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Artistic Creativity and Christian Spirituality

When we examine the relationship between spirituality and artistic creativity, we can recognize the common source whence artistic and religious impulses seem to originate. There are two basic questions in this respect: Why art? And, is there a Christian art?

I. Why Art?

Those who create art, who receive it and criticise it, are all partaking in a mysterious process which even now no one has been able to describe fully and satisfactorily. There are no practical reasons which might motivate artistic creativity.

Christians often try to justify art in an erroneous way. They talk about postmodernism – the end of logo-centric culture and the beginning of visual-pictorial culture. We need, it is said, art to communicate the Gospel to a postmodern mind. Art is understood as a means for missionary purposes.

This is dangerous for both art and mission. Art is then understood only as a beautiful cover for our ideology, the best way to sell our faith. But this kind of craft is not art at all. What comes necessarily from it is the ideological misuse of art.

There was a stream called Socialist realism, an art serving the Communist ideology. If you compare the art produced in Nazi Germany and the art produced in the communist regimes, you will find them very similar in many ways. They are uncreative and untrue. Art as a means for mission (of any ideology) will be uncreative and untrue as well.

Artistic creativity by definition is “unuseful,” impractical. We do not need art for our survival. Its purpose is in itself. As a pure act of creativity without secondary purpose, it is the clearest reflection of mystery in human nature.



In creating something for no secondary reason, we exercise the *Imago Dei* in us. So when we are asking “Why art?” we are in fact asking also, “Why humanity?” Art is not a means, art is the end. We do not have Christian, Buddhist or Islamic science. We only have good and bad science. Similarly, we have only good and bad art.

1. Beauty in Creation and Eternity in Heart

Let me use the words of Ecclesiastes 3,11 to shed light on our question: “He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of people, yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.” Have a look at the three basic words in the text: beauty, desire for eternity and a human striving to fathom the mystery revealed to us in the place where beauty and the desire for eternity meet.

A. Beauty

There is a deep mystery in our aesthetic apprehension of existence. In the shapes of things, in colours, sounds, in the quality and rhythm of sounds, in the proportions of things and different spaces, even in different combinations of words in our languages, there is something with a potential to alter our consciousness to an exalted state of fascination. We find ourselves moved by wonder.

I would like to point out the connection between beauty and eternity in the heart of a human. There lies the spiritual explanation of our aesthetic experiences. With the word “beauty,” we mean a special quality in the created world that points out from the mortal world in space and time to eternity. For us as aesthetic beings, all objects in the created universe have the quality of symbols – they stand here for something else which is hidden behind matter, behind atoms and quarks; something revealed in the mysterious quality of beauty.

When a painter is painting a landscape, she or he is transferring the three-dimensional reality of the countryside into a two-dimensional reflection of that reality on her or his canvas. Then someone sees the painted landscape. It awakens in her or his heart the desire to enter it, to walk in the shade of the woods there. But the person cannot enter. It is just a sign of reality, not the reality itself.

Similarly God, by creating the universe, transferred the content of God’s eternal existence to the relative, mortal and limited canvas of the time-and-space world. By seeing this universe, our desire for eternity is awakened in us. But there is no way to enter it through nature. It is just a sign of Reality, not the Reality itself.

But there is a danger too: for many, beauty means only an apprehension of nice and harmonious parts in the universe. There is a deep wisdom in the way beauty is depicted in our modern art: there is a place for ugliness in it. To be precise, it is not ugliness as such, but discovering beauty in what seems at the first glance to be just mere ugliness. But this wisdom is much older than modern times; it has come to art mainly from Christianity.

If we compare artefacts from Western Christian civilisation with artefacts of any other great civilisation, we find that in the Western Christian tradition there is much more room for ugliness and pain in aesthetic apprehension of the world than in other cultures.

From the beginning, besides harmonies of colours, proportions and shapes, there has been a place for the expression of ugliness and pain; however, not just as an expression of bad things – a demon or evil, hell or the killing of martyrs. We will find pain and ugliness there as an expression of beauty, an expression of a good thing, even as a part of God in the image of Christ. Think, for example, about the *Crucifixion* of GRÜNEWALD.

It has come to Western culture from the paradox of the cross: God becomes a human, Who – without sin – becomes sin instead of us. God – the source of existence – dies for humanity, on behalf of humanity. Truth and Beauty are always bound in paradox here.

This is the main ethos of the Gospel, the paradox of the Cross, the paradox of sin and grace. The paradox of humanity created in God's image on one side, and humanity's fall on the other side. The idea of beauty in ugliness in modern art has come there as a fruit of the Western understanding of the world within the Paradox of the cross.

Real beauty is bound in a paradox. Real joy can exist only in deep coexistence with real sorrow and pain. If I read a book in which everything is painted in pink, harmony and optimism, I can not read it through. I cannot believe it. If I read a book where everything is painted in black, destruction, hopelessness, disharmony, I cannot trust it either. I can trust only artefacts having the quality of the paradox: ugly and beautiful, joy and sorrow, dark and light.

B. Desire as Eternity in Heart

Is there eternity in our hearts? All cultures and civilisations are expressions of a mysterious desire implanted deeply inside us – a desire to overcome our limited existence, a desire to move from the relativity of our human condition to perfection. Paul KLEE, the great modern painter, was also a great thinker and poet. In a short poem, he describes humanity as a valley between two mountains:

*There are two mountains, where clarity and light dwell.
Mountain of animals and mountain of gods.
But between them, twilight valley of humans is situated.
One who will rise his sight up,
will have presentiment of something,
one will feel unquenchable desire for them,
those, who do not know, that they know
and those who know, that they know.*

One mountain in the poem is a mountain of animals; the other is a mountain of gods. Human beings in the valley are looking to both of these mountains with desire. To the mountain of animals, where those live who do not know that they do not know; and to the mountain of gods, who know that they know.

So, to be human means to be in an unfinished condition: the persons who know that they do not know. To be human means to be an arrow in the middle of the flight from nature to Spirit. Some of us call it emptiness, some boredom, some meaninglessness, some loneliness. So, there is a deep wound in our soul. We are separated from our unity with the spiritual source of our consciousness. There is a desire for eternity in our hearts.

We can describe the phenomenon of art as the meeting of beauty in creation – the symbol of eternity – with the desire for eternity in

the human heart. When this meeting takes place in our consciousness, we are moved to fathom it. It is impossible for us to really fathom it completely. There are different skills, different gifts, different languages in which we are fathoming it. Art is one of them.

C. To Fathom: Art as Language

Some scientists are talking today of the Antropic Principle. Deriving from the way the universe is made, it seems (as Dyson FREEDMAN puts it) that the universe must have somehow known that we would arrive. It seems that evolution prepared everything for humans to come as observers of beauty and the mysteries of the cosmos.

A human is here to contemplate the cosmos. The cosmos is the language that, out of all created beings, only humans are competent to read. This vision of human as a contemplator of the universe can be found in the writings of different cultures and different ages, e.g. in THALES of Miletus, EPICETUS, CICERO and AUGUSTINE.

We can find it even in the New Testament. Paul puts it in this way: "What may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – God's eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made" (Romans 1,19–20).

To fathom the mystery revealed to us in contemplation of the created universe, we use different languages. Our languages are complex semiotic systems – systems of symbols and signs. Their function is to read reality, to translate and communicate it to others. They are the decoding and coding systems. First one decodes reality to grasp it, to experience it, to understand it; then one codes it for the others. At the end of the process of receiving the message, there is a recipient, decoding it for her- or himself.

Through our languages we are reading the Logos of God written inside all reality and trying to communicate to others what we have discovered. Where is the place of art in this process? To fathom reality, humanity uses a whole scale of different complementary languages.

There is a language of natural science; a language of philosophy, theology, humanities; a language of engineering; and of economy; a language of psychology, sociology; a language of religion, mysticism and adoration; and a language of art. Art is one of the systems through which we read and communicate with the world.

Art, on a scale, is opposite to science. The language of science is the language of mathematics; the language of art, however, is the

language of music. If a scientist is talking about light, she or he will try to define it as precisely as possible. She or he will separate its meaning from all secondary associations. In an ideal situation she or he will not even use words, but numbers. If a poet is talking about light, she or he will try to connect its meaning with all possible associations.

Scientific language separates the specific, precise meaning from all secondary associations – it is analytic. Art as a language, on the contrary, is connecting everything with everything in the holistic perception of reality – it is synthetic. Art is the most basic, most fundamental of all human languages – it is the language of children, the language of the first, deep wonder, and the language of adoration.

2. Art and Adoration

It is clear now that there is a great overlapping between the inner state of adoration and the inner state of creative inspiration. This common ground is the state of a moving wonder. Human creativity and human spirituality spring from the same source.

A. Glory in Creation and Resistance of the Human Egocentric Will

Let us come back to Paul's claim in his letter to the Romans. A person can learn everything important about God from reading the mysteries of creation outside and inside. Where, then, lies the problem which is separating us from God? The problem lies in our will. Our will rejects accepting existentially what our mind is telling us rationally. We see unbounded glory, unbounded greatness revealed to us in the universe, but we do not want to surrender to it.

The problem is in our egocentric self. We resist everything which is higher than our ego. Our sinful self desires to be above all; so God, Who is above all, is the greatest rival for our ego. The greatest hindrance lies in the centre of our perception of reality. Friedrich NIETZSCHE put it thus: "If God existed, how would I be able to bear the fact that I am not God?"

B. Two States of the Creative Will: Pride and Humility

The main temptation coming with art lies in the very nature of the motivation causing the creative process. There are two opposite possibilities: pride or humility. Art made out of pride, made for pride and received in pride would be idolatry. Art made out of

overwhelming wonder and humility, made to express humility and received with humility will be an act of adoration.

C. Adoration or Idolatry

Art can be an Idol or an Icon. An Icon is a window to heaven. It is not heaven itself, it is created to be emptied from itself, to be transparent. An Icon is pointing beyond itself. An Idol is pointing to itself, saying "I am God, bow to me."

The Old Testament example of the tabernacle and the golden cow can be remembered here. The tabernacle was an Icon, a place where everything (the shapes, colours, fragrances and sounds) were pointing out the invisible presence of God. The golden cow was made to be "these gods which brought us here from Egypt."

There are different types of idolatry in art. The Idol in the classical sense is an artefact exalted to the status of God by the theological construction which lies behind it. The Idol in modern times becomes something very different. Western people in last century put their trust in science. Scientists became priests of the new positivistic religion.

Only what could be analysed and measured by scientific method was regarded as reality. Reality was reduced to its laboratorially attested parts. In effect, Western people started to view themselves as biological machines, as processes of biochemical reactions. Led by their positivistic reasoning, they found themselves divided between reason on one hand, and intuition and emotion on the other.

During all of known history, people have been building mythological, cosmological and theological constructions, in which reason was united with sensitivity and intuition. And so desire for eternity in human hearts always found a rational reason for hope.

The mind of an ordinary Western person is today pressed to give up any hope for absolute and eternal reality. But desire for eternity in the heart of a modern person is not less intense than it was in the heart of the primitive human.

The contemporary Western human still desires something higher and bigger than the ordinary experience of life, but her or his reason mocks this desire. Artefacts of modernism in visual arts, in literature or in music, bear witness to that division between heart and mind.

We can see it in the story of one of the grandfathers of modern art: Paul GAUGUIN, who was enthralled by Polynesian religion; we can hear it in the music of Igor STRAVINSKY; we can trace it in PICASSO's fascination with African masks. None of them really

believed in religion, and artefacts were a source of fascination for their thirsty hearts. Art itself becomes a religion of nothingness.

But the most common feature of our times is an author being exalted to the status of God. In medieval times, authors were anonymous; the authors were unimportant, the important thing was their work.

From the Renaissance on (when the first biographies of artists were written), authors grew more and more important. Today authors are more important than their work. Work is only a gesture through which authors are pointing to their mysterious exalted status of demigods.

In the first part of my essay, we explored the mystery of the most unexplainable human activity: Art. We saw that there is a common source whence springs both spirituality and creativity. We paid a bit of consideration to spiritual temptations which are involved in the processing of artefacts. Let us turn our attention now to questions which people in this context often ask.

II. Is there a Christian Art?

I must admit that I personally dislike this question. Sometimes in passionate discussions I used to answer it very simply: “No, we only have good and bad art.” So why do we ask this? We are living in a culture which divorced itself from Christian heritage. This is the result of a mutual hostility between Christendom and popular society.

Let us first observe the Church. Most churches see it nearly impossible to use contemporary art in their liturgies. Most church authorities view modern art as something elite, bizarre or at least not understandable for common church-goers. You will find a similar attitude on the other side of the church wall as well.

From the Enlightenment onward, the Church has been viewed by a large portion of the society as a hindrance to scientific, technical, social and cultural development. To some extent this is the price we have to pay for the time when the Church held the authoritative position of cultural leader by political power.

But the Church as cultural authority was dethroned and She is now learning to accept Her modest position in modern society. Sadly enough, She has adopted a largely defensive position. This is true even about traditional big churches, such as the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran or Reformed churches.

Churches of free evangelical traditions adopted an even more

hostile position toward culture. This stems mostly from a legalistic understanding of sanctification and holiness. We have to be aware of our present position in culture in order to move toward something more appropriate.

1. Different Meanings of the Word Christian in Connection with Art

A. Christian as Subculture

This understanding I regard as dangerous both for Christianity and for art – for Christianity, because it is viewed as one of many subculture clans. I see it as a kind of escapism: it escapes from the difficult task of communicating Christianity in the open critical cultural space.

It is dangerous for art because it creates a narrow situation where real art cannot be developed. Christian subculture forms a safe, favourable, uncritical space where every work with an explicitly Christian content is praised.

But real art can be developed only in competition with the best works of contemporary culture. So Christian subculture is only a shadow of the general culture; it imitates in Christian dressing what is happening in the general culture.

So we have Christian rock festivals, Christian exhibitions, Christian theatre festivals and so on. I see some value in these activities. They somehow bring the issue of art into church thinking, but for their shortcomings I personally do not support them.

B. Christian as Sacral Art

If we take the historical point of view, we have another meaning for the term. Here Christian art means sacral art in the context of Christian religion. This is an appropriate and necessary distinction. There is some use of it even in contemporary context.

We have to ask how deeply the sensitivity of contemporary art is integrated to our religious life, how far symbols in our liturgy and sacramental life reflect discoveries of contemporary arts. I believe there are some critical points which we have to improve.

C. Christian as an Artefact Produced by a Christian Person

By Christian art we can also mean simply the art of an artist who happens to be a Christian. But here more precise wording has to be adopted: art produced by a Christian. There would not be necessarily any distinction between art produced by a Christian or art

produced by anybody else with a different world view or confession. It is quite possible that Christians who are professional artists separate their creativity from their spiritual life.

D. Christian Artist Integrating Spirituality and Creativity

We can talk about a special quality in the works of an artist who concisely integrates spirituality with art. It is with this connection between Christianity and art that we should be most concerned.

2. Art as Mediator of an Emotional Atmosphere

If art is not to be a means of ideological propaganda, if art is not the tool of evangelism, what is its social function then? I am aware that some purists will be unhappy with the expression: *social function* of art. But whether we like it or not, art has had and will have a powerful impact on the social life of any culture.

Most people are led to their opinions by the prevailing spirit of the culture. There is emotion in the air of every land. We breathe that emotion from our birth to our death. In most cases we believe everything that is regarded as being “inside” our culture.

There exists something (a *life-feeling*) that emotionally indoctrinates us from our childhood on. That life-feeling is irrational; it cannot be explained, but for most of us its authority decides what we believe to be true and what we believe to be false.

Art is the most powerful medium in the formation process of the life-feeling. If the prevailing feeling that was spread by different art forms is cynicism or hopelessness, we will be inoculated against trust in love, sincerity or truth by means of our basic life-feeling. The message of the Gospel will then appear as less believable.

Art therefore creates an atmosphere in which some things are believable and others not. When the Church adopted Her defensive position towards culture, evangelicals put all their energy into evangelism. But people of their lands were intoxicated by the powerful emotions created by the arts, and so the popular culture was inoculated against their message.

Paradoxically, the more the evangelicals withdrew themselves from culture and the arts in order to do their mission, the more resistant became the atmosphere of the culture to which they were communicating the message.

III. The Disintegration of Western Culture

If we talk about art in the context of our contemporary European or Western culture, we have to think about its profound disintegration. This complex phenomenon is well-described in the book *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* in 1948 by a leading poet of the modern age, T. S. ELIOT. The process of disintegration since then has gone much further.

1. Description of Disintegration of Culture by T. S. ELIOT

As for the disintegration of culture, let me quote ELIOT: “Cultural disintegration is present when two or more strata so separate that these become in effect distinct cultures; and also when culture at the upper group level breaks into fragments, each of which represents one cultural activity alone.”

If we think of the present state of our culture, we will find that the separation is growing not only between the different segments of society, such as science, art, religion, but more and more inside of them as well.

In art there is a growing fragmentation between groups of different styles and philosophies of art. In most cases they do not even communicate with each other and they look down on each other. I believe that in science disintegration grows through higher and higher specialization.

Today it is impossible to connect exact discoveries in different areas of science into one comprehensible, exact and detailed picture. I agree with ELIOT that it is dramatically crucial for the future well-being of art and religion to integrate the new relations.

Let me quote here ELIOT again: “Religious thought and practice, philosophy and art, all tend to become isolated areas cultivated by groups in no communication with each other. The artistic sensibility is impoverished by its divorce from religious sensibility, the religious by its separation from the artistic.”

2. Disintegration of Culture and Disintegration of Church

ELIOT noticed that the disintegration of Western culture has much to do with the disintegration of Christianity:

“The schisms of the XVIth century can be studied either as the history of the division of religious thought, or as the disintegration of European culture. Yet, while these wide divergences of belief on the same level are lamentable, the Faith can, and must, find room

for many degrees of intellectual, imaginative and emotional receptivity to the same doctrines. One of the features of development is the appearance of *scepticism*. Scepticism is a highly civilised trait; though, when it declines into pyrrhonism, it is one of which civilisation can die.”

On one hand ELIOT sees the damage which was done to European culture by Christian schisms and divisions; on the other hand he also sees the necessity and benefit of the differentiation between theological interpretations and various forms of worship.

Scepticism is a necessary element in the higher strata of developed culture and it helps to evaluate deceptions, but he also sees the destructiveness of scepticism degenerated to *pyrrhonism*, a situation when there is nothing else than doubts about everything.

First, we have to be aware of the negative role which our theological wars brought to culture. We have to understand that there is a profound source of contemporary secularism which was caused by the Church. In order to build a peaceful society, secular thinkers decided to dethrone the Church from Her leading position.

Christian religion in that time proved to be a highly divisive power bringing undesirable conflicts and even wars to society. We have to repent and change in our thinking the elements which caused painful divisions and hatred among Christians.

The main element is a certain intellectual absolutism, the strong presupposition that we can have truth in its definite sense. Wars were led between absolute and absolute. There cannot be coexistence and dialogue when we own the Truth in a definite sense.

Some Christian thinkers today are talking about the need for a new reformation. I could agree, but this new reformation has to point to the opposite direction than the old one. We need a reformation which will bring spiritual unity into Christendom. Otherwise, how can Christianity be the mediator of healing for a disintegrated culture?

We need to develop a new ecumenical theology. I am not proposing a situation in which Christianity comes back to one head and one structure, one train of thought. I believe we have to gain a new unity of spirit and life in the context of the vast diversity of opinions and practices.

Secondly, we have to welcome the healthy scepticism which questions everything superficial in our faith and opinions and in final analysis even our faults. True faith comes from true doubts. But true doubts can come only on our way to real conviction.

3. Blessings and Curses of an Integrated Past

If we compare the past with the present stage of the Church, we will see that there were times when the best art of the period formed the main elements of worship. The Church integrated everything from architecture, sculptures, paintings and poetry to music into Her liturgical life.

But today our devotional life is painfully separated from aesthetic apprehensions. Our religious sensitivity becomes more and more shallow. It was true also with theology. The greatest theologians of the past were as well the greatest philosophers. You will find the name of AUGUSTINE or AQUINAS or ORIGENES not only in encyclopædias of theology; you will find them in encyclopædias of philosophy as well.

Of course, there were also many shortcomings in that period, and we are paying back dearly for that time in our days. The Church in the past was able to integrate Christianity with art, theology and philosophy with the whole culture, because She held positions of power. This power brought the Church into many tragic failures.

It is one of the main strengths of the Western civilization that it finally separated political power from the spiritual power of the Church. In this respect we do not want to go back. So we have to move forward and work for a new integration of art and religion on a spiritual basis.

IV. The Cultural Mission of the Church in a Secular Society

As for my personal utopia, when I am contemplating the present stage of our culture, it seems to me that we are on our way to mediocrity. The main power which is forming our present culture is the free market; it is becoming the god of a new religion: *consumerism*. Everything is becoming business – science and art as well.

Art is more and more regarded as a type of enterprise. The aim of science is not anymore regarded as a free and passionate search for truth; it is in our days becoming more and more a servant of technical development which can be sold well on the free market.

Art is not anymore regarded as a search for deeper sensitivity and perception of the mysteries of existence; it is more and more about entertainment, which can be sold well on the free market. We should resist the idea that the free market is the key to everything. On the other hand, in our days there is a growing hunger and search for spirituality among artists themselves.

It is quite obvious that if the fine arts have to survive in future society, they need to find groups in society which will support the non-commercial development of art. In my opinion, the Christian Church is best suited for this. She has an understanding of reality which gives meaning to non-commercial arts and theoretical science.

Truth and beauty have lasting meaning in the context of the eternal destiny of humankind. The Church is not only an institution, but a community of converted persons acting in different areas of society.

We have to develop our theology of art and science in order to inspire converted businesspersons to support not only missions and social care projects, but the free development of non-commercial fine arts as well.

Here lies the main hindrance. The Church of our days in general does not recognize Her cultural mission. She should be here to give meaning and support for all genuine efforts to enlarge our knowledge of reality and deepen our perception of the mystery of life.

There is a great example of that kind of development in our past. In the VIth century there were great movements of Irish monks. Their ideal was to cultivate science, art and faith, united in one living culture.

The process of integration shall start from *within*. We have to cultivate our personal life, to integrate our faith with contemporary thinking, to integrate our devotion and adoration with a certain sensitivity towards contemporary arts. We shall work out deep connections with great values of the past in our art and in our thinking.

Christianity is in that regard overwhelmingly rich. There is an amazing richness of music, art and wisdom gathered throughout two millennia of Christianity. Only a movement of such integrated persons can change the present state of our religious life, our forms of worship and liturgy and the quality of contemporary religious sensitivity.

Only such a transformed community can work together to bring about the new integration of our disintegrated culture. Even if we do not succeed to full extent, there is no other way to live out meaningfully our vision of reality.

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