

New insights through art

The arts are playing an increasing role in the way we access and react to the world around us. Theology Through the Arts (TTA)¹ is a project that engages with this growing artistic ferment. It aims to show how the contemporary arts can help us discover and explore afresh the riches of the Christian faith.

'Theology' is, of course, one of the most contested words in history. For the purposes of TTA, it is Christian faith seeking clearer perception and deeper wisdom. Theology's immediate aim, we are suggesting, is wisdom, and in the ancient tradition of Proverbs and biblical wisdom literature, gaining wisdom concerns much more than amassing information for the mind's scrutiny. Wisdom is evident in the making of appropriate judgements in particular practical situations, and is geared towards a whole lifestyle 'in tune' with God. Being theologically wise means being able to discern what is right to say and do in a specific situation—this time and place—in a way that

of other functions of the arts (e.g. self-expression, entertainment). Rowan Williams expands: 'Art, whether Christian or not, can't properly begin with a message and then seek for a vehicle. Its roots lie, rather, in the single story, metaphor or configuration of sound or shape that requires attention and development from the artist. In the process of that development, we find meaning we had not suspected; but if we try to begin with the meanings, they will shrink to the scale of what we already understand: whereas the creative activity opens up what we did not understand and perhaps will not fully understand even when the actual work of creation is done.'⁴

The same goes for enjoying art. We can perceive what we have never perceived, or only part-perceived, before. And this extends far beyond unearthing the inner thoughts of the artist (if that is ever really necessary, or even possible). Realities hitherto unnoticed come to meet us through art, call forth our



reflects what the Apostle Paul calls 'God's wisdom'.² Hence theology, as the pursuit of this wisdom, though undoubtedly intellectual, is integrally related to right action, indeed to every aspect of being human. Wisdom is lived knowledge.

Discovery and articulation

Christian theology is unavoidably interpretative. It takes its bearings from a received Gospel or *kerugma*³ and issues in a new 'word' —in and for this time and place. This interpretative activity involves a process of both discovery and articulation in a complex interplay. TTA seeks to find ways in which the arts can serve this process.

With regard to discovery, TTA is especially concerned to recover a sense of the potential of the arts to reveal. This capacity of the arts has in the modern world frequently been downplayed or forgotten in favour

attention, shift our outlook. (This, of course, is not to assume that the arts necessarily disclose truth, they can be media of distortion as well as discovery.)

With regard to articulation, TTA is concerned with the ways in which the arts can assist and enable an appropriate presentation of the Christian faith. This 'presentation', of course, can be in artistic form in addition to the more traditional prose of theological disciplines.

Art and reality

Since its inception, TTA has found itself working with a number of associated convictions concerning the arts, some of which, though not controversial, are worth registering. The arts are not necessary for biological survival, but it would appear that they are for full human flourishing. TTA makes no apology for treating the arts as more than dispensable luxuries.

Hovering, 2007, Stefan Roberts,
(edition of five), Giclee print on paper, 520 x 415mm.

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The arts are socially and culturally embedded. The arts will always embody social and cultural reality, no matter how individualistically produced, no matter how intertwined with the circumstances of a particular artist, no matter how autonomous with respect to intended function. The arts can be authentic modes of knowing. That is, though they are obviously constructive practices, the arts can constitute means of coming to terms with realities beyond the fabrication of the human agent.

Why is Theology Through the Arts needed?

There are a number of reasons, I would suggest, why the issue of the contribution of the arts to theology should be pressed today. Some result from aspects of our culture. For example, it is common to point to the saturation of many parts of Western society with artistic forms of one sort or another, and to the explosion of the electronic media, which not only disseminate art with unprecedented power but have also generated many new forms of art. Disillusionment about some of the grand claims once made for the natural sciences and an unease with direct and unambiguous styles of representation have led many to seek fresh meaning in the world of the arts and the imagination. Many would also allude to the ways in which matters of 'spirituality' are increasingly explored through artistic forms, even if such 'spirituality' is often diffuse and unformed.⁵ If part of theology's calling is to engage the main currencies of the cultural environment in which it finds itself, and if the late- or post-modern ethos is in many respects an artistic or aesthetic one (especially when broadly religious concerns are in view), then it is clear that those concerned to grow in wisdom about God cannot afford to ignore the arts.

Another reason why theology might find a ready engagement with the arts today is because of a certain kind of damaging intellectualism in much theology, especially that of the modern Western academy.⁶ One of the primary services the arts can render to theology is their integrative power, their ability to interrelate the intellect with the other facets of our human makeup—our bodies, wills, emotional lives, and so on—thus helping to nourish 'wise' theology and offset the dichotomies which have plagued so much theology in the past.

Anxieties and objections

It must be acknowledged that some people have concerns that the proposed interaction risks compromising the integrity of theology or of the arts respectively. Several things can be said in response.

First, there is no intention of using the arts to displace the traditional prose of theology. Neither is it being suggested that artistic and non-artistic modes are intrinsically at odds with each other, or that one is superior to the other in all respects or for all purposes. Rather, what is being sought are ways in which artistic modes may enrich, illuminate, complement and interact with more 'traditional' modes of theology. Precisely in order to be more rigorous and accurate—and thus more appropriate, more faithful to its subject-matter—there may be times when theology requires the arts (and its secondary disciplines—for example the psychology of music), in order to approximate more closely to God's truth.

Another understandable hesitation is that the arts will eclipse appropriate criteria of theological truth. In other words, some will fear that the foundation from which Christian faith receives its identity will

be lost. Of course, the anxiety is hardly surprising. History is replete with examples of the arts overdetermining theology: among the most extreme forms, the exaltation of art to quasi-divine status by the Romantics; among the subtler forms, the way in which some are keen to label the immense psychological power of music, film, painting or whatever as 'spiritual', and then cultivate some strain of 'theology' accordingly. The 'pressure of interpretation' in responsible Christian theology must come ultimately from the self-disclosing activity of God, not from this or that artistic practice.

From the artistic side, concern will be voiced about artistic integrity. It is feared that talk of the arts enriching theology inevitably means they will be dragooned into becoming mere carriers of pre-determined theological messages, or even worse, choked by some rigid orthodoxy. Accordingly, some Christians have joined a steady stream of writers who want to pull the arts apart from all questions of practical or extra-artistic use altogether. It is undeniable that the arts have often been treated by Christians as little more than an attractive gloss for conceptual 'truths'—secondary and colourful wrapping, to be tossed away once an idea has been grasped. Nonetheless, a theological orientation towards the self-disclosing activity of God, and a recognition that the 'pressure of interpretation' must always come from this source, does not necessarily entail that the particularities of artistic creation and enjoyment are effaced or distorted.

Theology Through the Arts is an attempt to rediscover complex interrelationships. It is an acknowledgement that the resources needed to discover, understand and bear witness to the wonder, profound meaning and purpose of the created order are not confined to one discipline or to one field of expression alone. TTA seeks on theology's behalf the enrichment of mutual conversation, of new insight and of a shared apprehension of God's nature.

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- 1 *Theology Through the Arts* (TTA) was set up in September 1997 as a project within the Centre for Advanced Religious and Theological Studies in the Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge. It now has its home at The Institute of Theology, Imagination and the Arts at the University of St Andrews. www.theoarts.org
- 2 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:16, the Bible.
- 3 *kayroog-ma*: that which is proclaimed by a herald or public crier; a proclamation by herald. In the New Testament, the message or proclamation of the heralds of God or Christ.
- 4 'Making It Strange: Theology In Other(s) Words', in *Sounding the Depths: Theology Through the Arts*, ed. Jeremy Begbie, London: SCM Press, 2002, p 28.
- 5 See for example, Robert Wuthnow, *Creative Spirituality: The Way of the Artist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
- 6 It is a common lament that theology has often been captive to a Cartesian or quasi-Cartesian exclusive concentration on the mind. Theology becomes construed as an activity of the isolated mind, prior to, superior to and essentially separate from 'action'—the embodied commitments and activities which make up our lives from day to day. 'Liberation theologians' among others have quite properly protested against this arid and self-serving vision of a supposedly 'pure' theology.