

by Don Michael Hudson

Reading

the World

Where does

Art, beauty, and the voice of God. And what of beauty? Six years ago, as a 37-year-old American evangelical Christian, it dawned on me that I had spent a great part of my life searching for truth at the expense of beauty. Or maybe it is better to say that I had obsessed myself with the pursuit of “true” truths—books, theology, languages, doctrine, and graduate degrees. I was searching for the God I could understand with my mind, grasp within my reason, grip with the gray matter of my consciousness. Eventually I discovered that all these things were mere mind games—every one of them. Not that any of my mind searches were bad, but something was haunting and calling my heart. There was something missing, something more tugging at me.

I had bought into one of the most deadening myths of American evangelical Christianity—that God resides squarely within the Word, but not the world and the earthy, sensual things of this world. I was taught by the mainstream that God was a rational God, but beware of the sensual, dancing, untamed Creator of beauty. I was taught that God was the Creator, but beware of the creators of sensual, dancing, untamed beauty.

I felt this tension fiercely in my mind. While reading and studying books about God in the seminary and the church, I would secretly steal away to the arms of beauty. William Faulkner’s *Light in August*. Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*. Pablo Picasso’s *The Yellow Sweater*. Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. Arvo Pärt’s *Passio*. Gabriel García Márquez’s *Love in the Time of Cholera*. Robert Plant’s “Ship of Fools.”

Illustration by M.P. Wiggins



it say that **God** will speak only through the **Word**?

Gerard Manley Hopkins' "As Kingfishers Catch Fire." They seduced me. They spoke to me—spoke something to me that the Word alone could never tell. They consoled me. Where does it say that God would be limited to the Word and the Word alone? And what of the world? Has God, the Western-conceived rational God, absconded into the Word only to abandon this beautiful world?

IF IT IS TRUE that every human being bears the image of God, then every human being who creates,

speaks, sings, writes, or sculpts reflects something of the Creator. In fact, I would argue that the only effective denial of the existence of God is the refusal to create—to remain silent in the face of chaos and suffering. At any point of human artistic creation, we press the fingerprints of God into existence. In the shadow of God's absence in this world, every day is an opportunity to express, and every creative act calls forth the presence of God in beautiful colors and sounds and

textures. God is present in sensuous beauty just as much as God is present in the rational word.

Psalm 19:1-3 reminds us of the reality of God-in-the-world. "For the heavens declare the glory of the Lord, the skies show the beautiful work of his hands. Every day the heavens speak, and night after night they show forth knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard." The Hebrew in these verses is quite astonishing. Literally, verse 1 goes like this: The heavens tell the story of the glory—literally, the heaviness, the weightiness, the substance—of God. God's invisible glory is seen in the tangible, beautiful things of this world. God's substance is revealed in the created acts of this world.

In seminary I was taught the "two-book" theory. One book is the Word of God or what the theologians call "special revelation." The other book is comprised of the things of this world, what is called "general revelation." Time and again, I was taught that special revelation speaks more eloquently and more directly to the "truth" of God. But why is this so? And is it true? Nowhere in the scriptures do I find this teaching. Has this belief in the pre-eminence of special revelation emerged more from modern thinking than from the radical vision of Psalm 19? If I understand the teachings of the scriptures, the Word and the world speak eloquently, not one better than the other—just differently. The Word presents one poetic vision of God and the world another. Will I stand in awe before both poetic visions? The beauty of God-in-the-world is the reality that we can see and experience God everywhere. "There is no speech or language where the

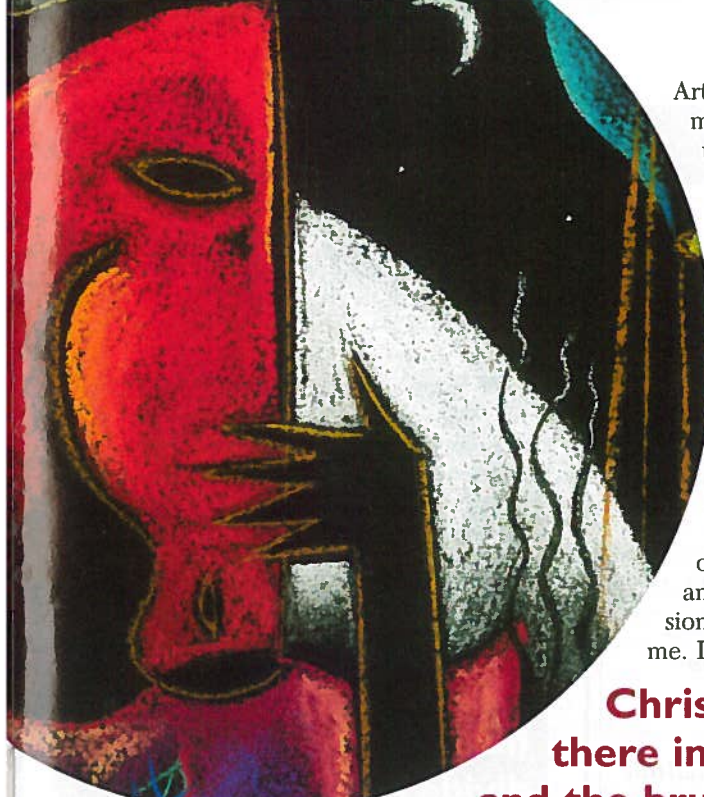
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Art is a place where we meet God and God meets us, a place that evokes communion and worship, creativity and imagination.

Intriguingly, whether a work is categorized as secular or sacred, Christian or non-Christian, isn't really the point. Instead, there is something about the work of art that calls me to worship, and in opening myself to art, I am allowing God an occasion to connect and speak to me. If something is sacred, it

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voice is not heard." Art is an eloquent language revealing the presence of the Lord.

For most of my life, I have heard Christians make the case for a very strong distinction between "Christian" art and secular art. But can we comfortably make such a distinction in the arts? To be quite honest, I am suspicious of most so-called "Christian" art because typically the *message* of the piece overtakes the *aesthetic* of the piece. Truth dominates and eventually diminishes beauty. Once again God-in-the-Word intercepts God-in-the-world. True art, however, calls forth our individual freedom and our own creativity to imagine God in ways we could never imagine without the artist's vision.

More tragically, though, we lose something central to our humanity when we divide our world into neat little packages of sacred and secular. If I understand Psalm 19 and other passages in scripture, there is no difference between the sacred and the secular. In my world, anything secular can at any moment become sacred, and conversely, anything sacred can become secular. If we can reach out of traditional evangelical thinking for a moment and allow no separation in sacred and secular, we can see new and significant realities:

does not necessarily mean that it is Christian, but that it is set apart from the mundane and the banal, and it brings the profound presence of God to my world. Every moment is an opportunity to create and experience a sacred world or a secular world. This is one of the great ironies of our Christian culture today: By refusing art or ignoring art we lead acutely secular lives. However, by opening ourselves to the artist's vision, we have the chance to live in the splendid light of the sacred.

WHEN I ENTER an art gallery or watch a film or listen to music, I don't ask myself whether the work is sacred or secular. Instead, I expect to be moved by the work, to be challenged, to be enriched as a human being. I expect the artist to expand my vision of the world. But I also expect more. I am eager to glimpse traces of God. My theology of art is really quite simple. I believe that Christ is seen in all things—everything visible and invisible.

Two amazing verses in the New Testament are significant for this thought: "For by Christ were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or

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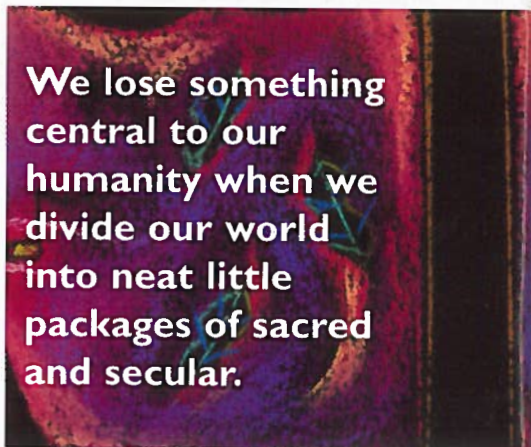
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powers: all things were created by him, and for him. And he is before all things, and by him all things consist" (Colossians 1:16-17). Paul tells us explicitly that nothing in this world exists outside the purview of Christ. Christ is "the firstborn of every creature." Christ is the beginning of everything and the end of all things. Can Picasso truly exist outside of Christ? Or Hemingway? Or Pablo Neruda? This does not make these artists Christians by any means, but nor does it relegate their work to a diminished or degenerate art because they were not Christian. Instead, I would argue



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that Christ lies in wait there in the colors and the brushstrokes, the lines and the syncopations. Further and most beautifully, we are told that all things were created "by him and for him." All things created for Christ—imagine that. I wonder at times if my Lord loves to be swept away in the arms of beauty just as much as I do. I believe so.

Indeed, the heavens declare, tell the story of, paint, sculpt, swing, compose, weave, and imagine the glory of the Lord. As does Hemingway. And Picasso. And Van Morrison. And Jean-Michel Basquiat. And Terrence Malick. And Toni Morrison. And Mary Cassatt. And Langston Hughes. And Julio Cortázar. And Pablo Neruda. And Radiohead. And....And what of beauty? Beauty speaks the inexpressible, astonishing glory of the Lord. And Christ plays in ten thousand places. Will we dare to expand our visions and join Christ in his frolic with beauty? We might be pleasantly surprised with the world God will show us. ■

Don Michael Hudson is a founding member of CAST: a center for arts, social justice, and theology (www.wearenear.com). He lives in Seattle.

Works Cited