

“ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN”:

Is Art Necessary for the Christian?

By Don Hudson

As the old myth has it, Narcissus was a handsome youth who arrogantly shunned the nymphs of the forest. One maiden in particular desired to attract Narcissus' attention, but as much as she tried, Narcissus would not attend to her beauty. At last, she prayed to a goddess that Narcissus would return her love and affection. But her prayer was to no avail—Narcissus only continued to spurn her. Thus, in desperation, the maiden prayed that Narcissus would learn, as she had, what it is to love someone without the return of love. The goddess heard the maiden's prayer and granted her wish.

In the forest was a quiet fountain undisturbed by man or beast. One day, Narcissus approached the fountain. As he knelt down to drink from it, he was surprised by a lovely sight: a beautiful image in the clear pool. It was his own image, of course, but he thought it to be a handsome spirit peering from the fountain. It had beautiful hair, bright, blue eyes, and a healthy complexion.

Narcissus had never seen a more lovely, enrapturing creature, and immediately he fell in love with himself. He drew near to his image to kiss it and tried in vain to embrace his reflection. Yet, every time he tried to grasp his image, it fled away. It was so engaging he could not bring himself to leave, and he lost all desire for food and drink.

Soon Narcissus began to talk with his image in the fountain. “Oh beautiful spirit, why do you escape me each time I try to embrace you? It cannot be that my face is ugly, for all the nymphs of the forest think me to be very beautiful.” Over time he pined away for the image and soon began to lose all his health and beauty.

Finally, Narcissus died staring at his image in the fountain striving to embrace the one object of his desire—that is, himself.

NARCISSUS HAS
NO NEED OF
ART BECAUSE
HIS OWN
REFLECTION
PREOCCUPIES
HIM.

Narcissus has no need of art because his own reflection preoccupies him. Beauty engages him, but tragically, what he beholds as beauty is a mere reflection of himself. I would argue moreover that such beauty is no beauty at all. Infinitely worse, it is an obsession that destroys Narcissus. He adores the reflection of his face to a tragic end—and in that end, he is defaced; he disappears from his own view.

This is the supreme irony of Narcissus. He attempts to comprehend himself strictly within the scope of his own image, and in his endeavor to perceive himself, he pushes everything else outside himself.

The story of Narcissus has enormous value to us today—both to secular society and, particularly, to the modern church. Simply put, like Narcissus, the modern world is losing a sense of beauty beyond itself. And this loss of beauty is most clearly seen in our approach—both society's and the church's—to art.

George Steiner, in his masterful book, *Real Presences*, warns against modern humanity's retreat from art and the divine presence it reveals. His point is quite clear: if we lose the transcendent power of art, we become narcissistic. "It is, I believe, poetry, art and music which relate us most directly to that in being which is not ours." Art must by nature extend beyond its creator or its spectator, or it merely recreates them as Narcissus' mirror did for Narcissus.

Yet, the modern world is a relatively new one in which art focuses upon the subjectivity of the artist. In rare cases does art exist for the sake of external meaning, for something beyond the work of art. No longer does art throw open a window to a reality beyond ourselves and our world as it did up through the nineteenth century. The poetry of Mallarme, the music of John Cage, the novels of Robbe-Grillet, and the paintings of Jackson Pollock persistently express the internal reality of the artist over the reality of truth *beyond* the artist.

But let me make a note of caution here. I can't say that I enjoy or appreciate Cage's music, but I do appreciate Robbe-Grillet, Mallarme, and Pollock. At times we dismiss artists because their creations do not fit our categories of what good art is or should be. Modern and contemporary artists are doing more than reflecting an internal view. Whether intentionally or not, they are reflecting their world and interpretations of their world. I find Pollock's paintings delightful because there is an emphasis on color and measured chaos. His view of the world, although strange and subjective, adds to my world view.

Nor do I believe that secular, subjectivist art fails to reflect mean-

ing. It is inevitable that a work of art reflects its creator and his or her era. Furthermore, humans who are made in the image of the Creator inevitably reflect him. I know that I will have major dissent here, but every work of art reflects both the artist and the artist's Creator. Ultimately, silence is the only effective denial of God. Even art that denies God cannot deny God.

I want to make it clear that I am not saying that modern art is bad art because it is subjective or overtly meaningless. But generally speaking, art, in the modern age, focuses on the subject to the exclusion of the object—the other, the transcendent.

Early in this century, Gertrude Stein quipped that “there is no there there.” Her pronouncement gives expression to the modern's loss of meaning and transcendence—and, I would add, in the final analysis, the loss of God.

And yet there is an immense wager in this view of art. At the risk of simplistically paraphrasing George Steiner: When we lose God, we lose art. And conversely I would add, if we lose art, we lose God. As we see in the case of Narcissus, self-centeredness paves the way to self-destruction.

Hans Urs von Balthasar notes in his book *The Glory of the Lord, Vol. 1*, that modern humanity lives in a world with very little beauty. It is a world “which is perhaps not wholly without beauty, but which can no longer see it or reckon with it.” Von Balthasar reproaches the modern secularist for this ruin of beauty.

This secularist prides himself or herself in a steady, cold stare into the mirror of reality. He or she no longer holds to “myths and fables” which might cloud a vision of *authentic* existence. Indeed, authenticity is touted by secular philosophers and psychologists to call individuals to be true to themselves—to authenticate themselves by knowing themselves. As von Balthasar teaches, however, knowing oneself is not the problem. Rather, the problem is *how* we go about knowing ourselves. The secularist authenticates himself or herself outside the reality of God or truth. And if there is no truth outside of self—“no there there”—then truth must lie within.

Hence, in a secularist philosophy, traces of God must be stripped from language and art (Derrida's “zero theology”) and thus, in effect, from consciousness. Secularists are left staring starkly into a mirror, and like Narcissus they are enamored with their reflections. But they are bored. Walker Percy, in his collection of essays *The Message in the Bottle*, asks why America, the most prosperous society in history, is bored. It is because we have discovered *ourselves* in a secular age and thus we have lost our vision of beauty.

ULTIMATELY,
SILENCE IS THE
ONLY EFFECTIVE
DENIAL OF GOD.
EVEN ART THAT
DENIES GOD
CANNOT DENY
GOD.

A CHOSEN
IGNORANCE OF
ART IS MORE THE
RESULT OF AN
UNINFORMED
SUBCULTURE
THAN AN
INFORMED
READING OF
THE BIBLE.

It is tragic enough that some segments of modern society have lost the relevance and meaning of art. But there is a far greater tragedy: I see Steiner's warning of narcissism as extending to the evangelical church. In short, the evangelical church is losing art. Indeed, in literal terms, much of the church is either suspicious of art or ignores it entirely. We warn of the dangers of film, literature, poetry, and music. But the tragic result is that as Christians we not only live in a world without beauty, but we also live in a church without beauty. Some of us live in a Christian subculture that cares more about censoring artists than extolling the God-given virtues of art to our children.

It is important to recognize that the church's suspicion of art is somewhat of a modern dilemma. Ecclesiastical history plainly shows that until recently, the church in general has not existed outside the realm of art. From the first-century catacombs of the Roman Christians to the novels of the southern writer Walker Percy, the church has inspired great art and has been inspired by great art. Historically, the Christian church has been the progenitor and guardian of art.

But that is no more. Beginning with the Reformation and the Enlightenment, the *subculture* of the modern church began to differ significantly from its ancient predecessor in many areas, but in one area in particular: art. Today the evangelical church is surrendering art and its relevance to the mundane demands of everyday life. Most Christians live outside the purview of the paintings of Chagall, O'Keefe, Brueghel; the novels of Marquez, Morrison, Baldwin; the music of Mozart, Arvo Part, Thelonius Monk; the films of Tarkovsky, Fellini, Wenders; the poetry of Homer, Paz, Angelou.

Ironically then, the Christian who ignores art agrees with a secular view of art—that art has no ultimate meaning for life nor does it reveal the God who is there. I find this fact greatly disturbing. In an area where the church believes itself to be more holy by ignoring music, film, poetry, literature, and the plastic arts, it actually looks more modernist than it does Christian.

In plain terms, the Christian church, historically the creator and guardian of great art, has abdicated its role of nurturing and appreciating great art. Meanwhile, the Bible teaches us something completely different from the modern church's attitude toward art. The question is, does the church's uneasiness with art stem from its historic faith or its modern subculture? I would argue that a chosen ignorance of art is more the result of an uninformed subculture than an informed reading of the Bible.

Psalm 19 tells us that God reveals himself to us in two major

ways: his artistry (“the heavens tell the story of God”) and his word (“the law of the Lord is perfect”). God speaks to us through symbol and language, art and word. He created us to delight in beauty, goodness, and truth. However, God, the Primary Artist, never intended us to find beauty and meaning within ourselves. Rather, we must look beyond ourselves for these things. According to Psalm 19, knowing God through the avenue of the written word is a necessary but incomplete part of the picture. Throughout its history, the church has known God through the word *and* art, truth *and* beauty, grace *and* nature.¹

As Christians, we need to come back to the whole truth—truth which is both rational and sensual. Once again, von Balthasar warns that the church has sacrificed beauty for exactness and in so doing it has lost an important element of the truth. He calls the church to break through a rational, propositional, exact view of God “in order to bring the truth of the whole into view again—truth as a transcendental property of Being, *truth which is no abstraction*” (emphasis mine).

In this sense, my answer to the question, “Is art necessary for the Christian?” is an unequivocal “yes.” Art is God-ordained; it is a divine gift that we cannot live without. Without art we lose beauty, and without beauty we lose the vision of a God who is relational, not just propositional. In short, we lose a vision of God who compels awe in the hearts of those who love him. As Wendell Berry writes in his essay, “Style and Grace,” “Works of art participate in our lives.”

Yet, if this is at all true, then what is it that art brings to the Christian? I propose that art brings three realities to our lives.

Art Transcends Us

“Creation is not a hurdle on the road to God, it is the road itself.”

—Martin Buber

We can worship art, or art can aid our worship. This is an important distinction. Many Christians conclude that if they love art they are in reality worshipping art. I have never, nor would I ever invite Christians to worship art. If we worship art we are no better than the secularist who admires the work of art but fails to see God shrouded behind that work. Or worse, we are no better than the pantheist who sees God *dwelling* in the work of art. To the secularist, there is no God to be revealed by art; to the pantheist, God is the work of art. In both world views, art loses any sense of transcendence. The work of art becomes an end in itself, not an avenue to knowing and loving God. Without a transcendent view of art, art becomes an idol, not a symbol.

ART IS
GOD-ORDAINED;
IT IS A DIVINE
GIFT THAT WE
CANNOT LIVE
WITHOUT.

¹ Art must be subsumed under specific revelation—never specific revelation under art. Therefore, specific revelation critiques and questions art. Von Balthasar writes the distinction quite nicely in Vol. 4 of *The Glory of the Lord*, “The heart of the revelation of God in Christ can be seen only by one who neither takes the cosmos as the final meaning of the revelation...nor takes man as the final meaning (as the modern period prefers to do).”

COMPARING
LOVE TO A ROSE
RESTRAINS LOVE
FROM BEING
A COLD
ABSTRACTION.

When we speak of art in terms of understanding life, we must consider how art and language function in our lives. Simply put, art and language reflect a reality beyond themselves. For example, the word "heaven" does not contain heaven itself but instead points to the concept of heaven. The word is not a cul-de-sac; it is a path to a fascinating domain we have never seen. Every time we use the word "heaven" we understand something very fundamental about life.

The point is, we cannot talk about reality directly but must talk and live in symbols. We live in a world of symbols. Even language is symbolic. It is quite strange to think that a mortal who has not seen heaven uses a word to *symbolize* heaven. This is partly what the ancients meant when they spoke of the "analogy of being." We understand ourselves, our world, and our God through analogies (symbols)—the Scriptures, stories, sermons, paintings, relationships, baptism—the list is infinite. Symbols are signposts and pictures along the way. In *Images and Symbols*, Mircea Eliade writes, "The symbol reveals certain aspects of reality...the deepest aspects...which defy any other means of knowledge. They bring to light the most hidden modalities of being."

Symbols, then, have two dimensions: the symbol itself and the reality the symbol points to. A rose is a rose, but more importantly a rose can symbolize love. The literal rose helps us to see a dimension of love we would fail to see without the rose. But the analogy of the rose does much more: it attires love with beauty, passion, vibrant color, and sensuality. Recall von Balthasar's assertion that "no truth is abstraction." Comparing love to a rose restrains love from being a cold abstraction.

But a symbol does more than incarnate abstractions. A symbol—art—brings beauty to our lives but it also brings meaning. Art is a crossing from the mundane to the beautiful and the meaningful. A transcendent view of art transforms the earthly for the purpose of disclosing a deeper reality to our existence here on earth.

Steiner, in *Real Presences*, supposes that transcendence is possible because theology undergirds art and language, "It [his essay] proposes that any coherent understanding of what language is and how language performs, that any coherent account of the capacity of human speech to communicate meaning and feeling is, in the final analysis, underwritten by the assumption of God's presence." To Steiner, art is a passage from "meaning to meaningfulness." Borrowing terms from Chomsky, art is the "surface structure" that leads us into the "deep structure" of the divine presence. In other words, art, beginning with a natural, earthy perspective, transcends us into a divine spectacle.

Some use art as a shibboleth to distinguish between naturalism and supernaturalism. Because I teach that the Christian should appreciate art, read literature, view films, and listen to music, I have been called a naturalist. Often I chalk this up to an uninformed response by a Christian who is terrified of mystery. The so-called supernaturalist, who by definition lives outside the mundane realm of art, pretends to know God outside of any “human” vehicle. He or she claims to understand God directly, without the use of symbols or art.

This belief, though, is more than supernaturalism—it is mysticism. It is fideism, and at its worst it is narcissism because the person projects himself or herself upon God. On the contrary, an orthodox, supernatural viewpoint understands that the knowledge of God is not *immediate* but must be mediated—mediated through symbol, art, word. Good art says that God can be known in multiple dimensions but cannot be apprehended, controlled, or put in my own personal box—that he is not made in my mirror image. Ultimately, then, the Christian who rejects art believes earth to be more true than heaven, because he or she sees no need for symbol. And without symbol we cannot see beyond this world.

If art has two dimensions, it also has two functions. It simultaneously reveals and conceals God. Art is an expression of God’s infinite mystery and extravagant beauty. But it is also an expression of something strangely familiar. Like Lucy’s sighting of Aslan in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, something leaps inside us when we see art. Whether this happens when we hear the music of U2, read the novels of Flannery O’Connor, see the drawings of Blake, or read the poetry of Langston Hughes, something deep inside us leaps because we recognize the *unknown known*.

Art Questions Us

“Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time.”

—Thomas Merton

“Love the questions themselves,” pleads Rilke to his young friend in *Letters to a Young Poet*. Perhaps we shun art because we hate the questions that art raises in us. If art transcends us, helping us to see multitudinous pictures of God, then art also questions us, helping us to know ourselves. The difference between art and narcissism here is quite simple: Narcissism reflects the viewer without questioning, while art reflects something that naturally questions the viewer.

Let me illustrate this by pointing to the teaching of Martin Buber. In *I and Thou*, Buber writes that humans cannot have authentic relationship without an “I” and a “Thou.” He uses these two terms

THE CHRISTIAN
WHO REJECTS ART
BELIEVES EARTH
TO BE MORE TRUE
THAN HEAVEN,
BECAUSE HE OR
SHE SEES NO NEED
FOR SYMBOL.

ART IS ONE
IMPORTANT
ELEMENT OF
COMMUNITY
THAT HELPS
ME TO
UNDERSTAND
MYSELF BY
QUESTIONING
ME RATHER
THAN MERELY
AFFIRMING ME.

to signify that relationship is comprised of subject relating to a subject, not subject to object. When anyone in a relationship becomes an object, then the relationship, rather than being an "I—Thou" relationship, becomes an "I—It" relationship.

As an example, Buber speaks of how two people view a tree differently. One may love the tree for its beauty and majesty and thus respect it. The subject (the person who admires the tree) loves another subject, the tree. The tree means something to the person's life. Since I was a boy, I have remembered an oak tree that stood on the edge of our farm in Tennessee. In my more pensive times, I would escape to the oak tree and sit under it for hours. I do not know if that oak tree still stands today, but I hope it does. I love that tree because it means something to me. That tree is one of my sacred places. Buber would say I have an "I—Thou" relationship with my oak tree. Subject relates to subject.

A carpenter, however, would see my tree very differently. He or she would look at the tree with one question: "How many board feet can I get out of this tree?" In other words, "How might I *use* this tree for my own purposes?" All at once, the carpenter is the subject but the tree has become an object. In this "I—It" relationship, the carpenter (subject) stands over the tree (object). The tree does not address the carpenter; the carpenter has full sway over the tree. Buber says this is not relationship because the carpenter and tree are not in conversation with one another. One sets out to exploit the other. By using this example, Buber was not espousing pantheism—he was not saying that God resides in the tree and thus God speaks through the tree. Rather, he was speaking of how humans should view life and others. He was critiquing a faulty world view held by the subject. Essentially, he was saying that one cannot love or understand without the *other*. Bernard of Clairvaux addressed this in Christian terms: "He who understands truth without loving it, or loves without understanding, possesses neither the one nor the other."

So how does this relate to art? Art is wholly other. Art is not the same as I am, and hence it ushers me into the presence of the other. The artist brings his or her world view to my life, and there the work of art addresses me and questions me. Another's world view challenges my own and hopefully shakes me out of my provincialism and narcissism. That is the meaning of Merton's quote at the beginning of this section. Art is one important element of community that helps me to understand myself by questioning me rather than merely affirming me.

The travesty of idolatry is that an idol reflects the worshipper without question. Idols do not bear witness to truth. They only project one's image, much like the pool in the story of Narcissus.

The solitude of the idol applauds me; the community of art examines me.

My task then is to widen this community immensely. My personal "larger community" includes artists as diverse as Picasso, Augustine, and Carson McCullers. Picasso paints a world that is relative, fractured and polyvalent. His emphasis on a certain aspect of truth challenges my absolutism. Augustine, in *City of God*, critiques a pagan view of history by representing an eternal view over a cyclical view. His world view encourages my despair in a history that seems to make no sense. Carson McCullers, in the *Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, writes of a grotesque world. Her *other* world provokes and challenges my insistence on normalcy.

What would our world be without Chagall, Fellini, Faulkner, Maclean, Dostoevsky, Rembrandt, Dante, Marquez, Chekov, Strindberg, Verdi, Messiaen? I believe that we would be impoverished because our community of otherness would be tragically diminished. One of the great advantages for the modern is that he or she has thousands of years of art to remember and to be questioned by. And yet many Christians live outside the domain of these artists; their art might as well not exist. The result for our community of faith is that we live in a selfish, self-imposed exile. When we live outside the realm of the other, it is impossible for the other to question our lives. Furthermore, living outside the other (the Thou) draws us near to a great danger: We begin to believe the illusion that our way of thinking is the only way, that our truth is the "total" truth.

Emmanuel Levinas, in his book *Totality and Infinity*, warns us that a person who thinks this way is in truth a totalitarian.

Art Remembers Heaven

"Beauty is the infinite presented in the finite."

—Schelling

We live between the cross and the resurrection. Steiner, in *Real Presences*, writes that we live in the Sabbath between the suffering of the Friday crucifixion and the hope of the Sunday resurrection. He states that art helps us live with the tragedy of the cross while awaiting the future resurrection. Art reminds us that heaven is still to come.

Our Lord instructs us on this matter through his prayers. And indeed Christ often prayed strange prayers. He prayed one in particular to teach his disciples to pray, recorded in Matthew 6, and we call it the Lord's Prayer. What amazes me most is how earthy his prayer is. It acknowledges a fractured world: heaven is not earth

ART HELPS US
LIVE WITH
THE TRAGEDY
OF THE CROSS
WHILE
AWAITING
THE FUTURE
RESURRECTION.

WE ARE
PILGRIMS IN A
STRANGE
LAND, BUT
GOD HAS PLACED
REMEMBRANCES
OF HEAVEN
ALONG OUR
WAY.

and earth is not heaven. There is a rift between the noumenal and the phenomenal. As Christians we cannot tolerate gnosticism or pantheism because it confuses heaven with earth or earth with heaven.

But our Lord prays for things on earth to be done as they are in heaven. I find it very interesting that he prays for the kingdom to come to earth, not for the believers to come to the kingdom. He recognizes that his followers remain on earth as exiles of heaven.

And without art we live in an unadorned exile. Yes, we are pilgrims in a strange land, but God has placed remembrances of heaven along our way. Art on earth gives us a view of a world that is not ours right now—a world that we do not live in but that we have a suspicion of, one that we desire but cannot touch. The Renaissance saw painting as a window on the world. And art is, in the final analysis, a window on heaven. From Homer's *Odyssey* to Dante's *Divine Comedy* to Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror*, art transcends mundane space and time and transports us to radiant images we could never have in a world without art.

Mozart's *Requiem* evokes God's fury against death. Melville's *Moby Dick* pursues God's hiddenness. Chagall's *Time is a Clock Without Hands* alludes to God's eternal whimsy. Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* yields to the kindness of God in a savage world. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* gropes for the fatherhood of God by reminding us of the tragedy of a fatherless society. Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* calls on God's justice. Arvo Part's *Misere* remembers God's tears. And Georges de la Tour's *Christ in the Carpenter Shop* sights the faint light of heaven in the shadow of earth. Do we see these glimpses, even if through a glass darkly? Do we catch these works of art winking at us from twinkling, knowing eyes? These luminous signposts provide glimmers of heaven. They participate in our lives by giving us glimpses of heaven on earth.

Above all else, art is the remembrance that Beauty will come—through the messenger who will make all things right, the one who has made all things beautiful through the artistry of redemption. His beauty was fashioned not by the glory of heaven but by the cross of this earth. His death ruined the tragedy of this world. And art helps us wait faithfully for the second resurrection by reminding us that the darkness has not overcome the light, that death has not swallowed up life. "Beauty will save the world," says Father Zosima in *The Brothers Karamazov*. And so it will.²

2 This essay more than any I have written has taught me that writing is not solitary but communal. My thanks to Suzanne Hudson, Dan Allender, Stuart Hancock, and John Cunningham, but especially Scott Sawyer who shaped so much of this essay.

Works Cited