THE ORIGINS OF PROTESTANT AESTHETICS IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

The aesthetics of everyday life, as reflected in art museums and galleries throughout the Western world, is the result of a profound shift in aesthetic perception that occurred during the Renaissance and Reformation. In this book, William Dyrness examines intellectual developments in late medieval Europe, which turned attention away from a narrow range of liturgical art and practices and toward a celebration of God's presence in creation and in history. Though threatened by the human tendency to self-assertion, he shows how a new focus on God's creative and recreative action in the world gave time and history a new seriousness and engendered a broad spectrum of aesthetic potential. Focusing in particular on the writings of Luther and Calvin, Dyrness demonstrates how the Reformers' conceptual and theological frameworks pertaining to the role of the arts influenced the rise of realistic theater, lyric poetry, landscape painting, and architecture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

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Calvin's Reformation Poetics

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108493352
DOI: 10.1017/9781108593311

First published 2019

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd. Padstow Cornwall

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
NAMES: Dyrness, William A., author.
TITLE: The origins of Protestant aesthetics in early modern Europe : Calvin's Reformation poetics / William A. Dyrness, Fuller Theological Seminary, California.
DESCRIPTION: 1 [edition]. | New York : Cambridge University Press, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2018058441 | ISBN 9781108493352 (hardback : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781108717823 (pbk. : alk. paper)
SUBJECTS: LCSH: Christianity and art–Reformed Church–History–16th century. | Christianity and art–Europe–History–16th century. | Aesthetics–Religious aspects–Reformed Church–History–16th century | Calvin, Jean, 1509-1564.
CLASSIFICATION: LCC BX9423.A77 D968 2019 | DDC 261.5/7094–dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018058441

ISBN 978-1-108-49335-2 Hardback

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PREFACE

This book attends to the emergence of particular aesthetic attitudes that can reasonably be described as Protestant, especially in Geneva, England, and Holland, and that developed between 1500 and 1650. It may be thought anachronistic in this early modern period to describe a developing aesthetics – since the word, in its modern sense, was not used before Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten wrote his famous *Aesthetica* in 1750. In that work the philosopher sought to place aesthetics – what he termed *scientia cognitionis sensitivae*, or the science of sensuous knowing – along with logic, as a source of theoretical knowledge. His goal was to describe the perfection of sense knowledge as beauty itself, which he believed represented the perfected attainment of knowledge through the senses.[1]

Baumarten's formulation, however influential, was not entirely original. In fact one can argue that he is reprising conversations that were prominent in the medieval period. Thomas Aquinas, for example, describes beauty in closely related terms: "Beauty . . . has to do with knowledge, and we call a thing beautiful when it pleases the eye of the beholder. This is why beauty is a matter of right proportion, for senses delight in rightly proportioned things as similar to themselves, the sense-faculty being a sort of proportion itself like all other knowing faculties. Now since knowing proceeds by imaging, and images have to do with form, beauty properly involves the notion of form."[2] Clearly the human affective response to beauty of form and sound is perennial; it did not await the Enlightenment to be noted and appreciated, even if its significance and place in the order of things has changed and developed.

[1] See Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 156.

[2] *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 2: *Existence and Nature of God* (Ia. 2–11), trans. Timothy McDermott (London: Blackfriars, 1964), pp. 71, 73.

Still we must avoid reading modern and Enlightenment categories back into those earlier conversations. Because beauty was central in many medieval conversations, modern readers, thoroughly schooled in discussions spawned by Baumgarten, are tempted to understand those experiences in modern terms.[3]

This danger arises from the fact that, arguably, aesthetic experience has come to play a more central role in the twenty-first century than it did in any previous century. Robert Wuthnow has documented the fact that, in America at least, each generation during the last one hundred years has been progressively more interested and invested in the arts and aesthetic experience.[4] And it is precisely this expansion of aesthetic interest that serves as the starting point of my reflections on the early modern period. As I will point out in Chapter 1, this wide-ranging interest in the arts – and the particular institutions that have arisen to support this – stands in marked contrast to the medieval situation. And, I will argue, the events consequent to the Protestant Reformation have played a considerable role in laying groundwork for the expansion of interest and attention to the arts that modern people have come to take for granted.

Though it may be anachronistic to speak of Reformation aesthetics, as Clark Hulse notes, it is a potentially useful anachronism.[5] He goes on to argue that the more familiar term in the sixteenth century would have been "poetics," which designated language characterized by *mimesis*, or imitation, both of classical forms, as in rhetoric that sought to persuade and order, and of nature, which in its development often reflected its Reformation context. Both forms of imitation, I argue, were famously developed in Calvin's work, and both became characteristics that defined the emerging category of "literature." Aesthetics then can be used as a broader term under which poetics, dealing specifically with language, may be understood, and as indicative of other aspects of the emerging system of the arts familiar to a modern person. My argument is that though rhetoric and literature were central to the emerging Protestant aesthetic, it is mistaken to see the Reformation as involving a simple replacement of image with the word, or even more

[3] Something even the classic treatment of Umberto Eco does not always avoid. See *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bredin (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986).

[4] Wuthnow, *All N'Sync: How Music and Art Are Revitalizing American Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 66. See William Dyrness, *Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), pp. 11–13.

[5] Hulse, "Tudor Aesthetics," in Arthur F. Kinney, ed., *Cambridge Companion to English Literature: 1500–1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 33. For what follows, see pp. 34–38, though the connection with Calvin is my observation.

reductively, seeing with hearing. Rather, their more comprehensive vision of society and its accountability to God provided space for other forms of art to appear – specifically, realistic theater, landscape painting, and neo-classical architecture, in addition to literature.

The danger persists in any historical reflection to read back into earlier periods attitudes and practices that developed only later. For this reason Chapter 1 makes an attempt to understand the medieval situation on its own terms, in order to contrast that world with the world born during the Renaissance and Reformation. As I will seek to show, contrary to what is sometimes assumed, the Reformation represented a development of medieval attitudes rather than simply a radical break with the past, even if eventually it would form a world that would look and feel very different from that past. The relatively long period under investigation allows us to see ways in which the Reformation only gradually brought about changes in experiences and practices, and allowed, with respect to the arts, a modern world to emerge that modern people will recognize.[6]

Written by a theologian of culture rather than a historian, this work seeks to provide a fresh angle of vision on this endlessly fascinating period of history, and especially on some of its central figures – Martin Luther and, in more detail, John Calvin. My argument is that their novel interpretation of the human religious situation had the additional result of expanding the attention given to the *theatrum mundi*, with long-term significance for aesthetics no less than for other areas of human investigation. While this broader attention to the world is often thought of as an incipient secularization, in the minds of the Reformers it was nothing of the kind. Rather, Luther and Calvin sought to extend, albeit in different ways, the accountability one owed to God more broadly to their life in the world. This enlarged sense of responsibility and the attention it sparked, I will argue, led both directly and indirectly to development in the arts.

Parts of the argument of this book include material previously published in articles that have been revised for this work, and I want to express my appreciation for permission to use this material. "The Perception of Spirituality: Hans Holbein's 'The French Ambassadors'" appeared in *Art as Spiritual Perception: Essays in Honor of E. John Walford*, ed. James Romaine (Wheaton: Crossways Books, 2012); "God's Play: Calvin, Theatre and the Rise of the

[6] This reflects and learns from more recent scholarship on the Reformation that takes a longer-term view of the changes and fractures that occurred during this period. See the critical discussions developing this perspective in Nicholas Tyacke, ed., *England's Long Reformation: 1500–1800* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

Book" formed a chapter of *Calvin and the Book: The Evolution of the Printed Word in Reformed Protestantism*, ed. Karen Spierling (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015); "God, Language, and the Use of the Senses: The Emergence of a Protestant Aesthetic in the Early Modern Period" will appear in *Protestantism and Aesthetics*, ed. Sarah Covington and Kathryn Reklis (New York: Routledge, forthcoming); "Text and Media: Portraits and Representation in Elizabethan England" was published in *Arts, Portraits and Representation in the Reformation Era*, ed. Herman Selderhuis (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018); and "Hiding in Plain Sight: Theology and Visual Culture in Early Modern Calvinism" will be a chapter of *The Handbook of Calvinism*, ed. Bruce Gordon and Carl Trueman (Oxford University Press, forthcoming). All Scripture references are to the *New Revised Standard Version* unless otherwise noted.

I owe large debts of gratitude to people who know far more than this writer about the subjects of the following chapters, especially John Lee Thompson, John Witvliet, Matthew Rosebrock, Randall Working, Sarah Covington, Kathryn Reklis, Jérôme Cottin, Cornelius Van der Kooi and Mia Mochizuki. And I have profited much from conversations with Robert Johnston, Patrick Coleman, Martin Shannon, Joseph Prabhu, Henry Luttikhuizen, and Timothy Verdon. I want to express special gratitude to the management and staff of the Henry E. Huntington Library, which has offered a particularly congenial environment for the research and writing of this book, and in particular for the support of Christopher Adde and Nathan Pendlebury. And I am grateful for the encouragement and support of Beatrice Rehl, and the assistance of Ayyappan Sindhujaa, Stephanie Sakson, and the always competent staff of Cambridge University Press.