

Salt and Light Papers provide important information and analysis to help Christians and Churches to engage with 21st century social issues

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CHRISTIANS AND THE ARTS

Over the centuries evangelicals have had an uneasy relationship with the arts. In the post-Reformation period there were outbursts of severe iconoclasm, it being estimated that in the periods under Henry VIII and Cromwell, 95% of all English art was destroyed.

Later generations came to distrust the arts for a variety of reasons. Some saw them as sensual and worldly; some as belonging only to the aristocracy. And many, understanding the Christian's sole purpose in life as spreading the gospel, regarded the arts as irrelevant, except where they could be dragooned into directly gospel purposes, for instance in connection with church decoration, hymn-writing and Bible illustration.

Over the past 40 years, however, the involvement of Christians in the arts has radically altered. There are now many hundreds of evangelicals working in the mainstream arts, as painters, musicians, actors, TV and theatre directors, stand-up comics and performance artists. They are doing this not as 'Christian artists', i.e. those who use their art as a direct form of evangelism, but as artists who are Christians, aiming to produce good art which embodies their values as Christians.

The motive force behind this shift in thinking largely came from the writing and lecturing of Francis Schaeffer and Hans Rookmaaker in the 1960s and 1970s. They recognised that Christians wishing to engage with twentieth-century culture needed to take its art seriously, both its visual artists and its writers. And they also came to see that Christians could make a significant impact on the culture by responding with their own art, directed not at other Christians but at the wider world.

A Christian understanding of the arts

In his highly-influential book *Modern art and the death of a culture*, Rookmaaker set out his basic understanding of where the arts fit in to a Christian worldview. The fine arts, a unique feature of Western civilisation, trace their roots back to the icons of the Byzantine era, from which words such as 'iconology' and 'iconography' are still in use in the study of the arts. Icons, he argued, were images that embodied the highest values of their culture – not just images of Mary, Jesus, and the saints, but the emphasis on the reality and *otherness* of the spiritual realm.

Although the Renaissance brought secular and pagan values into the arts, this did not change the nature of the fine arts: that a painting or sculpture embodies something of the fundamental values or

worldview of the artist and/or their culture. A work of art will say something about what the artist views as being of ultimate importance; his or her ultimate commitments; something about the nature of reality, or the nature of human beings. It is this that distinguishes the fine arts from the applied arts which are found across all cultures.

This understanding is what enables us to chart a link between such diverse images or objects as Rembrandt's *Descent from the cross*, Monet's *Waterlilies*, and Tracey Emin's unmade bed. Rembrandt speaks of the humanity of Jesus, the reality and therefore the significance of his death, and the profound interconnection of God with his world, and of sinful human beings with the spiritual realm.

Monet, an arch-materialist of the nineteenth century, focuses solely on what he can see – light reflecting off water and onto his retina: a beautiful, but frighteningly limited understanding of reality. And Tracey Emin also reflects on her own view of reality – a very public, candid self-revelation, recognising the sordidness of her surroundings and, by implication her life-style, and yet, for lack of an overarching set of values, unashamed. They all, in their own ways, express some ultimate values of their culture and/or themselves.

Christians in the arts

Into this arena Christians are setting foot with increasing boldness, putting forward their own values. They have to do so with subtlety, for that is the nature of the fine arts. The arts are not the same as propaganda. Propaganda has its place, by simply stating its message as clearly and forcefully as it can, whether in a tract or a poster. But propaganda does not make good art.

The arts work by allusion and reference. They never have a single definable 'message', but they can promote values and aspects of a worldview which challenge popular assumptions. C S Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* are a well-known example, perfectly readable as stories in their own right, and understandable as Christian allegories by those who know what to look for. But they are also stories which promote clear Christian values such as the reality of sin, the need for redemption, the power of substitutionary atonement and the possibility of personal change.

A few years ago the American Christian rock band P.O.D. had a hit with *Alive*, the accompanying video showing a hideous car accident, at the end of which the driver cautiously and thankfully pokes his head out of the vehicle, clearly unharmed. The message of the song, limited in scope as is appropriate to rock music, was simply that it is good to be alive; but that in itself is a radical challenge to the message of much contemporary music.

In the 1980s a Christian artist, Gerry Griffiths, had a work exhibited in a major exhibition of contemporary art. It was a simple still-life, showing a knife, fork and spoon set out on a clean table cloth. Not a lot to go on, you might think. But reviewing the exhibition in *Art Monthly*, a leftwing art journal, the critic Andrew Brighton singled this work out, illustrating it alongside the text, and asked 'What makes this artist so certain?' Brighton, an intelligent, sensitive critic, had engaged with Griffiths' work and understood what he was saying: that there is an order and a purpose to reality which needs to be acknowledged and explained.

Many artists, too, offer a very humble service of helping us to see what is in the world, and help us to overcome that sense of alienation which sin often creates. This is especially the case with those working in the Dutch tradition, observing light or shape or detail in the everyday that the rest of us miss.

The English artist Peter Smith made a series of woodcuts of scenes in the London Underground, showing people walking through tunnels, or waiting on platforms. They are quiet, humble images, which highlight aspects of reality that we normally miss in the bustle of life. And their effect is quietly redemptive: now, when I walk through the underground system, I notice things that he has noticed, and the world becomes a little bit more familiar, and less alienating than before. By carefully and lovingly capturing these aspects of reality in their work, artists can help the viewer subsequently to see them for themselves.

The church and the arts

One of the great insights of Schaeffer and Rookmaaker, drawing on previous generations of Dutch Calvinist thinkers, was that the lordship of Christ over all of life must be made a reality in our daily lives. We are here as witnesses to the grace of God, but not just as one-dimensional gospel preachers, but as those who are working to bring all of life under the lordship of Christ (Ephesians 1:10).

Our creativity is part of the way God has made us, and the arts, like every part of life, should be redeemed for Christ – not just made a vehicle for evangelistic propaganda, but dedicated to Christ as really good art embodying the values of Christ.

The arts are important for church life: uplifting music, attractive surroundings, thought-provoking drama, challenging DVDs, all have their part to play in our gatherings and our outreach. But the arts are for more than direct evangelism. They are an enrichment of everyday life, a way of helping us to understand the world around us, and the thinking of our culture.

The arts are not elitist, but are open to everyone. Like anything that's worth doing, however, they require an investment of time and energy for us to be able to understand them and enter into them. If you have artists in your congregation, encourage them by talking to them about their work, praying for them, and buying their work. And if you would like to know more, start reading and looking.

Nigel Halliday

Hans Rookmaaker *Modern art and the death of a culture* (IVP, 1970; Leicester, England: Apollos, 1994)

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The Old Bank House, 17 Malpas Road, Newport, South Wales. NP20 5PA
Telephone: 01633 893925
Email: office@affinity.org.uk
Website: www.affinity.org.uk

affinity
gospel churches in partnership