



Art as theology and drowning in words

An interview with Dr Bob Robinson

Dean, Bible College of New Zealand, Christchurch

Beauty is one of the pathways to God, because of the created world - what Calvin called 'the theatre of the Divine'. We see things in this theatre; see things about God, through creation, through beauty, that we may not see elsewhere.

Bob Robinson was born and bred in Christchurch. He went to Sydenham School and Christ's College and earned a degree in psychology at Canterbury University. He contemplated practising psychology but felt it provided only insights and couldn't transform people. 'Psychology is great for the symptomatic stuff but can't deal with the human predicament. My motivation was to get to the heart of things, dealing with causes rather than symptoms.' It was this view that led him to theology (Ridley College, Melbourne). Converted along the way as a 16-year-old at St Stephens Anglican Church, in Christchurch in 1962, Robinson did a curacy at St Stephens, during which he completed his MA in Philosophy and Religious Studies. He served six years as a missionary in Singapore with the Church Missionary Society, but was called back to be their CEO. Prior to his appointment however, he spent two years in London completing his PhD on the Hindu/Christian encounter. Bob Robinson served 12 years as CEO with CMS and is coming up to ten years as Dean of Bible College, Christchurch.

What is your interest in the arts and where/how was that first engendered? Your parents?

'No. I grew up in a working class Christchurch family, no books, no art, no music, a "Shall-we-give-Dad-a-book-for-Christmas?...No-he's-already-got-one" sort of home. An interest in the arts began as an engagement with life in all its richness in Singapore. Working with the Indian community opened more dimensions visually, because Hinduism is nothing if not a visual religion. I grew sensitive to the role of music, the visual arts, poetry and drama in reaching places that words don't reach.'

Was part of that evolution, then, a reaction to your upbringing, furthered by a culture shift to Singapore?

'No. I'm just curious about everything. Curiosity made me ask why it was that the visual arts and music can reach places emotionally and religiously that words don't.'

How then can the arts shape our view of God?

'This morning in class I began a lecture with Hopkins' poem *Pied Beauty*¹. I pushed the last line of that, "He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change: Praise him". There's quite a sophisticated argument for the existence of God called the "aesthetic argument" (used in a mild form by C.S. Lewis). Part of God's glory is beauty. We all resonate with what we know to be true and good and beautiful.'

Do you draw on the arts in your teaching practice as a way of opening up an understanding of God, theology, beyond words?

'Yes. I use visual art, a series of case studies. I use Rublev's *Trinity* icon² - a wonderful tool for teaching on the Trinity. When it comes to sin, I use Max Beckman's painting *In The Night*³ an absolutely chilling painting done after the Great War about the collectiveness of sin - very powerful. I use Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (ca.1662) on redemption and salvation. For Christology I use Dali's *Christ of St John of the Cross* (1951) - his suspended Christ looking down over Port Lligat, the bay in Spain where Dali lived.

'I always give students a chance to do theological case studies, based on those works. Not many take it up, which may show how impoverished students are at reading art theologically.'

Has the presence of the Kauri Collection benefited Bible College in any way?

'The beauty and interest of the Kauri Collection makes that art worthwhile on its own. People come in; their eyes warm to the art in the way they wouldn't to a blank wall. There's good light here; the large scale of the art is appropriate. It helps create a sense of sacred space. I want to see our lecture rooms and public spaces as sacred space, places that are set apart to encounter God. The Kauri Collection helps to do that.

'Secondly, it has didactic value. This morning in a theology class, I was able to refer to the rather whimsical work above and around the doorway to the cafeteria [Mark Lander's *Tree of Life*, 2001] about the Fall, the pursuit of the knowledge of good and evil. I was able to say to the class, "as you can see in this piece of art..."'

Do you think the arts have a role to play in training and equipping church leaders, related to the 'new horizons' confronting Christianity?

'In two ways: the arts point to a more than rational, greater than verbal, dimension to understanding who we are as humans, and who God is. Evangelical theology, like the theology of Bible College, has typically been so word-centred that we often threaten to drown in words. We are often made anxious by silence, feel that silence has to be filled with words. To appreciate things that are beautiful can move the human spirit, in a way that words can't. Music and the visual arts can point to parts of our humanness, and ultimately that we are made in the image of a creative, creating God.

'I would add that people respond to what is beautiful, which makes it all the more puzzling that all too often our churches are barren and visually ugly.'

The Catholics have a good handle on that, but the Protestant tradition is very barren isn't it? Traditionally a reaction to beauty, creativity and ornate decoration...

'Yes, the arts can remind us of some forgotten dimensions, such as the importance of creation, the stewardship of creation. Our God calls us to a "cultural mandate" on behalf of Himself; even this



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Dr Bob Robinson. Photo: Andrew Clarkson.

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fallen world is to become the object of his redemption. Redemption is to do with wholeness. That means the whole of creation, not just "saved souls".

Is there a particular exemplar or artist or genre that means a lot to you personally in terms of what it teaches and how it acts as a theological portal?

'The icons of the Orthodox Church do function for me as a "window on eternity". Orthodox theologians say they can function that way. It's not just didactic, they are beautiful in their own right, and they somehow lift the human spirit. They repay careful reflection, when you realise they were often painted over many years, and under conditions of prayer and meditation. So there are dimensions and depths to them that appear only when approached in prayerful silence.'

John Stringer

- 1 Gerard Manly Hopkins, *Pied Beauty* (1918)
- 2 Andrei Rublev, *Icon of the Trinity* (1410)
- 3 Max Beckman, *In the Night* (1918-1919)

Left: *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Rembrandt (ca.1662).

