

AESTHETIC POVERTY IN A LAND OF PLENTY*

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Since the realm of aesthetics is usually regarded as a matter of private prejudice and fancy, it may seem eccentric to pick this as a touchstone for guaging the substantial failure of the Christian missionary effort in modern Japan. To speak of failure is not to suggest that Christianity is being countered to any great extent — it is simply being ignored. Yet how effectively it is being ignored can be inferred from hearing discussions of whether Christianity has kept up with the moderate population growth of recent years or whether the growth has produced a net loss in church membership. Substantial failure there has been and it is none too soon to level a critical and un-myopic gaze at our general performance. If further instance of the need for a severe reappraisal will help, let me cite the following:

A colleague from Saitama Prefecture who is in charge of a Christian Center writes of this experience: In preparation for an evangelistic mission thirty eight church members were sent out two by two to visit the thousand homes nearest the Center. They carried pamphlets and invitations to the meetings. Printed fliers were inserted in nine thousand newspapers, and thirty posters were displayed in the area. Volunteers distributed tracts and invitations at all the exits of the nearest public transit station for three days. The meetings were planned to include the services of four or five clergymen and a joint choir from several churches.

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ches. The meetings attracted three new people the first night, in addition to regular church members, two new people the second, and one new person the third night. The man who took the initiative in planning the operation is a capable and dedicated missionary clergyman with many years of experience in Japan, and the results of this effort should in no way be regarded as a reflection on his personal ability.

A survey published 1962 by the Department of Evangelism of the National Council of the Nippon Sei Ko Kai (The Anglican Church of Japan) suggests that the laity of this church are already looking towards a seriously neglected area in the hope of making the Christian faith more intelligible and more relevant in Japan.¹ Members of 153 congregations and 119 clergymen returned questionnaires. Of eleven reasons suggested for being attracted to Christianity, "being brought by a friend" was first among lay respondents, while "the cultural activities of the church" was ranked next to last, the questions having to do with the past personal experiences of the respondents. However, under the heading of recommendations for methods of future evangelism "cultural activities" was ranked first out of nine possibilities.

If this admittedly sketchy information suggests a possible close identification of religion and the arts in the minds of Japanese church members, such an identification would be based on solid cultural precedent. Conversations with eminent historians of oriental art have produced the strong impression that in Japan, at least, religion and art have traditionally been regarded as more or less two sides of the same coin. A hasty survey of the outstanding landmarks in Japanese art history would tend to corroborate this point of view.²

A cursory glance at the history of Japanese art usually begins with

the introduction of Buddhism. Horyuji, the spiritual center of pre-Nara period Buddhism is also regarded as one of the highest artistic achievements in Oriental art history. Its architecture, images, frescoes, and scrolls depicting religious subjects are an eloquent testimony to the early fusing of religious and artistic sensibility. The Nara temples with their Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and portrait scrolls and images of disciples and founding priests represent a continuation and development of this remarkable beginning. The most notable achievements of the Heian Period continue to be in the realm of temple architecture and religious statuary. During the subsequent Fujiwara Period tastes became more ornate and the Tosa school of scroll painting with its combination of landscape and narrative was developed as a secular art form to please the eye of sophisticated courtiers, but Buddhist statuary remained an important vehicle for religious-artistic feeling. This was followed by the Kamakura Period and the importation of Sung Dynasty art works from China. The Japanese reaction to these influences was a refinement and naturalization of Buddhist imagery and the all important beginnings of Zen-inspired pottery and scroll painting. In the following Ashikaga Period this subtle but austere brush and ink style reached its highest culmination in the work of Sesshu, a style and method which might be regarded as primarily secular by the casual observer, but which in fact expressed a profoundly religious attitude towards life. The Katsura Palace may also be regarded as a further application of the Zen principles of self-effacement and nature mysticism, transforming a princely country lodge into a place for religious meditation, and replacing pomp with rigorous austerity. This brief catalogue of some of the major trends in Japanese art history may serve to indicate how deeply art and religion have been

intertwined in the national consciousness.

At this point the question of the universal religious significance of art might be raised again. It is sometimes unconsciously assumed that for Christianity, art is a dispensable luxury rather than an indispensable ingredient. I should like to suggest that this point of view ignores some of the implications of the Doctrine of the Incarnation. Christian theology is unique in its insistence upon the union of Creator and Creation in the person of an individual man at a particular point in history. This Prototype teaches us that we are not to reject the physical as unworthy of truly representing the spiritual, since "God was in Christ". A dialectical understanding of the relationship of matter and spirit, however expressed, has kept the Christian Church from totally separating or simply identifying the two. Where this has been fully understood, tangible objects have always served as a means of grace. It is almost inevitable then that a mature Christian faith should see in the artistic union of spirit and matter a parable of the Christian understanding of reality, since all art represents an active union of material and inspiration. Matter and spirit are too deeply interrelated for a profound faith to produce nothing but trivial art. The process may be temporarily halted by the lack of adequate means and appropriate idiom but in the longer view we can safely say, "By their art works ye shall know them."

If faith and art are more than casually related what do we find associated with this new faith in an old land of art? The brand of art that has accompanied the Christian faith into Japan in modern times has, on the whole, left a good deal to be desired. On the Roman Catholic side we find an architecture deriving from the mentality of the Counter Reformation, being in essence a poor adaptation of late medieval

Gothic. Interiors are usually dominated by a clutter of ornate altar furnishings which cannot be given an indefinite reprieve from aesthetic judgment. Liturgical reform has resulted in spectacular exceptions in Japan as in other countries, recently, but the impression of aesthetic obsolescence has been made. Sentimentalized plaster cast Virgins and the lowest common denominator in pictures are other items of cultural legacy. The currency of these forms in the West is the result of an attempt to hold the attentions of the common man in a rapidly secularizing society. Seen in perspective they are questionable at home and indefensible abroad.

Protestantism appears to be in an equally awkward position in regard to religious art. Sometimes the evident solution seems to be to try to abolish art altogether. The struggle of the Christian conscience over the idolatrous misuse of images has obvious Old Testament origins. The iconoclastic controversy is almost as old as the Church, the Spanish Council of Eliberis having denounced the use of holy pictures as early as the year 306.³ The early years of the Protestant Reformation were accompanied by a considerable outpouring of religious art, perhaps the most significant of which was the rise of popular hymnody among the Bohemian Bretheren and the musical work of Luther himself culminating in the magnificence of J.S.Bach.⁴ In the lonely figure of Rembrandt we see the transformation of the vernacular Bible into etchings which have never been artistically superseded. However the impetus for reformation continued to swing relentlessly towards the goal of pure immediate religious experience. By the last quarter of the 17th Century a pietistic reaction against orthodox Lutheranism began to develop, a movement contributing to the later decline of German liturgical music.⁵ Great

religious art seems to have lead to a dead end in Remdrandt. Calvinism eliminated non-Biblical hymns from public worship, leaving no work for the church musician except settings for metrical psalms. This austerity became the norm for Anglican worship, also, and hymnody of all sorts was kept within the strictest bounds. (When John Wesley produced an anonymous hymnal in Georgia in 1737 he was prosecuted by the colonial government for transgressing the limits of the metrical psalter.)⁶ The liturgical arts continued to labor under the severest restrictions until the 19th Century Oxford Movement in England and Mendelssohn's revival of Bach in Germany, to cite two major influences, showed the way toward a wider and more historically-minded expression of the Christian faith. Music, painting, and architecture were revived with a vengeance but somehow the touch seemed to have been lost. No great church composer seems to rise out of the vast welter of Victorian hymnody. If the graphic arts are represented by Leigh Hunt, his rejection out of hand by serious art criticism of a later generation cannot be ignored. The Gothic revival in architecture was largely devoted to the mechanical reproduction of by-gone forms.

The multiple revolutions of the 20th Century have dealt harshly with these revivals, and often supplanted 19th Century art forms with their aesthetic opposites. The exhilaration and vigor of 20th Century liturgical art, moreover, has not been made widely available for export to Japan. Art we do have, of a sort, since it is quite impossible for any institution to be really art free. Our buildings are going to have form, we seem bound to sing, our Sunday School materials, if nothing else will continue to bear symbols, pictures and designs, especially in a country like Japan. The real question is when will we begin to take our religious art

seriously? Speaking in broad terms, Protestant church architecture in Japan has been shabbily derivative. Vague preconceptions of what a church should look like have been the basis for imitations of imitations of Gothic structure. Cheap reproductions of 19th Century religious paintings constitute an unfortunate combination of questionable taste and low grade mass production. Church music tends to be limited to the dregs of Victorian hymnody. Meanwhile, it was possible during Holy Week of this year to hear over FM a government radio corporation broadcast series devoted to Lutheran passion music with musical and even religious commentary, entirely under secular auspices, which showed a very high level of appreciation of Christian art. Reproductions of Rembrandt etchings are normally available only in commercial art stores. The non-Christian Japanese architect has to explain to the church committee what some of the possibilities of modern church architecture are. In a land possessed of a unique understanding of the possible relation of religion and art, we seem to be quite unpregnant of our cause.

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- 1) Report on Enquiry into Mission Strategy, Department of Evangelism of the National Council of the Episcopal Church in Japan, (mimeographed), p. 36, ff.
- 2) cf. "Japanese Art", Vol. XI, Collier's Encyclopedia, P.F. Collier & Son Corporation, New York
- 3) Ibid. "Iconoclastic Controversy", Vol. X
- 4) Church Music in History and Practice, Winfred Douglas, Revised with Additional Material by Leonard Ellinwood, Charles Scribner's, New York, p. 173, ff.
- 5) The Background of Passion Music, J.S.Bach and His Predecessors, Basil Smallman, SCM Press, Ltd., London, p. 15
- 6) Winfred Douglas, op. cit., p.195