

THE HOLINESS OF BEAUTY



Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) argued that all poetry is divine revelation. God's original revelation to us is in the poetry of the Old Testament, the pinnacle of which is the Song of Songs.

Herder rejected the allegorical interpretations of the Song, upon which its inclusion in the biblical canon was justified. He was well aware that the frank sensuality of this collection of poems could give offence to some, but for him the tone of the whole was so patently innocent as to be inspiring to true morality.

While acknowledging the Bible as the Word of God, Herder claimed that God had to reveal himself in human language - adopting the imagery and thought mode of those to whom he was speaking, with particular reference to the historical and geographical situation in which they lived (cf. 2 Peter 1.21). Yet how often do we apply literally those many (symbolic) biblical texts which were intended for a specific time, place and culture, rather than adopt the principles held within?

Thus Herder regarded the Bible as a collection of texts written by humans for humans. Yet, he stressed, the more God's Word is read in a human way, the closer the reader will come to the purpose of its Instigator, the One who created us in His own image.

For Herder, the function of the poet (and we might include here the creative artist) was to make known God's purpose, and to interpret the universe and nature by recreating them and making them live again. Shakespeare, whom Herder regarded as a 'creator' and 'dramatic god', taught him that the role of the poet was to lead the human race to a deeper understanding of God's preordained plan for the world.

The Bible contains doctrine, reproof, correction and instruction (2 Timothy 3.16), but includes poetry, legend, history, biography, proverb, apocalyptic, prophecy, symbol and allegory. Like many works of creative art, it contains much imperfection - enhanced by great beauty. Arguably, all creative art, whether literature, painting, music or architecture, emanates from that creative spark provided by the Creator. Humans write, paint, compose and design as they are moved.....

Sometimes beauty is corrupted by evil, just as the Bible contains dark passages – but if art can reveal something to us of God, of our place in His Creation, of our salvation through Christ, then surely it is indeed ‘inspired’. We must not reject art because of its human imperfections – to do so would force us to ignore sections of the Bible, whose bloody battles hardly fill us with an understanding of God’s love.

Conservative Christianity has traditionally shunned the arts, yet they provide us with opportunities to explore human frailty and to reflect on God’s plan for us. I challenge you to study biblical texts alongside works of art, and to find ways in which they complement each other. Go to your nearest art gallery and note how much is biblically based or leads you to spiritual reflection. Read works of poetry or prose, and find the truths contained therein. Visit the theatre and prepare to be challenged, amazed and uplifted. Attend a concert or opera, and note how many works (from Bach and Handel to Britten and Adams) are based on the Bible, the human condition, and the theme of redemption.

In his music drama *Parsifal*, for example, Richard Wagner examines the struggle between the earthly and heavenly, the erotic and the spiritual. Parsifal – a Christ figure – resists temptation and overcomes evil. He baptises Kundry, and she anoints his feet, drying them with her hair. We might even interpret the unveiling of the Grail as our finding salvation through the blood of Christ.

If a secular collection of love poems can be contained within the Bible, and yet lead us in some way to God, surely other works of art can do the same. We can use them too to reveal further truths about what God has prepared for us.

Let us worship the Lord in the holiness of beauty.

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