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## Fine Arts in the Christian Community

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# The Fine Arts in the Christian Community

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by Nick Van Til  
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Abraham Kaplan, philosopher and astute observer of the American scene, summed up his findings and evaluations of the popular arts in an essay, "The Aesthetics of the Popular

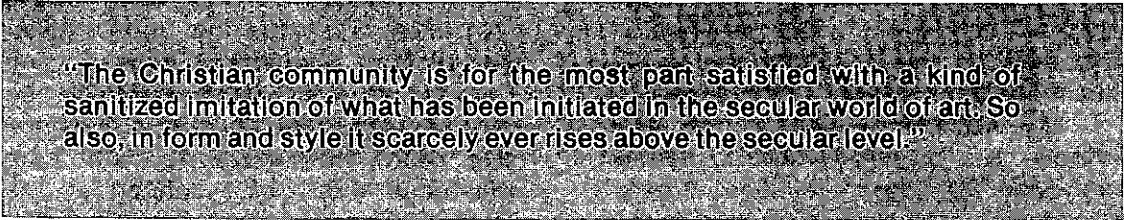
Arts."<sup>1</sup> Kaplan concluded that the state of the popular arts is not so much that of degradation as it is immaturity. I think the same can be said for the Christian community and its approach to the arts.

Seldom if ever does it launch any art movements of its own. The Christian community is for the most part satisfied with a kind of sanitized imitation of what has been initiated in the secular world of art. So also, in form and style it scarcely ever rises above the secular level.

Various examples come to mind as I think about what passes for art in the Christian community. I think back to my first year at Dordt College when the limited student body and faculty made it impossible for the college to provide any fine arts leadership for the community. So it happened that one of the churches in the community sponsored a concert by the music department from a Bible college in an adjacent state,

turned out while three xylophonists played a number illuminated only by their phosphorescent gloves and sticks. Fascinating, no doubt. But would it not have been better to base the acceptance of the number on the quality of the music rather than on its eye appeal?

More fascination was provided in the finale. It was *The Battle Hymn Of the Republic*, that great classic of American civil religion. For this extravaganza, each participant was dressed to represent some vocation as included in the mix of American economic life. One could scarcely fault the singers for turning in a somewhat less than stirring performance when all the emphasis seemed to be on sight rather than the sound. One would have to say that the



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presumably to alleviate the dearth of musical performances available to the community.

One of the publicized assets of the performance was to be found in the fact that it had as its producer a former Hollywood production man who since his conversion had dedicated his talents to the Lord. And the Hollywood style was clearly in evidence. There were various fascinating gimmicks in use. For example, the house lights were

aesthetic quality of the music was eclipsed by the fascination of the sight. The production was based on the presumption of an immaturity of taste in the audience, so the audience had to be satisfied with a fascinating experience instead of a highly artistic and deeply moving one.

In some places and in some cases we expect and excuse immaturity of taste. I recall a freshman of some years ago, one of six men who lived in our

lower level apartment. We could fictitiously call the student Harry Kool. Whenever Harry returned from his college classes he straightway loaded his hi-fi with enough ammunition to last the duration of his expected stay on the premises. Trouble was, not only did Harry want the feel of the rhythm in his bones, he wanted the hyper-decibled volume to move the surface of his skin as well. This activated the ceiling joists, making them pulsate to the rhythm of the beat, so we had to ask Harry Kool to take his "hairy" "cool" music elsewhere.

In spite of our difference in musical taste, we did not blame Harry for his musical preference. We didn't hold him entirely responsible for the fact that up to that time he had a one track mind for eight track tapes. Often, by dint of economic circumstances, family inclinations and traditions as well as small town or ghetto background, Dutch or otherwise, students come to college and their adult years with a very limited exposure to and appreciation for the fine arts. I think that calls for a remedy.

My recommendation for the remedy is a good quality color television set. Most families already own one as their basic avenue of entertainment, so the remedy will come in the use and not so much in the expenditure itself. It is likely that not everyone is as conveniently located as we are here at Dordt College. We have access to a station from the Iowa public television network and from the South Dakota network as well. This means that if we find a fine arts program in conflict with one of our family, school or church responsibilities, we can generally pick it up on the scheduling of the other network. In addition, KDCR, the college radio station, furnishes us with the best of sacred and classical music all day and every day.

Let me review a week's fine arts of-

ferings on television. Beginning Sunday, at 1 P.M. you could catch Erich Leinsdorf and the Vienna Symphony in "Variations from Vienna." At 2 P.M. you could join Jacques Cousteau for a tour of the stone monuments on Easter Island in the southeast Pacific Ocean. 3 P.M. provided the summation by Ronald Eyre of his thirteen-part series on world religions, "The Long Search." At four o'clock, there was a repeat of a 1967 Leonard Bernstein "Young People's Concert." At 9 P.M., you could again catch "The Long Search" on Iowa Public Television, if you had missed it on the 3 P.M. South Dakota network showing.

The fine arts fare for the remainder of that week was little short of fantastic. On Monday evening, public television presented Seiji Osawa and the Boston Symphony Orchestra with Murray Perahia as guest soloist for Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 4 in G*. On Wednesday evening, Iowa public television presented the State University of Iowa Symphony Orchestra and Chorus live from Hancher Hall in the performance of Handel's *Messiah*. Thursday there was a rebroadcast from Washington D.C. of a concert by the National Symphony in honor of the sixtieth birthday of the conductor-composer Leonard Bernstein. The finale was Beethoven's *Triple Concerto in C* with Bernstein on the podium, Yehudi Menuhin on violin, Mstislav Rostropovich on cello and Andre Previn at the piano. It was a stellar performance by a once-in-a-decade aggregation of some of the greats in classical music.

Interspersed amongst the above public television fine arts offerings there were some worthwhile commercial television programs. Monday and Tuesday evening in consecutive two-hour segments one could view a dramatization by Cicely Tyson of the life of Harriet Ross Tubman, the black

woman who not only liberated herself from slavery via the underground railroad but some three thousand fellow slaves besides—a neglected hero of American history whom every school child should come to know and respect. That week Dick Cavett presented a three-segment discussion on "Human Nature." There were opposing points of view. On Monday evening the Harvard socio-biologist, Edward O. Wilson, argued that man is what his genes are. On Tuesday evening an anthropologist, from Columbia University, Marvin Harris, took up the case for environmental influences. The evidence both men presented was touted as more sophisticated than the standard arguments of the past. On Wednesday Cavett had both men back for personal confrontation and dialogue.

On the basis of my monitoring of those TV offerings, I find myself in complete disagreement with the attitude towards TV expressed by Gordon Oosterman in the September 1978 issue of the *Christian Home and School*. Oosterman wrote, "The television set given us ten years ago (a used item then) has been defunct these past six months. Last week a new fuse (cost \$1.78) got it back into bleary operation. Our friends told us we had not missed anything important. It appears they have been telling us the truth."<sup>2</sup> At the risk of indicting Oosterman and his friends for "cultural lag," in this case not keeping abreast of the cultural opportunities which TV offers, I would suggest that most any week there are enough excellent, interesting and educational programs on TV to accommodate the amount of time which one may conscientiously spend on entertainment and diversion.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson exacts a pledge from his Chicago followers that they will keep the TV set off for two hours every evening to give children

time for their home work. Similarly, school boards ought to take a pledge from those who enroll their children that they will not use television as an entertainment catch-all and diversion pacifier. I would like to propose that someone connected with the Christian school at both the grade school and high school level be appointed as TV monitor. A weekly sheet of recommended programs could be sent home with the children in the hope that the parents would be willing to accept some guidance.

Initial exposure will undoubtedly be the major hurdle. Some time ago, a local Christian school teacher recommended a TV program for its artistic and educational value. Thereupon one student complained that it would not be available to him because it fell on Wednesday evening and that is the evening that his father is engrossed in *Charlie's Angels*. One has to decry the state of that father's artistic and moral sensitivity when, by the admission of one of its former stars, the success of *Charlie's Angels* is attributed to the fact that the three "angels" do not wear brassieres. We may have to admit that even in a Christian community and in a Christian school constituency there are some Archie Bunkers who turn the TV, which could be a useful instrument for cultural enrichment, into a "boob-tube," a name that, with indiscriminate viewing, it richly deserves.

Even so, if a change is to take place, a beginning must be made. Perhaps, this beginning will require some cajoling by sensitive leaders. That could result in increased exposure which in turn will bring about heightened appreciations. Such efforts should bring about increased support for Christian ventures into the world of fine arts and general cultural innovation. Christians with their own communications media, for example, Dordt College radio, could expand

on the basis of increased support and offer leadership in areas where Christians have for the most part been followers.

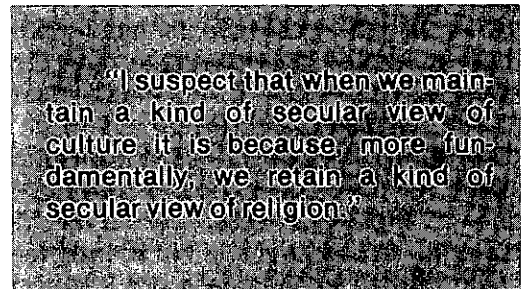
To all the foregoing one may uncontroversibly respond, "I can go to heaven without ever having seen a painting by Rembrandt, a play by Shakespeare or a ballet by George Ballanchine. I don't need to augment my appreciation of the simple gospel hymns to include an enjoyment of Bach, Beethoven and Bartok." In response to that kind of an apologetic for the failure to include the fine arts in a Christian life style, I would suggest that it proceeds from two basic misunderstandings. First, there is a misunderstanding of what constitutes our responsibility toward culture. This, in turn, is based on a second misunderstanding, that is, a misunderstanding of the place of religion in life.

As to the first misunderstanding, I believe that many Christians maintain a kind of man-on-the-street secular view concerning their cultural responsibilities. Culture is something which people with wealth and leisure dabble in or aspire to, while we of middle-class North America go about our business of making a living, with only such relief from that daily grind as our recreational time and tendencies permit.

Such a narrow vision fails to take account of the cultural mandate which was laid upon man in Genesis 1:28: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill and subdue the earth. Rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and over every living creature that moves on the earth" (N.I.V.). The "fruitful and increase" part seems to come quite naturally. The subduing part has been subject to misappropriation and neglect. Not only has subduing been perverted into exploitation, but we take a kind of secular pick-and-choose approach to that responsibility. We think

we may subdue when and where we please, with the result that there are vast regions in the domain of culture which are left to the dominion of Satan.

I suspect that when we maintain a kind of secular view of culture it is because, more fundamentally, we retain a kind of secular view of religion. When the present day secular humanist on our continent thinks about religion, he thinks of it as something that takes place on Sunday in a church and under institutional auspices. He does not think of all of life as religious. Religious rites and obligations can be discharged, then, in a very small time-slot as far as anyone's total week of activity is concerned. This leaves major areas of life for which one has no religious responsibility. One can then neglect those areas of activity which do not captivate one's interest or do not show any promise of becoming financially profitable.



The secular compartmentalizing of life is nowhere more strikingly and stridently maintained than in the popular American attitude towards education. Education, so it is argued, is something that can take place in a neutral sphere, sealed off from religious influences. If there are those who want to expose education to religious tenets,

it is because they are sectarian. All such should be willing to pay for their sectarian view by paying for their education twice; once by taxation and a second time through private school tuition.

Contrast that secular view of life and culture with that of the Christian who knows his life is under the all-encompassing eye of God. He self-consciously, with religious intent, takes up his cultural task before the face of God in love. He not only applies himself to his own chosen vocation with great energy but he does not want to rest until the whole creation is moving to cultural fruition through the creating and forming activity of Christians in community.

Such a culture-developing Christian, whether business executive, farmer, salesman or educator, actively supports works of mercy, education, and political action, and by no means neglects a cultivation of the fine arts. Such Christians delight in the great beauties of sight and sound which are made available to them through the gifts which God has given to mankind. Such Christians will be particularly interested in the support of those who also, with self-conscious dedication, are working in music, painting, literature, sculpture, drama and the dance, recipients of gifts of creativity from their Creator. Such Christians will support all efforts to wrest cultural leadership from the apostate of this world and once again bring it under subjection to Christ. This includes all that comes from man's creative powers, not the least of which are the fine arts.

Klaas Schilder in his book, *Christ and Culture* becomes almost satirical on this point. After discussing some of the problems which Christians face in the development of a Christ-anointed culture, Schilder writes, "The worst part is the servility with which Christian confessors, as soon as they touch the

problem of culture, timidly look up to the unbelieving culture-philosophers next-door: Would they be so kind as to grant us a nod of approval? The progressive submission of Christian thinkers and theologians to (non-Christian) cultural and other philosophers, is more and more becoming an obstacle to giving a unanimous and unequivocal answer of faith."<sup>3</sup>

The lack of unanimity and the presence of ambiguity and equivocation stems in a large measure from divergent opinions as to the Christian's proper response to the cultural mandate. That variety of opinions has been delineated for us by H. Richard Niebuhr in his book, also entitled, *Christ and Culture*.

The first approach which Niebuhr outlines for us is that of "Christ Against Culture."<sup>4</sup> This is a position of world-flight which in Protestantism is most often held by Anabaptists and their theological descendants.

The second position is designated "The Christ of Culture."<sup>5</sup> Those holding this position Niebuhr calls the Culture-Protestants. They are generally the theological liberals who equate the spirit of Christ with all progress and goodness in the world. "They feel no great tension between church and world, the social laws and the gospel, the workings of divine grace and human effort, the ethics of salvation and the ethics of social conservation and progress."<sup>6</sup> The Culture-Protestants have their membership in the mainline Protestant churches where the gospel is the "social gospel."

Niebuhr offers as his third classification "Christ Above Culture."<sup>7</sup> It is the synthesis approach which was first worked out systematically in theology and philosophy by Thomas Aquinas. According to this approach, you can begin your knowledge of God and religion as well as social ethics by

looking to reason and common sense. This knowledge is good as far as it goes but by revelation from above there must be added some additional theology and knowledge of the theological virtues. It is a two-story approach. It is the official Roman Catholic position but is also widely held by Protestant evangelicals who have failed to work out the full implications of their faith. This position allows the Christian to work with the non-Christian in large *neutral* areas of activity without a difference and without confessional impositions.

A fourth attitude towards culture is expressed in the model, "Christ and Culture in Paradox."<sup>8</sup> This attitude is often attributed to Luther but it depends to some extent upon which passages of Luther one reads. Luther did not find such extremes of paradox as are imposed by Kierkegaard and his neo-orthodox followers, e.g. Emil Brunner, who looks upon the power of the state as demonic. Luther looked on the state as having divine approbation if not as of divine institution.<sup>9</sup> Luther was most enthusiastic about music among the fine arts but for Christians the hope of a better culture

"is not their chief concern, but rather this, that their own particular blessing should increase, which is the truth as it is in Christ. . . . But besides this they have. . . the two greatest future blessings in their death. The first, in that through death the whole tragedy of this world's ills is brought to a close. . . . The other blessing of death is this, that it not only concludes the pains and evils of this life, but (which is more excellent) makes an end of sins and vices. . . . For this our life is so full of perils—sin, like a serpent, besetting us on

every side—and it is impossible for us to live without sinning; but fairest death delivers us from these perils, and cuts our sin clean away from us."<sup>10</sup>

Here Luther isn't far from the Anabaptists whom he roundly condemned. He is far removed from the later Calvinists who saw the blessings of "truth as it is in Christ" as furnishing the foundations of culture. To the latter we now move.

Niebuhr's last position is that of "Christ the Transformer of Culture."<sup>11</sup> He calls this the "conversionist" understanding of the relation of Christ to culture. As to worldly culture, "they see the self-destructiveness in its self-contradictoriness. Yet they believe also that such culture is under God's sovereign rule, and that the Christian must carry on cultural work in obedience to the Lord."<sup>12</sup> This nicely expresses the position of those who have followed Calvin and, later, Abraham Kuyper.

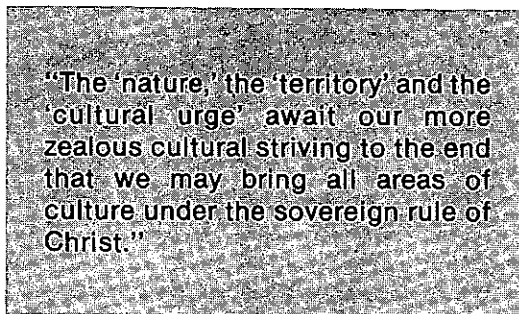
From time to time there have been hyper-Kuyperians abroad in the earth who were hopeful of so exercising a new dominion over culture and changing its direction to include Christian artistic techniques as if there might be a Christian way of improving one's velocity in playing a chromatic scale on the piano or that one might develop a Christian brush stroke on his canvas. This, to me, is a misguided and forlorn hope.

Since the days of the early Greeks, there have been those who thought the problem of evil in man was metaphysical and not moral, that his problem was the finitude of his being and not the turpitude of his heart. That kind of evasion of the problem is wrong. Even so man's cultural problem is not physical but one of motive and motif, that is, the problem of intent and dominant theme.

Schilder maintains that "no real



*koinonia* [communion] exists among men unless it has been brought about by God's Spirit." Yet "there is only one nature, but a twofold use of nature; one material but a twofold fashioning of it; one territory but a twofold development of it; one cultural urge, but a twofold cultural striving. There exists a *sunousia*, a being-together, among all men."<sup>13</sup> The "nature," the "territory" and the "cultural urge" await our more zealous cultural striving to the end that we may bring all areas of culture under the sovereign rule of Christ.



The nature and the territory is out there already richly furnished with technical skills which furnish models of physical mastery. Such skills can serve as models for instruction. So often in the Christian community, especially in the fine arts, we attempt to change the cultural direction by supplying new motives and motifs before we have mastered the techniques to the point of true excellence. Sacred music in particular often falls victim to this disparity. Often there is the attempt to sanctify a trite tune by the use of sacred texts. But for the most part it falls short of the kind of excellence that is a worthy vehicle for the Redeemer's praise.

Only an inveterate optimist would presume that the Christian community

will soon bring about a conversion of the cultural direction of our age. Yet, I think, pessimism supported by indifference is even less excusable. Like Alexander the Great, we cannot weep because there are no more worlds to conquer. We must weep because as yet we have scarcely begun to conquer.

Some have wrested the words, "whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely," from their context in Philippians 4:8, trying to make them the basis for art appreciation and morality in art. The text speaks to our social relations. Putting it into the context of art appreciation is what I would call exegetical strong-arming. We don't need to proof-text our way into art appreciation and our responsibility towards the fine arts. The Word of the Scriptures demands our response and the Word in creation surely invites our response. And this can be our reward. What we begin as a task will presently be an avocation of sheer delight.

## Footnotes

1. Abraham Kaplan, "Aesthetics and the Popular Arts" in James B. Hall and Barry Ulinov, *Modern Culture and the Arts*, McGraw-Hill. N.Y., 1967, p. 65.
2. Gordon Oosterman, On Choosing A Channel, *Christian Home and School*, Sept., 1978, p. 5.
3. Klaas Childer, *Christ and Culture*, Premier, Winnepeg, 1977, p. 11.
4. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, Harper and Row, N.Y., 1951, Chapter 2.
5. *Ibid.*, Chapter 3.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
7. *Ibid.*, Chapter 4.
8. *Ibid.*, Chapter 5.
9. Martin Luther, *Works*, "Concerning the State," Meuhlenberg Press. Phila. 1965, Vol. 45, p. 258.
10. Niebuhr, *op. cit.* p. 179.
11. *Ibid.*, Chapter 6.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 191.
13. Schilder, *op. cit.* p. 55.