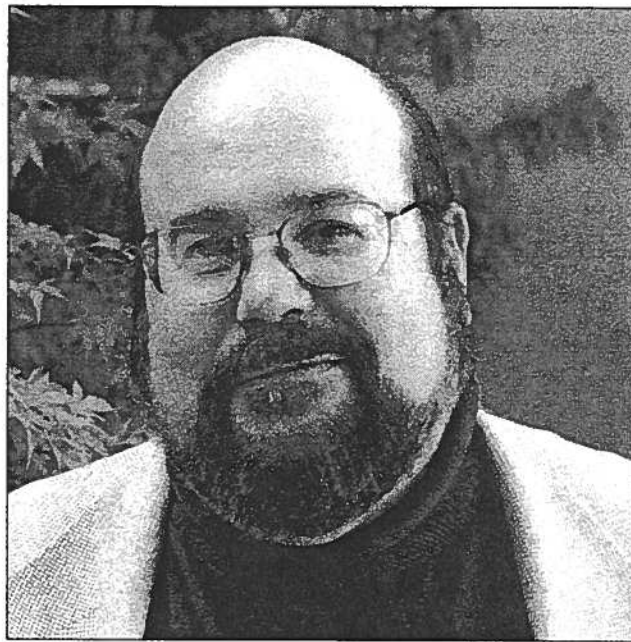


Distinguished Faculty Lecture



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The Sense of Beauty and the Talk of God

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1. Introduction

When Dean Eldon Ernst asked me if I would accept the honor of giving the Distinguished Faculty lecture for 2002, my first question to him was: Are you sure you called the right number? It is not only a great honor but a humbling experience to be counted as part of the enterprise and legacy of the outstanding work done here at the Graduate Theological Union. It is especially humbling to realize that I follow in the steps of who are pioneers in the field of religion and the arts. I am thinking of Jane Dillenberger, Margaret Miles, and John Dillenberger as well as Doug Adams, Michael Morrison, Bonnie Hardwick, and Mark Delp. As such, religion and the arts exemplifies much of what the GTU stands for. It is a field thoroughly inter-disciplinary, extraordinarily ecumenical, and profoundly visionary. In short, it is a field only made possible in the unique environment that is the GTU. Only at the GTU can a Roman Catholic systematic theologian work together with an Episcopalian art historian, a philosopher of ancient aesthetics, a Buddhist theologian, and a Russian Orthodox icon painter to explore a relationship that is at the same time profoundly religious and also beautiful.

2. The Sense of Beauty and the Talk of God

The study of this relationship, I believe, not only is important but urgent. The past two centuries have seen systematic theologians struggling with two serious challenges. The first challenge came from the study of the True. The great success of scientific knowledge put theology on guard that accurate and precise knowledge of the world could not be assumed or deduced but must be discovered. Moreover, science revealed the dependence of theological reflection on cosmology. How one understands the world also influences how one sees the divine. Theology's unfortunate response to this critical challenge has been to distance itself from the True. As such, it is, in my estimation, a kind of intellectual cowardice. How hopeful it is, then, to see here at the GTU, Bob Russell and the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences rejecting this timid position and working hard to renew theology's relationship with the True.

The other great challenge for systematic theology has been the extraordinary levels of suffering and violence the past two centuries have seen. Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and Bosnia have raised the issue of the Good to a seemingly insuperable challenge for both theological and humanist thought. Theologians can no longer propose tired and vacuous sentiments against what Marilyn McCord has called "horrendous evils." Unfortunately, theological responses to this critical challenge have often deteriorated into even more horrendous moralisms. The intrinsic freedom that is part of religious experience becomes shackled to a dogmatic moralism. Again, how blessed are we that the GTU faces this critical challenge with the faculty of Area 4 and the work of the Center for Ethics and Social Policy.

I come to you tonight, however, to suggest that, as challenging as the True and the Good have been, the talk of God today faces an even greater challenge. I am speaking of the challenge posed by the sense of Beauty. It is the sense of Beauty that attracts us to the True and to the Good. It is this power to attract that is the challenge for if the True and the Good do not attract us, then cannot enter the imagination of our society. The great Swiss theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar put it this way in his great work *The Glory of the Lord*.

"No longer loved or fostered by religion, Beauty is lifted from its face as if a mask, and its absence exposes features on that face which threaten to become incomprehensible to man.

We no longer dare to believe in Beauty and we make of it a mere appearance in order the more easily to dispose of it.... We can be sure that whoever sneers at her name as if she were the ornament of a bourgeois past--whether he admits it or not--can no longer pray *and soon will no longer be able to love*.... In a world without Beauty... the good also loses its attractiveness.... Man stands before the good and asks himself why *it* must be done and not rather its alternative, evil. For this, too, is a possibility, and even the more exciting one: Why not investigate Satan's depths? In a world that no longer has any confidence in itself to affirm the beautiful, the proofs of the truth have lost their cogency. In other words, syllogisms may still dutifully clatter away like rotary presses.... But the logic of these answers is itself a mechanism which no longer captivates anyone.”

Von Balthasar sounds the alarm to a great spiritual truth. It is the sense of Beauty that teaches us how to love God and our neighbor. Towards this end scientific knowledge is less a means to solve the world's problems than a powerless endeavor. Towards this end, horrendous evils do not shock us into loving our neighbor but, more horribly, fascinate us with their cruelty. Indeed, I am convinced that it is the loss of the sense of Beauty that has made the talk of God increasingly irrelevant and morally impotent in our day. For this reason, we ought to be concerned about the present state of the talk of God that serves the sense of Beauty and the sense of Beauty that grounds the talk of God.

How are our churches, mosques, temples, and synagogues fostering the sense of Beauty so crucial to spiritual love? Indeed, how are the arts cultivating the sense of Beauty so crucial to loving our neighbor? It doesn't take long to realize that the answers to these questions leave one a bit discouraged about the present state of affairs between religion and the arts. Fortunately, theologians have increasingly become aware of this loss and have begun to reflect upon it. The past twenty have seen a marvelous renaissance of study about the relationship between theology and the arts. Books like *Religious Aesthetics* (Frank Burch Brown), *Theology, Music, and Time* (Jeremy Begbie), and *Theology and the Arts* (Richard Viladesau) have begun a marvelous conversation. In turn, art historians have increasingly begun to reflect on the systematic

exclusion of religious sensibility in their accounting of the history of the arts. Works like *The Power of Images* (David Freedberg), *Visual Piety* (David Morgan), and *The Religious art of Andy Warhol* (Jane Dillenberger) have broken new ground in renewing historical study of the relationship between religion and the arts. It appears that we are at the beginnings of a wondrous revitalization of study on the relationship between the sense of Beauty and the talk of God and the birth of a theological aesthetics. Tonight I would like to offer my own limited reflections that come out of this marvelous conversation in which I have been privileged to take part.

3. Theology and the Arts

Why should theology be interested in the arts? Although this question preoccupied theology since its beginnings, it was rarely asked in modern times. In the late twentieth-century, however, theologians began to ask the question anew addressing two very different contexts. One context, the European, saw the theologian, von Balthasar, raising the question from within a thoroughly secularized Europe. He saw more clearly than other European theologians that the problem of secularization was one with the problem of the loss of the sense of Beauty. Balthasar restored an ancient theological insight when he made the point that the *only way we have of knowing God is through our senses!* By this Balthasar refers to a long theological tradition that insists that one of the ways that God is known is Beauty. Beauty is, according to the author of "The Divine Names," one of the names of God. As such, whatever participates in Beauty is beautiful and reveals something about God. Beauty, then, not only is divine but its experience, the beautiful, is a way to the divine, a means for the soul to ascend to a blissful union with God.

The sense of Beauty, then, carries certain theological implications. If Beauty is divine, then the sense of Beauty is key to knowing and loving God. And if the sense of Beauty is key to knowing and loving God, then the sense of Beauty is also key to the talk of God. In other words, the sense of Beauty is both an aesthetic and a religious experience. Today however we have reduced this crucial relationship between the sense of Beauty and the talk of God. The beautiful for us today has become a highly specialized type of experience, that is a mere aesthetic

experience, an experience dogmatically guarded by the merchants of art, the profiteers of the elite that buy and sell works of art for their investment value rather than their beauty, and the profiteers of the masses that offer up a pale shadow of beauty in order to sell a trinket, a name, even our souls. What we call beautiful today is far removed from a theological understanding of the sense of Beauty.

The sense of Beauty, however, as a fundamental ground for the talk of God judges these offerings of the beautiful. The sense of Beauty is more than an aesthetic experience. It is at once an aesthetic and a religious experience. As such, the sense of Beauty is not a given or self-evident experience. The sense of Beauty is not some immediate gratification. The sense of Beauty is not the manipulation of aesthetic design principles. The sense of Beauty is not forged at Sotheby's auction block. Indeed, the sense of Beauty is not an empty imputation of "beautiful" onto some object simply because it was made by an "artist." The sense of Beauty that grounds the talk of God is more like a profound religious insight than a valuable commodity. The sense of Beauty is found not only on museum walls but also on our knees in the Church's nave. As such, the sense of Beauty is, at its heart, the fruit of a spiritual journey and this simple theological observation has been forgotten in our day.

That such statements sound strange to the contemporary ear is the result of having separated aesthetic experience from religious experience. This unhappy separation can be traced to two traditions that have been all too influential in the European context. The first tradition is ancient and is first seen in the writings of Plato. Iris Murdoch wrote in the 50's a book called "The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato banished the artists." Murdoch's thesis was simple but profound. Plato banished the artists because he felt religious experience was fundamentally different than aesthetic experience. Though Beauty is divine, the beautiful is a mere appearance. Thus Plato rails against the works of artists but strongly encourages the spiritual seeker to follow the sense of Beauty. Beauty will reward the spiritually hungry by taking them into the sunshine of the Good.

The second tradition is Modern. Influenced by Kant and various modern philosophers, this tradition has no official name yet has provided a powerful aesthetic paradigm. Let me call this tradition "aesthete." The "aesthete" tradition tells us that aesthetic experience is unlike any other. It is radically unique. Thus a work of art cannot be judged by any other standards of experience except that experience peculiar to art itself. One expression of this paradigm is the phrase "art for art's sake." Aesthetic experience in the "aesthete" tradition is the experience of a work done by an artist. Artists create an aesthetic experience not a work of art. By insisting on the uniqueness of the aesthetic experience, the "aesthete" tradition has the same effect as the Platonic. It also separates aesthetic experience from religious experience. Only this time, it is the aesthetic experience that is valued over the religious.

These two traditions, the "aesthete" and the Platonic, function powerfully against the theological sense of Beauty, that is, the sense of Beauty in which aesthetic and religious experience meet and become one. While the Platonic tradition tells us that the sense of Beauty can only be a religious experience, the "aesthete" tradition tells us that it can only be an aesthetic one. As such these two traditions act against seeing a viable relationship between religion and the arts. These two traditions act together to discourage religious institutions from engaging the arts and the arts from engaging religious institutions. The tragic result has been that many talented artists have avoided exploring the intersection of aesthetic and religious experience or, at least, done so in secret.

The other context which has generated the study of the relationship between the sense of Beauty and the talk of God is Latin America. Those of us whose living context is Latin or Hispanic America have also asked the question of the relationship between theology and the arts but in a very different way than European theologians. The question was raised in a distinct way in the Latin American context right after Vatican II. It was asked in a roundabout way when Enrique Dussel, a well-known Latin American theologian, started an ambitious project to document an authentic Latin American theology. It was, at first, a practical issue. Where can the theologian find the documents of an authentic Latin American theology? It soon became

obvious that such documents were textual and had been made mostly by (and for) people in a position of power. These power brokers, whether churchmen or secular, were rarely true Latin Americans. They were, for the most part, Europeans assigned to Latin America because Latin Americans were not trusted by Europe.

For this reason, as Dussel recounts, "Everywhere we were asked: A history of Latin American theology? Does such a theology exist? How do you make a history of the nonexistent?" Dussel's group responded with a striking affirmation. "Yes," they said, "an authentic Latin American theology exists but it will not be found in texts of theology. An authentic Latin American theology will be found in the symbols, rites, music, images, and stories of the living, Latin American Church."

For me, this answer came as a lightning stroke of insight. There exists a type of theology that could be called "living" as opposed to "textual." Living theology has its home in symbols, images, and songs. There is a theology that lives in the music, imagery, and cultural symbols of those who must live out that which textbook theology attempts to understand. At this point, I do not want to be misunderstood. I am not disparaging textbook theology. I am simply saying it is insufficient in the study of a living faith. Let me make an analogy using an example from my freshman biology days. Dissecting the cadaver of a frog gives me some understanding of a frog but this understanding is insufficient to understand a living frog. Textbook theology dissects while living theology appreciates. Textbook theology provides understanding of the static parts; living theology helps us appreciate the living whole.

As I began to explore the living theology of Hispanic America by studying the symbols, imagery, and stories of the Latino community of faith (alongside a healthy dose of textbook theology!), I also began to see that the Latin American question raised the issue of the adequacy of existing theological method. Traditional method emphasizes formality and rationality. What symbols, imagery, and music have in common, however, is an aesthetic dimension. If formality and rationality give substance to textbook theology, art and aesthetics animate a living theology. Aesthetics, I became convinced, was the key to a living theology. With this insight, a world of

possibilities has opened up for me. Not only symbols, images, and music but also poems, drama, and dance articulate a living theology, give spirit and life to textbook theology. If formality and rationality are the flesh and bones of theology, then the arts are its very breath and life.

4. The Caves of Lascaux

Having come to this insight, I faced another question. Where would a theologian begin to re-discover this inseparable connection between textbook and living theology, between the talk of God and the sense of Beauty? I had no further to look than my own Latin American experience. Latin American theologians have raised in the world's conscience the horrendous existence of massive poverty. What liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez in his book *Las Casas* have pinpointed is that such suffering has as a major spiritual cause the lack of conviction that all human persons have a precious worth and dignity. Indeed, such lack of conviction is not specific to Latin America. Faith in the dignity and worth of the human person has been shaken by the horrors and cynicism of the present age. If in earlier theology, theologians strived to defend God's goodness in the light of the existence of evil, then today's theologians must strive to defend the goodness of the human in the light of remarkable cruelty and violence.

It is this second insight of Latin American theology that convinced me that a viable theological aesthetics must also be a defense of the human person. It must start where the Renaissance started. It must start with the rediscovery of the dignity, nobility, and worth of the human person, in other words, a new humanism. But where would one begin to discover such a new humanism given the grave misgivings society has today about the very worth of our humanity. The answer came to me in the form of a question. Why not begin at the beginning? Why not begin at the very beginnings of our humanity?

The question took me to a place in France where such a question could be answered, the caves of Lascaux. The minute we enter the primary cave, the heart stops and then races as it recognizes itself in a marvelous profusion of incredibly beautiful images. Bears, horses, and rhinoceros prance, gallop, and stand in awesome majesty before our eyes. Jean Clottes, France's

most eminent expert on prehistoric art, described this experience. "I remember standing in front of the paintings of the horses facing the rhinos and being profoundly moved by the artistry.

Tears were running down my cheeks. I was witnessing one of the world's great masterpieces."

Whoever created this incredible Beauty was one of us, was human. And this human lived 30,000 to 50,000 years ago! This fact makes us wonder which is more impressive: that the first humans were capable of such striking Beauty or that someone should be moved so deeply by such ancient paintings fifty thousand years after their creation! Indeed, Jean Clottes' experience raises all sorts of philosophical and theological questions not only about the nature of art but also about the nature of our humanity. Perhaps most enigmatic is the question about the relationship between religion and art. For, in his response, one finds the unmistakable signs of a deep, religious experience.

The paintings of Lascaux reveal a marvelous human dignity, a religious humanism that is manifested in the grace and Beauty of works of art. It also asks the question. Whatever happened to the relationship between humanism and the arts? If the modern era began with a celebration of the human person, the Renaissance, then it is ending with an almost cynical conviction in an insuperable violence and cruelty woven deep into the human fabric. Theology cannot respond to this profoundly cynical conviction by merely stating dogma about the worth of the human person. Rather, theology's task is helping the world to "see" again the worth and dignity of the human person. Such task is not possible for textbook theology, but it is the very medium of a living theology, that is the theology found in images, music, literature and poetry.

Such living theology must address the vision of human nature that grounds the rationale of a profound cynicism over human worth present. Such rationale takes the form of either a scientific reductionism that identifies our humanity as the symptom of more basic mechanical or biological causes or a sociological reductionism that sees our humanity as essentially violent. Let me suggest that such rationale can be addressed by one other possibility that has yet to be explored. What marks us as human is not some effect of biological and physical mechanisms. Nor is it a penchant for violence. But, rather, what marks us as human is a marvelous innocence.

If we are to be able to “see” once again the dignity of the human person, then we must begin to “see” again that very special innocence that is uniquely human.

5. Innocence and the Human Person

This unique human innocence cannot be understood from a purely secular point of view. Part of the problem in “seeing” the unique innocence of the human person is a reduction in the meaning of innocence. A great part of our understanding of innocence has been shaped by the legal system and a moral philosophy that can be traced back to Kant and the Enlightenment. A certain “conceit” of moral philosophers is that experience is permanently corrupting. Such “conceit” sees innocence not as a noble trait but, rather, as a mark of moral immaturity, a type of “pre-reflective, natural state.” The philosopher, Alexander Eodice, puts it, “though experience corrupts, knowledge resolves the problem of ignorance.” Thus, innocence is seen as a mark of moral immaturity because it is also seen as a kind of ignorance. Thus, innocence not only is incompatible with experience but it is also incompatible with learning. Such a view puts innocence at odds with both aesthetic and religious experience. Indeed, such a view places a seemingly insuperable chasm between human innocence and a theological aesthetics.

Part of the problem lies in that such a view of innocence combines two very different senses of innocence that ought to be distinguished. There is innocence with respect to actions but there is also innocence as describing a human condition. Innocence with respect to actions lends itself to legal language and concepts. A legal sense of innocence involves the notion of being absolved from guilt of some terrible deed. Innocence as describing a human condition, on the other hand, lends itself to theological language. Such innocence describes the nature or character of a person. Unfortunately, this type of innocence is very hard to describe.

Many describe this type of innocence in terms of “lacks”—the lack of self-critical ability, the lack of knowledge, and so on. Such innocence describes the innocence of a child. It is an innocence that describes a certain kind of moral purity. No wonder, then, that so many horror movies feature children. Evil in a child is horrific precisely because the child represents a kind of innocence that is synonymous with moral purity. What is more difficult to understand is the

kind of innocence that would apply to an adult. Evil in an adult no longer seems to shock us. It is expected, indeed, prescribed by many. Yet how can the horror of evil be recognized, even judged, without the presence of some innocence in the human person. Yet our day has seen the loss of the conviction that such innocence is possible. It is, I believe, the consequence of equating innocence and moral purity. Innocence, if seen as moral purity, is impossible in an adult. But, as the theological tradition informs us, there is another kind of innocence possible.

This type of innocence is capable of exciting wonder in us. It can be recognized as something beautiful and “particularly rare and wonderful.” Indeed, I argue it is the stuff of which the beautiful is made. It is innocence, Eodice tells us, seen as virtue, innocence seen as something a person has fought to achieve. Such innocence is not opposed to experience but is gained through experience. Such innocence is not opposed to knowledge but relies on knowledge to realize itself. Moreover, such innocence is not an innocence free of guilt. Such innocence, is in Eodice’s words, “the difference between a person who feels guilt and.... one who chooses to redeem himself through internal suffering.” This type of innocence is only possible through the requirement of love and love, as the great philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein puts it, is that which is needed by “my heart, my soul, [but] not my speculative intelligence.” In other words, such innocence is the stuff of a living theology.

6. A Wounded Innocence

What Eodice and Wittgenstein are telling us is that there is a dynamic dimension to innocence that contrasts with the static view of innocence assumed in our attitudes about human dignity and worth. Eodice and Wittgenstein, however, are not the only ones who have proposed such a view of innocence. A more profound view of innocence can be found in the living theology of the arts. This innocence, a wounded innocence, can be found in Caravaggio’s *The Incredulity of St. Thomas*. Caravaggio offers us a profound theology of innocence through the Beauty of his art. Caravaggio, known for his gritty realism, has Jesus grasping the hand of the apostle Thomas and thrusting it deep within the wound at his side. Indeed, Caravaggio powerfully aligns Jesus’ and St. Thomas’ hands to form a lance that thrusts, once again, into

Jesus' side. St. Thomas' face expresses profound surprise as his finger thrusts deep into Jesus' wound. Perhaps, the surprise has to do with his unbelief. Yes, this is the Lord I saw dead and hanging on the cross. It could also be, however, surprise at the realization that he, too, is also pierced. Indeed, St. Thomas appears to clutch his side as if he becomes aware of a wound at his side as well. And we who wince at this gritty depiction feel a wound at our side as well. Caravaggio has masterfully captured through the hands of Jesus and Thomas the dynamics of a wounded innocence.

This "wounded innocence" continues to be explored through the means of light. We catch, for example, the apostles, all of them, at the instant of certain kind of enlightenment. As Jesus' arm pulls his robe to uncover the wound at his side, it enters a region of light as if the act of unrobing is identical with the act of revealing or enlightenment. What is revealed, however, is a wound and it is this wound that is the source of such enlightenment. The light that reveals the wound also fills the faces of the apostles signaling the instant of a very special enlightenment. Jesus' firmly guiding St. Thomas' finger into his wound gives support to that impression. Jesus, the wounded, becomes as well the Teacher. And we who contemplate Caravaggio's gritty realistic depiction of this profound encounter are also drawn into that instant. For we not only wince at the thrust of the finger but also sense that something has been revealed; we sense a moment of insight in the felt presence of a living woundedness and, as such, the insight becomes more than mere enlightenment but also redemptive. St. Thomas' poking into Jesus' wound reveals in a way no textbook could, the human need for salvation and also the way of that salvation.

If St. Thomas expresses surprise, the other apostles' faces register something else. Wonder shapes the faces of the other two apostles. But it is wonder whose striking reference is a marvelous woundedness. Indeed, Jesus' wound is placed near the center of the composition and the heads of the apostles, St. Thomas and Jesus hover over the wound in the shape of the cross, the apostles' faces expressing a marvelous wonder. But, what, is the source of that wonder? Is

the wound itself? Let me suggest that we once again follow the living logic of the light as Caravaggio presents it.

The source of light is the source of wonder. That source is Jesus' body. Caravaggio through the means of light alerts us that the risen Jesus' body is no ordinary body. It is what the theological tradition calls the "glorious" body. A "glorious" body is different from a mortal body in that it is a newly innocent body. It is a body that has come through an awesome guilt into a marvelous, wondrous innocence. And Thomas, in Caravaggio's painting, is invited into that innocence as well. This is the meaning, I think, of Jesus' sure and guiding hand on Thomas' physical and seeking finger. Jesus takes Thomas into the woundedness of Thomas' own guilt of unbelief in order to transform it, as the light shows, into a profound insight. Thomas in touching Jesus' wound becomes innocent again and is given a taste of the possibilities of a full humanity.

Caravaggio's *Incredulity* serves to illustrate my thesis. Our age shall find again its sense of Beauty when it begins to see again a marvelous *innocence* in the woundedness of our humanity. Art shall find its religious power once again when it addresses and comes forth from such a dynamic innocence. Caravaggio's *Incredulity*, however, also suggests that the sense of Beauty is something that will always be a spiritual struggle in every generation. The sense of Beauty will always be one with the talk of God. As such, it possesses what theologians call an eschatological dimension. We may never, in our lifetime, ever experience the fullness of the sense of Beauty, but there will come a day when that fullness shall be ours. When it comes, it will dazzle us and grant us ecstatic vision. Until that day, however, the arts can serve to give us a foretaste of that day for the power of truly religious art is to enkindle and renew in us again the core and source of our human dignity: the human capacity to achieve and bear a wounded innocence.