

Re-enchanted by Beauty. On aesthetics and mysticism

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The article investigates the potential of mysticism to revitalise theology. It firstly traces how aesthetics was understood in theology and provides reasons for this view. It then investigates how the predominant epistemological approach in theology privileged conceptual knowledge and relativised aesthetics as being subjective and therefore unreliable. It gives special attention to this epistemology by spelling out how the intellectualisation of contemporary theology intensified the process of obfuscating and sidelining aesthetics. In a third part, the article spells out the consequences of this position by analysing how theology is becoming a disenchanted enterprise. The article then investigates how aesthetics often is taking over the role of theology and its formative role in social discourse. It focuses on the epistemological nature of this turn towards aesthetics, arguing that aesthetics with its profound notion of beauty (with goodness and joy as its corollaries), is increasingly reappraised as a legitimate, but different kind and source of knowledge. The article then argues how aesthetics can reinvigorate theology as a source of knowledge together with conceptual knowledge. It ends by investigating how theology can be re-enchanted by learning from the prominent role and invigorating forms of aesthetics in mysticism.

Introduction

Traditionally aesthetics was understood to refer to the theory of beauty, but in later times it was associated more broadly with reflection on art in its many forms like, for example, visual art, music, literature, drama, theatre and architecture. In recent times, its horizon has broadened to reflect on 'everyday aesthetics' about food, clothes, dwelling, socialising, going out (Melchionne 2013), city strolling (Paetzold 2013) or even wine tasting (Burnham & Skilleas 2013:6). This complexity of aesthetics explains why aesthetics has evoked extensive debates about, for example, the characteristics of an art object, the experience of art and beauty as a key motif in art. As a consequence, aesthetics is a contested term that is understood in various ways according to interpreters' ideology, context, culture and other factors. From this follows that any discussion, especially in an article like this with its restricted space, is by necessity selective and reductionist.

A telling example of this growing and expanding interest in aesthetics is the online journal with the title *Contemporary Aesthetics* (est. 2002) which is described in an announcement on its website as follows:

[I]n recent years aesthetics has grown into a rich and varied discipline. Its scope has widened to embrace ethical, social, religious, environmental, and cultural concerns. As international communication increases through more frequent congresses and electronic communication, varied traditions have joined with its historically interdisciplinary character, making aesthetics a focal center of diverse and multiple interests. These need a forum that is universal and inclusive, easy to access, and unhampered by financial, political, and institutional barriers. An online publication offers an ideal opportunity for advancing these purposes and *Contemporary Aesthetics* hopes to provide that forum.

The growing interest in aesthetics stands in tension with its earlier place in history in which scholars regarded any attempt to a scientific approach to art with suspicion. Kivy (2008), for example, noted how philosophy as a discipline and especially as conceptual enquiry marginalised aesthetics in earlier time:

Questions concerning art, beauty, taste, and criticism were empirical questions for psychology or anthropology, sociology or art history to deal with: questions of who liked what, and why: and questions for art critics to answer in their own distinctive ways, untainted by philosophy. (p. 3)

This understanding of aesthetics is also true of theology's attitude towards it. Despite the prominent place of the arts in the history of Christianity, theologians of different persuasions often regarded aesthetics with apprehension as being of lesser value or even as distraction from

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the pursuit of truth and knowledge, as will be explained below. This article on the role of aesthetics in a theological context, will firstly investigate this perspective on aesthetics and reflect on the strong antipathy against art and the theological considerations for this opposition. It will then outline and explain how this position has been changing in line with the general attitude towards the aesthetic. In a third part it will analyse how theology can contribute meaningfully to the formation of aesthetics through mysticism.

On the role of aesthetics in the theological discourse

Aesthetics was a major part of religious life during some periods of the church's history. In the Middle Ages, for example, aesthetics empowered and enchanted faith. It was the time in which cathedrals were built, spiralling mystically into the sky as symbols of the longing and desire for the divine, but also as space where laypeople who often lived in abysmal, dreary conditions could experience the presence of the sacred during their worship services. MacSwain (2012:48–49) drew attention to liturgies that were characterised by vivid sensory experience in spaces enchanted by brilliant mosaics, devotional statues and richly coloured vestments. Worshippers moved around, following the stations, listening to sermons and participating in baptisms. Incense was burnt, people walked on herbs scattered on the floor, sending up rich scents. 'These congregations were ambulatory, not because pews had not yet been invented, but to engage and enhance worshippers' sensory presence in the liturgy' (MacSwain 2012:49). The role of aesthetics is further exemplified by the extraordinary attention to the physical appearance of the Bible. Monks meticulously produced beautiful, richly illustrated manuscripts of the Bible (Caldecott 2009:39). The activities of these traditions articulated and supported the sensory experience of Christian faith rather than, as in later times, their doctrinal views.

Theology was, however, not always comfortable with aesthetics. The less positive attitude of theologians and spiritual leaders towards aesthetics is illustrated by a remark by Burrows (2009) who has been researching the link between theology and aesthetics for some time:

Poets have not found an easy welcome among modern theologians. They might be commissioned to write an occasional hymn, or ornament a liturgy, but rarely have they been trusted as partners in the professional guild of theologians, ministers, and priests. What, after all, does the instinct of the poet's eye, the habits of the poet's ear, the music of the poet's tongue, have to do with the demands of theology in the 'prose-flattened world' of modernity? (p. 341–342)

This situation is not unique to modern theology.¹ The influential figure of Augustine provides a good example of a similar attitude that was often found in early Christian history. He regarded art, including poetry, as potentially dangerous for Christians. Like many others before and after him, he claimed that art in its sensual, worldly forms

1.Cf., for example, for more information on the opposition to aesthetics, see Otten and Pollmann (2007:6) and Westra (2014:14).

obstructed contemplation of God and had the potential to lead astray or distract from the truth. He was, however, not completely opposed to art, as is clear from his positive appraisal of hymns and his moving remarks about the role of music in his life. According to the *Legenda Aurea*, he even composed the *Te Deum* for his baptism in Milan (in 378 CE).

This was the exception to the rule: He tolerated hymns on the understanding that they should promote knowledge and understanding of Christian doctrine (Harrison 2013:92). Thus, not its beauty, but its cerebral function was emphasised.² In later times, it was occasionally argued that aesthetical activities like music and, in particular, poetry (also of the Psalms) should promote devotion and piety. The intellectual nature of such piety and devotion is found in the time of the Reformation when some criticised art as idolatrous attempts to depict the divine in human terms. This critique was also levelled against cathedrals, images, relics, vestments and objects of art that they thought promoted superstitious attitudes and stood in the way of true piety and devotion.

This intellectual approach developed into neglect of and even full-blown opposition to aesthetics in modernity. This happened when an epistemological approach that had developed since the Enlightenment, played a crucial role to promote a closed, totalitarian rationality that claimed logical argumentation as its highest good. Scholars with this mindset argued that aesthetics was unreliable because it had to do with matters of taste and appreciation, which were subjective, arbitrary, emotional and sensory. For critics of aesthetics, a rational mindset furthermore meant that academic research should follow a neutral, objective approach to determine knowledge of truth.

This development is not restricted to theology only. Scholars in the discipline of philosophy, for example, have been raising concerns about a similar development in the history of their discipline. Solomon (2002:47; cf. 19–20), for example, described how contemporary philosophy has abandoned its original Socratic ideal of searching holistically for wisdom that is transformative. The intellectualisation of philosophy in modernity meant that knowledge was pursued for knowledge's sake. This often happened through arbitrary quibbles and petty distinctions about technical matters. Philosophy thus became an intellectualist enterprise that focused predominantly on the propositional, rational and cerebral with little, if any concern for its social relevance. As a result, philosophy has lost its transformative power and has little or no influence on social and cultural discourses. Solomon (2002:19) ascribes this development to the neglect of the experiential, the affective and relational, which would, amongst others, be found in aesthetics. The way out of this situation is to restore, with full retention of a critical mindset, the relational character of philosophy and seek to account for its setting in life.³

2.Cf. the interesting remarks by Veith (2013:244–250). For a discussion on the role of art in the Reformation, compare Treier, Husbands and Lundin (2007:7–9). They point out that Protestantism should not be seen as having been opposed to beauty and the arts. They provide examples in the works of Luther, Calvin, Bach, Edwards, Rembrandt and many others.

3.Cf. De Villiers (2006) for an extensive discussion of Solomon's insights.

A similar development is taking place in theology. Theology at times invests heavily in an intellectual investigation of truths about God. Much energy has gone into theology as an academic activity that seeks to pursue a conceptual, rational approach. In its analyses it seeks, for example, to analyse the phenomenon of faith, not so much to relate to or engage with the transcendent giver of faith, but claiming that an academic approach is required of theologians to distance themselves from their object of research. Theology thus mostly spoke *about* experiences of God without any self-implication of the researcher. Creative and imaginative appropriation of beliefs was relegated to seminaries, the church or, at most, to practical theology.

Raising questions about this intellectualist approach does not mean that such a critical approach is to be regarded as illegitimate or undesirable. Critical debate about propositions and doctrine can indeed be liberating and transformative. The researcher at times should and must assess traditional positions and beliefs objectively from a distance. This focus on conceptual knowledge should not cause other forms of knowledge (especially in aesthetics) to be neglected, disparaged or relegated to the margins of critical enquiry.

Conceptuality represents one dimension of knowledge which cannot be separated from other forms of knowledge. In recent epistemological developments the notion of a disinterested observer is unmasked as a fallacy, especially because the outcomes of such 'objective' knowledge often reveal more of the scholar's prejudices and convictions than of reality. Scholars are increasingly acknowledging their vested interests in their research work. In addition, there is also an understanding of the vital connection of theology with the life experience of the theologian. This insight can be found already in the earliest history of Christianity. Decock (2013:202) remarked how Origin described discernment as a deeply mystical process. Origin stressed that understanding is steered by the religious and moral qualities of the researcher. But ultimately spiritual progress is determined by seeking union with God and by participating in the mind of Christ. Decock (2013) quotes Origin who wrote the following about the greater knowledge that is:

[E]xperiential knowledge and not mere knowledge *about* God transmitted in doctrines, reasoning or imagining. To know the reality of God, we have to become like God and so become ever more able to recognise that reality within ourselves. This knowledge becomes real only to the extent that the similitude of God develops in us, because only like understands like. (p. 202)

Such an approach has major consequences for the theological enterprise: Understanding and knowledge are integrated in the person of the researcher as a spiritual being who seeks ever deeper dimensions of truth. Theology therefore should seek an imaginative, creative appropriation of its traditions in new contexts and communities. It seeks to speak truthfully about the ultimate meaning of life – mirroring the intention and nature of its foundational texts. Aesthetics plays a decisive role in this appropriation, as will be explained in the following part of this article.

An epistemology that reduces knowledge to the conceptual and privileges knowledge for its own sake obtains, in the description of Max Weber, a disenchanted character, bereft of imagination, symbols and poetics (cf. Jenkins 2000:12), but it also becomes alone and isolated.⁴ Theology that separates knowledge from aesthetics, also widens the gap with faith. Such a theology loses its vitality, often failing to be a transformative influence in society and communities. One can even see how the rupture between theology and aesthetics contributes to the growing fragmentation of society. Theology, art and the mystical experience of faith are separated and go their own ways with little interaction. Each becomes assigned to a different field and is allocated an own character. The dynamic effects of aesthetics on theology will now be discussed in more detail by noting and examining the growing interest in aesthetics.

A turn towards aesthetics

The situation described in the previous section is changing. As a result of technological developments in recent decades, global communities – even in the most distant parts of the planet – have been exposed in an unprecedented manner to beauty, creativity and imagination in the arts, films, music, architecture and many other aesthetical activities and forms. This development coincided with and stimulated careful reflection on the nature, impact and function of aesthetics. Leading thinkers like Fish and Derrida understood the importance of these developments when they reaffirmed, for example, the importance of aesthetics for the interpretation of texts and pointed out the limitations of conceptual knowledge. The impact of this revolutionary development is indicated by a publication by Clark (2000) that was given the telling title, *Revenge of the Aesthetic*. And the comprehensive nature of this development is revealed by the impact of aesthetics even on research in the natural sciences. Thomas Kuhn, for example, pointed this out when he wrote that 'the paradigm shifts leading to scientific revolutions were often experienced because of aesthetics, not measurement' (Edgar 2001:109–110).

The turn to aesthetics can also be seen within the contemporary theological discourse by the growing number of papers on this theme at international conferences, in research publications and in research projects like theopoetics. This turn was partially caused by and represented a reaction against the outcomes of the theological paradigm that has existed from Enlightenment times until the 20th century. Increasingly scholars, including theologians, began to point out the limitations and even the negative consequences of the intellectualisation of theology through their attention to aesthetics.

Towards the end of the 20th century, for example, Von Balthasar (e.g. 1968:114–115) noted in his widely read seven-volume work on aesthetics and theology, that knowledge as pursued in science and technology, in many ways failed

4. Weber's disenchantment had to do with the ongoing development in which the world and human experience had become understood as being less mysterious because they are knowable, predictable and manipulable by humans. Science and rational thought have conquered and co-opted them in their interpretive schema.

society. He argued that this approach overpowered and suffocated sources and forces of love in the world. He famously and poetically wrote (1968) that the result of this intellectualisation with its obfuscation of beauty as a corollary:

[I]s a world without women, without children, without reverence for love in poverty and humiliation – a world in which power and the profit-margin are the sole criteria, where the disinterested, the useless, the purposeless is despised, persecuted and in the end exterminated – a world in which art itself is forced to wear the mask and features of technique. (p. 114–115)

Where such knowledge reigns supreme, Von Balthasar concluded, beauty is often despised with, for example, the tragic result that the despiser no longer is able or want to pray and love (cf. Caldecott 2009:33–34).⁵ Theology has become disenchanted, bereft of beauty that inspires and invigorates.

He was not the only the one to point out the negative outcomes of an intellectualist paradigm. Soon afterwards the respected New Testament scholar, Amos Wilder (1976:1) wrote almost despairingly about the prosaic state of affairs in some theological interpretive traditions in his systematic reflection on theopoetics as a form of theological aesthetics. He stated that:

Religious communication generally must overcome a long addiction to the discursive, the rationalistic, and the prosaic. [...] My plea for a theopoetic means doing more justice to the role of the symbolic and the prerational in the way we deal with experience. We should recognize that human nature and human societies are more deeply motivated by images and fabulations than by ideas. This is where power lies and the future is shaped. This plea therefore means according a greater role to the imagination in all aspects of religious life [...]. But imagination here should not be taken in an insipid sense. Imagination is a necessary component of all profound knowing and celebration; all remembering, realizing, and anticipating; all faith, hope, and love. When imagination fails doctrine becomes ossified, witness and proclamation wooden, doxologies and litanies empty, consolations hollow, and ethics legalistic. (Wilder 1976:1)

These scholars thus began to argue for a new, different epistemological approach to address the destructive consequences of a rationalist paradigm of thought. Wilder proposed that aesthetics could remedy the situation. He rejected the position that aesthetics contradicts or obfuscates knowledge and argued that it represents a legitimate form and reliable source of knowledge that could empower and enrich theology. At the same time, he understood the distinctive nature of aesthetics. Aesthetics is not the same as conceptual knowledge. This position is clarified by remarks of Burrows (2009:341–342) who refers to, for example, insights of many profound thinkers, amongst them Gadamer, who argues that the experience of art, though different from rational, conceptual knowledge, has a legitimate claim to

⁵Cf. Edgar (2001:107–122) who points out the impoverishment of theology, when texts were interpreted in terms of how they reflect power games or promote or obstructs justice, rather than for their language or beauty. Such interpretive traditions contributed towards the neglect of aesthetics, or, to his mind, even the hostility towards aesthetics.

truth. Aesthetics reflects participatory knowledge which has to do with a sensed participation that comprises more than logical argumentation. Aesthetics brings knowledge through experiences, feelings, self-knowledge, sensing, discernment, remembering and intuiting. All these can reinvigorate and re-enchant theology.

The re-enchantment of theology restores its transformative impact on moral and social discourses. This mirrors the influence of aesthetics generally on individuals and societies. Aesthetics has often transformed societies more effectively than theology could. It ironically sidelined, overshadowed or replaced conceptual knowledge as a formative force. Richardson (2009), for example, notes that:

A transformation has taken place in the way people become convinced about moral and spiritual choices. In modernity, people were convinced by compelling, rational, logical arguments. In a postmodern world, the battle for allegiance is a battle for the spiritual and moral imagination of people. *The arts have become the key arena for moral and spiritual discussion and exploration in our world* (author's own italics). (p. 50)

It is an ironical development: Aesthetics replaces theology, almost as an act of revenge for its long-suffering fate under theology. Richardson's remarks thus represent the advent of a more positive attitude towards aesthetics among theologians. It reveals how beauty and the arts have consequences beyond their own area and transform other discourses because of their compelling nature and contents.

Embodied aesthetics

The growing awareness of the reductionist epistemology in modernity, the upsurge of aesthetics through technology, and its transformative impact only partially explain the turn towards aesthetics in theology. Recent developments in the theological discourse reveal another reason for its turn to aesthetics. This needs more discussion now.

The discussion above pointed out how the whole person is involved in understanding. Understanding is not merely a conceptual undertaking and process. Concrete experiences and feeling as well as unique, creative powers and imagination also play a seminal role in how people understand their encounter with the divine and reflect on the meaning of life (Pramuk 2009:xxi). It is helpful to recall what Krüger (2006:206–207) remarked aptly, '[w]ithout the feeling of soul, even the most encompassing and brilliant knowledge is mere cleverness.' It is a statement that reminds one of the Pauline pronouncement about the decisive role of the affective, the experiential and the relational in understanding, when he stated that knowledge without love is empty and nothing (1 Cor 13:2).

This implies that aesthetics as feeling and experience is inextricably intertwined with the bodily, material and concrete. Aesthetics takes seriously the sensory in its concreteness and bodily-ness. That is why there is in our times an ecological movement in aesthetics with an

immense interest in and celebration of nature in travel, pilgrimages, wilderness, food, retreats and landscape architecture. This ecological movement is about a quest for beauty.⁶ Seen from a theological perspective, aesthetics reaffirms the notions of creation and incarnation as key motifs in the foundational sources of the Judeo-Christian traditions. This should be integrated into its wider framework: In these sources, creation and incarnation reflect gifts that flow from the goodness of the divine relationship with the world and humanity. It is also an interest that is invigorating new ways of theologising and of expressing or experiencing faith.

This love of creation illuminates a fundamental aspect of beauty as a key motif in aesthetics. Theological aesthetics in a postmodern context affirms beauty in its fragmentation: Beauty is found in the many, even contradictory aesthetical experiences and embodiments, as in the remark by Brown (1999:1), 'all material reality can potentially function sacramentally as vehicle of divine grace.' This is illustrated, once again, by everyday aesthetics that seeks to find beauty in mundane phenomena such as food, clothes, dwelling, socialising, going out, hiking, and strolling (cf. Melchionne 2013; Paetzold 2013). As a result, aesthetics celebrates the many treasures that are recognised and articulated through human creativity and imagination, even if they are often contradictory and irreconcilable. Fragmented, even seemingly disharmonious voices, coalesce in the ever new, unusual and mystical ways in which they speak. On a deeper level, the voices ultimately celebrate and reflect these fragments of beauty as the many faces of the divine relationship with creation and humanity. The many mundane sounds form 'an unmistakable music, a kind of unifying harmonic key' in so far as they awaken the remembrance of the divine (Pramuk 2009:xxii). The most mundane form of beauty can bring with it a transformative unification that uplifts and transcends the mundane. The concrete, bodily nature of aesthetics thus evokes 'a sense of a real Presence, stirring dormant seeds of hope' (Pramuk 2009:xxii). The mundane, the concrete and the bodily, Balthasar (2009:37) wrote, speak a 'wordless' language that cannot be transposed into concepts. Words cannot exhaust beauty or encapsulate it in language. Aesthetics in its fragmentation ultimately transcends reason and understanding, thereby confirming the limitations of intellectuality and rationality. Embodied aesthetics brings humanity to stand in awe before infinity. It is knowledge that comprises a feeling of soul that culminates in love. It thus speaks of beauty that inspires and transforms those who discover it.

Mysticism and aesthetics

The turn to aesthetics has the potential to enrich and transform theology. The challenge will be to understand *in what way* aesthetics can contribute to doing theology in an aesthetic age. In this there is something to be learnt from the past. This is understood well by those who realise that

6. For a criticism of the creational, incarnational and sacramental perspectives on aesthetics, compare the useful remarks by Trier, Husbands and Lundin (2007:10).

the dearth of artistic sensibility in contemporary times represents a great loss of the rich aesthetical traditions in the history of the church. Edgar (2001:111) notes how such people 'found they missed the mysterious, the prophetic, and the beautiful, especially the rich musical heritage of the church of the ages.' This is an interesting observation for more than one reason. It reveals how the theology of our times is experienced as prosaic and even unattractive and uninspiring. It secondly points towards a tradition that still appeals to contemporary believers for its aesthetical qualities, its beauty and power. Finally, the remark seems to suggest that these traditions and aesthetics are inextricably linked.

There are good reasons to link these rich traditions with mysticism as a key dimension of ecclesiastical traditions. Though mysticism is, like aesthetics, a contested word, recent research has brought more clarity than ever about its nature. McGinn (2008:44–63) made some seminal remarks about mysticism that indirectly spelled out its significance for the understanding of aesthetics. Mysticism in a Christian context is for him part of spirituality which, as a broad term, signifies the whole range of beliefs and practices by which the Christian church strives to live out its commitment to the Spirit present in the risen Christ (1 Cor 6:14–20; 2 Cor 3:17). Mysticism, he adds, is the inner and hidden realisation of spirituality through a transforming consciousness of God's immediate presence. The goal of spiritual practices is therefore, mysticism.

In this approach, McGinn uses terms like consciousness of the Divine, beliefs and practices that have to do with the sensory and with creative imagination. They indicate that the mystical relationship with God is anchored in and transformative of the experiential. Practices together with beliefs are accorded a key role in the understanding of mysticism. Helpful to understand the full implications of McGinn's insights, is Krüger's description of mysticism. He also refers to the beauty and aesthetical quality of mysticism. He sees mysticism as:

[T]he yearning of the human spirit for utmost transcendence and utmost integration; as awe before the ultimate mystery of the source of things; as the experience and the expression of the communion, union, or non-difference with, of commitment to, that source. (Krüger 2006:9)

One recognises in this description such mystical *and* aesthetical characteristics like ineffability, integration, harmony, fascination, awe, ultimacy and union. In a later, powerful passage on 'feeling' as a dimension of mysticism, Krüger (2006:204–226), considers 'feeling' (2006:205) as 'shorthand for our aesthetic appreciation of the relationships and proportions in life, whether pleasant or unpleasant, beautiful or abhorrent.' Though he points out that there are many varieties of feeling and experience like, for example, pain, joy, peace, terror, alienation, boredom, sympathy and many others, he believes its essence can be expressed in the word 'love'. The mystic as lover of God is drawn irresistibly to totality, nothingness and infinity as a transforming power

of the inner life. Despite fragmentation, there is unity. Krüger (2006) then turns his attention to art and observes that:

Apart from its other functions, art is essentially the creative expression of the search for the depth dimension of the world, and the expression of what has been glimpsed. Great music, painting, sculpture, poetry, drama – in all the many moods coming with that epoch, cultural and religious background and personal taste and talent – are great because the transport us to the portals of totality, infinity and unground. (p. 207)

Of special importance in this remark is his reference to the *creative expression* of the search for the depth dimension of the world' (author's own italics).

One will find such artful appropriation throughout the history of mysticism and its traditions. There are many examples of major mystical texts or figures that expressed their awareness of the Divine presence in imaginative and creative aesthetical forms. This happened already in biblical texts like Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1 and Daniel 7 which used beautiful, fiery and awesome imagery to speak of their mystical encounters before the 'throne' of God. The lyrical celebration of intimate love in the Song of Songs offered material for countless mystics of later times to speak in new ways about their mystical experiences of God's presence.

Other examples abound, of which only a few can be mentioned in this restricted space. John of the Cross wrote poems about Divine love that contributed to his reputation as one of the most famous of Spanish poets and mystics. There is the intense, passionate poetry of Hadewijch (Van Dijk 2009), the *Canticle of Brother Sun* by Francis of Assissi, the *Inferno* by Dante, whilst the poems of a modern mystic like Thomas Merton (1980) provide further evidence of the close relationship between mysticism and aesthetics. There are also secular poets and artists who can be mentioned for their mystical aesthetics. They included the earlier love mystics (Shelley, Browning), nature mystics (Vaughan, Wordsworth) and philosophical mystics like (Emily Brontë, Coleridge, Spinoza, Hegel). Also worth mentioning are mystical painters like Velasquez and Dali and in the South African context, the profound, mystical poems of Sheila Cussons.

These examples provide some insight into the role of aesthetics in mysticism. Aesthetics functions in these authors to evoke and speak of beauty that is present in the journey towards becoming a fulfilled, integrated human being. Even though beauty is, as Saliers (2005:307) pointed out, a contested term in aesthetical reflection, it remains 'persistent in our utterances about what affects us and draws our desires in becoming human beings.' Beauty in a mystical context has to do then, with what inspires the art of living, with the loving transformation of one's inner being in order to become fully human. Beauty inspires the longing and quest for utmost transcendence and utmost integration.

This insight into the nature of beauty needs to be qualified further. Aesthetics does not understand beauty in a superficial, sentimental way, as was also evident in Krüger's

nuanced comments cited above. In this regard Saliers (2005) helpfully pointed out that:

[T]he stunned silence before an object that attracts powerfully, as well as the silence in the presence of the traumatic may be related in ways we do not ordinarily consider. The unspeakable can refer to the searingly traumatic terror, and also to stunning revelatory beauty. (p. 307)

Balthasar (cf. Caldecott 2009:35–36) mooted a similar point when he spoke about the Cross as key metaphor in Christianity which, also in its repulsiveness, illuminates beauty. As the 'supreme work of art', he argued, the Cross is a source of life that overcomes the ugliness and hate of death. It represents a new design of existence that transforms one's perspective on the world: It speaks of love that turns away from itself and pours itself out for others.

All this can also be illustrated in religious contexts through the concrete example of monastic life which is both attractive and unattractive, pleasurable and displeasurable. The ascetic lifestyle is often associated with disciplined and an even unattractive life of silence and withdrawal. And yet, there is a beauty in monasticism to be found in its prayerful attention to soul and spirit. This can be detected in its rhythm that is centred on the divine office with its liturgical celebrations and its prayer of the Psalms. Through the sensory activity of music, as Caldecott (2009:39) indicated, monasticism reveals aesthetic attributes of an ordered existence that is proportionate, harmonious, disciplined, and (often) joyful. At the same time monasticism also confirms and celebrates the mundane and the body through its requirement of manual labour. The beauty of monastic life is further indicated by its careful study of the classics for their symbolism and beauty, the reading of scriptures in terms of the rich and multidimensional rhythm of *lectio divina*, the arduous, disciplined copying of manuscripts with elegant handwriting and illustrations and, equally mundanely, the aesthetic experience of the making and drinking of wine.

There is more, though: In aesthetics beauty is beauty is beauty, like a rose is a rose is a rose – to quote Gertrud Stone's famous 1913 poem. This means that aesthetics questions a utilitarian value system, characteristic of consumerist societies, where religious experience is often valued for its usefulness. Aesthetics also challenges a theology that is only about the cerebral and useful (Brown 1999:1–3). Mysticism is about contemplating and celebrating 'beauty' when someone is found, ecstatically, in the beautiful moment of experiencing life to its fullest and in the presence of the Divine.

The role of beauty in mysticism can be illustrated by other examples. The Princeton scholar on aesthetics, Graham (2014:24), reflected in a recent article on the function of music in worship in a way that indicates its mystical nature. Worship, he notes, is not aimed at presenting God with something beneficial, or to please God. One should not force worship into a utilitarian mould. 'Rather it is action that enables human beings to reflect divine activity.' Worship is action that both takes place in time and space and yet, also is

beyond time and space. It is about action that enables us, in Schleiermacher's phrase 'to be eternal in a moment'.

Re-enchanted by beauty

The liberating and enriching experience of the Enlightenment has invigorated theology in many impressive ways. The critical insights of many scholars in the field have brought about better understanding of key matters to theology and the church. They liberated people and communities from uninformed and even totalitarian, abusive practices and mindsets. They provided profound theological insights that supported many in their spiritual journeys. They also opened many possibilities to reflect on the ongoing relevance of scriptures and traditions in modern times.

This paradigm of thought has had, like all others, its limitations that require new solutions and approaches. Though conceptual knowledge will remain with theology as a permanent gift and presence, the time is ripe for the self-critical researcher to pursue other ways of interpretation. One such option is to explore how aesthetics offers and promotes knowledge. Theology can be re-enchanted by beauty in a new way, that is, by acknowledging and appropriating aesthetics as a form of knowledge that has existed only on its margins in earlier times, but that has proven itself as a transformative and beautiful force of love in the spiritual journey.

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