TRAPS FOR MEDITATION:
ART AS EPIDHANY AND IKON

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FATHER EARL FERNANDES
Let us be silent and remember that God is with us now:

O God of all, you are the holy one, you are the holy and immortal one, you are the holy, immortal and eternal one. In the forms and changing lights of this world help us to behold your wondrous beauty. For it is in the manifold beauty of this world that is revealed our source and our destiny. We believe that seeing the source and purpose of creation has the power to transform. Help us in this time and place to glimpse our life in relation to you, our source and our end. For this beauty which mirrors and echoes your beauty has the power to make us more fully human, which is, making us more fully of you, our God.

We pray through that one who most perfectly mirrors your beauty, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
"All art worthy of the name is religious," Matisse said, late in his life. "Be it a creation of lines and colors: if it is not religious, it does not exist. If it is not religious, it is only a matter of documentary art, anecdotal art, which is no longer art. Which has nothing to do with art."

(quoted by Calvin Tomkins, The New Yorker, February 11, 1985, in a review of Pierre Schneider's Henri Matisse (Rizzoli; $95))

"The sacred is the stuff of this world being broken open to reveal its source and its destiny. Seeing the source and purpose of creation has the power to transform. The sacred, then, has to do with glimpsing our life in relationship to God who is its source and end. From this perspective the sacred is that which has the power to make us more fully human, which is really making us more fully of God."
THEOLOGY AND ART

Let me begin boldly by stating a fundamental conviction: there is an intimate connection between the affirmation of faith and aesthetic experience. It seems to me that there is a kind of analogy linking the person who says, "I believe in the God of love!" and the person who says of a poem or play or picture, "That's beautiful!" Both such individuals are allowing themselves to be captivated by a reality beyond themselves. Both will find it hard to convey in any kind of easily analyzable way precisely what it is that has so transformed, even for a moment, life itself. For myself, I want to take a stand with the great Swiss theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, who begins his monumental work, Herrlichkeit, with the single word, "beauty." For Urs von Balthasar, beauty, together with truth and goodness, have necessarily a central place in Christian theology, and the loss of the aesthetic dimension in Christianity has been a disastrous one. When the Christian Gospel broke upon the classical world, the notion of beauty was at the heart of that world's myths, philosophy, and literature. This was, as it were, baptized by the Fathers in their concern to illuminate the biblical notions of kabod ("honor") and doxa ("glory"), as in Psalm 79:9 "For the glory of thy name: and deliver us..." or in Luke 2: 9, "And the glory of the Lord shone round about..." But with the waning of the Middle Ages this insight into the nature of reality was lost, indeed radically rejected by the Reformers and radically distorted by the counter-Reformation, but I shall speak a little of that in a moment. Let me simply sum this up by saying that in my view --using scholastic terminology--beauty is a **transcendental**, a fundamental determination of being, that just as all things partake of truth and goodness, so do they of beauty. In the words of the charming children's song of a few years' ago: "Everything is beautiful, in its own way."

Having laid that shattering truism on you, let me say that when I use the term, "art," I am using it in the widest sense possible so that I should want to include the so-called fine arts (painting, sculpture, architecture),
the literary arts (novels, poetry, plays), and the musical and performing arts (dance, theatre, music itself). To put it very simply, by art I mean any human fabrication of enterprise that can potentially evoke in us an aesthetic response.

there are sources of theological insight outside the walls of a lecture hall and the covers of a theologian's *magnum opus*.)

Let me begin by summarizing in an absurdly skeletal way the historic relation between the world of religion --understood exclusively as Judaeo-Christian-- and art.

Among Jews, for example, there have been very differing attitudes over the centuries. Prophetic religion mistrusted our human capacity for image-making while the cultic or priestly religion used, and indeed, abused that same capacity. Again, with the emergence of Judaism, prophetic mistrust was renewed but by the time of the Middle Ages in Europe it was possible to find some exceptions to the strict prohibition of the orthodox rabbis upon image-making. It is important to remember that each attitude, from the religion of the prophets to the Jewishness of say, Marc Chagall, is based upon whether the principle of unity --historic monotheism-- is served and preserved or threatened and denied. Chaim Potok's novel, *My Name is Asher Lev*, expresses this tension beautifully, the tension between the innate human capacity for image-making, whether it be in painting or story-telling or film-making, and the prophetic fear that such images will serve as surrogates for that reality which is beyond even the loftiest of human concepts. In the novel, Potok tells the story --perhaps his own story-- of the separation between a young Jewish painter and his orthodox parents.

Let me contrast for a moment the classical Jewish and Christian attitudes toward the arts. There is, of course, a common ground: art must never be allowed to displace or distort the transcendent otherness of God. Classically, there
has been an uneasiness, bordering on prohibition, for Christians as well as Jews, to portray the Godhead in any literalistic way. For example, there were various synods in the Western Church from the ninth century on which forbade the depiction of the Holy Trinity. And the emergence of sacred art in Christianity was by no means an easy evolution. But having granted that there was, and is, a good deal of ambiguity in Christianity about the propriety of image-making, I would want to argue that the Ikon, understood in the widest sense, is a logical outcome of the doctrine of the Incarnation. If it is true to say that Jesus in his humanity is, to use John A. T. Robinson's evocative phrase, "the human face of God," then the image of the holy face cannot but carry power with it for the devotion of the faithful. If it is true to say that the saints are "the friends of God," then it can be understood why people wished to have their images. In other words, if the premise is that the Divine is somehow mirrored in the human, the Other in the familiar, the Sacred in the commonplace, then one can hardly be surprised that by the fourth century Christians made use of images. But having said that, one can also hardly be surprised at the sudden appearance of iconoclasm. The art of antiquity, surviving in the representational and degenerate art of the Graeco-Romans, was inadequate to the aspirations of Christian monotheism and presented a definite temptation to a relapse into idolatry, the then chronic weakness of the Eastern Mediterranean. There was thus excited a Christian iconoclasm in Constantinople on the model of those frequent iconoclastic movements of the Semitic world recorded in the histories of Judaism and Islam. The impulse to art was, however, too strong to be repressed, so that the unlooked-for result of the iconoclastic movement was, in the words of Robert Byron, "a compromise, of austere and unearthly magnificence whereby the artist, in the place of reproducing a subject in the exact likeness of his world, was now to reproduce his own emotional reaction to the central and One Factor in his and everyone else's lives." Iconoclasm itself accounts, perhaps, for the special intensity of high Byzantine art.

Much the same can said of the iconoclasm, the image-breaking, of the six-
teenth century reformers. Without embarking upon the anthropological or psychologi-
cal roots of the seemingly endemic human temptation to relapse into idolatry, it
is enough to say that even in the most strongly puritan enclaves of the sixteenth
and seventeenth centuries the impulse to art was too strong to repress, but rather
than being directed in the way of the transcendent mysticism of, say, the mosaics
of Monreale and Ravenna, it expressed itself in the celebration of the commonplace
and the ordinary: Jesus depicted not as Pantocrator, Emperor of the Cosmos, but
Jesus depicted as "your neighborhood rabbi." And by the end of the eighteenth century
with few exceptions, not even that.

All of this has meant a separation between great artistic enterprises
and the explicitly religious. Among Catholics, there has all too often been an
acceptance, at best, of sacred propaganda, no better exemplified than in the Basilica
of St. Peter in Rome; at worst, of kitsch, with all too frequent lapses into something
analogous to idolatry. Among Protestants, there has been, if anything, an intensi-
fied ambivalence. I suppose it is true to say that the self-conscious "good-taste"
of Episcopalians has had its impact upon all the branches of historic protestantism.
But for Catholic and Protestant alike, little of the art of the present, from
theatre to music to painting to dance, can be thought of in any traditional way
as religious.

But having said that, that thematically there is very little religious
art in the traditional sense of the word today, it is my conviction that one cannot
experience a serious artistic enterprise, however explicitly and self-confessedly
secular it may be, without being brought into the moral-theological order, whether
one likes it or not... This is to say, the Christian who reads a poem by Philip
Larkin, looks at a painting by Francis Bacon, listens to a piece of so-called
serial music by John Cage, is present at a performance of a play by Samuel Beckett,
or goes to see

will, willy-nilly, be confronted
by a more or less powerful aesthetic response that cannot but have implications
for him as a Christian. For example, both Philip Larkin and Francis Bacon are
self-described as atheists, and yet I cannot read Larkin's quietly nihilistic poems or look at Bacon's powerfully disturbing paintings, without finding my faith in some way challenged, disturbed, enhanced, refined, weakened, and even, paradoxically, strengthened. It is, of course, a commonplace to say that today's philosophers and theologians not infrequently turn to the novel or the play or the poem to express their deepest convictions about what it is to be human or, in old-fashioned language, what is the nature of things. I am thinking not only of Sartre and Camus but of the American preacher, Frederick Buechner, whose book on preaching, Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy-Tale, is simply the best apologetic I have read in the last ten years and whose novels are stunning literary works and stimulating theology. Frankly, I believe that the clue to this is simply the experience of beauty, not just the natural beauty of say, a mountain, or a forest of redwoods, but the terrible beauty of Hector's farewell in the Iliad, or the hilarious beauty of Papageno in The Magic Flute, or the tranquil beauty of a scroll by the seventeenth century Japanese painter, Chu Ta. And as I have said, there need be nothing explicitly religious about the work; indeed, it can even at times be explicitly a-religious.

But let me speak practically for just a moment. The person who never visits an art gallery, attends a concert, goes to a play, reads a novel, or sees a movie may be an exemplary Christian, but is decidedly one-dimensional, perhaps even in his or her faith. I hope it is not necessary for me to urge upon you a frequent exercise of your aesthetic faculty. It is true, of course, even if you watch nothing more on television than, say, , you are being stirred aesthetically. But that is a diet of big-macs and Pepsi when you compare it with the substantial fare of concert halls and films and theatres and art galleries.

It may be no more than a decision to read a good collection of contemporary American poetry, but I have a feeling that read with the right disposition and attitude one cannot but discover that one's faith has
been enhanced, one's theological insight deepened.

"The right disposition and attitude..." That is the kind of language used in connection with worship and prayer. We speak of being disposed to worship and of assuming an attitude of prayer. The person who stands before a great master's painting with gratitude and humility is not so far from the simple believer, whatever his or her personal beliefs may be. Frederick Buechner speaks in one of his books of the sight of a friend and neighbor, a non-believer, singing in an amateur performance of the Mozart Requiem. The words, Kyrie eleison, "Lord, have mercy!" come rolling off his tongue because he has allowed himself to be captured by the transcendent power of a masterpiece. Obviously, however important our own critical faculties may be in the aesthetic experience, what I shall call the "Archie Bunker school of artistic criticism" with its assertive "I know what I like and I sure don't like that!" can have no place if we are to be truly open to the power of art. Denis de Rougemont once said: "Art is a trap for meditation." The greatest of art will move us to something akin to prayer whether we explicitly recognize and acknowledge the underlying determinant or not.

Both great art and contemplation, or the highest kind of prayer, have the ability to transform krons, ordinary time, into kairos, "the acceptable time." And here both art and prayer are closely related to play, for all three what Doctor Johnson called have the power to liberate us from the tyranny of the present." Just as children who have stayed-out after dark excuse themselves by saying that they "lost track of the time," so music-lover and the mystic find themselves so caught up that consciousness of the passage of time ceases. For myself, I believe it is one and the same reality which is the ground of both experiences, that one of whom Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote: "He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change: praise him!"