



ARTS &  
CULTURE

# PLEASURES OF THE IMAGINATION

DEVELOPING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN  
AESTHETICISM AND THE CHURCH

BY AARON MITCHUM

"This imagery of a Creator Spirit who is a Divine Artist at work in the cosmos can be interpreted in two ways. The first interpretation envisions a God who is essentially separate from what has been made and remains outside it. The second interpretation, familiar to poets and mystics, assumes instead that God is a brooding, hovering, indwelling Presence, always acting from within creation: renewing it, cherishing it, loving it."

- Maria Harris

I have stood at a painting and wept because it spoke something true to my soul. When I listen to Beethoven, feelings churn in me that speak as if shouting from a mountain, yet I can't fully describe what they are saying.

The arts cannot be understood or fully engaged using language like *reason* or that which points to the use of other intellectual faculties. The language of the arts is best understood through informed feelings or intuition.

When someone sits in therapy, the therapist is interested in unearthing what has yet to be put into words. The role of the arts is not unlike the role of a therapist. They provide a voice or language for what we have no words for—things such as the divine; the deep things of God that speak truth that is felt but not always spoken. Or, in the words of Bruce Springsteen, “talking about music [art] is like talking about sex. Can you describe it? Are you supposed to?”

I have stood at a painting and wept because it spoke something true to my soul. When I listen to Beethoven, feelings churn in me that speak as if shouting from a mountain, yet I can't fully describe what they are saying. This phenomenon of mystic knowledge being revealed through the arts might be why Jesus chose to describe the kingdom of God through the art of the parable. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. The kingdom of God is like a man who found a treasure in a field. The kingdom of God is like a woman who lost a coin. These words and images have many layers, meanings and functions, not the least of which is the ability to tell us what the kingdom of God is like without ever explicitly defining it.

### Art and Relationship

Art is relational. This is not a new concept; there are several people from the age of enlightenment who greatly shaped this conversation, such as Alexander Baumgartner, Joseph Addison and Immanuel Kant, among many others since then as well. But it is a concept that is not often spoken of in the church.

There are three parts to this relationship: the creator, the art and the receiver. Each part's potential impact is corollary to the amount of honesty and truth involved. The artist needs to create the piece with honesty; the piece needs to be able to communicate that honesty; and the receiver needs to be willing to engage the piece with a reciprocal level of vulnerability. For example, Beethoven's Ninth symphony is a gut-wrenchingly honest piece. It was conceived that way, and it is able to communicate that truth. But the truths in Beethoven's Ninth are only fully known when the listener receives the piece with an honesty that is similar in amount to the intimacy in the symphony itself. Honesty is why some art is great while other art is not. Before technique or form, honesty is first in defining good art.

There have been many different ways of interpreting the phrase *good art* over the years. For this article's purposes, good art is defined as that which has content as high as or higher than its form—*content* meaning, the amount of connection the piece makes with the immovable in our hearts.

These relational requirements that good art asks for have been hard for the church at times. The church is human, so the things that fill humans with tension also fill the church. That said, there is a struggle in the church when it comes to being intimate and vulnerable. This tension makes having a steady, healthy context for art difficult enough; add in the element of money through the business of commercial art (which came along around the time of the Renaissance), and it gets even trickier. Over time, this has led the church to becoming something of a top that wobbles back and forth between Vincent van Gogh (a passionate Christian who never sold a painting in his lifetime yet created some of the most celebrated art

of all time) and Thomas Kinkade (a Christian artist who has been successful commercially but who is often accused of having a void of honesty and an overabundance of sentimentality in his work).

### Art and the Artist

For the Christian, the role of the artist can be found in the story of creation; specifically the parts where we find out human beings were created in God's image. The idea of an idol or an image of a god among its people was not uncommon in the time the Torah was written. Idols were a reminder of the dominance of a god. In the Judeo-Christian story, though, God chooses to put his image into humans, forming an intimate relationship not of dominance but of love between the creator and the created and making us what Scot McKnight calls *eikons*, or representations of God.<sup>2</sup> From this, we see that our identity as humans is rooted in our existence representing God.

We have been given some features similar to God's, some of which are the ability to govern, mediate, reason and create. In reference to the latter, Andy Crouch says in his book, *Culture Making*, that this doesn't mean we create *ex nihilo* (out of nothing); rather, we create out of what was initially created.<sup>3</sup> In other words, what is in front of us can be seen as a beginning rather than an end result.

Using this story as a lens, we can begin to understand the artist's role as one who represents and mediates the light of God to creation *through* creation. Isaiah 9 tells of Jesus' coming as a light for the people who are living in darkness. Yet John 1 says when Jesus did come as the light of the world, the world did not yet know him. That light of Jesus Christ that is all around us but not always known is what the artist points to with her craft.

This can take on many forms. Some prophets are also artists, which makes their art poignant; other artists simply try to show the world as it is (and, by default, God's existence in that world).<sup>4</sup> Whether it's done knowingly, artists act as the mediators between the order and the chaos of the world and, at times, this act thins the veil between heaven and earth.

As a Christian and an artist myself, there have been numerous influences in my life in the explicit realms of faith and art; one of those influences was Daniel Smith of the band The Danielson Family. The Danielson Family played odd music and donned nurse's outfits to represent the healing power of Christ. They played in bars, clubs and venues with unashamed music that housed their faith and everything else important enough to them to write about. They made it in the indie rock world because they were uncompromising in their content and their music. It was fresh, real and original.

But the content was not the only thing important to the band's success; how they carried themselves was pivotal too. The members of The Danielson Family were hospitable and kind and thoughtful about what they did. The Danielson Family, along with a few others like them, really influenced me not to seek out the Christian subcultural as the venue for my art but instead to find and proclaim God in the normal places where people gather. This approach made sense to me both as an artist and as a receiver.

### Art and the Receiver

Once, in an interview with Daniel Smith, the interviewer stated, "Daniel, some of the Christian pop music I've heard has sort of a self-satisfied, complacent sound to it, but it doesn't draw me in at all. But when you sing about the beauty and the difficulty of your Christian faith, even though I'm not Christian myself,

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I can relate to what you're singing, and I'm drawn into it."

The sense of being drawn in to a piece of art speaks to the point that good art has little to do with its content being labeled Christian or secular; it has to do with the truth that draws one in. Augustine in his work *On Christian Doctrine* states, "Nay, but let every good and true Christian understand that wherever truth may be found, it belongs to his Master."<sup>5</sup>

When I was 21 years old, I recorded my first solo record, with the help of a producer/engineer named Mike Crawford. Mike taught me a lot in the six months of recording and mixing we did in my house during that fall and winter. One of the most important lessons was that recording a *great* record didn't mean recording a *perfect* record. It meant, among many other things, being attentive to the mistakes and unseen turns. Many times when we had a take that had a mistake in it, I'd say, "Well, that one didn't work; let's go again."

Mike would say, "Hold on; let's listen back. There might be something there." Mike taught me that the mistakes are sometimes the most brilliant parts of the songs, and sometimes they show us what the song was meant to be.

Or, as Russell Hammond in *Almost Famous* says about the Marvin Gaye tune "What's Going On," "That single *woo* at the end of the second verse... There's only one, and it makes the song."

That lesson from Mike sums up what seems to be missing from much of the Christian arts scene—namely, the honesty needed for it to be more than entertainment.

An example of this could be found in most of the contemporary Christian music industry, which often seems less interested in fostering integral art (so people are opened up to God) and more interested in neutering art so it limps along at the same pathetic level of realness as fast food.

This isn't restricted to Christian art, by any means. I was reminded of this recently, when our band played a show with a local bluegrass band. As I sat there and

listened to their set, I felt bothered. They had musical talent; they could play and sing very well; but there was a real air of pretention about them. They seemed to expect the audience to share their perspective about life, so much so that at certain points when the audience was presumably not responding the way they hoped, the front man began mumbling insults about them! Their attitude and demanding perspective made what they were offering feel thin. Contrast that to the week before, when we played with a band full of Christians, who created art that incorporated media, loops and music in an honest and compelling way. Their art didn't force itself on the listeners yet drew us in through its integrity, and because of that, the room could relate.

### Art and Youth Ministry

This language of honesty that good art brings is needed in the church in order for a robust witness to happen. Steven Pressfield, in *The War of Art*, said, "The artist is grounded in freedom. He is not afraid of it. He is lucky. He was born in the right place. He has a core of self-confidence, of hope for the future. He believes in progress and evolution. His faith is that humankind is advancing, however haltingly and imperfectly, toward a better world."<sup>6</sup>

The good news is that the artist exists in abundance in our young people. Being an artist will always be an uphill battle. But youth pastors can make a huge difference. Begin by investing in a community of creative people who can turn around and invest in their kids. For no single artist's perspective is big enough to round out a young person's formation. There were several older people in my life who did this.

James, a young professional who hung out at the local coffee shop where I did my homework turned me on to Van Morrison and Bruce Springsteen. Tom Willet, a professor, showed me the value of artistic integrity in my songwriting. My parents taught me to see myself as a creator, just as God is a creator. All these people, along with many others, spoke into me as an artist and taught me the value of communal artistic formation. But this type of mentorship—inspiring others to lean into their creative spirits—shouldn't be relegated just to the "artists" in your group. Creativity and art should flow out of all of us at differing levels.

## Art and Environment

The Catholic priest and political activist Daniel Berrigan reminds us that creating art is imperative to any healthy community of Christ:

“I can only trust the movement that is producing art, whether it’s poetry, or visual art, or dance, or music—it doesn’t make any difference. But there has to be that overflow that says, ‘We are on the move. We have enough to give and we’re going to give it. We have more than enough and we can give it.’”

As well as:

“You can really trust the movement that is producing that kind of overflow of the vessel—it’s getting tipped and there’s enough for everybody. And we call it art. We call it joy. The joy can’t be mandated, it’s just there or it isn’t there. And if the community is growing and deepening, it will be there. I’m convinced, it will be there.”

I don’t know exactly what that looks like, but space and time do matter. The situation you meet in is sometimes more important than your explicit content. My imagination for this looks a little like bath time with my son.

Most nights, I sit in our hall bathroom and watch my 12-month-old son in the bathtub. It’s by far his favorite time of day. Why? I don’t know, but I have a theory. Bath time is a structured, free and shared environment in which creativity is completely encouraged.

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### *Structured*

There is a set place of activity—namely, inside the bathtub. Elliott (my son) knows he is limited by the physical space of that porcelain rectangle. There are a limited amount of

toys (right now, it’s two plastic books, a rubber duck and the shampoo bottle). There is also a limited amount of time and physics (i.e., he can’t stay in there forever, and he can’t breathe under water).

### *Free*

Inside the structure, Elliott is encouraged to go nuts. Sing, splash, explore and examine; create narratives with his toys and his mysterious baby-talk language; as well as anything else he can think of. The combination of structure and freedom is inspiring. It leads to a greater depth of enjoyment in his bath as well as toleration for the actual washing that has to happen right at the end so as to justify the wet floor.

### *Shared*

Although Elliott laughs and carries on by himself, our enjoyment is increased because we are there together. When our eyes meet and we start laughing over what he’s doing, we are both lifted by his creativity.

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Basically, my son loves the bath because he can both feel inspired and be creative in it. If we are interested in creating environments where God can be discovered, then we need to think of more than just the formal content of our meeting times; we need to think of the situated content as well.

## Art and the Church

Calvin Seerveld, a Protestant theologian, said, “Truly God-praising artistry must be deeply embedded both in an artistic community and in the wider, societal communion of sinning saints.”<sup>8</sup> Our artists should not be limited to creating art for the church or even always *in* the church. But it is important for Christian artists to

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have a local body of believers out of which their work can come, as well as that community of fellow artists.

While artistic community can speak frankly and formatively about the artist's craft and content as well as share and inspire artists through their works, the church community can give meaning to what the artists speak in their creation while the artists in turn can give language for the community's beliefs. In order for this to happen, though, our churches need to be places that welcome the artist and the artistic perspective into the folds of the existing conversation. This has been a struggle for many of our congregations. My own community was a rational one, and as a young artist, I felt lost and unidentified. However, through the intentional and relational work of a few men in our community who were artists themselves, I was shown that the lens through which I saw the world wasn't a bad or broken one. Actually, it was a needed and unique one that God wanted to use.

Beware of these incubators, though. Structure, freedom and shared space are difficult to regulate, and when they flourish, their very appearance can challenge traditional leadership structures. Remember: Art has no concept of hierarchy, and what a ninth grader has to say through a poem can sometimes be more powerful than a youth leader's talk.

If you are a vocational pastor and an artist, take care

of yourself first in this arena. My friend Mike encouraged me long ago to find the freedom to be inspired. So, listen to what you need to listen to, look at and build what you need to. Go to the source. Don't feel ashamed of practicing the discipline of inspiration. For, those who practice that discipline are the ones who continue to create, and the world needs that.

Good art points to the beauty of the divine in a way that is equal to or greater than its form. It is void of over-sentimentality and kitschiness and avoids being mere entertainment. Good art is relational. It requires intimacy and honesty and hard work from the creator, the creation and the receiver. This relationship is one of the unique ways in which God speaks to us, and it's a language the church needs to be engaged in, lest she forget the things it has to say to her and to the world.

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  4. O'Connor, Flannery. *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 166.
  5. St. Augustine. *On Christian Doctrine*. Book II, Chapter 18, public domain.
  6. Pressfield, Steven., *The War of Art: Break Through the Blocks and Win Your Inner Creative Battles* (New York: Warner Books, 2003), 34.
  7. Taken from an interview with Daniel Berrigan on Sojourners Website. <http://www.sojournal.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj1003&article=passing-the-peace>
  8. Seerveld, Calvin. *Rainbows for a Fallen World* (Toronto: Tuppence Press, 1980), 26.

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