

# Towards An Integrated Christian Imagination

## Rom 12:1-2

University of Arts CU – 10 May 2012



What is your supreme motivation in life? What gets you out of bed in the morning?

12:1-2 Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. 2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

This is the fundamental difference between the Christian gospel and paganism - in fact I'd go so far as to say all other religions:

- The Christian Life is lived in response to God. (in other words, God in Christ has taken the initiative to love us first).
- Paganism is lived in anxious anticipation of God (in other words, we try to bribe God to do something for us).

Romans 1-11 articulates God's mercy. From 12:1 onwards, Paul tells us how to live in view of that mercy. It is to offer whole ourselves to God in response.

Round the clock God... Round the clock people... (is there any point at which you stop *being*?!)  
... Round the clock discipleship

In view of mercy... if don't understand, if not changed by it...

*Cf Luther *experientia facit theologiam**

Every Christian is a theologian. We all have responsibility to understand, be faithful to, and draw others to the God of Grace revealed through Christ. For the follower of Christ, the theology of Christ is not an optional extra. It's not about temperament or inclination. We want to be integrated people. That means integrating mind, heart, body and soul. The trend of the postmodern world is to fragment, in large part as a reaction to the oppressive unifying power of the modernist world.

But God doesn't squash people into conformity. He calls people into integrity.

## 1. Theologians of the Imagination

Must include imagination... Perhaps as Christian arts you should see yourself as theologians of the imagination.

Which brings 2 significant roles, I think.

### ● Visionaries

Some great ads around the moment for Specsavers - people ending up in a bit of a state because they can't see properly: e.g. Pensioners having their sandwiches on a nice bench which turns out to be a roller-coaster; space shuttle pilots landing at Luton airport by mistake

Artists are life's equivalent of Specsavers. You help us to see what we didn't see. And that requires deeper and more deliberate looking and listening and feeling (I don't want to restrict it to the eye but all our senses).

Wonderful illustration from Hockney.

*There was a fantastic Monet exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1995. They got a million people to see it. There are forty-six Monets in the Art Institute's collection, which*

they lend to other exhibitions, so a lot of museums owed them a favour. As a result, for this exhibition they had got together about a hundred and fifty of his paintings. I went to see it one Sunday morning. It was fabulous. When I came out, I started looking at the bushes on Michigan Avenue with a little more care, because Monet had looked at his surroundings with such attention. He made you see more. Van Gogh does that for you too. He makes you see the world around just a little more intensely. And you enjoy seeing it like that, or I do. (Gayford, *A Bigger Message*, 85)

But it is not just about sensing better than most - it is about communicating it better than most...

### ● **Prophets**

It is a fact those involved in the arts and media are the prophets of our generation. It is no longer the philosophers, the statesmen or the preachers. The prophetic is more likely to be discovered in the Tate Modern or National Theatre than it is in a cathedral or House Commons. Which means that there is an influence you have that most of us do not. And I hope that you're intimidated by that. You should be! For as Peter Parker's famously said to him before he became Spiderman: *With great power comes great responsibility*. That is a weight to bear.

Again back to Hockney - here he is in conversation with critic Martin Gayford (in his wonderful compilation of conversations called *A Bigger Message*) about Picasso.

John Richardson, Picasso's biographer and a close friend of the artist in his later years, told me a story about Picasso:

Lucien Clergue, the photographer, knew Picasso incredibly well. The other day he said to me, 'You know, Picasso saved my life.' I said, 'What?' He said, 'Yes it was after a bullfight in Arles.' Lucien said he had been feeling fine, had lost a bit of weight but wasn't worried. Out of the blue Picasso said to him, 'You go instantly to a hospital.' Lucien asked 'why?' Picasso said 'You've got something seriously wrong with you.' Lucien was damned if he was going to do it, but Jacqueline [Picasso's wife] added, 'When Pablo says that, for God's sake go.' So he went, and the doctors had him taken straight into the operating theatre. They said he had an extremely rare type of peritonitis, which is lethal. The bad thing about it is that it doesn't manifest itself in pain, it just kills you. Picasso used to say quite often, 'I'm a prophet'.

I repeated this to Hockney, who strongly agreed with that conclusion.

Picasso *was* a prophet. He must have seen something, most likely in Clergue's face. Picasso must have looked at more faces than almost anybody, and he didn't look at them like a photographer. He would have been thinking how would you draw it? Most people don't look at a face too long; they tend to look away. But you do if you are painting a portrait. Rembrandt put more in the face than anyone before or since, because he saw more. That was the eye - and the heart. (Gayford p82)

## **2. The Visionary and Prophetic Mandate**

When Paul wrote to the Philippians (Phil 4:8-9) encouraging them to fill their minds with 'things above' and focus on whatever is noble, pure, lovely, excellent and worthy of praise - and so on... he was calling them to godly lives. In particular to godly thought lives (cf Rom 12 where Paul speaks of our response to God beginning with renewal of the mind). It is crucial.

And the challenge here is therefore that we know ourselves. We know our own fallibility and areas of temptation - we are all different. This has relevance to the question of where the line between art and pornography should be drawn. Not a failsafe rule, but one which we must attend to. It is also relevant to how we engage with violence (e.g. on movies or on canvas). And so on.

But I think at times, these verses have become a rod for Christian artists backs. They are told that these verses restrict what can be created. Paintings have to be lovely and pure - art must

always be improving and theatre can only be noble. That sort of thing. But that is to miss the point. And too often it has led Christians down the blind alleys of kitsch, clichés and platitudes.

But I think if we take the visionary prophetic as our model, and take our cue from what the OT prophets did, then our horizons are far greater. For this means that integrated Christian art has a place (and in fact **MUST** have a place) for the ugly and the despairing. Because that is the way our world is. There are many things we could pick out, but let me try 3 for starters. And perhaps we can then discuss them together.

But briefly before starting, we must understand - we're not involved in propaganda. Calvin Seerveld is particularly helpful about this

You cannot bludgeon people with Christian art into accepting Jesus Christ. But neither should you settle for just being as dispassionately good as the secular artist, adding: 'I do it for Jesus, you know.' It is the crux of your task as a communal body of fellow christian artists to fire your art until it emits sparks that warm, or burn, those it reaches. (Seerveld, *Bearing Fresh Olive Leaves*, p35)

### ● **Truth: Exposing the False, Reflecting the Real**

Of course, the very notion of truth is rejected by contemporary culture. The common assumption is that there are no shared foundations on which to base any statements or criticisms of the culture.

But if we are followers of Christ, then we have a duty not to be conformed in our minds to the way the world things (as Paul said to the Romans) but to be transformed. Scripture is the foundation for that intellectual and spiritual renewal and the benchmark for our understanding of renewal. Now we can be oblique, we can be metaphorical - but I would argue that we have to be true. And do we not have a duty to expose the false - in whatever way it comes.

I love this point by Seerveld:

Art, like anything else, is relevant if it supplies what is needed. Art that is popular is supplying what is wanted, but not necessarily what is needed, and may not therefore be relevant. (Seerveld p36)

Let me give you an example. I was talking to someone the other day who has for years been involved in writing for soap operas. She is a keen believer and works hard to bring her faith to bear on what is a very hostile and difficult environment. But one way that she works is to be true to reality in plot lines. So take one of the lies of our age - it doesn't matter who you sleep with. It is easy for soaps to portray easy sex as having no consequences. But in the moral universe created by a holy God, that is simply not true. So sex in the wrong place can destroy and damage all concerned. Especially if it's in the context an affair. Now so when you write about it (as you have to in soaps) my friend will ensure that there is no such thing as consequence-free sex. One of the reasons I love *Mad Men* - amazing in that show (of all places) that sin has consequences.

Here's an example Steve Turner picks up:

**A Painter:** The Catholic painter Georges Rouault, like many of his contemporaries, painted prostitutes, but the art critic Louis Vauxcelles noticed the difference: 'Unlike Lautrec,' he wrote, 'when he [Rouault] paints a prostitute there is no cruel pleasure in seeing vice exalted by a creature. He suffers and he weeps.' (Steve Turner, *Imagine*, p84)

Now I suppose you could apply Phil 4 crudely and say it is unlovely to think about prostitutes. But to do that, then you'd actually come into conflict with Jesus himself. He didn't exploit prostitutes, he didn't take pleasure from them, he suffered and wept with them. And they with him. Like when he was anointed by the so-called sinful woman in Luke's gospel. There is reality

and compassion there. So could we not expose the horrors of human trafficking through an integrated application of our christian imaginations?

Sometimes this will entail reflecting the ugly in our world. Because that is the real, that is the true. After all, what is a war artist trying to do? What is Picasso's Guernica seeking - a colossal painting driven by the artist's awakened rage at the horrors of war.

A Writer: Flannery O'Connor: My own feeling is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse and for the unacceptable... Redemption is meaningless unless there is a cause for it in the actual life we live, and for the last few centuries there has been operating in our culture the secular believe that there is no such cause. (Imagine p59)

But secondly, I do not think we should relish the ugly - there is of course a place for beauty - for there is a place for raising our eyes above the mundane and grubby to the transcendent.

### ● **Beauty: Exposing the Idolatrous, Reflecting the Wondrous**

But I put this in the same breath as idolatry because the Romantic movement in the last 150 years or so has idolised beauty to such an extent that many reacted against it but relishing the ugly and bestial. It was an understandable reaction - because it seemed to focus only on some unreal ideal - a feeling that seemed to hark back to art fixated on the Greek myths with heroes located in stylised Italian landscapes where everything was in its sun-drenched perfection. But neither is helpful.

Instead, I do think where beauty is important is if it draws us in to point us away from itself. We don't worship beauty, for that is no different from any other idolatry. We don't worship created things but the creator. And I guess the challenge of portraying beauty for the artist (who just happens to be a Christian) is to use it to reflect the truly wondrous.

A Singer: T. Bone Burnett, speaking to the *L.A. Weekly*, said, "If Jesus is the Light of the World, there are two kinds of songs you can write. You can write songs about the light, or you can write songs about what you can see from the light. That's what I try to do." (Imagine p51)

Here is how a poet has responded to the challenges of living in an urbanised and concretised world that has tried to suppress the wonder of the creation and the divine.

A Poet: Gerard Manley Hopkins:  
(from poem God's Grandeur)

THE WORLD is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;     5  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;     10  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Now let me indulge in some serious nepotism and play a song by my sister-in-law - Miriam Jones, a Christmas song as it happens. But I think she captures something here - from her recent album Fire-Lives.

**Wondrous, Mysterious**  
Miriam Jones

I turned on the TV and it  
suddenly was Christmas  
and I hollered at the advert  
that they wouldn't get my money  
and I could not believe they honestly  
were trying to take my heart for Christmas

The airwaves jammed with snowmen  
and with santa claus and angels  
and I do believe in angels  
but not the kind that do not scare you  
and I prayed some kind of holy fear  
would find its way to me this Christmas  
*'Cause my heart is dying to prepare  
for something wondrous and mysterious  
This world is ringing in my ears  
and it's thunderous and delirious*

I walked into town  
and it was red and gold and sparkling  
and while I waited for my watch

I hovered round the shiny shops  
oh you who have no money come and buy  
fill your hearts full up this Christmas

Steering down the sidewalk  
I could hear a conversation  
'bout a boy who had a head  
they'd like to push under a faucet  
and I wondered are we saving up  
all our loving hearts for Christmas  
*'Cause my heart is dying to prepare  
for something wondrous and mysterious  
This world is ringing in my ears  
and it's thunderous and delirious*

Part way through December  
I pulled out the wooden figures  
from their boxes and I placed them  
and I looked into their faces  
wondering what they all were looking at...  
*'Cause my heart is dying to prepare  
for something wondrous and mysterious  
This world is ringing in my ears  
and it's thunderous and delirious*

### ● **Hope: Exposing the Baseless, Reflecting the Future**

I wonder how many saw the exhibition at the RA recently of Soviet architecture. I didn't see it but read around it - fascinating. The Soviet state would only commission art that glorified the state or was sufficiently ideologically pure to inspire people about the glorious future of Communism. Everything was working towards this.

But this wasn't hope - it was idolatrous delusion. And it was oppressive. I don't know about you, but I look at some of the images from the propaganda of the period, and it is crushing and inhumane. It brooks no dissent. It is the ultimate 'Get with the programme' kind of art. That is not liberating hope - that is bludgeoning jackboot art.

But for the Christian, hope is fundamental. Without it we would desiccate and be crushed. And if our art is to be integrated, it should surely reflect that hope, in some shape or form. I've no idea how - that's your job! But how else are we going to combat the prevailing cynicism and even despair of modern cultural life if we don't somehow point to there being more beyond. That doesn't mean we always have to have the glimmers of dawn on the horizon, or paint a rainbow on everything. But surely one of our most urgent questions, and our society's most pressing needs is for us to find a vocabulary of hope for our generation. And at the heart of that hope must be God's mercy in Christ and his Cross.

Steve Turner again:

It is easy to state the bare facts of the cross. The difficulty is to do it in a way that is consistent with the rest of our art and that engages our audience. It is easy to write a song that says "the saviour of the world died on a tree/ in order to save you and me" but how many people have their perceptions rattled by such language? Art should be helping us see things as if we had never seen them before. "We need to clean our windows," said writer J R R

Tolkein, "so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity." (Imagine p91)

So let's try to draw these threads together by seeing the way we portray and communicate reality in a sequence of concentric circles - really helped by Steve Turner here. It is a matter of being intentional about what we're seeking to express - and there is a huge range of possibilities. I've tried to sum up what he says diagrammatically (see slides)

- Reality and truth (without expressing one's worldview explicitly)
- Values of faith expressed (e.g. Dignity of life, a sense of awe)
- Themes that are biblically but not exclusively Christian
- Primary biblical themes
- The explicit truths of the Christian gospel
- The heart of the gospel: The cross

Lest we get ideas above our station and become so wrapped up in our own creativity that we forget we can never do more than reflect the Lord's great creative acts, check out this:

Joyce Kilmer's thought: Poems are made by fools like me, but only God could make a tree (Seerveld, p161)

### **3. Brian Eno & Shostakovich Tips**

Finally, here are some practical tips from a couple of creative heroes of mine.

Producer Brian Eno in particular encouraged the band [U2] to pursue nonlinear methods of creation rather than turn prepared statements into songs. Sound checks and jam sessions were recorded so that new musical themes could be spotted. Mistakes, instead of being discarded, were used as clues to the existence of untapped ideas. One of Eno's mottoes was "Honour thy error as a hidden intention." (Imagine p107)

Secondly, here is Shostakovich - a man who lived the most difficult and tragic life under the gruesomely watchful eye of Stalin, and the Communist regime. In his memoir (dictated a year before he died), he describes 3 lessons for creative artists, as offered to him by his old theatre-director friend Meyerhold before he ended up executed by the regime.

- Always do something new - don't settle for simply repeating what you've done before and been successful with.
- Always do detailed preparation before you create - study how predecessors have handled difficult artistic questions and use their answers to inspire a development or rejection of what has already gone.
- Beware critical responses - ignore when everyone says it is good or bad. The ideal is when 'half are in raptures, and the other half want to tear you apart.' This means you have created something which provokes and challenges. (Testimony, 1974, p61)