Abstract

Beauty is intrinsic to the human experience. In a world that is growing increasingly violent and chaotic, the restoration of a primary emphasis on beauty is urgently needed. Restoring beauty offers a way to counteract chaos. It forms the connection between the human and the divine. The intentional incorporation of beauty into the Christian pedagogical framework invites the possibility for transformation and hope. It facilitates a process that leads to a holistic, integrated, formative approach to Christian education.
Humans engage beauty in countless ways. A world where the beautiful is absent is not comprehensible. Even in the most formidable circumstances, humans long for it, make accommodations for it, search for it and incorporate it. They are transformed by their experiences of it but are challenged to adequately describe their encounters with it. “There is an unsettling prodigality about the beautiful, something wanton about the way it lavishes itself upon even the most atrocious of settings, its anodyne sweetness often seeming to make the most intolerable of circumstances bearable:” (Hart, 2003, 22177) for the search for beauty in the human is a drive that will not be sublimated. Psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl, an Auschwitz survivor recounts that, “As the inner life of the prisoner tended to become more intense, he also experienced the beauty of art and nature as never before. Under their influence he sometimes even forgot his own frightful circumstances.” (Frankl 1992, 50) Beauty is intrinsically connected to the human experience and offers a pathway of order even out of chaos that defies description.

But defining or fully describing beauty has been an elusive quest. It does not possess common properties or values. There is no universal concept of beauty that transcends cultural location or time. Yet, humans can acknowledge that they have experienced beauty in some way. The desire to encounter beauty is embodied in our very being. We recognize it when gazing at a sublime landscape, in the face of the beloved, in artistic expression or meaningful ritual. We know beauty because we are deeply affected by it, but words to adequately convey what we have gained from the encounter are never enough. Beauty holds an ineffable, elusive quality that brings us to awe and wonder, capable of initiating transformation.

**A Brief Overview of Beauty and the Christian Faith**

Beauty’s history has been deeply intertwined with the story of the Christian faith. Drawn from its roots in the Hebrew Testament, attention to beauty to glorify God is in evidence in Exodus 26. God specifies the details of the construction of the Tabernacle and certainly there is no question of what is to take place. “For the Old Testament writer the concrete form of the tabernacle is inseparable from its spiritual meaning. Every detail of the structure reflects the one divine will and nothing rests on the *ad hoc* decision of human builders.” (Childs, 1974, 540) This is to be a sacred space set apart, reflecting the beauty of the divine. Whether or not the specifications could be acted upon by mere mortals is not the issue here. It is that God’s home among God’s people is to be beautiful in proportion and appointment. The beauty of the Tabernacle is the embodiment of the divine.

Beauty is an integral portion of the Christian experience. From its earliest expression on the walls of the catacombs to the present age, art has been used as a portal to the experience of the Divine. The artistic expression of Christian belief through architecture, art, music, sculpture and poetry reflects the historic and cultural contexts of the faith. The aesthetic experience that is enabled for those who encounter these artistic offerings provide a way to experience the awe and wonder of God.
For example, the artistic representation of John 1:5, “The light shines in the darkness and the
darkness has not overcome it.,” is brought to fruition in Christian art. “John asserts from the
beginning that the *logos* is and always was the exclusive source of light for men.” (Culpepper,
1983,191) Art illustrates the theological construct of this passage in John’s Gospel. The
symbolism of light is captured in illuminated manuscripts, glowing icons and renditions of
Biblical stories in mosaics. Perhaps, the most powerful illustration of the use of light as theology
resides in the stained glass of the Medieval cathedral. “A basic structural principle of Gothic
cathedrals was that they should give the effect of light erupting through an open fretwork.” (Eco,
*Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, 1986, 46) Beauty, embodied in the Cathedrals, offered an
aesthetic experience available for the royal personage and the poorest laborer. It offered a
glimpse into the heavenly realm proclaimed by the Christian faith. The aesthetic experience
provided by Cathedral architecture was available for all in Medieval society “It meant
discerning in the concrete object an ontological reflection of, and participation in, the being and
the power of God.” (Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, 1986,15) The integration of
symbol and allegory embodied in the structure of the Cathedral, was interpreted in sculpture,
stained glass, architectural elements, and fabric. These incredible masterpieces remain a
testament to the role of beauty as the representation of the divine in the Medieval period.
However, in time, this era would no longer be able to sustain its incredible integration of
religion, art and power. The reformers would initiate a different understanding of beauty.

The aesthetics of the Protestant reformation took a series of turns but the overarching construct
involved a much simpler architectural style for worship. Religious art would be largely relegated
to the context of the individual and the home. “The accusation of ‘idolatry’ resonated for a
longtime in Europe, not only against the world of art, but also against the whole devotional and
religious system of Catholicism.” (Brown, 2008, 252) This prompted a shift in religious
expression that was directed toward the intimacy of the family rather than the large, imposing
structures that dominated the community.

Ironically, the interiors of worship spaces took on an austerity that reflected the ascetic aesthetic
promoted by Bernard of Clairvaux, a Medieval French abbot who was diametrically opposed to
the highly decorative and elaborate artistic style displayed in the Medieval Cathedrals of his
time. “Confronted with the beauty that perishes, security could be found in that interior beauty
which does not perish.” (Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, 1986, 9) The aesthetic
principle of the reformation reflected Bernard’s concern with worship spaces that allowed the
faithful to develop the interior life without distraction from too much visual stimulus.

“The drama of the ascetic discipline lies precisely in a tension between the call of earthbound
pleasure and a striving after the supernatural. But when the discipline proves victorious, and
brings the peace which accompanies control of the senses, then it becomes possible to gaze
serenely upon the things of this earth, and to see their value…” (Eco, *Art and Beauty in the
Middle Ages*, 1986, 6) The mystical union with God was facilitated by an environment that
reflected the order and peace of the heavenly realm. Not surprisingly, Clairvaux would have a
profound influence on two key figures of the Reformation, Martin Luther and John Calvin.
The Protestant aesthetic was redirected to personal reflection. More could afford books and the ability to read was on the rise. “The spread of new ideas was facilitated by the recent invention of print, allowing widespread circulation of texts and a rich pictorial output, based on the biblical representations and polemical images adopted in anti-papist propaganda.” (Brown, 208, 254) Beauty was still a factor in these illustrated texts but they were relegated to use in private. The aesthetic experience of these biblical illustrations were personal rather than communal. Congregational spaces featured an aesthetic of harmony and simplicity as the ideal, supporting the primacy of the sermon and the preacher.

The type of aesthetic experience and the impetus toward it shifted in the Reformation but it was still a part of the theological framework of Christian worship and pedagogy. This has often been overlooked or disregarded. The Reformation brought about a new understanding of beauty, not a denigration of it. The design of the worship space was vital to the theological framework of the Reformation. The concept of what was understood as beautiful had shifted, but the primacy of aesthetic experience did not diminish.

Beauty, however, is now often confused with decoration and the aesthetic experience is often relegated to a non-essential by-product of religious experience. The hermeneutic of suspicion regarding beauty continues to remain an issue of concern. The incorporation of beauty connects us to the experience of the sacred. “It is part of our everyday experience of powerful aesthetic experience that it can take you by surprise, and distract—or even abstract—you from the rest of the world around you.” (Starr, 2015, 59) An encounter with beauty is not mundane or ordinary. It provides the opportunity to engage the divine. The restoration of beauty as a theological and pedagogical construct is necessary to restore the sense of wonder, reverence and awe into the Christian experience as we live into the post-modern era.

*Beauty in the Post-Modern Era*

Beauty in the realm of philosophical inquiry and as an artistic goal declined to a great degree in the twentieth century. Beauty was declared subjective and therefore, it reflected its perception through the lens of the individual. The concept of beauty was transitory, yielding its qualities to its situation in time and place. From a modernist perspective, beauty was viewed largely as commodity that was reduced to the quantifiable. “The new Beauty could be reproduced, but it was also transitory and perishable: it had to persuade the consumer of the need for rapid replacement, either out of wear and tear or disaffection, so that here might be no cessation of the exponential growth of the circuit involving the production, distribution, and consumption of goods.” (Eco, *The History of Beauty*, 2005, 376-377) Beauty was relegated to a shifting perspective that placed it on dangerous ground. Anything could be beautiful or nothing could be beautiful. Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain*, a porcelain urinal, is a case in point. David Bentley Hart offers an explanation of the modernist perspective that encapsulates the problem beauty poses for our time.
“the modern disenchantment with the beautiful as a concept reflects in part a sense that while beauty is something whose event can be remarked upon, and in a way that seems to convey a meaning, the word “beauty” indicates nothing: neither exactly a quality, nor a property, nor a function, not even really a subjective reaction to an object or occurrence, it offers no phenomenological purchase upon aesthetic experience. And yet nothing else impresses itself upon our attention with at once so wonderful a power and so evocative an immediacy. Beauty is there, abroad in the order of things, given again and again in a way that defies description and denial with equal impertinence.” (Hart, 2003,16)

As the modern era recedes the traces of Cartesian dualism still stalk the post-modern landscape. There are strains of compartmentalism and a continued emphasis on the product rather than the process that creates disunity and division. Although advances in science have given us incredible tools to face human challenges the scientific perspective has also caused a focus on distinct parts instead of on the integrated whole.

“Modern science has therefore rent asunder what the classical imagination brought together: the physical world and the semiotic world, the world of nature and the world of culture, have been split apart from each other, such that what was once considered knowledge—indeed the highest form of knowledge, the contemplation of the True, the Good, and Beautiful—is now appropriated as no more than private belief or personal preference.” (Turley, 2014,5)

The concept of the sacred has been replaced by what can be quantified. The need for a worldview that establishes beauty as a primary focus can provide the possibility for a framework that restores a reverence to life. “Much of the stress and emptiness that haunts us can be traced back to our lack of attention to beauty. Internally the mind becomes coarse and dull if it remains unvisited by images and thoughts which hold the radiance of beauty.” (O’Donahue, 2004, 4) One does not have to search for collaboration on the condition of the mind when it is fed a diet of reality television, films and video games inundated with gratuitous violence and a lack of any aesthetic experience that establishes a connection to wonders of nature or artistic expression. The role of Christian pedagogy in the restoration of beauty is of primary importance, for it is here that the connection between Beauty and the Divine can be explored.

In the past decade, there has been a resurgence of interest in beauty in philosophy. Howard Gardner reflects on the importance of beauty in the context of the present age. While he moves beyond the classical understanding of truth and beauty, he acknowledges the necessity to reconsider their intrinsic value.

“Despite the postmodern and digital complexifiers, the trend toward firmer established truths is solid. In contrast, traditional conceptions of beautiful objects and experiences no
longer suffice. The experience of beauty is ever more dependent on the creation of objects and experience that, whatever their provenance, engender interest, are memorable, and invite further exploration. Moreover, and importantly, what will be judged as beautiful cannot be predicted in advance; historical, cultural, and accidental factors overwhelm any brain-based or economic considerations.” (Gardner, 2011, 76)

Neuroaesthetics provides insight into how these experiences are perceived in the human brain and why they offer transformational possibilities.

**Beauty and the Brain**

Neuroaesthetics have fostered the exploration of the human brain and its reaction to beauty. The intersection of evolutionary construct and encounters with our environment form the framework for the aesthetic experience.

“Our mind has been sculpted by nature and it is tightly coupled to the environment. We cannot ask questions about the structure of our minds without bumping into properties of the world. The question of whether beauty lies in the world or in our heads might be reframed as follows: what in the coupling of mind and world gives us the experience of beauty?” (Chatterjee, 2014, 4)

Some neuroscientists advocate that beauty is a product of survival instincts that have been deeply imbedded in our brain composition. Our reaction to beautiful landscapes comes from a survival response that indicate that these experiences yield safe environments. “Strong evolutionary forces selected minds that find some places more beautiful than others. Powerful emotional responses evolved to guide and encourage actions that improved our ancestors’ chances of survival.” (Chatterjee, 2014, 48). This reasoning asserts that beauty is deeply linked with our desire to survive. Instead of viewing beauty as a superfluous life enhancement, it links it to our ability to continue to exist. However, as Chatterjee indicates, “As changes in our cultural environment accelerate, the link between our adapted predispositions and our present-day actions becomes increasingly attenuated.” (Chatterjee, 2014, 111) Evolutionary factors play a role but they are not solely determinative.

There is no region of the brain that centers exclusively upon perceptions of the beautiful.

“Aesthetic experience relies on a distributed neural architecture, a set of brain areas involved in emotion, perception, imagery, memory, and language. But more than this, aesthetic experience emerges from networked interactions, the workings of intricately connected and coordinated brain systems that, together, form a flexible architecture enabling us to develop new arts and to see the world around us differently.” (Starr, 2015, xv)
This highly nuanced system allows the human to have the aesthetic experience and then offers the possibility of fostering new possibilities. “Powerful aesthetic experience makes us return to that state of watchful waiting characteristic of core consciousness, but carry an awareness of the pleasure of looking at an object and contemplating its worth: perhaps powerful aesthetic experience unites what we didn’t predict with what we are always waiting for.” (Starr, 2015, 67) The aesthetic experience is not only formational it fosters a way forward, a creative response that extends beyond the self. “Aesthetics is all about newly created and reconfigured value, about something that wasn’t there in quite the same way before, something that was in part created in the brain and that leaves traces in how we go forward. “ (Starr, 2015, 149) Neuroaesthetics provides a means to understand the powerful role the aesthetic experience has upon the brain and its implications for transformational action. Its implications for the practice of Christian pedagogy are formidable.

The Role of Beauty in Christian Pedagogy

Beauty in the context of a Christian pedagogical framework provides the foundation for the experience of awe and wonder. Beauty is not to be confused with ornament or decoration but a deep sense of the divinity inherent in all things. Although beauty is most closely associated with artistic expression or the sublime in nature, it can be found in the realm of mathematics and science as well. Consider the Fibonacci sequence of numbers that is found throughout art and nature. “Nature is full of hidden geometry-harmony, as is the human mind; and the creations of the mind that awaken or recreate this sense of pattern and order tend to awaken or unveil beauty.” (O’Donahue, 2004, 14) Beauty offers a way forward out of chaos.

In a world where violence is increasingly prevalent, where uncertainty is the norm and where experiences of the beautiful and the divine are rare commodities, Christian education is called to provide a return to the recognition and experience of the sacred. Embodied faith is not an exclusively intellectual exercise. It comes through experience that invites reflection.

While I do not pretend any affinity towards the study of mathematics I was drawn to the film, The Man Who Knew Infinity. It explores the life of Srinivasa Ramanujan, a brilliant Indian mathematician of the early twentieth century. He was able to devise mathematical theorems of unquestioned brilliance having almost no formal training in pure mathematics. During his brief life which ended shortly after the First World War, he was able to make mathematical discoveries that have contributed to the understanding of black holes among other notable achievements. His considerable body of work is still being explored. A deeply religious Hindu, Ramanujan spent five years developing his work at Cambridge University. His mentor, G.H. Hardy, an avowed atheist was confounded by the intuitive style that governed Ramanujan’s work. Ramanujan would often declare, “An equation means nothing to me unless it expresses a thought of God.” He considered his work to be divinely inspired and experienced the beauty of the divine through mathematics. Ramanujan was formed by his faith and lived a life that reflected his beliefs.
The intersection between beauty and the divine is found in an infinite variety of aesthetic experiences. In Christian pedagogy, it is imperative that an avenue for providing access to experiences of beauty is built. “Knowledge in its traditional sense begins in wonder and in fact ends in wonder, since one is penetrating more deeply into the mystery of reality.” (Turley, 2014, 88) Inspiring awe and wonder in the context of Christian education restores the relationship between the human and God.

Encountering the sacred in our world is a rare occurrence. Those “burning bush” moments where you must remove your sandals because the ground you are to walk on is holy, are almost non-existent if you do not approach life as sacred. Incorporating a reverence toward the holiness that is found in creation is the foundation of discovering beauty within the context of human existence.

A Way Forward

Many expressions of Christian education reflect the process of modernity and the imparting of information, rather than a holistic vision of forming the human person. “In particular, Christian education has absorbed a philosophical anthropology that sees human persons as primarily thinking things.” (Smith, 2009, 31.) This does not serve to make the process of Christian education equipped to respond to formative aspects of the pedagogical process which fully recognize that each person is a reflection of the image of God. In Christian pedagogy and practice, providing opportunities to engage in aesthetic experience in the quest of beauty is of the utmost importance.

Christian education should reflect a teaching process that incorporates worship, ritual, service and spiritual disciplines. The core identity of each person should be formed through aesthetic experiences that engage the awe and wonder of God. The aesthetic experience can be drawn from the creative arts but certainly is not limited to it. As has been demonstrated, mathematics and science hold great potential for experience with awe and wonder. Encounters with nature are certainly a forum for engaging beauty. “Education is not something that traffics primarily in abstract, disembodied ideas; rather, education is a holistic endeavor that involves the whole person, including our bodies, in a process of formation that aims our desires, primes our imagination, and orients us to the world—all before we ever start thinking about it.” (Smith, 2009, 39-40) It is not possible to teach beauty or to quantify awe and wonder. The Christian educator cannot determine the outcome or the scope of an aesthetic experience. However, the opportunity to enter into the possibility of an encounter with beauty can be designed and implemented. It requires intentionality and the desire to move beyond the inclination to impart knowledge as a means to an end. Providing an atmosphere where beauty can flourish requires engaging the whole person through the senses as well as cognitively. The aesthetic experience is the pathway to an encounter with Beauty and the possibility for transformation.
Bibliography


