

ARTS

THE ARTS IN RELIGIOUS AND THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

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Theology of the Arts and the Vocation of the Artist

by
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Where are the creative energies and best hopes for fresh thinking in the study of religion and the arts today? My answer is theology of the arts, a peculiar interstice between theology and practice, which is, quite literally, where I stand professionally. I was trained as and continue to work as a visual artist; I was also trained as a theologian. I now teach theory and modern art history (which I prefer to call cultural history) in a university art department dominated by the studio arts. I am committed to investigating how religion, politics, and broad processes such as secularization and industrialization have impacted artists and the visual arts.

A theology of the arts should be carefully distinguished from theological interpretation of art works, which involves examining the theology implicit or explicit in an art work or artist's *oeuvre*. Thanks to the work of many scholars much attention has been paid to theological interpretation of both historical and contemporary art works. This has been one fruitful arena for theoretical work during the past years, combining as it does theological analysis and practical insight. This has been the dominant form of writing about the relationship of theology and art, in part because historically most art within Judeo-Christian culture has been religious.

By its very name, a theology of the arts is oriented theologically. But just what does "theology of the arts" mean? Following the perspective Wilson Yates articulated in *The Arts in Theological Education*,¹ a theology of the arts delineates the role of the arts in addressing the theological and ethical dimensions of culture, and it also sets forth the limits of what the arts can and cannot do for theological understanding. A theology of the arts thus moves in two directions. On one hand, we may focus primarily on the arts as vehicles for communicating theological and ethical issues within a given culture, for example, postmodern North American culture. On the other hand, we may focus more on theological ideas and the possible relevance, as well as the limitations, of the arts in addressing

those ideas. I propose, however, that a theology of the arts is not limited to consideration of how the arts express, validate and help to shape Jewish or Christian or Hindu world views.

The primary function of the arts historically in western culture, at least until the Renaissance, but in some parts of Europe extending until the sixteenth century reformations, was to propagate and circulate doctrines of the Christian church. To put it simply, the arts, including painting, printmaking and sculpture, were teaching tools for religious ideologies. Within modern and contemporary culture, however, where there are few shared religious values, the arts have taken on a series of other functions. They are used for entertainment, or they are offered as consumer goods. At times, artists have adopted a more critical or visionary stance and have produced art with political, ethical or religious content.

While to speak about theology of the arts in our present context may seem anachronistic, it can actually help us identify the unique value of art that has moral and religious content. During a time such as ours when the arts are not primarily understood as embodying either religious or moral values, a theology of the arts can articulate a counter-understanding. If the dominant understanding of the arts within the public sphere is driven by a materialistic and consumer-related ethic, then perhaps a theology of the arts participates in what Rita Felski has called a "counter-public sphere."² Drawing on Habermas' model of the bourgeois public sphere as a critical and independent public domain for discourse, Felski introduces the idea of the counter-public sphere as the site of critical oppositional forces within the society of late capitalism. She then shows the importance of a feminist counter-public sphere that functions both to generate solidarity among women, and to challenge and change existing structures of authority.

The idea that theology of the arts could be part of a counter-public sphere may at first seem a bit frivolous. Who would care? But my point is that

theology of the arts articulates a perspective directly at odds with dominant cultural values, and I think we are wise to acknowledge this from the start.

As a theoretical enterprise, a theology of the arts may address many questions: the revelatory, prophetic and sacramental potential of the arts; how the arts aid in understanding Jewish and Christian doctrines such as creation, fall, reconciliation and eschatology, as well as post-christian ideas and values concerning the sacred; the role of the church and secular institutions in supporting the arts; the religious and moral dimensions of creativity (which is a theme I have explored in relation to Mikhail Bakhtin's early writing³); and the vocation of the artist.

This last category, the vocation of the artist, is the focus of my current work, and it is my starting point in attempting to engage in dialogue with secular artists. I think a related set of issues concerns theological education and the arts: how do we teach people about the arts from within that setting, especially if we want to go beyond simple theological interpretation of art works? What can it mean to talk about the vocation of artists in a commodity-driven postmodern culture in which artists must vie for limited opportunities to enter the art market and gallery system—and then, even when one “arrives,” the economic realities are such that the best galleries are unable to sell much work?

Within the discourse about late twentieth-century postmodern art, especially since the late 1960's, attention has shifted from interest in the artist and the artist's biography to concern with either the object or the viewer. In particular, there are the essays by Roland Barthes (1968)⁴ and Michel Foucault (1969)⁵ that dealt with the death or disappearance of the author (I substitute “artist”) as if art, like history or God, is “dead.” I see the shift from concern about the artist to an object- or viewer-centered criticism as the signal of a particular loss: what is lost is the sense that the artist has a *vocatio*, a calling to do artistic work of spiritual, moral, and political significance.

What about this word *vocatio*? Tertullian was evidently the first to translate the Greek *klesis* as *vocatio* in the third century. The history of its use has evolved since its appearance in early Christian texts, including the New Testament and writings of the church fathers such as Basil and Cassian, up to Erasmus and Luther. In its early usage in both eastern and western traditions *vocatio* meant not only renunciation, but

also grace from God; it was blended with the idea of a special profession based on aptitude and right intention.

Writing about its subsequent history, Karl Holl agrees with Max Weber's thesis that monasticism played a fundamental role in articulating the idea of a special calling, but Holl and Weber disagree about the relative importance of that role. While Weber asserts that through its high evaluation of productive work, monasticism prepared the way for later secular usage of the term vocation, Holl counters that the secular occupations themselves helped to strengthen the idea of a special calling.⁶ Holl claims that German mystics such as Meister Eckhart articulated a notion of a call from God completely independent of monasticism or entrance into a religious order. Instead, a call could be related to secular work through which one could experience the ideal of the nearness of God.⁷ By the late sixteenth century a complete reversal of the meaning of the word had occurred. At first the word had meant that the monk alone has a special calling. Luther's assertion that only through work in the world could one genuinely realize the calling of God reflects this reversal. In its contemporary usage the word vocation has been even more thoroughly secularized, so that it is virtually synonymous with profession, occupation, or work. The secularization of the artist's vocation took place over a long period and through complex ideological processes—from the Renaissance through the sixteenth-century reformations and the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, to the rise and fall of the modernist paradigms in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In proposing that postmodern artists have a distinctive vocation, I am not trying to suggest that artists should return to making art for Christian or other religious institutions. I am, rather, claiming that artists need to pay careful attention to the nature of their activity in the world, and that the word vocation brings to our attention distinctive characteristics of that activity.

And how might artistic activity be characterized? I suggest that we consider two possible paradigms or models of the artist's vocation: cultural criticism and visionary activity. Art that takes its mission of cultural criticism seriously not only needs to empower us to imagine the dreadful in terms of nuclear extinction, but also it should address issues such as racism, invasions of the underdeveloped world, multinational complicity in governmental corruption, and the

NOTES

1. Wilson Yates, *The Arts in Theological Education: New Possibilities for Integration* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1987).
2. Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989): 164-174.
3. See the author's book, *The Gift of Form*.
4. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image-Music-Text* (London: Fontana, 1977): 208-213.
5. Michel Foucault, "What is an Author," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977): 113-138.
6. Karl Holl, "History of the Word Vocation" (*Beruf*), Pamphlet trans. by Hebert F. Peacock, n.d., pg. 14; and Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958). Holl also mentions the importance of Berthold of Regensburg, Aquinas and Tauler in developing the idea of vocation.
7. Holl, 19, 22.

feminization of poverty. Obviously, this is a massive agenda. We bear religious and moral responsibility for others and for the world; in Bakhtin's words we are *answerable* to and for one another. The results of abdicating that responsibility are apparent in the world at large by even the most cursory glance at the news of ecological devastation in Alaska, in the republics surrounding the sarcophagus of Chernobyl, and in the destruction of the rain forests. Our abdication of responsibility for other persons is apparent in the inner cities, where poverty, inadequate health care and violent crime are rife.

The artist as a cultural critic deals with these themes. The work of Suzanne Lacy is a powerful example of this kind of commitment. But there is a contradiction in linking creative activity to the themes of suffering, destruction and death. As a creative act, a work of art is also an affirmation of life. Yet it may be *necessary* to create a profound work of art about suffering, destruction and death. Each artist's challenge is to engage in reflection about the timing and appropriateness of varying responses.

What about the idea of visionary activity, what we have sometimes called prophecy? While it has roots in biblical texts, prophecy, like cultural criticism, is a social practice. There are three moments in prophecy: the prophet receives a message, then relates this message to present concerns or core cultural values, and finally helps to stimulate action around those concerns and values.

The prophet answers to the tradition and to a perceived need in the present with the goal of promoting an active, committed and responsible answer from the audience. The prophet speaks with a specific message to a particular group in a given situation. Indeed, prophetic criticism is most powerful not because of its universalistic message but precisely because of its particularity. And, as I wrote earlier, action may result.

In my usage, the words "prophetic" and "visionary" are virtually synonymous, but I use "prophetic" advisedly, especially when I talk with secular artists, because of its distinctly Christian roots and meaning. Language such as this may seem archaic or, worse, meaningless. What I am trying to point to, nonetheless, is the nature of this special kind of activity. The work of Leon Golub, David Wojnarowicz and Martha Rosler illustrates a prophetic sensibility in very different forms.

In postmodern culture many artists retreat into solipsistic activity, into a more privatized model of art-making.

Some return to (or continue) making artful objects—clothing, dishes, furniture—thus making it possible for those who can afford these artifacts to live in visually stimulating and functional environments. Other artists abandon traditional forms of image-making and move into persuasive and powerful media such as computers, video and television. A few take a path such as Sue Coe's, becoming modern day Daumier-style illustrators, occasionally hired by the likes of *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* magazine, but mostly unable to have images widely distributed.

With these kinds of alternatives how can we engage secular artists with religious and moral issues, or talk about the meaning of the artist's vocation? Probably not by engaging them in discussions about Christianity or Judaism, or any other religious tradition. Instead, I think it is crucial to begin by teaching them what "religious" means, what "moral" and "ethical" refer to. It is important to bring the word "theology" back into common parlance. Most of the artists I know and work with have not had a traditional religious education, nor are they religious people in any traditional sense of the word.

We live in a largely secular, postmodern, and nuclear era. This complex phrase indicates that: a) there are no shared religious values and, in fact, no religious values at all in some quarters; b) there is no consensus within the cultural arena about what art is and should be, and little attempt to articulate its purposes; and c) the stakes in this highly ambiguous and uncertain context are high, i.e., nuclear annihilation, from nuclear waste if not from bombs, and ecological destruction are distinct possibilities. In my view, our social, political and ecological situation on the planet lends vividness and urgency to the religious and artistic spheres of culture because it is through religious and artistic imagination that we envision the future. Theorists such as Fredric Jameson have bemoaned the loss of ability to imagine possible futures other than total devastation. I agree with him that we must regain the capacity to act and struggle, a capacity rooted in imagination and one which is in many respects presently neutralized.

A theology of the arts is one direction for creative and productive thinking in the study of religion and the arts. Articulated within a counter-public sphere and developed in dialogue with artists, a theology of the arts may help provide the theoretical basis for action and struggle, and for imagining the future. ❖