

CHRIST IMAGE PROJECTION: ESTHETICS IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

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Abstract

Through the controvertiality of *The Last Temptation of The Christ* we can learn, there is an intrinsic connection between theological aesthetic and moral theology: the theology of Christian praxis. In order to liberate, truth must capture the mind, goodness must enrapture the heart. The good and the true must appear as good and true *for us*. That is, truth must show its persuasiveness, goodness must show its attractiveness. The true and the good must be revealed as corresponding with our deepest human purposes and desires; in short, they must be apprehended as beautiful. Beauty can then be the instrument of conversion.

Abstrak

Dengan aspek kontroversialitas *The Last Temptation of the Christ* dapat dipelajari ada koneksi intrinsik antara estetika teologis dan teologi moral: teologi praksis Kristen. Demi tujuan pembebasan, kebenaran harus mampu memuaskan pikiran dan kebaikan harus mampu mencerahkan hati. Yang baik dan yang benar semestinya baik dan benar bagi kita. Artinya, kebenaran haruslah mengandung unsur persuasif dan kebaikan semestinya mengandung unsur atraktif. Yang benar dan yang baik sebaiknya diungkap berdasarkan tujuan dan hasrat terdalam manusia; singkatnya, keduanya hendaknya diterima sebagai keindahan. Keindahan inilah yang menjadi menjadi instrumen antara dalam suatu konversi.

Kata kunci: *Estetika, Teologi Kristen*

I. INTRODUCTION

In 1955 Nikos Kazantzakis published a novel entitled '*The Last Temptation of The Christ*'. The novel was in controversy and immediately the author was in the note by Carol Iannone excommunicated by the Greek Orthodox Church. The church classified the novel into those that were forbidden. While the American Protestants tried every possible effort to investigate and to banish all of the novels found in the libraries across the country, it became otherwise the bestseller nov-

el of the day (Inugroho, 2004: 85).

Forty years later, to be exactly in 1988 a Hollywood film director, Martin Scorsese released the film based on the novel and again the controversy emerged. Carol Iannone took a note in her Article "*The Last Temptation Reconsidered*" (published in *First Things* 60-February 1996, p. 50-54) that the film has ever been considered to be an attack against Christianity, or the urge to completely crush the famous and honored figure in the human culture. However, there was also a bishop commenting that the film was not at

all a matter in Christianity because it explicitly described the human side of Christ as clearly stated in Gospel. Still another stated that actually many Christians were not comfortable with the idea of the Christ who was fully human (Inugroho, 2004: 85).

The controversial aspect of the film *'The Last Temptation of The Christ'* lay in the physical projection of the image of Christ (played by William Dafoe) with the prostitute, Maria Magdalena, who was his friend in his childhood. Therefore, the Christ was described as having family and five children. However, the Christ's disciples remained on the position to describe him as stated in the Gospel. Furthermore, the betrayal of the disciples was committed following his order to 'complete himself as Messiah'.

It was fifteen years later that Mel Gibson worked for the project *'The Passion of The Christ'*, which is controversial both in its artistic and ideological aspects. The artistic controversy resulted from the suffering that was so realistic described, while the ideological controversy took place because the film was considered to be anti-Semitic that stimulated the anger of Jews who were described in the film as the cause of the crucifixion of the Christ.

There were two interpreting phenomena in the artwork that stimulated the discussion on Christian esthetics. Dorothy Sayers complained that the authors of mystery novel who were also Christian were lack of Christian philosophy of art. The majority of the Christian accepted their faith "formally" through a mixture of sermon and direct lesson. In fact, there are many of our actual understandings of faith and also theology mediated by arts.

The brief paper represents an appreciation of the author of the Christian theology and esthetics. The description will be directed to the importance of building the discourse of religious esthetics or theology on the basis of historical, philosophical and systematic explanations. That way, the description of the Christ will be more integrated and able to inspire human being in improving their religious quality.

II. DISCUSSION

2.1. The Image of Jesus in Historical Passage

According to Anton Wessels (2001: 1) the Christ's image was and is in a constant change in Europe. One of the methods in illustrating it is to see how the Christ is expressed in arts. It is on the arts that beliefs, obedience and theological view are reflected for centuries. Jesus is described symbolically and allegorically. Two of the most images of him are fish and lamb. Alpha and Omega are used as the monogram of Jesus. It seems that the cross sign remained hidden in the early centuries because of security consideration. It was just after the Great Constantine that the cross was publicly exposed in 312 — i.e., "with the cross you will win" (Anton Wessels, 2001: 3).

In the fifth century the Augustine of Hippo stated the last thing when he said that we knew the details of His image (*qua fuerit facie non penitus ignoramus*). In other words, there is no detailed description of how is actually the image of Jesus.

"The oldest images" of Jesus in the human body form may be found in catacombs in Rome and in the churches of Doura Europos, a fortress situated in the side of Euphrates River. He is illustrated as "a good, young and handsome shepherd". It is a very popular image and many people like it so much. Subsequently, the image is developed into an image of teacher — for Clemens of Inkandaria (215). He is "an educator" and "a teacher" and at the same times a shepherd playing music. The argument for the defense of the image of a young man is: "If he is not handsome, he is not recognized as God", Origenes said in his writing against "the infidel" Celsus (Anton Wessels, 2001: 3-4).

The first changes or variations are concerning to the age of the figure. His face becomes longer and his hair is at shoulder long and split in two. Jesus is also illustrated as having a beard. At present his face appears to be oriental and of brown skin. Therefore, the image of "a glorified God" emerges, who is the teacher and the lawmaker. However, the images should not be completely considered as merely the fantasy of artists. They are told through the beliefs of the early centuries and the position of the young church



in the tyrannical treatment era (Anton Wessels, 2001: 4-5).

“The victory” of the Great Constantine also means the victory of Christianity over the infidel religion. It is clearly reflected on arts. Thus, the images of Jesus originating from the cult of the imperia of the late antiquity that have to denote the victory of Christ: Christ the Victor, who was crowned by the hands of God into Cosmocrator and Pantocrator, the king of universe (Anton Wessels, 2001: 5).

In the middle age the human aspect of Jesus or Jesus as human being was highly emphasized. Though in thirteenth century Jesus was increasingly illustrated as worldly being, the theme of “king” and “victor” are well preserved. In the high Gothic style the terrible character of anger of the images and the sculptures changed and were replaced with the noble human face as clearly observed in Chartes and Amiens cathedrals. Under the influence of Bernard of Clairvaux and Franciscus of Asisi a careful attention was given to the image of worldly and suffering Jesus. The triumphant Christ was transformed into patient Christ. The theme of suffering flourished at the end of the middle age. The matters appertaining to the personal liberation are the most important things: The suffering Christ gave “perfect justice” (Anton Wessels, 2001: 6-7).

In fifteenth century Jesus was described as the figure living in the historical environment of

the painters of the era, for example in Vlanderen. “The old” Peter Bregchel placed the occurrence of the cross bearing in 1564 on its own era and circumstance. The typical characteristic of the image of Christ of Baroque style is the emotional nature and the visionary imagination. It was the images that played an important role in “the resignation” of Christ to the parts of newly found world, which was the main purpose and mission. It can be stated from various periods “the main purpose of arts is the materialization of Christ’s work of salvation.” Till twentieth century Jesus is still illustrated through arts in Europe (Anton Wessels, 2001: 8).

2.2. The Philosophical Argumentation of Religious Esthetics

Ron O’Grady (www.asianchristianart.org) suggests that “Christian art is impossible to define. When the Asian Christian Art Association was founded in Bali twenty years ago, there was strong debate about the definition of “Christian” art. According to him, there are three elements to be considered: the artist, the theme of work and the viewer. All of the three are filled with contradictions.

Driyarkarya (1984: 33) suggests a more optimistic opinion that certain religion can serve as the source of certain arts of the trademark of the religion as far as the respective religion offers particular view. He refers to the religion of Cath-

olic that is typically Christ centric. Everything is seen as having its root in Christ. In the self of Christ, God has revealed it self because it is Jesus who serves as the very light for the Christian not to be lost. Everything is experienced in experiencing Christ.

Driyarkara (9-12) argues in his article 'Arts and Religion' that the certainty of the encounters of nature and human being causes him to experience what so-called an esthetic moment. It is in such a moment the human being experiences the unification with the nature without any purpose. In the esthetic observation the human being "sees and feels" appearance and form. Consciousness has not in the observation been fragmented and represents an integrated unity. The understanding and the willingness to be there have not been fragmented and even they are still a solid unity. It is there that human being simultaneously serves as subject and object. The hug is the compound of the understanding and the willingness. The esthetic moment is simultaneously materialized in the arts. The human being manifests and wants to give his experience certain appearance and form, including esthetic and beauty experience. Therefore, the sound of esthetics is then expressed "musically" (music) or "sculptured" or "expressed in a language" (literatures).

Meanwhile, human being sees itself in religion. The religion means "sacred bond" by which the human being binds itself to God. The religion really exists when the human being presents before God as the Great Personality and surrenders completely. As long as the human being admits that the God exists and has not completely surrendered (it is in practice impossible without any prayer), there has nor been or is not any religion. In the religion the human being admits that it is absolutely dependent of the God that has His authority over it (Driyarkara, 1984; 25). In the religious experience the human being stays before the God. The human being as a person stays before the God as the Great Person. There is an *Ich-Du* relationship, i.e., to be person-to-Person. In such a relationship the human being surrenders completely. It surrenders completely: *Oefnung und Hingabe des Ichs* (Karl Gigenchon). However, because its physicality can understand the God in term of symbols, the relationship between the symbols and the symbolized is as follow: the symbolized is captured by

the symbol, but the symbols will never be a sufficient representation. In dealing with the symbols, the human being is in an unity with the symbolized, but at the same time in certain distance to it. Thus, it is in a constant longing for the symbol. The satisfaction and the happiness experienced in the religion are insofar the human being "breaks through" the symbol (Driyarkara, 1984: 14-15).

All that he wants to put forward is the difference between religious experience and esthetic experience. That there is a disparity between the two, it does not mean that there is not any relationship that enables the transition from the esthetic experience to the religious experience and vice versa. The transition takes place because of the fact that the esthetic experience is unstable in nature and always wants to be free and to pass by.

Once the esthetic experience fades away, the subject and the object are assimilated. The subject is now before the object. Thus, there is not any difference between the symbol and the symbolized, i.e., the symbol only symbolizes and does not represent the complete realization of the symbolized. In other words, the symbol is broke through and the breaking-through of it occurs after the esthetic experience. The breaking-through occurs because the human being pursues "the infinite". The human being searches for the absolute and hence the esthetic experience mounts empties into the religious experience: the feelings of being touched are transformed into prayers. The surrender to the beauty is merely denoted by the symbol and hence becomes the surrender to the infinite Source of all beauties. There is here the change in the experience structure. However, the experience in the new structure is experienced in an esthetic moment and does not completely disappear. Therefore, the religious experience contains the esthetic experience. Thus, there is a way open into arts (Driyarkara, 1984: 16-17).

According to Driyarkara, the realization of the esthetic experience takes place in the arts in the form of objects. It is the objectification of the esthetic experience that causes the emergence of beauty impression, but simultaneously it shows and hides an idea. It means that the idea and the reality become in the arts one (of course, as long as it is possible), but the idea is always known. Meanwhile, in enjoying the beauty, the

human being becomes open to higher beauty, the beauty that can not be expressed using words. The human being does not only become open, but also feels motivated. In other more complicated terminology, the human being is transcendent to the artistic beauty experience it enjoys. Thus, the beauty as the beauty brings the human being to the religion or the relationship to God (Driyarkara, 1984; 18).

III. CLOSING: Esthetic Theology Systematics

Richard Viladesan (2002; 00) explore briefly the relevance of art to several of the different contemporary branches of theology. *First, Art as a source and resource for Historical theology.* It has long been obvious that the history of Christian art is a significant part of the *history of the church*. How could any account of Christian history — or, indeed, European history in general — leave out the building of the great cathedrals, the invention of new styles and genres of music, the development of theatre from liturgy, the creation of countless religious statues, pictures and books by artists of all kinds and of all levels (Richard Viladesan, 2002; 232).

But more recently attention has also been drawn to relevance of art specifically to the history of theology. It aids in the attempt to think “with” people of past ages, to overcome the sometimes alien character of their ideas and to avoid the temptation of anachronistic understandings. Because the arts — especially pictures — were consciously used as a means of teaching theological ideas to the widest possible audience, and because folk art shows the reception of such ideas in popular piety (Richard Viladesan, 2002; 232-233).

For the same reasons, the arts are also relevant to the *history of faith*. That is, That is, art is one of the languages in which faith has expressed itself through the ages: a language that is irreducible to concepts and that must be approached on its own terms. This means that art, as a primary place where the Christian tradition and Christian religion are found, is a source not only for the study of theology’s history, but also a primary source for reflection on faith itself, as well as on faith’s ambiguities and the distortions that it sometimes undergoes in concrete piety.

Second, Art and the doing of theology. Christian art then, can be source for the conceptual

understanding of the past tradition. But we can also say that in itself it already embodies an “understanding” of faith — albeit understanding in a non-conceptual mode. In this sense it can likewise be considered theological. Art gives categorical form to inchoate human apprehensions of beauty, goodness and truth (Richard Viladesan, 2002; 233)

The consideration of the arts as a locus of revelation, as Christian tradition and as a non-conceptual mode of reflection is a central aspect of the discipline “theological aesthetics”. Overlapping with this is what we might call “aesthetic theology”: Christian reflection, in word or symbol, that speaks artistically — that is, that itself attempts to be beautiful, artistic, in consonance with the joy and delight that should be an element of the good news of God’s self-revealing love (Richard Viladesan, 2002; 233).

Aesthetic theology with-out the complementary discipline if rigorous thought can easily become subjective. It can turn into mere aestheticism, to the neglect of the dynamism toward truth. In symbolic modes of thinking, even more than in concepts, there is a constant danger of projection. And there is the temptation to reduce the awesome and unsetting beauty of God to a mere prettiness that produces pleasure—forgetting the challenge of the cross, whose moral beauty demands conversion of our aesthetic sense just as it does o our intellect (Richard Viladesan, 2002; 234).

Third, Art and fundamental theology. The arts, insofar as they strive toward experience of beauty can mediate a kind of “natural theology.” On a pre-conceptual level, they can open the spirit to the awe of being, the joy of existence, the gratuitous given-ness of creature-hood, the dynamism of creativity, the glorious unity in diversity of things. And from these experiences, the mind may make the intuitive step to their ground and foundation in a Creator. The fundamental theologian may make this non-verbal process reflective, as a thematic way to God. The distinct forms of art, from sculpture to music, exhibit varying degrees and ways in which insight and affect can be embodied in the sensible. They constitute different means of “referring” or evoking transcendence (Richard Viladesan, 2002; 234-235).

Fourth, Art and systematic theology. According to Karl Barth, Mozart’s music is theological, because it allows us to hear directly what the

theologies of creation and eschatology attempt to express haltingly in words: the unity and goodness of God's creation. Art can be theological in an of itself, outside the boundaries of ecclesial theology (Richard Viladesan, 2002; 235).

Balthasar's theological aesthetics is purposefully systematic: its primary concern is with the divine glory as actually revealed in the Gestalt of incarnate and crucified Lord. Theology unfolds the form and splendor of divine revelation in Christ: its power to attract and delight us by its truth and goodness. But despite its aesthetic starting point, Balthasar's theology has little to say about art. Not only individual artwork, but the very styles development in architecture, music, sculpture and painting are "classics" of the Christian tradition, to be understood and interpreted anew for the disclosure or their transformative and revelatory power.

Five, Art and practical theology. Richard Viladesan (2002; 236) belief that there is a sense in which beauty and the arts that attempt to mediate it have an especially important role to play in salvation, and hence in the practical theologies that reflect on the human role in its accomplishment. Obviously, to speak of beauty in this connection is to see it in its deepest dimension: the sense in which "the beautiful" is one of the names of God and a necessary attribute of God's self-revelation. Being grasped by this kind of beauty presupposes openness to grace.

In this perspective, there is an intrinsic connection between theological aesthetic and moral theology: the theology of Christian praxis. In order to liberate, truth must capture the mind, goodness must enrapture the heart. The good and the true must appear as good and true for us. That is, truth must show its persuasiveness, goodness must show its attractiveness. The true and the good must be revealed as corresponding

with our deepest human purposes and desires; in short, they must be apprehended as beautiful. Beauty can then be the instrument of conversion (Richard Viladesan, 2002; 236).

In short, art is relevant to both social and individual levels of moral theology. As a medium of communication, art is an effective way of presenting examples of virtue. It can also serve as a kind of contrast theology: that is, it can dramatically present situations of evil in such a way as to heighten our consciousness and bring about awareness of responsibility. The medium of film, in the hands of genuine artist, seems to have special potential in this area (Richard Viladesan, 2002; 237-238).

The latest religious theology may serve as our reference in understanding the controversy of the film '*The Last Temptation of The Christ*' and '*The Passion of The Christ*'. The director of the film 'The Last Temptation of Christ', Martin Scorsese, suggests that his film is a gradual assimilation of Jesus as a man into Jesus the Christ. It tells us about how is the process of extinguishing the anxiety and the longing for the worldly things in the passage to the unity with God that explicitly expresses the meaning of the cross (Inugroho, 2004: 85).

It is also the case of the author of the novel '*The Last Temptation of The Christ*', Kazantzakis. In his memoir '*Report to Greco*' (1961) he said: "*When we wants to whole heardly follow Him, it is a must for us to have an in-depth knowledge of the conflicts He experienced. It is a must for us to revive His anxiety and sufferings. ... In the climbing passage to the cross — the highest sacrifice — and to God, the Christ walked the roads just as his fellow men did. It is how His sufferings are so familiar to us. We also see Him in the struggle and find the strength there*" (Inugroho, 2004: 85).

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