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‘A Wild Whisper of Something Originally Wise’

Harnessing the Arts to Restore

the Plausibility of Transcendence within the Immanent Frame

By

Mark J. H. Meynell

A Dissertation Submitted to

the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary

in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Ministry.

Saint Louis, Missouri
2022

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Graduation Date May 13, 2022

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore how artists are able to expose secular audiences who inhabit the 'immanent frame' to the plausibility of transcendence while avoiding the pitfalls of propaganda. To combat the Western church's unprecedented cultural disdain, it needs a convincing rearticulation of the faith, for which Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*[1] provides essential insights. The arts have a crucial role to play in this, but the church has a poor record of harnessing them well.

This study employed a basic qualitative research design, using semi-structured interviews to gather data. Eight creative professionals from a range of artistic fields were interviewed, focusing on four areas: their personal experiences of secularism; their view of the arts' potential for communicating transcendence; their creative processes; their navigation of the problems of propaganda.

The literature review focused on four key areas: biblical narratives of a transcendent God's involvement within the immanent frame; how the arts challenge and change worldviews; the relationship between the arts and the reality of transcendence; how propaganda exploits and abuses the arts.

This study concluded that the arts' apologetic importance derives from their ability to be truth-bearing outside rationalism. They provide the means for helping people of faith to subvert the norms of prevailing secularism while drawing outsiders to consider a reality beyond closed immanence. Artefacts result from a process of creative

[1] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007)

exploration driven by an innate curiosity. This penetrates facades and superficiality, with the best of the arts resisting the propagandist's instinct for assertion and manipulation.

If the church is to harness the arts, it must learn to avoid the propagandist's easy answers and controlling assertions. At the local church level, this will entail leaders listening to and learning from creative professionals to understand how they work and how they can contribute to the life and witness of the people of God.

To CMM & EMM

Inspirations

Flannery O'Connor… spoke of "the conflict between an attraction for the Holy and the disbelief in it that we breathe in the air of our times". And she spoke of how in her kind of realism, to which she sometimes applied the term "grotesque", the writer uses "an extreme image to join an instance from everyday life with 'a point not visible to the naked eye, but believed in by him firmly, just as real to him, really, as the one that everybody sees'". That "point not visible" is the point outside the self-contained system of everyday explanation, the one in relation to which all our ordinary meanings change, the hinge of the paradigm shift. The artist takes us "past psychology and sociology 'towards the limits of mystery'".

— Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (2007)

And all for what? Those moments of mysterious intrusion, that feeling of collusion with eternity, of life and language riled to the one wild charge.

— Christian Wiman, *The Art of Faith, The Faith of Art* (2019)

This is not a game I am playing. If I begin to enjoy it as a kind of intellectual exercise, then I am cruel and can expect no real spiritual results. As I push the man off his false balance, he must be able to feel that I care for him. Otherwise, I will only end up destroying him, and the cruelty and ugliness of it all will destroy me as well. Merely to be abstract and cold is to show that I do not really believe this person to be created in God's image and therefore one of my kind. Pushing him towards the logic of his presuppositions is going to cause him pain; therefore, I must not push any further than I need to.

— Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (1968)

Contents

Illustrations

Figures

Tables

Abbreviations

OED	Oxford English Dictionary
WAAC	War Artists' Advisory Committee (an official body of the UK government in the twentieth century)

Acknowledgements

My first experience of Covenant was Zack Eswine's invitation out of the blue to give the Preaching Lectures in 2017. Having heard good things from various friends at English L'Abri, I was delighted to discover that the hype matched reality. I was given a very warm welcome and especially enjoyed meeting President Mark Dalbey (now Emeritus), but I didn't do much to follow up his suggestion of doing a DMin! Some time later another invitation appeared out of the blue, this time from Mark Ryan, to consider the new Cultural Apologetics DMin programme. I was conscious of the need to refill my intellectual reservoir if I was to continue writing, and remarkably, despite initial assumptions, it was going to be possible to make it fit with my work. It was daunting to swap places in the classroom after nearly 25 years but I quickly acclimatized. Despite the traumas and disruptions of Covid19, I am so thankful that, in the Lord's providence, I had this DMin to get stuck into during the interminable months of lockdown (since my day job, which usually kept me travelling for several weeks a year, had ground to a halt).

The highlight for me though has been a fantastic cohort. My fellow students have been a joy: fun, life-giving and deeply encouraging. I have especially loved our little European enclave of me outside London, Cindy Hylton in Prague, and Bori Mikola in Budapest. I have also survived (I think) as the token Anglican in a sea of Presbyterians, and see little prospect of me shifting in the short term! After all, the grass is invariably not greener.

Many individuals have helped me significantly over the last three years. First and foremost, I must thank the three saints who pioneered the programme and poured their

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I gained invaluable advice early in the dissertation planning process from Prof Jeremy Begbie of Duke and Cambridge Universities (I only wish I had listened to him more as a Ridley Hall ordinand!); Dr Steve Guthrie, formerly of St Andrews and now of Belmont University, Nashville.

The Rabbit Room has been the best thing that's happened to me over the last 6 years. The commitment of Andrew and Jamie Peterson and so many other dear friends to be the catalysts for a thriving community around creativity has been exhilating. I am so grateful for the countless conversations, provocations, examples, and joys.

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But my greatest inspiration for all this—in life, as well as in questions researched in this thesis—unquestionably, has been my parents. So it is to them that I dedicate this work with love and gratitude.

Chapter One

Introduction

Entire university departments are dedicated to exploring the creative output of artists, writers, and musicians from the ages, resulting in what the late philosopher George Steiner describes as 'a grey morass' of humanities research predicated on 'the evidently false postulate that tens of thousands of young men and women will have anything new and just to say about Shakespeare or Keats or Flaubert'![1] Less common (especially in evangelical circles) is a contemporary theological engagement with this heritage, despite the evident Judeo-Christian cultural context of these Western iconic figures. Nevertheless, there is a growing bibliography of mature apologetic and confessional reflection on the arts.[2] Much scarcer is a theological engagement with creative professionals themselves, exploring their perspesctives, processes and purposes. This thesis seeks to be a contribution to filling that gap. This research is no idle curiosity but a matter of profound cultural urgency since the church in the West faces unprecedented cultural disdain.

Consequently, the church needs a convincing rearticulation of the faith for an ever more sceptical era. It is the contention of this thesis that the arts are essential to this task.

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[1] George Steiner, *Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say?* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989) 35.

[2] For example, in music: Jeremy Begbie, and Steven R. Guthrie, eds., *Resonant Witness: Conversations between Music and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011) In art: Calvin G. Seerveld, *Bearing Fresh Olive Leaves: Alternative Steps in Understanding Art* (Carlisle: Piquant, 2000) Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Carlisle: Solway, 1971) In literature: Malcolm Guite, *Faith, Hope and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010) Richard Harries, *Haunted by Christ: Modern Writers and the Struggle for Faith* (London: SPCK, 2018) In cinema: R. Douglas Geivett, and James S. Spiegel, eds, *Faith, Film and Philosophy: Big Ideas on the Big Screen* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008) Kutter Callaway, *Scoring Transcendence: Contemporary Film Music as Religious Experience* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013)

It is no accident that Charles Taylor, the Canadian philosopher, social scientist, and now professor emeritus at McGill University, concludes his magnum opus *A Secular Age* by engaging with the Victorian Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins.[3] He presents alternatives to the prevailing culture, 'portraits [who] *are* the apologetic' according to Christian philosopher James K. A. Smith in his readers' guide to *A Secular Age*.[4] But navigating such uncharted waters between the Scylla of irrelevance and Charybdis of compromise is fraught with danger. Before plotting such a course, therefore, it is essential first to grasp the nature of these challenges.

1. Complex Currents in Western Scepticism

Building on Taylor's work (particularly his *The Malaise of Modernity*[5], as well as *A Secular Age*) and before him, that of the late Austrian-born sociologist and Lutheran theologian Peter Berger (especially *A Rumor of Angels* and *The Sacred Canopy*[6]) and British missiologist Lesslie Newbigin[7], as well as more recent or accessible volumes[8], it is possible to identify at least three distinct but related undercurrents:

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[3] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 755-765.

[4] James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014) 133.

[5] Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord, ON: Anansi, 1991)

[6] Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (New York, NY: Anchor, 1970); Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York, NY: Anchor, 1990).

[7] Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (London: SPCK, 1986); Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 2004).

[8] These include: Alan Noble, *Disruptive Witness: Speaking Truth in a Distracted Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2018); Justin Ariel Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics: The Beauty of Faith in a Secular Age* (Downers

(i) The implausibility of transcendence within a secular frame

(ii) The experience of being haunted by the loss of enchantment

(iii)The legacies of power abuse for trusting authority figures

The Implausibility of Transcendence

In writing *A Secular Age,* Taylor addresses one fundamental question. 'Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?'[9] As James K. A. Smith explains, 'The difference between our modern, "secular" age and past ages is not necessarily the catalogue of available beliefs but rather the default assumptions about what is believable.'[10]

Phase	**Definition**	**Context**
Secularity$_1$	A culture in which matters of eternity/the next world (the 'sacred') are the preserve of the clergy, while those of this world (the 'secular') preoccupy laity	Prevelant in an overwhelmingly Christian context, such as Mediaeval / Renaissance Europe
Secularity$_2$	A culture in which the non-religious social imaginary (in contrast to the religious) dominates, claiming the neutrality of a secular public square devoid of God.	Arising from sceptical Englightenment rationalism, shrinking the nature of reality from a created cosmos to a closed universe.

Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020); Marcus Honeysett, *Meltdown: Making Sense of a Culture in Crisis* (IVP, 2002).

[9] Taylor, *A Secular Age* 25.

[10] Smith, *How (Not) to Be*, 19.

Secularity$_3$	A culture in which social imaginaries are bombarded by countless belief options, and even though scepticism still buffers selves against the transcendent, they are left haunted by it	Religious and non-religious can both be 'secular' now; but few are able to hold to a belief system without a sense of insecurity and provisionality.

Table 1: Summary of Charles Taylor's 3 stages of Secularity

Taylor responds with three distinct phases in the development of Western secularism.[11] What he terms 'Secularity$_1$' arose within Europe's mediaeval and Christian framework. Indeed, in Taylor's understanding, it could have arisen in only such a setting. This is indicated by the word's linguistic roots (*saeculum,* Latin for 'this age'), in that it connoted matters of the contemporary, of the earthly, of this temporal world, as opposed to the eternal—hence its common antonymic pairing with 'sacred'[12]. Both concepts are fundamental to a Christian worldview, such that a person could be religious while going about secular tasks, while the marjoirty of sacred tasks were the preserve of the clergy. Within such a framework, there was thus room for a degree of vocational variety for lay people, albeit a variety limited by the bounds of Christian theism and, in particular, the assumptions inherent in European Christendom.

This meaning was not, of course, in mind when people subsequently self-identified as 'secular'. Something displaced the theological meaning with an a-theological, if not anti-theological, one. This later usage, designated 'Secularity$_2$' by Taylor, refers to being non-religious as opposed to being temporal. Enlightenment

[11] As outlined in the first pages of Taylor, *A Secular Age* 1-4.

[12] Derived from Latin *sacer, sacr-*, for 'holy'.

thinkers made this cultural shift, such that the traditional, supposedly benighted worldviews buttressing monarchy, aristocracy, and religion were now contested, often aggressively so. Closely bound to the revolutionary era ushered in by events in the United States and France between 1770 and 1800, the zeal to overthrow and reform tended towards normative exclusivity. Its legacy persists in that phenomenon of late modernity, New Atheism.[13]

Yet Taylor's diagnosis goes further than traditional analyses in discerning a third phase, 'Secularity$_3$'. This phase regards *every* viewpoint (rather than merely the political and theological pre-modern inheritance) as contested. All beliefs are now mere options, including high modernity's dogmatisms like communism and capitalism. God has not disappeared, as the secularists eagerly anticipated; he is now a lifestyle choice. But so is not believing. Making the distinction between Secularity$_3$ (what he terms 'modern secularity' here) and the plausibility of Secularity$_2$, Taylor writes:

> … modern secularity in my sense has been coterminous with the rise of a society in which for the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option. I mean by this a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing. Of no previous society was this true.[14]

Far from 'self-sufficient humanism', along with its corollary atheism, being intellectually absurd, it is now buttressed by the incontrovertible successes of the scientific-materialist worldview and the technology it spawned. Indeed, its optimism still

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[13] Christopher Hitchens et al., *The Four Horsemen: The Conversation That Sparked an Atheist Revolution* (New York, NY: Random House, 2019)

[14] Taylor, *A Secular Age* 17

seems conceivable, despite the previous century's legacy of world wars and genocide. The heady optimism of techno- or transhumanism claims, 'that the human species in its current form does not represent the end of our development but rather a comparatively early phase.'[15]

While Secularity$_2$ still wields influence, it is contested. Only a minority advocate New Atheist dogma consistently—see for example the social media backlash to Richard Dawkins's comments about aborting Down Syndrome babies and the subsequent interview on Irish national radio RTE1[16], despite the logical consistency of his position within scientific materialism. There is an openness to previously untried pathways, which explains the attraction and appropriation of non-Western thought systems, especially where they seem compatible with atheistic sympathies (as with some forms of Buddhism, for example). Christianity is therefore not in view for many; in Taylor's idiom, Westerners tend to be 'buffered' against it.

A significant consequence of this contested space is life in 'an immanent frame'. Even for religious Westerners, Christian or otherwise, it is hard to resist being primarily shaped by the '"natural" order, to be contrasted to a "supernatural" one, an "immanent" world, over against a possible "transcendent" one.'[17] The phrase 'immanent frame'

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[15] The mission statement of Transhumanism+ (formerly World Transhumanist Association) quoted in Gerald McKenny, "Transcendence, Technological Enhancement, and Christian Theology," in *Transhumanism and Transcendence: Christian Hope in an Age of Technological Enhancement*, ed. Ronald Cole-Turner (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011); see also Yannick Imbert, "Transhumanism: Anthropological Challenge of the Twenty-First Century," *Unio cum Christo* 3, no. 1 (2017)

[16] @RTERadio1, "How Do You Think It's Immoral to Bring a Child with Down Syndrome into the World?," Twitter, May 11, 2021, 2021, 7:08 pm.

[17] Taylor, *A Secular Age* 542.

encapsulates the experience (not merely the creed) of life in a closed universe, without anything metaphysical or transcendent. The immanent frame inevitably presents profound challenges to defenders of a religious worldview, not just a Christian one. For, in Smith's description, they 'inhabit it as a closed frame with a brass ceiling', buffered against those who 'inhabit it as an open frame with skylights open to transcendence.'[18] Or in sociologist of religion Peter Berger's characterization of religious worldviews, 'all phenomena point toward that which transcends them, and this transcendence actively impinges from all sides on the empirical sphere of human existence.'[19]

If the heart of the Christian story is one of transcendence breaking into immanence, of a divine creator being enmeshed and enfleshed among his creatures, there is a problem. Such supernatural events are implausible to some religious worldviews (such as ancient Greek dualisms which privileged the spiritual over the material), and they are impossibly absurd in the immanent frame. At one level, the work of the Holy Spirit merely extends the threat to theism posed by Enlightenment thinking. What is new, however, is the insidious ways in which Secularity$_3$ corrodes the confidence of religious adherents, surreptitiously persuading them that they can function without divine intervention perfectly well.

Haunted by the Loss of Enchantment

In his qualitative study of American fundamentalists whose faith positions were subverted by their experiences of the arts, Philip Salim Francis describes his subjects

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[18] Smith, *How (Not) to Be*, 93.

[19] Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*, 94.

enduring a process of bereavement. For some, this grief never ended. The loss even drove one or two to suicidal ideation. They could never erase the memory of the comforts and certainties given by their religious upbringing. One, Frank Z. described how he had 'religion in the bloodstream'[20], while another, Jeanie C. spoke of 'the God-shaped hole.'

> I realized that not only did I not believe the doctrines but I actually didn't even believe God existed. This hit me hard as a punch in the gut […] This feeling is still with me. It's the feeling that something that I loved and needed was there and now is gone. C. S. Lewis talks about 'the God-shaped hole in every person's heart.' That's how I feel more or less every day.[21]

Their words encapsulate what Western culture has gradually experienced as a whole for perhaps three centuries. Whether intentionally or not, Francis's subjects echo the oft-repeated words of Julian Barnes, the acclaimed British novelist[22], in the opening sentence of a recent book: 'I don't believe in God, but I miss Him.'[23] Barnes later describes the repercussions of such a loss in his extended meditation on the death of his wife of nearly forty years, *Levels of Life*, although it is intermingled with his very human grief.

> There is a German word, *Sehnsucht*, which has no English equivalent; it means 'the longing for something.' It has Romantic and mystical connotations; C.S. Lewis defined it as the 'inconsolable longing' in the human heart for 'we know not what.' It seems rather German to be able to specify the unspecifiable. The longing for something—or, in our case, for someone. *Sehnsucht*

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[20] Philip Salim Francis, *When Art Disrupts Religion: Aesthetic Experience and the Evangelical Mind* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 128.

[21] Francis, *When Art Disrupts*, 127.

[22] Julian Barnes was approached via his agent to be a possible participant in this research. He eventually replied with a courteous message, 'I'm afraid I feel I have been interviewed to death over the last 40 years or so, and nowadays try to avoid such events. So, I must decline your kind suggestion.'

[23] Julian Barnes, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (London: Vintage, 2009), 1.

> describes the first kind of loneliness. But the second kind comes from the opposite condition: the absence of a very specific someone.[24]

Barnes is here recalling the loneliness he experienced as an undergraduate in Paris, which profoundly shaped his understanding of his new state as a widower. The 'very specific someone' is evidently his late wife, Pat Kavanagh. However, as the book is constructed, he weaves his feelings of grief into a meditation on post-Enlightenment ideas, reflecting on Nietzsche's 'death of God' and the achievements emblematic of modernity, named by Nadar as 'photography, electricity, and aeronautics.'[25] For Barnes, Nadar is the embodiment of this modernity, a modernity that has discarded the need for the divine.

> God is dead, and no longer there to see us. So *we* must see us. And Nadar gave us the distance, the height, to do so. He gave us God's distance, the God's-eye view. And where it ended (for the moment) was with Earthrise and those photographs taken from lunar orbit, in which our planet looks more or less like any other planet (except to an astronomer): silent, revolving, beautiful, dead, irrelevant. Which may have been how God saw us, and why He absented himself. Of course I don't believe in the Absenting God, but such a story makes a nice pattern… We have lost God's height, and gained Nadar's; but we have also lost depth.[26]

What Barnes describes as *Sehnsucht*, an experience he articulates with remarkable candour, corresponds closely with the contemporary sense of being 'cross-pressured', to adopt Taylor's phrase. In context, it diagnoses what Taylor perceives as the prevailing malaise of immanence.

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[24] Julian Barnes, *Levels of Life* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2013), 112.

[25] Barnes, *Levels of Life*, 11.

[26] Barnes, *Levels of Life*, 86.

> This condition is defined by a kind of cross-pressure: a deep embedding in this identity, and its relative invulnerability to anything beyond the human world, while at the same time a sense that something may be occluded in the very closure which guarantees this safety. This is one source, as I mentioned above, of the nova effect; it pushes us to explore and try out new solutions, new formulae.[27]

The fact of the 'nova effect' has been corroborated by Tara Isabella Burton in her recent book *Strange Rites*. She writes that millennials have 'more options—both in terms of determining their social identity and in terms of building their own spiritual fabric—than their parents did, and, they feel entitled to seek them out.'[28] However, as Taylor continues, the phenomenon is not entirely positive. 'But it also helps explain the fragility of any particular formula or solution, whether believing or unbelieving.'[29]

The essence of this phenomenon, then, is dissatisfaction, the nagging feeling that there is something more fulfilling over the horizon, which leads to a permanent state of transience. The premodern world was 'enchanted', such that life was replete with metaphysical significance, the divine an expected and regular factor, if not actually the prime mover, in human affairs. At any moment, one might stumble upon a 'thin place', a kind of portal popular in Celtic spirituality, for example, a place of intersection between earth and heaven, between the immanent and the transcendent. They were distinct but

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[27] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 303.

[28] Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2020), 55.

[29] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 303.

connected.[30] In time, such thinking would be dismissed as superstitious irrationality, nonsense that must wither under the blazing glare of enlightened rationalism. Thus, the process of 'disenchantment' begins, whereby the world "becomes progressively voided of its spirits and meaningful forces, and more and more the disenchanted world we are familiar with."[31] Subsequently, meaning must be derived by us; it is no longer inherent.

This new reality feels at once liberating and overwhelming. The limitless possibilities available for invention create Taylor's aforementioned "nova effect". Yet life within the closed universe of the immanent seems 'flat', with many crushed by the empty ordinariness of life.[32] The modernist dream is far from the emancipation it was heralded to be. In Smith's summary of Taylor's point:

> it is precisely our *un*happiness, our restlessness in these conditions, that, according to Taylor, gives 'us cause to speak of a "désir d'éternité" in human beings, a desire to gather together the scattered moments of meaning into some kind of whole' (p. 720). There seems to be something here that we just can't shake—that no amount of "rational" atheism seems to be able to excise. Might its persistence be reason to think that *there's something to this*?[33]

Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly bring out a similar point in their 2011 bestseller, *All Things Shining*, which derives meaning in the closed universe from the

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[30] Connected in the sense that C. S. Lewis' Narnia is (through a wardrobe, for example) but Tolkien's Middle Earth is not. The latter is entirely separate. See for example Francis Spufford, *The Child That Books Built* (London: Faber & Faber, 2003), 100.

[31] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 83.

[32] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 309.

[33] Smith, 131 (emphasis original).

classics of Western literature.[34] Commenting on the suicide of the brilliant writer David Foster Wallace, they suggest that this tragedy was 'more than the loss of a single, talented individual. It is a warning that requires our most serious attention. It is, indeed, the proverbial canary in the coal mine of modern existence.'[35]

By any account of traditional Christianity, the pivotal moment of the faith is the Incarnation, a moment that (by definition) assumes both transcendent and immanent realities. The internal logic of its narrative, quite apart from its explicit claims, requires a paradoxical alienness to Christ's person. He must be one with humanity and one from beyond humanity. But if one erases even the possibility of the transcendent frame, at best, 'the pale Galilean' is the only residue, a remote Jesus retrieved from scant historical data who is, by necessity, utterly distinct from the 'Christ of faith'.

Christian apologists are thus faced with a conundrum. They must resist the reductionism of the immanent frame with integrity, for their own sakes. Taylor's formulation of Secularity3 suggests how deceptively easy it is to hold to a transcendence-embracing worldview and yet function purely within an immanent frame, while diminishing the implausibility of transcendence. The traditional response would simply be to 'keep preaching the gospel', 'to let the Word do its work', or some such mantra. There is certainly truth in this charge. However, it is not, as ever, quite as simple as that.

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[34] Hubert L. Dreyfus, and Sean Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2011).

[35] Dreyfus, and Kelly, *All Things*, 26.

The Legacies of Power Abuse

Not only are religious worldviews highly contested today, but the advocates of these beliefs are regarded with growing suspicion, and not without justification. In recent years, on both sides of the Atlantic, prominent Christian leaders have been exposed as serial power abusers, exploiting spiritual authority in order to manipulate and coerce, resulting in scores of victims of sexual, psychological, or even physical abuse.[36] The precise details have differed, but there are common patterns. The church cultures at Willow Creek, Chicago (under the leadership of Bill Hybels) [37], and Mars Hill, Seattle (under that of Mark Driscoll)[38] have become case studies of how toxicity develops within churches. Then, Ravi Zacharias, one of Christianity's most influential Christian apologists, was widely exposed as a serial sexual predator, but only after his death from cancer.[39] On this side of the Atlantic, the leadership legacies of Jonathan Fletcher at Emmanuel, Wimbledon, and of Steve Timmis (who, not coincidentally, succeeded Mark Driscoll as CEO of the Acts 29 church-planting movement), have both been subject to

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[36] The wider impact of these downfalls is noted in Burton, *Strange Rites*, 243. The story of the abuses and subsequent covers-up in the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston was revealed by dogged journalists in Boston: The Investigative Staff of the Boston Globe, *Betrayal: The Crisis in the Catholic Church* (New York, NY: Little, Brown, 2003) The impact is noted by Ross G. Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2012), 132f.

[37] Questions about the culture at Willow Creek were hinted at as far back as 1995 as in G.A. Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services: Evaluating a New Way of Doing Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995) More recently a proposal for growing healthier church cultures was written on the back of processing painful experiences at Willow Creek in Scot McKnight, and Laura Barringer, *A Church Called Tov: Forming a Goodness Culture That Resists Abuses of Power and Promotes Healing* (Carol Stream, IL: Momentum, 2020).

[38] The Christianity Today podcast analysing the collapse of the Mars Hill network is the most thorough investigation to date: Mike Cosper, "The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill," 2021, produced by Mike Cosper, Podcast, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/podcasts/rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill/.

[39] It would take an inquisitive lawyer who was exploring the faith claims of Christianity, Steve Baughman, to begin the process of serious investigation. See his self-published book: S. Baughman, *Cover-up in the Kingdom: Phone Sex, Lies, and God's Great Apologist, Ravi Zacharias* (BookBaby, 2019).

thorough investigation by the Christian safeguarding charity, *thirtyone:eight*[40], but it is still too soon to evaluate the undoubtedly widespread consequences. Awareness of such scandals might have remained concealed in previous generations, or at least restricted to closely guarded circles, but the age of #MeToo (going viral in 2017 after allegations against Harvey Weinstein first surfaced), and its offshoot #ChurchToo, thwarted any hopes that some may have harboured of that. Media interest in ecclesiastical scandal remains unabated, making headlines in both the United States and United Kingdom.[41]

The fallout from such abuses is complex, but one wider consequence, as explored in the 2015 book *A Wilderness of Mirrors*[42], is undoubtedly its contribution to the contagious collapse of trust in honoured institutions like the church. While the scandal under the microscope at time of writing was that of Boston's Roman Catholic Archdiocese and its systematic protection of paedophile clergy, the problem could not be limited there.

> However, the horrors were by no means restricted to the United States or to Catholicism. Repercussions were felt across the Catholic world, with what was described as 'a raging bushfire' spreading to Ireland, the UK, Belgium, Australia, and Latin America. In 2013, the Church of England had to issue its own 'unreserved apologies' for a catalogue of sexual abuse and

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[40] thirtyone:eight, *An Independent Learning Review: The Crowded House* (26 Oct 2020). https://thirtyoneeight.org/media/2678/the-crowded-house-learning-review-full-report.pdf See also thirtyone:eight, *Independent Lessons Learned Review Concerning Jonathan Fletcher and Emmanuel Church Wimbledon* (23 Mar 2021). https://thirtyoneeight.org/get-help/independent-reviews/jonathan-fletcher-review/

[41] For example, Mark Driscoll's resignation from Mars Hill was reported in the *Washington Post* on 15th October 2015, Bill Hybels' on 11th April 2018. The Steve Timmis issue was not reported outside evangelical circles, but the Fletcher story has been widely covered, for example in *The Times* (23rd March 2021) and frequently in *The Daily Telegraph* (from 20th June 2019 onwards).

[42] Mark Meynell, *A Wilderness of Mirrors: Trusting Again in a Cynical World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), especially chapter 3.

> negligence in Chichester diocese (including serious allegations against one of their retired suffragan bishops).[43]

Many sympathize with the father of a victim of one of the most prolific predators in Boston who said, 'I left the Church... I never went back.'[44] With the growing numbers of the 'religious nones' (those who select 'no religious affiliation' in censuses or surveys) across the Western world[45], the likelihood of secular people taking the risk of joining a church is surely diminishing. As historian Robert Wilken notes in the context of the impossibility of divorcing matters of truth from their historical and social context, 'The first question, then, that a Christian intellectual should ask is not, "What should be believed?" or "What should one think?" but "*Whom* should one trust?"'[46] However convincing their apologetic claims might be, churches characterised by unchecked toxic leadership cultures face insurmountable hurdles. They simply lack credibility.

2. Wary of Propaganda

Propaganda has not always been regarded with unveiled suspicion. Indeed, the origin of the contemporary usage dates back to the Counter-Reformation and the Roman Catholic Church's department for 'propagating' the faith. This title no doubt carried sinister connotations for the Protestant sphere of influence, but it was not until the Modern Era proper (usefully, if artificially, dated from the time of the French Revolution)

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[43] Meynell, *Wilderness*, 59.

[44] Globe, *Betrayal*, 57.

[45] James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014).

[46] Robert L. Wilken, *Remembering the Christian Past* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 173.

that the term accrued wider political usage. Mark Crispin Miller describes its original purpose (in his introduction to Edward Bernays's 1928 book *Propaganda*):

> Far from denoting lies, half-truth, selective history or any of the other tricks that we associate with 'propaganda' now, that word meant, at first, the total opposite of such deceptions.[47]

G. K. Chesterton might have agreed. Thomas C. Peters notes how Chesterton admired the brilliance of both Rudyard Kipling and George Bernard Shaw as much because of their propaganda as their passion and insight.[48]

> The best short stories were written by a man trying to preach Imperialism. The best plays were written by a man trying to preach Socialism. All the art of all the artists looked tiny and tedious beside the art which was a by-product of propaganda.[49]

Chesterton is playing the contrarian here, and the relationship between art and propaganda is an issue on which this thesis will focus in due course. While propaganda might be regarded as a necessary evil in the mediated technological society, few now recommend it as enthusiastically as Chesterton. It is too tainted.

Naturally, contemporary hearers like to think of themselves as wise to the machinations of the powerful and thus alert to propaganda. Or at least, they think they are. In his acclaimed analysis of the phenomenon, Jacques Ellul defines it as:

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[47] Mark Crispin Miller, "Introduction," in *Propaganda by Edward L. Bernays* (Brooklyn, NY: Ig Publishing, 2004), 9.

[48] Thomas C. Peters, *The Christian Imagination: Chesterton on the Arts* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 2000), 49.

[49] G. K. Chesterton, "Heretics," in *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*, vol. 1, ed. D. J. Dooley (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1986), 199.

> A set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals, psychologically unified through psychological manipulations and incorporated in an organisation.[50]

The operative word there is 'manipulations' and, by definition, it presumes to pass undetected. That stealth is precisely why the concept causes alarm. The shock of Ellul's analysis is that the educated are most vulnerable to propaganda, in part because of how highly they regard their ability to discern and evaluate truth from falsehood.[51]

Bernays (nephew of Sigmund Freud) analysed how this could be done in 1928, and his book quickly became something of a manual, admired as much by the copywriters of Madison Avenue as by Hitler's propaganda minister, Josef Goebbels. He sought to be both 'a truth-seeker and a propagandist for propaganda.'[52] Yet he was but one of many working on this issue, under not just fascist systems but communist and capitalist as well. All participated in the quest for what Walter Lippmann called "the manufacture of consent"[53] with propaganda being a feature of peacetime just as it had been during the First World War. It seems that Bernays was well aware of the public's growing distrust of corporate and government messaging. Miller notes in his introduction that a British MP named Arthur Ponsonby published a bestseller in the same year called *Falsehood in War-time*, in which he simply catalogued government deceptions.

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[50] Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (New York, NY: Vintage, 1973), 61.

[51] Konrad Kellen, "Introduction," in *Jacques Ellul's Propaganda* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1973), vi.

[52] Edward L. Bernays, *Propaganda*, ed. Mark Crispin Miller (Brooklyn, NY: Ig Publishing, 2004) *Propaganda,* 15

[53] Bernays, *Propaganda,* 13

Nevertheless, Bernays was determined to persevere. “Its use is growing as its efficiency in gaining public support is recognized.”[54]

So, when churches employ crude, not to mention underhanded, marketing techniques, with sophisticated branding to convey the appearance of relevance, is it any surprise that they are dismissed with the rest of the junk mail? Exasperation with constant marketing is a driving force behind countercultural forces like Burning Man or the Occupy movement. The sense that churches, and in particular their preachers, are indistinguishable from other propagandists is enough to repel spiritual nomads for life. Is there another way to help honest searchers to overcome both the implausibility of the message and their repulsion at its messengers?

3. Power in the Arts

The Weight of Glory is one of C. S. Lewis’s most significant essays, and it is noteworthy for being one of the places where he touches on that indefinable longing which so affected Julian Barnes. The terms he uses are telling. In a variation on his famous argument in *Mere Christianity* about this world’s inability to provide truly satisfying experiences, he writes, “If a transtemporal, transfinite good is our real destiny, then any other good on which our desire fixes must be in some degree fallacious, must bear at best only a symbolical relation to what will truly satisfy.”[55] He then proceeds to note how modernism works to embed people within an immanent frame, such that they feel a ‘shyness’ and ‘awkwardness’ when admitting to experiencing that longing, as if

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[54] Bernays, *Propaganda*, 30

[55] C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory, and Other Addresses* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2001) 29

they have been cursed by some modernist spell. He is evidently enjoying himself at this point because the idea that a rationalist would even conceive of using, let alone exploit, incantations is ludicrous. Lewis knows far more than the rationalist at this point, of course, as he would illustrate in his *Screwtape Letters*. The spell must be broken.

> Spells are used for breaking enchantments as well as for inducing them. And you and I have need of the strongest spell that can be found to wake us from the evil enchantment of worldliness which has been laid upon us for nearly a hundred years. Almost our whole education has been directed to silencing this shy, persistent, inner voice; almost all our modern philosophies have been devised to convince us that the good of man is to be found on this earth.[56]

Lewis was speaking from personal experience, having been a committed atheist, determined and resistant. But the lure of the transcendent proved irresistible. Few articulate the experience as eloquently as Lewis, but many have followed similar paths, including, for example, several of the subjects in Joseph Pearce's survey of twentieth-century, British and mainly catholic, 'literary converts' as he calls them.[57] Thus, the great war poet Siegfried Sassoon was hardly the only one to articulate a 'deep disillusionment' with the prevailing shallowness.

> To many of these twentieth-century literary converts an acceptance of God went hand in hand with a rejection of 'the world' and its materialism. The alienation so evident in Sassoon's own poems had been a central theme of many of the writers who eventually found

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[56] Lewis, 31

[57] Joseph Pearce, *Literary Converts: Spiritual Inspiration in an Age of Unbelief* (London: HarperCollins, 2000)

> consolation in Christianity, with Eliot's *Waste Land* as the archetype and forerunner of much that followed.[58]

The catalogue of artists who came to faith during the first half of the previous century is as impressive as it is broad because they bucked the secularising trends of the era: poets T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Dame Edith Sitwell; novelists Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh; sculptor and printer Eric Gill; actor Sir Alec Guinness; journalist Malcolm Muggeridge. Then, of course, there were the Oxford Inklings, the loose circle of friends that included J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Owen Barfield, and Charles Williams, and on its fringes, Dorothy L. Sayers, not to mention their influences from previous generations like George Macdonald and G. K. Chesterton. In their various ways, all were disillusioned with the *status quo*, not least after the horrors of the First World War. But for the purposes of this dissertation, no example captures the heart of the matter better than Pearce's description of George Mackay Brown. The native of the Orkney Islands came under the influence of his fellow Scot, the poet Edwin Muir, who 'bequeathed [a] belief in the transcendent mystery at the heart of and the root of life to his disciple."[59]

What is it about the arts that has the power to wrest people free from the shackles of the immanent frame? Do the creative arts as a whole have a peculiar ability to expose people to the plausibility of transcendence, or is it only certain artforms? If the latter, why those in particular? It is in exploring these questions, especially by drawing on the perspectives of individuals who create these things, that fresh paths might be charted for apologetic endeavours.

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[58] Pearce, *Literary Converts*, 324.

[59] Pearce, *Literary Converts*, 431.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to explore how artists are able to expose secular audiences who inhabit the 'immanent frame' to the plausibility of transcendence while avoiding the pitfalls of propaganda.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the qualitative research:

(i) To what extent are the artists aware of the impact of secularism in contemporary society? How does it affect their religious beliefs (if any)? In what ways does it motivate their creative process? How conscious of worldview issues are they during the creative process?

(ii) In what ways do the artists understand the power of the arts to communicate transcendent reality to 'imminent frame' inhabitants? What goals do the artists have at the start of the creative process? What makes transcendent reality more plausible for artists?

(iii) What intentions and methods do the artists include in the creative process? To what extent is communicating transcendence a goal?

(iv) How do the artists understand the nature of propaganda? To what extent are artists engaged with problems of propaganda? To what extent do artists seek to avoid propaganda if communicating transcendent realities?

Significance of the Study

This study has significance for those whose have become increasingly conscious of the marginalisation of the evangelical church in Western contexts, such that neither its

message nor activities make significant inroads into the surrounding culture. In a more Christianised culture, preaching the gospel to outsiders was sufficient, in part because of familiarity with the basic concepts. This is no longer possible. Because of the cross-pressures resulting from Secularity$_3$, whereby Christianity is merely one of hundreds of options (and to many minds it is no longer a plausible one), the church is relegated to a corner of a bookshop's lifestyle shelves. This shift has shaped the 'social imaginaries'—Taylor's phrase for 'something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode'[60]—of church attendees as profoundly as those of the unchurched. Because of the centrality of Christianity's claims of transcendence, the lingering scientific materialism of Secularity$_2$ renders it implausible.

As a result of this study, it will be clear that this state of affairs can change. The arts provide tried and tested means for breaking out of the confinements of immanence. By exploring how individuals have sought to do this in their creative work, the hope is that confidence for the church's core apologetic task can be renewed. Thus, churches might gain or regain the value of the arts to God's purposes. They can then make the most of the creativity of others within and beyond the church; they might be spurred to stimulate and nurture fresh creative initiatives within their fellowships.

Definition of Terms

In this study, key terms are defined as follows:

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[60] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 171.

The Arts – refers to all kinds of artforms, including, but not restricted to, the literary (fiction, poetry, biography), the visual (sculpture, painting, installations), the aural (classical, rock, folk music), and the dramatic (theatre, cinema, small screen, dance). The focus of this study will primarily be on fictional narrative, painting, and classical music composition.

Buffered self – the experience within Secularity$_3$ whereby reality is internalised, and the transcendent realm is deemed implausible. Contrast with the porous self.

Immanent Frame – A way of life that assumes the totality of reality to be restricted to the material and physical; there is nothing beyond this realm (the metaphysical), so there can be no interaction with nor intervention from that realm.

Nova effect – the recent, extreme multiplication of different belief and lifestyle options open within Secularity$_3$.

Plausibility Structure – coined by Peter Berger, refers to the cultural and social contexts for systems of meanings to make sense.

Secularity$_1$ – the premodern sense, that of the affairs of this age and this world, in contrast to the sacred realm tended to by priests.

Secularity$_2$ – the post-enlightened, 'modern' sense, describing reality as defined by rationalism, and which reject religion and subjectivity.

Secularity$_3$ – Taylor's definition of the time in which belief is contested and people are cross-pressured by the nova effect. Atheism is plausible, and people are buffered against the transcendent.

Social Imaginary – Taylor's coinage designed to reach beyond the intellectualism of 'worldview' in order to include something broader and deeper, and perhaps never even

articulated, for the lifestyles and social contexts that motivate people's dreams and aspirations for the good life.

Transcendent Frame – a way of life that is conscious of reality beyond the material, and thus is open to the divine and the spiritual realms.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which the arts can impact a secular worldview (especially as it perceives the implausibility of the transcendent frame) as a means to equipping and stimulating those involved in their creation.

To place this exploration in a theological context, the literature review opens with key biblical precedents of transcendent reality impinging on the immanent frame, indicating how this differs fundamentally from secular misunderstandings of these realities. This context is crucial for grasping the nature of the interface between these two realms, and for understanding the potential of human creativity for exposing secular people to transcendent reality. On that basis, then, three particularly relevant areas of literature provide a foundation for the qualitative research. These areas focus on the literature concerning the paradox of transcendent arts, the arts and worldview change, and the shadow of propaganda.

1. The Paradox of a Transcendent God in the Immanent Frame

From its earliest manifestations, a divine creator being enmeshed and enfleshed among his creatures has been central to Christian claims. This truth claim lacks credibility for most to comprehend.. The problem is exacerbated by the claims made about the sources of this message. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann explains that the goal of a ‘coherent account of Yahweh’ is complicated by the Jewish scriptures

offering a testimony that 'is relentlessly narratival in its utterance.'[1] Readers are never presented with a neat, systematized doctrine of God, so those seeking a plain explanation for how a transcendent God might operate within the immanent frame will search in vain. Instead, people must glean whatever they can from the biblical narrative about the nature of divine transcendence.

(i) The Nature of YHWH's Transcendence

A scientific-materialist account of the origins of life will reject the Genesis narratives of creation as a matter of course, since the notion of a 'supernatural' God creating the 'natural' world is irrational. This rejection is foundational to contemporary secularism. Thus, as the late comic novelist and comrade of Richard Dawkins, Douglas Adams put it, 'The whole point of religious faith, its strength and chief glory, is that it doesn't depend on rational justification.'[2] Believers, Queen-of-Hearts-like, may then posit as many contradictory propositions as they wish, merely squaring the circle of irrationality by claiming a paradox. Yet paradoxes may not be readily dismissed as irrational, since even within the scientific realm, they have explanatory power. In quantum mechanics, for example, phenomena display apparently incompatible characteristics, such as light consisting of waves and particles. To rule out the possibility of paradox is to employ a reductionist logic. As those with an artistic outlook are often

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[1] Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 206.

[2] Douglas Adams, *The Salmon of Doubt: Hitchhiking the Galaxy One Last Time* (London: Harmony, 2002) 144-147. From an extemporary speech given in Cambridge in 1998.

quick to mention, reality is invariably more complex than acknowledged. Unsurprisingly, so is the debate over the nature of transcendence.

The Problem with 'Contrastive' Logic

A common conception of transcendence frames it dualistically, as antithetical to immanence, so that secularists can then dismiss it. Swedish theologian Andreas Nordlander describes how this antithesis usually results from an understandable extrapolation from the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. This doctrine holds not simply that everything owes its existence to its creator but also that the act of creation was not derivative. God did not rearrange pre-existing raw materials but created them from nothing. Furthermore, he was not bound by any external constraints such as Plato's eternal 'forms'. As philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff puts it, God worked from 'ideas in his own mind' because he 'creates in sovereign freedom.'[3] Thus, divine creation is *sui generis*, existing in a category entirely different from that of human creativity.

One misstep from this doctrine, as Nordlander explains, assumes that 'the created world is the Creator's "other" according to a straightforward dialectic, such that more God equals less world, and vice versa. On such a construal, affirming the immanent must of course imply negating the transcendent.'[4] It is not hard to grasp a certain logic here, as well as why it appeals to those within Secularity$_2$. The immanent world is tangible, visible, and perceptible; transcendence is not. So immanence easily eclipses it. Yet this

[3] Wolterstorff, *Art in Action*, 51.

[4] Andreas Nordlander, "The Wonder of Immanence: Merleau-Ponty and the Problem of Creation," *Modern Theology* 29, no. 2 (2013), 105.

view has allowed a preconceived system to preclude alternative possible conceptions. Indeed, as the Canadian Catholic theologian Emmanuel Durand points out, the only theistic framework remotely compatible is Deism, which is by no means consistent with traditional Christian orthodoxy.[5] What initially appears to be a logical impossibility can be avoided by reframing the terms, which is precisely what happens when a narratival portrayal of reality is offered.

Cambridge philosopher Janet Soskice has analysed the Hellenistic Jewish thinker Philo's understanding of *creatio ex nihilo*, highlighting his pioneering descriptions of God as 'unnamable' (ἄκατανομαστος), 'unutterable' (ἄρρητος) and 'incomprehensible in any form' (κατά πασας ἴδεας ἄκαταλεπτος). [6] These terms are necessary, in Philo's view, in order to preserve the absolute otherness of God. In his essence, the Maker is transcendent, utterly and absolutely unlike what is made. Nevertheless, the Jewish Philo must insist, according to Soskice, that the 'God of the Pentateuch is personal and providential.'[7] That much was apparent from the divine acts of creation and redemption. The problem Philo fails to pre-empt, and which Soskice seeks to address, is how these apparently mutually exclusive ideas are simultaneously tenable. Specifically, how is it possible for the unnamable God to be named, as he so frequently is in the Pentateuch? In her analysis of the debt owed by the *creatio ex nihilo* doctrine to inter-testamental Hellenistic thought (which, of course, is not the primary concern here), Soskice notes:

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[5] Emmanuel Durand, "God's Holiness: A Reappraisal of Transcendene," *Modern Theology* 34, no. 3 (2018).

[6] Janet Martin Soskice, "Creation and the Glory of Creatures," *Modern Theology* 29, no. 2 (April 2013), 180. She draws on the work of the Irish classicist and philosopher, John Dillon, here.

[7] Soskice, *Creation*, 180

> The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is a biblically-inspired piece of metaphysics—not a teaching of hellenistic philosophy pure and simple, but something that arises from what Greek-speaking Jews found in their scriptures.[8]

In other words, it was inferred from close, exegetical study of the biblical narrative. While interpreters before Philo did not employ terms he innovated, they will certainly have been alert to the difficulties presented by scripture. So what are some of the options available for either harmonising the text's apparent contradictions or, if that is not possible, for understanding their origins?

Tackling the Contradictions

Different Sources

In previous centuries, biblical scholars nurtured in German source criticism[9] would have speedily resorted to a straightforward solution. The apparent contradictions are not the result of inconsistencies in one mind but of the compilation of the fruits of several minds. Different religious traditions within ancient Judaism were (sometimes crudely) collated without thought to the subsequent problems. This tactic is employed, for example, by New York University's Robert S. Kawashima. In comments on passages in Exodus (a book that will be central to this literature review), he suggests that Exodus 24 and 33 exhibit 'two contradictory surface expressions of the same underlying concept',

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[8] Soskice, *Creation*, 181

[9] See, for example: E. W. Nicholson, *The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 21.

explicable in part because they reflect their different documentary sources.[10] An older, less nuanced example of this approach might be Rosemary Nixon's analysis of the differences between how God is presented in Genesis 1 and 2.[11] In both cases, the philosophical conundrum of divine transcendence and immanence is bypassed. Thus, Kawashima can suggest that the transcendent God, in his pre-historic act of creation, 'merely acts upon inert matter. There is no substantive interchange between the two, for they are mutually incompatible.'[12] He does not deny that God acts in recordable time, since 'God takes up residence on earth only within history, in a contingent encounter, an intrusion into time and space: the "glory" (*kaʾbôd*).'[13]

Yet, in this treatment, the deeper conundrum remains untouched. Furthermore, source criticism has come under increasing scholarly scrutiny in recent decades, so that its opponents are by no means 'limited to those of a conservative theological outlook'.[14] The late Old Testament scholar R. N. Whybray is the most significant of these critics, and tellingly, in his summary of key objections, he makes an important literary point: 'The breaking up of narratives into separate documents by a "scissors and paste" method not

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[10] Robert S. Kawashima, "The Priestly Tent of Meeting and the Problem of Divine Transcendence: An 'Archaeology' of the Sacred," *The Journal of Religion* 86, no. 2 (2006), 230.

[11] Rosemary A. Nixon, "Images of the Creator in Genesis 1 and 2," *Theology* 97, no. 777 (1994), 192-193.

[12] Kawashima, *Priestly Tent*, 251.

[13] Kawashima *Priestly Tent*, 256.

[14] T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch* (Baker Academic, 2012), 61.

only lacks true analogies in the ancient literary world, but also often destroys the literary and aesthetic qualities of these narratives.'[15]

Personification and Anthropomorphisms

To preserve divine transcendence by regarding any encounters within the immanent frame as simply phenomenological, commentators term them as spiritualized descriptions of experiences explained in other ways. It was common enough in ancient literature to ascribe supernatural causes to hitherto inexplicable natural events. Thus, a transcendent divinity might manifest itself through a lightning storm or an earthquake. The myths of Greece and Rome teem with examples. Poseidon, the lord of the oceans, is a crucial antagonist in Homer's *Odyssey*, and his anger against Odysseus delays his return home. Homer's maritime hazards, familiar to all audiences of the ancient bards, were natural phenomena personified as displays of Poseidon's anger or perhaps his offspring (such as Charybdis, the personification of the whirlpool in the Strait of Messina between Sicily and Reggio Calabria[16]).

Against this classical backdrop, the Jewish Bible contains nothing comparable. Personification occurs in poetic passages, such as when God interrogates Job with questions like this:

> Do you send the lightning bolts on their way?

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[15] R. N. Whybray, *The Making of the Pentateuch: A Methodological Study* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1994), 130.

[16] Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Walter Shewring, *Oxford World's Classics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), X.104-441.

Do they report to you, “Here we are”?[17]

Or, more poignantly, the Book of Lamentations personifies Jerusalem, such that an observer of the city’s plight asks, ‘To what can I liken you that I may comfort you, Virgin Daughter Zion’?[18] The closest the literature gets is the personification of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 8–9. She is present at creation and advises human authorities on how to rule well.[19] In biblical theological terms, the New Testament will appropriate this precedent by applying it christologically. So Paul frequently identifies Jesus with God’s wisdom: ‘Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God’;[20] and in the Christ-hymn of Colossians 1:15–17. Nevertheless, despite personification being a relatively common poetic device in the wisdom literature, the line between transcendent creator and phenomena within creation is never blurred. Creation is always distinct from him, at his disposal and command and the imagery is never employed to represent divine activity within the immanent frame.

There is still a biblical use of anthropomorphism. Adam Jones surveys the impact of Philo’s treatment of the Bible’s commonplace anthropomorphisms—Philo, in fact, employs ἀνθρωπόμορφος specifically to underline that ‘God is not in the form of man.’[21] Thus, God can be said to ‘stretch out his hand’ to perform miracles in Egypt; when the Levitical sacrificial regulations are itemized, they are invariably to be burnt so as to offer

[17] Job 38:35.

[18] Lamentations 2:13b.

[19] Proverbs 3:19-20; 8:22-36.

[20] 1 Corinthians 1:24.

[21] Adam W. Jones, "Philo's Influence on Understanding Divine Anthropomorphism," *Evangelical Quarterly* 91, no. 1 (2020), 51 (fn 7).

'an aroma pleasing to the Lord'; most famously, he is described as 'walking in the garden in the cool of the day' in Eden.[22] Few would ever have understood this phrase to imply that a transcendent God possessed physical limbs or human sensory perception. Philo was adamant and commented, as already mentioned, that 'God is not only not in the form of man (ἀνθρωπόμορφος) but belongs to no class or kind'.[23] Since the Hellenistic mindset repudiated the material realm as evil, or at least incompatible with spiritual purity, it could never conceive of divine activity within the immanent frame. Jones argues that this motivated Philo's marginalization of literal interpretation of the scriptures in favour of the allegorical[24], and while clear that it would be anachronistic to label him as such, Jones shows how Philo, through his influence on some early Christian thinkers, unwittingly sowed the seeds for Docetism and, more broadly, Gnosticism. So yet again, the conundrum remains intact.

Moses at Horeb: The tension at its most taut

If there is a place in the Pentateuch where the tension between divine transcendence and immanent involvement is at its starkest, it is surely in the Mount Horeb dialogue between YHWH and Moses. In context, it immediately follows the people's idolatry with the golden calf.[25] There are resonances with the Exodus 3 theophany at the Burning Bush, which of course took place on the same mountain. Back

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[22] Exodus 3:20; Leviticus 1:9 etc; Genesis 3:8.

[23] Philo, *Leg.* 1:36-37. in Philo, *The Works of Philo (Vol. I)*, trans. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, *Loeb Classical Library* (London: Heinemann, 1958).

[24] Jones, *Philo's Influence,* 56.

[25] Exodus 33:7–34:35

then, Moses had been able to approach when God called his name but was then instructed to keep some distance and to remove his sandals 'for the place where you are standing is holy ground'.[26] Old Testament scholar Christopher Wright describes the tension like the 'opposite poles of a magnet working together: pull and push; come close but keep your distance.'[27] But the tension in Exodus is not so much philosophical as moral.

When Moses returns to Horeb, nothing has altered the continued threat to the people from God's holiness. Despite reaffirming the covenant promises of a land, YHWH tells them, 'If I were to go with you even for a moment, I might destroy you'[28]. Their idolatrous disobedience was still fresh. Nevertheless, Moses has a mysterious relationship with God, as the rest of the chapter narrates. When he enters the Tent of Meeting, the pillar of cloud stands at its entrance, prompting the people's worship[29]. Meanwhile, 'The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend'[30]. As Wright notes, Moses was not the first to 'see God' since Hagar and Jacob had done so previously,[31] but this is certainly the most developed description of such an encounter. It is consequently the most puzzling. God reassures Moses that his 'Presence' would go with the people, but when he is asked by the prophet to make his glory visible, he insists on clear limits. 'You

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[26] Exodus 3:5.

[27] Christopher J. H. Wright, *Exodus, The Story of God Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021) 100.

[28] Exodus 33:5.

[29] Exodus 33:10.

[30] Exodus 33:10.

[31] Wright, Exodus, 573.

cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live'.[32] So within the space of only ten verses, the narrator has contradicted himself. On the one hand, the encounter with God is described in explicitly anthropomorphic terms ('as one speaks to a friend')—suggesting divine immanence at an intimate level—while on the other, God's nature is of an altogether 'other' character that renders such intimacies impossible. These instances do not prevent the covenant's renewal through Moses (represented by the Ten Commandments' replacement tablets), nor do they bar Moses from spending forty days on the mountain with God.[33] In fact, the divine presence seems somehow to irradiate him, such that even he must be veiled for the sake of the people.[34]

It can hardly be explained by appealing to a redactor's oversight, especially because the word translated as 'Presence' in verse 14 (legitimately because of its idiomatic use) is the same as that for 'face' in verse 20: *pā-nay*. As Old Testament commentator John Goldingay says, it is hardly possible to 'avoid saying things that seem contradictory'.[35] Despite that, one Jewish commentator, Nahum M. Sarna, appears to ignore the problem altogether.[36]

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[32] Exodus 33:20.

[33] Exodus 34:10–28.

[34] Exodus 34:33–35.

[35] John Goldingay, *Exodus and Leviticus for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2010), 122.

[36] Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus [Shemot]: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New J. P. S. Translation* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 215.

The need for closer reading

Perhaps errors of interpretation are to blame, so one option is for closer textual analysis. Thus, Calvin assumes differences in degree or intensity of what Moses experienced because of the subsequent assertion that seeing the divine face was lethal: 'Moses had indeed seen it, but in such a mode of revelation, as to be far inferior to its full effulgence.'[37] There is a logic here, but nothing in the text warrants this move.

More recently, John Durham finds consistency through distinguishing between the sight and nature of the theophany.

> what [YHWH] gives to Moses is quite specifically *not* the *sight* of his beauty, his glory, his Presence—that, indeed, he pointedly denies. What he gives rather is a *description*, and at that, a description not of how he *looks* but of how he *is*.[38]

This approach is a case of splitting hairs. Childs previously commented that too often, midrashic and 'pre-critical' interpreters were undermined by their 'frequent recourse to going beyond a text to solve a difficulty, either in the form of a rationalistic harmonization or a homiletical glossing over the tension'.[39] 'Post-critical' interpreters suffer from a similar affliction. While Calvin is perhaps guilty of Childs's second recourse, Durham illustrates the first. Most recently, the renowned Hebrew scholar Robert Alter takes a literary critical approach, discerning 'hyperbole' in verse 11's use of

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[37] Jean Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses, Arranged in the Form of a Harmony.*, trans. Charles William Bingham (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1852) 381.

[38] John I. Durham, *Exodus, Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1987), 452 (emphasis original).

[39] Brevard S. Childs, *Book of Exodus, Old Testament Library* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2004) 586.

two idioms, one that is 'in all likelihood a continuation of the visual perspective of the people so clearly marked in verses 8-10.'[40] This interpretation carries more weight.

Wright acknowledges the problem but offers three plausible resolutions, all of which are derived from the text itself. His first chimes with Calvin, suggesting that God's prohibition in 33:20 is possibly referring to 'God's "face in glory"'. The second draws on the context of Israel's rebellion immediately before, so God is effectively saying the prohibition is 'not now'. Finally, he notes the distinction between Moses '*talking* to God face to face' (in 33:11) and God's rejection of Moses' request 'to *see* God in a way he had not done so far'.[41] Of all the options, the third does have merit. But Wright's conclusion is striking:

> Whichever way we rationalize the matter, we should understand that by putting these two 'face' texts so closely together (v. 11 and then vv. 20–23), the narrator is forcing us to wrestle with the difficulty of expressing exactly what the presence of God means.[42]

In many ways, this discussion reflects the deeper challenge mentioned above, namely that of drawing out systematic theological propositions from the Bible. Goldingay comments that this 'constitutes another example of Exodus thinking its way round a theological profundity by telling a story.'[43] At the very least, assuming that the passage has textual integrity and a coherent vision, it must lie in the realms of the paradoxical. So, when the

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[40] Robert C. Alter, *Torah: The Five Books of Moses*, vol. I, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Co, 2019), 346.

[41] Wright, *Exodus,* 581 (emphasis original).

[42] Wright, *Exodus,* 581-2.

[43] Goldingay, *Exodus and Leviticus,* 120–121.

prophet is permitted his briefest theophanic glimpse, as Childs notes, even the sight 'from the rear is so awesome to the man Moses that God himself—note the strange paradox—must shield him with his own hand'.[44]

Could it possibly be, however, that the narrator intends to leave the matter unresolved precisely because it is unresolvable by human logic? Surely, if one accepts the reality of the transcendent realm, it is to be expected for the finite human mind, limited as it is by the experience of the immanent frame, to struggle, and for language to break down. This explains Alter's important observation:

> …that God's intrinsic nature is inaccessible, and perhaps also intolerable, to the finite mind of man, but that something of His attributes—His 'goodness,' the directional pitch of His ethical intentions, the afterglow of the effulgence of His presence—can be glimpsed by humankind.[45]

Perhaps an escape from the impasse is available if, as suggested at the start, readers reframe the distinction between transcendence and immanence in the first place. Then, the relevance for creative endeavours becomes clear.

(ii) Reframing Conceptions of YHWH's Nature

What happens if a non-contrastive definition of transcendence and immanence is established? As discussed above, Nordlander does this by grappling with the presumption that the doctrine of divine creation inevitably entails a form of determinism. Determinism drove French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty to reject the doctrine of creation,

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[44] Childs, *Exodus*, 596.

[45] Alter, *Torah*, 348.

because to his mind, 'a transcendent creator implies a fully determined creation and therefore the loss of the human phenomenon, its freedom, and its creative meaning-making'.[46] Divine causality and human freedom feature in a zero-sum game, he assumes, whereby the greater the transcendent Creator's responsibility for causation, the greater the diminution of human contingency. The logic seems impeccable enough, but as Nordlander makes clear, this reading does not fit with how the theologians have traditionally conceived the doctrine. Likewise, Durand notes that Augustine, Aquinas and Calvin all rejected such an approach.[47] Drawing on Karl Barth's discussion in his *Church Dogmatics*, Nordlander notes:

> Catholic and Protestant theologians rightly appropriated the philosophical notion of causality to speak both of God as creator and sustainer of the world [*causa prima*] *and* of creatures as causes in their own right [*causae secundae*], such that God can be spoken of as the cause of all causes [*causa causarum*].[48]

Of course, this theory works only if one precludes a strictly mechanistic model for reality (the liberation from that is precisely what a transcendent frame offers, after all) and a recognition that divine transcendence is not antithetical to immanence. Not only can it be said that the divine is entirely 'other', so also must the 'causal agencies' of creator and creation 'not be thought to be operative on the same level'.[49] Nordlander explains this distinciton in terms of what Catholic philosopher Robert Sokolowski termed 'the

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[46] Nordlander, *Wonder of Immanence*, 116.

[47] Durand, *God's Holiness*, 422.

[48] Nordlander, *Wonder of Immanence*, 116 (emphasis original).

[49] Nordlander, *Wonder of Immanence*, 117.

Christian Distinction' because it ushered in ideas previously unknown in classical thought. Sokolowski puts it like this: 'No distinction made within the horizon of the world is like [creation by a transcendent God], and therefore the act of creation cannot be understood in terms of any action or any relationship that exists in the world.'[50]

Human language is by necessity immanent and so must always fall short when describing the transcendent. What if divine causality and human causality simply operated on different levels, on different dimensions? That idea would suggest they do not work in competition but in parallel. After all, the Bible never allows these causalities to be pitted against one another, constantly presenting human beings as entirely responsible for their actions within an order that God both created and sustains.[51] Barth captures the paradox beautifully: 'God rules in and over a world of freedom.'[52] In a mechanistic framework such a statement would be nonsensical. Yet, to appropriate terms famously articulated by Thomas Kuhn[53], what is needed is a theological paradigm shift, equivalent to that from a Newtonian to an Einsteinian model of physics. Unless theologians help secular sceptics recognize that transcendence need not be contrastive, the church will struggle to make inroads into a closed immanent frame.

In the light of this, how might the church proceed?

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[50] Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1995), 33.

[51] See Colossians 1:16-17; or Hebrews 9:27.

[52] Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, Study ed., vol. III, *Church Dogmatics* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 93.

[53] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 50th Anniversary ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

Divine Accommodation

In recent decades, the centrality to Calvin's thought of the notion of divine accommodation has undergone something of a reassessment.[54] Early on in the *Institutes*, he notes how God through scriptures speaks 'in accommodation to the rude and gross intellect of man.'[55] One particularly famous analogy is derived from the way adults communicate to infants:

> For who is so devoid of intellect as not to understand that God, in so speaking, lisps with us as nurses are wont to do with little children? Such modes of expression, therefore, do not so much express what kind of a being God is, as accommodate the knowledge of him to our feebleness. In doing so, he must, of course, stoop far below his proper height.[56]

The fullest divine communication within the immanent frame, in scriptural terms, is the Incarnation, and with Calvin, it is the accommodation *par excellence*. Immediately before the lisping nurse, he rejects 'The Anthropomorphites … who imagined a corporeal God from the fact that Scripture often ascribes to him a mouth, ears, eyes, hands, and feet…'[57] As Calvin scholar Arnold Huijgen notes, this section of the *Institutes* shows a deep-seated concern to preserve the integrity of both the immensity (hence the rejection of Manicheism) and the spirituality (hence the rejection of anthropomorphitism) of God's

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[54] For example, see Edward Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952) Jon Balserak, *Divinity Compromised: A Study of Divine Accommodation in the Thought of John Calvin* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006).

[55] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. I, *The Library of Christian Classics*, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2011), I:XI:1, 120.

[56] Calvin, *Institutes*, I:XIII:1, 147.

[57] Calvin, *Institutes*, I:XIII:1, 147.

essence.[58] His doctrine of accommodation is applied here, explained by Huijgen as 'an anti-speculative line of defense, or shield, around divine transcendence.'[59] This thinking is picked up much later in the *Institutes,* when Calvin credits Irenaeus with the insight, 'that the Father, who is boundless in himself, is bounded in the Son, because he has accommodated himself to our capacity, lest our minds should be swallowed up by the immensity of his glory.'[60]

Calvin echoes passages such as Exodus 33–34, an entirely warranted move because it is precisely what the prologue to John's gospel does: 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth'.[61] Commentator D. A. Carson notes how the whole paragraph that follows from this verse alludes to those Exodus chapters, not least because in this particular verse, John's choice of σκηνοω (translated 'dwelt' in NIV) literally means 'the Word pitched his tabernacle, or lived in his tent, amongst us'.[62] As if to avoid misunderstanding, the prologue emphasizes the most scandalous and improbable element of the verse: 'We have seen his glory'. In other words, what Moses could barely glimpse, and that in the most extraordinary of circumstances, was available to all of John's

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[58] Arnold Huijgen, "Divine Accommodation and Divine Transcendence in John Calvin's Theology," in *Calvinus Sacrarum Literarum Interpres: Papers of the International Congress on Calvin Research*, ed. H. J. Selderhuis (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 125.

[59] Huijgen, in *Calvinus Sacrarum Literarum Interpres: Papers of the International Congress on Calvin Research*, 125.

[60] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. II, *The Library of Christian Classics*, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2011) II:VI:4, 403.

[61] John 1:14.

[62] D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester: IVP, 1991), 127.

contemporaries. As he goes on, 'No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known'.[63] Wright says of the Exodus passage, 'to see or not to see, that is the question.'[64] The fourth gospel provides the emphatic answer. Because of Jesus, sight is now possible. In that light, Christians might wonder that if this is a case of divine lisping, God's full revelation of himself must surely explode every conceivable category of thought. It stands to reason that an immanent mind cannot possibly grasp the full reality of a transcendent intelligence. But surely there is no intrinsic reason why the inverse should be impossible.

So the tension seen in Exodus 33, a tension which remained unresolved throughout the rest of the Jewish scriptural canon, can be seen to have found resolution in John's prologue. It is no longer necessary to presume that talking 'face to face' with God must simply be deemed an idiomatic description for the indescribable; now, through the Incarnation, God is embodied and has a face. The conceptual tension is eased not through philosophical gymnastics but through a birth. Far from being bound by a Hellenistic revulsion at material reality, the God of the Incarnation is unashamed to take on human fleshiness, with all that this entails.

Divine Holiness

What is harder to grasp is that according to the biblical narrative, not least that of Exodus, transcendence is not God's most pressing challenge. Human finitude is not the only, or perhaps even primary, impediment; it is accompanied by human sin. Human

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[63] John 1:18.

[64] Wright, *Exodus*, 573.

intellect is not 'rude and gross' simply because of created limitations but because of the distortions resulting from rebellion. The context of Moses' tent of meeting theophany reinforces the point, because of the traumatic golden calf incident in the previous chapter. That event shattered the covenant relationship during Moses' absence on the mountain and prompted Moses to plead for the people in the first place. In response to God's warning, 'I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way',[65] Moses manages to reason YHWH round. 'How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us?'[66] In what several have noted as an extreme example of biblical anthropomorphism, God is apparently persuaded to change his mind.

Childs insists, however, that this text does not undercut the seriousness of sin. Instead, the narrative provides 'an excellent illustration of the biblical approach to sin and forgiveness… This tension between God who judges and forgives which is present in Exodus 33 will later reach a point of genuine paradox (Job 19:25ff; Rom. 8:1ff).'[67] Interestingly, Goldingay disagrees, contrasting how Augustus Toplady's famous hymn inspired by this chapter, 'Rock of Ages', is 'preoccupied by God's righteousness and our sin while the story is preoccupied by God's supernatural splendor and our mortal ordinariness.'[68] However, this conclusion seems odd, especially because of the necessity of Moses' intercession. God must accommodate himself not only because of his

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[65] Exodus 33:2.

[66] Exodus. 33:2.

[67] Childs, *Exodus*, 599.

[68] Goldingay, *Exodus and Leviticus*, 120–121.

transcendence but also because of his holiness. After all, Isaiah's temple vision early in his ministry is the only occasion on which God is described with a threefold repetition of the descriptor[69]. Although the Hebrew word for 'holiness' connotes separateness and difference, Old Testament scholar Alec Motyer notes that it entails 'his total and unique moral majesty.'[70] In other words, his otherness is moral as much as it is ontological. Human sin, and not human immanence, is the primary impediment to God's communication.

Nevertheless, Isaiah's seraphim conclude their chanting of the word 'holy' with these extraordinary words: 'the whole earth is full of his glory.' The whole of the created world is his domain because he created it all. There is no metaphysical impediment to be overcome despite his absolute otherness. For, as Motyer insists,'This transcendent holiness is the mode of God's immanence… Holiness is God's hidden glory; glory is God's all-present holiness.'[71]

Divine Engagement

If God's transcendence is not contrastive with the immanent frame but is a different category or dimension altogether, then there is no reason why divine activity within the immanent frame should be problematic. If his will demands it, it will happen. As Durand notes, 'God's transcendence is revealed by Godself through words and

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[69] Isaiah. 6:3.

[70] Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Leicester: IVP, 1993), 77.

[71] Motyer, *Isaiah*, 77.

theophanies which are addressed to real human beings.'[72] Thus he adopts the formulation of 'relational transcendence' for what takes place in the covenant, to avoid the deistic misstep of contrastive transcendence.[73] This idea resonates with an important thread in the work of theologian of the arts Jeremy Begbie, who notes that divine transcendence refers to 'God's otherness and uncontainability, propelled by ceaseless and holy love, and these are most clearly on display just as God is directly and intensively active toward and in the world.'[74] In no sense is it ever seen to preclude that activity.

For example, the Pentateuch's entire sacrificial system can be seen in this light. It was an initiative of that holy love, motivated by the divine desire to bring sinners into his presence. Such grace never negates his holiness; it negates human sin. This initiative is a consistent theme throughout the canon of scripture. As in Hosea, God famously says, 'I am God and not a man' and immediately follows this assertion of his otherness with 'the Holy One among you'.[75] Durand articulates the shock of this well: 'At the center, the assertion of difference is worked out right away in terms of presence and indwelling.'[76] This combination corresponds to the Johannine announcement of the Logos as coming 'full of grace and truth... Out of his fulness we have all received grace in place of grace

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[72] Durand, *God's Holiness*, 431.

[73] Durand, *God's Holiness*, 432.

[74] Jeremy Begbie, *Redeeming Transcendence in the Arts: Bearing Witness to the Triune God* (London: SCM Press, 2018), 120.

[75] Hosea 11:9.

[76] Durand, *God's Holiness*, 425-426.

already given'.[77] But perhaps the most startling juxtaposition of divine transcendence and grace comes from Isaiah:

> For this is what the high and exalted One says—he who lives for ever, whose name is holy:
> 'I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.[78]

Human awareness of God's presence regularly results in awareness of sin. Moses has to be taught this at the burning bush.[79] Isaiah's response to the temple vision is one of overwhelmed confession.[80] Simon Peter arguably experiences something similar after the miraculous catch of fish.[81] Yet, each time, the initiative to overcome that problem is God's. Such is the nature of divine grace within the grand narrative of the biblical canon.

There is one final aspect of this gracious engagement to note before moving forward. Because the creator of the cosmos is active and engaged, creation is 'not something that happened to the universe a long time ago.' As Soskice continues, 'It is not the distant accomplishment of a distant God. *Creatio ex nihilo* underscores the belief that God imparts the being of all created things, visible and invisible. The world is graced in its createdness which is happening all the time.'[82] Thus, society and culture in general, and the arts in particular, are a worthy object of theological study, since the divine creator

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[77] John 1:14, 16.

[78] John 1:14, 16.

[79] Exodus 3.

[80] Isaiah 6.

[81] Luke 5:8.

[82] Soskice, *Creation*, 185.

works within the activity of human creativity. As Rowan Williams writes, 'To think of God as "transcendent" is to recognize that for God to act freely and fully doesn't mean that he needs to interrupt the flow of events within the world; he acts in and through the processes of the world and what finite beings decide.'[83]

Summary of the Biblical Framework

Central to the Christian message is the belief in a transcendent God active within the immanent frame and human history. This belief presents a significant problem for those who inhabit the closed framework of secularism. Furthermore, traditional conceptions of transcendence and immanence have pitted them against each other as antithesis, assuming they are contrastive as if in a zero-sum game. The more divine transcendence is at work, the more that the immanent frame is impinged and marginalized. Since Christian doctrine is derived from biblical narrative, further complications arise, illustrated by the apparent contradictions in the narrative of Moses' encounters with YHWH on Mount Horeb.

However, as soon as contrastive definitions of transcendence and immanence are jettisoned, the terms describe separate dimensions and explain why a transcendent creator could initiate immanent interventions. God's primary impediment is not ontological but moral; sin bars humanity from his holy presence. Yet, because love lies at the heart of his transcendence, he overcomes even that, its greatest manifestation being the Incarnation. He is as involved and experienced in the immanent frame as it is possible to be.

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[83] From Rowan Williams's preface to Anthony D. Baker, *Shakespeare, Theology, and the Unstaged God* (London: Routledge, 2019), ii.

This exploration thus offers a biblical setting for how creative professionals might legitimately understand the nature of their own work.

2. The Arts and Worldview Change

Before considering how the arts in general, and specific artforms in particular, affect those who engage with them, it is first necessary to define terms as well as briefly to address some of the suspicions sometimes raised against them, whether from a theological or other standpoint.

(i) Facing Suspicions about the Arts

Renowned philosopher and aesthetician Calvin Seerveld defined art in broad terms as 'an object or event conceived and structured by human design to be perceived by our senses, and characterized by an imaginative and allusive finish that affords the piece its own independent identity.'[84] Allusivity is the key, and it is usually deliberate, although, pinpointing an artist's precise intentions is a notoriously fraught endeavour. That 'independent identity' is also significant because if an artefact is communicating something—even when a successful artwork's creation entails deliberate randomness, such as Jackson Pollock's 'drip paintings' or the aleatoric music of Karl-Heinz Stockhausen and John Cage —then its form represents the best means of communicating it. George Steiner defines 'literature (art, music) as the maximalization of semantic

[84] Seerveld, *Fresh Olive Leaves*, 8.

incommensurability in respect of the formal means of expression.'[85] In other words, any other medium will be insufficient for conveying as much as the artwork conveys in its particular form. Hence the oft-quoted and multi-attributed line, 'Writing about music is like dancing about architecture.'[86]

Earlier in *Real Presences,* Steiner describes how, when the composer Robert Schumann was asked to explain what he was 'saying' in a complex étude, he promptly sat at the piano to play through it again, because 'the most "exposed", therefore engaged and responsible, act of musical interpretation is that of performance.'[87] By the same token, a great novel cannot be successfully précised, nor an Old Master portrait described, nor a lyric poem danced. Each inspires a different type of artwork, but each will have its own character, its own integrity. Because of this allusivity, anxieties arise, albeit from different quarters.

Monotheist Suspicion

The fact that the Decalogue prohibits God images had a profound effect on cultural developments in Judaism, not least because the second commandment carries an extended explanation and sanction, with only the fourth commandment, Sabbath-keeping, being of comparable length.[88] The text has raised many questions about the extent of the prohibition, as well as its motivation. Childs suggests that it is partly grounded on the

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[85] Steiner, *Real Presences,* 83.

[86] Garson O'Toole, "Writing About Music Is Like Dancing About Architecture," last modified 8 Nov, 2010, accessed 21 Dec, 2021, http://quoteinvestigator.com/2010/11/08/writing-about-music/.

[87] Steiner, *Real Presences,* 20.

[88] Exodus 20:4-6.

nature of YHWH's self-revelation (a point made explicit in the verses immediately preceding Deuteronomy's iteration of the commandments[89]), but he insists on greater weight being given to 'Israel's response to God in the light of his revelation.'[90] They are to worship YHWH, which entails worshipping him correctly and not worshipping other deities. Thus, it flows directly out of the first commandment. Wright supplements Childs's observation that the word for image (*pesel*) connotes an object like a carved statue, noting that '[s]omething that can *do nothing* is no image of the God who can *do all things*… Furthermore, a dumb statue is no match for the God who *speaks*.'[91] This point is certainly consistent with the Pentateuchal notion of humanity beings created in *imago dei*, since human beings are the only living things on earth that comparable to God.

Consequently, the golden calf incident was a catastrophic infringement of the second, as much as of the first, commandment. From the Deuteronomic historian's perspective, a grim precedent was set for subsequent Israelite history, with infringements scattered through the period of the Judges, especially in the northern kingdom post-Solomon.[92] Nevertheless, it is a remarkable historical fact that Israel persisted throughout its history in resisting visible representations of the divine. There is 'virtually nothing

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[89] Deuteronomy 4:9ff.

[90] Childs, *Exodus*, 409.

[91] Wright, *Exodus*, 362.

[92] This is indicated by the incessant refrain 'did evil in the eyes of the LORD' as in Judges 10:6 and 1 Kings 11:6.

significant archaeologically in the way of images of Yahweh.'[93] It is little surprise, therefore, that Jewish culture has shied away from the visual arts, usually in favour of the verbal or musical. The American rabbi Chaim Potok captures the anomaly in agonizing terms when one of his novels' Hasidic protagonists, Asher Lev, is forced (aged only ten) to grapple with his burgeoning artistic gifts. A family rabbi has insisted that his gifts have been granted by the source of evil and ugliness. 'How can evil and ugliness make a gift of beauty? I lay in my bed and thought a long time about what was wanted from me.'[94] His artistic calling pits him against his community and tradition.

That tradition would reverberate in the history of the Christian church as well, built as it was on the foundations of a Jewish inheritance. Theologians debated the issue with vehemence, sometimes even with violence. One of the most notorious episodes was the Byzantine Church's 'Iconoclastic Controversy', a crisis that lasted for over a century from the early eighth century, albeit to varying degrees of intensity. The appropriateness of visual art in church life, and in particular, the devotional use of saints' images (the 'icons' of early Orthodox Christian spirituality), was the catalyst for vicious conflict. On one side, the iconoclasts insisted that the second commandment prohibited all images in worship and so, for the people's protection, it was imperative that such images be destroyed; on the other were the iconophiles (or iconolaters as their opponents would have it).[95] They argued that Christ's Incarnation was transformative, not simply as a

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[93] Wright, *Exodus*, 361.

[94] Chaim Potok, *My Name Is Asher Lev* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972) 119. This novel is evidently an inspiration for the Israeli series *Shtisel*, recently shown on Netflix.

[95] Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, Revised ed., *Penguin History of the Church 1/7* (London: Penguin, 1993), 283.

divine affirmation of the material realm, but also to legitimate 'the production of images of Christ and the saints, provided that they represented the truth perceived by faith and tradition.'[96] That was a step too far for many.

The issue was further complicated by iconoclasm's impetus, originating in the Byzantine emperors after being initiated against the wishes of successive popes by Leo III in 726.[97] The iconoclasts' arguments carried weight, not least because they identified the influences on iconography as pagan, such that the common image of *Christ Pantocrator* was derived from the Olympian Zeus while *Mary Theotokos* was an appropriation of classical mother-goddesses. As Chadwick observes, however, the problem was that their arguments 'were too technical in the long run to be persuasive',[98] theough their position was sound. As Jensen notes, they held that 'both objects from the natural world and human-made images are capable of revealing the invisible divine—even if in an incomplete and mediated fashion.' [99] They could draw on passages such as Romans 1:19–20 to show that the creator's nature was reflected through the creation, and by extension, through those things made by his creatures.

The Eastern church would eventually embrace a wholehearted visual spirituality within church life, in contrast to the Western church. Thus, in the view of South African theologian John de Gruchy, the legacy of Roman Catholicism's lack of consensus was a

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[96] John W. De Gruchy, "Christianity, Art and Transformation," *Acta Theologica* 29 (2020), 6.

[97] Robin Margaret Jensen, *The Substance of Things Seen: Art, Faith, and the Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004) 55.

[98] Chadwick, *Early Church*, 283.

[99] Jensen, *Substance*, 58.

factor behind the renewal of iconoclastic energy in the Reformation.[100] The heralds of *sola scriptura* privileged the verbal over the visual—how could an image possibly equate to the grandeur of biblical revelation? The 'purest worship was with the heart, head, and mouth, and not with the eye. Adornments were, at best, aids to the memory or illustrations for non-readers.'[101] The irony, of course, was not lost on many. The novelist Dorothy L. Sayers noted that the prohibition on graven images could never shackle what those very same scriptures conjured up in the mind's eye: '… human nature and the nature of human language defeated them. No legislation could prevent the making of verbal pictures: God walks…'[102] God-talk is virtually impossible without metaphor, which is precisely what exercised Philo so greatly.

Many have sought a less confrontational view than either pole in the Iconoclasm disputes. John Dillenberger, former president of the American Academy of Religion, in fact, outlined several distinct ways in which theologians have approached the arts.[103] These roughly correspond to the various Christian responses to pop culture articulated more recently by cultural critic Ted Turnau.[104] Of these responses, three are most relevant.

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[100] De Gruchy, *Art and Transformation*, 3.

[101] Jensen, *Substance*, 59.

[102] Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1971), 21.

[103] John Dillenberger, *A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities: Visual Arts & the Church* (London: SCM, 1987), especially chapter 8.

[104] Ted Turnau, *Popologetics: Popular Culture in Christian Perspective* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2012), Esp. part 2.

The Arts as a Risk

Calvin, and subsequently Karl Barth, were concerned about the potential of the arts (particularly, though not exclusively, the visual) to encourage idolatry, as well as to eclipse the supremacy of the Word. However, it should be noted that Calvin never sought an absolute ban, since he affirmed that 'sculpture and paintings are gifts of God.' Instead, they should be put to a 'pure and legitimate use', which specifically meant depicting 'only those things … which the eyes are capable of seeing: let not God's majesty, which is far above the perception of the eyes, be debased through unseemly representations.'[105] The apologist Francis Schaeffer argued that the prohibition still allowed for considerable room for manoeuvre. So, 'the commandment is not against making art but against worshipping anything other than God and specifically against worshipping art.'[106] He then proceeds to expound several details of the divinely mandated artistry involved in the tabernacle and subsequent temple. This position, then, is less confining than first appearances suggest, and it coheres with the reformation principle of *abusus non tolit usum* ('the possibility of abuse does not remove the legitimacy of use').[107]

Turnau describes different roots for what he calls 'imagophobia'.[108] In his view, the heralds of this position were the Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan and American educationalist Neil Postman. Despite neither being Christian, these two thinkers have greatly influenced theologians who share the kinds of concerns held by

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[105] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I:xi:12, 112.

[106] Francis A. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 20.

[107] W. David O. Taylor, *For the Beauty of the Church: A Vision for the Arts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010), 156.

[108] Turnau, *Poplogetics*, 135.

Calvin and Barth, such as Kenneth Myers, in part because their cultural critiques are trenchant and plausible, with much to recommend them. Many are genuinely concerned that 'contemporary society is descending into mediocrity, or something worse, because of the devastating effects of an image-based popular culture.'[109] However, Turnau tempers these legitimate fears about the ills of image 'supersaturation' by tweaking McLuhan's famously absolutist slogan about messages being their media. He changes it to 'the medium deeply contours the message' because 'a medium's influence is *adverbial*'[110] rather than absolute. Furthermore, 'not only does the Bible show that images are necessary and can be good and true, but it reveals that words can be dangerously misleading. Words can seduce a person away from God as powerfully as images can.'[111]

Nevertheless, it is not difficult to find contemporary correlations for those ancient biblical concerns. Wolterstorff is hardly the first, nor only, commentator to observe that artworks have 'become surrogate gods' as 'aesthetic contemplation takes the place of religious adoration.'[112] This phenomenon prompted Gordon Graham's 2005–6 Stanton lectures at Cambridge.[113] While the focus of Philip Salim Francis's study was not representative of evangelicals, let alone Christians of broader convictions (he intentionally restricted his research to students from fundamentalist backgrounds, provoked by aesthetic experiences into changing or even discarding their faith), his

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[109] Turnau, *Poplogetics*, 139.

[110] Turnau, *Poplogetics*, 140 (original emphasis).

[111] Turnau, *Poplogetics*, 157.

[112]Wolterstorff, *Art in Action*, 50.

[113] Gordon Graham, *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Art Versus Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

research is likely to cause some pastors concern. These students found that the undeniable reality of what they experienced seemed more authentic and affirmative, even though it conflicted with the strict boundaries of their fundamentalist identities.[114]

Evangelicals are not the only ones engaged. When Karen Armstrong left her Catholic convent in 1969, she soon bought a record player and started listening to Beethoven's late quartets nightly after a friend's recommendation. She described how she had 'the kind of experience I had sought in religion. While I listened, I felt my spirit knitting together.'[115] Narratives such as Francis's fan the flames of suspicion. Taylor describes the central risk for the artist (as some would perceive it) in the starkest of terms: there has been a post-Enlightenment shift from mimesis to creation.

> No longer defined mainly by imitation, by *mimesis* of reality, art is understood now more in terms of creation… what we express is not an imitation of the pre-existing either, but a new creation. We think of the imagination as creative.[116]

The Arts as a Source

[114] Francis, *When Art Disrupts*, 43.

[115] Francis, *When Art Disrupts*, 132.

[116] Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 62.

Dillenberger's second category was derived from the work of his former teacher, the pioneer of existentialist theology, Paul Tillich. Instead of heeding the Old Covenant prohibitions, Tillich drew his inspiration for theology from the arts, perhaps in large part because the arts had indeed become surrogate gods. Far from being anxious to avoid an eclipse of scripture, this approach could be seen as a wholesale substitution of scripture.

Fig. 1: Sandro Botticelli, *Madonna with the Child and Singing Angels*, 1473, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, https://bit.ly/BotticellisMadonna.

Tillich here reflects on the profound impact that seeing Botticelli's *Madonna with Singing Angels* had on him.

> In the beauty of the painting there was Beauty itself … something of the divine source of all things came through to me. I turned away shaken… That moment has affected my whole life, given me the keys for the interpretation of human existence, brought vital joy and spiritual truth. I compare it with what is usually called revelation in the language of religion.[117]

There were several problems.[118] For one thing, De Gruchy criticises Tillich and his acolytes for an elitist preoccupation with the so-called higher arts. However, even without such cultural prejudices against the populist or demotic, Turnau has observed a

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[117] Paul Tillich, *On Art and Architecture*, ed. Jane and John Dillenberger (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 234-5.

[118] Jonathan Brant more recently has fruitfully used Tillich's approach to explore cinema: Jonathan Brant, *Paul Tillich and the Possibility of Revelation through Film: A Theoretical Acount Grounded by Empirical Research into the Experiences of Filmgoers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

similar approach amongst those engaging with pop culture. 'There *are* a lot of Christians who act as though trendiness were next to godliness', but the danger is that this tendency merely results in what he terms 'pop-syncretism'.[119]

Dillenberger laid down a different charge against Tillich's engagement with his theological sources. With reference to modern art, he offered 'dazzling theological interpretations'. These would undoubtedly compel his disciples but hardly persuaded others because they were 'grounded in theological seeing without faithfulness to the artworks themselves, [making them] unconvincing to critics and art historians.'[120] The same charge can be made against preachers' appropriation of pop culture artefacts to land a homiletical point.

Of course, a key hallmark of Reformed theology is its articulation of common grace, arguably the strongest grounds for taking prevailing artistic trends seriously. Thus, Calvin asserted that human competence in the arts and sciences resulted from 'those most excellent benefits of the divine Spirit, which he distributes to whomever he wills, for the common good of mankind.'[121] Nevertheless, for all their brilliance, insight, and benefits, human endeavours can never fend off the corruptions of the Fall. Any capacity for understanding divinely-created reality is 'an unstable and transitory thing in God's sight, when a solid foundation of truth [in other words, that of divine revelation] does not

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[119] De Gruchy, *Art and Transformation*, 4; Turnau, *Poplogetics*, 166, 189.

[120] Dillenberger, *Artistic Sensibilities*, 22l.

[121] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II:ii:15, 275.

underlie it.'[122] While there is much to learn from the insights of an artistic movement, it is unwise to use it as a primary, let alone exclusive, theological source.

The Arts as a Model

Dillenger offers another option, one which has garnered a wider spectrum of twentieth-century advocates; and while related to the second, it is more concerned with the arts as a model for doing theology and, indeed, for engaging with the totality of life. At their best, the arts have always sought to do so. Instead of relying on them as authoritative, this option studies how their makers perceived the world. Its advocates extend from the Catholic Hans Urs von Balthasar, Karl Rahner, and more recently, David Tracy, to the evangelical H. R. Rookmaaker (an associate of Francis Schaeffer) with those following his foosteps like Nicholas Wolterstorff and Calvin Seerveld. In their various ways, each produced influential theological engagements in philosophical aesthetics. The inclusion of Catholic thinkers invested in this work is perhaps unsurprising, not least because of the centrality of sacramental thinking. 'They are prepared to see a second dimension in the commonplace… to see the infinite working through the finite' such that 'the stuff of life becomes charged with possibilities.'[123] The recent emergence of these Protestant voices in a tradition that has tended to reject a high sacramentalism suggests a righting of the balance. It is by no means a pervasive Protestant concern, of course, featuring primarily amongst reformed thinkers (again largely because of common grace theology).

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[122] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II:ii:15, 275.

[123] Steve Turner, *Imagine: A Vision for Christians and the Arts* (Leicester: IVP, 2001), 34.

As de Gruchy explains, the object of both groups was apologetic, so that Rookmaaker for one 'used his extensive knowledge of modern art to interpret the meaning of the gospel.'[124] But their various engagements should not be reduced to 'mere' apologetics, since Wolterstorff is concerned in several works for the transformative power of the arts in serving the common good.[125] Thus, critics Hilary Brand and Adrienne Chaplin point out how Christian artists contribute to the wellbeing of society in their service of the church, because it is part and parcel of a disciple's stewardship of all that God has made and given.[126]

Some in the church, not to mention those outside it, dispute the importance of the arts on the grounds that they enable escapism. While a risk, such abuses are still insufficient for complete abstinence. Tolkien, whose epic tales might be regarded as the epitome of literature at its most escapist, argues in his defence of fairy stories that while escapist elements lie in fantasy (as in all fiction), they do not negate their power to illuminate lived reality (as millions of readers attest). Furthermore, there is what he calls the 'genuine escapist, or (I would say) fugitive spirit.'[127] This reflects the Christian grand story of which he was a devoted advocate, one in which it was possible to relish the 'consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good

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[124] De Gruchy, *Art and Transformation*, 4.

[125] See, for example, Wolterstorff, *Art in Action*, and Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, *Art Rethought: The Social Practices of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015)

[126] Hilary Brand, and Adrienne Chaplin, *Art & Soul: Signposts for Christians in the Arts* (Carlisle: Piquant, 2007), especially ch. 19, '*Art as a twenty-first century calling*'.

[127] J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tolkien: On Fairy-Stories*, ed. Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson (London: HarperCollins, 2014), 74.

catastrophe.' If there is to be escapism, it lies in the divine gift of escaping our mortality. He insisted that stories did not:

> …deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.[128]

A secular Marxist frame would inevitably reject this thinking as opiate delusion, but if the transcendent realm does exist, and a grand story is at work and has been revealed to the world, then its embrace is surely the antithesis of escapism in its negative sense.

Modernist Scepticism

In essence, modernist doubts about the arts fall into two main categories. The first is that human creativity rarely conforms to Enlightenment priorities and values. It is, therefore, no wonder that one of the first significant movements to resist its onward march to 'progress' was Romanticism, made up of artists across a variety of fields. The second category of nervousness about the arts derives from a recognition of their intrinsic power, drawn from a realm beyond these sceptics' own personal power. Since time immemorial, autocrats have brooked few rivals. While true for ecclesiastical autocrats, secular examples highlight the problem at its most stark.

[128] Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, 74.

Beyond the Reason's Progress

Enlightenment thought revolutionized how the world and life within it were perceived. According to philosopher Craig Gay, Descartes developed an understanding of reality to enable humanity's ascent to being 'the masters and possessors of nature', an integral element in what Gay summarized as a plan to ensure that 'life must somehow be reducible to a complete and consistent system of logical and mathematical operations.'[129] This distillation paid great dividends in science and technology, easily seducing many with its manifest successes. The story of progress displaced a biblical theology of reality suffused with divine providence, with humans usurping God as, to quote Newbigin, 'bearers of the meaning of history'.[130] This narrative could never have succeeded without corroboration, which is why Richard Dawkins notoriously asserted, 'Show me a cultural relativist at thirty thousand feet and I'll show you a hypocrite.'[131] After all, jet aircraft represent incontestable evidence for the power of scientific disciplines, efficiency and knowledge, establishing an apparent superiority of so-called 'objective' truth (such as quantifiable data and repeatable experimentation) over the subjective, personal, private, and imaginary. The consequences of this 'exclusive pursuit of objectivity' have been severe, condensed by the poet and priest Malcolm Guite, as 'progress in alienation', first of 'nature from humanity' and then of 'man from himself'.[132] For the arts to be as authoritatively truth-bearing as an Excel spreadsheet, say, is fanciful to a rationalist. Yet

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[129] Craig M. Gay, *Dialogue, Catalogue & Monologue: Personal, Impersonal and Depersonalizing Ways to Use Words* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2008), 63, 66.

[130] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 86.

[131] Richard Dawkins, *River out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (London: Phoenix, 1996), 53.

[132] Guite, *Faith, Hope and Poetry*, 76.

the Romantics denounced what Taylor summarized as the Enlightenment's 'disengaged rationality and … an atomism that didn't recognize the ties of community'.[133]

Guite goes to great lengths to glean the insights of William Blake, William Wordsworth, and especially Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Chief among them is the central importance given to the imagination. It is integral to being created in the *imago dei*, and as such is 'a reflection of the divine', which in Coleridge's terms is 'a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM'.[134] This insight would be echoed by C. S. Lewis decades later, acknowledging that 'reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning.'[135] Before his conversion to theism, Lewis embraced the closed universe of scientifict materialism as a philosophical necessity. His longings pointed him far beyond the confines of the material, but because of his rejection of the metaphysical, they had to be deceptions, even if 'breathing a lie through silver.'[136] 'Nearly all that I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought grim and meaningless.'[137] Elemental to this longing is Norse and Celtic mythology, suffused as it is with both the immanent and transcendent frames. That seemed *truer*, somehow, than the raw objectivity demanded by naturalism. Those ancient sagas, together with the writing of other authors, sustained his relentless *Sehnsucht*. It

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[133] Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 24.

[134] Malcolm Guite, *Lifting the Veil: Imagination and the Kingdom of God* (Baltimore, MD: Square Halo, 2021), 13.

[135] C. S. Lewis, "Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare," in *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2013), 256.

[136] Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, 65.

[137] C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London: William Collins, 2012), 138.

was on the bedrock of this longing that Tolkien built bridges to his sceptical friend after their famous late-night conversation on Magdalen's Addison's Walk, as articulated in his poem *Mythopoeia*.[138]

In Taylor's view, it is the inability of scientific knowledge to grant meaning to life that is central to the malaise of modernity, a point corroborated by many writers. The Catholic novelist Walker Percy provocatively presses this point home with one of the opening questions in his mischievously subtitled, 'The Last Self-Help Book':

> How is it possible for the man who designed Voyager 19, which arrived at Titania, a satellite of Uranus, three seconds off schedule and a hundred yards off course after a flight of six years, to be one of the most screwed-up creatures in California—or the Cosmos?[139]

Beyond the Levers of Power

The Russian writer Maxim Gorky was passionately committed to the Bolshevik cause in its early days, despite being exiled for opposing a major show trial as early as 1921. However, he knew Lenin personally and described the leader's love for the music of Beethoven, describing the *Appassionata* Sonata in particular as 'marvellous, superhuman music'.[140] However, he notoriously refused to succumb to this indulgence since 'it affects your nerves' such that one wants to 'say stupid nice things and stroke people on the head'.[141] It weakened the revolutionary's indispensible iron discipline

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[138] Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, 113.

[139] Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos* (New York, NY: Picador, 2000), 1.

[140] Adrian M. Coates, "Beauty Lived Towards Shalom: The Christian Life as Aesthetic-Ethical Existence," *Acta Theologica* 29 (2020), 2.

[141] Coates, *Shalom*, 2.

when, instead of kindness, it was necessary to 'hit them on the head without mercy.' Gorky's account is the obvious inspiration for Georg Dreymann, the playwright at the heart of the German film *The Lives of Others* when he said, 'You know what Lenin said about Beethoven's *Appassionata*? "If I keep listening to it, I won't finish the revolution."'[142]

Lenin recognised, and feared, music's power to move, to soften, to humanize. He had reason to fear it in those they ruled. Had not Lorenzo, in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice,* noticed that even for an angry mob ('a race of youthful and unhandled colts'), music has the capacity to transform? 'You shall perceive them make a mutual stand, their savage eyes turn'd to a modest gaze, by the sweet power of music.' He continues:

> The man that hath no music in himself,
> Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
> Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;
> The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
> And his affections dark as Erebus
> Let no such man be trusted. Mark the music.[143]

For Lorenzo, then, a love of music is a hallmark of the humane.

Unsurprisingly, the arts have been constant objects for political control. Stalin's putative successor, Andrei Zhdanov was so notorious that his name alone became a sufficient byword for state control of the arts, from George Orwell to Umberto Eco.[144]

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[142] Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, *The Lives of Others: A Screenplay* (London: Pushkin, 2014), 69.

[143] William Shakespeare, "The Merchant of Venice," in *The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), V:1.

[144] George Orwell, "Writers and Leviathan," in *Essays*, ed. Bernard Crick, ed. Bernard Crick (London: Penguin, 2000), 453. See also Umberto Eco, "Ur-Fascism," Article, *New York Review of Books* 42, no. 11 (1995), 1.

Through organisations such as the Unions of Soviet Writers and of Soviet Composers, then subsequently as Second Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, Zhdanov exercised brutal authority.[145] All were dragooned into producing work that lauded the revolution and avoided compromises with the bourgeois or cosmopolitan, whether verbally, visually or musically. Failure to conform resulted in incarceration, the Gulag, or death. As the composer Shostakovich is said to have remarked towards the end of his life, 'Almost none of my friends avoided torture.'[146]

However, it is not merely the arts' potential to humanize in view here. Ever since Nathan's prophetic use of fiction to challenge the crimes of King David, the arts have subverted the powerful. It was not mere paranoia that roused Stalin's ire when the poet Anna Akhmatova received an ovation at a recital organised for Leningrad Poets. Enthusiastic support for her may well have indicated disloyalty to him. As Julian Barnes's fictionalized Shostakovich reflects, 'Shakespeare held a mirror up to nature, and who could bear to see their own reflection? So *Hamlet* was banned for a long time; Stalin loathed the play almost as much as he loathed *Macbeth*.'[147] No wonder, since *Hamlet*'s denouement is premised on a drama within the drama being employed to speak truth to power, his notorious mousetrap. No wonder also, then, that the arts became a vital weapon in the hands of propagandists for the powerful, ever since the glorification of

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[145] Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle, New ed. (London: Verso, 2011), 40.

[146] Solomon Volkov, *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), 12. See also Brian Moynahan, *Leningrad: Siege and Symphony* (New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly, 2013), 10.

[147] Julian Barnes, *The Noise of Time* (London: Vintage, 2017) 88. See, for example, Irena R. Makaryk, "Stalin and Shakespeare," in *The Shakespearean International Yearbook 18: Special Section: Soviet Shakespeare*, ed. Tom Bishop, Alexa Alice Joubin, and Natalia Khomenko (Routledge, 2020).

Augustan Rome through Virgil's *Aeneid*, Henry VIII's rule through Hans Holbein the Younger's imposing portraits, or the Nazi Reich through Leni Riefenstahl's films.

Regardless of any artistic merits (and each of these three examples displays many), the propagandist reduces the artform, as Calvin Seerveld explains. In the end, 'its *validity* [is equated] with its *usefulness*, no matter whether that "usefulness" was in giving a lot of people pleasure or morality or something spiritually valuable.'[148] Regardless of the ideology or regime peddled, the arts are vulnerable to being commandeered, such that in a capitalist context, they may be reduced to being 'justified by a society's yardstick of economical usefulness, and absolutely so.'[149] For this reason, the issue of propaganda in the artistic process will be addressed further.

(ii) Engaging the Subversive Power of the Arts

What is it about the arts in their various forms that is so potent that cultural apologists of various stripes appeal for renewed engagement? Justin Ariel Bailey speaks of the contemporary cultural crisis as representing 'an imaginative crisis and an imaginative opportunity.'[150] Taylor draws his *magnum opus* to a conclusion with some close readings of the poems of Charles Péguy and Gerard Manley Hopkins, for example.[151] Holly Ordway takes her cue for much of her argument from C. S. Lewis's conversion process, in particular the writing of the Scottish minister George MacDonald.

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[148] Seerveld, *Fresh Olive Leaves*, 11 (emphasis original).

[149] Josef Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings: Art and Contemplation* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1990), 20.

[150] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 54.

[151] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Ch. 20, sections 3-5.

According to Lewis's own account, MacDonald baptized his imagination, such that even while still a convinced atheist, 'he had tasted something of transcendence and gained a glimpse of the Christian vision of the world.'[152] Indeed, years later, Lewis suggests in a letter to a friend that the advantage of popular ignorance about the Christian gospel is that 'any amount of theology can now be smuggled into people's minds under the cover of romance without their knowing it.'[153] Many attributes of the arts have been highlighted, but for the purposes of this topic, several stand out.

The Acuity of Artistic Perception

Seventy years ago, in a catalogue essay for an art exhibition, the Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper, himself a translator and populariser of Lewis among German speakers, lamented that 'Man's ability to see is in decline.' He was not speaking physiologically but metaphorically, of 'the spiritual capacity to perceive the visible reality as it truly is.'[154] This comment does not deny the complexity in the physical act of seeing, since, as Malcolm Guite explains, even that requires 'two kinds of light':

> … the perceiving soul is not a blank piece of photographic paper on which this light falls so as to record an impression. The perceiving soul goes out towards these objects, envelops them, comprehends

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[152] Holly Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination: An Integrated Approach to Defending the Faith, Living Faith* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road, 2017), 6.

[153] Julianne Johnson, "More Than Myth," in *A Compass for Deep Heaven: Navigating the C. S. Lewis Ransom Trilogy*, ed. D. Pavlac Glyer and J. Johnson (Baltimore, MD: Square Halo, 2021), 21.

[154] Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings*, 31.

> their form; there are, as it were, rays from the eye, as well as to the eye which 'spread outwardly'.[155]

Physical sight requires a pre-existing understanding of context to make sense of what is being viewed, as the acclaimed neurologist Oliver Sacks illustrated with the story of Virgil, a man born blind but given sight through surgery at the age of 50. Coping with his new sense was perplexing, since he 'was able to make out colours and movements but arranging them into a coherent picture was more difficult… his habits, his behaviours, were still those of a blind man.'[156] Sacks went on to say that Virgil had to 'die as a blind person to be born again as a seeing person.'[157] What is clear, however, is that the spiritual sight which concerned Pieper is not far removed from what is entailed by physical sight.

While Pieper's lament is grist to the mill for propagators of cultural pessimism, it echoes a complaint from three quarters of a century before by the Victorian polymath John Ruskin. He observes, 'Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, and thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, religion—all in one.'[158] This chimes with the Romantics' vision but overreaches, as will be discussed in due course. True seeing is hard. So Pieper's prescription is striking: 'to be active oneself in artistic creation, producing shapes and forms for the eye to see.'[159] In other words, the act of making requires seeing the act of seeing. Consequently, others can see

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[155] Guite, *Faith, Hope and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination*, 88.

[156] Oliver Sacks, *An Anthropologist on Mars: Seven Paradoxical Tales* (London: Picador, 1995), 111.

[157] Sacks, *Anthropologist*, 134.

[158] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol. 5-6, *The Works of John Ruskin* (New York, NY: J. Wiley & Sons, 1885), 262.

[159] Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings*, 35.

themselves, in vicarious perception. Thus, Lewis describes reading great literature as enabling him to 'see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.'[160] Such is the power of the imagination because, as William Dyrness defines it, it provides 'the ability to shape mental images of things not present to the senses.'[161]

What Alfred H. Barr, the first director of New York's Museum of Modern Art, said during the Second World War of fine artists could be applied to creative professionals across the board. They are 'the sensitive antennae of society', those who expose the 'vanity and devotion, joy and sadness [of] ordinary life' while wrestling with 'the crucial problems of our civilization.'[162] Theologian Langdon Gilkey takes it still further, paradoxically explaining that the artist 'opens up the truth hidden behind and within the ordinary… to what is really there and really going on. Far from subjective, it pierces the opaque subjectivity, the *not* seeing, of conventional viewing, and discloses reality.'[163] Three key artistic categories explain this process, starting with that which is most naturally related to the act of seeing.

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[160] C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 140-1.

[161] W. A. Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 4.

[162] Jonathan A. Anderson, and William A. Dyrness, *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture: The Religious Impulses of Modernism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 35.

[163] Langdon B. Gilkey, "Can Art Fill the Vacuum?," in *Art, Creativity, and the Sacred*, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 189-90.

Seeing… through Art

The artist has permission to look, to stare even, in ways that transgress social conventions. As Merleau-Ponty explains, 'Only the painter is entitled to look at everything without being obliged to appraise what he sees.'[164] For example, a portrait artist must spend hours looking at a person's appearance, not to map out a photorealistic image, but to get a sense of a person's presence, temperament or mood. During a series of conversations with British painter David Hockney, critic Martin Gayford told a story about Picasso ordering a friend to go to hospital 'because he had something seriously wrong', even though, as an artist, he lacked medical training. Doctors wheeled the friend straight into theatre to treat a rare form of peritonitis which kills without presenting with any pain. Hockney was unsurprised, suggesting that he likely saw something in his friend's face. 'Picasso must have looked at more faces than almost anybody… Most people don't look at a face too long; they tend to look away. But you do if you are painting a portrait.' Hockney had a long career but initially made his name in portraiture. He mentions one of his own inspirations, Rembrandt, who 'put more in the face than anyone before or since, because he saw more. That was the eye—and the heart.'[165]

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[164] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics*, ed. J.M. Edie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 161.

[165] Martin Gayford, *A Bigger Message: Conversations with David Hockney* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 82.

Another acclaimed portraitist with similar powers of insight was Lucian Freud, the British grandson of Sigmund. Martin Gayford's experience of sitting for a portrait by Freud is instructive. He takes Freud's portrait of fellow artist John Minton (Fig. 2), painted in 1952, 'in which the sitter looks doomed, as though he is about to fall apart from emotional stress.'[166] In contrast, photographs of Minton 'reveal far less—almost none—of the inner tension and anxiety'.[167] Yet five years later, Minton would take his own life on Christmas Day. Freud had seen seeds of that despair.

Fig. 2: Lucian Freud, *Portrait of John Minton* 1952, (presented by the artist to the Royal College of Art © Lucian Freud Archive / Bridgeman Images), https://bit.ly/FreudsMinton

This acuity is not limited to portraiture, of course. At another point in his conversations with Gayford, Hockney mentions the huge Monet exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1995 for which they had gathered an unprecedented collection of 150 paintings. Particularly striking is Hockney's observation on its impact afterwards: 'When I came out, I started looking at the bushes on Michigan Avenue with a little more care, because Monet had looked at his surroundings with such attention. He made you see more.' The result of the artist's seeing is that the viewer is also initiated into new ways of

[166] Martin Gayford, *Man with a Blue Scarf: On Sitting for a Portrait by Lucian Freud* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010), 116.

[167] Gayford, *Man with a Blue Scarf: On Sitting for a Portrait by Lucian Freud*, 116.

seeing. He then adds that 'Van Gogh does that for you too. He makes you see the world around just a little more intensely. And you enjoy seeing it like that, or I do'.[168]

What the artist sees is not necessarily visible to the naked eye. The surrealists transfer Freudian dreamscapes onto canvas; in the twentieth century, even official war artists convey the futility and horror of conflict, in contrast to previous generations of painters who narrate military glories. In his account of a small cohort of talented painters at London's Slade School of Art who all served in the Great War, David Boyd Haycock explores the critical success of their first post-conflict exhibition. One of their number, Richard Nevinson, remarks, 'I was the first artist to paint war pictures without pageantry, without glory, and without the over-coloured heroic that had made up the tradition of all war paintings up to this time.'[169] A case in point (fig. 3)

Fig. 4: C. R. W. Nevinson, *Paths of Glory*, 1917, Imperial War Museums, London, https://bit.ly/NevinsonGlory.

Fig. 3: Elizabeth Thompson, *Scotland Forever! Royal Scots Greys' charge at Waterloo*, 1881, Leeds Art Gallery, https://bit.ly/ThompsonWaterloo.

[168] Gayford, *A Bigger Message: Conversations with David Hockney*, 85.

[169] David Boyd Haycock, *A Crisis of Brilliance* (London: Old Street Publishing, 2010), 261.

is his 1917 work *Paths of Glory*, a title drawn from Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*: 'The paths of glory lead but to the grave'.[170] The contrast with Fig. 4, made less than forty years before, of a war a full century before the Great War, could not be more marked. Elizabeth Thompason evokes the grit and chaos of war but captures a moment seconds prior to the engagement with the enemy, courage and heroism freeze-framed. Nevinson unflinchingly peers into a battle's aftermath, confronting the viewer with a scene from which it is impossible to discern anything about the war dead other than their fate—nothing of their bravery or cowardice, folly or misfortune.

Unsurprisingly, the military officials were furious, accusing its painter of undermining morale, so they banned Nevinson from showing it. He disobeyed, merely covering the corpses with brown paper on which was printed 'CENSORED'.[171]

Fig. 5: Mark Gertler, *The Merry-Go Round*, 1916, Tate Modern, https://bit.ly/GertlerMerryGo.

One of Nevinson's closest friends and fellow Slade graduate, Mark Gertler, was a conscientious objector. So it came as a surprise, not least to him, to be given a significant commission by the government's

[170] Charles W. Eliot, *English Poetry*, vol. 1, *Harvard Classics* (New York, NY: P. F. Collier & Son, 1910), 443.

[171] Boyd Haycock, *Crisis*, 273.

War Artists' Advisory Committee (WAAC) in 1918,[172] in spite of the fact that two years before, he had painted his most famous work, *The Merry-Go Round* (Fig. 5). This haunting painting depicts adult men and women in military uniform, bound to carousel horses perpetually. But their rictus smiles betray the truth, and consequently, the funfair ride is a potent metaphor for the futile but inescapable horrors of war. The novelist D. H. Lawrence was impressed, calling it 'the best modern picture I have seen: I think it is great, and true. But it is horrible and terrifying.' [173] Both Nevinson and Gertler remorselessly displayed what they could see but what too many contemporaries were reluctant to see. Both men were deeply scarred by the events of the age. Gertler would find himself 'depressed by the apparent failure of… his life's work'. When he, a Jew, heard 'radio broadcasts of Hitler's vilification of the Jews' in June 1939, he was overwhelmed by despair, gassing himself in his studio. 'One of his greatest artistic achievements, *The Merry-Go-Round* would be discovered rolled up in his studio, unsold.'[174]

Wilson Yates, a scholar who has specialised in the relationship between the arts and theology, summarizes thus:

> To speak of the *revelatory and sacramental power of art* is to speak of its power to reveal reality, to make visible the invisible, to express meaning through its own symbolic forms and images while inviting participation in that reality through participation in the work

[172] Boyd Haycock, *Crisis*, 289.

[173] Boyd Haycock, *Crisis*, 257.

[174] Boyd Haycock, *Crisis*, 318.

> itself… art becomes a window that opens up to us that which lies beneath the surface.[175]

Seeing… through Literature

While painting conveys what the artist has seen, words can do likewise, by conjuring mental images. The supreme gift of the writer is to articulate what is seen (or experienced) such that others without the same verbal dexterity might recognize it. Taylor points out that as Europe's cultural cohesion forged by Christendom broke down, it was no longer possible to rely on 'an established gamut of references' from shared intellectual or aesthetic values. Consequently, the Romantic poets, such as Wordsworth in England and Friedrich Hölderlin in Germany, had the freedom to discover a new language, to 'make us aware of something in nature which there are as yet no adequate words.'[176] The effect is similar to that which Van Gogh and Monet had on Hockney, and chimes with Steiner: 'The streets of our cities *are* different after Balzac and Dickens. Summer nights, notably to the south, have changed with Van Gogh.'[177]

Two English language poets in particular have resonated with writers on this point, Shakespeare and Coleridge. At the conclusion to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Theseus opens Act V with a famous description of the importance of imagination:

> The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
> Doth glance from heaven to Earth, from Earth to heaven,
> And as imagination bodies forth
> The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen

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[175] Michael J. Bauer, *Arts Ministry: Nurturing the Creative Life of God's People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 67.

[176] Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 85.

[177] Steiner, *Real Presences*, 164 (emphasis original).

> Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
> A local habitation and a name.
> That, if it would but apprehend some joy,
> It comprehends some bringer of that joy.
> Or in the night, imagining some fear,
> How easy is a bush supposed a bear![178]

The poet's seeing kindles the reader's and listener's seeing. The poet's imagination is at work as it tries to make sense of what is visible and invisible ('from heaven to Earth, from Earth to heaven'). Only then can names be given. Guite highlights the juxtaposition, in the last three lines quoted, of 'apprehend' and 'comprehend'. He comments that an artist is a bridge-builder 'between apprehension and comprehension. All great art is a bridge with one foot in the world of comprehension, the visible, the earth, and one in the realm of apprehension, the invisible, heaven.'[179]

Coleridge takes it even further, framing the artist's act of seeing in a context of service. Here he explains that in their collaboration, *Lyrical Ballads,* he and Wordsworth were seeking:

> …to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention to the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand![180]

A failure to see might not merely result from over-familiarity but also from 'selfish solicitude', if controversial, and unexpectedly adding ethical dimensions to the task.

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[178] Shakespeare, "A Midsummer Night's Dream," in *The Complete Works,* Act V, Sc. 1.

[179] Guite, *Lifting the Veil: Imagination and the Kingdom of God,* 21.

[180] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria (Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions),* ed. James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), Vol ii, 7.

Coleridge makes this more explicit by alluding to prophetic precedent in the Scriptures.[181] The poet removes that 'film of familiarity' and expose 'the wonders of the world', to enable comprehension and apprehension. Roger Scruton picks up on this, insisting that the task of poets is 'to show consciousness, alive and judging, in a world that will not be judged.'[182]

Peeling back that film is a harder task than many suppose. One challenge lies in the dilution of language. Literary critic and former Bishop of Oxford Richard Harries has noted, 'So much of the language we use is recycled cliché, the linguistic sludge of a lazy culture.'[183] Similarly, former Archbishop of Canterbury and accomplished poet Rowan Williams says of the Narnia chronicles: 'It is a consistent theme in Lewis. The truth of God is found in rebellion against the oppressive clichés of the world.'[184] Clichés, as George Orwell astutely observed, have a dulling effect, and are a gift to the propagandist because 'by using stale metaphors, similes and idioms, you save much mental effort at the cost of leaving your meaning vague, not only for your reader but for yourself.'[185] That vagueness can be exploited by the unscrupulous, with imprecise metaphors the means by which political writing becomes 'the defence of the indefensible'. He cites euphemisms

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[181] Isaiah 6:9, Mark 4;12, and Mark 8:18.

[182] Roger Scruton, *Modern Culture*, 2nd ed. (London: Continuum, 2007), 77.

[183] Harries, *Haunted*, x.

[184] Rowan Williams, *The Lion's World: A Journey into the Heart of Narnia* (London: SPCK, 2012) 51.

[185] Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in *Essays*, 354-5.

such as ‘pacification’ to refer to the bombardment of defenceless villages from the air, and the ‘elimination of unreliable elements’ to mask the horrors of the Gulag. [186]

When fresh language jolts the reader out of lethargy, however, it does bring about new sight. For example, T. S. Eliot was complimenting Henry James when saying he ‘had a mind so fine no idea could violate it.’[187] In other words, he oberved people as they actually functioned, not through preconceived lenses or according to prejudicial categories. He truly saw because, according to Eliot, James ‘felt that there were truths above the level of ideas, truths of the instincts, of the heart, of the soul’, and it was these ‘he attempted to plumb in his novels and stories.’[188]

Seeing… through Music

Of the artforms under consideration, music seems least suited to the current discussion. It is the most abstract of arts, perhaps the hardest to articulate in words, especially when it is ‘pure’, that is, without words or a narrative programme underlying the musical journey. Nevertheless, it represents communication by a musician. The quintessentially English, yet also radical, composer Ralph Vaughan Williams wrote to a school in Norfolk (where a house was to be named after him) using these terms: ‘Music will enable you to see past facts to the very essence of things, in a way which science cannot do. The arts are the means by which we can look through the magic casements

[186] Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in *Essays*, 356.

[187] Joseph Epstein, "A Literary Education," *New Criterion* 26, no. 10 (2008), 13.

[188] Epstein, *Literary Education*, 13.

and see what lies beyond.'[189] Similarly, Steiner calls melodies 'the supreme mystery of man' because they 'can arch across an abyss or they can, as it were, pulse underground, unsettling all foundations.' He is quick to admit that his attempts to articulate it in words are but 'lame banalities'.[190] Finally, the contemporary British composer Sir James Macmillan speaks of music possessing:

> …the power to look into the abyss as well as to the transcendent heights. It can trigger the most severe and conflicting extremes of feeling, and it is in these dark and dingy places—where the soul is probably closest to its source, where it has its relationship with God—that music can spark life that has long lain dormant.[191]

That divine relationship bears further review, but for now the mysterious ability that music possesses to evoke and express an astonishing breadth of lived experiences is noted. Abstract music may or may not prompt mental images, but attentive listening is sure to stir emotional responses. When composers are able truly to perceive the complexity of their emotional state, they can convey that in sound to listeners. It is an act of generous communication. The listener's circumstances then can be truly 'seen'. The German Romantic aesthete Wilhelm Wackenroder captures that sensation, saying that withdrawal 'into the land of music' had a profound effect on him because 'all the anxiety

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[189] James MacMillan, "Ralph Vaughan Williams," 30 Dec, 2021, in *Faith in Music*, produced by Rosie Boulton for BBC Radio 4, Audio, 27.27, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000q3g3.

[190] Steiner, *Real Presences*, 197.

[191] James MacMillan, *A Scot's Song: A Life of Music* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2019), 10.

of our hearts is suddenly healed by the gentle touch.'[192] No wonder, as Lewis suggested through his mentoring devil Screwtape, that music and silence cannot be found in hell.[193]

The Paradoxes of Artistic Greetings

Truthful Fictions

The language of sight has shifted from the physical to the metaphorical, such that it is possible to speak of 'seeing' what is unseeable. Sight language is so idiomatic in contemporary colloquial discourse that it can take an encounter with someone who is sight-impaired to be alerted to the fact. Similarly, the prevalence of art forms in modern life obscures an essential point about them, namely that each one represents a paradox.

Fig. 6: René Magritte, *La Trahison des Images*, 1929
©LACMA, https://collections.lacma.org/node/239578

The category of fiction, therefore, is applicable to more than the short story or novel.

Just as every metaphor is a truth-bearing fiction, so is every artform. The surrealist painters understood this, with René Magritte making the point explicitly in his famous 1929 painting, *La Trahison des Images* ('The Treachery of Images', Fig. 6). The text below the almost photorealistic impression of the pipe translates, 'This is not a pipe.' Magritte is playing with the viewer. The statement initially seems absurd. But a

[192] Wolterstorff, *Art Rethought: The Social Practices of Art*, 35.

[193] C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), 119.

moment's reflection shows that it is far from absurd, since the viewer does not see an actual pipe, only an artist's impression of one. This and others like it have prompted innumerable conjectures, from philosophers Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard

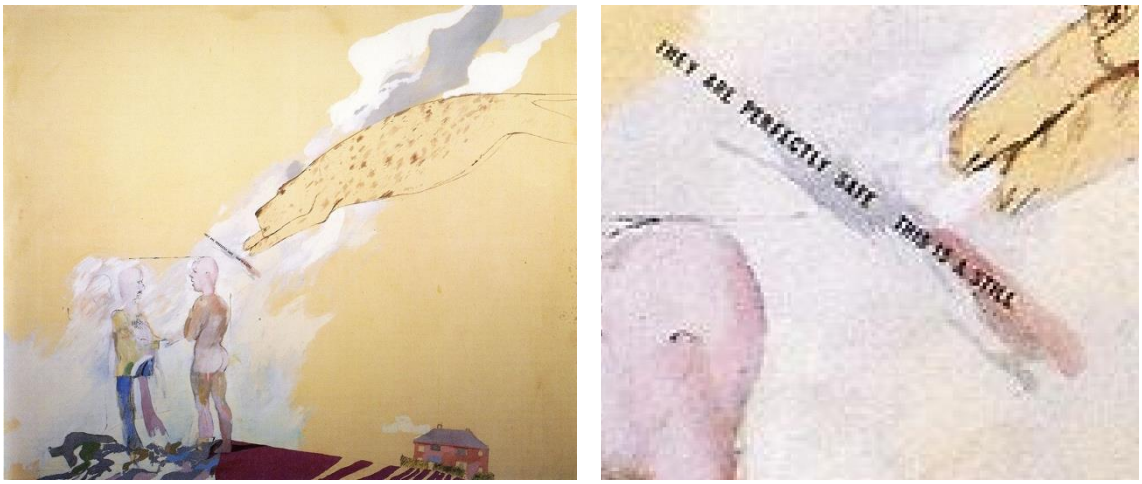

Fig. 7: David Hockney, *Picture Emphasizing Stillness*, 1962, *(private ownership)*; with detail *(right)* https://www.thedavidhockneyfoundation.org/artwork/3588

onwards, with the latter's work on simulacra being particularly influential.[194] The text intersects with the image in an unsettling, contradictory dynamic, prompting questions about the ability of art to convey reality. Many have since joined in the fun. For example, Hockney's *Picture Emphasizing Stillness* (Fig. 7) depicts two men oblivious to the incongruous threat from a leopard. But in between them and the animal, Hockney has written in minuscule text (thus illegible to all but those standing very close), 'They are perfectly safe this is a still', which is itself a play on the multivalence of the word 'still'. Magritte's paradoxical statement is simultaneously valid and false. Might the same be said of other artforms?

[194] Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, trans. James Harkness (Berkeley, CA: UCal, 1992); Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1994).

The Elizabethan poet, courtier, and soldier Sir Philip Sidney wrestled with the nature of poetry. Detractors have cast aspersions of falsehood on the arts since time immemorial, from Plato's complaints of layers of imitation and representation to David Hume's barb that poetry only has the 'air of truth,' and therefore, however ingenious their performance, they 'will never be able to afford much pleasure.'[195] To counter this archetypal Enlightenment attitude, Wolterstorff appeals to Sidney's apologetic for the form, which marshals biblical precedent to forestall those of a puritanical persuasion. 'Now for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth. … therefore, though he recount things not true, yet because he telleth them not for true, he lieth not—without which we will say that Nathan lied in his speech before-alleged to David;' after all, says Sidney, anyone who thinks Aesop's fables are literally true is 'worthy to have his name chronicled among the beasts he writeth of.'[196] He is affirming that such fictions can nevertheless be truth-bearing so that, in Nathan's case, a parable provokes the king into recognizing the truth of himself. This was a remarkable precedent for the way Jesus used the same form as his primary teaching tool. Fiction is a catalyst for confronting truth, which is perhaps a paradigm for all art forms.

On the smallest scale, metaphors function in this way. As Harvard professor and *New Yorker* regular James Wood puts it, 'Every metaphor or simile is a little explosion of fiction within the larger fiction of the novel or story.'[197] '…Often the leap towards the

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[195] David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects* (Auckland, NZ: The Floating Press, 2009), 198.

[196] Charles W. Eliot, *English Essays from Sir Philip Sidney to Macaulay* (New York, NY: P. F. Collier & Son, 1910), 36.

[197] James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (London: Vintage, 2009), 153.

counter-intuitive, towards the very opposite of the thing you are seeking to compare, is the secret of powerful metaphor.'[198] A sign that they have succeeded is 'the tiny shock of surprise, followed by a feeling of inevitability.'[199] That sense of inevitability is dependent on a metaphor's relationship with lived experience and may feel remote from the reader's lived experience, but it needs to be grounded in some reality. Otherwise it is fancifully arbitrary at one extreme, or dead at the other, which, according to Sayers, happens 'only when the metaphor is substituted for the experience, and the argument carried on in a sphere of abstraction without being at every point related to life.'[200]

The crucial element is the juxtaposition of ideas which is 'the result of neither of induction nor deduction, neither scientific observation nor logical reasoning … Indeed, metaphor subverts logic; it has been called an 'intentional category mistake'.[201] The aural equivalent might be the cinematic soundtrack featuring a beautiful aria, say, to accompany a sequence of visceral violence, such Oliver Stone's use of Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* alongside the climactic death scene of Willem Dafoe's character in the 1987 film *Platoon*. More shocking is the conclusion to the Paul Thomas Anderson film of 2007, *There Will Be Blood.* After committing a gruesome murder, Daniel Day-Lewis's oil-man protagonist sits exhausted at the end of a private bowling alley. His butler has come to investigate but is simply told, 'I'm finished'. After only a beat, the soundtrack launches into the exuberance of the final movemenet of Brahms's *Violin Concerto in D,*

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[198] Wood, *Fiction,* 157.

[199] Wood, *Fiction,* 158.

[200] Sayers, *Mind*, 45.

[201] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 129.

whereupon the credits roll. It subverts the tropes of a former Hollywood era in which good can be relied upon to defeat evil.

Hospitality for Reality

If sight is a prevalent metaphor used to describe the power of the arts, one less common but no less evocative is that of 'hospitality' and its cognates. It has a significant pedigree, according to philosopher Elaine Scarry, if we can relate the arts as a whole to the significance of beauty. She notes that the list of those who describe beauty as a 'greeting' includes Homer, Plato, Thomas Aquinas, and Dante. Thus, 'at the moment one comes into the presence of something beautiful, it greets you. It lifts away from the neutral background as though coming forward to welcome you.'[202] The arts are not coterminous with 'beauty', yet the latter is a significant ingredient. They represent an invitation, one which viewer, listener or reader is always at liberty to decline. There is no coercion. There may well be surprises, however—even unpleasant surprises.They are an invitation to a perspective far removed from that of solipsistic insularity.

The old bonds that gave Western society cohesion are being corroded and thus exacerbating the problem of individualism, a catalyst for Taylor's 'nova effect', but he is by no means the only scholar to have diagnosed the problem as both a consequence of and a reaction to modernity.[203] The Romantic movement foresaw fragmentation.[204] More recently, sociologist David Lyon has long recognized that 'less and less [could] be taken

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[202] Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 25.

[203] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 299

[204] Wolterstorff, *Art Rethought: The Social Practices of Art*, 31.

as given, so more responsibility is placed on the individual to account for, and act in, the world', such that we cannot escape 'life in fragments' (here quoting his subsequent writing partner, Zygmunt Bauman).[205] Writing before any of today's most powerful social media sites had even been launched[206], Lyon expected digital technology to 'offer as many opportunities for fragmentation as for harmonious interaction.' He could see that far from 'creating a world of organic wholeness … there is plenty to suggest an explosive multiplication of minor interests and specialized tastes using this medium.'[207] Similarly, Peter Leithart described postmodernity as representing 'the recognition of modernity's failures and an embrace of the fragmentation of politics, selves, language, life,'[208] just as Marx had lamented in 1848: 'all that's solid melts into the air'.[209] What could possibly foster communication and connection? The arts have a role here, in opening space to hear and see 'the other', to encounter the different.

Roger Scruton pinpoints art's fascination as it offers an 'encounter with the individual.' By individual, he intends the one who has made something original; it is an artefact that originates with that individual. If that has occurred, 'It shows us the world from his or her perspective, draws us into spheres which are not our own, and enables us to rehearse the possibilities of feeling on which an ideal community—a community of sympathy—is founded.' It requires the audience to 'set our interests aside, in order to

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[205] David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 42.

[206] LinkedIn: 2003; MySpace: 2003; Facebook: 2004; Twitter: 2006; Tumblr: 2007; Instagram: 2010; Snapchat: 2011; TikTok: 2016.

[207] Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland*, 71.

[208] P. J. Leithart, *Solomon among the Postmoderns* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 39.

[209] Leithart, *Solomon*, 42.

open ourselves to what another person is, says and feels. it need not be new; but it must at least be *his*.'[210] In other words, to be a genuine encounter, the viewer relinquishes personal prejudices and agendas. Literature scholar Alan Jacobs sees the arts as an antidote to what Lewis called 'chronological snobbery'[211] and Oxford Regius Professor Oliver O'Donovan called 'historicism', which 'consists in confusing the good with the future'.[212] Jacobs notes the comon tendency to be highly selective with gleanings from the past, extracting whatever is deemed to corroborate rather than challenge contemporary viewpoints (unless done for the purposes of censure or ridicule).[213] He offers a healthier attitude to the contributions of history with a comparison to those working in prisons who understand that 'no one should be defined by the worst thing they ever did'.[214] It is a powerful counter to today's cancellation instincts.

Newbigin describes a fundamental requirement for missiological encounters with other faiths: 'Eagerness to listen, to learn, to receive even what is new and strange will be the mark of one who knows the word of Jesus: "All that the Father has is mine."'[215] Humility before the unfamiliar or alien applies the doctrine of common grace and is as applicable to apposite in the arts as it is to any sphere of life.

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[210] Scruton, *Modern Culture*, 45.

[211] Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 58.

[212] Oliver O'Donovan, *A Conversation Waiting to Begin: The Churches and the Gay Controversy* (London: SCM Press, 2009), 88.

[213] Alan Jacobs, *Breaking Bread with the Dead: Reading the Past in Search of a Tranquil Mind* (London: Profile Books, 2020), 51.

[214] Jacobs, *Breaking Bread*, 51.

[215] Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 183.

The impediments are obvious. As theologian and novelist Frederick Buechner observes, 'People are prepared for everything except for the fact that beyond the darkness of their blindness there is a great light. They are prepared to go on breaking their backs plowing the same old field until the cows come home.'[216] Eliot lamented in *Burnt Norton*, 'human kind cannot bear very much reality'[217] even if, in Buechner's words, that reality brings 'treasure … rich enough to buy Texas.'[218] The impediment, as all pastoral workers know, is the high cost of facing reality, which, for many, can seem too great. But the arts captivate even the most reluctant, such that the bitterest pill is sweetened or even overlooked. Lewis recognised fiction's potential to 'smuggle in' doctrine, so Rowan Williams's comment on Narnia is pertinent: '… putting humanity in its place is an important aspect of the Narnia stories—both in the obvious negative sense of puncturing human self-confidence and illusory optimism and in the positive sense of reaffirming the unique role of humanity…' The eyes open to see 'where we actually are in relation to Creator and Creation'.[219] Yet that self-confidence is precisely what can cause reality-resistance. As Steiner reminds us, 'Narcissus has no need of art. In him, utterance, fantastication, the making of an image, come home, fatally, in the closed self.'[220] Just as

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[216] Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1975), 70.

[217] T. S. Eliot, *The Poems*, ed. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, vol. 1 (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), 180.

[218] Buechner, 70.

[219] Williams, *Lion's World*, 96.

[220] Steiner, *Real Presences*, 138.

with Nathan before King David, the only means of subverting self-confidence might well be by exploiting the apparent distance of a story.

The arts present more than merely the beautiful, and necessarily so. Flannery O'Connor famously suggested that of all novelists, it was those 'who see by the light of their Christian faith' who would have 'in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable...' For, as she continues, 'Redemption is meaningless unless there is cause for it in the actual life we live, and for the last few centuries there has been operating in our culture the secular belief that there is no such cause.'[221] Many, especially evangelicals, shy away from the grotesque, perhaps taking their cue from misinterpretations of biblical passages like Philippians 4:8. The problem, as New Testament scholar Gordon Fee notes, is that 'what Paul says here is much less clear than the English translations would lead one to believe.' Far from simply recommending thinking higher thoughts to the exclusion of the unlovely or mere worldly, Paul (as Fee understands him) advocates that the Philippian Christians '"take into account" the good they have long known from their own past, as long as it is conformable to Christ.'[222]

Gerald Hawthorne takes a similar line, explaining that Paul is 'acknowledging that there was much good in pagan life and morality' and thus calling on them to resist a

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[221] Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally FitzGerald and Robert FitzGerald (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969) 33.

[222] Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, *New International Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 415–416.

totalizing withdrawal from the world in the guise of spirituality.[223] Discernment was the key, which makes the use of this text to insist, as some do, that congregants restrict their cultural diet to 'Christian' music or films all the more ironic. In fact, as O'Connor pointed out, since secular humanism insists on innate human goodness or perfectibility, art forms which simply reinforce goodness are effectively redundant and, even more ironically, unlovely. The apostle's 'true', 'noble', and 'lovely' may well entail confronting the reality of the grotesque and unacceptable. While undoubtedly challenging, such confrontation may be what a hospitality of reality demands.

As the British philosopher R. G. Collingwood explains, 'The artist must prophesy not in the sense that he foretells things to come, but in the sense that he tells his audience, at the risk of their displeasure, the secrets of their own hearts.'[224] However, as Thomas Peters notes of G. K. Chesterton, 'He held a profound belief in the potential holiness of the arts as "the wild whisper of something originally wise"'.[225] Far from being an escape from reality, they represent the deep wisdom derived from exploring reality. Chesterton's use of 'whisper' is the key. A whisper knows its context and audience, compelling its listeners to engage more fully. The shock—the scandal even—comes through its wildness, for successful art is hard to domesticate. It is an invitation issued from the imagination of its maker, one that may well be rejected, but a gift nonetheless. No wonder, then, that Chesterton relished the power of the imagination:

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[223] Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, Revised ed., *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 249.

[224] R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

[225] Peters, *Christian Imagination*, 11.

> Imagination does not breed insanity. Exactly what does breed insanity is reason. Poets do not go mad; but chess-players do. Mathematicians go mad and cashiers, but creative artists very seldom. I am not in any sense attacking logic: I only say that this danger does lie in logic, not in imagination.[226]

Speechless Truth

Nicholas Wolterstorff says that artistic creation is 'the product of imagination, not of instrumental rationality.'[227] Scientific materialists eye such talk as absurd. Yet countless creative people, as well as those who enjoy their hospitality, attest to art's power to transcend words.

Music is a prime example. Composer Stephen Johnson discusses Sigmund Freud's apparent aversion to music by suggesting, 'What troubled him about music was that it did have an effect on him, but one that he found impossible to rationalise—and rationalising was crucial for Freud.'[228] Lenin said the same. Perhaps the trouble lies in the fact that while music is not rational, it is not inherently anti-rational; it is *sui generis*. George Steiner comments that while it is impossible to put music into words, 'it is at once cerebral in the highest degree—I repeat that the energies and form-relations in the playing of a quartet, in the interactions of voice and instrument are among the most complex events known to man—and it is at the same time somatic, carnal and a searching out of resonances in our bodies at levels deeper than will or consciousness.'[229]

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[226] G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1943), 14.

[227] Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic*, 32.

[228] Stephen Johnson, *The Eighth: Mahler and the World in 1910* (London: Faber & Faber, 2020).

[229] Steiner, *Real Presences*, 217.

The desire to shackle music then ensues. The Reformers insisted that church music serve words and the Word. The American historian, James R. Gaines, observes, 'Luther's mandate for music to deliver "sermons in sound" had several important results over time. It gave new life to an ancient connection between musical composition and classical rhetoric, which after all shared music's new purpose of moving an audience in a particular direction.'[230]

The English composer Thomas Tallis exemplifies how the Reformation transformed Western music. As court composer under Henry VIII, he became known for his expansive, polyphonic settings of Latin liturgies, even after the break with Rome. Yet the Reformers objected to polyphony because listeners were unable to discern the texts being set to music. Rather, they experienced something akin to waves of sound. Thus, during the brief reign of Edward VI, the reformers' principle of 'to every syllable a note' held sway. Nevertheless, Tallis was able to adapt his style and achived simple perfection with anthems such as 'If ye love me'.[231]

With Queen Mary succeeded by Elizabeth I's less strident but no less domineering regime, Tallis returned to Latin polyphony, because both monarchs loved it. *Spem in Alium*, a motet for forty distinct parts (eight choirs divided into five parts each), became his masterpiece and is described choral conductor Andrew Gant as 'an inexplicable prodigy'.[232] The text certainly inspires a thematic coherence conveyed

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[230] James R. Gaines, *Evening in the Palace of Reason: Bach Meets Frederick the Great in the Age of Enlightenment* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), 81.

[231] Andrew Gant, *O Sing Unto the Lord: A History of English Church Music* (London: Profile, 2016), 88.

[232] Gant, *O Sing*, 134.

musically—in this case, that of gospel confidence—but it is more the sum of music plus text rather than the result of verbal clarity. While recognizing the primacy of the verbal in Mozart's music (as those familiar with his theology would expect), even Karl Barth could see that his music was 'a free counterpoint to that Word given to him. This is what inspires him, this is what he accompanies and plays about ... In both he hears and respects the Word in its distinct form and character, but then to both he sets his own music—a music bound by the Word, but in this "binding" still a sovereign shape with its own nature.'[233]

Of course, much music lacks words altogether or uses foreign words. So KD, one of Francis's interviewees whose faith was shaken by aesthetic encounters, described how, as she transitioned, words had been 'such a part of my struggle. I had words coming out of my ears.' She spent hours listening to the Icelandic band *Sigur Rós*—known for their ethereal soundworld akin to choral polyphony—and she reflected later that part of the appeal was that their 'frontman sings in languages I don't understand… it was a more dream-like language, like speaking in tongues… The point is that music was something that wasn't putting more words in my ears or demanding more words from my mouth. I could just be with music, rest in it.'[234] The music was meeting a deep psychological need.

Those gifted in creating one art form often lack the confidence to use words well. Stephen Johnson describes Shostakovich as 'a composer first and foremost' who 'seems to have been innately suspicious of words as a vehicle for his truest, most private

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[233] Andreas Pangritz, *The Polyphony of Life: Bonhoeffer's Theology of Music*, trans. John W. De Gruchy and Robert Steiner (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019), 35.

[234] Francis, *When Art Interrupts*, 101.

thoughts.'[235] No doubt that suspicion arose from the danger of using words in Stalinist Russia. But even without an oppressive climate, different media appeal more readily to creative professionals than words for good reason. It is a question of taking that medium on its own terms to grasp what it might communicate. Art historian T. J. Clark notes that 'Paintings are not propositions: they do not take the form of image-sentences. They are not even like propositions. That is, they do not aim to make statements or ask questions or even, precisely, to seek assent.'[236] Yet, just as music can be cerebral while non-rational, so paintings can speak as well.

> Naturally a painting 'takes a view' of things; it adopts an attitude to them; it discriminates and prioritizes, putting a small world in order. But this is not the order of the linguistic. It is an ordering of things more open and centrifugal—more non-committal—than grammar can almost ever countenance. Pictures are taciturn.
> Their meaning is on the surface—merely and fully apparent.[237]

Building on philosopher Herbert Marcuse, who asserted that the primary function of art is to communicate 'truths not communicable in any other language…', Woterstorff explains that it 'illumines reality for us' so that 'in its very illuminations of reality this alteration of consciousness is enough to alter our intellectual/impulsive structure as well.'[238]

The same principle can be applied across the art form spectrum, as each creative professional masters that form's potential. Hence Annie Dillard's advice to aspiring writers to do what writing can achieve best, rather than imitataing film badly: 'The

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[235] Stephen Johnson, *How Shostakovich Changed My Mind* (London: Notting Hill Editions, 2018), vii.

[236] T. J. Clark, *Heaven on Earth: Painting and the Life to Come* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), 135.

[237] Clark, *Heaven*, 135.

[238] Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic*, 154.

printed word cannot compete with the movies on their ground, and should not. You can describe beautiful faces, car chases, or valleys full of Indians on horseback until you run out of words, and you will not approach the movies' spectacle.'[239]

The relevance becomes clear in Stephen Johnson's powerful memoir of mental illness and the music of Shostakovich. He agrees with T. S. Eliot's *Burnt Norton* in which Eliot says, 'Words strain,/ Crack and sometimes break, under the burden.' Words have severe limitations for articulating mental anguish, but in order both to grasp something of the nature of his illness—its truth even—as well as to survive it, he is clear: 'Words, yes; but (in my experience) music, no,'[240] an experienced truth that mysteriously does not require words. Because of humanity's unfathomable diversity of context, temperament, and experience, other art forms are bound to have something of same effect.

Ambiguously Truthful

Those resisting enlightened rationality are drawn to their preferred arts to speak truth in these unknown languages. 'Speechless truth' offers an account of reality mysteriously open and provisional. Jeremy Begbie, a theologian and classically trained musician, recognizes in music 'an excess, an abundance of life that inevitably invites speech but always resists linguistic enclosure. In contrast to, for example, "death's sterilizing inexplicability," music is marked by a "fertile inexplicability",'[241] making the discussion of music so open-ended. Swiss Catholic Hans Küng thus cautions theologians

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[239] Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1989), 18.

[240] Johnson, *How Shostakovich Changed My Mind*, 139.

[241] Begbie, *Redeeming Transcendence*, 53.

to ‘be on guard against commandeering art for religion’.[242] Neverthless, music can evoke depths of psychological truth, creating sensations that seem perfectly to echo a mood or moods even when words have cracked under the weight. ‘Linguistic enclosure’ evidences the enlightened pursuit of scientific finality, the reductionism undermined by lived experience.

However, ‘linguistic enclosure’ is hardly inevitable even when words are the raw materials. In the hands of a poet or novelist, they offer openness and provisionality, far beyond authorial intent, making fiction so compelling, since great writers imbed subtleties to their protagonists which demand debate. As Holly Ordway rightly notes, ‘In the right context, multiple *correct* meanings can operate simultaneously; it is a characteristic not just of literature but of language itself that words do not have precise semantic boundaries.’[243] If true of a fictional human being, how much truer of real people and ultimately of the transcendent realities? As Frederick Buechner wisely discerns, ‘there are mysteries that do not conceal a truth to think your way to, but whose truth is itself the mystery. The mystery of your self, for example.’[244] He goes on to add, “To say that God is a mystery is to say that you can never nail him down. Even on Christ the nails proved ultimately ineffective.”[245] Prompted by this, Terry Glaspey suggests that the arts engage with mystery well because they revolve around ‘living the questions, letting them

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[242] Hans Küng, *Mozart: Traces of Transcendence* (London: SCM, 1992), 31.

[243] Ordway, *Christian Imagination*, 37 (emphasis original).

[244] Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 267.

[245] Buechner, *Beyond Words*, 267.

guide us toward truths that are richer and deeper than rationality alone has the ability to explore.'[246] Calvin Seerveld develops this theme:

> In other words, artistic truth has its own ontic legitimacy that is not in competition with other modes of knowledge that may also bode epiphanies of God's blessing to those who are busy thinking, speaking, or doing just deeds. Allusive imaginative knowledge exemplified, Paul Ricoeur would say, in parables like ones Jesus told, with all their complicated, indirect, surprising twists and turns, harbours an arresting potential for telling reliable truth peculiar to its particular aesthetic configuration.[247]

Many novelists, from many cultural contexts, acknowledge that exploration of questions is central to their process. Graham Greene points to the 'virtue of disloyalty' because the storyteller is 'to act as the devil's advocate, to elicit sympathy and a measure of understanding for those who lie outside the boundaries of State approval.'[248] Likewise, Czech novelist Milan Kundera insists, 'The novel's spirit is the spirit of complexity. Every novel says to the reader, 'Things are not as simple you think.'[249] Several commentators observe this embrace of complexity in Dostoevsky's novels, describing them as 'polyphonic' because of their multiple voices and perspectives.[250] Jane Austen continues to enthrall for comparable reasons despite the narrow arena in which she sets

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[246] Terry W. Glaspey, *Discovering God through the Arts: How Every Christians Can Grow Closer to God by Appreciating Beauty & Creativity* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2020), 86.

[247] Calvin Seerveld, "A Concept of Artistic Truth Prompted by Biblical Wisdom Literature," in *Truth Matters Knowledge, Politics, Ethics, Religion*, ed. Lambert Zuidervaart et al. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 302.

[248] Marie-Francoise Allain, *The Other Man: Conversations with Graham Greene* (London: Penguin, 1984), 75.

[249] Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), 18.

[250] Harries, 11. See also: Lynne M. Baab, and Carolyn Kelly, "Art Has Its Reasons: The Emerging Role of the Arts in Protestant Congregations," *Journal of Communication & Religion* 34, no. 2 (2011), 175.

her dramas. So the Iranian literary scholar Azar Nafisi is drawn to *Pride and Prejudice* because of 'Austen's ability to create such multivocality, such diverse voices and intonations in relation and in confrontation within the cohesive structure of the novel.' She describes this as 'one of the best examples of the democratic aspect of the novel' because it offers both 'spaces for oppositions' as well as 'space—not just space but a necessity—for self-reflection and self-criticism.'[251]

While the rationalist detests ambiguity, the artistic temperament thrives in it. Many have resonated with the poet John Keats's term, 'negative capability,' the ability to experience 'uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'.[252] It does not imply an absolute relativism (although for some it might), merely the ongoing provisionality of our knowing. As Ordway points out, there is a false dichotomy between 'disembodied objectivity on the one hand and total relativism on the other'. The reality is that '[t]ruth-bearing language does not have to be purged of ambiguity in order to be truthful',[253] but it takes a poet like Malcolm Guite to plumb the depths of that. He gives a striking example from the Anglican divine George Herbert, who captures the mysterious grace of the communion cup without getting embroiled in heated Catholic-versus-Protestant debates. In 'The Agony', Herbert 'takes us to the heart of the whole atonement whatever model you use, takes us straight to Love himself', as

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[251] Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (New York: Random House, 2003), 268.

[252] Brian Rejack, and Michael Theune, *Keats's Negative Capability* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), 28

[253] Guite, *Faith, Hope and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination*, 5.

the poem's concluding couplet demonstrates: 'Love is that liquor sweet and most divine,/Which my God feels as blood, but I as wine.'[254]

(iii) Witnessing Affected Lives

Creative people aspire to have an impact on their cultures and contexts; this section considers evidence for the power of art to do so. Why is it that philosopher William Lane Craig writes to a sceptic (who accepts his arguments but still struggles to believe) and suggests that he pursue aesthetic experiences (in this case, from the natural world) to 'put you in touch with the transcendent… to escape the cloying bonds of naturalism by catching glimpses of a transcendent reality beyond the material world'?[255]

A Capacity to Provoke Yearning

Aesthetic experiences lift people out of the mundanities of life, providing a taste of what could be or will be. The conductor John Eliot Gardiner has won great acclaim for his study of J. S. Bach because he applies musicological scholarship and extensive performance experience. As he explains, *St Matthew Passion* is one of Bach's most revered. Gardiner's first performance happened to be in communist East Berlin in 1987—just two years before the toppling of the Berlin Wall. '[I]n the audience were GDR soldiers weeping quite openly.'[256]

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[254] Guite, *Lifting the Veil: Imagination and the Kingdom of God*, 39.

[255] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 67.

[256] John Eliot Gardiner, *Music in the Castle of Heaven: A Portrait of Johann Sebastian Bach* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), 13.

They are not alone. Something extraordinary affects countless listeners profoundly. Friedrich Nietzsche writes to a friend in 1870, 'This week I heard the *St Matthew Passion* three times, and each time I had the same feeling of immeasurable admiration. One who has completely forgotten Christianity truly hears it here as Gospel.'[257] Within a decade, he would be repudiating such a view, together with his quasi-adoration of Wagner. But in 1870 he was transfixed by both German composers. Similarly, in 2009, the Hungarian composer György Kurtág makes this astonishing confession:

> Consciously, I am certainly an atheist, but I do not say it out loud, because if I look at Bach, I cannot be an atheist. Then I have to accept the way he believed. His music never stops praying. And how can I get closer if I look at him from the outside? I do not believe in the Gospels in a literal fashion, but a Bach fugue has the Crucifixion in it—as the nails are being driven in. In music, I am always looking for the hammering of the nails… That is a dual vision. My brain rejects it all. But my brain isn't worth much.'[258]

Philosopher Ernst Bloch, also an atheist adds, 'Music begins wistfully and by all means as a cry for what is lacking.'[259]

Music is not the only art form to have such an effect. The man who would be known globally as a writer, Thomas Merton, turned to the monastery path after seeing some Byzantine mosaics during a visit to Rome. He had gone as a regular tourist, intent on seeing the classical and Renaissance-era sites. But nothing impacted him as the Byzantine imagery did. For no ostensible reason, he found himself being drawn to

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[257] Gardiner, *Castle of Heaven*, 153.

[258] Gardiner, *Castle of Heaven*, 154.

[259] Pangritz, *Polyphony of Life*, 27.

churches rather than excavated sites. One was the church of 'Sts Cosmas and Damian, across from the Forum, with a great mosaic, in the apse, of Christ coming in judgment in a dark blue sky, with a suggestion of fire in the small clouds beneath his feet. The effect of this discovery was tremendous.' He naturally did not understand what he was looking at. But he was gripped. 'I was fascinated by those Byzantine mosaics… and thus, without knowing anything about it, I became a pilgrim.'[260] He was compelled by what he saw to pursue what they proclaim. That sense of longing is the key to Lewis's famous argument on the significance of hunger and desire. They point to 'something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country.'[261] The aridity of his materialism was accentuated by his love of poetic and whimsical fictions, and his writing provoked a similar reaction in his readers.

Francis Spufford is a widely respected literary editor (for Faber & Faber) who has also written a range of his own fiction and non-fiction. In his reading memoir, he reflects on the fact that of all the books he loved as a child (and subsequently reread in middle age), it was the *Chronicles of Narnia* that reigned supreme, still.

> Other imaginary countries interested me, beguiled me, made rich suggestions to me. Narnia made me feel I'd taken hold of a live wire. The book in my hand sent jolts and shimmers through my nerves. It affected me bodily. In Narnia, C. S. Lewis invented objects for my longing, gave forms to my longing, that I would never have thought of, and yet they seemed exactly right: he had anticipated what would delight me with an almost unearthly intimacy.

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[260] Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (London: SPCK, 1990), 108.

[261] C. S Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Collins, 1984), 137.

He naturally had many other literary favourites, but nothing could ever compare, such that he 'was was always seeking for partial or diluted reminders of Narnia... Once felt, never forgotten.'[262]

A Capacity to Transform and Restore

From the time of Homer, beauty has been regarded as lifesaving. Many followed Homer's lead, as Augustine described it as 'a plank amid the waves of the sea.'[263] But the previous century suggests the value of beauty is unwarranted, grandiose romanticism. Many chime with Dostoyevsky's nihilist, Ippolit, who asks the enigmatic naïf, Prince Myshkin, a crucial question. 'Is it true, Prince, that you said the world will be saved by beauty? … What sort of beauty will save the world?'[264] As Steiner writes, 'We now know that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning.'[265] Some claim that art exists on a higher plane than politics, which is what the Berlin Philharmonic's conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler tried to claim during the post-war denazification process. But this will convince few rationalists. What can be said of the arts' redemptive qualities, if anything?

The French painter Henri Matisse had a bold, although not exactly redemptive, goal. Scarry notes that 'he repeatedly said that he wanted to make paintings so serenely beautiful that when one came upon them, suddenly all problems would subside.' She

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[262] Spufford, *Child*, 86.

[263] Scarry, *On Beauty*, 24.

[264] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. David McDuff (London: Penguin Classics, 2004), 449.

[265] George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays 1958-1966*, 2nd ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), x.

comments that 'his paintings of Nice have for me this effect.'[266] But the effect works like a sedative or distraction more than a way to address problems, modernists propose, and in many ways, as de Gruchy knows all too well from growing up in apartheid South Africa, 'Much modern art has been a protest against seductive beauty, and for this reason has employed the ugly as a way to shock us into recognition of its banality and danger.' Picasso's *Guernica* is a case in point, painted on a vast canvas in a fury in only thirty-five days, after the horrors of Nazi and Fascist bombing of a Spanish republican stronghold in 1937.[267] The problem, he says, is that 'ugliness in itself has no power to redeem and renew life and humanity; it may be good as a tool for protest but it is not helpful for healing.' [268] Nevertheless, for art in its widest sense, he insists, 'Art is not an optional extra but a personal and public necessity that contributes to both human flourishing and social transformation.' It can do this by 'supplying images that contradict the inhuman, and by providing alternative transforming images to those of oppression. In this way, art negates present realities, challenges destructive, alienating trends, and anticipates future possibilities.'[269] The act of imagination here is a rebellious act.

Roger Scruton contrasts the power of beauty with the phenomenon of *kitsch* and suggests that the latter is a reason for the former being discredited by intellectuals. He places beauty here in a decidedly moral frame. 'Beauty tells you to stop thinking about yourself, and to wake up to the world of others. It says look at this, listen to this, study

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[266] Scarry, *On Beauty*, 33.

[267] Paul Preston, *The Destruction of Guernica* (London: HarperCollins, 2012).

[268] De Gruchy, *Art and Transformation*, 7.

[269] De Gruchy, *Art and Transformation*, 8.

this—for here is something more important than you. Kitsch is a means to cheap emotion; beauty is an end in itself.'[270] This recognition does not necessarily crush spirits because it may instead create a greater sense of social cohesion. In conversation with Stephen Johnson, Scruton made a fascinating remark: 'Where some other composers say "I" in their music, Shostakovich says "We".' Johnson immediately agreed, 'and concrete examples from Shostakovich's work flooded into mind.'[271] Perhaps the most compelling illustration is his *Leningrad Symphony*, written during the Nazis' brutal, relentless siege of the city. The symphony has generated a significant mythology because of its circumstances, a siege described by one historian as 'the greatest demographic catastrophe' ever experienced by a single city.[272] Yet several writers have investigated what did happen, interviewing some of the few surviving players from that war-torn performance. An oboeist, Ksenia Matus, remembered realizing 'that these people were not just starving for food, but for music. We resolved to play the very best we could'. Though the performers were themselves starving (such that each rehearsal was restricted to only fifteen minutes because of the wind and brass players' exhaustion), she recalled 'feeling strangely happy for the first time since the blockade'.[273] The rapturous applause given by a hall packed with an emaciated, sick and despairing audience was overwhelming, because they felt indebted to 'the composer for giving form to their

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[270] Roger Scruton, *Confessions of a Heretic*, ed. Douglas Murray, Revised ed. (Honiton: Notting Hill, 2021), 13.

[271] Johnson, *How Shostakovich Changed My Mind*, 13.

[272] Moynahan, *Leningrad*, 171.

[273] Moynahan, *Leningrad*, 481.

feelings'.[274] Johnson recalls the old actors' adage that 'people go into a play as individuals but leave as an audience'.[275] That something redemptive and community-building could come in the midst of horror and agony was an experience that the ancient Greek tragedians knew well.

The Irish poet and Nobel Prize Laureate Seamus Heaney quotes Nadezhda Mandelstam, a Soviet-era poet and close friend of Shostakovich, in his Oxford lectures on the purposes of poetry. She suffered in Stalin's purges, and her husband Osip died en route to the Gulag in 1938, but she insisted that poetry be a 'vehicle of world harmony'. If that also sounds over-inflated, Heaney explains that the goal of being 'a source of truth and at the same time a vehicle of harmony… expresses what we would like poetry to be and it takes me back to the kinds of pressure which poets from Northern Ireland are subject to.'[276] Poetry has a social character, then; it is 'concerned with the doings of the poet's fellow men, among whom he lives and whose fate he shares. He does not speak for them, but with them, nor does he set himself apart from them: otherwise he would not be a source of truth.'[277] This idea he terms the 'redress' of poetry, the title of his lectures.

Because it is created by someone who shares in the experiences of listener or viewers—whether specifically in an event like a siege, or from generic experience—a work of art presents a new alternative, a different narrative, a better future perhaps. At the very least, it may simply be a record of someone able to create in the direst conditions,

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[274] Johnson, *How Shostakovich Changed My Mind*, 7.

[275] Johnson, *How Shostakovich Changed My Mind*, 52.

[276] Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), 193.

[277] Heaney, *Redress*, 193.

which is itself a testimony to vitality. Tolkien understands the value of fairy-tales, for example, with his articulation of the gospel-shaped 'eucatastrophe'.[278] A story presents an alternative reality, making credible at least the possibility that the worst will not happen. Stanley Hauerwas's compelling exposition of Richard Adams's tale of an English rabbit community, *Watership Down* says likewise.[279] And one of the most moving examples of an artefact bringing light into darkness is the footage of a flashmob in a Madrid unemployment office suddenly striking up the Beatles' hit 'Here Comes The Sun'.[280]

A Capacity for Suspending Disbelief

On entering a theatre or cinema, the artificiality of the aesthetic experience on offer is plain for all to see. Of course, the creators of that experience hope that audiences are so immersed in the performance that they temporarily forget that artificiality. In her essay on C. S. Lewis's science fiction novels, Julianne Johnson explores his methodology, noting that he exploits fiction because the genre demands 'a suspension of disbelief, or a setting aside of our criticisms and expectations for reality, which allows the imagination to interact more freely with the ideas presented'. In so doing, he hoped to 'strip away the stained-glass and Sunday school associations' that had repelled him from

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[278] Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, 78.

[279] Stanley Hauerwas, "A Story-Formed Community: Reflections on Watership Down (1981)," in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. Cartwright and Berkman (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2001).

[280] Carne Cruda, "Flashmob Oficina Paro (Carne Cruda 2.0)," recorded 8 Jan 2013, 2013, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kS709ZyZ_YU.

the Christianity of his youth so that the true gospel myth could 'for the first time appear in [its] real potency.'[281]

Tolkien ignored intellectuals' patronising scorn for his universe of elves and hobbits because he did not despise what children instinctively have, namely what he calls 'literary belief'. He quibbles with the notion of 'willing suspension of disbelief', preferring the notion of a 'Secondary World which your mind can enter.' He also prefers terming creative people 'subcreators' because their making can only be a pale reflection of the original grand act of divine creation. But once that world is entered, it is true within its own terms: 'it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed.'[282] Roger Scruton describes fantasy as replacing 'the real, resistant, objective world with a pliant surrogate' defending it nonetheless because 'Life in the actual world is difficult and embarrassing.'[283]

Wolterstorff reframes Tolkein's position, suggesting that a crucial element of what an artist achieves (whatever the medium) is what he calls the 'action of world-projection'. [284] Some art forms do not aim for this (citing so-called 'pure' music and abstract art), but when they do function like this, it is 'perhaps the most pervasive and important of the actions that artists perform.' He is quick to point out that this is not to be identified with 'making false claims about the actual world' but that 'by way of

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[281] Johnson, in *A Compass for Deep Heaven: Navigating the C. S. Lewis Ransom Trilogy*, 19.

[282] Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, 52.

[283] Scruton, *Modern Culture*, 63.

[284] Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic*, 122.

fictionally projecting his distinct world the fictioneer may make a claim, true or false as the case may be, about our actual world.'[285] Intriguingly, James Wood sees the task of the artist being 'to convince us that this could have happened. Internal consistency and plausibility then become more important than referential rectitude.'[286] The late novelist John le Carré agreed, wrily acknowledging in an interview in 1976, 'if you write a spy story, the more credible, the more authentic, the more plausible it is, the less credit you get for an active imagination. I'd much rather have plausibility than authenticity—that is, after all, the writer's trade.'[287]

Wolterstorff outlines seven benefits of world-projection[288], the first three of which revolve around truth and falsehood. They can be summarized in this way:

1. Confirmation: 'the artist is not merely projecting a world which has caught his private fancy' but offers artefacts as community possessions, to 'confirm that community in [its] convictions.'[289]
2. Illumination: artists set themselves over society to highlight or expose an overlooked reality.
3. Truth: an artefact is truth-bearing, 'true to what one and another person *takes* actuality to be.'[290] It may also be false, but with a falsehood prized because it is escapist or projects an aspiration future.
4. Evocation: Evoking emotions and empathy (such as in tragedy)
5. Modelling: such as for an action to be emulated or avoided.
6. Communicating: such as offering an alternative to the actual world.
7. Consolation – exemplified by Tolkien's discussion of the *eucatastrophe*.

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[285] Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic*, 122.

[286] Wood, *Fiction*, 179.

[287] Matthew J. Bruccoli, and Judith S. Baughman, *Conversations with John Le Carré, Literary Conversations* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 34.

[288] Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic*, 144-150

[289] Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic*, 144.

[290] Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic*, 147.

The fictioneer projects a world, even if only in vague, sketch form, internally consistent. Imagination gives it plausibility. The concept of 'plausibility structures' was coined by the pioneering scholar Peter Berger, and it is crucial for grasping the sociological nature of secularism's success. Transcendent and metaphysical realities gradually lost their plausibility over time, but it wasn't the result of rational arguments alone. It required a critical mass within European society to shift the worldview balances of power.[291] Then, as Berger explains, 'At best, a minority viewpoint is forced to be defensive. At worst, it ceases to be plausible to anyone.'[292] The crucial thing, as Taylor shows at several points, is that secularism is only in part a subtraction story (removing the metaphysical realm); it claims to offer a better narrative, an alternative narrative.

Justin Ariel Bailey appeals for imagination in the apologist's task. It is not enough to deconstruct the narrative of secularity; in his words drawn from John Milbank, it is crucial not to 'outreason' but to 'outnarrate' the gospel's detractors. As well as offering more justifications of Christian truth, it is necessary to promote 'imaginative provocations of the goodness and beauty of the Christian way of life.'[293] The central characteristic of the arts, especially (but not exclusively) when narratival, of heralding a secondary world for which we suspend disbelief without objection or hesitancy, suggests that they can reinvigorate the plausibility structures of transcendence.

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[291] Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*, 61, 121.

[292] Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*, 7.

[293] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 74.

Summary of The Arts and Worldview Change

Historic suspicions about the validity and significance of the arts continue to haunt creative professionals, within and beyond the church, whether because of the legacy of iconoclasm or enlightenment thinking, or some combination of them. However, this exploration has demonstrated that their value extends beyond that of entertainment or distraction, such that they offer a vital means of helping those who experience them to perceive reality as it is, despite the artefacts' fictions and illusions. There are nevertheless demands made on those recipients, such as patient attention and reflection. For those willing to do this, the arts have a range of potential effects, including the ability to provoke yearning for a reality beyond the immanent, the means of transforming understanding and instilling empathy, as well as the opportunity to inhabit different perspectives and worldviews in the safety of suspended disbelief. These capacities are crucial if the arts are to play a part in the church's witness.

3. The Paradox of Transcendent Arts

(i) The Gap and the Nova Effect

As Begbie notes, 'The gut intuition that there is a special link between art and a transcendent "beyond" is ancient.'[294] Overuse has diluted the word's significance, as had the attempt to create a non- or post-religious framework for the arts, such that the arts offer aspects of religion's consolation to post-enlightenment agnostics. Thus, in the Cambridge lectures mentioned above, Gordon Graham cites the poet Matthew Arnold's

[294] Begbie, *Redeeming Transcendence*, 1.

hope that 'More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry.' This double-pronged assertion fills Graham's lecture series, namely that 'the traditional Religion of Europe has failed, and that Art can replace the loss that this failure represents.'[295] Arnold argues that religion is based on truth claims (the 'facts') to which human beings have attached emotions but which have been corroded by the advance of scientific enquiry. Because poetry is about ideas and not facts—in other words, it communicates viewpoints, perspectives, opinions—people attach emotions to something far less contentious but no less consolatory.[296] It is the attempt to find alternatives to those facts that fuels Taylor's 'nova effect', because their absence leaves a vacuum. In Smith's summary, this 'dissatisfaction and emptiness can propel a return to transcendence. But often … the "cure" to this nagging pressure of absence is sought *within immanence*, and it is this quest that generates the nova effect, looking for love/meaning/significance/quasi "transcendence" *within* the immanent order.'[297]

Drawing on Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski, he suggests that the gap left by the attempt to displace religion with science constitutes 'the revenge of the sacred in the secular'.[298] He states, 'The value of science is not something that science can itself

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[295] Graham, *Re-enchantment*, 29.

[296] Graham, *Re-enchantment*, 52.

[297] Smith, *How (Not) To*, 69 (emphasis original).

[298] Graham, *Re-enchantment*, 142.

explain.'[299] Meaning and value come from elsewhere, he says, while acknowledging true reality as it is understood (for which scientific enquiry is a vital component). If 'art is to re-enchant the world in the aftermath of religion's demise, it must in some way enable the most honest and truthful apprehension of our finite humanity to be at the same time an inspiration to be human.'[300] Human mortality mocks human delusions of significance. Without religion, humanity wrestles as the existentialists did, to choose between religious pretence (what Sartre termed 'bad faith'), acceptance (whether reluctantly or not), or 'the pursuit of a distinctively human transcendence' to overcome 'the contingency of our existence'.[301] As Graham notes, the 'religious impulse often arises from an anxiety that we are alone in the world, and a consequent relief at finding there are other spiritual agencies besides ourselves (the gods, or God and His angels).' Peter Berger terms this relief the 'nomos' of religion, the elements of a worldview which function as a 'shield against terror', growing out of the instinctive 'human craving for meaning'.[302] It seems absurd to expect human artefacts (however brilliant, 'inspired' or affecting) to provide the same relief and meaning.[303] So, Graham's conclusion is categorical. 'In short, the abandonment of religion, it seems, must mean the permanent disenchantment of the world, and any ambition on the part of art to remedy this is doomed to failure.'[304]

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[299] Graham, *Re-enchantment*, 143.

[300] Graham, *Re-enchantment*, 154.

[301] Graham, *Re-enchantment*, 153.

[302] Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, 22.

[303] Graham, *Re-enchantment*, 165.

[304] Graham, *Re-enchantment*, 186.

(ii) The Trinitarian Transcendent

Supposing that the transcendent realm does exist, and the rejection of the religious is a significant misstep—after all, George Steiner boldly insisted that the validity of all language and meaning depended on a 'wager on God'[305]—is it not at least possible for the arts to have a significant role to play?

The term 'transcendent' has been diluted, having two common senses, describing a powerful aesthetic experience, either exceptional or explicitly metaphysical. After its introductory definition ('beyond or above the range of normal or physical human experience'), the OED offers two distinct uses in common parlance: 'Surpassing the ordinary; exceptional' with the illustration of 'her transcendent beauty' and then the second usage, more metaphysical: '(of God) existing apart from and not subject to the limitations of the material universe. Often contrasted with immanent.' Even though many aesthetic experiences may well be 'exceptional', this study examines art that offers a reality beyond the physical, a sense even of the divine.

Classical philosophy muddies the waters, however. A Platonic conception of reality, beyond the shadowy cave of this life in where the perfection of forms exists, could be described with the second OED usage. Thus, in aesthetics, the focus is often on the so-called 'transcendentals', such as truth, goodness, and beauty. It is possible to understand them without recourse to Christian theology. So, in her 1997–1998 Tanner Lectures, Elaine Scarry binds beauty to the other two, goodness and truth.[306] Despite the idealism of Scarry's ambition, a degree of realism is required. Wolterstorff counters her

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[305] Steiner, *Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say?*, 4, 215.

[306] Scarry, *On Beauty*.

point, suggesting that 'We have all known people who were intensely attentive to beauty but cared not a fig for justice ... who live in large, elegant houses, work in elegant offices, have extensive art collections.'[307]

Similarly, the Romantic movement resists both premodern religion and Enlightenment reductionism by relishing the numinous, the sublime, and the transcendent through the grandeur of the natural world. As Scruton observes, 'The romantic poets and painters turned their backs on religion and sought salvation through art.' The key to the artist's genius was the 'capacity to transcend the human condition in creative ways, breaking all the rules in order to achieve a new order of experience. Art became an avenue to the transcendental, the gateway to a higher kind of knowledge.'[308] Goethe defined the artist in theological terms 'as someone called to be the custodian and eager herald of an avowed sacred reality'.[309] This genius enables the artist, in the words of E.T.A. Hoffmann's celebrated 1810 review of Beethoven, to unveil 'before us the realm of the mighty and the immeasurable… destroying within us all feeling but the pain of infinite yearning (*Sehnsucht*)'. He 'sets in motion the machinery of awe, of fear, of terror, of pain, and awakens that infinite yearning which is the essence of romanticism.'[310]

However, Christian aesthetics need to go further, as Jeremy Begbie outlines. They must incorporate the 'particularities' of the Trinitarian God as they have been revealed. This explains why he takes issue with the implication that 'divine transcendence can be

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[307] Wolterstorff, *Art Rethought: The Social Practices of Art*, 200.

[308] Scruton, *Confessions of a Heretic*, 3.

[309] Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings*, 62.

[310] Begbie, *Redeeming Transcendence*, 51.

theorized in a manner that presumes a *unitarian deity*, an undifferentiated God' such that elaborating such a God in Trinitarian terms 'would make no substantial difference to the way we imagine transcendence.'[311] Such art fails to do justice to the Trinitarian and Christological nature of divine revelation.

In considering the arts apologetically, there are two questions. The primary question, as has been clear throughout, is in making transcendent reality more plausible. After that, however, is the question of whether they can point to a specifically Trinitarian nature of transcendence to render it particularly Christian.

These questions get to the heart of the central paradox, namely that artefacts restricted to the immanent frame are bound by human finitude in some way and still reveal something of the transcendent.

(iii) Transcendent Beauty in the Immanent

In a poem composed almost entirely of paradoxical couplets, William Blake's 1803 'Auguries of Innocence' juxtaposes the world's beauty and wonder with its pervasive evil and corruption, opening with these lines:

> To see a world in a grain of sand
> And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
> Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
> And Eternity in an hour.[312]

Blake focuses on creation, seeing each object within it as a reflection of and integrated into the whole. Almost a century later, Thomas Hardy found himself, in the depths of

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[311] Begbie, *Redeeming Transcendence*,19.

[312] William Blake, *Selected Poems* (London: Phoenix, 1999), 114.

winter, meditating on the failed promises of Victorian progress and prosperity. Written on 31st December 1900, 'The Darkling Thrush' paints a bleak and haunted picture of the world, a gloom which is suddenly pierced by a thrush 'in a full-hearted evensong of joy illimited'. Hardy uses ecclesiastical metaphor often, despite his rejection of Christianity. So the poem closes on an unexpected note of optimism, albeit one of tentative ambiguity:

> So little cause for carolings
> Of such ecstatic sound
> Was written on terrestrial things
> Afar or nigh around,
> That I could think there trembled through
> His happy good-night air
> Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
> And I was unaware.[313]

As Guite comments, Hardy might well have ignored or resisted the metaphysical implications of the bird's song. Most of those immured in the immanent probably would have. Instead, 'Hardy's witness in this honest poem is that he can neither ignore nor believe the thrush.'[314] He draws on Heaney's Oxford lectures in which he also comments on the poem, noting that Heaney had much in common with Hardy. Both poets, despite their agnosticism, maintain what Heaney would describe as a willingness to be 'exposed to every wind that blows' even if that propelled them towards the transcendent or even religious.[315] This openness is a humility before the alien or unfamiliar. Scruton quotes from Wordsworth approvingly: 'Anybody who goes through life with open mind and open heart will encounter these moments of revelation, moments that are saturated with

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[313] Thomas Hardy, *Poems of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Claire Tomalin (London; New York: Penguin, 2007), 25.

[314] Guite, *Faith, Hope and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination*, 184.

[315] Seamus Heaney, *North* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), 10-11.

meaning, but whose meaning cannot be put into words. These moments are precious to us.'[316] Guite then makes this crucial point: 'Once we know that the things we see might seem rather than be what we think they are, it becomes possible that, if only for a moment, something else might "tremble through" them.'[317]

The issue at stake here is whether or not human-made artefacts share similar properties. Might not human-made artefacts also offer a means by which the transcendent might tremble through? Taylor suggests they can. 'There are certain works of art—by Dante, Bach, the makers of Chartres Cathedral: the list is endless—whose power seems inseparable from their epiphanic, transcendent reference. Here the challenge is to the unbeliever, to find a nontheistic register in which to respond to them, without impoverishment.'[318] Countless people have taken up that challenge with alacrity, prompting the art historian James Elkins to go so far as saying that '[c]ontemporary art… is as far removed from organized religion as Western art has ever been… The separation has become entrenched. Religion is seldom mentioned in art schools and art departments, partly because it is understood to be something private… and partly from a conviction that religious belief need not be brought into the teaching of art.'[319] While this exemption may be true for literature and theatre, it is less applicable to music. Avowedly atheist or

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[316] Scruton, *Confessions of a Heretic*, 91.

[317] Guite, *Faith, Hope and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination*, 185.

[318] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 606.

[319] James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (London: Routledge, 2004), 15.

agnostic composers frequently undertake religious commissions and have even set liturgical music unbidden.[320]

Polyphonic Music and the Real World

Nevertheless, regardless of the religious perspectives of their makers, artefacts seem to possess that 'epiphanic, transcendent reference'. Thus, one of Tolkien's and Lewis's fellow Inklings, Charles Williams, writes, 'A voice, crying out in song, went through the air of Eden—a voice that swept up as the eagle, and with every call renewed its youth. All music was the scattered echo of that voice…'[321] Note, he refers to 'all music', rather than simply religious music. Music is integral to the beauty and wonder of a created universe and thus reflects the God who created it. The French Catholic composer and organist Olivier Messiaen held that organ music was particularly suggestive because its performers were concealed high up in an organ loft. 'What comes from the organ is invisible music, propelled by wind, yet whose instrument gives no sign of activity and whose player normally cannot be seen. Organ music symbolises and makes real the contact between the mundane and the eternal. Indeed it makes a sacrament of all the world.'[322]

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[320] For example: Leonard Bernstein (*Chichester Psalms*, 1965); Leoš Janáček (*Glagolitic Mass*, 1926); György Ligeti (*Lux Aeterna* in 1966, used in Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey*); Peter Maxwell Davies (*Missa super l'homme armé*, 1968); Camille Saint-Saëns (*Requiem*, 1878; *The Promised Land*, 1913); Ralph Vaughan Williams (*English Hymnal*, 1906; *Five Mystical Songs*, 1911; *Mass in G minor*, 1922).

[321] Charles Williams, *The Place of the Lion*, New ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 1965), 166.

[322] John William McMullen, *Miracle of Stalag 8a - Beauty Beyond the Horror: Olivier Messiaen and the Quartet for the End of Time, The* (Evansville, IN: Bird Brain Productions, 2010), 91.

More importantly, if Williams is correct and music does indeed have Edenic origins, it might possess the restorative potential of a world created for good. Bonhoeffer, a gifted theologian and martyr under Nazism, faced a genuine dilemma deciding between church ministry and professional music. He derived solace from his photographic memory of musical scores while in Tegel military prison and Sachsenhausen concentration camp. In a sermon at his nephew Dietrich Bethge's baptism, he said, 'Music as your parents understand and practice it, will bring you back from confusion to your clearest and purest self and perceptions, and from cares and sorrows to the underlying note of joy.'[323] But Bonhoeffer went further. During the interminable hours in a cell, he reflected on the deep relationship between music and a Trinity-established cosmos. According to Andreas Pangritz, a theologian and musicologist of distinction, Bonhoeffer treasured polyphony, especially that of his heroes Heinrich Schutz and J. S. Bach, because instead of regarding it with Reformation-era suspicion, he thought it offered the ideal 'musical description of the Christian life'. The polyphony of life 'does not mean harmony without conflict or dissonance'.[324] What captured Bonhoeffer is the capacity of polyphony to create beauty without ever flattening life's dark and painful elements; on the contrary, it integrates them within the harmonies and musical arguments. In a letter to Eberhard Bethge, he writes, 'The image of polyphony is still following me around. In feeling some sorrow today at not being able to be with you, I couldn't help

[323] Pangritz, *Polyphony*, xviii.

[324] Pangritz, *Polyphony*, xvii.

thinking that sorrow and joy, too, belong to the polyphony of the whole of life and can exist independently side by side.'[325]

Bonhoeffer developed the metaphor further, drawing analogies from its musical construction. Essential to mediaeval polyphony is the *cantus firmus,* a strong melodic line, usually set for the lower voices or instruments to anchor the piece. The other voices or parts could then elaborate, oppose, or weave in and out of that line's harmonies, using the technique known as counterpoint. J. S. Bach is the master of counterpoint, using the method to powerful effect in masterpieces like *St Matthew Passion*. But in Bonhoeffer's hands, the *cantus firmus* would have theological significance. He takes the command to love God: 'God, the Eternal, wants to be loved with our whole heart, not to the detriment of earthly love or to diminish it, but as a sort of *cantus firmus* to which the other voices of life resound in counterpoint. One of these contrapuntal themes, which keep their *full independence* but are still related to the *cantus firmus*, is earthly love.'[326] But he then applies this more widely:

> Where the *cantus firmus* is clear and distinct, a counterpoint can develop as mightily as it wants. The two are 'undivided and yet distinct,' as the Definition of Chalcedon says, like the divine and human natures in Christ. Is that perhaps why we are so at home with polyphony in music, why it is important to us, because it is the musical image of this christological fact and thus also our *vita christiana*?[327]

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[325] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison,* trans. Isabel Best and et al, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works,* ed. Victoria J. Barnett (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 388.

[326] Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers,* 385.

[327] Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers,* 385-6.

Bonhoeffer applies music's capacity, one which he regarded as inherent because of its divine origins, to the work of theology—in particular, to liberate it from the potential reductionism of dialectical thought. Thus music, experienced in the immanent frame, reflects the indivisible but integrated, transcendent God.

Two Dimensions Invaded by the Third

Fig. 8: Giotto, *The Scrovegni Chapel*, Padua, facing west, 1303-5, https://bit.ly/GiottoPadua

A painting represents an immanent archetypally because of its static physicality and the inevitablity of its decay. Yet, as noted already, a great painting also presents depth, time, and activity. Can transcendence be appended to that list? A resolutely atheist scholar, art historian T. J. Clark, tackles the subject because it is such a dominant theme in mediaeval and renaissance art and thus unavoidable. Indeed, he dedicates an entire publication to the question, tracing it through individual masterpieces by Giotto, Bruegel,

Poussin, Veronese, and finally Picasso.[328] He opens with an in-depth focus on Giotto's monumental frescoes in Padua. Giotto completed his work for the Arena or Scrovegni Chapel (fig. 8) in 1305, depicting the *Life of Christ* and the extra-biblical *Life of the Virgin* in cycles painted on opposite walls, with other surfaces depicting *The Last Judgement* and *Vices and Virtues*, to name just two.

Clark homes in on only two panels from *the Life of the Virgin* on the south wall, in particular *Joachim's Dream*. Clark comments: 'Giotto's great subject in the *Dream* is the co-presence—the disconnection and tying together—of earth and heaven. But all the nouns here are too abstract. What counts in Giotto's treatment … is the ordinariness, the worldliness, of the meeting of opposites.'[329] To illustrate the point, he highlights the angelic appearances in both the *Dream* and *Annunciation to St Anne* panels.

Fig. 9: Giotto, *Joachim's Dream,* (l); *The Annunciation to St Anne* (r), 1303-5, https://bit.ly/GiottoPadua

[328] Clark, *Heaven.*

[329] Clark, *Heaven*, 65.

In the latter, the angel appears, comically, through St Anne's bedroom window. There is little sense there of boundaries being crossed other than the wall that partitions interior from exterior. However, in *Joachim's Dream* (Fig. 9), something more remarkable is depicted. While the main character sleeps, an angel hovers, appearing to coordinate events (including the dream itself) below. Instead of his legs being hidden from view (as in panel 5), they dissolve apparition-like into the atmosphere. Clark draws on Ruskin's rule of thumb that '"Whenever we encounter in a work of art some awkwardness or abbreviation that strikes us as not realistic or not true to life"… the question occurs: "What other aspect of the thing seen or event imagined does the 'unrealistic' notation make vivid?"'[330] The angel in the *Dream* is a case in point. Clark suggests it is as if the artist hints at what 'might have struck Joachim afterwards as unbelievable,' by means of a depiction which is 'neither flesh nor spirit, stopped at the moment of transition, of becoming an image'.[331] Clark's outlines these ideas in the book, despite what he calls his 'secular, sceptical, atheistic mind'.[332]

The first idea is the possibility that 'the world we inhabit might open onto another—be interrupted by it, or called to it, or visited by it and make sense at last in the light of the visitation… the image of the earthly giving way to the heavenly.' His second idea is related, namely the possibility that 'the world we know might be raised to a higher power, "deified" by an energy that, though it may ultimately be a gift of God, is manifest here and now in a quickening, an intensifying, an overflowing, a supercharging of

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[330] Clark, *Heaven*, 52.

[331] Clark, *Heaven*, 47-8.

[332] Clark, *Heaven*, 59.

altogether human powers.'[333] The heart of the matter is the profound relationship between artefacts created in the immanent sphere but which connect to the transcendent, the point of this thesis. Merleau-Ponty makes a similar point in more philosophical terms:

> Things encroach upon one another because they are outside one another. The proof of this is that I can see depth in a painting which everyone agrees has none and which organizes for me an illusion of an illusion… This two-dimensional being, which makes me see a third, is a being that is pierced [troué]—as the men of the Renaissance said, a window… But in the final analysis the window opens only upon partes extra partes, upon height and breadth merely seen from another angle—upon the absolute positivity of Being.[334]

Giotto is a master of the figurative image, depicting biblical and other stories in the world familiar to his contemporaries (in much the same way that Sir Stanley Spencer would do in twentieth-century England). He portrays Ruskin's 'unrealistic' details, but they draw the viewer into deeper meanings. Twentieth-century artists, who have rejected figurative painting altogether in favour of abstraction, forge alternative means of conveying depth. For example, one contemporary critic, Harold Rosenberg, writes that the abstract expressionist Barnett Newman demonstrates that 'painting was a way of *practising* the sublime, not of finding symbols for it.' According to Rosenberg, this meant making art that is capable of 'giving someone, as it did me, the feeling of his own totality'.[335] Paul Klee's words were subsequently inscribed on his tomb: 'I cannot be

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[333] Clark, *Heaven*, 17.

[334] Merleau-Ponty, in *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics*, 173.

[335] Michael Austin, *Explorations in Art, Theology, and Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2016), 133 (emphasis original).

grasped in immanence'.[336] One artist most frequently identified with this phenomenon is Mark Rothko, as we will explore.

Steiner challenges the English artist Ben Nicolson's appreciation for the works of seventeenth-century Lorraine painter Georges de la Tour. To Nicolson's claim that 'painting and religious experience are the same things, and what we are all searching for is the understanding and realization of infinity', Steiner rightly asks, 'Yes; but which infinity? Chaos, too, is boundless and free.'[337] What he does not question, however, is the mysterious power of art to touch the infinite.

Words to Make Life Livable

When the power of narratives was recognised by the advertizing industry, art could no longer only describe a product's features. It had to tell a story, not that of its inventor or producer, but to appeal to aspirations of the consumer. The customer will then think, 'The product I own tells a story and I want to be part of that story.'[338] Such a cynical manipulation of an audience would not be possible were storytelling not essential to human nature. Spufford suggests that the 'essential breakthrough of human language' is for events to be 'represented', such that even a 'two-year-old who has started to understand the rules of story is coming into an inheritance which may be as genetic as the

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[336] Merleau-Ponty, in *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics*, 188.

[337] Steiner, *Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say?*, 59.

[338] Peter Jonker, *Preaching in Pictures: Using Images for Sermons That Connect, The Artistry of Preaching Series* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2015), 67.

upright gait of our branch of primates, or our opposable thumbs.'[339] In a short essay, predating the Inklings by several years, Chesterton extolled the virtues of fairy tales, specifically because all children have sufficient imagination to dread what he calls the 'bogey' and because the stories provide them with 'a St. George to kill the dragon,'[340] essential to their mental equilibrium.

Not just children need this, as the writers of biblical apocalyptic literature knew well. During the darkest days of uncertainty and oppression, clinging to a narrative that could embrace the darkness without belittling it, while holding out a different future, might be the only means of survival. Victor Frankl knew from his experiences of the horrors of Nazi concentration camps that Nietzsche was correct: 'He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*.'[341] A story gives a why, even a story at its bleakest. Stephen Johnson relates the story of a young actor suggesting to the nihilistic playwright Samuel Beckett that 'there wasn't much hope in his plays. "Really?", Beckett is said to have replied, "But if I didn't hope, why would I write?"'[342] If this can be true for the writer of *Waiting for Godot,* how much truer might it be of a writer more prepared to be open to the transcendent?

The Enlightenment's reductionism of truth to proposition eclipsed Christianity's defining historical narrative. Yet, as the theologian Kevin Vanhoozer observes, 'Narratives make story-shaped points that cannot always be paraphrased in propositional

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[339] Spufford, *Child*, 46.

[340] G. K. Chesterton, "The Red Angel," in *Tremendous Trifles*, ed. Ben Schott (London: Hesperus Press, 2009), 42.

[341] Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York, NY: Pocket Books, 1997), 126.

[342] Johnson, *How Shostakovich Changed My Mind*, 108.

statements without losing something in translation.'[343] Goheen's study of the missiological legacy of Lesslie Newbigin returns to Newbigin's insistence on the necessity of narrative theology. 'The Bible is a *story*; it is a *true* story and it is a *comprehensive* story with authority over every nation and over the whole of human life.'[344] The Christian has little choice but to acknowledge this story as a given, to submit to it, to participate in it. For as John Millbank has written, 'the Church stands in a narrative relationship to Jesus and the gospels, within a story that subsumes both. This must be the case, because no historical story is ever "over and done with".' He continues, 'The metanarrative is not just the story of Jesus, it is the continuing story of the Church, already realized in a finally exemplary way by Christ, yet still to be realized universally, in harmony with Christ, and yet differently, by all generations of Christians.'[345]

Shusako Endo's acclaimed novel about the struggling church and a small band of Jesuit missionaries in seventeenth-century Japan is a story of failure, with persecution virtually expunging Christianity from the country completely. To smoke out members of the now underground church, the authorities paraded a '*fumi-e*'—a carved image of Christ or the Virgin Mary—and compelled suspected believers to walk or 'trample' on it on pain of torture or death. The missionaries would face the same trial when caught. It is a bleak and brutal tale. However, Endo writes with great subtlety. Prior to their arrival in the country, the missionaries dream of the glory from their inevitable martyrdoms. But

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[343] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2005), 93.

[344] Michael W. Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2018), 26.

[345] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 387.

their captors order them to recant to stop the torture and execution of the Japanese believers. There is no glory. So when one priest, Rodrigues, is unable to endure any more, Endo tells us, 'The priest placed his foot on the *fumie*. Dawn broke. And far in the distance the cock crew.'[346] Without fanfare or further embellishment, Rodrigues's betrayal is located within the immensity of the Christian narrative. By alluding to the apostle Peter's experience, Endo shows us that no biblical story is 'over and done with'. It was because of his convictions about this narrative, Olivier Messiaen had no qualms in declaring, 'I am convinced that joy exists, convinced that the invisible exists more than the visible, joy is beyond sorrow, beauty is beyond horror.'[347]

(iv) Transcendent Encounters in the Immanent Frame

A contrastive view of transcendence can lead to a Platonic understanding of reality, such that material is subordinated far below the spiritual. Christian and Romantic aesthetics have stated that 'the transcendent power of the arts [is identified] in their supposed capacity to leave behind the finite and material.'[348] Begbie identifies several examples, together with justifications of varying legitimacy. However, he insists that, from a strictly Christian perspective, they all result in 'a serious loss of a deep-rooted biblical theme: the reality and measureless value of this world to God, in and with its finite materiality.'[349] He writes, 'God's transcendence (as otherness) has nothing to do

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[346] Shusaku Endo, *Silence* (London: Peter Owen, 2006), 171.

[347] McMullen, *Stalag 8a*, 41.

[348] Begbie, *Redeeming Transcendence*, 131.

[349] Begbie, *Redeeming Transcendence*, 131.

with separation or disengagement, let alone indifference; it is redolent of God's unswerving commitment to what God has made.'[350] No property intrinsic to immanence precludes interventions from the transcendent. As a result of this 'measureless value', an immanent encounter with the transcendent is at least conceivable.

While human creativity might connect with transcendent reality, the creator of the material may be reaching down in and through that human creativity simultaneously. The Incarnation is the true exemplar of this idea, as Kyle Beshears's observes, 'In this distracted world, God isn't merely unneeded, he's *unnoticed.*'[351] As the Apostle Paul saw, blindspots impede the recognition of the Incarnation and what Christ achieved on the cross, by presuming on the need for validating miracles or philosophical brilliance.[352] In Christian theology, the gift of the Incarnation means that immanence and transcendence must be understood in its light rather than overshadowing that light.

Many have rejected agnosticism or atheism as a result of aesthetic experiences. Catholic philosopher Peter Kreeft mentions three friends who shed their scepticism when they 'intuitively heard in Bach… the Voice of God… It was not arguable; it was immediately evident.'[353] George Steiner counters Bertrand Russell's notorious assertion that God had left insufficient evidence for his existence by stating, '[Russell's] observation is, metaphysically, tone-deaf. It leaves out the entire sphere of the poetic, be

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[350] Begbie, *Redeeming Transcendence*, 89.

[351] Kyle Beshears, *Apatheism: How We Share When They Don't Care* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2021), 37.

[352] 1 Corinthians 1:22–23.

[353] Peter Kreeft, *Doors in the Walls of the World: Signs of Transcendence in the Human Story* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 2018), 112.

it metaphysical or aesthetic, it leaves out music and the arts, without which human life might indeed not be viable.'[354] Steiner's wager on God is only due to the scepticism brought on by rationality and the fact that people 'are now at home in immanence and verification'.[355] However, these testimonies suggest that aesthetic experiences break through the secular self's buffers to increase the plausibility of transcendence.

Rowan Williams draws from a contribution to an essay on C. S. Lewis's writing by the journalist and novelist Stella Gibbons. Williams notes how Lewis temporarily immerses his readers in Narnia so that they might 'know Aslan better in this world', but Williams's introductory guide is written 'to make sure that the doors between the worlds are in reasonably good order, so that we may share that slowly flowering awareness of something constantly discovered and rediscovered and always new.' To illustrate this point, he cites Gibbons's essay, in which she describes her shock at the conclusion of *The Last Battle* in finding 'the great lion… given a capital H—"and as He spoke to them, He no longer looked like a lion."… pure shock, as if cold water had spouted up from the page.' Williams's comment is apt: 'Lewis could have asked no better reaction than such a shock, the shock of unexpected homecoming as the Lion's world is revealed once and for all as our own.'[356] To that end, Lewis fulfils precisely what his literary hero, George MacDonald, advocated in the introduction to his stories: 'The best thing you can do for

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[354] Steiner, *Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say?*, 228.

[355] Steiner, *Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say?*, 229.

[356] Williams, *Lion's World*, 144.

your fellow, next to musing his conscience, is not to give him things to think about, but to wake things up that fire in him; or say, to make him think things for himself.'[357]

While aesthetic experiences may be instrumental in conversion—or, as Philip Salim Francis has proven, in a person's deconversion—expectations from these experiences need to be limited. Because the focus of this thesis is confined to the raising of plausibility rather than a compulsion towards faith—a goal that gravitates dangerously towards propaganda—there are grounds for hope. So what might that look like? Roger Scruton comments that 'works of the imagination do not provide us with doctrines or recruit us to the religious life.' With reference to George Herbert, whose extant poetry, after all, was the work of a man who integrated his exceptional gifts into his Anglican parish ministry, Scruton praises 'the innocent sincerity with which he expresses his doubts, his waywardness and his joyful reunion with his Saviour.' This is entirely legitimate, if not necessary for an artistic endeavour, because, 'The imagination can show us *what it is like* to believe some doctrine, and *what it is like* to follow customs and rituals that may be strange to us and alien; and in doing so, it can awaken sympathy for emotions, beliefs and days of life that are not and could not be ours. But it does not import these things or impose them as a moral norm.'[358]

There are scores of examples of this phenomenon. Henri Nouwen's experience on seeing Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son* confronted him with the nature of his yearnings and expressed how the Christian narrative satisfies them. 'The tender embrace of a father and

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[357] George MacDonald, "The Fantastic Imagination," in *A Dish of Orts: Chiefly Papers on the Imagination, and on Shakespere* (London: Sampson, Low, Marston, 1893), 319.

[358] Scruton, *Modern Culture*, 66.

son expressed everything I desired at that moment. I was, indeed, the son exhausted from long travels; I wanted to be embraced; I was looking for a home where I could feel safe…'[359] Indeed, Rembrandt's 'painting has become a mysterious window through which I can step into the kingdom of God.'[360]

Nevertheless, just as with Stella Gibbons in her reading of Narnia, a confrontation or shock may occur, instead of a warm embrace or satisfaction. Bono, lead singer of U2, commenting on how inevitably 'gauche' Christians are made by worship and wonder, confesses that while '[c]oolness might help in your negotiation with people through the world, maybe, … it is impossible to meet God with sunglasses on. That's the connection with great music and great art'.[361] While they all wanted to join the band because they 'wanted to do the cool thing', he has since faced the fact neither worship nor honest creativity make someone cool, nor does being open to experiencing what an artefact presents.[362]

The final illustration comes from those who mediate transcendence through immanent beauty, the musician. Yevgeny Mravinsky lived the whole of his long life in St Petersburg, or Leningrad as it became. He was 14 when the revolution took place and died a year before the Berlin Wall crumbled. Astonishingly, he rose to the top of Soviet classical life, appointed as chief conductor at the Leningrad Symphony Orchestra,

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[359] Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming, The* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 2000), 5.

[360] Nouwen, *Prodigal Son,* 15.

[361] Michka Assayas, *Bono on Bono: Conversations with Michka Assayas* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2006), 53.

[362] Assayas, *Bono on Bono,* 53.

conducting a number of Shostakovich premieres. Nevertheless, throughout this time, he openly practised his Orthodox faith. Johnson discussed this with Mravinsky's widow:

> [She] confided to me that her husband had believed steadfastly that God Himself would send Russia a great tragic composer—a twentieth-century Tchaikovsky or Mussorgsky, whose voice of rage, grief, compassion, and defiance would speak for the true suffering spirit of the Russian people. As soon as he saw the score of the Fifth Symphony, Mravinsky knew he'd found his man.363

Summary of the Paradox of Transcendent Arts

A common thesis suggests that the arts have become a substitute for the functions of religion. Various scholars have argued against this idea as overreach because the arts cannot bear the full weight of religion, sociologically or metaphysically. At best, they can only approximate or evoke. However, assuming the universe is created by a purposeful creator, the arts do bear hallmarks of its creator. Within this framework, the arts reflect and access the reality of their Trinitarian creator, despite being within the immanent frame.

Again, the opportunity will arise to explore the ways in which the creative professionals being studied here go about their work, and to see how conscious and intentional they are in their making.

4. The Shadow of Propaganda

Dorothy L. Sayers is known today primarily for her pioneering detective novels featuring Lord Peter Wimsey, and the books brought her many devotees. Because she

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[363] Johnson, *How Shostakovich Changed My Mind*, 25-26.

openly professed Christian faith, she was asked on numerous occasions about the spiritual state of her main characters. She relates one such conversation with a woman who erroneously assumed she could draw various conclusions from the narratives (such as a liking for brandy).

> 'I am sure Lord Peter will end up as a convinced Christian.'
> 'From what I know of him, nothing is more unlikely.'
> 'But as a Christian yourself, you must want him to be One.'
> 'He would be horribly embarrassed by any such suggestion.'
> 'But he's far too intelligent and far too nice, not to be a Christian.'
> 'My dear lady, Peter is not the Ideal Man; he is an eighteenth-century Whig gentleman, born a little out of his time, and doubtful whether any claim to possess a soul is not a rather vulgar piece of presumption.'
> 'I am disappointed.'
> 'I'm afraid I can't help that.'[364]

Sayers then insists that she will 'work no irrelevant miracles upon him, either for propaganda, or to curry favour, or to establish the consistency of my own principles. He exists in his own right and not to please you. Hands off.'[365]

The term 'propaganda' is associated with political regimes even though, as Sayers well knew, the modern word's origins, if not all its connotations, can be traced to Pope Gregory XV's Counter-Reformation mission institution, the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*.[366] Her comments carry an air of something disreputable or, at least, creatively undermining. The arts have often been commandeered by the powerful to serve

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[364] Sayers, *Mind*, 131.

[365] Sayers, *Mind*, 131.

[366] Literally *The Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith*, now known as the *Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples* (see http://www.fides.org/en).

ulterior purposes. For the sake of making good art, Sayers resists the temptation at all costs, even if her protagonist does not share her own worldview.

In the early Soviet Union, the Bolshevik government dedicated an entire ministry to 'AgitProp' (the Department for Agitation and Propaganda), but the term would not become mainstream in the Anglophone world until Edward Bernays published his seminal introduction in 1928.[367] Bernays was Sigmund Freud's son-in-law but spent most of his life in the United States after his family immigrated soon after his birth. In his obituaries, he would be hailed as the 'father of public relations'. In his book, he is unexpectedly transparent, whether employed to sell products or persuade voters. He insists that, 'The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society.' This is despite the apparently undemocratic fact that we 'are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of.'[368] He explains that they are 'invisible rulers who control the destinies of millions. It is not generally realized to what extent the words and actions of our most influential public men are dictated by shrewd persons operating behind the scenes.'[369] These tactics are inescapable for the holders of public office, since their task is 'not so much to know how to please the public, but to know how to sway the public.'[370] In his introduction to Bernays's book, Mark Crispin Miller acknowledges the obvious problems, but he adds a pertinent question for a

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[367] Bernays, *Propaganda*.

[368] Bernays, *Propaganda*, 61.

[369] Bernays, *Propaganda*, 62.

[370] Bernays, *Propaganda*, 119.

sceptical, post-ideological age: '…the issue is not so much ethical as epistemological. In a world under the influence of propaganda experts, how does a costly truth get out into the world *as* truth?'[371]

If the goal is to sway rather than please, then it is unsurprising when the arts are commandeered. Stalin popularised the application of the Soviet Union's meteoric industrialisation to the creative arts. In a 1932 discourse at the home of writer Maxim Gorky, Stalin declared, 'The production of souls is more important than the production of tanks... And therefore, I raise my glass to you, writers, the engineers of the human soul.'[372] His words created the rigid dogmatism of Soviet 'socialist realism', which decreed that all creativity be subordinated to the glorification of the workers and their perfect future. Art was valid only if it contributed to moulding the communist ideal, *homo sovieticus*. As Duncan White notes in his survey of writers during the Cold War, both sides enlisted the creative arts to bolster their political agendas, yet there was nevertheless a difference of degree in the Soviet Union. 'The means, however terrible, were always justified by the end, which was the distant but inevitable socialist utopia prophesised by Karl Marx.'[373] Shostakovich came terrifyingly close to the torture experienced by so many of his friends.[374]

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[371] Bernays, *Propaganda*, 25.

[372] Peter Finn, and Petra Couvée, *The Zhivago Affair: The Kremlin, the Cia, and the Battle over a Forbidden Book* (London: Vintage, 2014), 5.

[373] Duncan White, *Cold Warriors* (New York, NY: Little, Brown, 2019), 83.

[374] Volkov, *Testimony*, 12. This is the essential background to one of Julian Barnes' most recent novels: Barnes, *The Noise of Time*.

The irony is that too much propaganda induces the very thing it seeks to forestall, swelling mistrust and cynicism. Moynahan quotes a Leningrad newspaper editorial during the horrific Nazi siege: 'Bolsheviks have never kept anything from the people. They always tell the truth, harsh as it may be.' As he says, nobody believed it. The common joke about the two main Soviet newspapers was, 'in *Pravda* there is no *Izvestiya*, and in *Izvestiya* there is no *Pravda*,' ('in the *Truth* there is no *News*, and in the *News* there is no *Truth'*). But as the editorial chillingly continued, readers could tell their future was bleak: 'So long as the blockade continues it is not possible to expect any improvement in the food situation.'[375] In this instance, they knew that the editorial, for once, spoke the truth.

(i) Propaganda and Creative Freedom

As the old adage has it, 'He who pays the piper calls the tune.' Few creative professionals, especially early in their careers, have been able to survive without patronage, which creates tension between creative freedom on the one hand and the agendas of the patron on the other. That agenda can be controlling. The Nazi and Soviet regimes are cases in point, rejecting art because it was 'degenerate' (that is, usually Jewish) or 'bourgeois' (insufficiently revolutionary) and 'cosmopolitan' (also Jewish), respectively. Roger Scruton, despite his political and cultural conservatism, makes a crucial point here. A conservative prefer the traditional over the revolutionary, yet Scruton knows the result is bad art. He writes, 'Art, unlike language, is intrinsically suspicious of this standardising process.' In fact, not only is its quality likely to be

[375] Moynahan, *Leningrad*, 213.

inferior, but if 'convention … becomes the foreground of the artistic enterprise, the result is cliché. The constant lapse into cliché, and the fastidious fear of it, are marks of a high culture in decline.'[376] Cliché works for the propagandist, since it rarely provokes reflection or conflict and is just as true of Christian propaganda as any other.

Begbie highlights a sermon by N. T. Wright describing several approaches to aesthetics under the banner of 'singing a new song to the Lord'. Wright is adamant that the arts strive beyond the 'stale' reductionism of secularism in exciting and innovative ways. He is clear that 'there is no way back to a pre-modern worldview; but we can go on, through the decay of secularism, through the scepticism and denials of postmodernity, and out into something new, something deeply and truly Christian, something for which there isn't yet a name.' Yet dangers lurk, as he implies in his appeal to resist artistic escapism: 'How can art, Christian art, Christian music be both utterly realistic about the appalling state the world is in and utterly hopeful about the way it will be?'[377] In other words, to be authentically Christian, art must be unflinchingly real about the present and unshakeably confident about the future. It must see and enable others to see. As Begbie notes, 'Wright's response echoes the New Testament's insistence that a victory has been won in our midst…'[378] In the face of what he discerns as the West's artistic impasse and decline into kitsch, the challenges and opportunities for Christians are great but not to be shirked. The church has 'a possibility of re-expressing once more the truth that heaven

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[376] Scruton, *Modern Culture*, 43.

[377] N. T. Wright, "They Sing a New Song," Sermon at the Southern Cathedrals' Festival Eucharist feast of Mary Magdalene, 22 July, 2005, accessed 16 Feb, 2022, https://ntwrightpage.com/2016/03/30/they-sing-a-new-song/.

[378] Begbie, *Redeeming Transcendence*, 141.

and earth are the interlocking spheres of God's creation and that in the arts, and perhaps especially in music, we are constantly brought within sight and sound of that other reality.'[379] Wright advocates against a nostalgia for the pre-modern past, as applicable to the church in general as it is to Christians in the arts.

Wolterstorff suggests that the arts do not simply entail freedom in making. Drawing on the German Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse, he insists that 'Art, then, is called to serve, and does in fact serve, human liberation in all its dimensions—not just the cause of the proletariat.' Because of 'its transhistorical, universal truths', art can appeal have what Wolterstorff terms 'nothing less than a surrogate for the gospel of redemption and liberation and for the Savior who is Jesus Christ'.[380] As a Marxist, Marcuse rejects the credibility of that redemption prototype. But if the arts have such liberating potential—and Steiner is another to insist that each artefact should and can be 'a phenomenon of freedom'[381]—then it should be clear how they are compatible with the communication of this liberation gospel. They can free people from closed presumptions, from the clichés that conceal actuality, from the idolatries and absurdities of human concerns—including those of the church.

The last major composition of Sergiy Prokofiev is a powerful illustration of this tension: his Seventh Symphony, completed just months before his death in 1953. By this stage, he was in Russia, having been lured back from the West by Stalin's promises of all the acclaim and resources available to the state. Once home, however, his passport was

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[379] Wright, *New Song*.

[380] Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic*, 151.

[381] Steiner, *Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say?*, 151.

confiscated and his final years characterised by illness and poverty. He desperately needed income and knew he had to aim for a Stalin Prize, which would bring him 100,000 rubles. The symphony expresses exuberance and melancholy, nostalgia and apparent cheerfulness, but a sense of threat permeates, with the first movement's clock-like ticking (played on the glockenspiel) returning in the fourth. More significantly, Prokofiev wrote two endings for the symphony. He explained to his protegé, the cellist Msitislav Rostropovich, that he wrote a brash, triumphant ending to guarantee winning the much-needed funds from the Stalin gold prize rather than the bronze. But the 'true' ending is bleak, so that the orchestra peters out into miserable oblivion. His Soviet masters would never have tolerated such an ending, and he would have been castigated for failing to comply with the demands of socialist realism. Yet he confided in Rostropovich and said, 'But Slava, you will live much longer than I, and you must take care that this new ending never exists after me.'[382] When in public, he was forced to present what W. B. Yeats called 'the smiling public man'.[383] His official 'new' ending represented his fixed public smile in music. Propaganda will not tolerate such individualism, nor can commercial impulse.

Calvin Seerveld, therefore, identifies three essential pitfalls with propaganda:

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[382] Daniel Jaffé, *Sergey Prokofiev*, *20th Century Composers* (London: Phaidon, 2008), 210.

[383] From the poem *Among School Children,* W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Poems* (London: Wordsworth Poetry Library, 2000), 183.

- ‘When propaganda is ideological, it is wrong.’ He is not denying the possibility of ‘an openly partisan promotion’; rather, something ‘uncritically over-simplified and rigid, as if it were the Word of God.’[384]
- ‘When propaganda is manipulative, it is wrong.’ That is, ‘it subliminally subverts our will-power.’[385]
- ‘When propaganda is misleading, it is wrong.’[386]

These themes will be touched on in the course of reflecting on their relationship to the arts. Yet, Seerveld is unequivocal. While personal bias is unavoidable, ‘when propaganda is coloured by greed and violence, hate or deceit, it has been perverted and is evil, no matter what the cause which is promoted may be.’[387]

(ii) Exploratory Rather than Declarative

Intrinsic to propaganda is the fixed agenda. Intrinsic to creativity is the step into the unknown. Joseph Epstein maintains that for writers, ‘if they are true to their craft, [they] are not out to prove anything.’ There is no guarantee of a successful outcome, but if ‘they tell their stories honestly and persuasively, straight and true, somehow all those little frogs of fact might just turn into a handsome prince of a beautiful idea.’[388] The same is true for painters. During a conversation about viewers’ tiresome requests for updates

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[384] Seerveld, *Fresh Olive Leaves,* 127.

[385] Seerveld, *Fresh Olive Leaves,* 128.

[386] Seerveld, *Fresh Olive Leaves,* 128.

[387] Seerveld, *Fresh Olive Leaves,* 128.

[388] Epstein, *Literary Education,* 14.

on how an artwork 'is going', Lucian Freud explained to Martin Gayford that 'each painting is an exploration into unknown territory'.[389] It was therefore impossible to know how to answer, especially without a dismissive quip. Consequently, it is notoriously difficult to know when a creative task has been completed. Whatever the medium or form, philosopher Peter Kreeft speaks for many: 'Nearly all great writers and musicians have said that the process of composing their greatest works was not *creation* but *discovery*.' As a Christian, he takes this further than a secular person would, but whatever the ultimate source of inspiration, nearly all would agree that 'what they gave us in their poetry or their music or their stories did not originate with them.'[390]

Often, the process will begin with a question, but Merleau-Ponty distinguishes 'the schoolmaster's question' (to which the questioner already knows the answer) from the artist's (asked by someone 'who does not know'). For, 'the painter lives in fascination. The actions most proper to him—those gestures, those tracings of which he alone is capable and which will be revelations to others because they do not lack what he lacks—to him they seem to emanate from the things themselves, like figures emanating from the constellations.'[391] So the process is discovery, not automatic or programmable. Artefacts 'do not provide us with doctrines, or recruit us to the religious life.'[392] Scruton, again with particular reference to George Herbert's religious poetry, says that art

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[389] Gayford, *Man with a Blue Scarf: On Sitting for a Portrait by Lucian Freud*, 65.

[390] Kreeft, *Doors in the Walls*, 112.

[391] Merleau-Ponty, in *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics*, 167.

[392] Scruton, *Modern Culture*, 66.

'interrogates the world, not as religion interrogates, in order to sniff out heresy and error, but in order to spread itself in sympathy.'[393]

Approaching the problem from a different angle, Begbie draws on the aesthetics of French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain because of his 'resistance to a certain kind of instrumentalism'. Instrumentalism is a besetting sin of the modernist who reduces value to outcomes. The form that concerned Maritain reduces the essence of art to:

> the expression of an artist's ideas or feelings, or when art making is driven by the desire to promulgate a moral virtue or disseminate propaganda… Art making, says Maritain, is opposed to any such will to power, the desire to control or manipulate ('egoism is the natural enemy of poetical activity').[394]

Thus, the contextual value of the arts for a suspicious, post-ideological culture is extended still further, as is their incompatibility with the propagandist's instincts. Instead, the artistic process entails a necessary act of faith, one which is akin to that of the Christian disciple. As cultural critic Alan Noble reminds us, T. S. Eliot offered the perfect antidote to modernist instrumentalism: dependence on God.[395] What Eliot insists is essential to the life of the disciple could be applied to the creative process.

> All men are ready to invest their money
> But most expect dividends.
> I say to you: Make perfect your will.
> I say: take no thought of the harvest,

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[393] Scruton, *Modern Culture*, 66.

[394] Begbie, *Redeeming Transcendence*, 138.

[395] Alan Noble, *You Are Not Your Own: Belonging to God in an Inhuman World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2021), 171.

But only of proper sowing.[396]

(iii) Polyvalent and Unpredictable

George Orwell hated injustice and oppression, which compelled his writing and his left-leaning politics. He claimed in one essay, 'Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, *against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic socialism, as I understand it.'[397] However noble those motivations might sound, it could be argued that this reflects propagandistic instincts. Indeed, in that same essay, he explained that his 1944 allegorical novel *Animal Farm* marked his first attempt 'with full consciousness of what I was doing to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole'.[398] He was unable to control the uses to which his artefact would be put, however, and complained to the poet Stephen Spender that he 'had not written a book against Stalin in order to provide propaganda for capitalists'.[399] Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* became another such weapon, widely distributed by the CIA, because it was regarded as a 'work of heresy' in Pasternak's native Russia.[400] But to underscore the risks and unforeseen consequences of waging cultural warfare, the CIA also invested in distributing hundreds of thousands of Qur'ans to Afghans to bolster their resistance to the

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[396] From *Choruses from 'The Rock',* Eliot, *The Poems*, 154.

[397] Orwell, "Why I Write," in *Essays*, 5.

[398] Orwell, "Why I Write," in *Essays*, 6.

[399] White, *Cold Warriors*, 222.

[400] White, *Cold Warriors*, 397-405.

'godless' Soviet occupation of their country.[401] They could never have predicted they were sowing the seeds of an entirely different conflict on American soil. Nevertheless, while *Animal Farm* is an influential novel, its propaganda value was a complex one for Orwell.

Art may also gain unexpected resonance in different contexts, especially when it is appropriated for propagandistic purposes. A common slogan in Stalin's time was 'Life has become better, life has become more cheerful'. So Shostakovich would delight in toasting each New Year with friends in the hope that life 'does not get better'.[402] The vast disparity between slogan and reality proved irresistable to those of a satirical bent because the rhetorical force of propaganda demands the silence of all rivals. New Zealand theologian Lynne M. Baab, with her colleague Carolyn Kelly, comments that several theologians (including Kevin Vanhoozer and Jeremy Begbie) apply the speech analysis work of Russian philosopher Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (writing throughout the Stalin era) in their discussions of Christian community dynamics. Bakhtin's distinction between 'centrifugal' and 'centripetal' movement in language grapples with the effect of art used as propaganda. The latter is controlling and centralizing, alternatively described as 'authoritative discourse', with Stalinist propaganda being a case in point. The former 'spins outward, generating possibilities, embracing diversity, moving towards fragmentation'. Artists rarely feel undermined by alternative readings. Bakhtin's ideal illustration is the novel, in which 'the reader encounters profound speech diversity in the

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[401] George Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly, 2003).

[402] Moynahan, *Leningrad*, 63.

multiplicity of voices of the characters, with the author's voice refracted through the voices of the characters and through the narrative.'[403]

Graham Greene is much heralded as a 'Catholic' novelist, sometimes in the same breath as Flannery O'Connor in the United States, François Mauriac in France, and Shusako Endo in Japan (whose *Silence* he held in high esteem). Nevertheless, he made a fascinating criticism of Mauriac's writing, because he considered that his loyalty to Rome made him 'too scrupulous' a writer. In Greene's view, the novelist ought to 'change sides at the drop of a hat. He stands for the victims and the victims change,' even if his own allegiances do not. To be a good novelist, a willingness to be 'unscrupulous' about these is 'indispensable'.[404] Greene would have approved of Sayers's reluctance to force her Whiggish protagonist to succumb to the vulgar presumption that he had a soul that needed saving.

Bakhtin's examplar was Dostoyevsky, hailing the 'polyphony' of the novels displayed in the characters' 'independence, internal freedom, un-finalizability, and indeterminacy'.[405] Just as in the masterpieces of Tallis, Palestrina and Bach, 'what unfolds... is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a *plurality of consciousnesses.*'[406] No propagandist will countenance a polyphony of voices, either in their productions or in their reception; they strive for something authoritatively irreducible. Not all art forms, nor

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[403] Baab, and Kelly, *Art has its Reasons*, 187.

[404] Allain, *Other Man*, 82.

[405] Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. Pam Morris, *The Bakhtin Reader* (London: Edward Arnold, 1994), 93.

[406] Bakhtin, *Dostoyevsky's Poetics,* 97.

even all novels, have the capacity to display the polyphonic complexity of Bach or Dostoyevsky, but their receptions are uncontrollable. 'The arts can act as powerful challenges to *reductionism*', Begbie notes. He identifies four common forms subverted by the arts: linguistic reductionism; that of 'efficient causality' (whereby events are wholly explained by immediately preceding events); the scientific reductionism of meaning and purpose (derived from biological processes, for example); and finally, the pragmatism that is concerned only with usefulness.[407]

(iv) Dehumanising and Damaging

Art's final incompatibilty with propaganda relates to art's hospitality. An artefact offers invitations, whereas propaganda, by its very nature, exposes underlying attitudes to its targets. As Josef Pieper explains in his essay on language and power, they have become 'an object to be manipulated' and thus, the means of communicating to them is 'an instrument of power' so that their human 'dignity is ignored' as they are used for the purposes of the propagandist.[408] Consequently, it is 'extremely difficult, at times impossible, to take a specific item (such as a novel, a stage play, a movie, a radio commentary, a critical essay) and identify the borderline that separates genuine communication rooted in reality from the mere manipulation of words aimed solely to

[407] Begbie, *Redeeming Transcendence*, 161-163.

[408] Josef Pieper, *Abuse of Language, Abuse of Power* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1992), 22.

impress.'[409] The target has been dehumanised through this deception (because, as Pieper explains, all lies dehumanise the other).

Calvin Seerveld defines propaganda as 'persuasive information' that is morally wrong whenever it is 'ideological'. 'By "ideological" I mean self-righteously doctrinaire. Ideological propaganda is more than a legitimate, clear witness and an openly partisan promotion: it is uncritically over-simplified and rigid, as if it were the Word of God.'[410]

(v) Convictions and Propaganda

While artistic movements have sought to purge the arts of dogma or morality—this was the case when Chesterton was working, according to Thomas Peters[411], as well as the Bloomsbury set following Virginia Woolf's lead in finding politics 'vulgar' and out of place in art[412]—this has not always been the case. Few today would begrudge a supporter of Black Lives Matter or refugee rights, say, making the most of their creativity to endorse the cause. Chesterton would perhaps have agreed. He used Rudyard Kipling and George Bernard Shaw as contrasting examples of writers with strong convictions and argued counterintuitively that 'the fiercest dogmatists can make the best artists'. [413] Of Kipling Chesterton said, 'The best short stories were written by a man trying to preach Imperialism', and with regard to Shaw, the 'best plays were written by a man trying to

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[409] Pieper, *Abuse of Language, Abuse of Power*, 28.

[410] Seerveld, *Fresh Olive Leaves*, 127.

[411] Peters, *Christian Imagination*, 48.

[412] White, *Cold Warriors*, 44.

[413] Chesterton, "Heretics," in *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*, 199.

preach Socialism.'[414] The key to Chesterton's provocative argument is that they had ideas and beliefs which energised their art and their desire 'to pass beyond it. A small artist is content with art; a great artist is content with nothing except everything.'[415] Chesterton then terms the work of Kipling and Shaw as propaganda, without disparagement.

Perhaps because of the heightened tensions between the world wars, the generation after Virginia Woolf's fundamentally disgreed with the detachment of politics from the arts. As Duncan White explains, events such as the Spanish Civil War and the rise of Hitler galvanised a swathe of writers to action, including Orwell, Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Louis MacNeice and Cecil Day-Lewis.[416] Indeed, a member of this younger group, the poet Julian Bell, followed Orwell to Spain to support the Republican side, despite being Woolf's nephew. Family pressure forced him to drive ambulances instead of fighting, but this did not prevent his early death in a bomb blast in 1937. So how might Chesterton's argument stand in the light of all that has been discussed previously?

(vi) Good Intentions

As Julian Barnes says of the object of his lifelong fascination, Gustave Flaubert, 'You don't make art out of good intentions.'[417] That is not Chesterton's point. His is more its inverse: artists cannot make art without good intentions or convictions. The

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[414] Peters, *Christian Imagination*, 48.

[415] Chesterton, "Heretics," in *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton* 198.

[416] White, *Cold Warriors*, 44.

[417] Julian Barnes, "Flaubert at Two Hundred," *London Review of Books* 43, no 24 (16 Dec. 2021), https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v43/n24/julian-barnes/flaubert-at-two-hundred.

anecdote about Beckett might be a case in point. Interpreters often exaggerate the importance of those intentions. As theologically-informed critics Banks and Evens recognise, 'an artwork can never be defined by the intent or history of the artist that created it', although they do resist the opposite approach which regards these not simply as irretrievable but irrelevant for interpreters.[418] Steiner is strong on this point, citing the analogy of the Old Testament's Balaam, who 'prophesies against his express will'. For as he explains, 'an artist may deceive himself radically as to his true motives… [Furthermore] his most private diaries, letters, programme notes, may be rhetorical fictions within the genesis of fiction.'[419] And yet, they may not be.

Lewis and the other Inklings had their own mixed motivations, yet they had strong convictions about reality and the arts as windows on that reality. They sought to communicate this reality—to smuggle it in, sometimes—through their art. So, do the tales of Narnia and Middle Earth, the paintings of Stanley Spencer, or J. S. Bach's Passions constitute Christian propaganda? In the terms outlined by Chesterton, the answer is affirmative. Might a contemporary artist then follow in their footsteps in order to communicate the reality of transcendence?

Olivier Messiaen was explicit about his attempt. In a lecture at the 1977 Notre Dame conference[420], the composer identified three types of music that could serve the church, which he arranged in order of increasing significance.

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[418] Peter Banks, and Jonathan Evens, *The Secret Chord* (London: Lulu.com, 2012), 95.

[419] Steiner, *Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say?*, 172.

[420] Olivier Messiaen, *Lecture at Notre-Dame*, trans. Timothy J. Tikker (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 2001).

(i) Liturgical music: the most conventional and unsurprising, namely music created for use in worship. The use of other art forms in liturgical contexts is far less developed in the Western church tradition, although notable examples clearly exist.

(ii) So-called 'religious' music: any artwork that 'attempts to express the divine mystery', for which Messiaen cites Chartres Cathedral, works by the painters artists Fra Angelico, Tintoretto, and Marc Chagall, as well as the music of J. S. Bach. Bauer notes that this is equivalent to what many might recognize as 'sacred art'[421], extra-liturgical works which depict theological themes or perspectives.

But the third category is most pertinent here:

(iii) Messiaen considers the third category the most sublime, calling it 'sound-color dazzlement' (*'éblouissement'* in French): 'Touching at once our noblest senses, hearing and vision, it shakes our sensibilities into motion, pushes us to go beyond concepts, to approach that which is higher than reason and intuition, that is to say FAITH.'[422] Bauer describes this as 'art at the height of its ability to be a vehicle for the transcendent God, art that works to transform human beings into the people they were created to be.'[423] This art is redemptive and revelatory, although this can never be automatic as if the result of a replicable process.

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[421] Bauer, *Arts Ministry*, 69-70.

[422] Messiaen, *Lecture*, 15.

[423] Bauer, *Arts Ministry*, 70.

A fascinating illustration is articulared by theologian and cultural critic Kutter Callaway in his exploration of film scores. While not the exclusive focus of his analysis (he also includes the likes of *American Beauty*, *Moulin Rouge!*, and films from the Pixar stable), his insight into the work of Paul Thomas Anderson is relevant. He suggests that the score 'is the very means by which filmgoers are able to derive a kind of "spiritual" significance from their encounters with film.'[424] Anderson's films might not expose audiences to the transcendent frame, and yet, 'For Anderson, even in the midst of a wholly disenchanted world, the divine is present and active. In this way, he reveals a basic dissatisfaction with the modern distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal worlds, the removal of the divine from our sensate experience, the separation of the sacred and secular.'[425] Earlier in his work, Callaway explores the distinction between diagetic and nondiagetic music; that is, the relationship of the score to the film's narrative (or diagesis).[426] Diagetic music is audible to a film's characters and functions within the narrative. Nondiagetic music performs other functions, being 'neither inside nor outside the image', which includes speaking 'from a transcendent realm beyond the image', should the director desire it.[427]

Drawing on Jürgen Moltman's pneumatology and, in particular, on John V. Taylor's seminal 1972 work, *The Go-Between God,* Callaway identifies a resonance in film music with Taylor's wider exploration of the 'transcendent Spirit who is immanent

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[424] Callaway, *Scoring Transcendence*, 93.

[425] Callaway, *Scoring Transcendence*, 148.

[426] Callaway, *Scoring Transcendence*, 85f.

[427] Callaway, *Scoring Transcendence*, 88.

in creation, our conscience, and our creativity'.[428] He therefore coins the term 'echonic' as an aural equivalent to 'iconic' (as understood in its Eastern Orthodox sense of providing visual access to metaphysical realities). When a score functions 'echonically', it is 'through our experience of film music [that] we are able to encounter the real presence of God… the echon is able to function in this manner because it works fourth-dimensionally; as music, it draws us not out of but into time.'[429] Callaway argues that Anderson seeks this effect in a 'seeming paradox [that] while the music in Anderson's films functions to indicate the presence of a transcendent Other, it does so through purely immanent means.' Anderson is by no means the first to expect this of music, and Callaway cites Mahler's work as an example of music that yearns for something 'beyond the things of this world'.[430] He could equally have mentioned Vaughan Williams, Beethoven, or even Messiaen.

Callaway's creative approach opens up the potential for discerning greater theological significance in a film than might initially occur. As he acknowledges, 'One would likely never consider the potential emergence or in-breaking of a transcendent Other in *There Will Be Blood*', not least because of the apparent nihilism of its brutally violent ending. But because of the dislocating shift in the score at that point, 'Anderson both critiques and moves beyond what, at first glance, appear to be two competing visions of the world: "one in which God exists and one in which God is conspicuously

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[428] Callaway, *Scoring Transcendence*, 59; on Moltmann see 161-175.

[429] Callaway, *Scoring Transcendence*, 173.

[430] Callaway, *Scoring Transcendence*, 139.

absent".'[431] In this way, Anderson's films 'offer an immediate, affective, first-order experience of the larger essence that constitutes our life in the world; they open the filmgoer out into the presence of something "transcendent"'.[432]

Summary of The Shadow of Propaganda

The scepticism that propelled the rise of science and rationalism has continued its corrosive course well into the twenty-first century. A hermeneutic of suspicion has been applied to all the institutions and cultural unifiers in the West, such that the postmodern incredulity towards metanarratives is applied to truth claims across the board. The church is no exception. The temptation to exploit whatever artefacts carry cultural weight for the purposes of reaching people is great. However, this too easily falls into the realms of propaganda and is thus treated with even greater suspicion. Furthermore, the arts function in ways that are incompatible with the nature of propaganda.

Summary of Literature Review

In light of the literature examined, it is fundamental that the Christian message entails belief in a transcendent God who is active within the immanent frame. This is one of the points at which rationalist secularism has attacked it. However, while not the answer to every objection, a closer examination of the biblical narrative to grasp the relationship between divine transdendence and human immanence shows that the primary impediment for God's intervention in the world is not ontological but moral; sin bars

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[431] Callaway, *Scoring Transcendence*, 147-148; quoting Richard Peña, "Magnolia," in *The Hidden God: Film and Faith*, ed. Mary Lea Bandy and Antonio Monda (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2003), 236.

[432] Callaway, *Scoring Transcendence*, 151.

humanity from his holy presence. Yet, because love lies at the heart of his transcendence, he overcomes even that with its greatest manifestation being the Incarnation. This provides a biblical paradigm for understanding the wider intersection between the two spheres, and thus for how the arts can function at that intersection.

Despite the many, historic causes of suspicion about the arts, their capacity for shedding light on the nature of reality has never been more needed. For those willing to give their patient attention, the arts offer powerful means for counteracting widespread Western malaise. This includes the capacity to provoke a yearning for reality beyond the immanent and enabling the person who engages with them to suspend disbelief in order to inhabit an alternative conception of reality. Both are invaluable for the Church's apologetic task.

The arts have become a tempting substitute for religion in the lives of many shaped by Secularity$_2$ and Secularity$_3$. This reflects the fact that artefacts are made by those created in the *Imago Dei* which explains why they consequently bear the creator's hallmarks. While these hallmarks have great power to move and shape people, they naturally can never bear the full weight of religion. In their right place, they possess an extraordinary capacity to connect those within the immanent frame to the transcendent.

Great care is necessary, however, to prevent the arts from becoming propaganda tools. Amid a prevailing, postmodern hermeneutic of suspicion, many are sensitive to manipulation and power abuses. When detected in the Church, not only does this undermine its integrity and gospel message, but it also reveals flawed convictions about the God and his people. Furthermore, propagandistic utilisation corrupts the very attributes that makes the arts so potent.

Chapter Three

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore how creative artists seek to expose secular audiences who inhabit the 'immanent frame' to the plausibility of transcendence while avoiding the pitfalls of propaganda. The research identifies four main areas of focus: the role of the arts in challenging and subverting worldviews; the conscious intentions held by theistic creative artists as they set about their making; the perception of the plausibility of transcendence held by such creative artists; finally, creative artists' understanding of, and relationship to, propaganda.

To examine these areas more closely, the following research questions guided the qualitative research:

(i) To what extent are the artists aware of the impact of secularism in contemporary society? How does it affect their religious beliefs (if any)? In what ways does it motivate their creative process? How conscious of worldview issues are artists during their creative process?

(ii) In what ways do the artists understand the power of the arts to communicate transcendent reality to 'immanent frame' inhabitants? What goals do the artists have at the start of the creative process? What makes transcendent reality more plausible for artists?

(iii) What methods do the artists include in the creative process? To what extent is communicating transcendence a goal?

(iv) How do the artists understand the nature of propaganda? To what extent are artists engaged with problems of propaganda? To what extent do

artists seek to avoid propaganda when communicating transcendent realities?

Design of the Study

Sharan B. Merriam defines a qualitative study as that which is 'interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences.'[1] Merriam identifies four characteristics of such research: 'the focus is on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive.'[2] The key element is the perspective of the participants themselves, focused on the so-called *emic*, or insider's, point of view, as opposed to the outsider's (such as that of the researcher) or *etic* view.[3] The researcher's agenda is therefore to elicit viewpoints from the participants and not to confirm a particular thesis. Interviews are an ideal vehicle, providing opportunities for observation and probing more deeply to follow-up participants' statements. This research is 'richly descriptive' because words are the primary data, rather than statistics sought in a quantitative study, for example. The participants' anonymity must be maintained even though each has made identifiable contributions to the cultural landscape on either side of the Atlantic.

This study employed a basic qualitative research design so that participants could describe the role of the arts in making transcendence more plausible from their point of

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[1] Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation,* Rev. ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 5.

[2] Merriam, *Qualitative Research,* 14.

[3] Merriam, *Qualitative Research,* 14.

view. Semi-structured interviews were the primary means of gathering data. Merriam outlines three types of interview structure: the highly structured or standardized, the unstructured or informal, with the semi-structured falling between the two. 'In this type of interview, either all the questions are more flexibly worded, or the interview is a mix of more or less structured questions.'[4]

Participant Sample Selection

This research required participants able to describe the experiences of creating artefacts (whether literary, musical or visual) and to articulate a deep understanding of those experiences. Therefore, the purposeful study sample consisted of a selection of English-speaking women and men from the creative arts who either identify as Christian believers, or who, if not practising, are at least sympathetic to Christian belief.

Participants were chosen as individuals who illustrate best practice in their respective fields for the data collected. Merriam describes such a sample as 'based on unique, atypical, perhaps rare attributes or occurrences of the phenomenon of interest.'[5] Participants have been able to make a living in a professional capacity (wholly or in part) from their creative work in a variety of disciplines: in literature, in the spheres of poetry and fiction; in the visual arts, in the spheres of cinema, painting and sculpture; in music, in both rock music and classical composition. Despite this wide variety, all share several commonalities. Each individual has made contributions to creative discourse in the public square, well beyond the bounds of the church's internal conversations. In their different

[4] Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 90.

[5] Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 78.

ways, each artist has been motivated by worldview convictions about reality beyond secularity's closed immanent frame. This has been evident from publications or from the nature or message of artefacts they have produced. Furthermore, their dogged individuality is an outworking of theological convictions about transcendent reality. The extent to which these convictions shape their work is the focus of this exploration. Each participant was invited by an introductory letter or email, usually through a third party (unless known personally).

If those approached expressed interest, each was then given written informed consent to participate as well as the 'Research Participant Consent Form' to sign and return, in order to respect and protect the human rights of the participants. In preparation for the research, the IRB (Institutional Review Board) requirements for human rights in research were completed, and the Human Rights Risk Level Assessment is 'minimal risk' according to Seminary IRB guidelines (see below).

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM
FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

I agree to participate in the research which is being conducted by *MARK MEYNELL* to investigate *the Plausibility of Transcendence* for the Doctor of Ministry degree program at Covenant Theological Seminary.

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary. I can withdraw my consent at any time without penalty and have the results of the participation, to the extent that they can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the research records, and/or destroyed.

The following points have been explained to me:

1) The purpose of the research is to investigate *how the arts are crucial for restoring the plausibility of transcendence to a secular mindset.*
2) Potential benefits of the research: although there are no direct benefits for the participants, it is hoped that the discussions will be of interest and the research will benefit wider understanding of the role of the arts both within and beyond faith communities.
3) The research process will include interviewing 8-10 individuals on one occasion with the audio recorded. These will be transcribed and then analyzed as part of the research for the final thesis. All participants will remain anonymous.
4) Participants in this research will meet with the researcher (ideally in-person) for up to 90 minutes, for a recorded interview (audio only).
5) Potential discomforts or stresses: None
6) Potential risks: Minimal risk (PTO)
7) Any information that I provide will be held in strict confidence. At no time will my name be reported along with my responses. The data gathered for this research is confidential and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior consent, unless otherwise required by law. Audiotapes or videotapes of interviews will be erased following the completion of the dissertation. By my signature, I am giving informed consent for the use of my responses in this research project.
8) Limits of Privacy: I understand that, by law, the researcher cannot keep information confidential if it involves abuse of a child or vulnerable adult or plans for a person to harm themselves or to hurt someone else.
9) The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the study.

_____

Printed Name and Signature of Researcher Date

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Printed Name and Signature of Participant Date

Please sign both copies of this form. Keep one. Return the other to the researcher. Thank you.

Research at Covenant Theological Seminary which involves human participants is overseen by the Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding your rights as a participant should be addressed to: Director, Doctor of Ministry; Covenant Theological Seminary; 12330 Conway Road; St. Louis, MO 63141; Phone (314) 434-4044.

Data Collection

The primary format of this study was the semi-structured interview for data gathering. The open-ended nature of interview questions facilitates the ability to build upon participant responses to complex issues in order to explore them more thoroughly. The advantage is that the researcher is able "to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic."[6] Ultimately, these methods enabled this study to look for common themes, patterns, concerns, and contrasting views across the variation of participants.[7] Most were conducted in-person, but this was not always possible because of the expense of international travel required or a participant's schedule; in these situations, the interviews were conducted by video conference.

The researcher performed a pilot test of the interview protocol to evaluate the questions for clarity and usefulness in eliciting relevant data. Initial interview protocol categories were derived from the literature but evolved around the explanations and descriptions that emerged from doing constant comparison work during the interviewing process. Coding and categorizing the data while continuing the process of interviewing also allowed for the emergence of new sources of data.

The researcher interviewed ten individuals for between one hour and ninety minutes. Prior to the interview, the participants were given a brief catalogue of terms and their definitions (see above, Chapter One), as a basis for shared understanding and exploration. In order to accommodate participant schedules, the researcher travelled to

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[6] Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 90.

[7] Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 17.

meeting places of the participant's choosing where possible. The researcher recorded the interviews with a dedicated digital recorder and iPhone. Directly after each interview, the researcher wrote field notes with reflective observations on the interview time.

The interview protocol contained the following questions:

1. To what extent does the fact of living in a secular society press in on how you think about life?
    a. Share some ways this affects your religious faith.
    b. In what ways might this motivate or stimulate your art-making?
    c. How conscious of worldview questions are you during the creative process?
2. In what ways do you see and understand the power of the arts to communicate transcendent reality to "immanent frame" inhabitants?
    a. What makes transcendent reality more plausible for you?
3. What are your goals at the start of the creative process?
    a. What methods do you use in your creative process?
    b. To what extent is communicating transcendence a goal?
4. How do you understand what propaganda is?
    a. To what extent do you wrestle with the problems of propaganda?
    b. To what extent do you seek to avoid propaganda when communicating transcendent realities?
5. Tell me about any times when viewers/readers/audiences have found your work evoking a sense of haunting or the reality of transcendence.

Data Analysis

The researcher immediately transcribed each interview personally, by using software to play back the digital recording on a computer and typing out each transcript. This work was always done within a week of each interview, and often within a day or two. When the interviews and observation notes were fully transcribed into computer

files, they were coded and analysed. This study made use of 'the constant comparison method', routinely analysing the data throughout the interview process. This method provided for the ongoing revision, clarification, and evaluation of the resultant data categories. As Merriam writes of qualitative research, "The overall object is to identify patterns in the data. These patterns are arranged in relationship to each other."[8]

The analysis focused on discovering and identifying (1) common themes, patterns, and approaches across the variation of participants and (2) congruence or discrepancy between the different groups of participants. In order to maintain the participants' confidentiality, names were changed as soon as the interviews were transcribed, with the result that the names used in Chapter Four are pseudonymous. However, because of the uniqueness of many participants' cultural contributions, it has not always been possible entirely to overcome the risk of identifying respondents from their context or comments.

Researcher Position

In the widely accepted methodology for qualitative research, the researcher is the primary means of data collection. This process inevitably raises the problem of researcher bias and influence within the process of data collection and subsequently the data analysis. Rather than being a creative professional himself, the researcher begins from the posture of recipient, if not consumer, of the artefacts made by the participants. In some cases, the researcher has been a long-term admirer of the individuals being interviewed,

[8] Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 30.

which inevitably challenges the ideal of analysis objectivity. However, because the areas of interest do not relate to questions of artistic merit or personal preference, but instead to matters of process, worldview, and cultural impact, the bearing on this research's outcome should be minimized. As an ordained clergyman in the Church of England, the researcher approaches these questions from a theological and cultural apologetics perspective and thus interacts with an expertise that the participants may not share.

Study Limitations

As stated in the previous section, and due to limited resources and time, participants interviewed for this study were limited to those making a living as creative arts professionals. Consequently, the findings from the research will directly resonate with only a small, if not elite, cohort of people. However, because the cultural impact of these individuals is so great, and as a result, because their work opens up space for countless others to consider the themes and perspectives that they express, the application within the realms of the church's cultural apologetics and outreach ministry of this study ought to be wide. As with all qualitative studies, readers bear the responsibility to determine what can be appropriately applied to their context.

Chapter Four

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how artists are able to expose secular audiences who inhabit the 'immanent frame' to the plausibility of transcendence while avoiding the pitfalls of propaganda. This chapter provides the findings from eight interviews and reports on common themes and relevant insights pertaining to the research questions. In order to address the purpose of this study, the following research questions guided the qualitative research.

(i) To what extent are the artists aware of the impact of secularism in contemporary society? How does it affect their religious beliefs (if any)? In what ways does it motivate their creative process? How conscious of worldview issues are they during the creative process?

(ii) In what ways do the artists understand the power of the arts to communicate transcendent reality to 'immanent frame' inhabitants? What goals do the artists have at the start of the creative process? What makes transcendent reality more plausible for artists?

(iii) What intentions and methods do the artists include in the creative process? To what extent is communicating transcendence a goal?

(iv) How do the artists understand the nature of propaganda? To what extent are artists engaged with problems of propaganda? To what extent do artists seek to avoid propaganda if communicating transcendent realities?

Introduction to Participants and Context

The researcher selected eight people of Christian (not necessarily evangelical) faith who have established careers in which they earn a living primarily or entirely from their creative endeavours. They work in a range of artistic fields. Some were known to the researcher previously, while others were contacted through mutual acquaintances. All have created artefacts which have been recognized as having spiritual and even transcendent resonance, while living in contexts that are secular to varying degrees.

All identifiable information has been changed to conceal participants' identities.

Table 2. Research participants

Name	*Age*	*Nationality*	*Profession*	*Interview date*	*Venue*
Eskil	40s	Baltic states	Composer	14-Feb-22	Zoom
John	60s	UK & Ireland	Composer	10-Mar-22	Home
Jake	40s	Low Countries	Filmmaker	18-Jan-22	Zoom
Amy	40s	UK & Ireland	Painter	28-Oct-21	Studio
Charles	70s	UK & Ireland	Painter	16-Nov-21	Studio
Alex	40s	UK & Ireland	Painter	20-Dec-21	Zoom
Michael	60s	UK & Ireland	Poet	04-Nov-21	Home
Martha	40s	N. America	Singer/Songwriter	19-Dec-21	Zoom

1. How Creative Professionals Experience Secularism

The first research question sought to determine the extent to which the artists are aware of the impact of secularism in contemporary society.

Fully Immersed

Each of the participants was acutely aware of working in a secular context, and while some found this oppressive, others regarded it as simply the context with which they were most familiar. The outlier is Eskil because he grew up in the last decades of the Soviet Union. The Baltic experience of secularism today is therefore different from that in the West because they have now enjoyed religious freedom and an openness to the metaphysical realm for thirty years. Before that, Marxist ideology patrolled the immanent frame with ruthless brutality.

Secularism is so pervasive that Amy said she constantly has to remind herself of its fundamental incompatibility with her Christian beliefs, a discipline she described as 'a constant struggle'. Jake put it less negatively, expressing a greater ease within this context: 'Sometimes I think I'm almost a humanist… I find it makes no sense to believe.' Secularism for him is a fact of life; it is everywhere, so he likened the experience of it to 'swimming in a pool.' He said that while he has known 'a lot of people, especially in the generation of 40 and above, who have moved away from the church', he has resisted any inclinations to reject his own faith entirely because of witnessing too many extraordinary things that God has done in individuals' lives. Speaking of a friend who had recently died, he said, 'His was a ruin of a life, and so many relationships were hurt.' Nevertheless, he had an experience of God, 'an enlightened moment in his life lasting 20 minutes… a moment he could fall back on.' At first, Jake assumed the experience had resulted from some form of psychosis but said, 'When I look at his life, it's just ridiculous to say God is not real.' Martha described a 'constant sense of burden and loss', which she has known her whole life, even though she would never have articulated it in

such terms when younger. She said she is conscious of secularism ‘almost every minute’, finding relief in her art-making from a culture which would otherwise occupy everything ‘mentally… and imaginatively’. This chimes with Jake’s swimming pool analogy.

Several participants mentioned that being Christian made them feel culturally out on a limb. Amy said she is conscious of this when she talks with friends about her faith and is weighed down by a ‘strong desire not to offend anyone’. She said, ‘I spend a lot of time thinking about that’ because she wants to stay ‘in the middle of things’ rather than be cut off or disengaged from the world around her. This reflects tensions felt by many, symptomatic of the cross-pressures identified by Charles Taylor.

Cross-Pressured

The plethora of religious options available was palpable to several participants. Charles described the vicinity of his London studio as surrounded by religious options, while the ‘Church of England has been in galloping retreat.’ Pointing to at least three churches within a hundred yards, he described frequently hearing one through the walls because of its heavy, ritual drumming and ‘screaming sermons with the refrain, “die by fire”’. He has been reticent to speak about his personal beliefs in part because of his national prominence, although it became clear through the interview that he is a churchgoer. This reticence reflected a wider cultural privatisation of faith as well as his preference, in common with other participants, for letting his art be the primary vehicle for public statements. He reflected on faith’s privatisation with wry amusement when describing a substantial commission by one of the major English cathedrals in the 1990s.

> It was revealing about the current Church of England. There was no discussion about religion, not once! It just didn't crop up! … I respected why it happened, but it was also rather curious.

This interaction illustrated the obvious point that an artist's talent and skill were of greater significance for the commission than the artist's personal beliefs, and that 'maybe that's how it must be'. But it is ironic that even cathedral clergy seemed reluctant to discuss theological issues, let alone an artist's personal views.

Martha valued having a manager who, despite not sharing her Christian faith, respects it and has encyclopaedic knowledge of its musical legacies. 'There's stuff there that you can't just obliterate', she insisted, because of the 'decades and centuries of belief'. But this kind of expertise reflects her manager's intellectual curiosity and musical passion more than any sense of obligation to the theological convictions that informed the music. There is not the slightest hostility to Martha's faith as might be typical of a Secularity$_2$ individual. It is a matter of living amid the swirl of privatized belief systems without any one dominating, precisely what Taylor leads us to expect of Secularity$_3$.

Jake made the point that the arts tend to be more secular than the wider culture, with his profession of filmmaking perhaps representing 'the temple of secularism'. But where one might expect a clash of views, there is none, partly from a film crew's professionalism, but also indicative of the privatization of faith whereby all have rights to their own views. It does not preclude some making tentative enquiries. Jake has been fascinated by questions from a hardened senior crewmember prompted to revisit her long-rejected childhood Catholicism after losing close friends to cancer. Because the themes of his current film relate to the impact of the church on an impoverished community, he had been concerned it might be too uncomfortable for some on the team.

On the contrary, he observed an unusually heightened respect on set around religious props such as a statue of the Virgin and Child.

If there is one artistic field which prompts the least secular resistance, it is perhaps that of classical or 'art' music. As John explained, the connections between music and religion go back millennia and are inextricable. Furthermore, he mentioned that the two most esteemed pioneers of modernist music in the twentieth century, Arnold Schönberg and Igor Stravinsky, were both deeply religious—Jewish and Russian orthodox, respectively. He then listed many important composers who followed in their wake, each of whom resisted the tides of either mandated atheism in the communist world or consumerist materialism in the West. One of the biggest threads in recent cultural history is that musicians, in contrast to those at the forefront of all the other key creative fields, share a common search 'for the sacred'. So, despite being outspoken about his own Roman Catholic faith, John said he has experienced very little pushback; it usually comes from those with little awareness of the history of Western music or who fear that a composer might turn out to be 'a Bible-basher out to convert secular people'. However, John said his experience of musicians and music-lovers generally is that they are 'open-minded and open-eared', willing to give attention to the new as well as old. This experience would not surprise lovers of choral music, for which both John and Eskil are well-known, because it is most commonly associated with religion. Therefore, it is intriguing that some compositions envisaged for the concert hall do gain acceptance, and even admiration, despite being inspired by religious ideas. Because Eskil works in a post-communist context, he enjoys even greater openness to such compositions. The reception

is different for those like Martha, working to gain a foothold in mainstream pop music, where threats to commercial viability are to be rooted out.

The relative freedom experienced by the participants discussed above is not common to all, however.

Actively Marginalized

Michael is a contemporary poet who combines a rich understanding of English literature with deep theological training and reflection. He sought to do doctoral work at the university where he worked, but at the time, his desire to straddle the English and Theology faculties was deemed impossible. In time, research projects that entailed partnerships between the Theology and other faculties arose, with his involvement, but he noted that 'the traffic is all one-way.' For example, the English faculty does not offer a theology module despite its centrality to pre-twentieth-century literature, while the Theology faculty offers one on the imagination. Now that he has published several volumes of his own poetry and academic engagements with poetry, he is frustrated.

> I am engaging with secularism. What I wish is that I was engaging more with secular people. One of the features of our culture—the hegemony of the secular and marginalization of the sacred—is that because my poems are published by a religious publisher, they find religious readers. They possibly outsell a lot of poetry. In bookshops…, you find me in the Spirituality section, not in the Poetry section. Even though I write poetry that is spiritually open, I see myself as writing in the mainstream of the English poetic tradition… I'm niche-marketed and categorized before I've said anything. So, it's as though I'm only allowed to preach to the choir.

Martha said she fears being 'trapped in a Christian social bubble' because of the relatively narrow and closed church culture in which she grew up and therefore longs to

engage with people outside it through her music—she tends to resist taking bookings in churches, for example. Michael finds himself similarly confined but as the result of external forces. These are not necessarily hostile; they merely presume a lack of traction or relevance for other segments of a fragmented society. He thus rued the decision to give one of his academic works a title that began with ‘faith’ rather than ‘poetry’.

One participant has experienced genuine opposition, however. Alex has worked with one London art gallery for several years while simultaneously supporting and mentoring other Christians in the art world through a small charity he helped to create. He said he mentors for only a few days each month, but because the charity is explicitly Christian, Alex’s faith has never been a secret. Yet because the charity’s website offers resources such as lectures and articles, and because these recently came to the attention of the gallery’s director, a difficult situation arose. By the time of our conversation in December 2021, the gallery director had given him an ultimatum, stipulating that if he continued ‘to speak publicly about my Christian faith, they will drop me from the gallery.’ While he had always sensed this kind of pressure and sought to be ‘thoughtful and sensitive about how [he] articulate[d]’ it, this was the first time such a demand had come to him in writing. There had been occasions in the past when he had received hints or warnings that if he continued to be open about his faith, as he put it, ‘I won’t have a career as a painter.’ Years ago, at an exhibition in a different gallery, he showed work from a residency at a Christian organization, but that gallery urged him to tone down the religious elements of his written explanations and titles. They eventually found a compromise and the show was a success. Regarding the current situation, he was evidently distressed about the impasse. He reflected philosophically: ‘… That’s both

traumatic and at the same time maybe quietly reassuring? That I'm perhaps saying something that is actually of interest?'

There are significant ironies to the gallery's ultimatum. The gallery is highly respected in the London art world and has recently put on an exhibition themed around spirituality in art and 'the sacred'. The works are drawn from the forty artists on the gallery's books. As far as Alex knew, only he and two Jewish painters were overlooked. The three artists who were most 'sincere about a specific form of spirituality' were not 'invited to the discussion. Irony upon irony!' In a text-message exchange in March 2022, Alex told me he was 'quietly leaving the gallery… They're clearly not the right gallery for me. It's a matter of trust between gallerist and artist. I need a dealer who is at least sympathetic.' His faith expression clearly represented some kind of threat. Why else would it provoke such a strong—and potentially illegal—response?

The only other participant who described comparable experiences was Eskil, but he had to look to the Soviet era to do so. Churches then 'were also open but technically. There were moments when a teacher would be standing close to the church on Sunday morning to see which pupils were going to the Sunday service. Then on Monday, in front of the class, the teacher would speak to the pupil and ask, "Why did you go to church? This is against science, there is no God." In front of the class!' This had not happened to him personally, but it did take place in his hometown.

Several participants sensed that belief in the transcendent and its concomitant lifestyles are regarded as transgressive in Western secular culture, which explains why Martha finds solace in reading James K. A. Smith's writing, for example. His cultural

analysis in light of Christian theological tradition helps to overcome confusion and assuage her feeling of cultural isolation.

Haunted Immanence

As Taylor observed, the secular mind is rarely settled or content, frequently haunted by intimations of the transcendent. This discontent conforms to the observations of several participants. Amy said her connections with other parents at her daughter's school gate have prompted unexpected conversations. One friend opened up about her fears of death and grief, indicating that the culture had not given her the consolation that Amy's Christian faith provides. Martha said she is particularly conscious of the dehumanising effect of secularism, noting how 'we have all been trivialized', and this is something she resolutely resists, not least in her song-writing. She said she feels that this is one point of contact with secular listeners, especially because it exposes what she described as 'the unbelievable contradictions' in the culture.

Michael explored this theme at length because he discerns that '[we are] culturally arriving at a point when the *idée reçue*' of scientific materialism, which insists 'that we're just a meaningless concatenation of atoms which has accidentally thrown up consciousness' is 'being tested to destruction.' Echoing the *Voyager 19* observation by Walker Percy quoted above, Michael said that while materialism will 'help with predicting the movement of the planets, [it] has absolutely no way of accounting for personhood.' It simply fails to resonate with human experience. He was quick to point out that problems remain and referred to Steiner's epistemological 'wager on transcendence' because a prerequisite for knowledge is trust. Science depends on the existence of 'something out there', itself a prior faith commitment. Yet this feature of

epistemology rarely threatened pre-modern thinkers and is increasingly being revisited, through the likes of Michael Polanyi. Most striking was Michael's exploration of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's resistance to Enlightenment reductionism. Referring to Coleridge's concern to 'awaken the mind's attention and to remove the film of familiarity', Michael said, 'If you ask any good scientist, that's exactly what they are trying to do.' He continued:

> That awakening of the mind's attention is the task equally of poetry and science. But poetry and science bring different instruments to the table. Just as a telescope and microscope are both optical instruments that use curved and polished lenses, but you can't use a microscope to see the stars, and you can't use a telescope to see the extraordinary movements of single-celled animals, you use the appropriate instrument. So, poetry brings certain lenses to our perception which science as it's currently configured can't bring. Just as poetry as it's currently configured can't bring certain things. We need both.

Because Enlightenment thinking marginalised the imagination as a medium for truth-bearing, modernists have floundered to explain the undeniable power of the arts, a contributory factor to the haunting of the immanent frame.

Jake offered another corroboration of this haunting by the transcendent. Although he works in the highly secularized context of film, he said he realizes he is 'not secular when [he] realize[s] [he's] a whole person.' By 'whole person', he meant something irreducible to the biochemical or material. 'I am a spiritual being who God has made. I don't know how that works… but I firmly know that it's not random, that there is a good will that wanted me.' This aspect of human nature forms a crucial element in his screenwriting. It would certainly have informed the defiance of Soviet atheism in the

composers that John listed, and it seems to be reflected in the inability of Jake's older colleagues to relinquish the religion of their childhoods entirely.

Another indicator of haunted immanence came from Charles's observation that with the apparent decline and absence of religion in the contemporary West, people have turned to the arts. Speaking of an annual show in London which draws thousands and the response of incomprehension common to many, he observed that they have 'an expectation of understanding… but alongside this, a feeling that the artist is somehow withholding a secret. That seems to me to very much characterize this encounter—the idea that art is a problem with a withheld solution.' Artists are expected to function as secularism's priests, despite the frustrating fact that they, with Charles, often 'give more weight to the presence of this question than the lack of any answer. As an artist myself I'm also drawn in the same direction—but without the responsibility of giving an answer myself.' A parallel is found in classical music, as John observed that the composers and practitioners of the last century and more have been open to the metaphysical. Even when people do not share John's religious outlook, he found it fascinating how, 'as soon as they start talking about the impact of music in their life, they start using quasi-religious terminology.' Other language seems insufficient.

Sometimes, it is precisely this haunting which preoccupies a creative professional's output. Amy has specialized in painting images of spaces which reflect the lives and concerns of their former or absent occupants. Her work has taken various forms over the years, but a significant focus early in her career was abandoned buildings characterized by 'a sense of atmosphere and loss.' It took her some time, as well as the prompting of a friend, before she appreciated the connection between this creative

preoccupation and the loss of her father when she was young. The theme goes wider and deeper than that since it reflects both her theological convictions about Christian hope and a consciousness of haunted immanence. When she discussed the request for an interview for this thesis with her husband, he immediately spotted its relevance to her work. 'That's basically what your work is all about, isn't it? The search for the transcendent in the immanent?' It is hard to conceive of a more applicable metaphor for a haunted culture than an abandoned building. Yet each of the participants interviewed found his or her artform a means for exploring this interface of dimensions in its own unique ways. For Michael, this interface is epitomized by Seamus Heaney's commentary on Thomas Hardy's poem *Afterwards,* from his Oxford lectures already cited.

> [Heaney's] is literary criticism at its very best, and so pithy, and noticing the difference between untransfigured and transfigured language. And the way Hardy is imagining the time of his death; and imagining the difference between him and the reader of the poem. I actually think that's like a worked example, one that is all the richer and more compelling because it's an example taken from of the writing of a professed atheist.

This ability to shift between the immanent and imagined transcendent is the artist's unique gift to prevailing secularism. Those with a sensitivity to the arts are often prone to the sensation of *Sehnsucht* familiar to C. S. Lewis and Julian Barnes. Such is their power.

Summary of How Creative Professionals Experience Secularism

The creative professionals interviewed were conscious of the secularism that characterises Western culture, though they have had varied experiences with it. For some, it is merely a fact of contemporary life, the nature of the waters in which they must swim. This can be unsettling, engendering a religious believer's sense of being in the minority;

confusing because of the plethora of belief options available; or even hostile, as Alex experienced with his gallery's ultimatum.

While complex reasons and varying circumstances explain this range of experiences, all the participants have been aware of how haunted the immanent frame is. This awareness has provided them with opportunities for exposing secularism's limitations and for articulating a longing for metaphysical reality.

2. The Power of the Arts to Communicate Transcendence

The second research question sought to determine how the artists understand the power of the arts to communicate transcendent reality to immanent frame inhabitants. Each was given the space to reflect on the power of arts in general, as well as on their chosen profession.

Imagination Matters

In light of Michael's comments about the power of imagination to bind the sciences and the arts in a common endeavour, it is no surprise to find creative professionals setting great store by their own imaginations. Charles went so far as to define 'art as where the imagination begins'. To make his point, he contrasted two English poets, Philip Larkin with the lesser-known C. H. Sisson (whom Charles had known). Larkin insisted that poetry emerge from the lived experience of the poet, something Charles perceived as 'an unduly moralistic' approach. He disagreed, citing

Sisson's appeal to Sir Philip Sidney's claim that poetry is 'of the party of the hippogriff'.[1] In other words, it is 'the party of invention, which takes its stand on bringing something new into the world as against the party of preservatism, which thinks, with Larkin, that "the impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of all art"'.[2] The centrality of imagination to the artist's work is precisely what provides the freedom to pursue the inclinations of curiosity without knowing where they might lead. 'You put up one colour and the next comes out of the air. And a process starts that is all collected in a painting. I suppose to sum up, you might call it an innate disposition to wonder, with "wonder" used in both senses of the word.' When asked whether the value of art lies in its ambiguity, Charles countered with, 'It's more openness… I mean, if you don't know somewhere and you open the door and step out, it's not ambiguous (which seems rather binary), it's just open or changeable, like

Fig. 10: 'Amy', *Sketches for Film Set series*, 2021 *(author photo)*

[1] C. H. Sisson, *The Avoidance of Literature: Collected Essays*, ed. Michael Schmidt (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1978), 516.

[2] Sisson, *Avoidance*, 516.

wandering in a landscape.' The exploration provides much of the attraction for the artist. Similarly, with reference to her depictions of absented spaces, Amy said, 'I make work that you can see. But I feel like I'm exploring ideas that you can't see.' She said she looks for 'the atmosphere and its emotive potential… the potential for something beyond'. She has developed this theme in her most recent project, paintings of film sets. Invited by a producer friend to visit the shoot of an historical drama, she took photographs and made scores of sketches for a potential series. One of these (the bottom image in Fig. 10) at first sight appears to be a shop or a partitioned area in a factory. Closer inspection suggests something more personal and inhabited, a workshop or studio. Yet there remains something unsettling, with details that seem incongruous: the large, rectangular set-lighting suspended top-centre, and the white sheet draped over the window below it—not an everyday scene. The incongruity is deliberate, designed to entice the viewer to closer inspection. In her notes written on the train home, she grappled with what fascinated her:

> I'm interested in the fact of what wasn't seen but is traced in the scene/seen... I had access to the edges, things that cannot be seen on screen. I saw modern life and what we're led to believe was from the past. The fabrication of the past is also intriguing. Everything was seen today but some was intended to point to the 1920s... The set had an intention to transport the viewer and the actors to another time. The camera is the unseen coordinator. Boundaries, meaning, seeing/not seeing, believing, longing, uncertainty, withheld emotions.

The power of her paintings lies, in part, in the interaction between the 'real' and the imaginary, both for the artist and for the viewer. They are allusive, exploratory, and inconclusive.

All art is unpredictable since every individual has a unique imagination and a unique sensitivity to the surrounding world. It is not merely the beholder's sense of beauty that affects a response but also how habitual the exercise of her imagination. Alex responded to a hypothetical case of a preacher commissioning a painting for a sermon about heaven by highlighting the freedom offered here. Because the Bible offers 'no singular description of heaven… that gives us a conclusive, fully rounded picture of what the heavenly reality is', it can never be reduced. However, 'the language of painting' can probe a single, relevant aspect and perhaps come at it slant. He suggested using Francisco de Zurbarán's renowned, meticulous painting of a sacrificial lamb (Fig. 11). This image would never be viewed as a literal depiction of heaven, yet its potency can stimulate extended meditation, with the apocalyptic vision of the Lamb on the throne.[3] Alex conceded that this suggestion was 'probably not what the minister was hoping for' but encouraged him to consider it as 'an equally valid painting of one description of heaven.' Again, this illustrates the interface between the visible and the imaginary, in the mind of both the artist and the viewer.

Fig. 11: Francisco de Zurbarán, *Agnus Dei*, ca1635–40, *Museo del Prado, Madrid*, https://bit.ly/ZurbaranAgnus

[3] Revelation 5.

Making Connections and Meanings

While scientific materialism marginalizes or stifles the imagination, the arts function as an antidote. Michael cited C. S. Lewis's fellow Inkling Owen Barfield, who published an essay entitled "The Coming Trauma of Materialism"[4], noting that despite being nearly fifty years old 'it was remarkably prescient'. In this essay, Barfield argues from the philosophy of Theodore Roszak that technology depends on a convenient reductionism while offering the illusion of reflecting 'the whole truth'. Barfield insists, 'it is *the* illusion, the one from which the whole of our cultural alienation springs, and we cannot find our way out of the one without finding our way out of the other'[5]. According to Michael, a crucial means of achieving this escape is to employ the imagination in the truth-bearing capacity that Coleridge identified. The imagination recognises that the present does not entail an inevitable future, so it is possible to imagine alternative possibilities. The imagination can resist the preeminence of the present over the past by considering that modernity's claims of progress might be illusory.

Michael's recent project has been a poetic dialogue with the Psalter. He described it as 'epistemologically liberating [to] write poems in conversation with ancient poems.' This description resonates with a comment made by Martha. She cited Japanese-American painter and writer Makoto Fujimura as an influence because of his intentional practice of employing ancient methods and forms in his making.[6] She especially

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[4] Owen Barfield, "The Coming Trauma of Materialism," in *The Rediscovery of Meaning, and Other Essays* (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 1977), 187-200.

[5] Barfield, in *The Rediscovery of Meaning, and Other Essays*, 188.

[6] She cites, in particular, Makoto Fujimura, *Refractions: A Journey of Faith, Art, and Culture* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2009).

appreciated his culturally transgressive act of 'doing what is historical, connected to the past.' The imagination enables an artist to build bridges to the 'other', whether that other is separated by history, geography, or culture. This process subverts the utilitarian way people tend to engage with the other, which Jake recognised as an inevitable tendency of daily life. While the arts can be reduced to their apparent usefulness, they always have the means to help people recognize and empathize with the other. By treating audiences as integrated beings with spiritual, physical, and psychological layers, 'We respect them, unlike Netflix which is about ticking emotional boxes' to ensure sustained viewing. 'They are not taking people seriously,' Jake insisted. He mentioned Netflix's audience survey model, whereby selected viewers are given electronic response devices with a dial calibrated from boredom to excitement. If a large proportion of viewers find a scene boring, it is often cut from the final edit with little regard to its importance to plot or character development. Jake viewed this as a focus on guaranteeing high ratings rather than prompting reflection or empathy.

It was evident on meeting Charles that he is an articulate communicator, such that he seemed comfortable when talking about his art. It was intriguing that he 'distrust[s] the word, or to be more specific, [his] opinions'. He elaborated:

> … in a rather English way, I tend to avoid politics and religion because I perceive them at the level of feeling and don't trust myself to account for them up at the surface… I far more trust my colour sensations or imagination because I can't get at it or interfere with it. And the more resistant to analysis, the more compelling.'

The artistic distance is presumably why he became an artist rather than a teacher. For Charles, a member of Sidney's 'party of the hippogriff', the imagination is preeminent. What results from the imagination transgresses the bounds of rationalism, words, and

analysis. It provokes the rationalist's suspicions, yet this transgression that the imagination and the artefacts stimulate are able to make connections with realities beyond the immanent frame. John expressed frustration with clergy who focus their preaching and teaching on matters of truth and goodness but not beauty. The absence of teaching on beauty leaves ordinary believers without a theological context for the arts. With that context, they would be able to appreciate that 'music is just part of life; it's not an aid to convert the unconverted.' This is true of the arts in general.

Sensitivity to the Transcendent

All of the participants were convinced that their artform offered potential connections to the transcendent. Alex said that he found himself 'increasingly in tune to God's voice as [he] paint[s] now.' He cited Merleau-Ponty's concept of attunement, which he explained as the 'place between imagination and reason', not so much as a means of calibrating between them but 'to hold the two in tension'. This is precisely what makes it hard to articulate. He said that painting is:

> … a beautiful coming together of the transcendent value, and the physical materiality, of the world. I don't say this lightly, but I don't think I could be anything other than Christian as a painter. What is paint but carbon, matter? In some cases, it's crushed beetles, it's rocks, mud, and oil, smeared across a bit of material. But at the same time, a painting is emotive, sensational. It points to questions that are invisible, that sort of float in the world somewhere. It points us to philosophies. It can reduce you to tears. It is absolutely an incarnation of the transcendent in matter.
>
> That to me is evidence alone of our universe existing in this way—that we're not just particles devoid of spirit—that matter is very important in the world. It has meaning and significance. I find the greatest understanding of that in Christianity, in the Incarnation, with Christ in flesh and also God at the same time. I see painting as an incarnate action.

This thinking corresponds to what Charles suggested, despite wrily commenting that this research was 'tempting [him] slightly further than [he] would normally go', namely, to admit what he felt 'to be demonstrably the metaphysical nature of painting'. There is 'more than merely the physical nature of it', he said. A painting is a two-dimensional object filled with colours and shapes, and yet, 'It is a very odd object.' When viewed:

> The colours appear to be in different spaces. Optically, warm appears to come forward, cool recedes, so there are mental perceptions that the hands can't prove by touching… The picturing, the throwing of a mental image, that happens when we look at the surface is inexplicable.

Speaking of the visitors to the annual art festival mentioned above, Charles said, 'They are drawn to look at something which is in the world and not in the world simultaneously. That is a very strange phenomenon.' The perfect exponent of this phenomenon is the work of Mark Rothko, who was mentioned by both Alex and Charles. According to Alex, Rothko 'talked about his paintings as the cloud of meaning, of knowledge. The

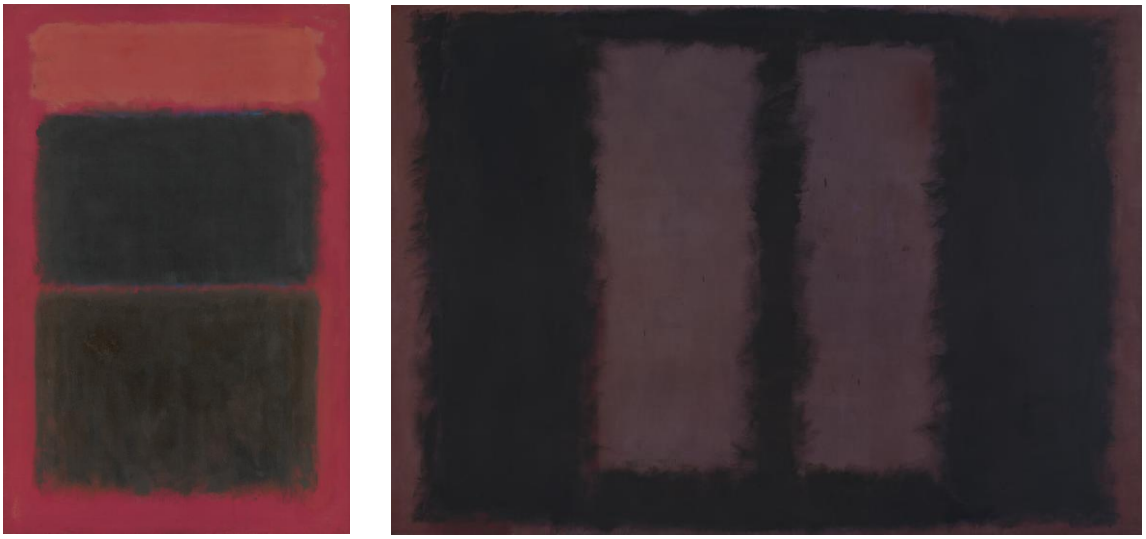

Fig. 12: Mark Rothko, *Light Red over Black*, 1957; *Black on Maroon*, 1958, *(Tate Modern, © Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko/DACS 2022)* https://bit.ly/RothkoSeagrams

misconception of Rothko is that it is nihilism… But Rothko's work was *full* of meaning. He had a clear sense of what the void was, and he took us to the edge of the void.' Rothko's experiments with colour and forms probe realities of the world which most people never even consider, prompting the viewer to reflect, to Alex's mind, why 'God chose certain colours for the sunset or the rain', and whether or not 'there was something in the creative capacity of God that is therefore intuitive or spontaneous, or felt right, that made him feel right to do this.'

Charles commented that children 'have a very fresh, bright, almost metaphysical insight into the world which they later lose or become embarrassed about. But it can break out again because it has lasting power.' Martha testified to this experience in her own life, recalling that from an early age, she was 'sensitive to … living in a world that [she] knew was spiritually alive'. This awareness informed her subsequent conviction that she must 'refuse to be defined by the immanent' so that in her song-writing, she explores how a song's constituent inspirations and elements 'interact to create an emotional experience for the listener'.

Jake and Michael suggested that film and poetry, respectively, also provide access to the transcendent. Jake was clear that in film this is not automatic and in his experience depends on certain directors. He said the films need to be shaped around more than simply the 'emotional level', by which he meant the Netflix product targeted at the cinematic thrill-seeker. As examples, he cited some of the films directed by Terrence Malick, Andrei Tarkovsky, Krzysztof Kieślowski, Luc Bresson, Wim Wenders, and Ingmar Bergman. The cinematic sum of the myriad parts involved in making a film can transport the viewer in extraordinary ways. At the opposite end of the collaborative

spectrum, a poem brings both 'transfigured and untransfigured language' together in one place, according to Michael. To illustrate, he cited Seamus Heaney's poem 'From the Frontier of Writing', which is ostensibly about Heaney's feelings on passing through a military checkpoint between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland. But it is hinted that it also describes his experience as a poet among critics and readers.

> And suddenly you're through, arraigned yet freed,
> As if you'd passed from behind a waterfall
> On the black current of a tarmac road.[7]

Michael interpreted this moment of breakthrough, saying it evokes far more than being waved through by soldiers, and more than connecting with an audience. It is about breaking into the transcendent realms. 'Look at the sets of adjectives to distinguish the two sides. His point is that this frontier is porous to the imagination, even if it is opaque to reason.'

John contended that music is 'the most spiritual of artforms'. This is perhaps one factor behind why:

> there's something baffling to our culture about music because it communicates its power, its emotion, its feeling, in something beyond words and images. It's a mysterious thing, music. They can't get a handle on it or explain it in words. Because it doesn't necessarily just deal with words. It deals with the manipulation of sound in a way that makes powerful connections with the human psyche and soul.

He said he has noticed that even when people do not hold conventional religious views, 'there is something in the artform they love that allows them to see ourselves or

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[7] Seamus Heaney, *New Selected Poems, 1966-1987* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), 216.

something beyond, to see ourselves as not just the sum of our parts'. He asked, 'Is that spiritual? It could very well be. Is that intellectual? Yes, it's that as well. There's something mysterious about music that is intangibly powerful, in a way that is different from the other arts.' This line of thought prompted him to reflect on the relationship between music and silence, which he characterized as a 'deep umbilical connection'. Music comes out of silence and returns to silence, so composers for centuries have used it to 'allow not just for the resonation of sound, but the resonation of thought and the resonation of a focus on what has just happened, textually and musically.'

It is a short step from this silence to reflection about the interior life, which is to enter the realms of religion. John mentioned a lesser-known fact—that composer John Cage had considered an alternative title to his notorious piece, *4'33"*, which consists of a performer sitting passively at a piano for just over four and a half minutes before closing the lid. The alternative title was *Silent Prayer*. John accepted this piece was a joke but added, 'It is a joke that makes a very serious point: it is all about how we hear, how we listen to things.' He mentioned Shusako Endo's novel *Silence* because it 'explores this very thing, that the silence of God does not necessarily mean absence or *nihil*, but accompaniment.'

John remarked that Cage had deliberately sought out Schönberg to become his teacher because 'he saw in him a fellow mystic'. Schönberg's *Second String Quartet* is written with an additional part for soprano voice, singing his setting of a poem about silence by Stefan George called *Rapture.* 'It describes sacramental images and talks about consecration and a holy whisper.' The relationship between silence and music has been understood by religion for centuries, and John, who grew up 'as a cradle Catholic',

always sensed that the two were connected. ‘Music does open a window on not just time but perhaps even the mind of God. It is music itself that is the way to these things because it deals with an intangible thing like time.’ Eskil made a similar point, saying music has the power to force busy people to stop and imagine, ‘to open the roof’.

Whatever the nature of people’s experiences with these artforms, the experiences can only ever be fleeting, which is why they arouse the sense of *Sehnsucht* familiar to many. The emptiness that often follows such an experience—the silence or absence—is what stimulates the longing. Amy seeks to convey this absence in her paintings, as she is drawn to ‘spaces that portray a sense of longing’. Even film sets are temporary but provoke a longing for permanence. Of this longing, Amy said, ‘I guess I’m talking about heaven here, a space that doesn’t fade’.

Sensing the Impact

If the arts possess an innate potency, evidence for its effect should be available. Whether an artefact has the impact anticipated by its maker is a different matter, since these effects are impossible to predict, let alone manufacture. Michael described the experience of composing poetic responses to Jesus’ parables. He said at the start, ‘I had the idea that I, the poet—it’s almost cringingly embarrassing to say it, oh the folly of it!—would come along and pierce and cut open, and unbind, open out and take away the familiar film over scripture’. However, he said:

> If I had succeeded in doing without the words and the poetic imagination pushing back, I would have written a truly awful poem. But that’s not what happened… the hidden text behind this, the scripture, is sharper than a double-edged sword piercing to the division between joint and marrow. So, what started off as a proclamation that I was going to peel aside the film of scripture

> switched to become a recognition that I require God, through scripture, to unwind *me*!

In other words, he was awakened to his own presumption and need for God. Martha commented that every artefact 'has two different lives'. The first is the impact on the artist in her process of exploration, whether seeing something anew or being immersed in a new story. The second is the impact on the listener. Martha related a recent experience of singing one of her songs in a service at the church where her husband had just become vicar. A woman who had left the church some years before decided to come that week, out of curiosity about the new pastor. Martha's song prompted her decision to return and stick with the church, although Martha only discovered this months later. While she had no idea how or why this took place, through hearing that song, 'somehow there [was] a connection'.

Each of the participants had parallel encounters. Alex told of a woman in Iceland who said one of his paintings was instrumental in preventing her descending into an abyss of alcoholic self-destruction. He had also painted a series of abandoned buildings in that country, 'rather small, melancholic pictures that reflected the landscape'. The woman came up to him 'on the opening night, I'll never forget it'. One image depicted an abandoned barn, with a gate opening onto a floodplain beyond. She told him that this captured her situation perfectly because she sensed a choice: 'to go out into the wilderness beyond or stay here and wrestle with what's going on at the moment. And I think God is telling me to stay this side of the gate.' Alex was astonished, not least because the woman had not known he was a believer. As he said, 'It wouldn't matter whether I was, but it was the way that God was speaking through the painting into the situation she was going through, and for the better… I think of that.' John has had

countless messages from people saying that his music has brought them back to church or helped to restore their confidence in the reality of God. Eskil spoke of how great art will not be confined to a particular historical moment because it has the unpredictable capacity to 'remain actual, over centuries, over the decades.' This is the 'unique power of art, it's kind of mystical.' He used the word 'vibrating' to describe the moments when these connections are made. In each of these stories, a piece of art made connections with people in a way that mysteriously awakened them, drawing them into a sense of the transcendent realm.

Summary of The Power of the Arts to Communicate Transcendence

All the participants in this study testified to the importance of the human imagination, as a counter to the dominance of rationalism and as a means of grasping different aspects of human reality. Some articulated a more philosophical explanation for this, while others described it instinctively. The imagination enables them to make connections in the interface between what is seen and not seen, what is spoken and not spoken, what is heard and not heard. This dynamic naturally occurs within the experience of the immanent frame, but because the arts function at this interface, they have the power to connect to the transcendent frame. This connection is not controllable or predictable. Each participant testified to ways in which their audiences or viewers had spiritual experiences as a result of engaging with their art.

3. Insights from the Creative Process

The third research question considered the intentions and methods employed by the artists in their creative process.

Flexible Intentions

The question of intention is complex, especially when discerning an artist's intent based on the artefact alone. N. T. Wright's oft-quoted quip, 'The road to hell is paved with authorial intention'[8], hints at how fraught it is. It became clear in each interview that creative professionals rarely have a clear sense of their intentions at the outset of a new project, other than in general terms. Even when they have finished, they are unsurprised to receive brand new, yet valid, insights from others.

Jake described the process of writing the films he directs. His wife is an investigative journalist constantly hunting for new stories. Once she has identified a story, she will doggedly pursue it for as long as it takes to get the story out, before moving onto the next one. Jake said he has often found that her investigative work will spark his own imagination. He said he stays with a story for much longer, not least because 'the financing of a project takes years.' On set, with crew and cast fully briefed and invested in the project, he said he finds that his writing is incarnated, 'but it can get out of hand.' When asked if the director functions as a god in a universe of his making, he laughingly dismissed the idea. 'This is the myth, right? The team is on board for three to four months, while I have been working on it for three to four years. But it goes because they usually catch up halfway. And then I lose my shine!' He conceded that a director regains a degree of control in the editing suite but said much has already happened up to that point. Once actors begin to inhabit their characters, his role shifts:

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[8] N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, vol. 1, *Christian Origins & the Question of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 20.

> …this is really true on set— it is often me that is asking the questions. I'm no longer answering. So, I might ask an actor, 'Why are you saying this line?' And it's a line that I wrote! But I'm questioning them. 'She would never say that! This is a very bad scene!' But they come back, 'No, it totally makes sense, because after that scene, what you don't know is that I was in my bedroom thinking this or this.' They are involved in creating this universe too. That way, you empower them to give a performance that is real, in the moment, in a way that I could never direct or predict.

Furthermore, the shooting process will include various versions of a scene. Sometimes this process brings more out of the actors without discouraging them with negative comments. Sometimes the director is genuinely unsure about what might work best on screen as opposed to on set. In short, a script is a catalyst for the collaboration of multiple voices. Even with the most autocratic of directors, too many variables are at work to make the journey from the germ of an idea to its completion predictable. The same is true when no other collaborators are involved, as in Michael's experience of writing verse inspired by the parables. He found that his own intentions and expectations were subverted by the voice of the scriptures. He described this as 'allowing my poetic imagination to move the goalposts.'

These responses should not be interpreted as a wholesale rejection of the consideration of intent. While the exact outcome of the making process is unknown at the start, there is purpose and expectation. All of the participants expressed confidence in the validity of their artforms for communication, even if what is communicated cannot be articulated precisely in words. Paradoxically, that is true even when the artform entails words, as poetry does. Michael said he perseveres as a poet because he is convinced by Coleridge's purpose to 'awaken the mind's attention and remove the film of familiarity'. Martha said she is willing to be culturally transgressive in the subject-matter of her song-

writing, broaching the realms of the metaphysical and divine, because she fails to see 'why it is such a big deal in society to talk about things that are so deep in me.' John said he perseveres with composing music because of a conviction that it brings 'a deep connection with the spiritual and the numinous'. It is not necessarily the fascination and love for the artform *per se* that compels them, although it may be a factor. They are drawn to make through the innate curiosity of the explorer.

Fired by Curiosity

Amy said she is drawn to superficially similar types of scenes, uninhabited or previously-inhabited spaces. The viewer never glimpses the people whose traces remain. She said that a vital element of her process is to identify what about that space compels her, so she writes thoughts down in a notebook. Ultimately, it is the act of painting which fires her curiosity. She said she needs to find a scene so 'visually interesting … that [she] want[s] to paint' it. A scene may be interesting because the space contains 'signifiers that something is not what you think it is'. It may be a location with 'a sense of lack or a disappearing history', such as the gentrification process rapidly transforming her district of London. She said she is not drawn to identifiably religious settings, but that if religious symbols are present incidentally, she regards that as a bonus. One of her sequences featured the stalls at flea markets, in part because of the incongruous juxtapositions of objects from disparate lives, so that 'they're like collages, physical collages.' Despite representing a departure from abandoned buildings, these scenes were equally 'thick with emotive potential and atmosphere.' One stall included rows of crosses and rosaries, as well as 'swords and stuff'. 'It really excited me to use that imagery because it was there,' she said.

Inevitably, the participants had their own individual means of sparking creative curiosity. Eskil said he finds the natural world essential, and now that he is increasingly in demand internationally as a composer and teacher, he said he always tries to squeeze in a free day to explore mountains or coastline. Not only does he need time in solitude, but he also finds that landscapes invigorate and inspire his composition. He has written a number of significant works as a result, including what he calls his 'multimedia symphonies' written for orchestra and choir, accompanied by audio/visual presentations. The natural world is likewise a prompt for Alex's painting, not simply because 'God reveals his invisible attributes through creation' but also because Alex is fascinated by attending to the aesthetic choices apparent within creation, as if they point 'towards the feeling, the emotion of God.' As Alex discussed in his reflections on Rothko's meditations on form and colour, the colours of a sunset reveal a lively intelligence and personality at work within creation.

Curiosity may be sparked by mundane subjects from daily life, or by the quirks and oddities of contemporary culture. Martha said she recently found the need to widen her sources because 'she's partly run out of stories' of her own. She said she has enjoyed the synergy that comes from juxtaposing song covers from different genres or backgrounds, because 'when you put these things in, this is what happens. Little connections are made that you weren't expecting.' One such discovery was finding that her cover of a hit from an old West End show unexpectedly evolved into a prayer. She juxtaposed that song with a new song of her own which was inspired by a friend's chance remark. She gradually realised that the new album's disparate elements shared a common theme: the tension from holding onto faith while continuing to search. Just as Amy found

with her painting preoccupations, it took time before Martha could identify why her curiosity was drawn to these songs. This process conformed to her expectations of what song-writing offers, for herself and her audiences. She said she hopes to stimulate listeners' imaginations just as hers has been so that they begin 'to make connections of their own and to inhabit the mystery of life. If we're not firing their imaginations but filling in the blanks with all the answers—I mean that's a bad word in the artistic community!... We're all about questions, or even just about thinking.'

These accounts are crucial for understanding how creative professionals approach commissions. The participants' careers are at different stages, so some are more dependent on commissions than others. Several hinted at a degree of nervousness. They noted that research is essential. Eskil said he follows up with detailed questions and concerns about the standards and abilities of the performers, and because of the breadth of his training, he is open to commissions in several different styles or musical schools. However, he said, 'I always ask for complete freedom in choosing my texts', presumably because this is integral to finding the necessary inspiration. John commented, 'I don't think composers should ever be in the position—it may be a physical impossibility to be—of writing music you don't want to write. I couldn't do that.' He acknowledged that this was inescapable for those working in film and television but said of his own work, 'I guide everything.'

Sometimes, the scale of a participant's projects is enormous. A symphony is a vast undertaking, for example. When interviewed, Eskil's focus was on a new creative endeavour: his first ballet. He anticipated that the ballet would take him three years to write. Similarly, a film can take at least that length of time from initial ideas to cinematic

release. A series of paintings may not demand years of an artist's time but will still fill many months, comparable to working on an album. Setting out into the unknown on such arduous, risky ventures demands a high degree of creative confidence, combined with the kind of curiosity that is compelling over extended periods of time. Each artist might have different methods to help them persevere. For example, Eskil said he keeps fresh by working on small pieces in a different mode or form, such as a short choral motet. All will need something to sustain their curiosity. A metaphor common to several, therefore, was that of exploration.

The Unknown Explored

Charles commented that many artists share an insecurity about their profession because of its apparent self-indulgence. This partly explains the romantic image of the bohemian artist in his garret, refusing to compromise his artistic integrity and thus suffering for his art. Charles said that 'suffering is not a value of art' but it is assumed to be because 'it's a safer position than appearing happy when others aren't'. To that end, he quoted fellow painter Humphrey Ocean, who said that this 'parallel misery story … was invented to make us feel less guilty for being artists.' In fact, he testified to the childlike joy he feels in artistic exploration, and this joy has been identified in his painting by other painters. He mentioned a poem he shared with some students at a prestigious art school: Geoffrey Hill's *The Jumping Boy*. He drew attention to these lines in the second stanza:

> He leaps because he has serious
> joy in leaping…

He is winning
a momentous and just war
with gravity.[9]

Charles commented, ‘In the poem, remembering himself as a child, [Hill] recalls the pleasure of jumping. Why jump? Because of the sheer joy of it. That’s an immensely helpful image, it being so close to what artist and poet do.’ Charles also mentioned why he painted a small series of works inspired by Wagner’s *Ring* cycle. When he shared his plan with friends in the art world, ‘there was combined sucking in of teeth and raising of eyebrows’ accompanied by no shortage of advice, saying that he needed to explore the symbolism or be elusive. In contrast, he was drawn to the subject simply because he had always loved the great myths when young, and with these in particular, ‘the small boy in me likes the realistic stagecraft.’ He was prepared to ignore the scorn of artistic snobbery because an exploration of these ancient themes was sufficient justification. He said that over his career, he has changed his focus on many occasions, often to subvert the orthodoxy of the moment. His Wagner paintings defied the presumption that ‘abstraction was the dominant mode in so-called “advanced art”, and figuration was illustrative and therefore of a second order. So, when my painting motifs took recognizable form, it felt provocative. I was trying to put something back into painting, something that would defy the orthodoxy and make it difficult again.’

More recently, he has been painting abstract works almost exclusively, relishing the chance to explore ‘putting that amount of pink next to that amount of blue exactly there.’ There is mystery to colour that can rarely be verbalized:

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[9] Geoffrey Hill, "The Jumping Boy," *The New Criterion* 24, no. 5 (2006).

> …colour is probably the most elusive and personal thing you can work with because you can't justify it, you can't explain it, you can't name it, you can't do anything at all with it. But it does come to mind, and the intuition delivers it to you, inexplicably. You put up one colour and the next comes out of the air. And a process starts that is all collected in a painting.

He said he finds his way as he paints, 'because I want it to be nothing but inspiration… If we agree that art is an artificial construction and that art can be anything you want, why not go for the most imaginative possible? Consequently, my approach is not even to plan it but to just go through and see what happens in the hope and belief that something happens.' Alex and Amy described their practices in similar terms. Amy said she starts painting as soon as she can without doing too much planning, while Alex enjoys the experience of 'playing in the mud'. He said he has been greatly helped by James K. A. Smith's writing about St Augustine.[10] He was struck by Smith's assertion that 'rather than thinking our way around the world, [Augustine shows that] we feel our way around.' Using the analogy of driving along a familiar route, 'you don't consciously think about where you're going to go, you feel your way because you've done it so many times.' Alex likened the body's muscle memory for painting to that of driving. He learned the crucial elements, such as colour theory and brush technique, so they 'are all in there somehow'. As a result, his work can be 'more intuitive, or responsive or emotional. It's not like I'm vomiting onto the canvas. It's not that at all. It is considered and thoughtfulness, built-up through muscle memory.'

He described the process as 'having conversations with the Lord in the studio' about, and through, his painting. He likened this process to the experience of 'creative

[10] James K. A. Smith, *On the Road with Saint Augustine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2019).

flow', a term coined in the 1970s by Hungarian-American sociologist Mihály Róbert Csíkszentmihályi. Alex described creative flow this way:

> …that sensation of hyper-focus, a point at which, through the development of muscle memory and routine and rhythm, you can find yourself in a place where it is almost as if your body takes over. Or your consciousness takes over, and you start to make movements and energies and motions that are very, very intense. So, he uses the example of the surfer… [who] reaches a point that when his body is so attuned to what is happening around him in the water, he can surf in a way he's never surfed before.
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> I experience that. If I've been painting for a full day, I reach a state where I can make marks and choose colours that I wouldn't choose at the beginning of the day…. Somewhere in that mix, I believe, is the Holy Spirit's work.

The human capacity for artistic, creative flow need not be reduced by a naturalistic explanation. By referring to the work of the Holy Spirit, Alex identified his experience of flow as the transcendent within his immanence-bound creativity, a spiritual act of incarnation he described as 'playing in the mud'. The transcendent cannot be contrived, however. He disagreed with Jackson Pollock's notion that 'something of the subconscious manifests itself on the canvas as you paint… It's not like God is holding my brushes as I paint… but I find myself increasingly in tune to God's voice as I paint now.'

There was a parallel in Eskil's process. He said he always begins his composition work with a short prayer, being conscious of his need for divine blessing and guidance. However, he was clear, 'The traditional way of thinking is that art needs to have a muse knocking on their window, or they have to wait for when God will open the sky and lay down the water of inspiration. No!' Just as Alex spent years studying the skills and techniques of his profession, so Eskil invested in gaining the technical knowledge of

musical form, harmony, and musical history. As a result, he has a responsibility to be what he trained to be. 'When you are a professional in your field, don't bother God with your waiting on him for inspiration for …how to resolve this stuck moment in your composition… That's your duty! You have to study, to work.' Nevertheless, there is always the possibility that 'suddenly your child might come up and he will by accident play a note on your piano, and "that's it!", and suddenly you look at it and say, "Yes! This is a wonderful solution for my stuck moment!"' God is at work within the processes Eskil employs, but he also reserves the right to intervene in unexpected ways.

In his poetic engagement with biblical texts, Michael found himself confronting the paradox at the heart of this thesis's biblical literature review. The Psalmist seems to wrestle with the same paradox Moses faced at Mount Sinai: 'You have said, "Seek my face." My heart says to you, "Your face, Lord, do I seek."'[11] Michael commented, 'There is a constant tension in the Bible between this possible impossibility, precisely because God is transcendent and cannot be seen.' Yet the more he explored this problem, the more he appreciated that the psalm is grounded in true hope and concludes with the resounding words: 'Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!'[12] Michael's description of this moment in his reflections was telling. 'I found that when I wrote about it, the sense that within the frame I've inherited, I'm constantly pressing against the bars of the world, constantly coming to the window, and gluing my face to it, and trying to see what's beyond it.' Here, he was experiencing Heaney's language of frontier for himself.

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[11] Psalm 27:8, cf Exodus 33:20.

[12] Psalm 27:14.

Personal Challenges

In addition to curiosity and the desire for exploration through experimentation, creative professionals are often compelled by the desire for constant learning and development. Particularly when they must work in isolation rather than collaboratively, this is a means by which to sustain a career.

This development might be brought about by relatively small changes. Both Amy and Alex mentioned how complex it is for painters to change their practice. ‘Seismic shifts are tricky for artists,’ said Alex, and he described a commercial aspect to this. ‘Cynically, in the art world, galleries really like it when you don’t change anything at all’. He mentioned the globally successful artist Damien Hirst, saying, ‘Everyone knows what a Damien Hirst looks like. You’re walking into a gallery and you see, “Ah! A Damien Hirst! I think I’ll buy that!”’ Nevertheless, the COVID-19 lockdowns gave him more time to rethink his painting practice because the ‘[art] market collapsed almost overnight’. The experience was ‘almost like going back to art school in a way’ and has led to him ‘wanting to be more prayerful for my painting, without the pressure of my gallery, or the market, or the tutor in my head. I was afforded an opportunity to do that.’

Yet there may be practical hindrances to change. Amy noticed that for a period, all her works were a similar size, and indeed for one series she had planned to make all the pictures identical in size. She wanted to resist commercial reasons for artistic choices—larger paintings are harder to sell—while at the same time be prepared to keep making incremental changes that forced her to innovate. Another such change was a shift in her palette because she became aware that ‘a bit of a trope for me [to convey] atmosphere was darkness’. She said she still uses ‘very rich red’ and ‘no pastels’ for the

filmset series, but she has deliberately lightened her palette across the board. For her flea market series, she deliberately rejected a naturalistic, photographic palette. She asked questions such as, 'Can I use obscenely bright colours… [to make] something challenging, something interesting?' Because her goal was not verisimilitude but evocation—capturing an atmosphere caused by an absence—she said, 'I enjoy the work being more painterly. The more obviously fabricated the better… [it's] exciting seeing the different colours in life.' As a result, she said she will paint the main image on the basis of several sketches. 'I use the subject matter as a starting point and then I want to work to lift off from that.'

It is not only painters who expressed the need to make occasional changes. Martha sensed she 'needed another voice', and she discovered that a new electric guitar provided this, as she had used several acoustic instruments on her previous albums. This new instrument gave her much-needed stimulation during the lockdowns because she had to learn how to make the most of its distinctive sounds.

> Really enjoying playing it was a fairly new thing for me. I was allowing the sound of the guitar to open up new places of words and landscapes, emotional content as well. I remember Madeleine L'Engle saying that the seed for your next work is always in the one that preceded it. I think that's always been true for me. In this case, I have had to do a lot of work because of the electric guitar. I had to do so much learning. This is probably the biggest change I've made musically.

Eskil said he is concerned never to 'copy and paste'. He said that in new work, he always seeks 'this vibration, so that I have a feeling that this work takes me to another level. If there is not this pull, then it'll just be copy/paste, or a reflection of my existing works.' There is a cost to this need for development. For his ballet project, he said, 'I'm working

day and night, and it's full of tears and challenges, and it's exact, exhausting… [but] through that challenge and emotional work, there is this pull. That's what makes a way of progress towards this new level. So, I myself am developing.' Much like Charles's desire to allow his painting to be 'nothing but inspiration', Eskil was concerned 'to have complete freedom', even for commissions. He said he is 'very self-critical… I always know exactly which works are on top and which are just good quality.' So, if a commission has too many prescriptions, he said that 'every single restriction cuts the wings of my imagination a little… How can I fly with these shorter wings in the highest orbits of my imagination? How? Every single restriction is just centimetre, centimetre, centimetre cut; but [Eskil] tries to fly higher, higher…!' His longing for creative freedom without copying and pasting means 'I can express myself fully.'

John made a similar point in his own terms. He said his primary goal is 'basically to supersede what has been achieved so far.' He said he needs to keep pushing his own boundaries because 'if I believe that something has been a success, it causes me great delight, of course. But almost immediately, the next anxious thought is how to do it better next time.' Just as Eskil needed to break up large-scale projects with smaller compositions, John spoke of 'needing to cleanse the palette and do something completely different. The move into chamber music was absolutely necessary.' He was prepared to write works for children and for competent amateur musicians, such as local church choirs. Some in the classical world failed to understand this, wondering, 'Why would you want to write music that is so functional, which takes people with a limited range and inclination in the pew to sing?' But his reason was straightforward. 'I just like having a varied life, to be honest!' This is not to suggest that the creative professional's life is

divorced from that of context or community. Both Martha and John expressed personal commitment to the local church as a matter of responsibility, for example, and even when the place for their art making within the church fellowship was not immediately identifiable, both Alex and Amy participated fully in church life.

Summary of Insights into the Creative Process

Contrary to what outsiders might think, it is rare for creative professionals to have a clear notion of what they intend to make at the start of the process, other than a vague or general plan. The process is one of discovery and exploration, so the act of making is a means of satisfying their curiosity or questions. Furthermore, when a creative project is collaborative, such as for a film drama, the number of collaborators involved will increase the range of potential outcomes exponentially. Hence for Jake, the notion of the 'director as god' is a myth.

Even with little or no collaboration involved, a painter, poet, or composer is nevertheless motivated to create by the desire to grow, learn, and develop, sometimes through incremental changes of practice or parameters, rather than from specific intentions.

4. The Problems with Propaganda

The fourth research question addressed how the artists understand the nature of propaganda and the extent to which they need to engage with problems of propaganda.

Not a Temptation

None of the participants sensed they ran the risk of creating propaganda. Amy said, 'I guess I don't feel prone to it, so, therefore, I'm not trying to avoid it.' Instead, she said she feels 'prone to tightening up as I paint, so I try to avoid that.' In a follow-up exchange by text message, she explained 'tightening up' as 'becoming more and more figurative, less abstract, and painterly. The looser my work the better, but that requires confidence and self-control I find!' This attitude is arguably akin to avoiding propaganda since propaganda tends to favour the figurative over the abstract. However, in her desire to make her work more 'painterly', she chimed with one of Charles's comments. He felt he was unlikely to create propaganda but said, 'If there's any propaganda in my work, it's propaganda for art, or for the openness of imagination and for the attempt to carry everything in all its complexity forward.' Charles noted a contrast between imagination and fantasy, taking his cue from Coleridge, whom he interprets as meaning, 'Imagination (properly capitalized) is your real work, your deep work. Fantasy is your improvisation, your day to day.' He regarded that idea as so significant he is its passionate advocate.

Jake said his own resistance to propaganda is largely derived from his inquisitiveness. He said he only starts to explore a corner of human society or a character's personality when it strikes him as alien or inexplicable. He said he must be 'curious about this character, about this story, and the way to explore it is on film. But if I *already* know, if I'm done, I'm not going to make the film. So, if everything is clear for me, there is no film.' Propaganda is antithetical to this method because it has *a priori* conclusions that need to be presented. There is a particular danger with films because 'they are empathy machines', so 'viewers cannot help but empathise with the people on

screen.' The capacity for audience manipulation is great, perhaps to a greater extent than in any other artform. Therefore, Jake is conscious of the responsibility of the filmmaker. Eskil is also aware of 'these buttons which I can press in composing the work' because of his extensive training and the ease with which he can work in many musical genres. He likens them to 'professional tricks' that are guaranteed 'to surprise people' or 'bump their brain and their body [so] they will have goosebumps. I know how to do this.' He explained that he has a strong sense of what pleases audiences 'and will receive applause… (and) wonderful reviews'. He is only deterred, as mentioned above, by the desire to avoid the 'copy and paste' of previously successful effects. He said doing that 'does not make me happy'.

Keeping it Open

In their different ways, each participant sensed that they were preserved from the pitfalls of propaganda by their approaches to their own artforms. They would no doubt chime with what Michael said about poetry, though none were as categorical in the interviews.

> I would say that at the point poetry becomes propaganda it ceases to be poetry. I have to say that there's lots of so-called Christian poetry which is not poetry but is propaganda, a series of rhymed declarations… Part of it is to do with trusting the wisdom of words themselves and letting the words do the work, and not imposing on the words what you're going to say. I encounter this all the time. I almost know whether a poem is going to be a 'keeper' … if I already know to begin with what I want to say, and I simply say it in a way that neither questions nor extends my first conception. Then what I've written is a note to self, not a poem.

He later developed this idea in ways that could be hard for the non-artist to grasp. With reference to the experience of his 'imagination moving the goalposts', he said, 'That's a real thing. Not only is it a poem coming alive in your hands as you write it, but it's actually speaking back to me. I have that experience, not every time I write, but often enough to make me feel that there is a real live thing happening and that it's worth pursuing for that reason.' In answer to the comment that a propagandist would close this down, he responded, 'Totally! So that's why poetry is quite a dangerous thing.'

An artist's curiosity is important, but it is the combination of curiosity with an openness to proceed down subsequent avenues, however unexpected or inconvenient, which renders artists such uneasy collaborators with propagandists. In fact, Charles went so far as to insist that he is 'resistant to art with messages', citing Romantic poet John Keats, who wrote, 'We hate poetry that has a palpable design on us … Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself —but with its subject.'[13] He lamented the fact that 'we're going through a time where art is often endorsed with a socially approved message. This has consequences, particularly in the art schools.'

Amy was prompted by the discussion of propaganda to mention an exhibition she had visited the day before, in which 'there was a painting of a shop that had loads of Black Lives Matter stuff, it had pictures of Breonna Taylor, [signs] saying "Say her Name!" Someone could say that's propaganda; someone else could say that it's observing reality.' Her comments were not the result of any political ambivalence about the issue,

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[13] John Keats, *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters*, ed. Horace Elisha Scudder (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1899), 285.

necessarily; rather she was noting an aesthetic ambivalence. Charles advocated an art in which 'you open the door and step out… like wandering in a landscape.' In contrast, Alex suggested that propaganda makes 'a statement from which there can be no negotiation. This is how it is. You need to believe it, otherwise you're wrong… or worse.' While he conceded that propaganda can be 'art' because 'art is a very broad category', he said art is most interesting when it is:

> … more discursive than that. It starts a dialogue; it asks a question rather than making a statement. It proposes something rather than demanding something. So, I get a bit nervous I suppose when propaganda is in the arts and would rather not make it.

Jake has learned to preserve his openness in scriptwriting through the respect he has for others. In the past, he assumed that meant respecting the filmgoer. He believed that 'God's commandment for me was to love my audience as myself. But it didn't work for me as a process.' He did not elaborate precisely why but said:

> So, I just forgot about it because it had meant I tried not to offend people too much or hurt them too much. But now I'm more working with the thought that I should love my characters as myself. When I'm writing them, they cannot become instruments of my god- or devil-like scheme in which I am in full control, where they just have to go left or right because I want them to. Or to make the audience shift in any direction. I should really respect them. It's strange, maybe, because they don't exist. But to me, they become real…

Jake seemed self-conscious about this, but he agreed that if the characters did not seem real to the person who created them, they were hardly likely to seem real to audiences. He continued:

> … hopefully this way of working still brings something to the audience, but it is less direct. If I love the characters, then they can do really horrendous things in theory, but I would have to embrace

> that. That can create a pain or friction for the viewer. But that is not a problem, I guess. I mean people can also encounter others in their own lives that can create that kind of trauma.

Respecting the characters as individuated and autonomous, within the universe crafted by the narrator's imagination, guarantees an openness to the art of filmmaking. The story becomes inherently unpredictable and therefore of greater interest to the filmmaker.

Thus far, the concern has been with how the participants perceive the relationship of the arts to propaganda in general. They also discussed the tensions caused when the church seeks to co-opt the arts.

Christian Pitfalls

While music is the artform to which the church has historically seemed most attuned, John sensed that fellow believers are suspicious of musicians, perhaps perceiving them to be 'a bit precious because of the things we say and believe about it.' He also suggested that many 'haven't given a space in their lives for the consideration of these things', while in his experience, nonbelieving people are 'more open to a kind of quiet, reflective consideration… I find a kind of barrier sometimes within the churches, within my fellow religionists, about the very thing I do.' This distance reflects a wider problem in contemporary church circles, whereby people 'get themselves into a kind of bind over what the arts are for. It shapes the nature of the art that they then use, or have in church and in the liturgy, and it can lead to great banality.' 'Use' is the operative word, with the arts being instrumentalized, yet as he cheerfully admitted, 'Music is useless, in the secular world as well as the church world!' He recalled a Bible Society conference at which Jeremy Begbie was challenged by some evangelical attendees who objected to his

preoccupation with classical music, which they seemed to regard as 'frippery and elitist'. They were evidently compelled by a desire 'to evangelise the world' but were profoundly shaped by pragmatism. Thus, when it came to making the most of the arts, they were convinced that this was 'best done through popular culture.' By this way of thinking, neither classical nor pop music have intrinsic merit; they are only a means to some other, supposedly greater, end. John was quick to identify manifestations of this in his own church circles. Speaking of the impact of Vatican II, he noted its seismic effect on Catholic music in particular.

> It wasn't just railings and altars thrown out of the church; it was choirs which were done away with because they were deemed to be antithetical to the new way of doing liturgy. Choirs discouraged congregational participation. So, there's a whole raft of a particularly Catholic instrumentalism that I have experienced and now won't have anything to do with.…
>
> I've run into so many prejudices. They assumed I was an art composer who wouldn't understand 'the pastoral needs' of the people. There was a whole raft of lay people, as well as clergy, who had decided what the new way of writing congregational liturgy was. [Of a mass written for children] …there was real pushback from a group in the church that thought it was unpastoral. There's a rising seventh at one point, and I was told that people can't do that. Any old rubbish excuse!

The relationship between instrumentalism and banality is the result of what might be described as a flattening, whereby anything that makes demands on performers or audiences is avoided. This is akin to the Netflix method of gaining high ratings which Jake mentioned. To serve the ends of those who would 'evangelise the world' or meet a congregation's 'pastoral needs', an artform is bound to lean towards the safe and the tried and tested. Innovation carries too much risk, so cliché is convenient and banality inevitable. In contrast, John insists, 'I never second guess a listener at all… [Music] is not

there as a kind of aid to convert the unbeliever. It's just life, it's part of who we are, just in the ether of the musician's makeup.'

John was not alone in being troubled by the prevalence of banality in so-called Christian arts. Jake admitted, 'So often in church, I am so bored.' He complained that Christian art can feel far removed from the realities of life, sardonically comparing it to do the difference between 'the act of talking about sex and the act of having sex!' Several participants identified aspects within their respective fields where cliché is prevalent. When pushed to explain what she meant by 'the naff Christian art' she avoids, Amy explained:

> I mean paintings of Jesus. Because the problem is there is such a history there. If someone was trying to do it in convincingly, they would just miss something completely. There's just simply no way you could make someone be moved by the suffering of Christ on the cross by making a painting of Christ, because it rings too many other bells in painting. I guess, for me, I would question even the attempt. But certainly, it's not something I feel troubled by. For example, there's a book in this image [pointing to a work in progress]. I could write 'Holy Bible' on it. But I could still see it's a Bible without writing that.

As Alex put it, 'There are quite enough Christian paintings of doves!'

No one advocated for a complete avoidance of explicitly Christian symbols or themes. As already noted, Amy was excited to find theologically freighted objects on a flea market stall and depicted the scene 'because it was there'. This approach is very different from that of the propagandist. Likewise, Martha said she is 'not afraid to reference God [in song-writing], but I am careful how I do it because I want to connect with people, because I don't want to alienate people. I want to be thoughtful about how I do it because if you are, it does powerful things.' This resonates with Amy's concern to

preserve ‘a sense of nuance in terms of understanding people’ whenever discussing faith matters with friends. Martha said she is motivated to persevere, regardless of the outcomes, because ‘I just believe that God is working in people, and if he’s not, then why are you bothering? This is what I know how to do, and these are the stories that I know how to tell, out of a place of searching and faith.’

Several participants were quick to connect the detrimental effect on the arts by the propaganda instinct with how churches relate to the arts. For example, Martha described the music often playing on the radio when she was growing up as ‘Nashville Christian music’. While she was reluctant to class this as ‘Christian propaganda’, she described how even at a young age she was ‘was conscious of the narrowness of language and content. I knew right away that there was not enough reality, not enough flesh on it. I remember saying to myself, well if God is a reality in my life and journey of faith, then he can make himself known in his own way. He doesn’t need me to write things I haven’t experienced as true.’ In other words, Martha is committed to the openness so valued by Charles in his painting. She expressed wariness of the vision for the Christian life that ignores or forbids questions and doubts, a vision which invariably manifests itself in art that is sentimental and unreal. Instead, if she were to write for a church setting, it would be ‘a spontaneous expression of my response to what was said’. If commissioned, ‘I would probably need to have a broad remit and to know the intention behind it.’ She said she is committed to helping people ‘make connections of their own and to inhabit the mystery of life.’ None of this will sit comfortably with Christians wanting to present an exclusively positive spin to the outside world, but it is entirely in keeping with how each of the participants in this research functions.

Applying a broader pastoral problem to the issue at hand, Eskil spoke of the danger of ‘usurping God’. Anyone in Christian leadership—whether ‘you are the pastor, or if you are the choir director, or you are the organist, or the leader of the Sunday School’—should check themselves. There is a danger, ‘With God in your pocket, you are the only one who has all the rights to this work, so that you have become the boss and God is yours...’ Eskil’s countermeasure was to insist that ‘you always have to be open, open with your mind. Don’t be turned into this kind of traditional cleric where the church becomes according to your own taste.’ His point was that what some are tempted to do with the church resembles how the arts get commandeered for ulterior purposes. Some commandeer that which God alone has the authority and capacity to oversee. It is an act of Promethean conceit.

Alex suggested two artists whose work illustrates a rejection of the propagandist approach. The first is a German artist, Neo Rauch, who was born in 1960 in East Germany and studied art.

Fig. 13: Neo Rauch, *Holy Lights (Heillichtung)*, 2014 (© Neo Rauch c/o David Zwirner, New York) https://bit.ly/RauchHeillichtung

> He learned how to paint propaganda paintings and … they can be technically beautiful … there's a skill and a craft in the way that figures are rendered that is both beautiful and also very recognisable as belonging to that tradition. Neo Rauch managed to move from East to West Berlin before the wall came down and he continued painting. If you Google his paintings, you will see images of human figures that seem to come from different time zones, and some very much come out of East Berlin. Others look like some version of the future that was popular in the 1970s. Some look back to tsarist Russia. But all of them are in some way either oppressing other people or being oppressed. (See Fig. 13 and Fig. 14.) They're put into a situation with it being judged by a value system from another time... I think they're great paintings. In some ways they're about this very idea, about how future or past generations judge us and how we judge past generations on the basis of our culture.

Alex commented on Rauch's mastery of technique in glowing terms.

> There are bits that are very tight and focused, which could almost be Caravaggian in the render. Then with other bits, there is a slapdash

> look about it. They look like they came from a B-movie from the 70s.

When it comes to interpreting Rauch's images, matters are opaque. He does not appear to be reacting against propaganda *per se*. As Alex noted, 'He is slightly more elusive than that.' He said:

> [Rauch] talks more about raising questions around how propaganda functions, rather than stating a particular view on how he thinks it functions. You may have noticed that we artists do that, to skirt around an issue and ask questions of the culture!
> But looking at his paintings, he doesn't think the politics of his time is so cool; he definitely sees it as an oppressive system. In his paintings, it's mostly men in suits. They could be estate agents or lawyers or something like that. And they are also oppressing other people at different times and systems.

Fig. 14: Neo Rauch, *Above the Roofs (Über den Dächer)*, 2014; *Conspiracy (Konspiration)*, 2004 *(both © Neo Rauch c/o David Zwirner, New York)* https://bit.ly/RauchDachern

The second artist whose work illustrates a rejection of the propagandist approach, frequently cited in this research, is Mark Rothko. There is a room dedicated to his *Seagram Murals* in London's Tate Modern, a room which seems designed to evoke the atmosphere of a chapel (Fig. 15).

> I think of what happens when people sit in front of Mark Rothko for at least half an hour. The colours start to move. You have a sense of being in front of that void. Sometimes it's very hard to say what is happening. But something *is* happening to you, that is an experience of the transcendent that comes to you through this medium of pigment and paints and surface. I've yet to meet someone who has the patience to stand in front of a Rothko for that amount of time who is not affected by them in some way.

Fig. 15: In the Rothko Room, Tate Modern, London *(author photo)*

Here, Rothko is Charles's propagandist for art itself. He proclaims no message; he prescribes no response. As Alex said, 'It [is] very chapel like, but without specific images of saints or anything. It is just colour and form.'

The work of both artists, in different ways, defies the propagandist mentality: Rauch defies propaganda's reductionism because of his unsettling provisionality and subversion; Rothko defies propaganda's rationalism, dispensing with figure and narrative altogether, settling instead for an absolute commitment to vague forms and rich colours.

Summary of The Problems with Propaganda

None of the participants in this research felt inclined to produce propagandistic work because its nature runs counter to their philosophies of art and their standard artistic practice. Furthermore, despite having a general conception of what they are trying to achieve when they set out on a new project (such as to innovate or develop professionally), they stated they rarely have clear ideas of how the project will end. This reflected the common artistic desire to explore ideas or challenges through the means of their craft. Several testified to the need to ask questions more than they offer answers, a process that is incompatible with propaganda because of its concern to insist, assert, and demand assent.

Christian engagement with the arts often fails to understand the danger of propaganda, which explains the prevalence of kitsch and banality. The church generally needs a better grasp of how creative professionals work. The church must understand the capacities of art to open eyes and encourage searching, as opposed to the proclamation and assertion of truth.

Summary of Findings

Creative professionals in the West are sensitive to the secularism of the prevailing culture, as all the participants testified. This informs their artmaking such that it illustrates a resistance and immersion within the culture, while simultaneously making connections with the haunted immanence experienced by so many. They testified to the power of their artforms to communicate reality beyond a reductionistic rationalism, and they have witnessed how their art has contributed to 'removing the film of familiarity'. Their processes were built on years of training and experience within their fields of expertise, so they are able to grow and stretch themselves professionally as they explore new ground and challenges.

All of this has made them resistant to hints of the propagandistic, whether it be for political or religious ends, because their goals, processes, and artistic values run counter to the nature of propaganda.

Chapter Five

Church Conversations and the Future

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore how artists seek to expose secular audiences who inhabit the immanent frame to the plausibility of transcendence while avoiding the pitfalls of propaganda.

The following questions guided the qualitative research:

(i) To what extent are the artists aware of the impact of secularism in contemporary society? How does it affect their religious beliefs (if any)? In what ways does it motivate their creative process? How conscious of worldview issues are artists during their creative process?

(ii) In what ways do the artists understand the power of the arts to communicate transcendent reality to 'immanent frame' inhabitants? What goals do the artists have at the start of the creative process? What makes transcendent reality more plausible for artists?

(iii) What methods do the artists include in the creative process? To what extent is communicating transcendence a goal?

(iv) How do the artists understand the nature of propaganda? To what extent are artists engaged with problems of propaganda? To what extent do artists seek to avoid propaganda when communicating transcendent realities?

Research Summary

This study reviewed relevant literature in four areas and analysed interview data from eight Christian creative professionals. The literature review confirmed the central importance of transcendent reality for the Christian message and the ways in which it intersects with immanent frame. A close examination of the biblical narrative shows that the relationship between divine transdendence and human immanence is not a contrastive, zero-sum game; rather it is a question of parallel dimensions. The primary impediment for divine intervention is not ontological but moral; sin bars humanity from God's holy presence. Yet because love lies at the heart of his transcendence, he overcomes it, ultimately through the Incarnation. This underlines the value and dignity of the material for God, and the intersection between the two dimensions gives a paradigm for understanding how the arts can have value.

Despite the many historic causes of suspicion about the arts, their capacity for shedding light on the nature of reality has never been more needed. For those willing to give patient attention, the arts offer powerful means for counteracting widespread Western malaise. However, care is required because in the background, the arts have become a tempting substitute for religion in the lives of many shaped by Secularity$_2$ and Secularity$_3$. From a theological point of view, this is expected: artefacts made by those created in the *Imago Dei* will consequently bear the hallmarks of their makers' Creator. The arts can never bear the full weight of religion, but in their right place, they possess an extraordinary capacity to connect the immanent frame to the transcendent. Further care is necessary to prevent the arts from being exploited as propaganda tools, even in the church. Not only does this undermine its integrity and gospel message, but it also reveals

flawed convictions about God and human beings. Propagandistic utilisation corrupts the very attributes that makes the arts so potent.

The interviews revealed that creative professionals in the West tend to be sensitive to the secularism of the prevailing culture, as all the participants consistently testified. This informs their artmaking such that it illustrates both a resistance and immersion within the culture, while it simultaneously makes connections with the haunted immanence experienced by so many. Participants testified to the power of their artforms to communicate reality beyond a reductionistic rationalism. Their processes build on years of training and experience within their fields of expertise, so they are able to grow and stretch themselves professionally as they explore new challenges. All of this makes them resistant to hints of the propagandistic, whether it be for political or religious ends, because their goals, processes and artistic values all run counter to the nature of propaganda.

Conversations

The pastor hints at an eyeroll, one that is perceptible only to those who know him well, when a professional painter explains her conviction that God's plan really is for her to work at her easel for hours on end. When she then confidently declares that God was clearly speaking to visitors at her most recent show, his gentle scepticism evolves into pastoral concern. It is a strong assertion, and one at which those steeped in the evangelical doctrine of revelation will probably quake.

An outstanding young musician from a 'politically challenging' Asian country comes to Christ while at a London conservatoire. She seeks advice from one of her ministers because she is so troubled by the nagging doubts about the value of her chosen

profession. She has to spend six or seven hours a day practising her instrument alone. A handful of Christian friends had started to question her so-called 'eternal priorities'. After all, how can she witness to all her non-believing friends if she spends the best part of each day inside a closed practice room?

An English literature graduate moved to London with dreams of becoming a scriptwriter. She simultaneously gets stuck into her local church while landing what seems like the perfect starter job in the writers' room of a popular British soap opera. It is a 'second-tier' daytime show, so this attracts wry and occasionally snobbish comments from Christian friends, but she ignores them. She is delighted by the opportunity. One of her trickier assignments is to run a storyline about two central characters who have an affair, but she writes to the best of her ability. This writing provokes some confusion, if not hostility, from members of her fellowship group. 'How can she do this as a Christian?' Her explanation that she is not afraid to write about sin but always insists on writing in sin's consequences, in contrast to many more relativistic writers. This explanation does not convince them, especially after one member reprimands her for disobeying Paul's injunction to think about 'whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable'[1].

These scenarios are largely based on three individuals known to the researcher. Each has gone on to pursue a career in their chosen profession with notable success, but their experiences will be familiar to most creative professionals in churches. If the arts are to be harnessed as part of gospel witness, church leaders have much to learn, both about the nature of the artistic life and how the arts 'work'. The testimony of the

[1] Philippians 4:8.

participants in this research makes a significant contribution to this need. As lessons gleaned from the literature review are combined with their insights, it will be evident how important the arts are for the wellbeing of both church and society.

God-Meeting: Moses, Jesus, & Artists

The fact that God reveals himself by means of a narrative presents great theological challenges as well as artistic opportunities. The research did not find a satisfyingly neat system at the root of created reality, as if what was needed most was something akin to a vast engineer's blueprint to the Space Shuttle. Instead, God reveals himself as personal and sovereign, a Trinity whose name is Love. Immersed in that narrative, people have an encounter—a meeting between individuated persons—rather than an intellectual acquiescence to an abstraction or proposition. A relationship lies at the heart of created reality.

Naturally, this is no relationship of peers. Personhood does not entail equivalence, but when Creator and creature meet, there is a genuine, mutual encounter with an 'other'. It is striking that throughout this narrative, this encounter is something the Creator seeks. This is why the tragedy in Eden is epitomised by the sadness of the man and woman hiding, followed by their banishment from the garden.[2] This is the broadest context for the theophanies experienced by Moses in Exodus. In every case, as exemplified at the burning bush and then at Mount Sinai, YHWH takes the initiative to address his chosen leader. It could never be otherwise since the creature can never have a hold on the Creator.

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[2] Genesis 3:8, 24.

The distance between finite creature and infinite God is insurmountable for creatures. Because of the banishment from Eden, the moral obstacle to human access to a holy God is insuperable. If YHWH is again to be God living among his people in a restored Eden—his anointed king is to be given the title Immanuel in an allusion to the days when YHWH strolled around his garden 'in the cool of the day'[3]—the initiative can only be top-down. It can only be of grace. Only a transcendent God can invade the immanent frame, however mysterious or inconceivable that is to its inhabitants. The fact that he has crossed into this frame is a thread consistently woven throughout the narrative. This is what binds Moses' experience of God with the Incarnation as proclaimed in John's prologue.

God Is Sovereign in His World

A Creator is entitled to act as he sees fit. He is sovereign. Many texts assert the justice and morality of his deeds.[4] Theologians have long wondered how to recognise his deeds. This was, of course, precisely the problem at the root of the first-century Jewish rejection of Christ's authority, as Paul discussed in his Corinthian correspondence. Neither Jewish religious nor Greek philosophical frameworks were sufficiently broad to encompass the possibility of an Incarnation, let alone an event as dark as the crucifixion. For:

> Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to

[3] Isaiah 7:14.

[4] See, for example, Psalm 24:1; Job 38:12, 40:8-9; Romans 9:20.

> Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks,
> Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.[5]

At the cross, defying the devotion of the most God-fearing theologians and the logic of the most brilliant thinkers, the transcendent God sovereignly intervened. The cross is the true paradigm of what constitutes power and weakness, wisdom, and folly, in the kingdom of God. This ought to provoke a hesitation in any person who dares to discern what is, and what is not, a divine intervention. By extension, there should be a pause before an impulsive rejection of the participants' testimonies. Their conviction is that their creative work may be used by God, sometimes in extraordinary and unexpected ways. He is sovereignly at work through the human weakness and frailty of their own work.

This is not to suggest a theological free-for-all that dispenses with the benchmark foundations of revelation.[6] Along with de Gruchy, Turnau, Dillenberger, and Calvin, the church best be wary of aggrandizing the arts to the extent that they gain the unequivocal authority of divine speech. Rather, the caution is to warn against intellectual rigidity and religious presumption. The scandal and mystery of Christ's cross is both the rock from which the church should never shift and the reminder that God's ways will never be confined to our ways.[7]

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[5] 1 Corinthians 1:22-24.

[6] See, for example, 1 John 4:1.

[7] Isaiah 55:8.

God Works through His Workers

Despite their full immersion in secularism, the participants have moments of breaking through Seamus Heaney's 'frontier of language'. Jake is instinctively aware of being 'a whole person' rather than the pale, reductionist version of scientific materialism, when he interacts with other people at the deepest levels. He cannot deny God's unexpected work in his friend's 'ruin of a life'. This wholeness is certainly what Jake conveys in his filmmaking, so that he does more than simply connect 'on the emotional level'. Similarly, by adopting Merleau-Ponty's concept of attunement, Alex has found a way of articulating his experience of God in the studio. Just as Eskil does not require God to guide his every marking on the musical manuscript, so Alex does not believe that he is a remote-controlled automaton. He is the composite of his years of training, experience, reading, circumstances, and immediate context. By finding the intermediate stage between imagination and reason, he finds himself conscious of God's work in and through him. This is entirely consistent with the sense of immanence and transcendence not being contrastive but different dimensions. This is no zero-sum game. Alex works, and God works. It is possible to go further. Alex senses that he also works in ways that reflect the ways God works. He notes that the supreme vindication of the worthiness of materiality is Jesus' willingness to become flesh with us. This is why his 'playing in the mud' can be a spiritual act of incarnation, as he manipulates the pigments and oils made out of crushed beetles and rocks to create forms and impressions smeared on canvas in innovative ways. The result is that a painting mysteriously becomes more than the sum of its parts, as Charles explained.

Gallery visitors are presented with 'a very strange phenomenon' when viewing a painting: it is 'in the world and not in the world simultaneously'. As Magritte's painting

informs us, we are *not* looking at a pipe. He is playing with us, enjoying a ruse with what might be called the language of painting. The depiction of reality is not to be confused with reality itself. The paradox is that the depiction of reality may reveal the nature of reality better than our experience of reality. Therefore, the significance of this artform cannot be confined to a merely immanent plane.

The same is true of music, which John contends is the 'most spiritual of artforms'. As Vaughan Williams said, through music 'we can look through the magic casements and see what lies beyond'.[8] Is it any wonder that even non-religious people reach for religious language to articulate the effect of music, just as John described? The language of immanence seems too trifling and limp. This is music's mystery. However, it represents the entire experience of life within a closed immanence. Just as the arts can never bear the weight expected of them as ersatz religions, so are all worldviews confined to immanence. The *Sehnsucht* powerfully articulated by Julian Barnes and C. S. Lewis is inevitable for those with a sensitivity to the need for significance. But Barnes was unable to progress from the 'first kind of loneliness', whereby he longed for the 'unspecifiable'.[9] He has not taken the step which Lewis took in specifying what he longed for, which he termed joy. Lewis recognised that no apparition caused the culture's sense of haunting. Jesus' analogy for the Holy Spirit is that his invisible power is discerned in his unpredictable impact, just as with the wind.[10] Similarly, a Christian living in secular times will still insist that the haunting is the result of transcendent reality. The Christian

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[8] MacMillan, "Ralph Vaughan Williams."

[9] Barnes, *Levels of Life* 112

[10] John 3:8.

God, whose deicide Nietzsche had hubristically trumpeted, nevertheless remains. God is still at work, even when he seems to have absented himself.

It was intriguing that John brought up Shusako Endo's searing novel *Silence* during his explanation of the 'umbilical ink' between music and silence. 'Music goes out of silence', but it is crucial to grasp what composers instinctively know, namely that 'the silence is not absence or *nihil*, but presence'. As John understands him, this is precisely Endo's point. In the novel, Portuguese missionaries appear to have been wholly defeated; the protagonist succumbs to treading the *fumi-e*, his capacity for resistance crushed. Rodrigues's capitulation is accompanied by the crowing of the cock. But John's comment sent me back to the end of the novel, and I was reminded of Rodrigues's pitiful recollection of that fateful moment.

> I, too stood on the sacred image. For a moment this foot was on his face. It was on the face of the man who has been ever in my thoughts, on the face that was before me on the mountains, in my wanderings, in prison, on the best and most beautiful face that any man can ever know, on the face of him whom I have always longed to love. Even now that face is looking at me with the eyes of pity from the plaque rubbed flat by many feet. 'Trample!' said those compassionate eyes. 'Trample! Your foot suffers in pain; it must suffer like all the feet that have stepped on this plaque. But that pain alone is enough. I understand your pain and your suffering. It is for that reason that I am here.'
> 'Lord, I resented your silence.'
> 'I was not silent. I suffered beside you.
> 'But you told Judas to go away: What thou dost do quickly. What happened to Judas?'
> 'I did not say that. Just as I told you to step on the plaque, so I told Judas to do now what he was going to do. For Judas was in anguish as you are now.'[11]

[11] Endo, *Silence*, 190.

Endo does not iron out the theological conundrums that he wades into, such as the mystery of Judas's betrayal, and I would not expect him to. But here he is explicit about God's accompaniment in the silence. The silence is not empty, nor is the immanent frame devoid of transcendence. God is at work even in the silence, and as Martha said, 'I just believe that God is working in people, and if he's not, then why are you bothering?!'

There is a serendipitous correspondence then to Amy's career-long project to explore spaces that evoke and echo something from beyond. The recent film-set project is particularly potent symbolically, a small reflection of the pulling back of the stage curtains that God gives in the book of Revelation perhaps. In painting the visible when it conveys the invisible, she achieves something almost sacramental. It certainly embraces the concerns of this research.

God Sees, but Do We See?

As Charles observed, many secular people today turn to artists in the hope that they might possess answers to life's secrets, as part of the fallout from religion's demise. As several participants were at pains to point out, artists tend to be far more interested in questions than answers, and as Martha implied, artists often create as they are still trying to establish what the questions are. This makes them less-than-straightforward members of any social group, let alone a traditional Christian community. Yet it is easy to overlook the value of creative professionals' propensity to explore. It rarely helps them to conform, but this means they play an indispensable part in God's economy, since their curiosity prevents a complacency with the status quo. They see what many fail to see. Theirs is a potentially prophetic role, to function in small ways as Dreyfus and Kelly interpreted

David Foster Wallace's suicide: the 'proverbial canary in the coal mine of modern existence.'[12]

Speaking in 2018, Andy Crouch described artists in similar terms. Without mentioning specific examples, he noted how often, in his experience, creative professionals were the first to notice something was 'off' about a local church, even though they might not be able to articulate exactly what. He cited a couple of the evangelical power-abuse scandals emerging at the time and noted that some of his artist friends had sensed something was wrong.[13] Many artists share a sensitivity to their surroundings as well as a determination to get to the heart of things, to ignore facades in order to truly see. Just as Picasso could 'see' the potentially fatal peritonitis in his friend's face without the slightest appreciation of its biochemical cause or processes, so artists see the flaws and failings in the surrounding culture, perhaps especially when that culture infiltrates the church. This perception is not simply a matter of sensitivity to abberration or inconsistency. It marks a resistance to the status quo or asserted versions of reality.

Since the rise of Enlightenment rationalism, artists have had a relentless attachment to the imagination. The Romantics embraced all means of knowing reality. Martha illustrates this well. She resists Enlightenment progressivism through a willingness to be 'transgressive', valuing those like Makoto Fujimura who embrace the past without embarrasment. Though she is sensitive and careful in how she does it, she is

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[12] Dreyfus, and Kelly, *All Things*, 26.

[13] Researcher's personal notes from Andy Crouch's lecture 'Why the Church needs Artists and Why Artists need the Church', The Rabbit Room's *Hutchmoot 2018*, Nashville, Tennessee.

determined to articulate the spiritual realities of life, frustrated with a culture that makes it feel 'like such a big deal to be able to talk about things that are deep in me.'

Sometimes an artist's curiosity leads to an exposure of hitherto unnoticed absurdity or contradiction. While this exposure can lead to trenchant satire, in Jake's case it offered tensions from which to create a compelling narrative. In his most recent film project, he was drawn to the incongruity of an ecclesiastical institution created to investigate miracles which meticulously employs rationalistic tools like scientific scepticism and logic. His protagonist, sent by the Vatican to an impoverished Dutch town to assess the claims, is a priest who is struggling to believe. Jake is not Catholic, but this does not mean he is motivated by sectarian agendas. He is merely trying to walk in the shoes of the people in the story: to understand them, empathise with them, and see them.

There is something God-like in that, by which I do not mean the caricature of the director on a filmset. One of the most striking details in the narrative of Abraham and Hagar is one of its most unexpected.

> She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: 'You are the God who sees me,' for she said, 'I have now seen the One who sees me.' That is why the well was called *Beer Lahai Roi*.[14]

As a slave woman, she is the epitome of powerlessness, unable to resist the whims or cruelty of Abraham and Sarai as a member of their entourage. Genesis 16 has its challenges because the Angel of the Lord still insists that Hagar return to her mistress. Nevertheless, the focus of her response is her unique privilege of granting to God a new epithet: 'the One who sees me.' God is not merely looking or observing. This is divine

[14] Genesis 16:13-14.

sight beyond the façade, which identifies distress and pain. As Gordon Wenham comments, 'For even in the wilderness he sought her and cared for her. And the well too commemorates that divine concern: *Beer-lahay-roi* means "Well of the living one who cares for me." In her moment of greatest distress, Hagar has discovered God's concern for her.'[15] For God, to see is to care. Generations later, Exodus will declare, 'God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them.'[16]

Because artists of all stripes tend to be better at seeing reality than those who blithely live without the same curiosity, the church should always pay them heed. Are they seeing things that God sees but which the rest of us overlooks?

God Speaks, but Do We Hear?

The prophet does not merely notice what others ignore or are blind to. Following the Davidic prototype in Nathan, the prophet also declares what is seen. This may not require propositions or imperatives. Nathan, and Jesus after him, used a parable to immerse his audience in a fiction. This was ideal for subverting expectations and catching the powerful unawares. Yet such a declaration may not even entail using words. The Jewish prophets were sometimes forced into symbolic and shocking action: Ahijah tore his cloak into ten pieces; Micah conveyed the agony of exile by walking barefoot and naked; Isaiah wore the rags of destitute prisoners of war for three years in Jerusalem.[17] The most famous example is Hosea and Gomer's divinely mandated marriage and

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[15] Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50, Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1994), 12.

[16] Exodus 2:25.

[17] 1 Kings 11:29-36; Micah 1:8; Isaiah 20:1-6.

dysfunctional family life. God may resort to extreme measures. When Jesus is commanded by some Pharisees to silence his disciples, he retorts, 'I tell you … if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.'[18] While in context that is likely rhetorical hyperbole, the scriptures bear witness to bizarre episodes, such as Balaam's talking donkey.[19]

However, there is no need to resort to the miraculous or outlandish to find God revealing himself through nonverbal means. Consider the intricacies of the construction of the Tabernacle, and then the Temple. YHWH filled the craftsman Bezalel:

> … with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills—to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver, and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood and to engage in all kinds of artistic crafts. And he has given both him and Oholiab son of Ahisamak, of the tribe of Dan, the ability to teach others. He has filled them with skill to do all kinds of work as engravers, designers, embroiderers in blue, purple, and scarlet yarn and fine linen, and weavers—all of them skilled workers and designers.[20]

[18] Luke 19:40.

[19] Numbers 22:28.

[20] Exodus 35:31-35.

The intricacy and specificity of the Torah instructions for the Tabernacle should alert readers to its importance. These go beyond mere functionality, for this construction was to form the centre of an Israelite's cosmos as the place of atonement and access to the throne room of heaven. The symbolism of its location at the very heart of Israel's twelve tribes spoke volumes, as did the various elements contained within the cordoned-off priests' area and then the Holy of Holies (Fig. 16). Each instruction was rich in theological meaning and covenantal resonance for those with the eyes to see and curiosity to investigate. None of this was accidental nor gratuitous, nor could such details be explained in purely functional terms. Aesthetics surely played a part.

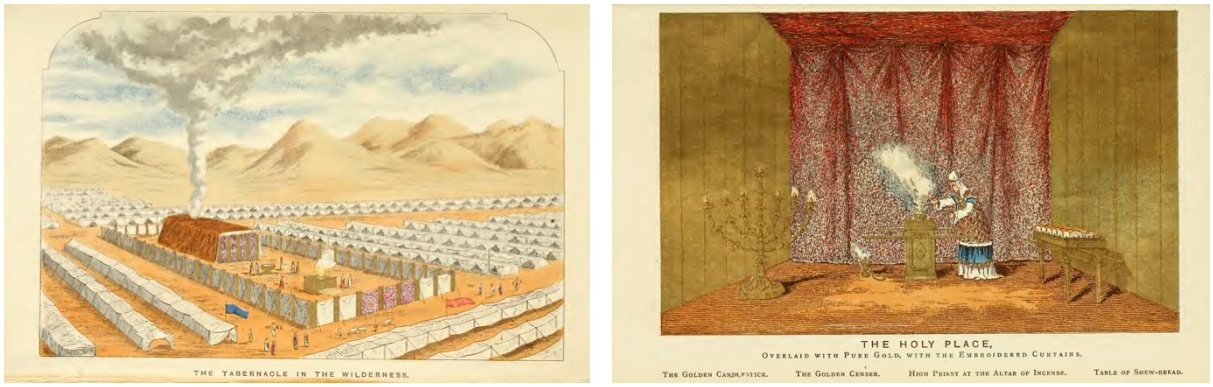

Fig. 16: Henry W. Soltau, *The Tabernacle in the Wilderness* & *The Holy Place*, 1875 *(Public domain)* https://bit.ly/TabernacleSoltau

By the time of the monarchy and Solomon's mission to give the Tabernacle permanence, the writer of Kings makes explicit allusions to the Exodus narrative:

> King Solomon sent to Tyre and brought Huram... Huram was filled with wisdom, with understanding and with knowledge to do all kinds of bronze work. He came to King Solomon and did all the work assigned to him.[21]

[21] 1 Kings 7:13-14.

When the construction is completed, the glory of YHWH descends and the temple is filled with the cloud, echoing what happened at the end of Exodus.[22] Apart from the obvious narrative resonance of the Temple's location on Mount Moriah, evoking Abraham's aborted sacrifice of Isaac, the most striking element of the building was its visibility in the city (Fig. 17). This would become a foundational liturgical image, as illustrated by Psalm 18 as well as the Songs of Ascents.[23] As the result of the skills and artistry of countless people, God speaks to his people and beyond.

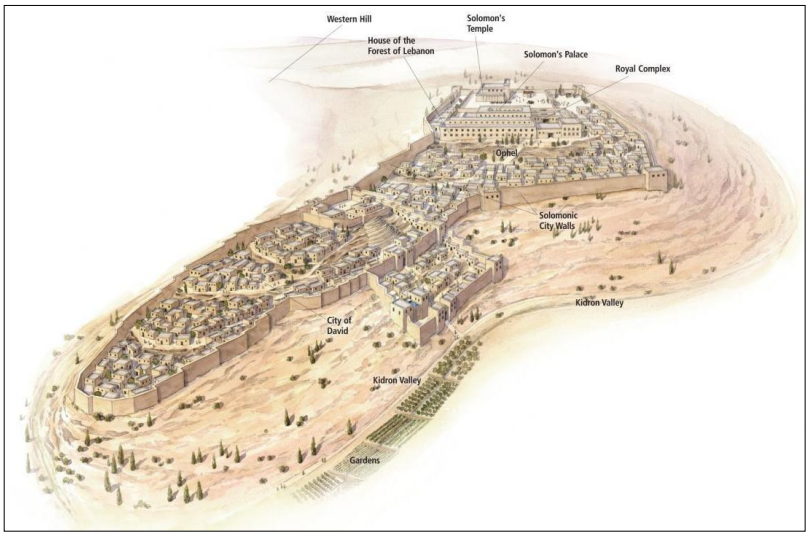

Fig. 17: Anon, *Artist's impression: Jerusalem in the Time of Solomon* (ESV Global Study Bible © 2008, 2011, and 2012 Crossway)

Geography and geometry play a part, through location and scale. Aesthetic concerns interplay with the requirements of functionality—colours, fabrics, and construction materials used in striking juxtaposition. All are combined with the sensory experience of a temple visit. Along with the sights that would seize the attention of pilgrims as they crested the horizon, there was the cacophony of people and sacrificial animals, not to mention the stench of viscera. Everything about the experience would have made its mark, as it was intended to. Who could possibly claim, after this, that God only makes

[22] 1 Kings 8:10-11, cf Exodus 40:34-38.

[23] Psalms 18:1-2, 46-50; 122: 1-2, 6-7; 125:1-2.

himself understood in propositional statements? Is it such a stretch to expect him to bring reality to people's attention, albeit in a less resounding and revelatory sense than in salvation history, through means of artisans and creative professionals—especially when they see what the majority fail to see? This surely explains Alex's encounter in Iceland or the ways John's and Martha's music has helped people return to church. It is how Amy made a connection with a young couple who bought one of her early works.

Truth-Bearing: Rationalists, Coleridge, & Artists

Of the eight participants, Michael has considered the challenges and dilemmas of communicating truth in the current age to the greatest depth. This is undoubtedly because his pastoral vocation is to minister within academia, while his poetic vocation is to create art with words. His grasp of Coleridge's counterpoint to the rationalism of Enlightenment thinkers is crucial. This point was subsequently championed by C. S. Lewis and Owen Barfield, among others. Michael is determined to challenge the plausibility structures of secularism because they blind people to reality as much as they enlighten them. Returning to Seamus Heaney's language frontier, Michael made the important point that 'the frontier is porous to the imagination, even if it is opaque to reason.' As Charles would have it, applying Sisson's appropriation of Sir Philip Sidney, 'I am of the party of the hippogriff.' Both reason and the imagination are essential for grasping truth because truth is revealed ultimately in the person of Christ. Michael commented that Coleridge's vision for poetry and the scientific quest are profoundly related. They are merely different tools; neither should be permitted to eclipse the other. Therefore, in appealing for the church to re-engage with the arts, I am not calling for a rejection of reason (the Romantic error), nor a marginalisation of revelation (the Liberal error). Instead, it is about restoring

human creativity to the God-given place of honour it was always meant to occupy in his economy. In their right place, the arts can provide vital correctives to how Secularity3 dwellers perceive reality, whether physical or metaphysical. Art does this in three crucial ways:

- Distillation without triviality: a guard against reductionism
- Mystery without confusion: a guard against rationalism
- Polyphony without chaos: a guard against relativism

Distillation without Triviality: A Guard against Reductionism

James Houston, British-Canadian theologian and founding principal of Vancouver's Regent College, was a geography tutor at Hertford College, Oxford, having completed his doctorate in 1950. During his Oxford years, Houston had been mentored by and become close friends with C. S. Lewis. A short time before Lewis took up his Cambridge professorship, Houston went to see him. In a recent interview, he remembered the conversation.

> In 1955 Lewis left to go to Cambridge… and that same spring I was getting married. I knew I wouldn't see him very much anymore and so I asked him, 'What is the most important message you want to communicate through your writing?' He responded, 'Against reductionism.' That was precisely what Lewis taught me most.[24]

Houston's interviewers, Jamin Goggin and Kyle Strobel, were surprised by Lewis's summary, but this prompted them to reflect on how it had shaped Houston's life and ministry. It is fascinating that Lewis regarded it as central to his own, and indeed, the sum

[24] Jamin Goggin, and Kyle Strobel, *The Way of the Dragon or the Way of the Lamb* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2017), 51.

of his writing fits, from the scholarly and literary to the fictional and apologetic. It is as if he was deliberately interrogating reality from a wide range of different perspectives, something for which his learning and gifts uniquely suited him. Lewis seems a brilliant exemplar of the teacher who is able to simplify complexity without being simplistic, a gift whose prerequisite is always committed labour. *Mere Christianity* is a case in point.

One of the roots of the success of scientific methodology is its relentless pursuit of the essence of things, down to the atomic and sub-atomic levels. The dividends are plain to see in its myriad applications from space travel to the eradication of smallpox. The problem comes when the same process is applied thoughtlessly to the whole of life, as if meaning can only be grasped when articulated in its most essential terms. Lewis understood this well, in *The Abolition of Man*, in his admittedly optimistic vision for what he calls 'regenerate science':

> The regenerate science which I have in mind would not do even to minerals and vegetables what modern science threatens to do to man himself. When it explained, it would not explain away. When it spoke of the parts, it would remember the whole. While studying the *It*, it would not lose what Martin Buber calls the *Thou*-situation. … Its followers would not be free with the words *only* and *merely*. In a word, it would conquer Nature without being at the same time conquered by her and buy knowledge at a lower cost than that of life.[25]

Lewis is not doing away with reason here. Michael underlined the importance of reason by marshalling what Augustine, Aquinas, and John Donne would have understood by it. Reason was the process by which human beings had to proceed towards the knowledge of God, 'faith seeking understanding', in contrast to the angels' knowledge of God, 'the

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[25] C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (London: Fount, 1999), 79.

knowledge of God which the highest angels had by direct apperception'. For human beings, reason starts with data drawn from revelation, both general and specific, and ultimately from 'Christ and him crucified.'[26] Michael continued:

> That's why Aquinas called theology a science: because it starts with data. It is not the kind of data that you can arrive at by reason, but it *is* the sort with which and from which you can reason. You then think it's reliable because the picture of the world that arises is a coherent picture and accounts for reality better than some other models do. Aquinas, of course, and others since, have pointed out that in fact there's not a massive difference there between that and a purely, radically sceptical reason. They must have certain axioms, including the validity of the process of reason itself, in order to work. So, all faith starts with something given from which we reason. The most obvious example of that, in terms of the whole edifice of contemporary science, is the presumption that there is something out there. Obviously, everything we know about the world is by definition something we know; it occurs as an event in our conscious mind which we credit as knowledge.

Whether Lewis was too optimistic in his vision for science is not the subject under discussion here. It has been evident over the last few centuries that artists of all kinds remind society how to hold reason and imagination in tension. Begbie wrote, 'The arts can act as powerful challenges to *reductionism*.'[27] A well-crafted narrative can achieve what no précis will ever manage, however accurate it is. A poem in which repetition is an integral device, such as Psalm 136, may be summarised legimately as a song of praise for God's covenant faithfulness through early Israelite history. To suggest it is *only* that is to rob it of its emotional force, of which those repetitions are a crucial element.

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[26] 1 Corinthians 2:2.

[27] Begbie, *Redeeming Transcendence*, 161-163.

The difficulty of reductionism only grows when the artform tends towards abstraction, visually or musically. A Beethoven symphony and a Debussy piano miniature defy rectionism, as do Botticelli and Rothko masterpieces. That may also be the case when words veer towards abstraction. The best artefacts stimulate almost infinite discussion and reflection because they can never be reduced. They are too complex.

This complexity does not deny the possibility of finding thematic coherence or underlying threads. In fact, a good critic can distil the meaning of a masterpiece to aid understanding, enjoyment, and immersion. But this should never be taken as a substitute for the artefacts themselves, as if all that mattered was becoming a walking CliffsNotes or Wikipedia entry. The arts will not allow for that. Reality is always far bigger than the propositions that try to summarise it. Failure to grasp this has been one cause of the contemporary sense of triviality which so affected Martha. Nothing feels substantial, but that is inevitable in a world of soundbites and slogans. If the arts have a common theme, it is surely that life is ‘more complicated than that’.

Too many strands within evangelicalism fail to grasp this, sometimes out of fear of liberalism and cultural compromise, sometimes out of fear of deviation from mission priorities and a proclamation focus. There is a grim irony here. The healthy desire for faithfulness can lead to an obsessiveness with certain modes of engagement with the world, without recognising how culturally conditioned or narrow they have become. In reducing Christian ministry and biblical communication to the propositional, churches risk appealing solely to the cerebral and rational—in effect, the educated middle class—rather than to the gamut of lived experience brought under the Lordship of Christ. Thus,

ministers' resolve to be single-minded and faithful can result in faithlessness to the realities of the people they serve.

The arts are ideal antidotes to this problem. They invite people to reflect on different ways of seeing, hearing, or being without imposition, insistence, or conditions. Alex spoke about this in the thought experiment about illustrating a sermon about heaven. He deliberately offered a partial response by suggesting the de Zurbarán painting and knowingly tackling the preacher's question from an oblique angle. There was never a claim to sufficiency nor comprehensiveness. Yet the image is so arresting, even to those who are familiar with it, that it provokes questions about its relevance to the topic. It becomes an easy stimulus for further dialogue.

Fig. 18: 'Amy', *Descent*, 2011 (© the artist; *photo credit: Rowan Durant*)

Another case in point is the conversation prompted by one of Amy's paintings, a vast work she made during a residence in an English church. Staircases have been an important motif for her, and for this piece she painted a spiral staircase on several adjoined canvases, measuring 11m (36ft) in height (Fig. 18).

> The painting was called 'Descent'. I remember, when doing this residency, a friend of mine was like, 'Shouldn't it be called Ascent?'

> And I said, 'No! Because actually the story of Jacob's Ladder is a story about God *coming down*, not us building our way up to him.' A fundamental misunderstanding of what it means to know God. It is not about what you do. I just always thought it really interesting that he thought I'd made a mistake.

A helpful, substantial discussion about the nature of God's grace ensued with someone who ordinarily would not have spared time for a sermon.

Mystery Without Confusion: A Guard Against Rationalism

A word like 'mystery' can be a convenient evasion, a means of escaping serious engagement with metaphysical complexity. Secularity$_2$ rationalists will regard it as such, unlikely to see the metaphysical as legitimate. Richard Dawkins even places it in inverted commas in a succinctly barbed section of a relentlessly polemical book.

> … Christians should warm to such sophistry. Rivers of medieval ink, not to mention blood, have been squandered over the 'mystery' of the Trinity, and in suppressing deviations such as the Arian heresy. Arius of Alexandria, in the fourth century AD, denied that Jesus was consubstantial (i.e., of the same substance or essence) with God. What on earth could that possibly mean, you are probably asking? Substance? What 'substance'? What exactly do you mean by 'essence'? 'Very little' seems the only reasonable reply. Yet the controversy split Christendom down the middle for a century, and the Emperor Constantine ordered that all copies of Arius's book should be burned. Splitting Christendom by splitting hairs—such has ever been the way of theology.[28]

Dawkins's scorn oozes through his compelling rhetoric, despite its preoccupation with straw men, as if theology is mere sophistry about meaningless terms. In his view, mystery

[28] Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Black Swan, 2006), 54.

is a means to dignify obscurantism. The connotations of the word are very different for the cross-pressured nomads of Secularity3. For them, mystery is a verbal shrug that yields to the impossibility of confidence in choosing from so many metaphysical options.

It need not be like this. Mystery can be a legitimately humble response in the face of unfathomable complexity, inevitable when finite minds grapple with realities that transcend the finite. How could it be otherwise? Accepting mystery represents neither resignation nor anti-intellectualism. It does not preclude ongoing engagement and reflection. Rather, it is a matter of recognising from the data that finding coherence between ostensibly contradictory truths is beyond the scope of the human mind. That is a very different thing from suggesting that coherence can never be found. What hubris to presume all reality will be comprehensible to the human mind! 'Paradox' is a word that has recurred in this thesis, but like 'mystery', it does not indicate a failure to think deeply. It may be that the only way to approach apparently contradictory but evidently true ideas is by accepting paradox as a reality. In other words, the data available has made both conclusions inexorable.

Part of the fascination of the arts in general is that they beguile through paradox, often in the form of a fiction. Painting gives the illusion of three-dimensional space and movement, despite being frozen in time on two dimensions. Sculpture shares a similar fixity, although within three dimensions, while conveying an illusion of life and activity. Theatrical drama occurs within an artificially limited space and time but gives the illusion of eavesdropping on reality. Cinema lacks that presence but is far less limited in space. Nevertheless, it gives a similar illusion of presence and ongoing reality, whether from an Olympian height or at ground level. Fiction uses words to evoke and describe, to allude

or conceal, but offers the illusion of divine omniscience or the effect of reading minds. Poetry achieves the illusion of an experience through even the most pared-down words. Music casts the listener into an illusion of changed circumstances or emotional reality. Dance gives a physical embodiment of that aural reality in an artificially enclosed space and thus gives the illusion of emotional reality through movement. Finally, opera seeks to combine many of these illusions in one form, compounding the illusion of emotional reality through the power of the human voice.

All art forms are fictions to communicate truth and reality. To that extent, to adopt Sidney's term, they are indeed 'lies' without the ethical connotations of the word. This is by no means to disparage them. Flannery O'Connor perhaps speaks for many artists when she writes, 'I'm always irritated by people who imply that writing fiction is an escape from reality. It is a plunge into reality.'[29] And, the arts are a plunge into mystery because that is the nature of reality; they are a plunge into paradox.

Therefore, the arts are necessary for bringing us up short and forcing us to recognise the provisionality of all knowledge. Indeed, as Coleridge understood, they prove to us that our knowing does not depend exclusively upon reason. This is not to suggest that our knowledge is anti-rational, but that it comes through a variety of means. The imagination is crucial, as we have already seen:

> …to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention to the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and

[29] O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 77.

> selfish solicitude, we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand![30]

How easy would it be to succumb to the 'lethargy of custom' and 'film of familiarity' if reason were the only means of grasping the nature of things? It takes the shock of a parable or the absurdity of an unexpected juxtaposition to remind us of our full humanity and that of others. A personal experience of this phenomenon occurred while writing this chapter.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has galvanised countless responses among the latter's allies, and this includes many Christian ministries. One immediate need is to find relief for the largest refugee crisis the world has seen since the end of the Second World War, so a few of us have created a process to make at least a small contribution.[31] A fortnight after launching it, I encountered a sculpture which stopped me in my tracks. I was involved in helping refugees, out of a Christian compassion but also a love for many individual Ukrainian friends. I imagined what it would be like if I walked in their shoes. But this sculpture had a visceral impact that hitherto personal imagination, and even friends' testimonies, had not. Bruno Catalano is a French sculptor born in Morocco and now based in Marseilles.

Fig. 19: Bruno Catalano, *Les Voyageurs*, including *Le Grand van Gogh*, 2016, *(© the artist)* https://bit.ly/CatalanoVoyageurs

[30] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*,, vol ii, 7.

[31] A service to match hosts with fleeing Ukrainians UkraineConnect.net.

He has made a name through his sculptures of people on a journey, sometimes carrying luggage, often with the features of a famous figure or a friend, such as Vincent van Gogh in Fig. 19. But each sculpture is hollowed out in some way, as if the person is missing something: their identity, security, or hope. Without words or propositions, the custom of lethargy, brought on by statistics and headlines, was swept away. Yet Catalano is not claiming to fully grasp what it feels like to flee. He evokes the pain and grief through a literal void where the viewer expects substance. It is allusive, provocative, and empathetic. It starts a dialogue; it does not close it down. It conforms to how Seerveld said the arts can work: 'Artistic truth has its own ontic legitimacy that is not in competition with other modes of knowledge that may also bode epiphanies of God's blessing to those *who are busy thinking, speaking, or doing just deeds*.'[32]

This is precisely what Martha seeks for her audience. As she said, it is 'so important for people to make connections of their own and to inhabit the mystery of life'. Far from avoiding reality, this is an embrace of reality, with humble curiosity and expectation. It is also what John described as the attraction of music for so many. A rationalist might reduce music to 'the manipulation of sound' as if that is a sufficient explanation for its power. That could just as well describe the roar of a fighter jet performing a low altitude pass. It is breathtakingly powerful. It could knock people off their feet or even trigger a serious coronary episode. Few would describe that sound as 'music'; fewer still would suggest, as John does for music, that it 'makes powerful connections with the human psyche and soul'. Yet this is what makes music 'a

[32] Seerveld, in *Truth Matters Knowledge, Politics, Ethics, Religion*, 302 (emphasis mine).

mysterious thing' and why people frequently resort to 'quasi-religious terminology' to describe it. That is not irrational; it is not completely rational either.

To return briefly to Dawkins's polemic, the Trinity is the target of choice for rationalists who seek to crush by disdain. It is easy to render it intellectually absurd and therefore contemptible. Yet to describe the Trinity as a mystery is not to abandon the mind. It is to embrace human finitude. It is striking that the psalm Michael used to illustrate his poetic exploration of the Psalter was Psalm 27. His poem is worth quoting in full because in it, he achieves a remarkable synergy of several themes under discussion.

> Oh let me see with his eyes from now on
> Whose gaze on beauty makes it beautiful,
> Who looks us into love and looks upon
>
> His whole creation with a merciful
> And loving eye. My heart has said of him
> Seek out his face, I've sensed his bountiful
>
> Presence shimmering behind the dim
> Veil of things. That presence calls to me
> Calls me to tremble at the brink and rim
>
> Of lived experience, and then to free
> Myself of fear, to trust him, and to dive
> Right off that brink, into his mystery
>
> Into that deep and holy sea of love
> In which the living worlds all float and swim
> To dare each moment's death, that I might live.

The poetic journey takes readers from a yearning for the divine presence, like Moses in Exodus 33, the presence he has sensed 'shimmering behind the dim veil of things'. Here he is standing at Heaney's 'frontier of language'. But what he grasps, following on from Steiner and Polanyi, is that knowledge depends on trust. Because this is about knowledge of a person and not of objective facts—although the objective reality of God is a fact—it

cannot be reduced to the propositional. To know that divine person, especially for the first time, we must experience him. A relationship must be entered. This is no blind leap, but a dive into the unknown, into the mystery of God's essence and nature. To describe it as such is to embrace the fact that entering this relationship means entering another dimension altogether—that of a 'holy sea of love' in which one can float and swim and live. Ultimately, true knowledge is relational, which is precisely what one would expect to find if all reality is the conception of a relational, Trinitarian God.

Polyphony Without Chaos: A Guard Against Relativism

Within a closed immanent frame, an imaginative articulation of knowledge seems implausible, just one of scores of metaphysical convictions that are meaningless and absurd. While a religious life within Secularity$_3$ is less contentious than in Secularity$_2$ contexts, it is hard to break through the *laissez-faire* apathy of those who have thoughtlessly imbibed the scepticism of the closed frame. Yet the arts have a way of undermining implausibility.

As seen in his prison correspondence, Bonhoeffer was mesmerised by the polyphony of Schutz and Bach and spent the interminable hours of his confinement reflecting on the applications this observation might have beyond music. A case in point is the direct link made to Christology.

> Where the *cantus firmus* is clear and distinct, a counterpoint can develop as mightily as it wants. The two are 'undivided and yet distinct,' as the Definition of Chalcedon says, like the divine and human natures in Christ. Is that perhaps why we are so at home with polyphony in music, why it is important to us, because it is the

> musical image of this christological fact and thus also our *vita christiana*?[33]

Bonhoeffer's point is that polyphony is no mere metaphor. It is an articulation of the nature of reality as it was created. Plurality and individuality can coexist simultaneously. This gets to the heart of how music works, but it also presents a model for how people were made to live in community. It neither results in the inevitable fragmentation from individualism, nor the dehumanising oblivion of communism. One. And Many. 'Undivided and yet distinct.'

Other artforms are, to a lesser degree, able to convey aspects of this idea. The polyvalence of Dostoyevsky's novels was cited by several interview participants. Graham Greene's advocacy of what he calls 'the virtue of disloyalty'[34] is another description, and it corresponds to Jake's change of heart over whom to love in his screenwriting: the audience or his characters? He switched his allegiance to the latter because he realised it was impossible to write convincing scripts without being faithful to his characters. Each must have a distinct voice for the drama to work, while at the same time, there needs to be a narrative arc. Too much writing fails through an inability to do justice to both the story and the characters within it.

The perfect illustration of this failure comes from the very first scene of one of Mozart's final comic operas, *Cosi fan Tutte*, usually translated as 'Women are like that'. In a less than savoury plot, two soldiers in a cafe are challenged by Don Alfonso to a wager over their fiancées' fidelity. The soldiers are sure the women will be steadfast,

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[33] Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 385-6.

[34] Allain, *Other Man*, 75.

while the Don is adamant about the fickleness of all women. So, they plan to pretend to head off to war, return in disguise, and attempt to seduce one other's fiancée. At the dockside, Don Alfonso and the two women wave the soldiers off, singing a trio, *Soave sia il vento*, 'May the wind be gentle'. It is one of Mozart's most sublime compositions, the perfect balance of orchestral colours evoking the breeze, weaving, heartfelt harmonies, and simultaneously, entirely contrasting psychologies. The trio sing virtually the same text but, with brilliant dramatic irony, the audience knows that they mean very different things by their words.

> May the wind be gentle,
> may the sea be calm,
> may all the elements
> respond favorably
> to our/your wishes.[35]

The key is that final line. The audience knows that the ensuing action will be anything but calm. The women's wish is clearly for their men to stay safe; Don Alfonso is secretly anticipating winning his bet at the women's expense; and the soldiers are counting on the women's fidelity so that the Don pays. All of this is conveyed in the space of three minutes.

If a human musician can create something utterly sublime out of this sordid tale, how much more might the reality of a creator God, whose unity is complex and trinitarian, become a plausible mystery?

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[35] Burton D. Fisher, *Mozart's Da Ponte Operas* (Miami, FL: Opera Journeys, 2007), 277.

Reality-Sharing: Chesterton & Orwell vs Bloomsbury & Galleries

As we have seen, Chesterton regarded propaganda as a positive occupation, one that was fundamental to the greatness of an artist's output. He cites Kipling and Shaw to make his point, to show that he is not making judgments about their convictions *per se*, only the fact of their convictions. The Bloomsbury set, and Virginia Woolf in particular, sought to encourage art for art's sake. To allow politics to shape or motivate it was to taint and diminish it. Orwell and Auden radically disagreed, with the former seeing his participation in Spain's Republican cause as equally on the spectrum of political engagement as his subsequent writing. In the current climate of secularism, if the experience of some of the participants is an indication, the pendulum has swung back towards the Bloomsbury side. Rather, certain viewpoints are no longer acceptable, such as Alex's readiness to be outspoken about his Christian faith, while others are perhaps encouraged, as Charles testified from his encounters with art schools and Amy described from recent exhibitions she has visited. Not all propaganda is created equal. Nevertheless, if the church is to embrace artistic creativity as part of its mission and ministry, it needs to establish how to do this well, without degenerating into a spiritualised form of propaganda's worst tendencies. In light of the literature review and participant interviews, I have identified three elements that must be in place for the church to succeed in embracing the arts.

Convictions Without Propaganda

Convictions are by no means incompatible with art-making. Indeed, it would be hard to defend telling Christians to leave their convictions behind when making art. As Alex demonstrated, his Christian beliefs inform and motivate his painting. As he said, 'I

would find it difficult to be a painter if I wasn't a Christian.' Chesterton agreed. His advocacy of 'propaganda' used the word without its subsequent totalitarian connotations. The problem is that modern sceptics tend to blur distinctions between all propaganda. Putin's social media manipulations before the 2016 Brexit vote and Trump victory get bracketed with Goebbels' Nuremberg rallies and even Vatican-commissioned Renaissance masterpieces. It is unsurprising that none of the participants sensed that their output had a connection with 'propaganda' as such.

The fundamental issue is not about underlying convictions but about posture. What is true for art-making should be true for Christian ministry. The posture must be one of humble invitation, an offering which leaves the range of options open, however stark or challenging the message. Compelling a response by whatever means, whether through manipulation, force, or deceit, is an abuse of power. Compulsion is also a denial of a fundamental ministry principle articulated by the apostle in his Corinthian correspondence. He is referring to proclamation ministry, and it is a mistake to assume that the artist's task is identical to the preacher's. Nevertheless, the principle surely stands that all should have 'renounced secret and shameful ways' such as deception and distortion.[36]

The notion that any participants might need such an admonition seems ludicrous. Each has a working practice, whether the raw materials are paint, words, crotchets, or film, whose primary agenda is driven by curiosity and exploration. This is not to say they are immune from darker forces, and in fact, several were conscious of the possibilities for manipulation, for example. Eskil knows that he can exploit all the tricks of his musical

[36] 2 Corinthians 4:2.

trade to induce certain emotions or responses. Jake is conscious of cinema being an ‘empathy machine’, which is precisely why it can be such a powerful propaganda tool. It is no accident that the USSR and Nazi Germany made such effective use of the likes of Sergei Eisenstein and Leni Riefenstahl. The common factor in preserving artistic integrity is the perennial desire for personal development and improvement. John spoke for many when he explained that, while success was gratifying, ‘almost immediately the next anxious thought is how to do it better next time.’ It is a mark of creative professionals that they are compelled to pursue their art relentlessly, success or no success. It is an insecure way of life because so few achieve success as conventionally measured. But this constant commitment to learn, develop, and grow is what sets them apart from those who merely dabble or enjoy these artforms.

It should be evident by now that others’ expectations of artists are invariably incompatible with how they operate. The suggestion that they could create when ordered within predetermined parameters is unrealistic, unless the artists have embraced that mode of working, such as a composer working in films or a painter illustrating books. Even then, it is highly unlikely that they would be prepared to allow their art to have ‘a palpable design’ on people. By this phrase, Keats did not imply an aversion to artistic composition or structure, but to having agendas for recipients. What he says here of poetry should equally apply to all artforms.

> We hate poetry that has a palpable design on us … Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself —but with its subject.[37]

A ‘palpable design’ undermines the integrity of the artwork. One of the difficulties faced by all creative professionals is the impossibility of truly grasping their own intentions quite apart from predicting possible outcomes and interpretations. Too many variables are at play in both poet and reader. To imagine otherwise is to invite charges of ignorance and folly.

In summary, convictions about reality and about the specific business of art-making are important and necessary, especially for the artist’s perseverance. The rest is a matter of trust and discovery.

Witness Beyond Programmes

Those with the mentality of the logistics manager or systems engineer might find the artistic temperament a source of frustration, as their success depends entirely on the ability to analyse and control each step along a process chain. There are clearly benefits to such an approach. However, it is dangerous if efficiency and economy become the primary criteria for assessing church life and ministry, as I have argued elsewhere.[38] People are not machines. They are not ‘resources’. Yet the spirit of Henry Ford seems to live on in the church. For example, evangelistic courses are devised on the basis of how much ‘content’ is necessary for conversion to take place and then planned accordingly.

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[37] Keats, *Complete Works*, 285.

[38] See Mark Meynell, "The Dehumanising Metrics of Modernist Ministry," *Quaerentia*, 2012, https://www.academia.edu/3160806/The_Dehumanising_Metrics_of_Modernist_Ministry_Updated_.

While there is merit in anticipating common needs, it is essential to incorporate flexibility to allow for the quirky and nonconformist, and many churches do precisely that. The programmes that churches put out have brought spiritual benefit to many and will hopefully continue to do so. Yet caution is necessary, and those with an artistic outlook tend to be the first to raise it.

It is easy to see why suspicions about the arts, derived from either theological or modernist roots, are bolstered by programme-driven ministries. Consequently, the way the arts often find their way into contemporary church life is when they are instrumentalized. In other words, the artform serves the programme. A church might put on a concert, for example. They hope this will draw a crowd across the threshold. So, the music or performers are chosen because of their popularity. Then comes the dilemma. Is this an opportunity to give a talk as well? Perhaps. After all, many in the audience may never have set foot in a church before. Is it enough that they are present and that the music itself might have an impact? If a talk is given, it must be explicit on publicity materials, otherwise audiences will think they have been brought under false pretences.

This dilemma should certainly be a matter for prayer. There is no automatic right answer, but this dilemma may serve as a litmus test. The instinct to include a sermon every time, however, suggests an instrumentalizing view, as if the artwork itself might be deemed insufficient to serve the wider programme. As someone might say, ‘the arts are so unpredictable, so uncontrollable. They seem insubstantial and transitory. They are a far cry from the Word that stands forever!’ The irony, of course, is that something similar could be said for the Word, in terms of its being unpredictable and uncontrollable. Can any preacher control the after-effects of a sermon? As someone who attended over 2000

church services before the faith began to make sense, I can state how impossible it is to know what will affect whom and when. The Spirit blows where the Spirit blows.

Taking Things Further

For those in church leadership, there are at least three applications.

(i) *Artists in church:* Spend time with creative professionals in the church.[39] Learn about their passions and what compels them to create. Seek to understand their challenges as well as their goals. What sustains them when the work is difficult or frustrating? What do they wish those with 'normal' jobs understood about their work? How does their work integrate with their Christian discipleship and church membership? How do they wish to see the church harness the power of the arts? Above all, develop relationships of trust and mutual understanding so that they feel valued as members of the fellowship who are able to contribute and serve.

(ii) *Commissioning Artists:* Great care is required when commissioning work from creative professionals. Be prepared to trust the artist's process and be open to discussing the nature and goals of the commission. Depending on the working practice of the artist, be flexible about how much collaboration to expect, if any. Get to know the artist's previous work but don't expect replicas of it. If the commission is for a performance, ensure that all those with regular responsibility for such activities, such as the choir or Sunday musicians, are fully involved in the

[39] There is merit in not restricting these suggestions to those who are creative professionals, as if they are an elite who should be set apart. For there are aspects of all professions and contexts which pastors should explore. It is unlikely that they have sufficient understanding of the working realities of most of their congregants.

process. If the commission is for an artwork or installation, careful consideration of future plans is vital. Many a church has found itself saddled to the aesthetic legacies of a previous generation's generosity. Above all, enjoy the process of commission artefacts but entrust the outcome to the Lord. Be prepared to be surprised!

(iii) *The Creative Arts in Church:* For the arts to find their place in church life, members must be ready for the unexpected. This requires a confidence in the intrinsic merits of the artforms within God's economy. It may also require some teaching to help church members understand what is being done. It may take time for people to adjust, so it is unwise to launch into avant-garde experiences immediately. Consider the process as one of many facets to the ministry of maturing a people's faith.

Further Research

This study focused on the experiences of eight believers involved in the creative arts as they work in a secular context. There is space for a deeper and broader survey of others working in the same fields, as well as from other fields of work. A number of possible avenues for further research present themselves.

- There are challenges and opportunities for the church presented by specific artistic callings. Rather than a general survey, work could be done on how painters, for instance, might be better integrated and involved in church life.
- Which fields not traditionally associated with church life merit investigation and possible experimentation? Have any successful

examples of this been studied, and if so, what conclusions have been drawn?

- Evaluate a local church's experiments and experiences of seeking a better integration of the arts in corporate life. This could examine what worked well and what did not, along with possible causes. It could involve qualitative research with participants, church members, and individuals from the wider community who were drawn in through these activities.

Final Thoughts

For the church to harness the arts, it needs a deeper grasp of how God is at work in his world, through and beyond the church. To grasp this entails a great deal of trust, especially because the spiritual dividends from doing so will not be discernible immediately. The church needs a conviction that the arts have intrinsic power which God can use to present people with spiritual reality in non-rationalistic ways. This is not to suggest the replacement of the regular and biblical elements of ecclesiastical life and witness. It is merely to insist that without them, the church is poorer and their witness less compelling and less rooted in the realities of human experience. The church must be willing to take risks, which entails a readiness to fail. The costs of not doing so will have been clear. The rewards could be incalculable. They could even be infinite. To apply Chesterton's insight, by harnessing the arts in church life, we create a space in which secular people may at last perceive the 'wild whisper of something originally wise.' So, with Eliot:

I say to you: Make perfect your will.
I say: take no thought of the harvest,
But only of proper sowing.[40]

[40] From *Choruses from 'The Rock',* Eliot, *Complete Poems*, 154.

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