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A REFORMED APPROACH TO CHRISTIAN AESTHETICS

by W. STANFORD REID

DR. STANFORD REID, Associate Professor of History in McGill University, Montreal, is always a most welcome contributor to our pages. Here he takes up a fresh subject, which will arouse widespread interest. What has theology—especially Reformed theology—to do with aesthetics? We have met some misinformed people who actually thought that Reformed theology objected to aesthetics on principle! And even among those who are better informed there are some who would be hard put to it to say exactly what the Reformed approach to aesthetics is. Let them read on; Professor Reid will enlighten them.

IN her essay, "Towards a Christian Aesthetic" (*Unpopular Opinions*, London, 1946), the late Miss Dorothy L. Sayers offered some suggestions towards the development of a Christian philosophy of art. Her basic concept was that every work of art is a projected image of the artist's experience, on the analogy of the relationship between the Father and the Son, in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. She endeavoured to show that the artist in producing a truly artistic work was actually "imaging" forth his own experience in some tangible form, by which others could share in that experience. It was an interesting thesis which she developed and one in which a great many sound and reasonable things, from the Christian point of view, were said. In fact probably most Christians could accept many of her judgments and insights.

When one examines the thesis closely and critically, however, one comes across a number of discrepancies, and also finds that as many questions were raised by Miss Sayers' thesis as were answered. Because the present writer differs with Miss Sayers on some fundamental and principal points, he has attempted in this article to set forth some of his own thoughts on the subject of a Christian aesthetic.

In considering what Miss Sayers has to say, one might take serious issue with her in three places. First of all, there is the

dubious analogy, perhaps based on Thomist theology, which she draws between the relationships of the Father and the Son in the Triune Godhead and the artistic experience of aesthetic creation. This assumes an analogy of divine and human being which is by no means certain. Secondly, she does not deal with the question of the validity of artistic experience. Are all experiences aesthetic and artistic? Is there any difference between "bad taste" and "good taste"? Finally, while Miss Sayers makes numerous quotations from the Bible, one could hardly say that her fundamental theme is in truth a Christian one. There is no consideration of such matters as Creation, Sin, Grace, Redemption. One receives the impression that aesthetic experience and expression are completely separate from all these matters so that the artist lives, moves and has his being, without any relationship to what one might term the "Kingdom of God". For this reason one cannot but raise the question as to whether Miss Sayers' thesis really is truly or uniquely Christian.

It might be well to point out at the beginning that when Miss Sayers boldly states that, "we have no Christian Aesthetic—no Christian philosophy of the Arts" she is not exactly on firm historical ground. While neither the Old nor the New Testaments attempted to give a thorough interpretation of the matter of art, nevertheless they had a considerable amount to say about it. What is more, although the Protestant Reformers are not infrequently regarded as being anti-artistic, they also had many things to say on the subject and it was by no means always unfavourable. While men such as John Calvin did not believe in the use of images or pictures in worship, they certainly believed that the artist had his place in society and that he was called to do his work as in the service of God.

Attempts have been made at times to declare that the Roman Catholic Church has been the only ecclesiastical body which has favoured the aesthetic in life, but any study of artistic expression, for instance, in Holland, Germany, England and Scotland or among such groups as the Huguenots of France, will show quite conclusively that Protestantism has done much for artistic expression and, what is more, has possessed a latent, if not fully expressed conscious aesthetic philosophy ever since the days of Luther and Calvin. This has come to expression in the works of a number of nineteenth and twentieth-century European scholars such as Abraham Kuyper, P. Romaine-Musculus and others, probably the largest work on the subject being that of Wencelius who in 1937

published his *L'Esthétique de Calvin*. These men demonstrate that there has developed over the past three hundred years in Protestant, particularly in Reformed or Calvinistic circles, something of a Christian philosophy of Art. It is to a certain extent on the basis of their work that the present writer would advance a few ideas concerning a Christian aesthetic.

To develop an aesthetic, or for that matter any interpretation of temporal phenomena, one can never begin with brute facts. One does not simply take experiences of the phenomena of this world and stick them together like so many bricks or building blocks. In order both to analyse and synthesize experience, one always begins with certain presuppositions and assumptions which are ultimately the controlling factor in all thinking. As Archimedes taught when he discovered the principle of the fulcrum, if only he could find a place outside the world on which to stand he could move the world, so all human thought begins with a certain archimedean point which because it lies beyond all experiment or rational thought, one must accept on faith. This is the starting point of philosophy which is beyond philosophy, and which in the nature of the case must be fundamentally "religious".

In the sphere of aesthetics, this question of starting-point or "religious" presupposition is just as important as it is in the sphere of metaphysics or any other type of human thought. When man is faced with an object his aesthetic reaction will be largely determined by his own being in its widest sense; his personality, which in turn reacts according to his fundamental presuppositions or "religion", even though the latter be atheism. The twentieth-century American has a reaction to medieval lute music very different from that of the medieval player. Let an Englishman and a Highland Scot listen to the bagpipes in the same room and their reactions are usually diametrically opposed. Why the difference in aesthetic reaction? The answer is that the hearers of the music have different backgrounds, outlooks and sets of experiences which tend to determine their aesthetic appreciation (or depreciation). Each aesthetic reaction is that of an individual who includes within his own nature many other facets or spheres, all of which are linked together by the unity of the individual himself and are dominated by the supra-rational archimedean point from which he commences his interpretation of all things.

The Christian, therefore, in his approach to art and aesthetics frankly takes as his starting point his faith in the sovereign Triune God, who is absolute: "infinite, eternal and unchangeable in His

being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth". This God, Himself, has spoken to man through the prophets and apostles, but particularly through Jesus Christ, His Son, the record of His self-revelation being the Old and New Testaments (Heb. 1: 1 f.). Thus when the Christian attempts to obtain any understanding of aesthetics and art, he turns back to the fountain of all beauty and perfection, his sovereign God, commencing with His givenness; and under the guidance of His revelation attempts to come to an understanding of artistic feeling and expression.

The first thing which the Christian faces in attempting to understand his own aesthetic philosophy is that God is sovereign over nature, for He is its creator and sustainer. Nature is not something independent of Him, nor is it something which He merely made to run as a kind of automatic machine. Rather, He both brought into, and continually maintains in, existence this universe containing millions of particulars all subordinated to general laws and principles. God is thus the ultimate source of the temporal "one and many". This means that throughout the whole of creation there runs a pattern of closely interwoven relationships, for God as well as creating the various individual facts has fitted them all into His sovereign plan. It is this pattern of factual relationships which is the source of the universe's beauty and significance. This is why the psalmist could sing: "the heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth His handiwork; day unto day uttereth speech and night unto night showeth knowledge" (Ps. 19: 1 f.).

At the same time God is also the originator of man, whom He created in His own image with true, but finite knowledge, righteousness and holiness. Upon man He bestowed the responsibility, privilege and necessity of thinking analogically to His thought, in order that he might think truly. Consequently, it is always man's duty to seek to discover God's pattern in nature and history, to understand the laws under which the phenomena of this universe operate, in order that he may truly think God's thoughts after Him. In this way he will come to a better understanding not only of temporal reality, but also of himself and of the sovereign God, thereby being more fully persuaded to "glorify and enjoy" God in all His perfections. Thus from the Christian point of view, man is responsible to seek an understanding of the universe in every possible way, rationally, empirically and aesthetically, in order that he may thereby truly praise and give honour to the Author and Source of all its marvels.

In the sphere of aesthetics man does not gain his knowledge by rationalizing or by experimenting, but rather through the feelings. The artist reacts intuitively to a certain pattern of nature or of human action, with an understanding which is perhaps deeper than that of the philosopher or the scientist, for he sees the unity of things more immediately than does, say the scientist. André Schlemmer in his article, "L'art dans la vie du Chrétien" (*Protestantisme et Beaux-Arts*, Paris, 1945) expresses it thus (pp. 62 f.):

Ainsi le sens esthétique est un mode de connaissance: non pas pratique, permettant de dominer le monde, comme est la connaissance scientifique, mais essentielle amenant à percevoir les sens des choses.

. . . L'art nous donne à contempler un ordre de réalité plus général, plus désintéressé, plus profond, plus totalement vrai que la sensation, le sentiment, l'abstraction ou la thèse.

Thus, by intuition, aesthetic reaction and feeling, from the Christian point of view, brings man more directly and immediately face to face with God than does reason or science. Nevertheless man, even in his perfection, was still a finite creature whose aesthetic nature, although uncorrupted, could not reach beyond its human limitations. Although he indeed truly saw God's pattern and handiwork, giving Him glory for it, his knowledge was never exhaustive nor absolute. He still continued to be man.

From this it is clear that Christian thought conceives of a basic unity between man and nature, not because man is somehow a product of blind natural forces, but because he was created to be the interpreter of nature to lead all the universe in God's praise. This man alone can do, since only his life ultimately derives from the inbreathing of God's Spirit. His responsibility was indicated clearly at the beginning by the inauguration of a covenant wherein God told man plainly that this was his duty and promised him eternal life on condition of obedience. At the same time He warned man that destruction and breakdown would be the penalty of disobedience. As long as covenant unity with God was maintained, unity between man and nature was assured, guaranteeing not only true religion and true science but also true art. Let the divine human link be broken, however, and all man's actions would become vanity and nothingness.

Then came sin, consisting fundamentally in "lack of conformity unto, and transgression of the law of God". Man declared himself to be independent of God and completely sovereign in his own sphere of thought and activity. This was not the result of a metaphysical or of a physical alteration in man, but of an ethical change of direction which in turn has had widespread repercus-

sions both in man himself and in society. Man continues to be man, but sin, which entered when man ceased to have real faith in, and love towards, his Creator (i.e., when man broke the covenant), now manifests itself in all spheres of human activity. Although he continues to have human reactions and feelings, man tends to interpret them in a radically different manner. His original religious archimedean point has been replaced, for God has been pushed out of the picture, a fundamental change thus being brought about in his attempts to interpret himself and the world. His god is now usually a projection of his own ego, whether this god is the operation of nature as in animism, an idol as in much primitive polytheism, an ideal as in much Greek thought, or a force, psychological, biological or physical, as in much modern religion and philosophy. And whatever the character of that god, he is finite, uncertain and not infrequently subject to or dependent upon man and nature. There are now three independent ultimates: God, nature and man.

No longer does man think in terms of a basic unity between himself and nature. Rather he sees the relationship of the two as something actually antithetical, man being over against nature and nature over against man. In modern thought this comes out in the continual conflict between the humanistic ideas of human personality and the scientific concept of the cosmic mechanism. Ever since the Renaissance there has been a continual oscillation between emphasis upon the freedom and greatness of man's personality, and the absolute rigidity of the physical world. In the present century this has gone even further with the development of new physical theories such as Relativity and the Quantum Theory so that the tendency is now to put man over against chance. Nor is this all, for the psycho-analyst has placed this same element of chance within man also, the only thing still common to man and nature being chaos, chance or absolute disunity. Thus the Christian point of view that there is a basic unity, man's highest responsibility being the work of interpreting and enjoying nature to the glory of God, is now no longer considered.

To the Christian way of thinking there can be no other result from this than complete artistic subjectivism. Not that any art can ever be wholly separated from the subjective, but as a result of sin and its logical consequences, subjectivity has embraced everything. If there is any pattern which man sees in nature, he feels that it is a pattern imposed by himself, neither inherent in the object of his observation nor possessing any content. Consequently

there is no real objective truth in art. If it attempts to find and express truth it is merely setting forth a subjective reaction which is an abstraction designed to express a feeling of the artist. Whether anyone else has the same reaction as a result of observing or of studying the work of art, is relatively unimportant. What is important is that the artist should express himself, and presumably when that expression takes place the artistic procedure is finished. An extreme statement of this is to be found in Herbert Read's *Surrealism*. Aesthetic production is totally divorced from all but the subjective emotion, objective truth being totally disregarded.

To the Christian, sinful man by thus forsaking the real archimedean point of his thought, the sovereign God, has destroyed his true understanding of things and in so doing has tended to destroy art. Sin has brought chaos to the human personality whose orientation is now in a totally wrong direction perverting thought, volition and emotion. Man is powerless to turn himself around, re-orient himself towards the truth; his only hope is God, who by gracious intervention can change his direction. For the Christian, therefore, the existence of art in the world today is not so much a revelation of man's potentialities, as it is a demonstration of God's grace.

Grace is revealed first of all in God's goodness to all men, His "common grace". Although man is in rebellion against Him, seeking to establish his independence, nevertheless God manifests great lovingkindness towards the erring sinner. True, His judgment is against such a one, but at the same time His goodness and mercy are also present in His dealings with even the worst of His rebellious creatures. This is manifest in His arresting the development of sin in the sinner's life. By the Holy Spirit and through His providence, God not only gives many gifts of mind and body but He also enables the sinner to put them to use. Thus the scientist makes his great discoveries, the business man conceives and carries out his great industrial and commercial schemes and the artist composes his great works. In this way, man can be said to be, albeit unconsciously, to a certain extent thinking analogically with God. However, if merely under the influence of "common grace" he does not even realize that he is doing so, for although he is able to attain to relative truth, to see the pattern concerning immediate things, his view of the ultimate meaning, purpose and environment of the universe is still wrong. He does not recognize the source of either the pattern or his ability to see it; nor does he employ his successes to glorify God. Consequently man is

successful as a scientist, thinker or artist despite his wrong philosophy. By divine grace he is inconsistent and in this inconsistency achieves his greatest intellectual, practical and aesthetic triumph by the grace of God.

As far as the Christian is concerned the only principally consistent man is the Christian for he has returned to the covenant relationship. God in His grace has accomplished this by laying hold upon a great number of men that they might be ethically re-orientated, that they might be "converted". This He has done through Jesus Christ His Son who has fully met the demands of divine justice for the sinner; and Christ's work is made effective through the Holy Spirit who, to use David's phrase, "creates in man a clean heart and renews a right spirit within him". He brings about a revolution in man's being so that man places his faith in Christ as his Saviour and seeks to serve Him as his Lord. Christ has now become the supreme manifestation of the glorious beauty of the sovereign God.

This means that for the Christian the world has changed. Now instead of seeing himself as independent and sovereign, he sees all things as God's possession which he must use to the glory of God. He has had his sight restored, although since he is still very much affected by the old sinful ways of thought and the old erroneous point of view, this restoration is never more than partial. To overcome this myopia he must now continually strive to see everything in its true perspective, see everything *sub specie aeternitatis*, doing everything *solī Deo gloria*. As he increases in understanding, more and more he recognizes the ultimate unity of all things in the creative and providential activity of God, and also acknowledges that there is a divinely ordained pattern in the universe, external to man, which man must endeavour to discover, for this is man's duty given to him from the beginning of time.

Thus the Christian as artist has as his first objective the understanding and appreciation of God's glorious handiwork. He does this aesthetically, but his aesthetic reaction is also a truly religious one, for in it is included praise and thanksgiving to Him who is not only "the great architect of the universe", but also his Redeemer and his God. His whole being is involved in this reaction to God's glorious power, goodness and grace. This he desires to express, not by a series of clichés or platitudes, but freely, clearly and forcefully. The Christian artist should above all things be independent of mere artistic convention because he is showing forth that which is above and beyond convention. He is expres-

sing, whether in line, in stone, in word or tone the glories of God's handiwork in order that others may see and with him grasp something of the glory of God by means of aesthetic experience.

Likewise every Christian should enjoy art, for spontaneously it should lead to Him who is behind all art, the sovereign God. This is true not only of the art of other Christians, but even of the art of the veriest unbeliever, for insofar as his art is true art, bringing forth true aesthetic responses, it is ultimately the gift of God. Thus all art, like all other creaturely products, is to be accepted by the Christian with thanksgiving. But merely having an aesthetic response is not all. The Christian who has such an experience, should thereby be deepened as a Christian, growing in faith and obedience, so that increasingly the glory of God is manifest in him and his life, making every Christian, in the most profound sense of the term, a true artist.

This brings us back to our starting-point. To the Christian a true aesthetic reaction is possible only to those whose archimedean point of thought is the Triune God, "of whom, by whom and to whom are all things". They through faith in Jesus Christ have come to see God as the highest good, whom man is to glorify and enjoy forever whether in the sphere of science, philosophy, history or art. He is the ultimate Artist from whom and to whom must go and come all true aesthetic reactions.

McGill University, Montreal.