

The Good, the True, and the Beautiful

Luce Chair Fosters Philosophical Dialogue on Theology and Art

by **Gordon Graham**

The Christian religion has had a long association with the arts. Indeed, the development of the fine arts as we mostly think of them—painting, sculpture, poetry, music, and drama—is an inextricable part of the story of Christianity. It is only in the last 200 years or so that the idea arose of “art for art’s sake.” With it came an ambition on the part of the arts to secure their autonomy, finally freed, as many contemporary artists now see it, from a stifling servitude to religion.

From time to time within the history of this long association, the arts have been embroiled in theological controversy. The Psalms, said or sung, were a crucial part of the Jewish religion, but Judaism forbade any visual depiction. Much later Islam continued with the same ban on the use of representative art for religious purposes, and extended its objection to the use of music in worship as well. In between, the early Christians, while making yet more extensive use of hymns and psalms than did their Jewish contemporaries, continued to struggle with doubts about visual art, but finally permitted its use, even the depiction of Jesus himself, though primarily for the education and enlightenment of the majority of Christians who could not read.

Over the centuries there were iconoclasts who, literally, smashed religious images. The Protestant Reformation extended this opposition to sculpture, and Calvinism forbade any music in worship other than the human voice. The objection to statues is still evident in hundreds of European churches, where empty niches and idle pedestals act as reminders of the religious figures for

which they were built, and in a few places still, the church organ is anathema.

In the late twentieth century, a quite different aspect of the relation between art and Christianity has come to the fore. Though the arts have largely won their autonomy from religion, they have come to be seen as allies in the war against the materialism of an increasingly secularized world. The result has been an immense number of initiatives—festivals, conferences, courses, books, journals, and academic programs—all intended to allow art and religion to find a shared purpose, and even a common voice in the world at large.

When the Luce Foundation decided to honor its founder Henry Luce III by the creation of a new professorship at Princeton Theological Seminary, it was obvious that the most appropriate subject for such a position should combine his two great philanthropic interests—the arts and the Christian religion. And Princeton being the world’s most distinguished Presbyterian seminary, where music and the word have long had close attention, it was also natural that the appointment should be used to emphasize the rather more neglected visual arts. How did it come about, then, that in the end the appointment was not of a theologian but of a philosopher, and one whose work in aesthetics had focused on music and architecture more than it had on painting or sculpture? Ultimately this is a question that can only be answered by the Seminary’s president, faculty, and trustees who made the appointment. But viewed from my perspective, it is possible to tell a story that naturally leads me from past to present.



Photo: Emily Dumler

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Aesthetics as a subject is largely the invention of the eighteenth century. That’s when the term itself was first used, and also the time when the idea that art was a distinctive realm of human experience and endeavor came to prominence. But the things we call the arts—drama, music, painting, sculpture—caught the attention of philosophers from the time of Plato and Aristotle, 500 years before Christ. Their interest lay in trying to understand the nature, value, and importance of these peculiarly human activities. This remains a subject of philosophical interest, but unhappily philosophical aesthetics has too often broken adrift from the thing that gives it life—the arts themselves.

It was the awareness of this rupture that first prompted me—a moral philosopher by training—to offer lectures on the philosophy of the arts at St. Andrews University in Scotland, where I taught from 1975 to 1995. My hope was to show the art lovers amongst my students just how interesting philosophy could be. Confined to the lecture room this had some success, but a huge added benefit



Bust of Plato

came when, by a rather odd combination of events, I was commissioned to create a University Music Center. The purpose of the center was to provide for the very best music making and music learning, of every kind and at every level, for staff and students, and in the absence of a department of music, to draw on the great pool of musical expertise in the surrounding community. The post was managerial and part time, not a full-time musical one. Inevitably it required me to think hard about the nature and value of music and



Rembrandt, *Aristotle contemplating a bust of Homer*, 1653

what it brings to human life as a whole. These are essentially philosophical questions, and so my continuing occupation as a philosopher stood me in good stead. But I had to pursue them in conversation with a wide variety of people whose musical abilities far exceeded my own.

The result was five of the most interesting years of my career—1990 to 1995. One important bridge lay in church music. Having sung in choirs for years myself, and

studied various aspects of the philosophy of religion, I was now both obliged and enabled to put everything together to both practical and theoretical effect. I organized concerts and tours, and conducted choirs at the same time as publishing essays about music for philosophers and giving philosophical lectures to musicians. Gradually my repertoire in the philosophy of art was extended to take in first architecture, then the visual arts, and then poetry—all in the interest of understanding the illumination the arts can bring to the experience of being a human being.

One important topic emerged from this activity. Art and religion can be allies—but they can also be rivals. Indeed, perhaps at the present time their relationship is more marked by rivalry than anything else, as art, having gained its independence, seeks to provide the secular world of the West with alternative “spiritual” values. Understanding the basis of this rivalry, and identifying both the positive and the negative within it, is

Art at Princeton Seminary

In its seventh year of operation, PTS’s Erdman Art Gallery now receives so many submissions that it doesn’t need to solicit them. An art committee of two professors, the Seminary’s graphic designer, and Mary Grace Royal, community programs coordinator at continuing education, chooses the art to be exhibited. “The gallery is purely for the pleasure of the community,” says Royal. The committee tries to include a variety of media including sculpture, oil painting, watercolor painting, and prints.

Chinese Christian painter He Qi, sculptor Lynda Juel, and Russian painter Alexander Anufriev have exhibited paintings of biblical scenes, metal sculptures, and oil paintings of angels. “We also hope to have more events connected to our exhibits,” Royal says. This summer, photographer Paul Grand showed his work in an exhibit titled “When the Photographer is Ready, Lord Buddha Will Appear,” a series of images of the Buddha that he took in Southeast Asia. The exhibition was accompanied by a continuing education event led by a local Buddhist nun titled “What is Buddhism?” Grand addressed the group after the course. “My practice is seeing,” he said. While some photographers take up to 3,000 rolls of film on a trip, he takes an hour to frame one photograph. “Edward Abbey wrote that the present moment fully lived is the eternal. For me, this is my way of feeling the eternal,” he said.

This fall, PTS trustee Heather Sturt Haaga exhibited her paintings in a show titled “The Spaces in Our Lives.” She paints to catch fleeting moments in spaces that constantly change, to capture space that leads viewers into their own spaces, their own stories. In November and December, Charles McCollough will exhibit a series of sculptures titled “The Art of the Parables.” McCollough imagines in clay how the word-pictures of Jesus offer “in-sight” as well as sound. Later this year, a group of iconographers from Trinity Episcopal Church in Princeton will exhibit their icons. For the past ten years, the group has met at the church to paint according to the ancient practices of the Eastern Orthodox Church and to study under master iconographer Vladislav Andrejev, who founded the Prosopon School of Iconography.

For more information on upcoming Erdman Art Gallery exhibits, go to www.ptsem.edu/ce/erdmanartgallery.php. To view works from past exhibits, go to www.ptsem.edu/news/galleries/index.php.



Alexander Anufriev, *Urban Angel*



Charles McCollough, *Prodigal Son*

a philosophical task. It requires exploration of certain key concepts. Is the "spiritual" in art as good as, or a poor substitute for, the "sacred" in religion? Can "the beauty of holiness" be replaced by "the holiness of beauty"? To approach these issues primarily in the light of either theological doctrines or aesthetic theories is to close off many of the questions that need to be explored if theology and art theory are to enter into dialogue and be enabled to address and enrich the cultural context of the Western world today.

For the most part, though, modern philosophy has parted company with theology, and vice versa. While in times past they were collaborators in the project of understanding the ancient trio of "the Good, the True, and the Beautiful," the combination of Enlightenment philosophy and Protestant theology have led to their estrangement. This seems to me a radically unhappy rupture, but for someone who holds such a view, often there is nothing to be done but to lament it. It is against this background that the prospect of holding a newly created chair of philosophy and the arts in a leading theological seminary takes on the significance it has. Here is a unique opportunity to formulate the conditions under which a fresh dialogue between religion and the arts can begin. It involves uncovering their truly common ground, and by the same token dispelling easy but mistaken assumptions about what they share. These are issues for philosophy rather than theology or the arts themselves, which is why philosophy may be the discipline that enables the right kind of dialogue. This is one that will both be and sound relevant to an increasingly secularized world in which the voice of theology is getting fainter and where the voice of the arts is more likely to be heard.

In my efforts to realize this opportunity, I will teach M.Div. courses and offer Ph.D. seminars on the central relevant topics of philosophy of the arts, philosophy of religion, and philosophy, art, and culture. Publication will also be important. The first essay published in my new position—"Can there be public architecture?"—appeared in the spring 2006 issue of the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, and my forthcoming book titled *Art and Re-enchantment*

will be published by Oxford University Press in 2007. Other avenues have opened up as well. Having been involved in radio for a good many years, I recently had the chance to make a series of four radio programs, broadcast by the BBC in Britain but more widely available through the world wide web. Titled "God's Craftsmen," the series looked at the relation of art and faith through the lives and work of four great artists—architect Christopher Wren, poet John Donne, painter Caravaggio, and composer J.S. Bach. (See http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio/noscript.shtml?/radio/aod/scotland_aod.shtml?scotland/religion2.)

These programs were made with the assistance of the Seminary's recording studio, and discussions are underway for developing opportunities for students to make more effective use of the audio component of the internet in their ministries. On the visual side, I have joined the advisory committee of the Erdman Art Gallery, and here, too,

my hope is that the opportunity the gallery presents can be exploited for a better engagement by Seminary students with the visual arts. Meanwhile, conversations with musicians in the Seminary and beyond are opening up discussion about collaborative courses in which music, philosophy, and theology might be combined in mutually enriching ways.

The new Luce Chair, as it has finally been configured, is unique. My task and my opportunity is to make it a position that others envy the Seminary for having, and seek to emulate if they can, not out of envy, but because of the fertile area that it shows the borderlands of philosophy, theology, and the arts to be. ■

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J.S. Bach



John Donne



Caravaggio



Christopher Wren