a former student of Karl Barth) and Takenaka who recognise the importance of the artistic representation of Jesus Christ stand within the Reformed tradition.

But let us go beyond the problem of the representation of the divine as such, whether the mystery of God or of God incarnate, and consider the work of the Spirit in artistic creativity more broadly. For Calvin, the Holy Spirit was the source of genuine artistic creativity, and artistic gifts sometimes flowered more brilliantly amongst those who were not believers.²⁵ All arts, sculpture and painting amongst them, come from God and can bring pleasure.²⁶ Calvin's categorical rejection of the gods of Olympus and any semblance of idolatry was not a condemnation of the arts as such but of the attempt to represent the majesty of God.²⁷ Thus works of art proscribed in the sanctuary might be quite appropriate in the public square. Images in secular places are not harmful, 'even idols kept in such places are not worshipped.'²⁸

The best of the Puritans likewise did not object to the arts as such (consider the poets Edmund Spenser, Philip Sidney, John Milton and Andrew Marvel), nor did they lack appreciation of the beautiful, or on occasion pay their respects to the spirit of the muses. What they objected to was ostentation and adornment that distracted from the dignity and simplicity of true worship and therefore authentic Christian living. They also objected, with Calvin, to any attempt by artists to usurp the role of God as creator.

The true artist, however, is not one who seeks to compete with God as creator, but someone whose creativity is a painful yet joyful response to God's providence and grace. Hence Barth's comments about the 'incomparable Mozart' whose music provides 'food and drink' for the Christian, and for which even the epithet 'beautiful' is inadequate.²⁹ Genuine artistic creation is a gift, a spirit-inspired construction which breaks open that which is hidden so that it may manifest itself, even if only for a brief moment.

Nonetheless, the form and manifestation of the 'beauty that saves' is a strange and alien beauty that challenges and transforms all our assumptions. So it is only when aesthetics is liberated from the tyranny of superficial and facile images of the beautiful that it can begin to understand the beauty of God and its redemptive power amidst the harsh reality of the world. Indeed, the beauty of God which is hidden in Jesus the crucified Messiah, and supremely veiled from sight in the ugliness of the cross, can only be discerned through the gift of the Spirit. It is through the Spirit that we are enabled to see and hear what is manifest in God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Moreover, it is through the Spirit that the beauty of God in the form of Jesus Christ becomes the power that attracts and transforms, bringing us through the painfulness of death and rebirth into conformity with the image of Christ (Galatians 4:19). And it is through the same Spirit that God inspires human creativity to reflect both the ugly pain of the world and the beauty of redemption.

25 Calvin, *Institutes*, p. ii.2.15-16.

26 Calvin, *Institutes*, p. i.11.12, ii.2.16.

27 Calvin, *Institutes*, p. I.xi.

28 Sergiusz Michalski, *The Reformation and the Visual Arts: The Protestant Image Question in Western and Eastern Europe* (London: Routledge, 1993), 71.

29 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/4: The Doctrine of Creation* (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark 1961), 297f.

In her delightful essay on 'Artful Theology', Sara Maitland convincingly argues that the renewal of the church as a transforming community in society is related to the extent to which it takes seriously the creative arts. Her reason is profoundly theological: 'because we create in this particular and conscious way only in the light of the creative power of our God.' In other words, artistic creativity is not only God-given but it is one of the main ways whereby the power of God is unleashed, awakening both a thirst for justice and a hunger for beauty.' She continues: 'Any movement for social change requires a revolution of the imagination...'³⁰ A challenge facing the church if it is serious about its own renewal and social transformation, then, is how to harness the creative energy and insight of local artists.

One of the Reformed theologians of the early twentieth century who recognised the necessary dialectic in which the church says 'no' to certain aspects of art and yet joyously affirms art and aesthetic sensibility as a gift of the Spirit, was P.T. Forsyth. Although sometimes referred to as a 'Barth before Barth', Forsyth was more positive in his embrace of Hellenism and in his desire to discern Christ on Mount Parnassus. And even though historical veracity is sometimes distorted by his rhetoric, he provides flashes of insight that take us forward in our quest for a Reformed aesthetic.

In Greece it was Art that destroyed Religion; in Europe it was Religion that destroyed Art. In Greece, the people, in the name of Beauty, ceased to believe; in Christendom, the people in the name of Truth, ceased to delight and enjoy. In Greece, Faith sank as taste spread; in Christian Europe, Faith rose and taste decayed... In Greece the Imagination destroyed the Conscience, in Europe the Conscience paralysed the Imagination...³¹

There is obviously a fundamental difference between art and religion. Art enhances faith, but is not a replacement for faith. Art provides a vehicle for the Spirit, but it is not the power of the Spirit. Hence the aesthetic 'peril to religion' which derives from what Forsyth calls its 'monopoly of the feelings.' Whether in literature or art, impression 'is mistaken for regeneration, and to move men is prized as highly as to change them.' The fundamental error, and this is of particular significance for our theme, 'is the submersion of the ethical element, of the centrality of the conscience, and the authority of the holy.'³² Art and religion need each other, but faith cannot find an escape from moral challenge in beauty, neither can beauty find an escape in faith without moral commitment. For just as beauty has the power to attract us to the worship of God, so too it has the power to seduce us into fashioning and worshipping false gods.³³

³⁰ Sara Maitland, *A Big-Enough God: Artful Theology* (London: Mowbray, 1995), 142f.

³¹ P.T. Forsyth, *Religion in Recent Art* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1905), 2f.

³² P.T. Forsyth, *The Principle of Authority* (London: Independent Press, 1952 (first published 1913)), 105ff.

³³ P.T. Forsyth, *Christ on Parnassus* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1911), 280.

Nonetheless, great art speaks to the soul, and while it may oust religion, it can also save religion from becoming closed and hardened. Faith without a sense of beauty, or religion severed from imagination and over-engrossed with public and practical affairs, leaves us with `a drought in our own souls.'³⁴ It no longer evokes a sense of wonder. Art, in fact, is `not a luxury' but `a necessity of human nature.' For this reason, no `religion can be a true religion if it does not encourage great art.'³⁵ Acknowledging that much Western art had lost touch with its religious source, advocating the holiness of beauty rather than the beauty of holiness, Forsyth nevertheless declared that while beauty might not be *the* way to God, it is *a* way. We `shall not go far in a true sense of the beauty of holiness without gaining a deeper sense of the holiness of beauty.'³⁶ That deeper sense brings together what the New Testament refers to as sanctification and what aesthetics calls good taste. Growing in holiness includes developing a sense of beauty.

Sanctification, Good Taste and Transformation

Frank Burch Brown has helpfully drawn our attention to the relationship between sin and bad taste, on the one hand, and sanctification and good taste, on the other. Aesthetic discernment or good taste, he argues, is a central element in religion.³⁷ There is, as illustrated in the call of Isaiah, `an analogy between aesthetic experience and the experience of the holy or divine.'³⁸ Aesthetic excellence from a Christian perspective, is `part of the glorification and enjoyment of God that is possible through the moral life.'³⁹ This has seldom been recognised in Christian tradition where bad taste is certainly not considered a deadly or even a venial sin. Nor is it normally condemned as a hindrance to sanctification or spiritual maturity. Impeccable `taste is hardly deemed to be one of the "fruits of the spirit".⁴⁰ Yet for the church to acquiesce in tasteless shoddiness will not inspire its members to creative expressions of response to the gospel in the world.

Christian formation does not only take place through teaching (truth) or example (goodness), but also through the cultivation of a sense of taste for what is genuinely beautiful in a world of competing images and ugliness. Yet, as Brown indicates,

The possibility that bad taste may be a *moral* liability is suggested in fact by the quite traditional notion that sin – which is not only wrong but also profoundly ugly – looks alluring to the unwary, whereas virtue – which is not only right but also profoundly beautiful – frequently appears drab at first sight. It

34 Forsyth, *Religion in Recent Art*, p. 7.

35 Forsyth, *Religion in Recent Art*, p. 145.

36 Forsyth, *Religion in Recent Art*, p. 84f.

37 Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 147.

38 Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, p. 146.

39 Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, p. 146.

40 Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, p. 136.

follows that failure to distinguish beauty from counterfeit can lead to moral error. Moral and aesthetic discernment often go hand in hand.⁴¹

This has been supremely true of Calvinist aesthetics in which, as Donald Davie observed with regard to Huguenot and Dutch Reformed architecture, 'everything breathes *simplicity, sobriety, and measure*'⁴² – qualities that reflect a particular understanding of God and the world in which truth, morality and beauty belong together.

One of Brown's representative types of bad taste is the philistine whose sin is the failure to take delight, whether in God or anything artistic.⁴³ Philistinism is 'the antithesis *par excellence* of aesthetic behaviour.' It is not simply vulgarity, it represents, as Adorno noted, 'indifference to or hatred of art.'⁴⁴ This may be rationalised on the basis of moral commitment or a concern to oppose idolatry and maintain purity. As such philistinism is perhaps the sin most commonly associated with Calvinists and Puritans. Taken to an extreme, philistinism results in iconoclasm, the uprooting of that which does not conform to our image of the good and true. This concern for moral and dogmatic purity plagued the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa during the apartheid years resulting in the censorship of those artists who stepped out of line. If art does not fit your criteria, and especially if it offends your religious convictions, then you declare it idolatrous and set about its exclusion or even destruction.

41 Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, p. 136.

42 Donald Davie, *A Gathered Church: The Literature of the English Dissenting Interest, 1700-1930* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 25.

43 Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, p. 151ff. cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. Eerdmans, 1980), 78ff.

44 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 342.

Philistinism expresses itself in many different forms. For example, a lack of care and respect for the environment may arise out of the failure to take delight in nature, that 'beautiful theatre' according to Calvin. Philistinism is also the failure to appreciate the artistic creativity of people and cultures different to our own. Good taste is not the sole possession of a particular ethnic community or some company of the culturally elite, neither is bad taste a characteristic of those who do not belong there. But there are other forms of philistinism which are perplexingly problematic because they seem to be so morally correct. For example, can a society afford to sponsor works of art when many of its citizens eke out their lives in poverty? Like earlier Cistercian reformers, Calvin was concerned about the ostentatious decoration of churches not least because of the misuse of money that should be given to the poor. The dehumanising of the 'image of God' in men and women was as serious as the idolatry of placing sacred images in the sanctuary. Should not world poverty force us all to become aesthetic 'philistines' in the pursuit of economic justice? Is this not more important for sanctification than the cultivation of aesthetic judgement and good taste?

On the contrary, the danger of allowing philistinism to set the agenda for sanctification would be disastrous for the long-term well being of society. Christoph Gestrinch's exposition of the Christian doctrine of sin confirms the insight of D.H. Lawrence that people need beauty and not just bread. When 'things no longer have any splendor', Gestrinch writes, 'their destruction is imminent.' He goes on to say: 'People who are headed for destruction are first deprived of their honor, stripped of their rights, and their outward appearance takes on a pathetic, ugly form.'⁴⁵ If, as Brown insists, 'moral and aesthetic discernment often go hand in hand,'⁴⁶ moral striving and the struggle for justice cannot be separated from the sanctification of our aesthetic sensibility, that is, with the development of good taste. Good taste is that spiritual capacity which enables us to appreciate the difference between the genuine and the ersatz, between false beauty and true beauty, between kitsch which debases and popular art which challenges and inspires. Good taste helps us to know the difference between an extravagance that is unjust and the creation of splendour that humanises, restores dignity, evokes hope and thus contributes to renewal and transformation.

The transformative power of art does not lie in any overt political content or didactic intention, but precisely in its aesthetic form and creative character. Art exercises its critical power by being art, by simply being there.⁴⁷ Yet this is not apolitical, for the necessity of art's autonomy derives from and is dependent on its ability to stand in opposition to society. 'Art', Adorno insists, 'will live on only as long as it has the power to resist society.'⁴⁸ The 'great artist', Monroe Beardsley once wrote, 'is always exploring new perspectives, inventing intense new regional qualities, putting things together

45 Christoph Gestrinch, *The Return of Splendor in the World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. Eerdmans, 1997), 1.

46 Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, p. 136.

47 cf. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 321.

48 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 321.

in hitherto unheard-of ways; and if what he makes is good, it will be the enemy of some established good that is not quite as good.⁴⁹ Thus some of the most creative artists are those who are anti-establishment, purposively choosing to be on the 'outside' because of the stifling character of society. Public outcries against their work, censorship by officialdom and even death threats often result. In telling the story of the early development of black art in South Africa, Elza Miles speaks of art as an 'intervention' which introduces a deeper discourse into the public square, resisting structures of power which dehumanise. Such art intervention may 'provoke outrage, as in the case of the art of AIDS activism', yet it is essential for the well being of democratic society.⁵⁰ This highlights the social significance of such art compared to the sterility of much that is religiously or politically correct, and therefore of the importance of the church to be sensitive in its response.

There are, of course, boundaries to what is appropriate art in both the sanctuary and the public square. Creativity can be abused. Works that may, for example, encourage sectarian violence, racism, or sexual abuse are clearly inappropriate. However the church should be careful not to act as a self-righteous but ill-informed moral guardian of aesthetic and artistic creativity. It should recognise that many so-called anti-social works of art are a form of protest against the ills, the meaninglessness, and the blind hypocrisies of society, rather than support for them. There is far more danger to society in the seductive art of certain kinds of advertising which promote questionable values than there is in the work of those artists who employ the tactics of shock to awaken social conscience. But none of this implies that Christians should not exercise critical judgement on the products of human creativity when these warrant critique. Artists, like anyone else, are called to use their gifts responsibly.

Art in itself cannot change society, but good art, whatever its form, helps us both individually and corporately to perceive reality in a new way, and by so doing, it opens up possibilities of transformation. In this way art has the potential to change both our personal and corporate consciousness and perception, challenging perceived reality and enabling us to remember what was best in the past even as it evokes fresh images that serve transformation in the present. This it does through its ability to evoke imagination and wonder, causing us to pause and reflect and thereby opening up the possibility of changing our perception and ultimately our lives. But art, and here in conclusion I return to my main theme, cannot fulfil its transformative function if the expression of beauty is excluded as a goal.

Herbert Marcuse spoke of the beautiful as representative of the pleasure principle rebelling against the principles of domination and death. 'The work of art,' he wrote, 'speaks the liberating language, invokes the liberating images of the subordination of death and destruction to the will to live.' This is 'the emancipatory element in aesthetic affirmation.'⁵¹ So it is that

49 Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics* (Hackett, 1981), 562f.

50 M Miles, *Art, Space and the City: Public Art and Urban Futures* (London: Routledge, 1997), 207.

51 Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968) 62.

the beautiful serves transformation by supplying images that contradict the inhuman, and thus provide alternative transforming images to those of oppression.⁵² From a Christian perspective, the supreme image that contradicts the inhuman and in doing so becomes the icon of redemption is that of the incarnate, crucified and risen Christ. So it is not surprising that artists through the centuries have sought to represent that alien beauty as a counter to the ugliness of injustice. We are not redeemed by art nor by beauty alone, but by the holy beauty which is revealed in Christ and which, through the Spirit evokes wonder and stirs our imagination.

⁵² Haynes faults Marcuse for the fact that his notion of 'the Beautiful' is too morally neutral, as in his affirmation of Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi films as 'compelling and "beautiful".' Deborah J. Haynes, *The Vocation of the Artist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 65.