Art and a Suspicious Church

When I became a Christian, people suggested I change job and be a nurse.
Graphic designer

When I go to church I feel like I’m always having to justify what I do.
Painter

The negative attitude of the Christian Union towards the media left me wondering if a career in film was worthwhile.
Film-maker

My college doesn’t understand my faith and my church doesn’t understand my art. Where do I fit as a whole person?
Art Student

These quotes are not freak examples. They are representative of the experience of many Christians working in arts and media today. If it is not your experience, be grateful, and perhaps skip this chapter.

For some sections of the church the arts have never been a problem issue. For others they are ceasing to be a problem as Christians enthusiastically embrace the arts for the first time in generations (an enthusiasm, however, that can be somewhat superficial and lacking in understanding). But still in some churches suspicion, if not downright opposition, remains. The strange thing about this suspicion is that it is very hard to trace its origins. If there have been any books written in the last hundred years counselling against the arts, or any sermons preached against them, they are very well hidden. In fact, the negative relationship between the church and the arts is barely chronicled at all. Dorothy Sayers seems closest to the truth when she comments that the church really does not know what it thinks about the arts, and isn’t too bothered either.

Is it perhaps because the Protestant church (and particularly the evangelical wing), having abandoned the arts some centuries before, no longer has any understanding? Is it now unable to find a point of entry? Is it simply frightened of what it does not know? Officially, the arts seem
Art and Soul

to have been forgotten rather than frowned on. But unofficially, it can be all too easy for the unfamiliar to become the enemy.

For a long while this divide hardly seemed to matter. Evangelicals withdrew to their own communities and kept well clear of dance halls, concerts and theatres. But when in this century, radio and TV started bringing the arts right into the home, gradually it dawned on many of them that a whole new means of communication was growing up from which they were completely absent. Here was a means of ‘reaching the unsaved’ that was not only energy-efficient but exciting. But of course, by then they had lost out on the aesthetic understanding that comes simply by being soaked for generations in good literature, good art, good music. So when their attempts to jump on the bandwagon were derided by critics and media professionals, these critics too were seen as the enemy, opposed to the message and persecuting the believers. Unfortunately, all too often the critics were simply pointing out that it was not art but propaganda.

The roots of division

How did this separation between church and art come about? What lessons, if any, does history have for us?

The fledgling New Testament church is of very little help to us here. Singing, of course, is much in evidence, in prison, in homes, in the open air, with gusto and in all circumstances the new believers sang. But of other arts there is a conspicuous absence. ‘We search the New Testament in vain for a glimpse of Christians meeting for recreation or artistic activity,’ comments biblical scholar Derek Kidner; ‘the most we find is an occasional dinner party. Life is too short, and indeed too absorbing, to call for distractions.’

There are many ways in which the New Testament church is a good model for us. Is this then, one of them? Trotsky might come to our aid here, with his observation that ‘Art is always in the rearguard of historic advance.’ At a time of revolution, everything is in a state of flux, transitional, on the move. Meetings are impromptu – in the open air, in homes, under cover. The newly formed church of the Acts of the Apostles was in just such a state of revolution, albeit a peaceful one. Its lack of art may not signify disapproval, merely the wrong circumstances.

When the first Christians began to get a toe-hold in imperial Rome, at least some art began to feature: a wealth of murals were painted deep in hidden catacombs. Records show, however, that disapproval of other types of art soon kicked in. Theatre, according to the Church Fathers, was a ‘licentious representation of decadent paganism.’ But then theatre, as playwright Murray Watts reminds us, has its roots in religious ritual. And in ancient Rome, by then beginning its decline and fall, theatre was no stranger then to a boot. 

For to bring paganism into the home, really overwhelming the last Chaldea, 1278, its bords...
was not only rooted in pagan ritual, but degenerate and immoral to boot. There were good reasons for keeping well away.

For as long as the Christians were a persecuted minority, struggling to bring in a completely new world order right under the noses of a huge pagan establishment, the situation was very much the same. But gradually over the centuries, the Christian worldview took hold and spread — around the Mediterranean world and then up through Europe — until at last Christianity itself became the establishment and clasped the arts to its bosom once more.

The flowering of Christendom

As we noted in the last chapter, the medieval age (a period of roughly a thousand years from the fall of Rome to the beginning of the sixteenth century) saw the great flowering of the Western church and its use of the arts. Its most magnificent legacy was a huge church-building boom. In a two-hundred-year period in France eighty cathedrals were built, along with at least five hundred churches of considerable size. The cathedrals were the arts centres of their day — combined places of worship, theatres, art galleries, schools and libraries. Markets were established outside, travellers were welcome to sleep inside and friends met for gossip in the aisles.

All education was in the hands of the church, the eminent thinkers were the monks and clergy and the great universities sprang up from the cathedral schools. Through this period, when books were hand-written in Latin and literacy was the province of religious professionals, it was paintings and sculpture which became the ‘books of the layman’. They told their stories around the cathedral walls, using a highly developed system of symbols in which most things had a spiritual as well as a literal meaning. Fire stood for martyrdom, the lily for purity, the owl for Satan, and the lamb for Christ.

Bible stories began to be dramatised, first with the development of liturgy into a form of dialogue and later developing into the mystery plays. Soon they were moving outside the church buildings and into the churchyards and beyond, bringing colour and pageantry to the streets and town squares. The plays were earthy but also profound. They were often funny and not afraid of the occasional dig at those in authority.

Singing, which for about eight hundred years of Christian worship consisted of a single line of melody, developed during this time into polyphony. The development of notation allowed for complex part-singing and new rhythms, shocking to some churchmen who nevertheless could not prevent the rapid spread of the new fashion throughout Europe. Other arts too — storytelling, poetry, dancing, instrumental music — flourished outside the church. In a society where all of life came
8. Lorenzo Ghiberti, detail from the doors of the Baptistery, Florence (1403–24), bronze (photo: Hilary Brand)

'The picture is to the illiterate what the written word is to the educated,' said Pope Gregory the Great. The people of Florence could stand in their central piazza and 'read' the gospel story (here the baptism of Jesus by John) on the great bronze doors of the Baptistery.
under the auspices of a Christian worldview, there was very little sense that these things were to be shunned.

Cutting away the canker

The medieval age provided a great flowering of Christian artistry, but by the beginning of the sixteenth century the canker had long been in the bud. Something was badly wrong in the Catholic church and, as Machiavelli pointed out, the nearer one got to Rome, the more corruption was to be found.9

Unfortunately at least one aspect of the corruption was inextricably linked with the arts. The building boom and particularly the architectural glories of the Italian Renaissance needed finance. And one handy way of funding, developed by the popes (especially the wily Sixtus IV, builder of the Sistine Chapel, and later Julius II, who started the rebuilding of St Peter’s), was the sale of indulgences. Medieval people had a real dread of purgatory, the period of punishment they were taught must come before a soul could enter heaven. The purchase of an indulgence could shorten or even wipe out this time of penance: ‘a penny in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs’.

On 31 October 1517 an obscure German monk could stand this ‘holy trade’ no longer and stated his objections in 95 theses nailed to a castle door in Wittenberg. Martin Luther was angry at a church he saw as having buried the gospel under a welter of tradition. Where images and relics had become idolised and detracted from the worship of Christ he condemned them, but he was not opposed to the arts as such. When riots of image-burning and stained-glass window smashing broke out in Wittenberg, he came out of hiding at risk of his life in order to stop the destruction.

Luther also clearly loved music. ‘Next to God,’ he said, ‘music deserves the highest praise... Whether you wish to comfort the sad, to subdue frivolity, to encourage the despairing, to humble the proud, to calm the passionate or to appease those full of hate... what more effective means than music could you find?’10 And the quote in the margin would suggest that he rather liked the idea of square dancing as well.

But if Luther wished to preserve that artistry which contributed to worship, there were those of his contemporaries who did not. Whilst Luther was in prison, Andreas Karlstadt took the reform movement in Wittenberg in a more extreme direction, including a blanket condemnation of the arts. ‘The Gregorian chant,’ pronounced Karlstadt, ‘moves the mind still further from God – to say nothing of the mumbling, the shrieking like geese of the choristers and lascivious sound of musical instruments, the wailing of organs.’11 He produced a tract entitled Of the putting away of pictures where he asserted that no one ever learnt

But when natural music is sharpened and polished by art, then one begins to see with amazement the great and perfect wisdom of God in his wonderful work of music, where one voice takes a simple part and around it sing three, four, or five other voices, leaping, springing round about, marvellously gracing the simple part, like a square dance in heaven with friendly bows, embraces and hearty swinging of partners.

Martin Luther12
Art and Soul

the way to heaven from a picture. 'I tell you that God has not less diligently and truly forbidden pictures than murdering, robbing, adultery and the like,' he insisted, and in the fervent polarising of opinions that the Reformation stirred up, there were plenty to agree with him.

There was, of course, alongside this turmoil of protest another powerful agent of change at work – the printing press. Here we have it again, the same phenomenon we noted in our opening chapter, technological revolution working alongside a revolution in ideas. Soon people were able to read or hear the Bible in their own tongue. From now on paintings in church were no longer needed in the same way, for what could be

better, from the

Lutheran

Europe, the

of Tren

down in

decency

be pain

also pro

impure?

Once oj

widen.

Getting

If Luther and John Calvin examined the promontory of decoratism from the statement that the purpose and the Dancing were b

Calvin depended that he have at

pleasant

. . . Has

Inde

put his n

acle pla

Geneva,

He u

vehicle f

There

in the

Iconoclasm has reared its destructive head many times throughout church history. In Britain it showed itself most clearly in Henry VIII’s systematic destruction of the monasteries, and Oliver Cromwell’s Parliamentary Ordinance commanding the ‘speedy demolishing of all organs, images and all matters of superstitious monuments’. Demolition is not always a negative force, as those anxious to rid our cities of the worst excesses of high-rise architecture and mouldering industrialism would agree. Unfortunately, by its very nature, those who come after are not in a position to judge. It is the tangible that is lost; what is gained is intangible.
better, the Reformers rightly asked, than to get one’s teaching straight from the Word?

Luther’s actions had opened the floodgates of protest all over Europe. The Catholic hierarchy eventually realised the seriousness of the challenge and tried to reform itself from within. The Council of Trent reaffirmed the value of arts in teaching the illiterate, but laid down that paintings should not conflict with church doctrine or decency. (Following this principle, Pope Pius IV ordered loincloths to be painted on Michelangelo’s naked figures in the Sistine Chapel.) It also pronounced against music that was ‘lascivious’ or ‘seductive and impure’. But it was too late to gather up the faithful within the fold. Once opened, the divide between Catholic and Protestant continued to widen.

Getting back to basics

If Luther began the chorus of protest, it was Calvin who orchestrated it. John Calvin is widely portrayed as a hater of the arts, so it is worth examining his words and actions a little more closely. He did indeed promote a strict and austere Christianity. Churches were devoid of all decoration and artefacts, lest anything should distract the congregation from the most vital element—the Word of God. As if making a visual statement, the pulpit became the central feature. Calvin believed singing should be praise pure and simple. The only texts he saw suitable for this purpose were the Psalms and one or two canticles. Singing in harmony and the use of instruments, including the organ, were forbidden. Dancing was classified along with visiting taverns as a moral lapse for which believers would be reprimanded in front of the congregation.

Calvin was determined to get back to the essentials of a religion that depended on faith in Christ alone. But it would be wrong to conclude that he was simply an aesthetically challenged killjoy: ‘Should the Lord have attracted our eyes to the beauty of the flowers, and our senses to pleasant odours,’ he asked, ‘and should it then be a sin to drink them in? … Has he not made many things worthy of our attention that go far beyond our needs?’

Indeed, he stated clearly that the arts were a gift of God, and in 1546 put his money where his mouth was by springing to the defence of a miracle play on the Acts of the Apostles that was being performed in Geneva, and pronouncing it ‘sound and godly’.

He understood that even art created by an unbeliever could still be a vehicle for truth:

Therefore in reading profane authors, the admirable light of truth displayed in them should remind us that the human mind, however much fallen and
Art and Soul

perverted from its original integrity, is still adorned and invested with admirable gifts from its Creator. If we reflect that the Spirit of God is the only fountain of truth, we will be careful, as we would avoid offering insults to Him, not to reject or condemn truth wherever it appears. In despising the gifts we insult the giver.\textsuperscript{18}

Indeed he acknowledged that art by non-Christians could often be better, rather wistfully remarking that ‘these radiations of Divine Light shone more brilliantly among unbelieving people than among God’s saints.’\textsuperscript{19}

But in understanding the power of good art, he also realised the dangers. ‘For music has a secret and incredible power to move our hearts. When evil words are accompanied by music, they penetrate more deeply and the poison enters as wine through a funnel into a vat.’\textsuperscript{20}

Playing it safe

As so often in history, the great pioneers have a courage and balance that those who come after them lack. Over the history of Protestantism that followed, all too frequently it was the perils of the arts that were emphasised, rather than the delights.

The theatre, it appears, was often considered the most dangerous of all. In 1575 the Church of Scotland banned liturgical drama, a move which arguably prevented the growth of any Scottish theatre tradition for centuries to come. In 1642 Oliver Cromwell’s Parliament passed a law closing theatres altogether. Quite what effect that would have had on British culture had the Royalists not regained power is a matter of interesting conjecture. What is apparent is that thereafter theatre, abandoned by Christians, became much more superficial. Elegant comedies of manners replaced the more searching Jacobean plays with their moral and spiritual dilemmas. ‘Something had gone,’ comments Murray Watts, ‘and it was undoubtedly a deeper sense of human value, which is closely allied to religious awareness, and can produce the greatest comedy as well as the greatest tragedy.’\textsuperscript{21}

A closer look at these bans on theatre will reveal that it was not simply the art form itself that was perceived as threatening. In the Scottish example, it can be seen as a reaction to the theology behind the plays, whereas in Cromwell’s Commonwealth it was more as a safeguard against political subversion. Perhaps it was the same sort of reasoning that today leads revolutionaries to take over the TV and radio stations before the parliament buildings. Theatre was, and still is, a powerful means of communication. Anyone aspiring to power is wise to treat it with respect, if not outright fear.
Art and a Suspicious Church

When in 1644 that same brief Puritan parliament ordered the demolition of 'organs, images and all matters of superstitious monuments', it was theology they were tilting at, rather than the art forms themselves. The organs and images were simply the outward symbols of an old set of ideas, and their destruction, thankfully a short-lived activity, was a show of power signalling the new to be ushered in. (In fact even the Puritans were not so averse to the arts as it might appear. One of Shakespeare's leading patrons was a Puritan; Cromwell's own officer Bulstrode Whitelock fought for operas to be allowed; and Cromwell


When Babette, a sophisticated but penniless Parisian refugee, finds herself washed up in a desolate corner of Denmark, among a strict but good-hearted religious community, she is grateful for their kindness. When an unexpected lottery win arrives for her, she decides to spend it all on one huge extravagant gesture — a feast. With reckless abandon she sends away for choice wines, meats and vegetables. With immense care she prepares her culinary masterpiece. The simple chapel folk, more used to a lifestyle of relentless austerity and dreary food, are at first suspicious, but gradually they begin to mellow and marvel at a richness they never dreamed of.

Babette's art form is cookery and, in her hands, the feast gives glory to God and delight to a community whose theology had left them dour and joyless.
Art and Soul

himself uttered one of the most memorable encouragements to artistic realism: 'Paint me, warts and all'!

Church history, then, would seem to indicate that the arts have been victims of the clash of two great theologies, Protestant and Catholic, with a particular pile-up of casualties behind the Protestant lines.

By the time the newly revived evangelicals found themselves in the Victorian era, with its all-pervasive principle of respectability, no one was even questioning whether the arts really were as dangerous as they were cracked up to be. It was best to play safe, argued our evangelical forebears, unaware of what meagre cultural crumbs that policy left them with. And anyway, the emergence of Empire and advances in travel meant there were other exciting frontiers to be conquered. The 'fields were ripe for harvest' and overseas mission beckoned. No matter that the church at home was becoming progressively more bland and dull and unattractive. No matter that it reeked of what psychologist William James called 'the atrocious harmlessness of all things'. (On visiting a supposedly idyllic Christian holiday centre, he found himself longing for the outside world with all its 'heights and depths, the precipices and steep ideals, the gleams of the awful and the infinite'.) No matter that, as author Garrison Keillor comments on his small town Lutheran heritage, 'The avoidance of unifying things as the ultimate value makes us lead very strange lives.' The Christian world was safe in its respectable cocoon, acting, in Calvin Seerveld's words, 'as if the Holy Spirit only shows up in straight-backed people wearing black suits'.

But, of course, the Holy Spirit has a habit of turning up in all sorts of unexpected ways and times. Indeed, it may be that a longer view of history will reveal the charismatic movement as one of the vital factors in the church's return to the arts. Certainly, it has brought back movement, symbolism and visual awareness to a church starved of colour – not to mention a willingness to change. It is perhaps too soon to write that particular chapter of the church's history, but it is certainly important to look back over the longer chronicle of Christianity's relationship with the arts and draw some lessons from it. It can point out to us both the dangers of glorifying the arts and the equal dangers of withdrawing from them altogether. God grant that in a new millennium we may find a positive and healthy approach which has been conspicuously absent for so long.