Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life

Frank Burch Brown

Frank Burch Brown’s book provides the kind of broad-based theological and philosophical framework that can nourish an appreciation of modern and contemporary visual arts, an appreciation that is necessary for any thoughtful contribution to the development of contemporary worship. Brown is not driven by polemics. In the introduction, Brown admits, “I have come to believe that matters of aesthetic taste—in a broad and non-elitist sense—are often intimately tied to various dimensions of morality (love, responsiveness, responsibility) and of religion (faith, worship, theology).

The first chapters offer an historical survey of taste. Here Brown introduces—and embodies—two diametrically opposed responses to religious art that he will return to throughout his book. The Danish existentialist philosopher Soren Kierkegaard represents a deep skepticism of religious art, and the Romantic poet/painter William Blake represents the enthusiastic response. The former sees art as a means to avoid serious religious commitment, while the latter regards art to be a vehicle for just such serious commitment. Brown’s agenda is to sketch an “ecumenical taste,” a state that would develop forms of perception, enjoyment and judgment that can “recognize and indeed relish certain aesthetic and religious differences,” “learn to discern, as an act of love, what others find delightful and meaningful in art,” and finally, “to notice points in life and worship where aesthetic aims and religious aspirations are wedded to one another.”

The next chapter focuses on writers for whom art had come to replace religion. Brown offers his own discussion of the concept of art—for art’s sake, which he refers to as “aesthetic purism,” and he discusses “strict” and “moderate” forms. In contrast to this purism, Brown presents an example of an integralist approach to art that does not separate religion from the aesthetic and art. Brown concludes this chapter with an analysis of the iconoclasm of postmodern theory, which rightly “contradicts simplistic views that postmodernism is a welcome reprieve for the contemporary Christian artist.”

Brown’s next chapter discusses the movement from a “taste for art” toward a “thirst for God.” Here Brown introduces Augustine into the argument between Kierkegaard and Blake, which he will utilize as a means to resolve the antithesis. Although he ultimately argues against the beauty of the world, Augustine nevertheless offers important observations and justifications for the appreciation of beauty. Brown is keen to capitalize on Augustine’s remarkable but extremely cautious sensitivity to beauty. In chapter five Brown offers an analysis of kitsch, not as a means to dismiss it outright, but to make sense of it from the perspective of what he calls “ecumenical taste.” It is this “ecumenical taste” that is the subject of chapter six, as Brown uses music, his own area of expertise, to affirm this broad but discriminating taste. Brown’s book is littered with specific examples, from music, art, poetry, film and architecture, which locate his argument.

In chapter seven Brown focuses on the relationship between sacred and secular spaces in China as a means to gain a different perspective on the relationship between the secular and the sacred. An analysis of the history of modern art, with its sacred space (art museums), sacred artifacts (works of art), and priests (artists) can offer another perspective on the relationship between the secular and sacred. A perspective that regards the modern and contemporary artists’ yearning for an honoring of the sacred to be a powerful manifestation of the inherent human desire to participate in and reflect divine order and its beauty.

The final two chapters focus increasingly more attention on the role of music in worship, and in fact, the role of art in worship in general. For Brown, as it was for the Patristic Fathers, the role of public worship (lex orandi) is the material manifestation of the rule of belief (lex credendi) as the former shapes and protects the latter. Brown concludes with the important insight that Christianity is not merely a set of beliefs, but it is a “practice” and it must be practiced “artfully.” It also requires discipline. And this is exactly what Brown argues about taste—it is not easy, and it requires practice. The challenge that Brown sees is that most Christians assume art that is Christian (or worth a Christian’s attention) should be easily accessible. When art is not, it is more often than not marginalized and dismissed as “elitist.” But this can also be the case with the practice of Christianity, in which many evangelical Christians are put off by aspects of the faith that require practice and discipline in large part because their assumption is that “their faith should not be difficult.” Taste for art, just like a taste for the spiritual, must be practiced and developed. It is a discipline. In the words of the Psalmist, taste and see that the Lord is good.

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Spirit in Drama: A Practical Guide for Churches and Schools

David W. Eggebrecht
St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004

David Eggebrecht, author of Spirit in Drama, seeks to provide a practical guide for incorporating religious drama in Christian education, worship and fellowship. He defines religious drama as a play having a central biblical theme. It may be an enactment of a biblical story, an enactment based on a Bible story set in a contemporary context or a modern story that examines Christian spiritual struggles. Eggebrecht contends that religious drama “has the responsibility of bringing God’s Word and saving message to the people” through excellent theatre productions that help audiences identify with biblical narratives and living their faith.

He sees the members of a production company as a community of believers who use their God given gifts to nurture their faith lives as well as their audience’s. Thus the performance of religious drama has an educational purpose in Christian congregations as well as schools. Dr. Eggebrecht draws on his numerous directing experiences in parish and community theatres as well as his work as director of drama at Concordia University Wisconsin. He provides an excellent model of how a Christian director plans, collaborates with others, and leads a theatre production. Even experienced directors will find his examples

book reviews
of how to handle the inevitable challenges of coordinating the work of volunteers and theatre professionals helpful. The book also contains prayers and exhortations to dedicate rehearsals as well as performances to building up the body of Christ.

The book addresses the areas of play selection, production planning, auditions, rehearsals, public relations, performances and building drama programs. However, each topic is rather briefly addressed. The author encourages the reader to consult additional books on theatre production for more information, but does not provide a bibliography of useful titles.

*Spirit in Drama* is organized by topic rather than moving from simple uses of drama to more complex. How to produce less complex dramatic forms, such as choral speaking, readers theatre, role playing and character monologues is not as well developed as the guidelines for full-length dramas or musicals. The author provides practical, but general, recommendations for time, resources and personnel needed to produce short dramas, longer plays and musicals. For example, a list of items that will need to be budgeted, including royalty fees, is provided, but no cost estimates for the markedly increasing fees of each form are made.

This book is most helpful for persons with some theatre background who would like to begin a religious drama program. It is also recommended for pastors, principals and directors of Christian education who seek information about the personnel and resources needed to develop drama ministries in churches or schools.

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**Silver Screen, Sacred Story: Using Multimedia in Worship**

*Silver Screen, Sacred Story* is a language training book. It is an excellent resource to help people develop or refine their use of the visual communication language. Bausch includes a good balance of theological, theoretical and practical concepts.

For those who are still wondering if electronic tools have a place in worship or are struggling with why it is important to communicate visually, the first section presents a strong historical and theological justification for using this language and tools—set to assist people in worshipping their Savior and compose more effective communication. I appreciated his comparison to a congregation that refused to use a new language in worship—English—and how they disappeared while the offshoot that used the new language prospered. If you’ve already decided visual communication is important, don’t get bogged down in this justification and miss the really valuable concepts in the rest of the book.

If your congregation is just beginning to use electronic visual communication tools in worship or is exploring their increased use, Bausch offers some excellent strategies to develop support. He encourages both embracing and resisting technology, cultural trends and media to be certain that they are incorporated with integrity and humility. He includes some very practical suggestions on helping groups to understand the potential and begin to use the language.

The strongest part of this book is the third section—learning the language. Projection and other visuals tools offer so much more than just being an announcement billboard or electronic worship folder. Through his descriptions of some very creative use of visuals, he motivates the user to start thinking visually. His concepts will spark more meaningful and effective worship. This section should be read by anyone who is involved in planning and leading worship—clergy, musicians, worship committees and other lay leaders.

"As with learning to communicate with any new language, worship leaders will want to develop their electronic language skills as they begin to think and speak in another

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