CHRISTIANITY, ART AND TRANSFORMATION

Theological aesthetics in the struggle for justice

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Introduction

The writing of *Christianity, Art and Transformation* has been a personal journey. Those familiar with my other writings may be surprised by it, for I have not previously indicated any serious interest in Christianity and art, or in aesthetics.[1] Yet there are continuities with what I have done before, and I regard this project as part of a broader post-apartheid process of doing theology in a new key.[2] It was a confirmatory surprise to discover that a similar development was evident in Latin American Christianity, bringing together a concern for justice and the recovery of the aesthetic in the life of the church.[3]

My journey began in earnest through conversations with my friend Julian Cooke, a professor of architecture at the University of Cape Town. Julian made me aware that apartheid was not only unjust but also ugly, and that this was reflected in the architectural landscape of our country. It all seems so obvious now, but it was a flash of insight when this first dawned on me. Exploring the connection between ugliness and oppression, and between beauty and redemption, made me aware that there is a deep underlying relationship between theological conviction, aesthetics and ethics. The gestation of the book had begun. In the course of my subse-

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[1] In my little book *Cry Justice!* I did, however, make use of poetry, several lithographs by Patrick Holo, an African artist then attached to the Nyanga Art Centre, and indigenous South African musical scores in developing a spirituality for justice. John W. de Gruchy, *Cry Justice! Prayers, Meditations and Readings from South African Christians in a Time of Crisis* (London; New York: Collins; Orbis, 1986).

[2] See especially Barney Pityana, 'Beyond Transition,' dissertation, University of Cape Town, 1995; James R. Cochrane, *Circles of Dignity: Community Wisdom and Theological Reflection* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999); Robin Petersen, *Time, Resistance, and Reconciliation* (New York: Orbis, 1999).

[3] Alejandro García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1999). Rivera's book is not, however, primarily concerned about the arts as such.

quent journey I came to believe more firmly in the transformative potential of the arts and their importance for Christian faith and praxis. So the book became a celebration of art and a statement of faith.

For some reason the connection between aesthetics and social ethics, between beauty and social transformation, was not apparent to those of us who were engaged as theologians in the struggle against apartheid. We were concerned about truth and goodness rather than beauty; about theology and social ethics rather than aesthetics. This does not mean that there was no interest in the arts or an absence of the aesthetic in the life of the church. How could that possibly be given the drama of its liturgies, the architecture of its sanctuaries and the role of music and symbol in its worship? But there was a lack of critical theological reflection on such issues. This requires urgent attention if we are serious about doing theology in post-apartheid South Africa, or anywhere else for that matter.

The more I explored the themes in this book, the more I became aware of the complexity of the issues. This may not surprise those who are familiar with the history of art or the development of aesthetic theory. Such people may smile wryly at the audacity of a theologian who ventures into such fields of enquiry. What, after all, is art, how does it relate to aesthetics, and in what if any sense does it have moral significance? Theodor Adorno put the problem succinctly: 'Everything about art has become problematic: its inner life, its relation to society, even its right to exist.'[4] But if this is true of art, the same could be said of Christianity. 'Transformation' is an equally contested notion, not least in post-apartheid South Africa. So the reader of *Christianity, Art and Transformation* deserves at least a brief introductory explanation of these key terms. Let me begin with 'transformation'.

'Transformation', a word in danger of losing significance through over use and abuse, is, nonetheless, the term used to describe the kind of society we are trying to achieve in post-apartheid South Africa. While its nature and goals are contested, it broadly means the creation of a just and equitable democratic society.[5] Given the legacy of South Africa's colonial and apartheid past, the sobering realities that face us, and the limited resources available, there is no

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[4] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 1.
[5] For a detailed discussion of these issues see John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity and Democracy: A Theology for a Just World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

easy road to transformation. But there is no viable alternative other than seeking to achieve those fundamental changes that a stable future and the sustaining and enhancing of life demand. 'Transformation' as I use the term is an open-ended, multi-layered process, at once social and personal, that is energised by hope yet rooted in the struggles of the present.

In many languages no distinction is made between art in the sense of doing something skilfully and 'works of art' referring, for example, to a painting or sculpture. However, when we speak of 'the arts' in English we usually mean 'fine arts', that is 'works of art' which meet certain aesthetic criteria and in doing so can be distinguished from craft and 'popular art'. But the boundaries between 'fine' and 'popular art', or between 'art' and 'craft', are fluid. At best they are theoretical and functional, enabling us to recognise how works of art relate to social forces as well as cultural norms and values.[6] Art, after all, is subject to historical developments and as such it is constantly changing in character.

An interest in art can be a way of escape from reality, as, I believe, the aesthetic movement ('aestheticism') became in the nineteenth century. Yet to sideline art as an elitist pastime is short-sighted and potentially dangerous. This was recognised by many within the liberation movement, and it was strongly reaffirmed at the time of the transition to democratic governance in South Africa. In the government White Paper on arts and culture published in 1996, human creativity was recognised as a human right and support for 'the arts' as a necessary part of good democratic governance. In defining 'the arts' the White Paper indicated that these include but 'are not restricted to all forms and traditions of dance, drama, music, music theatre, visual arts, crafts, design, written and oral literature'.[7] This inclusive understanding of the arts is of fundamental importance, for the potential of art in the process of transformation resides in the arts as a whole, both in their complementarity and in their distinctiveness.

I have purposely concentrated, though not exclusively, on the 'visual arts'. The reasons for this will become evident as we proceed.

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[6] See David Novitz, *The Boundaries of Art* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 20ff., 59f.

[7] The South African White Paper on 'Arts, Culture and Heritage', 1996; *The South African Handbook on Arts and Culture*, ed. Mike van Graan and Nicky du Plessis (Rondebosch, Cape Town: Article 27 Arts and Culture Consultants, 1998), 4, art. 12.

But a brief comment here may be in order. The visual arts, especially painting and sculpture, have been the most contested in the history of Christianity from its earliest days until the present. Yet it is precisely these arts, which have so powerfully stirred the human spirit and awoken the imagination for good and ill, and never so much as in the present day, that have been most neglected by theologians. There is, indeed, an urgent need for the visual arts to find their rightful place within the life and witness of the church. This is particularly so within Protestant churches, notably the Reformed, that have historically almost exclusively stressed the verbal arts and music. There are some notable and encouraging signs that this is changing. But there is much to be done and the need is ecumenical. It was a major twentieth-century Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, who argued that 'theology cannot be complete until it appropriates' the non-verbal 'arts as an integral moment of itself and its own life, until the arts become an intrinsic moment of theology itself'.[8] To reduce theology to 'verbal theology', Rahner continued, unjustifiably limits 'the capacity of the arts to be used by God in his revelation'. Moreover, in so reducing theology we neglect a fundamental resource in relating Christianity to other religious traditions and to culture itself. Much of what I shall discuss would apply, of course, to the non-visual arts as well even if they are not mentioned very often, but to do them justice would require fuller treatment than is possible within this project.

Just as it is not possible to give equal consideration to all art forms, so it is impossible to do justice to Christianity in all its variety. My horizons are ecumenical though my roots are in the Reformed tradition,[9] something that will become evident in various parts of the text and in my references to John Calvin, P. T. Forsyth and Karl Barth. Part of my concern is the retrieval of the arts within this broad tradition.[10] But what I have said in this connection has wider ecumenical significance. In the same way, my particular focus on

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[8] Karl Rahner, 'Theology and the Arts,' *Thought* 57, no. 224 (March 1982): 24.

[9] See John W. de Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology: A South African Contribution to an Ecumenical Debate* (Grand Rapids; Cape Town: Eerdmans; David Philip, 1991).

[10] There has been a remarkable interest in the arts and aesthetics amongst Dutch and North American neo-Calvinists during the past century. See, for example, H. R. Rookmaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (Leicester, UK: Intervarsity Fellowship, 1970); *Pledges of Jubilee: Essays on the Arts and Culture, in Honor of Calvin G. Seerveld*, ed. Lambert Zuidervaart and Henry Luttikhuizen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). For an indication of the growing interest in the broader Reformed family, see *Seeing Beyond the Word: Visual Arts and the Calvinist Tradition*, ed. Paul Corby Finney (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

South African Christianity has more than parochial relevance. Much of the initial research for this book was done in England, and I have discussed its themes with colleagues both there and elsewhere. The fact that the Christian tradition has been so profoundly shaped by its planting in Europe inevitably means that much of the initial discussion will be more Euro-centric than some might wish. But the context does change as we journey on. At any rate, the 'first-world' reader should not forget that Christianity is as much African as it is European, and is far more widespread and vibrant on the African continent today than it is in much of the West.

As this project has been a personal journey I have not hesitated to use the personal pronoun 'I' where appropriate. But I have also used the more inclusive 'we', not just through academic habit or literary convention but more as a means to include the reader in my explorations. Let me, then, provide a brief guide for our journey. The book is divided into three parts, each of which has two chapters. Part I is entitled 'Historical trajectories'; Part II 'Theological reflection'; and Part III 'Aesthetic praxis'. This structure reflects my conviction that Christian theology is critical reflection on historical experience in the light of Scripture and tradition; that it engages in such reflection in dialogue with other disciplines; and that it thereby informs our living and engagement in society.

In Part I, I first examine some of the major trajectories in Christian history on the relationship between 'Christianity and the arts' from the origins of the Christian movement, through the Iconoclastic Controversy, to the Protestant Reformation and Catholic response. The focus here is on the power of images. Images play a fundamental role in the shaping of cultural and religious identity, and in the construction, subverting and transforming of social reality. It is not surprising, then, that the production and control of images has been connected to struggles for ecclesial and political power. The sites of such struggles may well have changed in the modern world, but many of the issues remain. Political movements and advertising, for example, depend on the power of images, the one for the sake of selling policy and galvanising action for either the common good or self-interest, the other to establish the fashionable and the stylish in order to awaken desire and sell commodities. Our perception of the world is increasingly being redefined and reconstructed by the globalisation of media images. Those with the necessary skill and technology can exercise considerable control in

manipulating information and therefore in shaping values. The same is true in the world of entertainment, where art often provides a façade for real experiencing.[11] The globalisation of certain aesthetic values and commodities is therefore big business, and presents a challenge to those concerned about moral values and social transformation, not least theologians who take seriously their role as cultural critics.[12]

My attention shifts, in chapter 2, to the development of aesthetic theory within the post-Enlightenment European context in relation to Christianity. The word 'aesthetics' derives from the Greek αἴσθησις and literally means 'perception'. Aesthetics is about the way in which we see, hear and feel things through sense perception, primarily through the arts, and the way in which we evaluate and appreciate what we experience. The fact that my focus is on the post-Enlightenment European development of aesthetic theory is not meant to suggest that there was no aesthetic sense outside Europe, for that is clearly nonsense. But it is true that the debate about aesthetic theory, especially in relation to Christianity, was initially located in the West and only became an issue of discussion in post-colonial Africa.

In Part II I engage more specifically in theological reflection on aesthetics and the arts in dialogue with Hans Urs von Balthasar, Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. There are other theologians who have contributed to my enquiry who are neither male nor Teutonic. Feminist theologians, far more than others, have brought to the fore the sensual dimension of Christian theology, drawing fresh attention to the affective and physical, and reminding us of the centrality of the body.[13] The importance of this will be apparent, even if not by explicit reference to feminist theology, in my discussion of Bonhoeffer's aesthetics in chapter 4.

There are scholars who regard Balthasar's theological aesthetics as unhelpful in working out the relationship between Christianity and the arts because of his tendency to locate everything within a transcendental framework that inevitably dominates everything else.

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[11] See the critique of avant-garde art in the 1980s in Donald Kuspit, *Signs of Psyche in Modern and Post-Modern Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 273ff.

[12] I first became aware of theology as a form of cultural criticism in relation to the arts through attending Paul Tillich's seminars at the University of Chicago in the early 1960s. See, inter alia, Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

[13] See, for example, Sally McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

Others argue that Balthasar's theology has served reactionary causes within the Catholic Church, and for that reason is suspect as a whole.[14] These criticisms made me initially cautious. The reasons for choosing him as the senior partner in dialogue are, however, the theological profundity of his thought, his ecumenical concern, and the magisterial scope of his work. The significance of Barth lies partly in his role in renewing Reformed theology in the twentieth century, partly in his critical dialogue with Balthasar, his Swiss compatriot, but chiefly in the fact that a truly Christian aesthetics has to develop out of a trinitarian doctrine of God that relates directly to the transformation of the world.[15] Despite their patriarchal shortcomings, Balthasar and Barth together lay a solid foundation for doing Christian theological aesthetics even if we must go beyond them. Above all else, they inject into our discussion an understanding of aesthetics from the perspective of God's revelation in Jesus Christ that awakens faith, hope and love, and thereby transforms human existence. I should warn the unwary reader that the discussion in chapter 3 is, so some of my colleagues tell me, particularly demanding for those without a theological background. But I trust that those who plunge into it will soon recognise the importance of what has been attempted, and even discover that theology is as much about beauty as it is about truth and goodness because of the very nature of God.

Few twentieth-century theologians have been as influential as Bonhoeffer in enabling us to see the connections between faith and politics, spirituality and justice, and the renewal of the church within the life of the world. Despite my life-long interest in his theology, I had not, however, anticipated making much use of him in pursuing this project. Yet some cryptic comments in his *Letters and Papers from Prison* on 'aesthetic existence' and further hunches of my own spurred me on to examine his legacy in relation to my theme. I was overwhelmed by what I discovered, and it reshaped much of my thinking about aesthetics and the role of art in doing theology and in

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[14] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The von Balthasar Reader*, ed. Medard Kehl and Werner Loser (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1982), 4.

[15] In his important study of the neo-Calvinist approach to the arts, Jeremy Begbie rightly expresses the criticism that the neo-Calvinist doctrine of God is insufficiently shaped by a trinitarian understanding of God. Jeremy S. Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts* (Edinburgh: T. &T. Clark, 1991), 158.

the life of the church. Hence, chapter 4 represents a key moment in my journey, one that I am particularly keen to share with others.

Part III is entitled 'Aesthetic praxis'. One of the most heated of all debates in aesthetics during the twentieth century has been on the social role of the arts. This is obviously a matter of some importance in considering the connection between the arts and transformation. In chapter 5, 'Art in the Public Square', I focus first of all on the social role of architecture, and then on the visual arts as an expression of political resistance and social healing. South Africa provides a rich milieu in which to pursue such an enquiry,[16] and theological reflection which is serious about public life must take cognisance of it. In chapter 6, which brings my study to a close, I examine the significance of the visual arts and architecture for the life, worship and witness of the church in the life of the world. In both these chapters I seek to draw together the main threads that have emerged throughout the book, relating them to issues of practical concern. But let it be said immediately that art should not and cannot be reduced to matters of 'practical concern'. Ultimately art has to do with the awakening of a sense of wonder, and it is in and through that awakening that aesthetic existence becomes possible and transformation begins to take place. That is what the journey is finally about.

[16] *Culture in Another South Africa*, ed. William Campschreur and Joost Divendal (London: Zed Books, 1989); Sue Williamson, *Resistance Art in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1989); Sue Williamson and Ashraf Jamal, *Art in South Africa: The Future Present* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1996); Marion Arnold, *Women and Art in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1996).