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Natural Beauty

A Theological History

There is a sacred place in central Arkansas that is known only to locals, who refer to it simply as "the camp." They are speaking of Camp Mitchell, a retreat center owned and operated by the Episcopal Diocese of Arkansas. The camp is perched on the edge of a dramatic bluff on top of Petit Jean Mountain, the only high place for miles. Cabins look out over a lush valley made up of a patchwork of farmland and wilderness. Birds soar high over the meeting houses, taking prayers and human imagination with them. There is a sense of stillness there, a place where time slows and busyness subsides. And in the middle of the camp lies a small, unassuming chapel that is easy to miss at first glance. From the front, the building looks like just another cabin. The

surprise comes when one enters and discovers that there are no walls on the sides and very few items that would suggest a consecrated place. There are as few artificial boundaries as possible between the worshiper and the natural place. Rustic folding chairs face forward, and one's eyes are drawn to the altar, a bare table with a floor-to-ceiling open view behind it of the beautiful valley. Above the altar hangs a simple wooden cross, suspended by thin wire, a form that takes its place in the patchwork landscape below. The cross in the landscape invites those who have come to the camp to experience their faith in the context of natural beauty, and it provides a powerful image for the relationship between the drama of human salvation and natural beauty.

Martin Luther once said, "God writes the gospel not in the Bible alone, but on trees and flowers and clouds and stars."[1] For centuries, theologians have explored the beauty of creation as an agent within human salvation. Various roles have been ascribed to that beauty over time, from that of consolation for pilgrims while on earth or of a finite, accessible mirror of God's own infinite beauty to a means of conversion to Christ. What follows is an attempt to trace the history of theological reflection on the beauty of nature in relation to matters of soteriology. Beginning with the early church, and moving through the medieval church, sixteenth-century reform movements, and the Enlightenment and nineteenth century, I discuss eras within that history broadly, offering a closer look at representative theologians in each.

1. Martin Luther, *Watchwords for the Warfare of Life,* trans. Elizabeth Rundle Charles (New York: M. W. Dodd, 1869), 191.

As this history cannot be understood apart from the history of aesthetics, I also explore relevant trends and shifts in philosophical aesthetics as they influence theological developments.

The Early Church: Achieving a Vision of Beauty

A theological history of natural beauty must begin not with early church writers but with Western classical understandings of beauty and art, for these played a significant role in the shaping of Christian thought on beauty. Plato (ca. 424–347 B.C.E.) once wrote: χαλεπαν τα καλά,"beautiful things are difficult."[2] With this proverb he set the stage for the struggle to understand the nature of beauty and its relationship to the divine and to humanity that has challenged theologians for centuries. Describing beauty has proven to be an art in itself, as pinning down the nature of beauty through language has been highly elusive, or in Plato's word, difficult.

An exploration of classical understandings of both art and beauty shows quickly that modern notions of beauty and fine arts were unknown in the classical world. Art was understood as craft. What was beautiful was that which was a perfection of craft. Beauty in the ancient world, either in art or in natural beauty, consisted in correct proportions and arrangement of parts. Harmony and symmetry were essential. Mathematical expressions in particular were considered ideal for conveying

2. Plato, *Greater Hippias*, LCL, Plato IV (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 304.

this. In "The Great Theory of Beauty and Its Decline," Polish philosopher Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz defines the classical theory of beauty, based largely on Hellenistic concepts, as comprised of the following aspects:

- Beauty consists in the proportions of the parts.
- The beautiful object is one that displays a consonance of distinct parts.
- The beautiful object has a certain brightness or brilliance about it.
- The beautiful object has integrity or perfection.
- The beautiful object yields pleasure upon contemplation.[3]

Each of these aspects of the "great theory" plays a significant role in early Christian writings on beauty.

It is important to examine the ancient Greek word for "beautiful" as we explore classical conceptions of art and beauty. The Greek word καλός is significantly broader in definition than the modern English "beautiful" and refers to good, right, proper, fitting, better, honorable, honest, fine, beautiful, and/or precious qualities. In English we say that the opposite of beautiful is ugly, but in Greek it is αίχρός (disgraceful, shameful, dishonest).[4]

Turning to the founder of philosophical aesthetics, with Plato we discover Beauty in the realm of ideal forms and

3. Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, *A History of Ideas: An Essay in Aesthetics* (Warsaw: Polish Scientific Publishers, 1980), chap. 4.
4. Barbara Aland, et al., *The Greek New Testament, Fourth Revised Edition* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2001), 91.

contrasted with imperfect, sensuous beauty. According to Plato, art, understood as *techn*∑, belonged properly to the realm of forms, not ideas, and assumed a knowing and a making: knowing the end to be achieved and the best means for arriving that end. Art was excellent if the piece demonstrated proportion and measure, which in turn involved the good and the beautiful. Art, or *techn*∑, was imitative in nature and served the interests of the *polis*. This was true of all the arts except poetry, of which Plato was suspicious. Poets ran the risk of transgressing imitative art. As philosopher Albert Hofstadter writes of Plato's poet,

> The poet is inspired, a winged, holy thing, filled with the power of the divine, hence mad in a noble way far above ordinary knowledge and consciousness. It is this possession that enables him to achieve the authentically artistic that is more than *techne*. Conscious, rational intellect cannot reduce this to a rule, nor can the man who commands *techne* raise himself to the genuinely poetic without divine assistance.[5]

Poets, as the exception to the rule for artists, had the potential to disrupt the social order because of their unruled creativity that surpasses the imitative function of *techn*∑. The ancient artist was supposed to uncover, not invent. Together, the artist with *techn*∑ and the poet with unruled creativity and access to the "authentically artistic," as well as the individual in pursuit of erotic love, as in *The Symposium*, represent Plato's concept of achieving the vision of beauty, each to one's own capacity. There is a beauty in the ideal realm

5. Albert Hofstadter, *Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 5.

that is inaccessible, yet is approachable through sensuous art and beauty. This idea would play a significant role in the aesthetics of Augustine of Hippo as well as other early Christian writers.

Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) expanded Plato's concept of beauty by adding the idea of pleasure. For Aristotle, art had an efficient cause; it was not spontaneous creativity but began with a concept. Art fell within the virtue of making, in the practical intellect, and combined form and matter. Art was fundamentally intellectual, as by it an idea is impressed upon matter. One of Aristotle's key innovations was the idea that art, being good, is also pleasant. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) picked up on this thread in his own understanding that "beautiful things are those which please when seen. Hence beauty consists in due proportion; for the senses delight in things duly proportioned . . ."[6] Thomas goes on to define "duly proportioned" as including "three conditions, integrity or perfection, since those things which are impaired are by the very fact ugly; due proportion or harmony; and lastly brightness, or clarity (*claritas*), whence things are called beautiful which have bright color."[7] Drawing thus on Aristotle, Thomas adds the *experience* of the beautiful to his definition, opening the theological door for the idea that the practical realm of the beautiful (i.e., that which can be experienced) participates in some manner in the transcendental realm. For earthly beauty, this idea

6. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Blackfriars ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), I, Q. 5, art. 4.
7. Ibid., I, Q. 39, art. 8.

implies throughout Christian aesthetics—until the modern period—that natural beauty participates in some manner in divine beauty, and that what we can experience here on earth brings us closer to God.

Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus (ca. 205–270 C.E.) upheld the distinction between the perfect beauty of ideas and imperfect, sensuous beauty, and added (to the ancient theory of beauty thus far) the soul, which illuminates the proportions. With Plotinus we have moved to the realm of splendor. For him, religion and aesthetics were inextricably linked; like the Hellenistic philosophers before him, he was more concerned with the recognition or vision of beauty, a primary characteristic of reality, at the level of perception rather than with art and human creativity per se.[8] Beauty in the realm of ideas was the archetype for sensual beauty, and glimpses could be seen in the brilliance, including that of natural beauty, emanating from the divine One. In *On the Divine Names,* Pseudo-Dionysius (d. early 6th century) develops Plotinus's primary concern for divine splendor as he writes about beauty as consisting in proportion and brilliance, as seen (i.e., experienced in the sensory order) in divine emanation.[9] Thus from Plato to the early Christian writers we can see a progression in the idea of beauty from a virtually inaccessible existence in the ideal realm to a beauty that emanates in unity from the divine realm and shines within created beauty. In each step of this progression there remains

8. Margaret R. Miles, *Plotinus on Body and Beauty: Society, Philosophy, and Religion in Third-century Rome* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), chap. 2.
9. Tartarkiewicz, *History of Ideas*, 127.

the fundamental problem of how to achieve a vision of that higher or divine beauty and the question of the relationship between the achievement of that vision and human salvation or fulfillment.

Notes on Early Christian Art

It is against this backdrop of classical understandings of beauty that Christian art emerged. There is a commonly held yet erroneous interpretation of early Christianity as imageless and aniconic before the fourth century. The assumption is often made that the early church had an aversion to images from its Jewish roots, which was then overcome with Constantine's conversion. This argument is far to simplistic. In an iconographic study of the Ancient Near East, Othmar Keel has demonstrated that Judaism was rich in visual arts as a means of expressing an experience of God, though not to depict God directly. The command against images, he argues, was about representing the presence of God, not the ability to represent God by a copy understood as only a copy. Take, for example, the cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant. They signal God's presence. The images themselves are not the presence.[10]

A second, related argument is often made that early Christians resisted the use of images as a practice they associated with pagan culture, thus rejecting the classical

10. See Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms*, trans. Timothy J. Hallett (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1997).

aesthetics described thus far. However, as we will see below, several prevalent images from the surrounding cultures made their way into the early art of catacombs and house churches.[11] These two aniconic arguments were widely held through the mid-twentieth century. Eminent art historians at the time portrayed the earliest Christians as proto-Protestants: puritanical, anti-worldly, and opposed to images in worship and to visual art in general.[12] Yet early extant works offer a more nuanced view of the emergence of a distinctly Christian use of images.

The most popular images from a primary source of early Christian art, the catacombs of Rome and its environs, include a wide range of themes, both secular and sacred: banquets, Christ as a shepherd carrying a sheep, Christ as a philosopher teaching his disciples, scenes from the Hebrew Bible and less frequently scenes from the New Testament, and most commonly a repertoire of images found on Jewish, secular, and Christian tombs. These last include flowers and foliage, Roman gods, and *orantes*, figures common in classical painting, with arms lifted in prayer.[13]

There are two significant themes that are missing from the extant images prior to the fourth century. There were no naturalistic portraits of Christ, and there was no depiction of the crucifixion until 432. Constantine outlawed crucifixion in the early fourth century, but it took several years for the

11. Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 13.
12. Ibid., 14.
13. Ibid., 58–61.

associations of a dishonorable death to fade and the crucifix to be understood as a triumphant image. As evidenced in house churches and catacombs alike, Christians seemed to prefer themes of life and deliverance, even in times of persecution. They tended to choose images of peace, not death.[14]

Once portraits of Christ emerged, they varied greatly in form and style. Perhaps this can be attributed to the inculturation of the Christian message, in which just as no single gospel or text could convey the varied experiences of Christ in diverse communities, the same was true of single images of Christ. With the development of icons a more complex relationship between community and image would emerge, in which an image could convey both likeness and presence.[15]

In her masterful exploration of early Christian art, Robin Jensen argues that, in early Christian communities, texts and images must be interpreted together. Visual and literary images balance and reinforce each other. Texts alone only give a partial view of the experiences of the earliest communities, which must not be oversimplified as aniconic. Profoundly incarnational visual images "provide an extraordinary testimony to the hopes, values, and deeply held convictions of the early Christian communities."[16]

14. Margaret R. Miles, *The Word Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 61.
15. See Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
16. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 31.