RELIGION, THE ARTS, AND THE ARTIST: A POSTMODERN RETURN TO AN ABSOLUTIST AESTHETIC

by

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(Under the direction of Dr. Carl Rapp)

ABSTRACT

The relationship between religion and aesthetics is a complicated and turbulent one. Though art and religion seemed to be connected during the medieval period and into modern times, a great division eventually resulted from the heightened significance of the artist and art itself and from the loss of absolutes and a general mistrust of religion. However, during the postmodern era, a new group of Christian aesthetes described again a Christian aesthetic that not only expresses an inherent connection between art and religion but also presents the hope of restoration to the forlorn condition of humanity in Western culture and the world.

INDEX WORDS: Aesthetics, Religion, Aesthetes, Post-modernity, Christianity, Art, Artists

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DEDICATION

To my parents who instilled within me the desire to learn and provided examples of humility, love, dedication, excellence, and a commitment to truth.

Also, to my wife Elizabeth, the most important person in my life, who has supported me, helped me, and offered me the opportunity to follow my goal of becoming a college professor.

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> Christian writers, whether they like it or not, do not simply write for themselves; for good or ill, readers will see their work as reflecting Jesus Christ and his

> church. And if only for this reason—though there are other reasons—one must take care when dealing with potentially controversial topics not to imagine one's every pronouncement preceded by 'Thus saith the Lord.' The law of love, on which 'all the law and the prophets' depend (Matt. 22:40), mandates charity toward one's opponents in argument…. And charity and honesty so combined mandate humility about one's own conclusions—not timidity, or that vacuous failure of engagement that in our time passes for 'tolerance,' but rather a recognition that it is hard to know all the things one needs to know in order to make sound judgments about people and ideas.[1]

I trust the words that follow emanate from charity, honesty, and humility in the spirit of the new Christian aesthetes.

[1] Alan Jacobs, *A Visit to Vanity Fair: Moral Essays on the Present Age* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001), 17-18.

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CHAPTER 1

A RENEWED CHRISTIAN AESTHETIC: SIGNIFICANT RESISTANCE AND IMPROBABLE EFFECTS

The existing debate between religion and aesthetics has changed drastically in the face of the postmodern perspective, due in part to the ideas of a renewed Christian aesthetic defined by theorists Dorothy Sayers, Frederick Buechner, and Madeleine L'Engle.[1] Their explanation of a renewed Christian aesthetic has encouraged a return to Christian doctrines in aesthetic theory and has provided artists and religious people alike with the ability to find commonality in art and religion rather than disparity. In fact, Sayers, Buechner, and L'Engle suggest that aesthetics and religion are inherently connected, inviting an absolutist understanding of the contention between the two entities. A new group of artists, such as Annie Dillard, Wendell Berry, and Kathleen Norris, has emerged during the past thirty years displaying the qualities of the renewed Christian aesthetic in their creative acts and their reasoning, justification, and inspiration for creating.[2] These contemporary artists acknowledge Christian doctrines as the motivation and clarification of their position as artists and the purpose of the art they produce. They are committed to expressing an honest, hopeless picture of society and to communicating humanity's need and opportunity for redemption. From Sayers' writings, the artists understand their creation as a reflection of the Creator God, creating in the image of the Trinity, thus inherently connected to the absolutes of the Christian faith. The influence of Buechner and L'Engle can be seen in the contemporary artists'

confidence that they mirror God's act of creating and that their art supplies meaning, purpose, and truth, just as God's act of creation did. Also, as Sayers, Buechner, and L'Engle explain, the artists reflect the depravity and hopelessness of humanity but also present the redemption and grace offered by God. Novels such as *The Riders* by Tim Winton and the poetry of Wendell Berry (*Openings* and others) display both the negative reality of life and the positive opportunity for restoration. These contemporary artists, and others, produce art that develops from the ideas of the renewed Christian aesthetic, but their art continues to contend with substantial opposition to its absolutist ideals and the accepted ideas about the existing disunity between religion and aesthetics. However, for the good of both, the improbable, yet positive effects of the renewed Christian aesthetic have overcome the enormous resistance which both religion and the arts present, both purposefully or unintentionally.

Because of the unhealthy relationship that aesthetics and religion have experienced for so many years, the resistance to the attempts of a renewed Christian aesthetic to integrate the two is not surprising. Perhaps the most considerable opposition is the general hesitation in postmodern culture to the idea of absolutes. While post-modernity does welcome people from all viewpoints to offer their ideas, postmodern culture thrives on relativism. In other words, any perspective may be presented and can even be valuable or logical, but none may claim ultimate truth or absolute validity. Post-modernity allows the Christian tradition to be involved again in the cultural discussion, but the religion cannot claim its most basic and foundational belief—that everything Christianity claims from Scripture and divine inspiration is undeniably and absolutely true. Thus, the reliance upon absolutes and Christian doctrines that the renewed Christian

aesthetic proposes clashes with the relativistic nature of postmodernism. For that reason, the ideas of the artists of the renewed Christian aesthetic, as well as their art, often meet with hesitancy on the part of postmodern culture.

Secondly, though the renewed Christian aesthetic has established a place in postmodern culture, the ideas of ethics and morality, important elements to Christianity, are eclipsed often by emotionalism and personal freedom that thrive in the relativism and impulsiveness of postmodern culture. In post-modernity, spirituality is acceptable as personal self-expression because it can be an individualized decision, but ethics and morality, which claim absoluteness, are flexible and thus not defined. The lack of absolutes allows all people to make individual, subjective judgments of everything from honesty to aesthetics and "restrictive" topics like ethics are avoided, because they are different for every person. The aesthetic realm specifically denies a place for morality, suggesting that the artist has no right to define issues of morals or ethics for all humanity. Thus, the result is a society that Alan Jacobs compares to Vanity Fair, the city of depravity and distraction in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Jacobs describes the effect of postmodern culture on the interaction of morality and art, comparing the situation to Bunyan's novel:

> In today's Vanity Fair, vice has ceased to pay to virtue the customary tribute of hypocrisy. In Kierkegaard's terms, there has been a full retreat from, a complete abandonment of, the ethical sphere; the aesthetic alone remains. And the aesthetic realm judges the world by a single criterion: interestingness. To the aesthetic sensibility there is no virtue but to be interesting, no vice but to be dull.[3]

According to Jacobs, postmodern culture resorts to art that is deemed good if it is interesting, refusing to establish any moral standards for art or society. Thus, the renewed Christian aesthetic, which claims that art should be meaningful and commits to some sense of morality, meets with resistance from postmodern culture, reluctant to admit need and distrustful of Christianity's claim of absolute morals.

The religious establishment also contributes resistance to the idea that aesthetics and religion are inherently connected, creating a greater division between the two. While postmodern culture, by definition, discourages the inclusion of absolutes and issues of morality in the work of artists, many Christians and churches demand the inclusion of a specific morality and often a "perfect" ending that reflects the joy of religion. Oftentimes this type of art sacrifices an honest depiction of life and any empathy for real need or pain. Many Christians continue to hold a negative perception of art in general, failing to recognize the value of art that honestly explores humanity's forlorn condition and ignoring the prevalent place of art in Christian worship. Christians also unfairly label artists as lazy, abstract, immoral and thus ultimately unnecessary. As Gregory Wolfe explains, there exists "a deep American prejudice, fueled by our religious history, that those who live by their imaginations are predisposed to wantonness of various sorts."[4] As a result, most Christians remove themselves from postmodern culture, finding solace in the expansive, and all-inclusive Christian subculture that attempts to offer all the same services, activities, and products that mainstream society provides, including Christian art.

Unfortunately, an abundance of so-called "Christian art" is produced and sold in the postmodern period, books, music, poetry, paintings, and more that seem to ignore any

idea of the renewed Christian aesthetic and instead return to religion's didactic and controlling expectations of art. The rise of so-called "Christian fiction," which appeals to Christians wanting to reinforce previously accepted values and beliefs, has no influence in the wider scope of society. Instead, the didactic nature of the books, which always end with the heroine "finding God" or choosing Christian morals, ignores the main concern of humanity, which Walker Percy explains is 'what it is like to be an individual, to be born, to live, and die in the twentieth century."[5] Likewise, other Christian art merely repackages the Biblical story with glitzy marketing, flashy displays, and shock appeal. Series like the New York Times bestseller *Left Behind*, while appealing to a mass audience, fail to clearly explain the hopelessness of humanity, simplifying Christianity's offer of redemption to fancy publicity campaigns and a heightened sense of fear and drama. Most disheartening, both Christian fiction and other religious books do nothing but encourage the division between religion and the arts, and likewise misrepresent the Christian ideal that the division between humanity and God needs attention. Both the attitudes of the religious establishment towards aesthetics and the hesitations of a postmodern culture towards the existence of absolutes and morality in art, lead to enormous resistance towards the artists of the renewed Christian aesthetic. However, though both religion and art struggle to recognize the value of these artists and aesthetes, there are a number of improbable effects of their theories and art, including significant recognition and success for artists, a continuation of the discussion about religion and art, and the communication of a hopeful, meaningful message to a frustrated, confused culture.

In artistic communities and academic circles, a number of artists reflecting the renewed Christian aesthetic have gained notoriety, their art spawning a new interest in the connection between art and religion. Madeleine L'Engle was awarded a Newberry medal for *A Wrinkle in Time*, the first of her Time Quartet for children, and Annie Dillard won a Pulitzer Prize for *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, a non-fiction work published in 1974. Other authors and poets, such as Wendell Berry, Larry Woiwode, Shusako Endo, Ron Hansen, and Kathleen Norris are often anthologized, and both religious and non-religious readers praise their novels, poetry, and essays. Also, successful mainstream authors such as John Irving and John Updike, who claim a Christian influence, include religious morality and sensibility into their novels and have found literary success. A large number of journals and books not only include the works of these artists, but also dedicate articles, research, and study to their art. Many successful, religious journals, such as *Image: A Journal of the Arts and Religion*, *Books and Culture*, and others, have emerged in last few decades, reflecting a renewed interest in religious art and showing the tolerance of postmodern culture to such literature, poetry, and visual art. The success of these artists and their contemporaries, as well as the recognition for their art, illustrates the unlikely impact of a renewed Christian aesthetic, finding new readers and respect in their acceptance of the postmodern condition.

A second benefit of the renewed Christian aesthetic is the continuation of the discussion concerning art and religion. Since the beginning of the Modernist period there has been little hope that these entities would ever reunite, but the artists of the renewed Christian aesthetic not only are finding success at reconnecting the two, but also are maintaining the conversation, working as a mediator between the two rivals. Proponents

of the renewed Christian aesthetic, by assuming that art and religion inherently go hand-in-hand, attempt to move beyond the seemingly timeless debate and concentrate on how true art relates to both while sacrificing neither. Though both sides still present opposition to the union, the dialogue is open, creating hope that art can offer truths and absolutes and that religion will recognize the important role of art and the artist. As the effects of the renewed Christian aesthetic are experienced, religion and the arts begin to see that they naturally intersect, encouraging further discussion and collaboration. John W. De Gruchy, who believes that aesthetics can be used to encourage Christians to bring justice and transformation to the world through a change in their worldview, explains the natural relationship between art and religion and a further effect of their connection:

> Great art, like authentic religion, seeks to express awe and wonder, and to overcome the superficiality of life by exploring its depth. It is concerned about personal integrity in its endeavour to communicate the truth as it is perceived; and it evokes deep emotion, whether of sadness or joy, dread or elation.[6]

De Gruchy recognizes the inherent connection between arts and religion and suggests that art can serve as a mouthpiece for the transforming effects of Christianity, helping to achieve the third effect of renewed Christian aesthetic—communication of the Christian message to postmodern culture through a sense of community and interdependence.

The third, and most important, unanticipated effect of the renewed Christian aesthetic is the empathy and sense of unity created among people who recognize their shared hopelessness and need for restoration in the art they encounter. In "Literature and Morality in Contemporary Criticism," Lawrence Hyman argues that literature, specifically, can unify humanity by depicting amorality, displaying, as the renewed

Christian aesthetic explains, the moral ambiguity and general hopelessness that society experiences. Hyman contends that art can effectively help to unite people, leading them to a purposeful relationship:

> Any slogan or banner can unite men who agree; only genuine art can unite men who disagree. And by doing so, literature can use its amorality to bring men to 'greater and even greater union.'[7]

Hyman quotes Tolstoy, the Russian author who likewise saw the need to present the unpleasant and often disparaging reality of life, but who also understood that the union created would not only connect humanity in their hopelessness, but also in their acknowledgment of hope and redemption. In *What is Art?*, Tolstoy claims that genuine art should have a unifying effect for people needing both hope and commiseration:

> [Genuine art] either evokes in men those feelings which, through the love of God and one's neighbor, draw them to greater and ever greater union, and make them ready for and capable of such union; or evokes in them those feelings which show them that they are already united in the joys and sorrows of life.[8]

Writing decades before the artists of the renewed Christian aesthetic, Tolstoy offers a great synopsis of their work, using the harsh realities of life as a strict reminder of humanity's need for redemption. The renewed Christian aesthetic encourages art that unifies humanity, communicating a shared sense of need in the face of emptiness and confusion, ultimately proclaiming the restoration promised by Christianity.

In the estranged, individualistic society of Western, postmodern culture, where relativism reigns and truth is relegated to a personal opinion, art and aesthetics have become products judged by interestingness, shock or entertainment value, and emotions.

Post-modernity continues to disparage the idea of absolutes but also counteracts the scientific, rational dominance of the Modern period, creating a spiritual vacuum that welcomes everything but organized religion. In the midst of this relativistic climate, the artists of the renewed Christian aesthetic emerge, a group of Christian artists and critics displaying a new perspective on art and religion. Though aesthetics and religion have a turbulent history, these artists attempt to remind both entities of their inherent, shared qualities and ideas. Their emphasis on Christianity connects art, the artist, and the act of creation with the doctrines of the Christian tradition, reintroducing absolutes, but also offering humanity an answer to their emptied, confused condition. And though post-modernity is hesitant about the absolutist aesthetic of the artists of the renewed Christian aesthetic, they have also had an improbable effect on the artistic world, Christians, and humanity as a whole. Paul Tillich, the renowned Christian scholar and social critic describes the overall effect of Christian artists, a description that applies to the artists of the renewed Christian aesthetic:

> Their art, as authentic art, is an affirmation of all the values which are being threatened and violated in these tragic times. In an age of spiritual turmoil and anxiety, when all spiritual affirmations are difficult and rare, they have at least had the courage and the artistic integrity not to retreat into an empty formalism, or a traditionalistic conventionalism, or a dishonest saccharine prettiness.[9]

Tillich suggests that the artists like those of the renewed Christian aesthetic, not only present "val ues" which are under attack, but also do not sacrifice their art to trite forms, didactic reproductions, or meaningless, hopeless products which they know will appease an audience or find success in the art world. Instead, the artists of the renewed Christian

aesthetic dedicate themselves to their faith in Christianity, their belief in art as a harbinger of truth and meaning, and to their role as creators imitating the Creator God, offering hope and redemption in their creations. They reject the temptation to produce trivial "Christian art" or convoluted, interesting art that will attract audiences but offers no statement of meaning or truth.

In *A Visit to Vanity Fair*, Alan Jacobs paints an excellent picture of the artists of the renewed Christian aesthetic in postmodern culture, creating an alternative to the standard art of the time. He compares them to Christian, John Bunyan's protagonist in *Pilgrim's Progress*, on his journey through life to heaven. When Christian encounters Vanity Fair, the city of intriguing products, interesting people, and captivating events, the traveler becomes distracted from his original intention, asked to remain in the city rather than continuing his journey toward restoration and completeness. Jacobs suggests that the artists of the renewed Christian aesthetic, like Christian, reject the distractions of success and acclaim in their society, instead choosing to provide humanity with another choice to the "interesting" and seductive products of Vanity Fair. He argues that th e artists of the renewed Christian aesthetic ultimately recognize their eternal commitment to life's potential tragedy and the promise of redemption, hope, and truth:

> When being interesting becomes a way of life, becomes the sole criterion of judgment, it's time to leave town while we still can, muttering beneath our breath the invaluable—but perilous—catechism for visitors to Vanity Fair:
>
> Question: What do you buy? Answer: We buy the truth.[10]

The artists of the renewed Christian aesthetic refuse to accept the interesting offerings of postmodern culture but welcome the freedom the postmodern sensibility allows for them

to offer the truth of their absolutist aesthetic. Ignoring the criteria for art that exists in postmodern culture and prevalence of relativism and its confusion, they have instead embraced their role as imitators of God, creating as a reflection of the Creator, presenting truth, meaning, hope, grace, and redemption in their work. Rather than turning their backs on humanity, the artists of the renewed Christian aesthetic hope to communicate the possibility of restoration and wholeness, serving as a messenger proclaiming the emptiness of life and the mystery of God's redemption. The willingness of the artists of the renewed Christian aesthetic to present both hopelessness and salvation in their art proves their contention that art and religion can naturally connect and provides their absolutist answer to the complicated relationship between aesthetics and religion.

[1] For the purposes of discussion, religion will refer to Christianity, understanding that the Christian tradition was the main influence (and antagonist) for artists in American literature, Western culture, and most philosophers of aesthetic theory. All uses of church refer to the Christian church, "the holy, catholic (universal) church," as reads the Apostle's Creed, a foundational creed of the Christian religion. It is also important to articulate a few tenets of Christianity, so as not to add more confusion to an already convoluted discussion. The Christian tradition, based upon the Holy Bible, professes the existence of one, omnipotent, omniscient, God, the creator of all things on earth and in the universe. Also, Christians believe that all humanity is sinful, and thus in need of redemption, which God offers through the sacrifice of his Son, Jesus. While there are many denominations and separations within the Christian religion, I have tried to keep a very mainline, traditional perspective of the tradition.

[2] Other contemporary authors who have been influenced by the ideas of the theorists include John Irving, Tim Winton, Mark Helprin, Ron Hansen, Larry Woiwode, Shusaku Endo, and others.

[3] Alan Jacobs, *A Visit to Vanity Fair: Moral Essays on the Present Age* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001). 164-165.

[4] Gregory Wolfe, "The Form of Faith," *Image: A Journal of Arts and Religion* 30 (2001): 3-4.

[5] Walker Percy, "The State of the Novel: Dying Art or New Science?" in *The Writer's Craft: Hopwood Lectures, 1965-1981*. ed. Robert A Martin (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982), 218-219.

[6] John W. De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 240.

[7] Lawrence W. Hyman, "Literature and Morality in Contemporary Criticism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 30 (1971), 86.

[8] Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?* trans. Aylmer Maud (1899). in World's Classics (London: 1955), 241. quoted in Hyman, 83. Tolstoy's ideas in *What is Art?* demanded, in no uncertain terms, that art unite men and present the realities of restoration. Tolstoy neared elitism in his work, suggesting that art that does not achieve these goals is not art at all, an idea somewhat reminiscent of the theorists of the renewed Christian aesthetic, specifically Madeleine L'Engle.

[9] Paul Tillich and Theodore M. Greene, "Authentic Religious Art," *Masterpieces of Religious Art* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1954), 8-9. in *On Art and Architecture* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 233.

[10] Jacobs, 165.

CHAPTER 2

THE HISTORY OF RELIGION AND AESTHETICS

In today's postmodern culture, religion and the arts are open antagonists despite the efforts of the theorists and artists of the renewed Christian aesthetic. Often, mainstream religions serve as the first critic and ultimate censor of art. Whenever art is displayed that presents a questionable topic or utilizes an irreverent medium, it is often Christians, the self-proclaimed defenders of morality and decency, who are the first to call for inquiries into the allotments of the National Endowment for the Arts. Christians are also prone to organize boycotts of specific artists or art shows, calling down judgment on art they deem irreligious or immoral. Nicholas Wolterstorff suggests that the breach between art and religion is widely, and mutually, acknowledged:

> Everybody is aware of mutual recriminations between artists and the church. Members of the church criticize one and another piece of art as perverse, sacrilegious, destructive of faith and morals…. And artists criticize the church as a threat to artistic freedom, as having no aesthetic taste, even as being hostile to the arts.[1]

Sadly, many Christians do indeed fail to see value in art, associating the freedom and abstractness of art with impropriety or unreality and suggesting that the artist is expressing freedom from morality. Christians forget the value and uses of art in church settings, whether in architecture, music, or visual images. Artists become frustrated with the church's limited perspective on aesthetics and the artist, fearing a church-sponsored,

didactic art. The currently dominant Christian perspective, while certainly not one held by all Christians, as well as the attitude of many artists, reinforces a divide between Christianity and the arts, one that began considerably earlier in history before Christian fiction, governmental endowments, or the Gospel Music Association. What led to the visible, and according to Wolterstorff, obvious "mutual recriminations" between art and Christianity? Most importantly, in what ways do Dorothy Sayers, Frederick Buechner, and Madeleine L'Engle invite a renewed Christian aesthetic that not only illustrates a natural relationship between art and religion, but also finds a place for an absolutist ideal in postmodern culture? Before examining the present state and the existing hope for reconciliation, it is first important to investigate the relationship of religion and the arts from the Classical period to the beginnings of aesthetic theory during the Enlightenment.

During the Classical period, when Plato, Aristotle, and others argued about the nature of reality and the place of art in the depiction of that reality, the gods and divine inspiration played an important role in the discussion. Plato argues that poetry (meaning all forms of mimesis or artistic representation) cannot accurately depict reality because it merely imitates the sensory appearances of life, though on occasion he implies that the true source of poetry may be divine inspiration. He fears that the practice of representation will only lead to emotions, and bring about an end to intellectual inquiry; in other words, if artists can effectively reenact every situation, problem, sense, and desire of humanity, the audience will remain captivated by the details of sensory appearances and will not experience it for themselves. His theories undermine the work of the artists, suggesting that there was little practical value in creativity, especially in the poetry of the time. The poet cannot possibly represent the thoughts, ideas, dreams, and

knowledge of every person to whom he gives a voice.[2] While Plato does not speak of religion per se, the inclusion of the gods as inspiration illustrates a close relationship between divinity and art in the Classical period. And, even this early in the debate, Plato suggests that art can move beyond religion as represented in Greek art.

Aristotle, on the other hand, along with Longinus and others, defends the authority and value of artists' creative interpretations and representations of reality. In *Poetics*, the philosopher redeems poetry as an art or craft, stating that the creation of poetry requires some foundational knowledge; thus, the artist knows and understands reality before imitating it. In Aristotle's system, imitation comes from previous knowledge and not divine inspiration, which provides poets, and thus artists, with a supreme role, as they make deliberate choices in creating. Rather than placing importance with the gods or with the poetry itself, Aristotle emphasizes the position of the poet, the artist. Aristotle's defense of the artist leads to a heightened respect for creators, an ideal that continues to the present time. He does not deny a place for the divine in art, but is skeptical of its purpose. Aristotle believes that the burden to distinguish divinity's purpose lay with the poet and not the audience, who can potentially misinterpret or misunderstand the purpose of the gods' appearance or actions. Thus, while Aristotle acknowledges the place of the divine, or the gods, in art, he restricts their interpretation solely to the artist, who can understand their presence. Poets and philosophers in the Classical period recognize a connection between religion and art, though they are more concerned with definition and representation in art, relegating religion to an element in art which is less important than the accuracy of the imitation or the role of the artist.

After the Biblical account of Jesus Christ and Christianity's belief in his existence as the Son of God, art's relationship to religion changes dramatically. Christianity is founded on the belief that the doctrines, scriptures, and teachings of the religion are absolutes, bringing a new element to the idea of art and religion. The gods do not simply influence artists' minds in their act of creating as the Classical philosophers suggest, but, according to the Christian tradition, God takes the form of a human, not only inspiring artists but existing among them. With the advent of the Christian religion, after Jesus' life on earth, Christian leaders and followers ignore the visual arts and aesthetic theory for a number of centuries, instead dedicating philosophical endeavors to theological and spiritual defenses and proselytization. Also, as Richard Harries explains, "art in the Greco-Roman world was associated with paganism," leading to a lack of interest among Christians who were trying to separate themselves morally and culturally from that society.[3] The first Christians satisfy themselves with "an overwhelming sense of spiritual beauty expressed primarily in literary, rather than visual terms."[4] Not until after the Middle Ages do religious leaders and scholars seek an artistic philosophy that reflects the absolutes of their beliefs. In fact, "it was not until the fifth century, when the Byzantine Emperor Justinian commissioned churches and mosaics…that Christianity appeared as a flame of beauty," incorporating art into places of worship and thus into the everyday lives of Christians.[5] With the introduction of works of beauty into the church, religious leaders begin to deliberate on the place of art in religion and the issues of beauty and representation of divinity, reintroducing the issue of religion and the arts first discussed by Plato. Unfortunately, the theological writings discussing art and representation are often dogmatic and irrational, dwelling on spiritual assumptions rather than logical

arguments about knowledge, beauty, and reality. However, the philosophers are writing from a very specific set of beliefs, which they believe to be absolutely true, thus often failing to follow reasonable lines of thought. A few philosophers and intellectuals do emerge presenting hopeful and sagacious comments on religion and art.

Around the time of Justinian's mandate, Augustine of Hippo first offers his famous *Confessions*, which chronicle the saint's rejection of his mother's devout beliefs, his life away from religion, and his dramatic conversion back to faith in Christianity. Most significant for a discussion of the relationship between arts and religion are Augustine's viewpoints on beauty and God as well as his views on literature, found in *De Doctrina Christiana*, which became widely accepted in the Middle Ages.[6] *Confessions*, a theological defense of the Christian faith as well as an autobiography, includes what can now be called aesthetic theory, discussing the beauty of God as a motivation for spiritual devotion. Augustine's writings describe a theology which "emphasizes the beauty of God and the role of desire for the beautiful in drawing [humanity] to God—but also the danger that it may keep us from God."[7] In other words, the saint recognizes the beauty of nature specifically, which he finds to be a reflection of the God he believes created it; however, this Platonic ideal, for the Christian, suggests a potential worship of nature over the Creator God, a danger against which Augustine warns. This early theological aesthete also introduces an ideal which is to influence "later Western thought" on the subject of aesthetics—a "hierarchy of satisfaction" which is implied in much of the writings of the German Romantics and even influences the research and theory of contemporary critics such as Pierre Bourdieu.[8] Augustine's "hierarchy" implies a "Platonic 'ascent' from external beauty to the beauty of the soul, and finally to the

supreme source of all beauty, which is the ultimate truth." His viewpoints combine the absolutist beliefs and tenets of Christianity with the Platonic ideas of an aesthetic heightening, all leading to a better understanding and devotion to his God. Augustine's "Neoplatonic current" influences not only his contemporaries, but also thoughts of art and beauty throughout the Middle Ages until the beginning of the Renaissance.[9]

During the Renaissance, the church heavily influenced and almost entirely controlled the actual production of art, reinforced by Augustine's fear that art created outside the governing of the church could lead humanity away from God. In Western society, the church served as the only place for translating, copying, and preserving written and visual works. Within the mainly illiterate communities, the oral tradition acted as the only form of art that could be passed down with purely secular ideals or values. Clerical agents proclaimed acceptable forms of artistic expression, commissioning church-related pieces after the example of Justin and Constantine centuries before. Most art was housed or displayed inside the church itself, in the forms of stained glass, iconography, religious writings, and the Bible, all used for purely religious purposes. Authors such as Geoffrey Chaucer, Dante Alighieri, Margery Kempe, and others incorporated religious elements into their writings, whether out of duty or simple belief. Classic works from as far back as *Beowulf,* or other Old English poetry such as "The Wanderer," included religious elements that reflect the common beliefs and accepted ideals of people during that time.[10] Overall, art and artists illustrated the dominance of Christianity's ideals in the political, social, intellectual, and artistic communities. One of the positive results of Christianity's supremacy in the culture was the theological scholarship of thinkers such as St. Thomas Aquinas, continuing the

thoughts of Augustine who had written almost a millennium previously, but still representing the absolutist views of art and beauty and their relationship to religion.

The writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, whose *Summa Theologica* served as "the culmination of Scholastic philosophy," intended to illustrate "the harmony of faith and reason, and in particular the reconciliation of Christian theology and Aristotelian philosophy."[11] Though his main purpose is to find commonality with Aristotle, Aquinas mirrors the Neo-platonic ideas of Augustine in his views of beauty and religion. He writes a commentary on the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, another philosopher who expounded on the writings of Plato. In this piece, Aquinas agrees that "all beauty stems from God as First Cause, for the beauty of any creature is nothing else but a likeness of and participation in the divine beauty."[12] However, he continues on to say that instead of beauty and goodness being the same, as Pseudo-Dionysius argues, "beauty adds to the notion of 'goodness' an ordering towards the intellectual faculty." His argument reflects the idea of an artistic hierarchy as presented by Plato and found also in Augustine. Aquinas likewise defines specific criteria for beauty, and "selected wholeness, harmony and radiance as the quintessential characteristics of what is beautiful." Aquinas' views were widely accepted as a reinforcement of Augustinian thought and deeply affected the aesthetic and religious philosophy of the day. His reliance on absolutist thought, relating to his beliefs in Christianity, appealed to the clergy who controlled the artwork of the era. Furthermore, Aquinas introduced a definitional system for beauty, or aesthetic theory, a project that continued for centuries, even to the present day.

For Aquinas, as for Augustine, unconditional belief in God as the ideal and inspiration for beauty dominated all definitions and discussions, an influence that would

lose power as Western culture moved into the Renaissance period. Renaissance philosophers suggested that humanity was capable of rational thought and discovery without the inspiration or influence of a superhuman, or supernatural being. The rise of humanism, or humanity's reliance upon human thinking, power, and wisdom, reacted against the dominance of the Christian church and clergy, which believed that they, through the Bible and divine revelation, explained all thoughts, actions, and ideas. Rather than the church declaring the ultimate truth and certain guidelines for life, humanists argued that all men could do that for themselves, even religious humanists such as Martin Luther, Erasmus, and John Calvin. Thus, disciplines such as philosophy, science, and the arts became activities whose meaning and purpose were created by the very people who practiced them. The church and clergy began to lose the dominance that they once held over Western society, as the masses started to question the absolutes that had forever been impressed upon them. Art, poetry, and drama gained prominence outside of the church, and artists initiated ideals of their own, some in conflict with the teachings of Christianity. The beginning of the Renaissance was the start of the split between religion and the arts, but only the start. While art and other parts of life gained prominence in people's lives, somewhat affecting the influence of the church in the minds of the intelligentsia, the absolutes of Christianity still heavily influenced the lives of the people. Religion remained the most significant element in the life of the community. However, as science and other humanistic endeavors claimed discoveries, laws, and truths that suggested man's freedom and independence, the humanists gained reputation and renown in the eyes of the people, subtly shifting the main influence of society.

At the same time in philosophy, the empiricists, or natural philosophers, arose from the scientific advances of the seventeenth century and began to debate with the rationalists of the eighteenth century, who sought to investigate the internal will which governs cognition. The discussion, which religion influenced by virtue of its effect on society, involved the arena of art, which was a discipline that seemed impossible to judge or define. Alexander Baumgarten's *Reflections on Poetry* (1735) "coined the term 'aesthetics,'" a term he defined as the "'science of sensitive cognition.'" [13] Baumgarten recognized the value of the scientist, but sought a methodology for understanding and evaluating "the sensory perception of the poet." After his early thoughts on the idea of aesthetics, the term changed in meaning to "the philosophy of art" or "the study of beauty," definitions offered by other philosophers. Baumgarten's main contribution was the term aesthetics, which led directly to perhaps the most important philosopher to investigate the issues and questions of art, Immanuel Kant. Writing at the end of the eighteenth century, Kant adopted Baumgarten's term and used his ideas to discuss "an adequate theory for the art of modernity," an area that he felt Baumgarten had failed to address. Kant's writings, which were supposed to provide the definitive answer to the debate that continued between empiricists and rationalists, led instead to a discussion about the criteria of judgment and taste. Kant argued for a clear definition of aesthetics as determined by judgment and taste, terms that he attempted to qualify or standardize in order to create a universal opinion of beauty, experience, and the sublime. Living in a society that acknowledged absolutes, as found in Christianity, Kant suggested that the judgment of beauty could be universally consistent, if the criteria were properly defined and the audience was adequately instructed. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant sought to

determine whether judgment could serve as the "mediating link between the cognitive faculty and the faculty of desire," allowing neither faculty to control a person entirely and thus creating a perfectly balanced critic and judge.[14] In other words, Kant was investigating the use of judgment as a means of ultimately balancing the moral and sensual drives, hoping to produce a person dependent not on emotions, impulse, or practicality, but merely on taste, a universal determination that could be developed.

Most significant for a discussion of religion and art are Kant's views of determining the appropriate taste for beauty and sublimity. Taste, a subjective term, attends to "the formal, expressive, and imaginative qualities of the aesthetic object, which please in the very process of being perceived."[15] Kant maintains that though "the feeling of pleasure that registers the perception of beauty is subjective, one still says that the object of taste…is what is beautiful." In other words, while taste is indeed subjective, the object of "Beauty" is an absolute, an idea that mirrors the theories of Christian philosophers like Augustine and Aquinas. While Kant admits that judgments of taste are "personal," he does not believe that they were "private." Instead, he argues that "judgments of taste call…for the assent of anyone appropriately experienced and sensitive" suggesting that those judgments have a claim to universality, "though in actuality not everyone will happen to agree with any given aesthetic judgment."[16] Kant argues that due to individual experience, whim, and sensitivity, aesthetic judgment is a subjective decision that can be made universal through a proper understanding of the aesthetic. For Kant, any individual can determine the truly aesthetic once he or she reaches the zone of freedom, a state of free contemplation without hindrances, be they moral, volitional, or experiential. His findings undermined the theories of the empiricists

who relied on investigation and experience as well as the rationalists who found the purposes and intentions of action to be most significant.

Ultimately, Kant's investigation offered three important ideas for the future of aesthetics and its relationship to religion. The first, which has influenced aesthetic theory through the beginnings of postmodernism, is "that art is an end in itself."[17] The second ideal is that there is a "difference between aesthetic judgment and judgments of scientific and ethical values or goals," leaving room for investigation of the effect these other faculties have on aesthetics. The third and final impact of Kant is that "pleasure in the beautiful is disinterested and non-utilitarian." However, though Kantian aesthetics greatly influenced philosophical thought at the time, "his privatising of art failed to satisfy those for whom art had a deeper than secular and broader than private significance."[18] In other words, Kant attempted to separate art from morality, religion, and personal knowledge in order to protect the ideals of truth and goodness from subjectivism in the world of art. He failed to address the potential impact of art, whether religious in nature or not, which intended to present more than subjective ideas and hoped to interest more than those with a properly developed taste. Kant's only solution to the problem of art and religion was to divide the two even further, placing art in a separate category, the aesthetic, that was unaffected by the absolutes of the Christian faith, the church, or Biblical doctrines. Immanuel Kant's writings inspired a wide-range of German philosophers who likewise investigated aesthetics, either further developing Kantian ideals or attempting to dissect the definition of the aesthetic. Two philosophers in particular were most significant to the discussion of arts and religion—Friedrich

Schiller and Georg Hegel. Both recognized the importance of art but unlike Kant sought to find a connection between aesthetics and religious faith or truth.

Each of the German Romantic philosophers who followed Kant tried to establish the definitive purpose for and explanation of aesthetics, each finding slightly altered definitions of the arbitrary ideal, further complicating the issue and indicating that assigning universal absolutes of beauty, reality, and validity is a seemingly impossible task. Friedrich Schiller, possibly the least recognized of the German Romantic philosophers, wrote *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* as an educational manual for the development of the aesthetic individual. His main purpose ultimately was to correct the political and social problems he found in society; however, his instructions carried important implications not only for aesthetics, but for the relationship between art and religion as well. Like Kant, Schiller believed that in order to recognize the truly aesthetic, a person must not be controlled by the sensuous or moral drive. Schiller argued that the aesthete was controlled by both. Instead of separating the ideas of religion and morality (as well as knowledge) from art and beauty, Schiller claimed that the aesthetic could be judged by a person, "free of all determination whatsoever" resulting from a perfect combination of the sensuous and the moral, thus the "complete being."[19] Rather than ignoring either aspect of the human senses, the moral or sensual, Schiller incorporated both elements into the definition of aesthetic person. His emphasis on the complete person, with no shortcoming in any of his or her senses, corresponded to the Christian ideal of a believer in God, a man or woman made perfect, whole, and lacking nothing.[20] Schiller's writings, while perhaps less known than Kant's or Georg Hegel's, illustrated the sense of religion that the German Romantics, and most of Western

civilization, still felt. Schiller's inclusion of morality as a positive element of the aesthetic sense reflected the value placed on religion and acknowledged the backlash, continued by Georg Hegel, against Kantian separation of religion and art. However, before Hegel would deliver his lectures on *Aesthetics*, a different set of Romantics, these from England, would further Kantian notions of a separation between art and religion.

Just before the beginning of the nineteenth century, a new group of intellectuals and artists from England introduced their interpretation of art bearing a new emphasis, and as always, a new determination of aesthetics. The English Romantics, who included poets such as Samuel Coleridge and William Wordsworth, suggested a humanistic reliance upon imagination that they believed could serve to communicate meaning. These ideas continued into the beginning of the Victorian period in England, yet the Christian church remained the dominant fixture in most communities throughout Europe. However, the emphasis on the imagination developed into the thought that poetry could serve as its own religion, stirring emotion and creating community and faith all its own, indirectly undermining the dominance of the church. The ideas of the Romantics permeated social and intellectual circles in England and beyond, as many began to question the absolutes seemingly handed down from God's church, with little or no human involvement whatsoever. The questioning of religion and its absolutes led to a generation of scholars suddenly championing poetry and literature as a religion in its own right, undercutting the established church and its beliefs. Paul Tillich explains that art's replacement of religion was "manifest in the whole intelligentsia" of the time who believed "their way of despising all forms of classical religion and valuing the arts as the elevation of the soul" would, "after the vanishing of religion, be the domain of the

educated man."[21] Renowned intellectuals such as Walter Pater and John Ruskin respected the history and ideals of church, but also recognized that poetry and art were similarly able to rouse emotions and offer truth. Matthew Arnold, another critic of the nineteenth century, "openly liberal in religious views," upheld the value of poetry in an era when scientific achievement thrived and people grasped the effects of "the death of religious dogma."[22] Arnold acknowledged the decreasing influence of religion and morality, endorsing an increased valuation of poetry:

> More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry.[23]

Arnold's declaration unofficially stated the ultimate quality of art and poetry, marking a significant step in the separation between religion and art. Before the relationship further split, however, another German Romantic philosopher attempted one last effort at reuniting the two rivals.

Unlike Immanuel Kant, George Hegel truly appreciated all forms of art from music to painting. In his lectures on aesthetics, Hegel argued for a scientific approach to identifying and appreciating beauty, reacting strongly against the rationalists and English Romantics. Hegel believed that beauty, as he defined the aesthetic, merely existed as a "manifestation of *Geist*," or God, "in sensuous form."[24] Unlike Kant, who divided art and religion and Schiller who found the aesthetic in the perfect combination of the sensuous and moral drives, Hegel saw art as "'only a stage in liberation, not the supreme liberation itself.'"[25] In other words, art was a way to experience part of the freedom that

God offers, but was not the ultimate freedom of knowing God. Though Kant seemed to have created a breach between religion and art, Schiller and Hegel attempted to reunite the two through absolute ideals of both, art serving as a means to understand and attribute value to religion. Hegel's arguments were a reaction against the German Romantics, but were, in effect, also in contention with the beliefs of the English Romantics, who were already proclaiming that art was itself a religion, and would become the morality and meaning of civilization that religion had once been. Unfortunately, for artists and Christians, and most importantly for all humanity, attempts at unifying the two entities failed, and the divide between the arts and religion crumbled into an enormous chasm.

As the nineteenth century continued, scientists such as Charles Darwin, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Sigmund Freud reported new findings about humanity and the world which appeared to call into question Christianity and its teachings. More than contradicting the convictions of Christians, Darwin, Freud, Nietzsche and others offered alternatives which seemed to be believable, logical, scientific, and different. While not always attacking Christianity directly, these ideas were welcomed by Victorians disenchanted with a man-made religion of regulations based on fear and passivity. Along with the scientific arguments that offered alternative ideas to those of absolutist religion, authors, poets, painters, and other artists began questioning the rigidity of religion and pushing the borders of "decency" in art. These endeavors, while meeting with rebuttal and threats of condemnation from the church, more regularly delighted the common people, who desired freedom from a religious system of shame, correctness, and denial that seemingly restricted their lives. Now forgotten were the ideas that Augustine and Aquinas had advocated, using art as a means of fully appreciating God, who could

provide eternal life and freedom from life's struggles. The rise of scientific advancement and the questioning of religion itself led to subjectivity and a doubting of absolutes. Thus art, judged by individual taste according to Kantian philosophy, allowed artists to create something free of concerns about morality or the church. Art's end became, as Walter Pater said in *Studies in the Renaissance*, "not the fruit of experience, but experience itself," or as the famous phrase says, "art for art's sake." [26] In this new freedom artists flourished, ushering in the Modernist era. Gone were the "accepted" ideals of decency and religion; now arrived were subjective interpretations of meaning, reality, truth, and beauty.

The relationship between art and religion reached a crossroads at the end of the nineteenth century, nearing complete breakdown but with both entities grappling to remain connected. T. R. Wright describes the division between the categories of art and religion accurately in his explanation about the specific, complicated stress between literature and theology.

> All it seems safe to say is that there is, in the modern period at least, a tension between the two subjects, a tension which has been exacerbated by the decline of belief in Christianity and the rise of literature [or art] as the provider of a new canon, a new set of scriptures enshrining an alternative set of liberal-humanist values.[27]

It is not fair to simply place blame for the obvious split on the newly found freedom of the artists, who were reacting against a didactic, church-driven history of art used only for the church and religion. At the same time, the church rejected artists, condemning their

new expressions and their self-proclaimed release from Christian morals and traditions. John De Gruchy succinctly expressed the problem of division from both sides.

> The problem lies, on the one hand, in the fact that art and the aesthetic has lost its traditional theological foundations, but on the other, in the fact that if art is to flourish and to serve the humanising transformation of society truly, it cannot be made subject to ideological control.[28]

The freedom that people sought did not come from the wholeness that art and morality allegedly offered, according to Schiller and Hegel, but instead from the de-emphasis of religion and an open embrace of the fully expressive, personal experience. After the scientific community and the intelligentsia offered their findings and theories which undermined the dominance of religion, the public, and in turn artists, felt freed to welcome a new understanding of themselves and the arts, which 'were able to flourish in ways not possible before."[29] Thus, the breakdown of the relationship between religion and the arts was complete. The church began to criticize artists for their methods, representations, and products. These same artists complained that religion still attempted to entrap art, restricting it to didacticism, ignoring its expressive possibilities.

And yet, in the midst of the division and the loss of religious influence in society, the institution of religion did not disappear. Though the absolute ideals of beauty and aesthetics as recognized by religion had been questioned and seemingly abandoned, the new notions of subjectivity, scientific rationality, and moral freedom only brought more questions and confusion. Artists were welcome to provide their personal version of truth, but no one had to agree. In the shuffle and confusion, the issues of absolute beauty, truth, and reality were placed aside, and artists sought to represent the new freedom of

expression, leading to further breaches from morality, convention, and tradition. More important to many of the Modernists, who were born out of the shift in perspective, was reinvention—forgetting the past and looking to new things, people, and ideals. However, while Christianity was most often regarded as a collection of myths and children's moral tales, the questions of beauty, art, and the aesthetic remained. T.S. Eliot, a professed Christian, attempted to reunite art and religion in his poetry and essays. Strangely enough, even the Bible was not completely set aside. As John Updike explains, the Modernists could not ignore the impact of Christianity and the Bible on Western culture:

> Even those American writers not professing believers had been nurtured in a culture soaked in the Bible and the hymnal; they could call their novels *The Sun Also Rises* and *Absalom, Absalom* and *East of Eden* in confidence that the Old Testament resonance would still be heard.[30]

Christianity, and religion in the Western culture, still existed and still influenced people, whether from choice or from past influence. In the midst of an era that denied religion, scorned God, and shunned absolutes, the traditions, language, and mysteries of Christianity would not go away. During the early decades of the twentieth century, Western civilization entered a new time of destruction and anxiety, experiencing the world wars and tragedies like the Holocaust. Suddenly, the absolutes and answers offered by religion looked promising, or at least hopeful. Paul Tillich again diagnoses the situation.

> In and after the First World War, the belief in the arts as a substitute for religion broke down. Art was not able to open up the sources of power to meet the catastrophes of the twentieth century.[31]

As art failed to answer the questions brought about in the aftermath of the devastation of the world wars, there was, as Richard Harries explains, "a time of renewed religious faith."[32] While the antagonism between arts and religion remained, the heightened sense of faith opened a door for artists, specifically Christian authors, to reenter the discussion again, reintroducing absolutes and redefining aesthetics. The possibility of reuniting religion and the arts seemed real as a group of artists entered the aesthetic scene offering their perspective on the condition of humanity and the place of religious absolutes in society.

[1] Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Jamming With the Seraphim," *Books and Culture* 7, no. 5 (2001): 23.

[2] See Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato*, "Ion," trans. B. Jowett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1920), 285-297.

[3] Richard Harries, *Art and the Beauty of God* (London: Mowbray, 1993), 8.

[4] Harries, 9.

[5] Harries, 8-9.

[6] *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 5th ed., s.v. "Augustine."

[7] Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1999), 106.

[8] Viladesau, 106-107.

[9] Viladesau, 108.

[10] The idea that religious elements were added to such texts as *Beowulf* and other Old English and Middle English texts, while arguably inappropriate, still reflects the mindset of the times, and the dominance of Christianity in thought.

[11] *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 5th ed., s.v. 'St. Thomas Aquinas."

[12] Viladesau, 114.

[13] John W. De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 55-56.

[14] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1951), 4.

[15] Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, & Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 64.

[16] Brown, 64.

[17] De Gruchy, 58.

[18] De Gruchy, 59.

[19] Friedrich Schiller, "Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man," *Kleinere prosaische Schriften* 3 (1801): 44-309. in *Essays*. Ed. Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom.(New York: Continuum, 1993), 144-145.

[20] While theologians would debate the method, most would agree that God is perfecting Christians on earth, with the goal of their wholeness and completeness eventually in heaven. (See Hebrews 10.14, James 1.4 Philippians 1.6 New International Version)

[21] Paul Tillich, *On Art and Architecture*, ed. John and Jane Dillenberger (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 27.

[22] Brown, 75.

[23] Matthew Arnold, "Religion and Art," quoted in Brown, 75.

[24] De Gruchy, 60.

[25] Peter Hodgson, *G. W. F. Hegel: Theologian of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 142, quoted. in De Gruchy, 63.

[26] Walter Pater, *Studies in the Renaissance*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: R.& R. Clarke, 1893), 249, 252.

[27] T. R. Wright, *Theology and Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 5.

[28] De Gruchy, 67.

[29] De Gruchy, 67.

[30] John Updike, "Remarks at Indiana/Purdue University, April 1994." in *More Matter* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 848.

[31] Tillich, 27.

[32] Harries, 5.

CHAPTER 3

THE START OF A RENEWED CHRISTIAN AESTHETIC

As the cruel reality and effects of the world wars became evident, an emptiness and desperation settled on Western culture, and religion's offer of restoration and hope seemed to meet a prevalent need for many people. Artists writing at the beginning of the Cold War such as Flannery O'Connor, Evelyn Waugh, and Graham Greene, encountered a society seeking something to answer the questions left after the desolation and destruction of atomic bombs and the Holocaust. Interestingly, many of the most notable, acclaimed authors during the period claimed a belief in Christianity, a worldview they found helpful in dealing with the forlorn condition of the culture. Their writing was not like that of the medieval philosophers, dealing with theological arguments about beauty and art or the German Romantics who offered philosophical discussions of aesthetics and their potential relationship to religion. Instead, the Christian writers used methods that involved a less convoluted, less didactic technique. These religious writers emerged onto the literary scene depicting a depraved, absurd representation of humanity and society, hoping their grotesque and satirical descriptions would make humanity aware of its need for redemption. The authors, representing something of the state of art as well as society, captured the angst of the post-war world in their depiction of a cruel, dark, and isolated world. Much like Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Steinbeck, and others who wrote between the wars, the professing Christian writers of the 1950s and 1960s recorded the hopeless activities of humanity and its attempt to find purpose and meaning

in life. However, unlike their Modernist predecessors, writers like Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy described the forlorn condition of humanity in such graphic and grotesque ways in order to create a sense of need. Their emphasis on the absurdity of life coupled with their personal belief in Christianity created a new intersection of religion and art, implying a natural relationship between the two rivals, a characteristic that the theorists of the renewed Christian aesthetic would also suggest. These writers used portraits of the grotesque and miserable as a means to point society towards some semblance of faith, redemption, and absolutes as represented by their own personal beliefs.

Flannery O'Connor was perhaps the most vocal about her own practice of Catholicism and the relationship of her beliefs to her art. She felt that her "belief in Christian dogma" freed her "to observe," affecting her writing "by guaranteeing [her] respect for mystery."[1] O'Connor's appreciation of mystery prohibited her from claiming an absolute understanding of the Christian doctrines or truths and resulted in a writing style that was undidactic and less offensive to society. She chose instead to use violent and disturbing images to paint a picture of the depraved society in which she lived, allowing the reader to experience the tragedy and recognize their need for restoration. O'Connor explained that she portrayed the grotesque, rather than typical people, to surprise a culture that had ceased to be easily shocked. She describes the age in which she wrote with discouraging words:

> We live now in an age which doubts both fact and value, which is moved this way and that by momentary convictions, which regards religion as a purely private

> matter. Instead of reflecting a balance from the world around him, the novelist now has to *achieve* one by being a counterweight to the prevailing heresy.[2]

She recognized the doubts that controlled the society in which she lived but desired to offer an alternative perspective on the gloomy reality. O'Connor's purpose as a Christian writer was not to reunite religion and art, as her predecessors had tried, but instead to simply offer her beliefs in the midst of the work, hoping a depiction of the grotesque would cause readers to see their need for redemption. Her technique and personal beliefs combined in art, illustrating a natural intersection of art and religion. In the same way, Walker Percy dealt with religious issues in his writing, mirroring O'Connor's emphasis on the dejected and hopeless state of humanity.

Walker Percy dedicated himself to representing the truth and reality in his writing, and as a result his art proved disturbing and certainly revealing. Percy understood the need for an unforgiving portrayal of real life in art. Like O'Connor and other religious writers of his time, Percy recognized the hopeless state that existed in his culture and the literature of the twentieth century, and he lamented the subjectivity of truth and the struggling sense of faith or belief. In a 1997 lecture entitled "The State of Novel," Percy deals with the issues of contemporary fiction, the possible solution for an emptied culture, and the question of "good art." He describes "good art" in very specific terms, relating it back to Classical literature and times when absolutes were acknowledged:

> Good art tells some home truths about the way things are, the way we are, about the movement or lack of movement of the human heart. In great ages, when people understood each other and held a belief in common, great stories like the *Iliad* or *War and Peace* were also great art because they affirmed the unspoken

> values which a people held in common and made it possible for a people to recognize themselves and to know who they are. But there are other times when people don't know who they are or where they are going. At such times storytelling can become a form of diversion, or perhaps even a waste of time.[3]

Percy believes that good art involves the telling of truth, an affirmation of "unspoken values," and an activity of purpose and not simple "diversion." He claims "something has gone wrong…and that the usual experts cannot tell us what it is—and indeed that they may be part of the problem."[4] These conclusions lead Percy to explain that art, and specifically the novel, is a cognitive activity telling "the reader how things are, how we are, in a way that the reader can confirm with as much certitude as a scientist taking a pointer-reading."[5] Percy believes that an artist's role in art is "diagnostic" as well as "cognitive," suggesting that art not only diagnoses the alienation and emptiness of modern society but also suggests some answers to the problem. Unlike the alleged "experts" of the day —the scientists, politicians, and intellectuals—Percy claims that artists could effectively communicate humanity's need for redemption. Alluding to Joseph Heller's *Something Happened*, Percy attacks what he felt was the very heart of the problem:

> Something has happened all right, something has gone wrong, but what…? Is it the final passing of the age of faith? Are we talking about a post-Christian malaise, the sense of desperation which presumably always comes whenever the symbols and beliefs of one age are no longer taken seriously by people in a new age.[6]

Percy does not offer a definitive answer to his questions. Instead, he suggests that in the midst of the confusion artists are best able to present these questions, alleviating anxiety for society and creating community among all who feel the absurdity and emptiness of life. He compares the work of the artist, who can offer practical diagnosis for the lost and floundering, to that of the scientist, who appears to simply be seeking new found discoveries and technologies. Percy believes that science is unable to address itself to certain real questions and anxieties of the human mind, namely 'what it is like to be an individual, to be born, to live, and die in the twentieth century."[7] In other words, science cannot answer questions about purpose and meaning in existence, though it promises to provide answers and advancements for the betterment of the individual. Like O'Connor and others, Walker Percy hoped to provide an accurate, and thus empty, picture of society to force people to recognize their need for purpose, for meaning, and ultimately for redemption.

Writing during the last quarter of the twentieth century, artists like Percy and O'Connor benefited from the renewed interest in religion after the world wars. They were not interested in systematically or philosophically reuniting the arts and religion, the very entities that had divided over a century earlier. Instead, these writers attempted to show society its own forlorn state, presenting stories of the ugly, the lost, and disheartened, trusting that the images of the hopeless would lead their readers to a search for truth. The religious writers of the time could see no other way to communicate the spiritual and emotional condition of the culture than in their art, believing that art was the best method for convincing humanity of its need for restoration. As artists who were also Christians, they could not divide the purpose of art and the need of society. O'Connor

explains the inherent need for redemption that all artists and non-artists feel, which she wanted to evidence in her writing:

> There is something in us as story-tellers, and as listeners to stories, that demands the redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance of restoration. The reader of today looks for this motion, and rightly so, but has forgotten the cost of it, …the price of restoration. He has forgotten the cost of truth, even in fiction.[8]

O'Connor described a culture that had rejected religion, absolutes, and ultimately God, and though she hoped it would see the need for restoration in her fiction, she ultimately realized that the culture would not allow itself to see "the cost of truth," or "the price of restoration." O'Connor, like her counterparts, diagnosed the situation and in the end found that it would take more than the grotesque and the absurd to make society accept the cost of faith, the price of acknowledging their need for redemption. The writings of the religious writers during the Cold War did reintroduce the Christian tenets and traditions to a culture that had seemingly forgotten them, but ultimately their attempts to represent redemption did not have the effect they had hoped. Though readers were forced to see their need for restoration, the effects of the Modernist period and the general distrust of religion and absolutes kept Western culture from acknowledging the redemptive nature of Walker Percy's and Flannery O'Connor's fiction. Their attempts to represent the depraved state of society had succeeded but their hope that such grotesque depictions would communicate the opportunity for restoration did not occur; however, they did set the stage for a renewed Christian aesthetic, well-defined ideals that would encourage and describe art that would communicate a clear picture of redemption.

The art produced during most of the second half of the twentieth century reflected the return to art for art's sake and the position of artist as a messenger of hopelessness and confusion, or reality. Artists have regained their position as transcendent observers of reality, presenting alternatives to the strictness and absolutes of Christianity, and religion has reclaimed its position of antagonist to artists and their work. Authors fill their novels, poetry, and drama with depressed characters, hopeless situations, and indifferent surroundings. Art has become more abstract and empty, reflecting a confused and absurd reality just as Percy and O'Connor described. In a speech from 1994, John Updike describes the overall literary atmosphere in America, which also applies to much of the art created in the Western culture during the late twentieth century.

> In our digitized, channel-surfing America, the human integer of so-called minimalist fiction—a label no writer embraces but that covers a whole world of existing tone and mood—can no longer support a supernatural exponent; a momentary cup of positivity in the flow of electrons, the integral 'I' hardly exists now, let alone forever. Nor does the more knotted and baroque fiction of gifted and challenging young writers, …though more far -reaching in allusion and passion, aspire to hope of heaven, fear of hell, or thought of any life but this present one of bone and blood and eventual crushing disappointment. All is abysmally human, we might say.[9]

Updike's diagnosis of the literary climate identifies the lack of hope and the absence of "a supernatural exponent," alluding to the humanistic, detached, and shortsighted perspective of contemporary authors. Earlier in the same speech, Updike reports that in his opinion, "orthodox religion scarcely figures at all, even as a force to be reacted

against, in contemporary American writing."[10] Influenced by the humanistic, Modernist ideals, the artistic world offers no answers to the empty culture that surrounded it. The generations that experienced the hardships and sharp brutality of the world wars have aged and the new generation now looks to multiple sources for hope and meaning. Ironically, it would take a change to a more relativistic, individualized mindset to provide a new platform for the absolutist, universal ideals of a renewed Christian aesthetic to influence artists and the world of art.

As the culture moved from the modern to the postmodern period, a time characterized by emotion, subjectivity, and tolerance, religion again reentered the aesthetic discussion. The continuing debate between art and religion began a new period that reinforced the previous rejection of absolutes and cherished relativism. As the climate changed in philosophy and intellectual circles, all ideas became acceptable, the culture advocating tolerance of all people and beliefs. Because of the openness of the postmodern period, religion was again able to enter the art world, though the relationship between the two entities remained strained. Christians were afforded a great opportunity to directly represent their ideas about the production of art and their aesthetic ideals, though their methods and definitions needed to be respectful of the cultural climate. Theological discussions, domineering control, and religious dogma practiced in the past would only result in a further division of the arts and religion. In order to effectively transition to postmodern culture and positively renew the discussion about religion and the arts, a new philosopher or aesthete was needed. Thus, a renewed Christian aesthetic emerged, utilizing the tolerance of postmodern culture to communicate their ideals but also remaining faithful to the absolutes of the Christian faith. The proponents of the

renewed Christian aesthetic found a natural connection between aesthetics and their religious beliefs.

The renewed Christian aesthetic offers restoration to the alienated, relativistic, and hopeless condition of humanity and inadvertently provides an answer to the contention between aesthetics and religion. Introducing an absolutist idea of aesthetics based on the beliefs and doctrines of the Christian tradition, a contemporary Christian aesthetic has created an opportunity to naturally reunite religion and the arts. The renewed Christian aesthetic argues that aesthetics and religion are inherently connected, art acting as a means to depict the emptiness of life as well as to communicate the possibility of redemption. The new collection of artists, scholars, and critics who have defined the renewed Christian aesthetic reflect their beliefs in the absolutes and traditions of Christianity that influence every aspect of their lives. Remarkably, the postmodern period provides a place for Christian ideals, a forum to offer their views of aesthetics, the purpose for art, and the true nature of the artist. While postmodern culture questions the place and methods of organized religion, those who reflect the renewed Christian aesthetic see an opportunity to positively affect the views toward the intersection of art and religion and also use art as a means of presenting the redemption promised in Christianity. Many proponents of the renewed Christian aesthetic, such as Annie Dillard and Kathleen Norris, also distrust the Christian church and the subculture of Christianity, instead choosing to remain in the secular world, professing their personal, religious views through their art. These artists are unconcerned with the definition of "good art" or the "Christian art," and instead concentrate on the honest depiction of reality in their

creation. As Madeleine L'Engle announces in *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art*, the question is not about the issue of good or bad art:

> Art is art; painting is painting; music is music; a story is a story. If it's bad art, it's bad religion, no matter how pious the subject. If it's good art—and there the questions start coming, questions which it would be simpler to evade."[11]

L'Engle acknowledges the intersection of religion and art but is not interested in defining art as religious or otherwise. Instead, proponents of the new Christian aesthetic argue that all good art is religious and all bad art irreligious, whether it is created by a Christian or not. L'Engle and her counterparts argue that the difference is found in the effect that the art creates, rather than the intention and personal beliefs of the artist. The two categories are distinguished by a set of qualities that are found in the aesthetic theory of a few Christian, aesthetic scholars. These ideas have produced a new mindset on art and religion. The artists of the renewed Christian aesthetic do not suggest that Christians control art for mainly didactic purposes as the church did through much of the Middle Ages and into the modern period. Likewise, they are not willing to separate art and religion conceptually as Kant argued or replace religion with art in the spirit of the Romantics. The postmodern era hesitantly invites a renewed Christian aesthetic that encourages artists to recognize the natural connection between aesthetics and religion, creating art that honestly describes the forlorn condition of humanity, but clearly provides that same humanity with the possibility of redemption from God without condemning or attacking.

The artists of the renewed Christian aesthetic recognize that the subjectivity of aesthetics does not easily integrate with the absolutes of religion, specifically

Christianity, creating a disparity difficult to overcome. Thus, rather than concentrating on a philosophical justification for uniting aesthetics and religion, Christian aesthetes focus on meaning in art, whether created by a Christian or not, and its potential to communicate the needed restoration of a confused and hopeless culture. Unlike Augustine, who feared that people would allow art and the appreciation of beauty to take precedence over God, the renewed Christian aesthetic instead believes that art by any artist can portray humanity's need for God by displaying the condition of humanity. Paul Tillich and Theodore Greene explain the Christian aesthetic ideal of religious art, whether an artist communicates religious ideas "implicitly or explicitly:"

> Artistically authentic art, in turn, can be significantly religious in two distinguishable ways, implicitly or explicitly. It is implicitly religious if it expresses, in whatever fashion, the artist's sensitive and honest search for ultimate meaning and significance in terms of his own contemporary culture. If religious be defined as man's *ultimate concern for Ultimate Reality*, all art which reflects, however partially and distortedly, this ultimate concern is at least implicitly religious, even if it makes no use whatever of a recognizable religious subject matter or any traditional religious symbols… Authentic art is explicitly religio us if it expresses the artist's sensitive and honest search for ultimate meaning and significance with the aid of a recognizable religious subject matter or religious symbols, that is, by using, in whatever way, the familiar materials of some historical religious tradition.[12]

Tillich argues that any art that displays religious ideas, which he defines as concerning "man's *ultimate concern for Ultimate Reality*," can be considered religious art, whether

by an artist who professes to be a Christian or not. The artists of the renewed Christian aesthetic agree, identifying the search for meaning and purpose in life as an expressly religious concern and one that all art should reflect. What is most important to the artists of the renewed Christian aesthetic at the close of the twentieth century is the artist's handling of, whether intentionally or unintentionally, the hopeless condition of humanity and Christianity's promise of restoration.

The methods of the artists of the renewed Christian aesthetic are much less offensive than stadium crusades, door-to-door visitation, and street preaching—stereotypical, Christian techniques for communicating Christianity's message of God's redemption. Christian aesthetes are artists themselves and thus work in literature, painting, sculpting, and even aesthetic theory, exploring the characteristics of humanity and God, reexamining the absolutes of Christianity, and trying to find where these beliefs correspond with the artistic work. Like the religious authors of the middle of the twentieth century, the contemporary Christian aesthete emphasizes a realistic portrayal of the alienation, emptiness, and depravity of society and culture. However, rather than expecting the absurd and disturbing images to imply humanity's need for re demption, an artist who acknowledges the renewed Christian aesthete now clearly offers hope for dealing with the anxiety, hopelessness, and pain of reality without alienating a humanity that questions the authority and claims of religion. The foundations of the renewed Christian aesthetic do not stem from personal experience or individual beliefs, but instead from the absolutes of the Christian tradition, relying on religious creeds, doctrines, and the Bible's claim to ultimate truth. The Christian worldv iew serves as inspiration for art that explores the offer of restoration in Christianity and emphasizes the role of the artist

to communicate these truths to an empty, dejected culture. The artists of the renewed Christian aesthetic produce art that communicates three important truths of the Christian tradition. Rather than depression, there is an offer of hope. Instead of hopelessness and punishment there is the reality of undeserved grace. In exchange for all the answers supplied by philosophy, science, psychology, and inner knowledge, there is an acknowledgement of mystery and an emphasis on faith, sometimes without the promise of concrete answers.

Three specific authors of aesthetic theory, artists in their own right, set the groundwork for the emergence of the renewed Christian aesthetic— Dorothy Sayers, Frederick Buechner, and Madeleine L'Engle.[13] These theorists define the foundations of the renewed Christian aesthetic, recognizing the opportunity to create a new perspective on art and religion based on the absolute doctrines of the Christian tradition. The three theorists have no connection beyond their similar criteria of a renewed Christian aesthetic. Sayers seems oddly out of place especially since she defined her aesthetic ideals almost fifty years prior to Buechner and L'Engle, even before Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and their contemporaries set the stage for the renewed Christian aesthetic. However, her commitment to declaring the redemption offered through God places her alongside the later scholars rather than their Cold War predecessors, who never directly presented the means of redemption in their art. All three scholars suggest criteria for artists to follow in their own process of creating, and all three state that artists' creation should communicate the emptiness that humanity feels as well as offering redemption for the hopeless condition of society. Sayers, writing in the midst of World War II, challenges artists to create art just as God created the "heavens and the earth," producing

works that offer meaning, relating the very act of creation to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Buechner encourages artists to communicate the true condition of society and humanity as well as the absolute truth of the Christian message through art. He focuses specifically on artists, Christians and non-Christians, who exhibit the renewed Christian aesthetic in literature. L'Engle, recording her investigation into the nature of Christian art and the Christian artist, explains that artists must exhibit childlike faith and creativity to create art which shares the meaning of life and ultimately leads humanity to the wholeness it desires. All three define elements of a renewed Christian aesthetic that communicates the natural relationship between art and religion and expresses the real offer of redemption to a humanity that inherently desires meaning and restoration.

[1] Flannery O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," in *Collected Works*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Library of America, 1988), 804.

[2] Flannery O'Connor, "The Catholic Novelist in the South," in *Collected Works*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Library of America, 1988), 862.

[3] Walker Percy, "The State of the Novel: Dying Art or New Science?" in *The Writer's Craft: Hopwood Lectures, 1965-1981*. ed. Robert A. Martin (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982), 207.

[4] Percy, 208.

[5] Percy, 207.

[6] Percy, 214.

[7] Percy, 218-219.

[8] O'Connor, "Catholic Novelist," 863.

[9] John Updike, "Remarks at Indiana/Purdue University, April 1994," in *More Matter* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 849.

[10] Updike, 848.

[11] Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art* (New York: North Point Press, 1980), 14.

[12] Paul Tillich and Theodore M. Greene, "Authentic Religious Art," *Masterpieces of Religious Art* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago), 1954, 8-9. in *On Art and Architecture (*New York: Crossroad, 1987), 232.

[13] Others philosophers, scholars, and theorists that come to mind are the Inklings (C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, J.R.R. Tolkien, etc.), Flannery O'Connor, T.S. Eliot, Jacques Maritain, etc.

CHAPTER 4

DOROTHY SAYERS: ART, CREATION, AND THE TRINITY

Dorothy Sayers is an artist and scholar who contributed ideas about a renewed Christian aesthetic over forty years before the postmodern period. In actuality, the British author, best known as a mystery writer, preceded the religious writers of the 1950s and 1960s, such as Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy, creating the foundation for a renewed Christian aesthetic in the midst of World War II. Her presence as a postmodern proponent of a renewed Christian aesthetic is perhaps confusing, or glaringly unchronological, but her ideas are certainly applicable in post-modernity. Her non-fiction writings such as *The Mind of the Maker*, published in 1941 and *Creed or Chaos*, from 1949, evoke a postmodern sensibility while relating Sayers' faith in Christianity and lay the groundwork for postmodern Christian artists. In fact, an essay from her 1947 publication *Unpopular Opinions*, entitled "Towards a Christian Esthetic," explains the need for and explanation of a renewed Christian aesthetic based on the beliefs of the Christian tradition, specifically the doctrine of the Trinity. Her writings and ideas are foundational to the religious literary and aesthetic movement after the world wars and of the postmodern era. The author of the famous Peter Wimsey mystery series and acquaintance of such literary heavyweights as C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkein, Dorothy Sayers is the earliest theorist of the renewed Christian aesthetic, whose writings on religion and art set an example for artists who would come after her.

Born in 1893, Sayers was raised in the heart of the Modernist era and experienced firsthand the devastation and hopelessness of life during and after the world wars.[1] She worked as an advertising copywriter before writing her series of mystery books, which began with *Whose Body?*, published in 1923. After she had written the last of the Peter Wimsey novels and stories, Sayers turned to drama, composing plays mainly commissioned by cathedrals or festival celebrations, including *The Man Born to Be King* in 1941, a series of plays on the life of Christ eventually broadcast by the BBC. She also translated Dante's *Divina Commedia* into modern English and then spent the latter years of her life writing about Christian apologetics and aesthetics, including essays and a book on the religious elements of the creative process. Sayers found that her beliefs in Christianity greatly affected her views of not only mystery books, but of art and life as well. William Griffin, in the introduction to *The Whimsical Christian* (first published as *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World* in 1969), says, "if there were one word to describe Sayers' view of Christianity, it would be *whimsy*."[2] Not that her beliefs in Christianity were simple or fickle, but "intellectuals like herself who believed in the Incarnation were considered whimsical, frivolous, capricious" by the educated and philosophical intelligentsia of Western culture. Sayers, like C. S. Lewis, "saw that the world was divided, not into many Christian communities, each professing more or less the same thing, but into two camps, the believers and the non-believers." Her conclusions, while exposing an absolutist sensibility, greatly affected her thoughts on art and its relationship to religion. Sayers' strict sense of a dividing line between Christians and non-Christians mirrored the divide she recognized between art and religion and led her to seek common ground between them all. In her work on aesthetics, Sayers revealed

her belief that true art could serve as a possible connecting point between the rivals, though artists and religion had been divided for centuries. Like the theorists of the renewed Christian aesthetic who would follow, Sayers was more interested in the use of art to reunite God and humanity than in bridging the gap between art and religion. However, Sayers believed that a renewed Christian aesthetic could restore art in the eyes of the church and serve to make Christian doctrines relevant to artists. Her purpose was to educate artists about their creative processes and their actual creation, allowing the art to communicate the message to audiences who would experience the works. Most importantly, she was convinced that a Christian aesthetic, and artists of such an aesthetic, could act as a harbinger of truth and hope to the devastated, post-Christian world.

In her essay "Towards a Christian Esthetic," which first appeared in *Unpopular Opinions*, a book of essays published in 1946, Sayers explains initially why a Christian aesthetic is needed and what the new philosophy of the arts would encapsulate. The essay, reprinted in *The Whimsical Christian* in 1978, opens with the writer's very pointed purpose:

> I have been asked to speak about the arts in England—their roots in Christianity, their present condition, and the means by which (if we find that they are not flourishing as they should) their mutilated limbs and withering branches may be restored by regrafting into the main trunk of Christian tradition.[3]

Sayers, who recognizes the trouble between art and religion, set out to create a "Christian philosophy of the arts," hoping to reunite the arts with Christianity. Sayers explains that "the Church as a body has never made up her mind about the arts," an unfortunate oversight in her eyes. In Sayers' opinion, a Christian aesthetic is something the church

should have developed, but instead the Church either "puritanically denounced the arts as irreligious…or tried to exploit the arts as a means to the teaching of religion and morals."[4] Sayers admits that these mindsets misconstrued both the true purpose of art and the nature of Christianity. However, she continues on to suggest that by creating a renewed Christian aesthetic, religion itself could understand the nature and purpose of art, and the artist could understand the connection between the creative process and Christian doctrine. Thus, rather than focusing on the existing division between art and religion, trying to rectify the situation by declaring one or the other right, Sayers endeavors to change the viewpoint of the rivals to their points of intersection. Her radical handling of the Christian creeds and tenets provide a groundwork for a renewed Christian aesthetic, connecting with the Church but also giving a revived significance to the artist and art. As her Christian "esthetic," Sayers emphasizes the artist's role as a creator, mirroring God the Creator, associates the creation process with the doctrinal, Trinitarian view of God, and ultimately suggests that the creative mind could help communicate and offer restoration for the helpless state of society.

The first part of Sayers' renewed Christian aesthetic relates to the artist, who as a maker, is a creator just like the Christian God who created the universe. Unlike the Romantics, who felt that poetry was merely an echo of the divine, Sayers argues that the artist can create something new like God's creation of the universe from nothing. In fact, for Sayers, "the characteristic com mon to God and man is…the desire and the ability to make things."[5] Christian tradition teaches that in seven days "God created the heavens and the earth" and everything in them, making something out of nothing.[6] However, the artist, though he may create like God, cannot produce something from nothing. Sayers

refers to Plato's disapproval of imitation, the Classical thinker referring to the limitation of the artist, suggesting that art is mere reproduction and not original or unique creation. The artist, much like God, does makes things—poems, paintings, sculptures, ideas, etc.—but ultimately, they are only reproducing those things that have already been created by God, using materials that also were created. In the essay, Sayers addresses the issue of imitation, explaining that true artists, following a renewed Christian aesthetic, are in fact creating "something new."[7] She compares so-called "pagan" art of the imitative kind, and the "idea of art as creation," which she argues is Christianity's most im portant contribution to aesthetics. Sayers describes the tragedian Aeschylus as "a true poet" whose "art was that point of truth in him that was true to the external truth, and only to be interpreted in terms of eternal truth." In other words, Aeschylus could only create something true as it related to the greater, ultimate truth that existed outside of him. According to Sayers, "pagan" artists cannot create anything new but only art that contains partial truth of the absolute truth she believes comes from Christianity. The work of the "pagan" poets and artists was limited by their inability to make something new, for they merely offered "works of art that turned out to pattern," meeting certain criteria and relating truths that only made sense in conjunction with a greater truth outside the work. Under a Christian aesthetic, human creators are not imitating objects or scenes, but are instead creating "images," which Sayers claims are different from imitation and instead result in the "unimaginable" and its "image" becoming "one and the same."[8] She further draws the distinction between image and imitation by relating it to the relationship between God the Father and God the Son, or Jesus:

> There is something that is, in the deepest sense of the words, unimaginable, known to itself (and still more, to us) only by the image in which it expresses itself through creation; and, says Christian theology very emphatically, the Son, who is the express image, is not the copy, or imitation, or representation of the Father, nor yet inferior or subsequent to the Father in any way.[9]

Just as the Father and Son of the Trinity are equal but separate, according to Christian tradition, so the image and the unimaginable reflect one another, without one subverting the other, and both expressing eternal truth. Sayers' Christian aesthetic suggests that instead of an artist merely representing a previous object in imitation, the true artist can create images that communicate a much deeper mystery.

According to the renewed Christian aesthetic, the artist, "more than other men," is able to create "a whole artistic work" which is "immeasurably more than the sum of its parts," unlike any person's ability to create something by rearrangement or reproduction.[10] Thus, as Sayers explains, the artist follows the example of the Creator God, not just copying an existing idea or object but creating a new thing, an image of eternal truth. The artist is no longer just a talented copier of existing things, as Plato argued, but instead is declared a creator like God.[11] The heightened status which Sayers assigns to the artist changes the idea of the artist in the views of the church and Christianity and also supports the role of the artist as a harbinger of truth and hope. Thus, by naming the artist as a creator like God, Sayers illustrates the inherent connection between art and religion, using Christian doctrine to compare the work of the artist with the work of God. Having established the artist as a creator, Sayers moves to explain the creative mind at work as an image of the divine Trinity.

Sayers defines a three-step process of the creative mind that she compares to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—further reinforcing her idea of the natural relationship between art and religion.[12] She explains that the artist moves through a three-step process in the act of creation, steps which correspond to the triumvirate Father, Son, and Holy Spirit of the Christian God. Sayers, in "Towards a Christian Esthetic," explains the connection between the creative mind and the Trinity. Initially, the human creator must have an experience that leaves an impression. Second, the artist makes an expression of the impression that he or she felt, which becomes the actual piece of art. Lastly, once the artist has expressed emotions, thoughts, ideals, inspirations, etc., the third element of recognition occurs. Through recognition, the artist "makes [the experience] his own—integrates it into himself," creating a new perspective and a new image of truth for the artist as well as the audience.[13] For the artist, the image created, whether visually or in words, is not simply a representation of an object seen or a situation experienced. Instead, Sayers argues that the work of art is the actual experience. In other words, "the poet himself did not know what his experience was until he created the poem which revealed his own experience to himself."[14] Sayers sums up the process in this way.

> The act of the poet in creation is seen to be threefold—a trinity—experience, expression, and recognition: the unknowable reality in the experience; the image of that reality known in its expression; and the power in the recognition; the whole making up the single and indivisible act of a creative mind.[15]

The creative act in process, which Sayers describes as "a trinity," she fully explores in her book, *The Mind of the Maker*.

The first of Dorothy Sayers' books on things aesthetic and apologetic, *The Mind of the Maker*, published in 1941, connects the Christian doctrine of the Trinity to the work of the artist in imaging an experience for the good of truth. The three terms that Sayers uses in 'Towards a Christian Esthetic' —experience, expression, and recognition—she labels as Idea, Energy, and Power in *The Mind of the Maker*. She quotes a passage from one of her plays, *The Zeal of Thy House*, which best describes the threefold process.

> First, there is the Creative Idea, passionless, timeless, beholding the whole work complete at once, the end in the beginning: and this is the image of the Father [in the Christian Trinity].
>
> Second, there is the Creative Energy begotten of that idea, working in time from the beginning to the end, with sweat and passion, being incarnate in the bonds of matter: and this is the image of the Word [or Son of God].
>
> Third, there is the Creative Power, the meaning of the work and its response to the lively soul: and this is the image of the indwelling Spirit.
>
> And these three are one, each equally in itself the whole work, whereof none can exist without other: and this is the image of the Trinity.[16]

Without some knowledge of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity these assignations are perhaps convoluted or at best bizarre. However, Sayers draws the connection between the creative process and the Christian doctrine of the Trinity by relating back to the experience, expression, and recognition procedure. The Idea, or experience, exists without emotions and is not bound by time or space. The Idea is an absolute, an essential moment or epiphany waiting to be expressed, something more than a routine or

commonplace event in one's life. In the same way, God the Father, the first part of the Trinity, exists timelessly and immutably, absolutely and purposefully, a preeminent, omnipotent ideal and reality even without expression. The Energy (Activity), or expression, is the emotions, thoughts, and inspirations which emerge from the Idea and become incarnate or tangible. Likewise, God the Son, the "begotten" of the father, enters the world as "The Word" (as the Bible describes Jesus in the Book of John) and takes the form of a human, though no less God, just as the experience takes "body" in the expression.[17] The third element, the Power or recognition, "is the thing which flows back to the writer from his own activity," and "is also…the means by which the Activity is communicated to other readers and which produces a corresponding response in them."[18] Without the recognition, the idea and the energy are simply a pretty picture or fancy wording. The artist, by combining all three in the creative mind, creates something that speaks truth not only to the artist but to viewers and readers as well. Sayers says that the "recognition of the truth that we get in the artist's works comes to [the au dience] as a revelation of a new truth," like the Holy Spirit whose purpose is to lead the believer "into all truth."[19] The revelation is the new thing that the artist, like God, has created, offering a new perspective on a situation, object, or ideal, instead of a mere imitation. Sayers believes that the recognition of truth "tells us something about ourselves that we had not been always saying, something that puts a new knowledge of ourselves within our grasp."[20] Sayers believes that realization is the ultimate purpose of true art, which under the renewed Christian aesthetic would also tell the audience "new knowledge" about themselves.

After illustrating her idea of the inherent connection between artistic creation and religious doctrine, Sayers' idea of the Christian aesthetic ultimately returns her to the world and its need for restoration. Because she "saw that the world was divided…into two camps, the believers and the non-believers," Sayers believes that a Christian aesthetic leads to art which eventually points to the Creator God, modeling his act and methods of creation, and offering the restoration found in humanity's relationship to him. However, Sayers is aware that her use of Christian dogma and terminology does not immediately connect with the society in which she lives. Thus, she ends both the essay and her book by defending the role of the artist as the true hope for the world, creating art to show human beings their need for redemption, for a renewed relationship between God and humanity.

Sayers, after describing the true purpose of art created under the renewed Christian aesthetic, turns to the typical art which she finds in her society, made in the midst of the destruction of World War II. She explains that the people of the day do not want the "creative and Christian kind of art at all," but instead want "entertainment, or, if [they are] a little more serious-minded…something with a moral." [21] She argues that simple entertainment and what she calls "moral spellbinding," while useful, are "not art in the proper sense." She claims that entertainment art creates "a civilization that lives for amusement, a civilization without guts, without experience, and out of touch with reality," unable or unwilling to deal with the truth and pain of life.[22] On the other hand, moral spellbinding, or art which only encourages the audience "to virtuous action," tries to "produce the behavior without the experience," exerting "power" over the audience rather than communicating it.[23] Both entertainment art, which verges on art as religion or

anti-religion, and moral spellbinding, which seems to mirror the didactic art of medieval times, fail to deal with the alienated state of culture or offer hope for the future. As an alternative to these shallow purposes for art, Sayers offers art from the renewed Christian aesthetic, found in experience, born in expression, and delivering the truth of the Christian tradition.

However, Sayers recognizes that the idea of the artist creating as God did and the creative process compared to the Trinity would be difficult to relate to life and art during the Modernist era. For Sayers, living in 1941 (and sounding much like Walker Percy would some thirty-six years later), "it has become abundantly clear…that something has gone seriously wrong with our conception of humanity and of humanity's proper attitude to the universe."[24] She understands that humanity continues to seek solace and hope in man's dominance of nature or individual reasoning, "obsessed by the practice of a mathematical or scientific period," which promises the explanation of all things and thus life. As an alternative, Sayers suggests that the artist of the Christian aesthetic attempts to interpret nature, creation, the mind, and all things, to access "the hidden things behind that baffling curtain of phenomena."[25] Sayers believes that art and the artist "can, out of his own experience, tell the common man a great deal about the fulfillment of man's nature in living," but only if people see the need for understanding their nature and purpose. For Sayers, the renewed Christian aesthetic provides the "fulfillment" and the "the hidden things" that the world needs, enigmatic references to the promises of the Bible and thus Christianity rather than the scientific laws which aim to expose all mysteries.[26] She describes the role and "vocation" of the creative mind according to the renewed Christian aesthetic. She explains that the artist must step outside the current

cultural expectations and perspectives and instead offer the hope of restoration found in the mystery of God's grace:

> The mind in the act of creation is thus not concerned to solve problems within the limits imposed by the terms in which they are set, but to fashion a synthesis which includes the whole dialectics of the situation in a manifestation of power. In other words, the creative artist, as such, deals, not with the working of the syllogism, but with that universal statement which forms its major premise. That is why he is always a disturbing influence; for all logical arguments depend upon acceptance of the major premise, and this, by its nature, is not susceptible of logical proof. The hand of the creative artist, laid upon the major premise, rocks the foundations of the world; and he himself can indulge in this perilous occupation only because his mansion is not in the world but in the eternal heavens.[27]

The artist creates outside the perspective of common humanity, dealing in "universal statement[s]" and uniting all influences and aspects into one "manifestation of power," a new image of eternal truth. It is the artist, according to Sayers, who can recognize the renewed Christian aesthetic that "rocks the foundations of the world," especially after the world wars, when humanity has been debilitated and emptied. The artist who offers the Christian doctrines and beliefs to the broken culture presents a new truth and mirrors the act of the Creator God. Without a doubt, Sayers' definition of the Christian aesthetic and the true artist creates a new perspective of the artist and aesthetics. However, it does not revisit the strained relationship between art and religion, but instead suggests that art, as an act of creation, could reveal the Christian doctrines, traditions, and teachings about the

hope for a devastated world. Thus, audiences and artists alike recognize their need for redemption either through the creative process or by experiencing the creation.

Best known as a writer of mystery novels, Dorothy Sayers offers a new perspective on art and religion different from the previous centuries when religion tended to dominate the production of art or when art seemed poised to replace religion. Sayers recognizes the confusion and emptiness that developed out of the world wars and finds that a renewed Christian aesthetic is needed to offer the redemption that humanity needs. Like the religious writers who are to follow her after the world wars, Sayers recognizes the absurd and alienated state of society and suggests that true art can portray the opportunity for restoration as offered in Christianity as an answer to humanity's needful condition. As a Christian, Sayers does not attack contemporary aesthetics, nor does she defend the right of the Christian church to define and condone art. She concentrates on the role of the artist as a creator, like the Creator God, and compares the creative process to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Her Christianity affects her view of art, but in the same way her reverence for art influences her methods of presenting her beliefs. Her desire to follow Christian doctrines and her respect for art and artists lead her to a renewed Christian aesthetic which acknowledges an inherent connection between art and religion. In the end, Sayers announces that the artist is the best person to diagnose the deteriorating condition of the world and offer the hope, grace, and foundation that Christianity claims. As the earliest theorist of the renewed Christian aesthetic, relying on the absolutes of her Christian beliefs as well as her unquestioned trust in the arts, she suggests that art and religion are naturally connected. Thus, the artist can serve as a harbinger for Christianity's message of redemption in the midst of hopelessness and art

as a mirror to display the forlorn condition of a humanity in need of restoration, offered in a relationship with God.

The Christian aesthetic that Dorothy Sayers proclaims is well ahead of its time; however, at the dawn of the postmodern era, new theorists emerge who share the beliefs and ideas of Sayers. Their writings, published in a time when relativism dominated the intellectual community and discussion, find a place in the dialogue, though their faith in absolutes and the Christian tradition are really the antithesis of the postmodern sensibility. Sayers' legacy of a renewed Christian aesthetic echoes in the writings of Frederick Buechner, who shares her beliefs about the state of society and the potential for a renewed Christian aesthetic not only to show the natural intersection of religion and art, but more importantly to effect a reconnection between humanity and God.

[1] The short biography and information about Sayers' publications come from William Griffin's introduction to *The Whimsical Christian* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1969), vii-x.

[2] Griffin, ix.

[3] Dorothy Sayers, *The Whimsical Christian* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1969), 73.

[4] Sayers, 74.

[5] Dorothy Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1979), 22.

[6] Genesis 1.1 (New International Version)

[7] Sayers, *Whimsical*, 83.

[8] Sayers, *Whimsical*, 84.

[9] Sayers, *Whimsical*, 83.

[10] Sayers, *Mind*, 28.

[11] It is important to note that the artists' status as creator does not make him or her equal to God, but only a reflective image of God himself. Just as Jesus is considered an image of God, and humanity is made in God's image, so the artist has recognized his or her connection to that example. Artists still do not use materials that they have created, but must use those elements that the Creator God made. The key connection comes in creating something new, though it be from materials which are not new. It is not the tangible object that is new, but the reflection of eternal truth that is made in a new way.

[12] The doctrine of the Trinity simply says that God is Three Persons, Father Son, and Holy Spirit, each separate but still a part of one entity.

[13] Sayers, *Whimsical*, 86.

[14] Sayers, *Whimsical*, 85.

[15] Sayers, *Whimsical*, 86.

[16] Sayers, *Mind*, 37-38.

[17] John 1.14 (NIV)

[18] Sayers, *Mind*, 40-41.

[19] Sayers, *Whimsical*, 87 (closing quote from John 16:13 (KJV).

[20] Sayers, *Whimsical*, 87.

[21] Sayers, *Whimsical*, 88. Sayers comments here are suggested again in the Alan Jacobs quote found on page 3, speaking of contemporary art: "To the aesthetic sensibility there is no virtue but to be interesting, no vice but to be dull."

[22] Sayers, *Whimsical*, 89.

[23] Sayers, *Whimsical*, 88-89.

[24] Sayers, *Mind*, 181.

[25] Sayers, *Mind*, 187.

[26] See John 10.10 (NIV) and Luke 10.21 (NIV)

[27] Sayers, *Mind*, 211-212.

CHAPTER 5

FREDERICK BUECHNER: ART AND THE GOSPEL TRUTH

Frederick Buechner is a proponent of the renewed Christian aesthete, but unlike Dorothy Sayers, he proclaims the renewed aesthetic to the postmodern generation. Just as Sayers emphasizes the relationship of art to the Christian doctrines of creation and the Trinity, Buechner suggests that art, whether created by a Christian or not, can portray Christian doctrines and present the hope of the Gospel truth.[1] According to Buechner, the Gospel truth is the promise of hope and the opportunity of redemption in the midst of an empty life, marred by depravity and anxiety. However, Buechner is not advocating simple, didactic art, a return to medieval methods of art and aesthetics, but instead he offers that art and religion are inherently connected, both able communicate the same message. He believes that the truth found in a Shakespearean play or a novel by Herman Melville can present the absolute truth of God just as much as the actual Biblical story of Jesus' death and resurrection. Over a millennium before, St. Augustine had written that "every good and true Christian should understand that wherever he may find truth it is his Lord's."[2] But it is Buechner who suggests that literature, by authors who profess and others who deny Christianity, can express Gospel truth that illustrates the harshness of life and the real possibility of redemption. In *Telling the Truth* and *Speak What We Feel*, Frederick Buechner concludes that art plays an important role in presenting truth to society and displays how the communication of absolute truth through literature can help to change the condition of the postmodern society.

The author of sixteen fiction works, from plays to novels, and sixteen non-fiction works of inspiration, memoirs, and criticism, Frederick Buechner has committed his life to literature and religion. Born in 1926, Buechner can hardly be considered a product of postmodernism, though much of his art has been produced during the postmodern period.[3] He entered Princeton University in 1943, spent two years in the army during World War II, and then returned to Princeton to complete his Bachelor of Arts in 1947. He published his first novel, *A Long Day's Dying*, in 1950 and moved to New York in 1953 to continue writing. However, in New York, he was to experience a dramatic change in his life. He "began attending Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, pastored by George Buttrick," converted to Christianity, and enrolled at Union Theological Seminary where "he studied under theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr [and] Paul Tillich," significant scholars of religion and art. After receiving his Bachelor of Divinity degree, he was ordained as a Presbyterian minister and took a job at Philips Exeter Academy, in New Hampshire. It was not until 1967 that Buechner left Exeter for a Vermont farm, "where he began a career as a full-time writer and lecturer." However, the interplay of religion and literature had deeply affected the mindset of Buechner. His love for writing, coupled with his beliefs in Christianity, have led to fiction work that is heavenly influenced by Biblical themes and religious issues (*Godric*, *On the Road with the Archangel*), as well as non-fiction work that deals with the evidence of God's truth in art. Buechner's love and pursuit of truth, absolute truth, is clear in *Telling the Truth* and *Speak What We Feel*, where the author connects society's true state of emptiness with the dramatic effect that art, and specifically literature, has in representing and communicating the truth of redemption to that society.

Frederick Buechner, unlike Dorothy Sayers and Madeleine L'Engle, has not written a book specifically about the renewed Christian aesthetic. In fact, Buechner does not specifically write about aesthetics at all, but instead examines literature as a type of art that can be and is representative of the renewed Christian aesthetic. In *Telling the Truth*, Buechner says that art of all genres, periods, and from all types of artists—William Shakespeare's plays, the novels of Melville and Dostoevsky, and even the sermons of the preacher—can communicate the Gospel truth. Buechner examines artists who represent the opportunity for redemption in their art, thus illustrating the natural relationship between art and religion. Buechner argues that all artists are able to depict the truth of life's hopelessness in their art, creating disturbing and unsettling fiction that can direct humanity to its need for salvation. And, as Buechner explains, sharing the truth certainly includes depicting the ugliness and depravity of humanity as well as the general hopelessness in society, in the tradition of writers like Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy. He refers to ministers whose job it is to proclaim the truth, being willing to take chances and tackle the harsh reality of life before offering the possibility of redemption that is available through God's truth. Buechner says that before explaining the hopeful elements of the Gospel truth, ministers "must address themselves to the fullness of who we are and to the emptiness too, the emptiness where grace and peace belong but mostly are not." [4] In that way, preachers serve as examples to the artists of the renewed Christian aesthetic, presenting life's hardship as well as the truth of God's restoration.

Buechner argues that the Gospel truth of the preacher should also be the truth that the author portrays as well. Transitioning to *King Lear*, Buechner argues that Shakespeare, like a preacher, unabashedly presents the cruel reality of life, serving as a

model for artists of the renewed Christian aesthetic. Buechner elaborates on the results of Shakespeare's *King Lear*:

> What he has done in *Lear* is to look as deep as he can into the dark and ambiguous heart of things and then to body forth an impassioned statement about what he has found there which on its own scale approaches being as rich and complex and uncompromising as what he has found, a statement in which he is less concerned with matters of form and clarity and good taste than he is simply with telling the truth.[5]

Buechner argues that Shakespeare deals honestly with the dark corners of the mind, heart, and soul, and thus presents a play that challenges the audience, forcing it to revisit its own demons, anxieties, and fear. Buechner suggests that Shakespeare "risks making a terrible fool of himself in *Lear*," but chooses, "in the interests of truth-telling" to deal with the circumstances and horror, "as if from the conviction that if the truth is worth telling, it is worth making a fool of yourself to tell."[6] Buechner implores artists to dedicate themselves to delivering the truth, no matter the cost to their own reputation or success. Buechner does add that it is not only important to tell the truth, but also to "tell the truth in love" which means "to tell it with concern not only for the truth that is being told but with concern also for the people it is being told to."[7] Buechner's charge to artists, to follow the example of artists like Shakespeare, illustrates his belief in the truth of the Christian tradition and exhibits his conviction that art and religion are naturally connected, art serving as the method for communicating the truth that humanity needs. He believes that the artist should be the means of absolute truth of the Gospel and of life's emptiness, thus leading the audience directly to the redemption that God offers.

After explaining the need for an artist's commitment to truth, Buechner describes three elements of the Gospel truth that he believes should be included in art—tragedy, comedy, and fairy tale. The first element of the Gospel, tragedy, is the truth of life's emptiness and hopelessness, a reality that Buechner argues all artists should commit to depicting. Before humanity recognizes its need for redemption, it must acknowledge the tragedy of life that Buechner says "is bound to happen," none greater than the assurance of death.[8] Second, Buechner maintains that artists need to portray the comedy behind the Gospel, the sheer ridiculousness of God, who created all things, developing a plan to save humanity from the tragedy of life. Lastly, art should depict the fairy tale of the Gospel, the realization in humanity of all that God is offering in redemption. Buechner argues that art, if it includes all three elements, will not only connect religion and art but will also communicate the possibility of restoration and hope for a culture characterized by forlornness and depression. Buechner contends that the artist of the renewed Christian aesthetic will follow the advice of Edgar speaking at the end of *King Lear*: "The weight of this sad time we must obey, / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say."[9] In their sadness, artists recognize the condition of humanity, that the truth of life and restoration is the truth that is needed, the tired cliches, worn advice, and meaningless platitudes only serving to tell people what they want to hear. Essentially, Buechner's criteria for the renewed Christian aesthetic claims that the artist serves as the harbinger of truth in his or her use of art to depict the depression and angst and to point the audience towards the ultimate truth of God and the gospel.

In *Speak What We Feel*, Buechner specifically examines the lives and works of four artists, two professed Christians, an admitted atheist, and a spiritual enigma, that he

believes exhibit the criterion of the renewed Christian aesthetic he has defined. Gerard Manley Hopkins, G. K. Chesterton, Mark Twain, and William Shakespeare display not only the truth of life's tragedy but also offer the truth of the Gospel, Christianity's promise of redemption. Buechner distinguishes these four "vein-opening writers," as he labels them, who put "not just themselves into their books, but themselves at their nakedest and most vulnerable." He believes that Hopkins, Chesterton, Twain, and Shakespeare, though of different periods, persuasions, and beliefs, each "wrote in his own blood about the darkness of life as he found it and about how for better or worse he managed somehow to survive it, even to embrace it."[10] In other words, the four authors openly deal with the true tragedy in their own lives, their art reflecting the alienation, dejection, and emptiness as well as the glimmer of hope that they find or even experience through their art. Buechner suggests that sometimes communicating the Gospel truth can be just as mysterious and unexpected for the artist as it can for the audience:

> The writing of a book can be like the dreaming of a dream…and when that is the case, books, like dreams, can be thought of as bearing a message to the reader from the writer's subconscious or whatever it is in the writer that the dream comes from. But also, like dreams, books can on occasion bear a message from a remoter and more mysterious region still, and in that case they become a message not just *from* the writer but also *to* the writer, revealing things that the writer was not fully aware of knowing before.[11]

Buechner describes the ability of the artist to speak truth about reality, but also the truth of the Gospel, whether consciously or subconsciously, "revealing" the hope through his or her art to the needs of humanity. After relating the need for artists to serve as

purveyors of truth, Buechner turns to the dramatic effect that the created works of the "vein-opening" writers, which present the Gospel truth, had on the author, and then on the audience, and thus on a culture. Buechner examines some of the "terrible sonnets" of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Man Who Was Thursday* by G.K. Chesterton, and Shakespeare's *King Lear*, works that Buechner believes reflect the truthfulness of life's hardship and the real possibility of redemption—the Gospel truth.

First, he examines the life of Gerard Manley Hopkins and some of the "bloody" sonnets—"Carrion Comfort," "The Windhover," and "The Lantern out of Doors" — that he wrote during the final years of his life. The poems depict a depression and hopelessness that Buechner believes Hopkins was experiencing in his life, one poem speaking of "the fell of dark" and the "black hours," physical representations of the anxiety that the speaker feels. Buechner dissects the poetry, suggesting that "they are the poems in which, by facing the worst of his darkness with almost unbearable honesty, he manages somehow to face it down, to survive it."[12] Hopkins manages to grasp the full depression of his soul in his poetry, dealing "honestly" with the darkness that surrounds him and works within him. However, Hopkins' role as an artist also makes his words a message of the Gospel truth to himself and to his readers. In his willingness to communicate his own emptied state, Hopkins connects with readers who likewise experience the dejection of life. Buechner admires the simple honesty of Hopkin's poems, "but what gives them greater power still is that at the same time they speak for, speak to, speak about all those who in some measure have faced the same darkness themselves."[13] Beyond the ability of Hopkins to articulate the truth of his own soul's

darkness and anxiety, the poet succeeds in communicating to the hearts and souls of his audience, speaking to the truth of their emptiness, and relating to their need for restoration and hope. Many of the poems return to the speaker's need for God's help and restoration, though in his forlorn condition, God's help seems very unattainable. "The Wreck of the Deutschland," Hopkins' poem about the famous sinking of a ship, explains the faith and trust in redemption of nuns who cry out to God as they drown, true hope in the face of hopelessness. Buechner believes, or at least hopes, that Hopkins himself eventually embraced hope during his last years of life, but as Buechner says, "if nothing else, he *survived*."[14] Hopkins understood the purpose of art and though his poetry was oftentimes dark, Buechner declares him an artist whose art is able to articulate the true harshness of life and still communicate the truth of the Christian Gospel.

Mark Twain, Buechner's second example, though a "near contemporary" of Hopkins, lived a very different life publicly, but internally his anxiety and dejection led him to similar, truthful observations about life's tragedy and his need for redemption.[15] The author of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Twain seemed to be a successful writer and lecturer. However, Buechner suggests that "when he looked in the mirror, what he saw was a man haunted by guilt and remorse."[16] His childhood was marred by the failures of his father and his witnessing of many deaths, including the deaths of his sister and brother, the second for which he felt at least indirectly responsible. Twain attempted to keep "such horrors as these… hidden behind the blue-eyed, subtle smile, the puffs of cigar smoke, the glittering suit."[17] Buechner argues that Twain suffered not just from the death surrounding him, but also from success

and the way it had involved him in what he saw as 'the corruption of his time." Buechner explains that Twain held no high respect for the culture in which he lived:

> The Gilded Age was Mark Twain's term for those post-Civil War boom years when unscrupulous individualism ran unchecked in a world of wild speculation and shifting values, and in his characteristically self-flagellating way he saw its worst excesses as merely his own writ large.[18]

There is little doubt that the shift that Twain decried was the early development of the Modern period, a time that questioned religion, absolutes, faith, and tradition and instead emphasized 'individualism" and 'shifting values." Buechner describes *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as Twain's grasp at dealing with the true condition of that age, reflecting the author's distrust of society, his experience of life's hopelessness, the return to boyhood innocence and trust, and the hope found in restoration, though he never seems to have found it himself.

Twain's commitment to the true representation of the evils of humanity is nowhere more evident than in the adults of the novel, namely Pap Finn, the Duke, and the King. But it is Huck himself who exhibits the characteristics that the author believes could be the hope for humanity, the redeeming qualities that Twain admires. Buechner suggests that despite Twain's 'horror at the condition of the human race, including himself, he had discovered in the heart of his hero a measure of honesty, unsentimental compassion, and genuine goodness that he could affirm without qualification."[19] Ultimately, Huck's famous decision to lie and "go to hell," though conventionally wrong, is a decision that exhibits honesty and goodness, a true understanding of humanity's need for redemption. Though Twain truthfully depicts the depravity and darkness of his

society, he likewise offers the truth of goodness and the possibility of a culture's restoration through people like Huck who represent faithfulness, trust, and the desire to make things right. As Buechner says, 'there is hope for the world in hearts like Huck's and Jim's and here and there a few others." Twain successfully portrays the truth of life, discouraging and absurd, while simultaneously offering the hope that comes in loyalty, honesty, and friendship. However, Twain fails to ever grasp the true effect of the Gospel, his personal hesitations about religion prohibiting him from clearly portraying the Christian ideal of salvation. Nonetheless, Buechner argues that Mark Twain, though atheistic, is an artist who represents the elements of the Gospel truth in his art, though not the Gospel itself. Twain not only describes life's darkness and loneliness but also suggests his understanding of the need of restoration, though he can offer no confident hope for others.

The third artist whom Buechner examines is G. K. Chesterton, a professed Christian and an author of novels and non-fiction. More than the other writers discussed in *Speak What We Feel*, Chesterton felt the direct impact of the Modern era, living in England at the end of the nineteenth century. Buechner elaborates on the emptiness that Chesterton dealt with not only as an artist, but also as a man searching for truth:

> Part of his troubles was that the decadence and darkness that horrified him in himself were also all around him in those last few years of the nineteenth century. The beliefs and values that mid-Victorian England had looked upon as eternal were giving place to doubt, skepticism, and a loss of inner balance, and all that Matthew Arnold could hear of the faith of his fathers was 'Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar.' Schopenhauer was in vogue, with his grim philosophy that

> life is nothing more than an illusory, malignant affair that inveigles humankind into reproducing in order to perpetuate it.[20]

Buechner explains that Chesterton's novel *The Man Who Was Thursday* is a relation of the events which saved him not just from "the blackness of human nature" he found in himself but from a complete descent into madness.[21] Chesterton subtitled the novel "A Nightmare," "which he explains as the 'nightmare of things not as they a re, but as they seemed to the young half-pessimist of the [18]90s.'"[22] His book helps to present the truth of life's disappointment and eventually the truth of God's redemption not just to his audience, but to himself as well. After summarizing the novel, Buechner states that the protagonist's ultimate problem, along with Chesterton's, "is where to find hope."[23] However, the novel concludes by declaring that hope comes from the protagonist's superior, who identifies himself as the "Sabbath" or "the peace o f God." Buechner believes that Chesterton communicates both the absurdity and hopelessness of life as well as the Gospel truth, describing the truth of God's restoration for the sad state of humanity.

The final artist that Frederick Buechner examines in *Speak What We Feel* is William Shakespeare. Buechner believes that in *King Lear* the bard addresses the truth of life and the truth of the Gospel in the tragedy, comedy, and eventual redemption of Lear himself, though in death. The title of *Speak What We Feel* comes directly from *Lear*. Buechner suggests that with Edgar's lines at the end of the play, Shakespeare, "is describing precisely what in writing this most feeling of all his plays he had done himself."[24] Shakespeare clearly experiences and recognizes the life of tragedy, but also realizes that the "weight" of a "sad time" must direct an artist to saying what he or she

has to say, rather than what people expect to hear. There is little doubt that the events depicted in *King Lear* suggest a most profoundly disheartening view of life. The present significance of the play, proven by the prevalent influence *Lear* claims in Western culture, makes the portrayal of hopelessness and absurdity in the play all the more relevant in all time periods and places. Buechner describes the setting and events of the play as a "dark world," which mirrors "the world itself, Shakespeare's world, where fathers like his own fall from honor to dishonor, where children like his own die in childhood, where friends betray friends and lovers lovers."[25] The picture is so bleak, Buechner asks "what hope is there that somewhere there is light?"[26] And yet, in the midst of the bloodshed, deception, treachery, disfigurement, and betrayal, Buechner recognizes a glimpse of hope, of truth, of the Gospel in *Lear*. Buechner believes that the "vein-opening" playwright truly felt an obligation, as an artist, to address the truth of life and as a result the truth of the Gospel.

> [He] opened his veins to make his audience feel along with him that it was precisely that quality [of life as tragedy and comedy] that constituted the richness of it, and the terror of it, and the heartbreaking beauty of it, which perhaps it took a man facing old age and death, as Shakespeare himself was on the brink of facing them, to see. It is also to be noted that in every scene of great suffering, he has someone enter from the wings to relieve it.[27]

And yet, the relief of suffering is only part of the Gospel. Buechner argues that Shakespeare includes all three elements of the gospel—tragedy, comedy, and fairy tale—in his play, and though the tragedy and comedy relate the hopelessness of life, Buechner says that it is the fairy tale element of *King Lear* that speaks best of the Gospel truth:

> And yet, and yet, he seems to say, maybe life is like a fairy tale notwithstanding, if only in the sense that all disguises are stripped away in the end and all evil spells undone, so that even the Beast becomes beautiful when he discovers that Beauty loves him, and even the old king, with Beauty dead in his arms, finally becomes a human being, and the last word, like Albany's, is a word of mercy. [28]

Buechner explains that Shakespeare ultimately peels away the madness and masks and displays a repentant king, aware of his own faults and wrongdoing, reunited to his estranged daughter, who truly loved him. In the end, as Buechner states, "is a word of mercy," the representation of the Gospel, God's offer of restoration to a hurting humanity experiencing tragedy and comedy in life. For Buechner, William Shakespeare, like Mark Twain, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and G. K. Chesterton after him, accurately portrays the horrific reality of life, but always has hope "enter from the wings to relieve" that disheartening truth. Even in a tragedy like *King Lear*, the Gospel truth resonates, with honest, hopeful characters like Cordelia, Kent, Edgar, and the Fool. Ultimately, even Lear, who recognizes his own depravity and his need for redemption, acknowledges his need for the truth.

Frederick Buechner's two books, *Telling the Truth* and *Speak What We Feel,* while serving as the author's own analysis of artist's lives and works, also become important arguments for the claims of the renewed Christian aesthetic. As with Dorothy Sayers and her relation of art and the artist to the Christian doctrines of creation and the Trinity, Buechner describes the medium of art as a message of truth and the role of the artist as a harbinger of the Gospel truth. He suggests that the artists' true impact can be

found in that instance of redemption emerging out of the true depiction of emptiness and death.

> They preach the word of human tragedy, of a world where men can at best see God dimly and from afar, because it is truth and because it is a word which must be spoken as prelude if the other word is to become sacramental and real, too, which is the word that God has overcome the dark world.[29]

Simply put, the truth in pictures of dejection and hopelessness points directly to the truth of the Gospel. According to the renewed Christian aesthetic, the artist serves as a means to deliver the truth of the Gospel as well as the tragedy, the offer of hope and restoration in the midst of the bad news. And, Buechner argues that artists can serve as communicators of the truth of life's tribulations as well as the truth of the Gospel, whether they claim to be Christians or not. Of the four artists that Buechner discusses in *Speak What We Feel*, only Chesterton and Hopkins openly claimed a commitment to Christianity. Nonetheless, Buechner describes the authors as men who personally dealt with tragedy, loneliness, loss, and confusion, but ultimately represent the need and opportunity for redemption. These artists serve as models for the contemporary artists, including Buechner, creating art that exemplifies the very qualities that Buechner includes in the renewed Christian aesthetic. In the midst of the postmodern era, Buechner's arguments for a renewed Christian aesthetic find resonance with artists and humanity, though his reliance upon absolutes does not. However, his beliefs in the absolute truth of life's hardships and the truth of God's redemption directly connect to the ideas of the third theorist of the renewed Christian aesthetic, Madeleine L'Engle, whose

writings explain the process and mindset that artists must adopt to accurately and honestly portray truth, meaning, and ultimately wholeness in their art.

[1] For a succinct definition of "Gospel," as used in the Bible, see I Corinthians 15.1, 3-5 (New International Version). Buechner defines the Gospel in *Telling the Truth* (see note 4) as tragedy (humanity is sinful and in need of redemption), comedy (God, the Creator of everything loves humanity enough to devise a plan for its redemption), and fairy tale (the offer of salvation, made possible through Jesus, is too good-to-be-true). Christianity claims to be absolute truth, beyond subjective reasoning or individual whim. Thus, a colloquialism for being honest is telling 'the Gospel truth," by which the speaker suggests that there is no arguing or denying his or her words.

[2] The quote from Augustine serves as an epigram in David Lyle Jeffrey, *People of the Book* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 71.

[3] The biography information comes from the Wheaton College webpage that has a special collection of Buechner materials. The biography website is www.wheaton.edu/learnres/arcsc/collects/sc05/bio/htm.

[4] Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1977), 4.

[5] Buechner, *Telling*, 5.

[6] Buechner, *Telling*, 5.

[7] Buechner, *Telling*, 8.

[8] Buechner, *Telling*, 57.

[9] William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 5.3.325-328, quoted in Frederick Buechner, *Speak What We Feel (Not What We Ought To Say)* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), x.

[10] Buechner, *Speak*, x.

[11] Buechner, *Speak*, 116.

[12] Buechner, *Speak*, 20.

[13] Buechner, *Speak*, 20.

[14] Buechner, *Speak*, 39.

[15] Buechner, *Speak*, 47.

[16] Buechner, *Speak*, 53

[17] Buechner, *Speak*, 56.

[18] Buechner, *Speak*, 56.

[19] Buechner, *Speak*, 72.

[20] Buechner, *Speak*, 95.

[21] Buechner, *Speak*, 96.

[22] Buechner, *Speak*, 96.

[23] Buechner, *Speak*, 109.

[24] Buechner, *Speak*, 130-131.

[25] Buechner, *Speak*, 140-141.

[26] Buechner, *Speak*, 140.

[27] Buechner, *Speak*, 153.

[28] Buechner, *Speak*, 154.

[29] Buechner, *Telling*, 47.

CHAPTER 6

MADELEINE L'ENGLE: ART, MEANING, AND WHOLENESS

The third theorist of the renewed Christian aesthete, Madeleine L'Engle, while she might not welcome the label, would certainly understand the designation as a reflection of her viewpoints on religion and aesthetics. A Newberry award-winning children's author, L'Engle is also a devout Episcopalian whose views on art and Christianity have greatly influenced musicians, painters, and sculptors, as well as writers of literature and poetry. As a proponent of the renewed Christian aesthetic, L'Engle believes that art is a means of recreating, expressing, and deciphering the interconnection of man and God. An artist herself, L'Engle states that art can clearly articulate meaning to a reader, listener, or viewer, providing encouragement and answers to a humanity seeking purpose and hope. She describes art much as Dorothy Sayers and Frederick Buechner do, echoing the previous theorists' belief that art is able to encapsulate and explain Christian doctrines and arguing that belief and trust in those doctrines can lead to life's true meaning—a connection with the Creator God. Her book *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art* is written as an inquiry into the inherent intersection of Christianity and aesthetics and focuses on the qualities that define the artist who exhibits the renewed Christian aesthetic.

Born in 1918, Madeleine L'Engle has been exposed to Christianity since her childhood. As she says in *Walking on Water*, "I'm accustomed to being a Christian. I was born of Christian parents who were born of Christian parents who were…."[1] She has

written over forty books, from the popular Time Quartet for children to her four-volume memoirs, the Crosswick journals.[2] She has always committed herself to a level of creativity and imagination that is different from that of many artists, and her children's books, such as *A Wrinkle in Time* and *A Wind in the Door*, set a precedent of creation and invention often imitated since the books first appeared. L'Engle's main work of aesthetics, *Walking on Water*, is a book she did not initially want to write. She was asked repeatedly to lecture on the idea of the Christian artist and the criteria for such a person, but opposed classifying artists with such a potentially questionable and difficult label. Like Frederick Buechner, L'Engle instead defines the characteristics of the artist, Christian or not, who displays the elements of the renewed Christian aesthetic.

The intersection of religion and art, two entities with such a turbulent relationship, creates consternation within a Christian, like L'Engle, who happens to be an artist. As a Christian, she can fall victim to declaring specific art as Christian and thus appropriate, like the church since medieval times or many churches today. Likewise, as an artist, she can divide art from religion completely, as artists have done for the past century. Instead, ignoring the temptation to follow the typical example of the church or artists in history, L'Engle removes herself from the debate and proclaims that all "good art" is Christian in nature, communicating some ideal or aspect of religious life or inquiry, whether the artist is a Christian or not. L'Engle is not saying that only Christian artists produce art that is good or that all so-called "Christian art" is good art. Her hesitation to label art as Christian is evident in *Walking on Water*:

> Christian art? Art is art; painting is painting; music is music; a story is a story. If it's bad art, it's bad religion, no matter how pious the subject. If it's good art —

> and there the questions start coming, questions which it would be simpler to evade.[3]

She offers *Walking on Water* as an inquiry into those questions that surround the declaration of "good art" rather than an authoritative answer, suggesting that the nature of the artist, as well as the purpose of the art, prove the worth of art more than simple categorization. Her reluctance to assign the label of Christian art also reflects her belief in the natural connection between art and religion, suggesting that art does not have to be labeled as Christian or sold in Christian bookstores to communicate the truths of Christianity. Rather than attempting to unite the two entities of art and religion, or separating them into rivals which can never be reconciled, L'Engle, as a Christian who creates art, finds a natural interaction between the two:

> I learn that my feelings about art and my feelings about the Creator of the Universe are inseparable. To try to talk about art and about Christianity is for me one and the same thing, and it means attempting to share the meaning of my life, what gives it, for me, its tragedy and its glory.[4]

L'Engle explains that religion and art interact in a productive and organic relationship, both focused on the meaning of life. She refers to Leonard Bernstein's description of music, "cosmos in chaos," as a definition of art, suggesting that art can bring order, form, and thus meaning to the confusion and disarray of life.[5] L'Engle states that art created under a renewed Christian aesthetic will lead the audience, and artist, to grace in the midst of emptiness, restoration instead of life's dejection, and positive answers to the muddle of life—meaning out of chaos. *Walking on Water* encourages the artist to strive towards art which presents meaning, helping people "to remember some of the glorious

things we have forgotten, and some of the terrible things we are asked to endure."[6] L'Engle does not characterize the Christian artist or Christian art, but instead defines criteria for the artist to follow which will result in art that presents the meaning of life and will lead humanity to the possibility of wholeness, both for the individual and for all people.

L'Engle's investigation starts with th e history of aesthetics as she recounts her past experience with the nature and purpose of art. Her beliefs in the Christian tradition are, for her, absolutes, her faith in its tenets and doctrines unquestionable. Thus, she returns to the classic ideas about aesthetics, those readings she remembers from college, those phrases and writings that have deeply affected her creating—Tolstoy's *What is Art?*, Plato's "necessity for divine madness in the poet," and John Ruskin's phrase, " *the cursed animosity of inanimate objects*."[7] L'Engle also mentions Coleridge's " *willing suspension of disbelief*" and an Aristotle quote that she says "reinforces Coleridge, when he writes*, That which is impossible and probable is better than that which is possible and improbable*." Each of these perspectives influence L'Engle's definition of true art, but none sufficiently defines aesthetics for her. She adds that the distance of these past philosophers "from us in chronology seems to give them overwhelming authority," but in actuality, "they were as human as the rest of us" and thus their ideas are debatable. [8] From the postmodern perspective, their opinions of aesthetics are no more authoritative than those of anyone else, including L'Engle's, and thus she is prepared and allowed to present her own ideas, incorporating her religious beliefs and her opinions of art into the definition. She creates her own criteria for the true artist, influenced by her commitment to Christianity and her vocation as an artist. L'Engle explains that the true artist exhibits

childlike faith and creativity in order to produce art that expresses meaning. Ultimately that art illustrates the possibility of wholeness not only for the artist but will also encourage and depict the possibility of completeness for the empty and hopeless society that encounters the art.

The first characteristic of the Christian artist that L'Engle describes is childlike faith, a needed precedent before the artist can utilize childlike creativity. L'Engle suggests that 'it is only with the conscious-unselfconsciousness of a child that [one] can think about theories of aesthetics, of art."[9] In other words, childlike faith is the only thing that produces the environment necessary to cultivate childlike creativity resulting in true art. In the Bible, Jesus Christ often welcomes children to him, proclaiming them as the inhabitants of heaven because of their simple faith and trust.[10] In the same way, the artist who exhibits childlike faith recognizes the unbelievable and mysterious things of the world and is ready to believe the intangible reality of God and his promises, relying upon the foundational tenets of Christianity. L'Engle suggests that children are the models for artists because just as they unquestionably trust in authority, the true artist must believe that his or her creation will reflect the purpose and meaning of something larger, more significant, and complete. Thus, from L'Engle's perspective of a renewed Christian aesthetic, the artist must rely on divine inspiration and providence to create art that speaks to life's meaning—what L'Engle identifies as the wholeness offered in God's grace, hope, and mystery. Simply, the artist must have complete, childlike faith that something greater, namely God, inspires the art, before he or she ever begins to create. The artist can question or doubt, but when meaning emerges from within his or her art, the artist must simply follow in faith. Faith does not imply that the artist has immediate

understanding. On the contrary, L'Engle believes that the artist must listen to the Creator and the creation first, and then "instead of understanding—that intellectual understanding," there will be "a feeling of rightness, of knowing, knowing things which [one is] not yet able to understand."[11] Like Buechner, L'Engle implies that the artist may not completely comprehend the wisdom or ideas that he or she is presenting in the art, but may be learning a lesson or grasping an ideal simultaneously with the audience. True artists, like children, honestly represent what is revealed to them, not because they always understand but because they trust the inspiration that works within them. L'Engle states that an artist reflecting the renewed Christian aesthetic will exhibit childlike faith, acknowledging the inspiration and meaning that he or she is to offer comes from God.

Childlike faith frees the true artist to display childlike creativity, with confidence that the power that produces meaning will help to inspire art that reflects that meaning. L'Engle states that "all children are artists," because the creativity of a child is uninhibited, their imaginations unfettered by thoughts of practicality and reality, their minds unconcerned with believability or rationality.[12] L'Engle explains that the true artist is able to recapture the spirit of a child's creativity, unhindered by "the dirty devices of the world" that influence him or her in negative ways, stealing faith and replacing it with the hopelessness and dejection that often characterizes real life.[13] L'Engle quotes Finley Eversole's *The Politics of Creativity*, which further explains the statistical effect of the harsh culture on the faith and creativity of people, and specifically artists:

> In our society, at the age of five, 90 percent of the population measures 'high creativity.' By the age of seven, the figure has dropped to 10 percent. And the percentage of adults with high creativity is only two

> percent! Our creativity is destroyed not through the use of outside force, but through criticism [and] innuendo.[14]

L'Engle believes that the world and its brutal reality steal the innocence and faith of humanity, and thus the artist, in faith, is "constantly having to unlearn what the world would teach" to recognize the absolutes to be represented in art. She encourages artists to remember "the lovely things," the things of childlike faith, reclaiming the unbelievable and mysterious ideas which stretch the minds and beliefs of humanity, such as the absolutes of the Christian tradition.[15] L'Engle claims that the creativity that produces unicorns and angels that children see and in which they believe, while often overlooked by adults, is that place of imagination and invention that the true artist must embrace. She contends that the artist must step outside the realm of reality long enough to remember those things we are not supposed to be able to do. Then, having embraced the spirit of childlike creativity, the artist must allow that trusting and imaginative attitude to inform his or her perspective and representation of reality, a reality that is often marred by "the dirty devices" and hopelessness. The product of childlike creativity, aligned with the intention to honestly and accurately proclaim meaning, is true art, art which offers to lead society to the hope, grace, and mystery which Christianity promises regardless of the hopelessness in real life.

L'Engle, defining the second characteristic, argues that art should display meaning by connecting the created work with the Creator God who provides purpose and meaning for humanity according to Christian tradition. Like Dorothy Sayers, L'Engle argues that the artist actually imitates God in creating. She explains that the true artist, modeling the example of the Creator God, "is to affirm meaning, despite all the

ambiguities and tragedies and misunderstanding."[16] In the face of the "tragedies," the artist needs to regain childlike faith and creativity and declare meaning and purpose. L'Engle not only suggests that sharin g meaning is an attribute of the artist, she exhibits the characteristic in her creation of *Walking on Water*. She explains that her motivation for writing the book is to "share the meaning of my life," just as all good art exists to express meaning. The meaning of life for the Christian, and thus for L'Engle, focuses on a "connectedness" with God, a relationship that creates completeness unavailable outside of that connection. L'Engle believes that just as the Creator presents order in the midst of a broken, chaotic humanity, all true art should reflect the same intent towards meaning or cosmos.[17] L'Engle argues that the true artist must recognize certain absolutes in order to produce meaning in their art. First, the true artist should acknowledge reliance upon the Creator—"we cannot create until we acknowledge our createdness."[18] God initiated creation and thus "the artist is a nourisher and a creator who knows that during the act of creation there is collaboration" and that he or she does not "create al one."[19] Second, the true artist imitates the offer of redemption and meaning that God likewise presents to a lost humanity. L'Engle, echoing the words of Buechner and Sayers, articulates the condition of society:

> To the non-believer, the person who sees no cosmos in chaos, we are all the victims of the darkness which surrounds our choices; we have lost our way; we do not know what is right and what is wrong; we cannot tell our left hand from our right. There *is* no meaning.[20]

Though the situation seems hopeless, it is the responsibility of the artist to follow the example of God, who produces the meaning in life, offering hope and redemption to a

broken society. Once the artist recognizes the purpose and the model, he or she utilizes childlike faith and creativity to communicate meaning to humanity, pressing it towards completeness, L'Engle's ultimate goal for artists and their art.

Madeleine L'Engle believes that the artist who redevelops a childlike creativity, able to recognize and represent the fantastic and mysterious, and who commits to art which communicates meaning is a true artist, creating true art which points humanity toward wholeness. L'Engle understands that reality reflects a hopeless and tired culture, seemingly lost in the confusion and disorder of life, full of questions and anxiety, dubious of the actual existence of truth, absolutes, and completeness. However, L'Engle says the true artist, while aware of that harsh reality, can proclaim truth, meaning, and hope to an audience yearning for wholeness. As she says in *Walking on Water*, "earthbound as we are, even we can still walk on water."[21] In other words, though rationality and harsh reality burden humanity with the emptiness of life, the true artist can remind humanity that there is an opportunity to regain the mysterious, fantastic, and miraculous—"to see angels, to walk on water, to talk to unicorns," or to find redemption.[22] L'Engle emphasizes the differences between the two mindsets by comparing the fearful, limited viewpoint of the typical person to the faithful, meaning-driven perspective of the true artist who is willing to express the possibility for wholeness in art:

> We are afraid of that which we cannot control; so we continue to draw in the boundaries around us, to limit ourselves to what we can know and understand. Thus, we lose our human calling, because we do not dare to be creators, co-creators with God.

> Artists have always been drawn to the wild, wide elements they cannot control or understand—the sea, mountains, fire. To be an artist means to approach the light, and that means to let go our control, to allow our *whole selves* to be placed with absolute faith in that which is greater than we are.[23]

L'Engle explains that most people do not have the faith, trust, or sense of calling to become artists, to communicate the wholeness that the Christian tradition offers in a creative and original way. Instead, artists are those who are intrigued by the miraculous and the unbelievable and thus are able to allow their faith to produce creativity resulting in meaning. According to L'Engle, the goal of all artists then is to reach the state where childlike faith—the foundation of creativity—interacts with the desire to share the meaning of life—a state where faith and art combine perfectly in a presentation and promise of wholeness. Her final advice to artists concerns their need to achieve a perfect state of balance, a condition of personal completeness, before communicating the possibility of that completeness to others.

L'Engle' s state of perfect combination is the essence of a renewed Christian aesthetic drive, the place where the artist understands not only the intellectual knowledge of the Christian absolutes, but also acknowledges a faithful, intuitive reliance upon those absolutes to create meaning.[24] L'Engle maintains that the combination of creativity and shared meaning develops from the interplay of these two senses, the intellectual self and the intuitive self. She

relates her own reliance upon a perfect combination of both senses in her own creating:

> When I am working, I move into an area of faith that is beyond the conscious control of my intellect. I do not mean that I discard my intellect, that I am anti-intellectual, gung-ho for intuition and intuition only. Like it or not, I *am* an intellectual. The challenge is to let my intellect work *for* the creative act, not against it. And this means, first of all, that I must have more faith in the work than I have in myself.[25]

Though L'Engle recognizes the need for both drives to actively engage in the artist, she realizes that rarely are both active simultaneously within a person, creating an imbalance, and thus a lack of wholeness. She suggests a number of reasons for the imbalance of the senses of intellect and intuition. First, she explains that "throughout the ages women have been allowed to remain more in touch with the intuitive self than have men, who traditionally have been trained to limit themselves to the rational self."[26] However, gender differences are simply one condition that creates an incongruity of humanity's innate drives. She continues, stating that economic and social changes such as the Industrial Revolution ushered in a century that finds people living "almost entirely in the pragmatic, Cartesian world," dependant "more than ever on the intellect."[27] Her descriptions of the modern world mirror those of Dorothy Sayers and Frederick Buechner, depicting an unbelieving, faithless humanity living in a sterile, logic-driven society. The Modernist society, with an emphasis on scientific proof and practical, reasonable belief, has heightened the sense of intellect and minimized the influence of the intuition, the emotional, instinctive part of people. L'Engle is aware that separation of

the intellect and intuition creates a vacuum that debilitates the whole person. She says that humanity has come to "depend solely on intellectual control" which demands a relinquishing of "archaic understanding" and "high creativity." The result is a humanity that "goes along with all kinds of things [it] *can't* control."[28] Even so, L'Engle is not suggesting that we do away with intellect. L'Engle, who emphasizes the intuition over the intellect, sees the need to have both drives in action. She admits that letting go of adult intellectual control does not equate "to set[ting] aside or discard[ing] the intellect, but to understand that it is not to be become a dictator."[29] The perspective of post-modernity provides the needed emphasis on the intuitive self that combines with the intellectual emphasis of the modernist period, leading to the perfect combination that L'Engle describes.

Thus, L'Engle is advocating a sense of combination in "an effort toward wholeness," a state of restoration that comes from the promises of Christianity.[30] In fact, L'Engle states that "the great male artists have somehow or other retained this wholeness, this being in touch with both intellect and intuition, a wholeness which always has to be bought at a price in this world." L'Engle concludes that intellect, or the meaning of life, and intuition, or creativity of childlike faith, produces art of the renewed Christian aesthetic. Combining faith and meaning with artistic creation and message, L'Engle illustrates the natural connection between aesthetics and religion. In so doing, L'Engle not only develops a state in which artists create, but also a condition that all humanity can attain in experiencing the art that is created. Christians should appreciate art with childlike faith and creativity, attempting to remember the "lovely things" that the depravity of the world has taken from them. Non-Christians recognize the presentation

of meaning and wholeness in art. The end result is a complete human experiencing a "life more abundant," for completeness is the condition that all people desire, whether they are artists or audience, Christians or atheists.[31]

Madeleine L'Engle presents the third theoretical basis for a renewed Christian aesthetic. Her reliance upon Christian absolutes and the impact of the Creator God reflects a religious sensibility tempered by a love for art and a belief that true artists can portray meaning and purpose in their creations. Like Dorothy Sayers and Frederick Buechner before her, L'Engle encourages artists to embrace the traditions of the Christian faith, which for her define the meaning of her life, and offer answers to the anxiety and confusion of the Modernist culture. Her book, which appeared in 1980, encounters a postmodern culture that questions L'Engle's use of Christianity to explain aesthetics but also that respects her ability to communicate her opinions on faith and art. Madeleine L'Engle grounds her view of aesthetics in the Christian tradition, desiring to create and endorse art which does not didactically proclaim religious issues or viewpoints, but instead presents the Christian perspective on the state and condition of the world. L'Engle, with Buechner and Sayers, defines a renewed Christian aesthetic that recognizes an inherent, natural relationship between art and religion, leading to art that communicates humanity's need for redemption, found in the absolutes of the Christian faith.

[1] Madeleine L'Engle *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art* (New York: North Point Press, 1980), 14.

[2] The Time Quartet includes *A Wrinkle in Time*, *A Wind in the Door*, *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, and *Many Waters*.

[3] L'Engle, 55.

[4] L'Engle, 16.

[5] L'Engle, 17.

[6] L'Engle, 19.

[7] L'Engle, 15.

[8] L'Engle, 15-16.

[9] L'Engle, 52.

[10] See Mark 10.13-16 (New International Version).

[11] L'Engle, 23.

[12] L'Engle, 51.

[13] L'Engle, 72.

[14] L'Engle, 72.

[15] L'Engle, 107.

[16] L'Engle, 27.

[17] See I Corinthians 14.33, 40 (NIV)

[18] L'Engle, 41.

[19] L'Engle, 44.

[20] L'Engle, 27.

[21] L'Engle, 15.

[22] L'Engle, 75.

[23] L'Engle, 161 (emphasis mine).

[24] L'Engle ideas on combining the intellectual and intuitive drives are reminiscent of Schiller's argument that the aesthetic person unites the moral and sensual drives to also achieve wholeness.

[25] L'Engle, 179.

[26] L'Engle, 69.

[27] L'Engle, 90-91.

[28] L'Engle, 91.

[29] L'Engle, 75.

[30] L'Engle, 70.

[31] L'Engle, 195.

CHAPTER 7

THE PARADOX (AND RESULTING UNITY) OF THE RENEWED CHRISTIAN AESTHETIC

The very idea of a renewed Christian aesthetic, based on absolutes, emerging during the postmodern period, a time characterized by relativism, tolerance, and individualism, is seemingly ridiculous. In fact, the concept of a Christian aesthetic, and more so a Christian aesthete, is almost absurd, a paradox that attempts to unify two entities that not only have been separated for centuries but also ultimately appear diametrically opposed. However, the paradox of a natural relationship between religious absolutes and the unfettered, relative terms of aesthetics and beauty is disjointed simply because of its inclusion of concrete beliefs and foundational doctrines that religious people, namely Christians, incorporate into their lives completely and without apology. The proponents of the renewed Christian aesthetic—Dorothy Sayers, Frederick Buechner, and Madeleine L'Engle—unashamedly combine their personal convictions about God, redemption, human depravity, and hope with their art as well as their conceptions of artists and aesthetics. For them, the paradox of absolutes in postmodern aesthetics mirrors the paradoxes of Christianity, a religion riddled with apparently contradictory assertions.[1] The theorists of the renewed Christian aesthetic are not attempting to propagate their religious beliefs to the masses by hiding them in their art, subtly exposing audiences to the Christian tradition. Rather, the theorists and artists of the renewed Christian aesthetic include the components of the renewed Christian

aesthetic in their art—depictions of life's misery and pain and the offer of redemption and hope—as a natural, clear end of their personal beliefs. In other words, the absolutes of the Christian faith cannot help but be expressed in the artistic creations of proponents of the renewed Christian aesthetic. Thus, the paradox of absolutist aesthetics in relativistic post-modernity is a conflicting relationship that is unavoidable.

However, the paradoxical elements of the aesthetic proposed and practiced by Sayers, Buechner, L'Engle, and others, is certainly not the only Christian aesthetic, nor the most recognized. Author and intellectual C. S. Lewis, perhaps best known for his children's literature and his apologetics, also commented on the artistic environment during his era, oddly in the same period as Dorothy Sayers. While not as direct as Sayers or her later counterparts, Lewis advocated an honest, religiously respective art that not only includes the honest depiction of humanity's struggle (like his contemporaries) but also the need for restoration. His children's literature collection, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, is a dramatic, clear presentation of Christian allegory, though Lewis himself never admitted to writing the novels with that intention. In the same vein, T. S. Eliot, a professing Christian, also suggested a Christian aesthetic in such works as *The Idea of a Christian Society* and *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture*. These works, published around the time of Dorothy Sayers' *The Mind of the Maker*, deal more with the creation of a Christian culture, of which art is a part, rather than with the specific responsibilities and opportunities of artists. Others, including Leo Tolstoy and Flannery O'Connor in the past and Jacques Maritain and Francis Schaeffer more recently, have written about the relationship between aesthetics and religion, specifically Christianity.

The existence of other writings about Christian aesthetics, especially those written by more notable scholars and artists, makes the mention of an absolutist aesthetic as defined by Dorothy Sayers, Frederick Buechner, and Madeleine L'Engle seemingly minor, or perhaps even superfluous. It also begs the question as to why these three artists and theorists are compared without a mention of the better-known writers. On a greater scale, are all Christians that write about aesthetics and religion simply repeating each other, or at least saying some of the same things, creating a common aesthetic? Simply put, the answer is no. While the foundational beliefs of all these writers are the same, their perspectives on the relationship between art and religion vary in some degrees. The commonality between Buechner, Sayers, and L'Engle centers on their idea that aesthetics and religion have a natural relationship, an organic unity that maximizes the impact and quality of both art and the practice of Christianity through the interaction of the two. In reaction to the Modernist society in which they lived, Lewis and Eliot concentrated on the relationship of art and religion to culture and society, hoping to use aesthetics and Christianity to create a distinctive, religious culture. The proponents of a renewed Christian aesthetic propose that an art that includes the Christian ideals of depravity and redemption and Christian worship (or lifestyle) that incorporates an aesthetic element inherently affect the culture, without having to distinguish "Christian artists" or aesthetic Christians. For Sayers, Buechner, and L' Engle, art must exhibit transcendent, absolute beliefs, religion must utilize art, and humanity and society cannot help but be challenged, and hopefully changed, by the interaction of the two. The ideas of Lewis and Eliot, which support a common, Christian aesthetic founded upon doctrinal beliefs, is mirrored in the writings and thoughts of their postmodern counterparts; thus, the use of the term

renewed Christian aesthetic. However, where Sayers, Buechner, and L'Engle depart from the earlier aesthetic ideals is their determination that any true artist cannot separate art and religion, nor ignore their potential effect on society. They believe that the absolute questions of life and death, depravity and redemption, and God and man, are best represented, encountered, and weighed through the creation of beauty, whether the artist is a professing Christian or not. Scholars like Lewis and Eliot lived in the Modernist period that questioned and doubted their doctrines and creeds, ignoring religion in favor of science and rationality. Thus, their investigations of art and religion, which involved the creation of a Christian culture or subculture separate from the existing society, found little resonance with an antagonistically atheistic or agnostic culture. Instead of opposing the society in which they live, Sayers, Buechner, and L'Engle welcome postmodern culture, the relativism and tolerance providing the platform needed to openly acknowledge and, at least initially, recognize their aesthetic based on Christian doctrines and beliefs.

Thus, what is left is an absolutist aesthetic in the midst of a postmodern culture. Unabashedly paradoxical and Christian, the theorists of the renewed Christian aesthetic embrace the openness and acceptance of postmodern times as an opportunity for hope and restoration to be presented to humanity in the midst of its suffering. Without advocating religion as more important than art or suggesting that aesthetics replace Christianity as humanity's sense of transcendence or religion, Dorothy Sayers, Frederick Buechner, and Madeleine L'Engle instead present an aesthetic that incorporates the foundational ideals of Christian artists before them and presents them in postmodern fashion to postmodern culture. Sayers, Buechner, and L'Engle demand that art include

humanity's forlorn condition, much like the Christian writers of the 1950s. They also implore artists to represent Christianity's offer of redemption within their art, displaying the meaning and hope that humanity desires. Most importantly, the proponents of the renewed Christian aesthetic unite the historical rivals of aesthetics and religion showing their inherent connection. The result is the emergence of artists that see their need for redemption and wholeness in their lives and their art as well as Christians who embrace aesthetics as a natural part of their beliefs.

[1] For some examples of paradoxes within the statements of Jesus Christ and the Apostle Paul, see Mark 8:35 and Philippians 1:21.

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