

The Nexus of Prayer and Visual Art
by
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Introduction

Setting the context and stating the purpose of a paper probably should not be done in negatives—telling you what it is *not*. And yet it seems that is what I must do. This paper is an overview, a synopsis of some of the published writings on the subject. It is not a detailed analysis of the role of the visual in Christian practice. Likewise, I will not attempt to discuss the purpose of the visual in general worship services. There will be no discussion of the psychological issues regarding this subject, nor how since postmodernism and the arts are the language of spirituality. I will also not attempt to be prescriptive nor pejorative.

What I do offer to the reader is an overview of the visual in devotional practices, as well as a short historical review of denominational distinctions. The paper will close with some examples of visual aids used in promoting devotion to God. I hope that it will encourage you to include visual art in your own devotional practices.

Visual Postures of Prayer

Do you remember as a little child hearing from your mother and father, "Close your eyes and fold your hands for prayer."? This became the norm and expected posture whenever we entered into the presence of God. As adults, most of us have freed ourselves from having a single posture of prayer. We engage in prayer while standing (frequently with arms outstretched), sitting, kneeling, even prostrate at times. We've learned the value of kinetic response in prayer. And yet, the habit of closing our eyes as we pray often lingers. Perhaps it is to prevent distractions. Or, it may be that we have a belief that our imagination in our mind with our eyes closed is more "holy", or that we are able to wipe the mind clean of any images and therefore are better able to approach God. Closing our eyes remains an unexpected part of piety. Whatever the reason, it is not a universal expectation and definitely not one that has been consistent throughout

history, or in all streams of Christianity. In fact, during the early days of the church, it may have been just the opposite!

According to one author, Stephanie Leitch, sight was considered extremely important from the time of Christ through the medieval period. It was considered to be the only physical sense directly related to God. She writes, "(sight) was potent because of the reciprocity it afforded with the divine: sight was the human faculty understood to be shared by God. The difference between human and divine sight was one of degree rather than kind. (quoted in Seidel, 2001). It was through this sensory gate that both demons and humans viewed to a *finite* angle, while God's vision was *absolute*, according to Nicholas of Cusa in the 15th century (ibid.). The power in a gaze was widely feared, such as demonstrated in the ancient story of Narcissus or the widespread belief (extant today) in the "Evil Eye". Christians during this time often incorporated and "made holy" the pagan practices for avoiding the evil related to the eye by cleansing their houses before worship and wearing mirrored plaques (to turn away evil), or confronting demons with a bright or dazzling object. Amulets, especially in the form of a cross, were worn specifically to confound the evil associated with the power of seeing (ibid.).

It has been suggested that the importance of the visual may be the reason for the earliest Christian images, found in the catacombs of Rome dating from the Second Century. According to Jeremy Begbie, "The catacombs bear witness that wherever Christians prayed, they sought to create a visual environment that reminded them of the Kingdom of God and helped them to pray" (Begbie 2000). In addition, once there was a cessation of persecution, "early icons of a more developed style also survived in Rome, though they're chiefly mosaics" (ibid.).

During the first millennium following Christ, special objects were created for private devotion. They served to "mediate the act of vision" in order to achieve direct encounter with God. One example is Veronica's Veil, *vera icon*, reportedly imprinted with Christ's face. It was in popular use during medieval times for devotional practices, its use being strictly prescribed by Nicholas of Cusa.

During the 12th century there was a shift in focus within the church from the veneration of Christ's role as *divine judge* to his *human nature* being in focus. Christ's life on earth became the main subject of devotion and the imitation of his life became the goal. Paramount in this was the focus on the "all seeing eyes of Jesus". The Incarnation was most important and it is reflected in all art forms, whether paintings, pendants, or manuscripts. Artists sought to remind the devotees of the "true image of Christ". These were used for contemplation and as a reminder of "Immanuel".

From that time until now (with the exception of the Protestant movement), Christian practice of prayer and devotional activity nearly always included something visual. It was to "bridge the gap between quotidian activity and ecstatic vision" (Leitch in Seidel 2001). Belief that the "aim of meditation used to progress from contemplation of the physical to the spiritual in order to achieve eventual union with God" (Finaldi 2000) and meditation on something with the eyes contributed to this goal.

Focusing on an object or an image during prayer was "valued for its devotional effect and its educational function—inspiring people to greater love for Christ" (Veith 1991). It has been asserted that "private meditation... required visual cues (i.e. in early devotional guides)" (Seidel 2001). It is evident that "images played an important role in helping people to understand the Word of God, thereby fulfilling a pedagogical and religious function" (Cornelisse 2000). St. Augustine reflected on this, saying,

My God and my glory, for this reason I say hymns of praise to you and offer praise for him who offered sacrifice for me... for the beautiful objects design artists' souls and realized by skillful hands come from that beauty which is higher than souls; after that Beauty my soul sighs day and night (quoted in Krammes 2001).

You may ask, "Why isn't the Word enough?" The answer is far more complex than space allows. It involves individual differences in brain function and the ability to process information, which is far too involved to be explained here. But it is clear that the verbal/linguistic offering alone does not engender "holistic" worship. In general, it must be recognized that "humans do not lead their lives primarily on a verbal level, on the contrary, humans primarily exist on the level of the senses (taste, touch, smell,

hearing) whether they realize this or not, whether they like it or not, and whether they process their sensorial input or not” (Van Perys 2001). Van Perys stresses that worship—including meditation and devotional prayer—isn’t a “mere string of words” but is a “complex of sensorial impulses” (ibid.). So-called “authentic art” can “create a longing for God and an awareness of God” (Brand 1999).

It is clear that worship, devotional exercises, and prayer should not be merely linguistic exercises. In the Greek, the meaning of “worship” is derived from *proskeno* which “was literally a word used to describe the dog licking its master’s hand... worship is action motivated by emotions...” (Eric Shanburn quoted in Krammes 2001). The use of visual art in devotional practices, including prayer, is powerful. Visual art is capable of “two functions... to display God's goodness to others, which is people oriented, and to glorify God, which is worship or God-oriented” (Spencer 1998). The visual serves to focus our attention on the incarnate God, Jesus Christ. It may also “help us see the greater clarity...draw attention to overlook details...restore our sense of amazement” (Turner 2001).

Denominational Distinctions Regarding the Use of the Visual

In the early church, art used for prayer and devotional practices consisted of symbols, images from “reinterpreted” pagan stories and Old Testament typology. “Pious lay-persons employed visual cues in their devotional practices often in the form of amulets, in order to summon supernatural forces” (Leitch in Seidel 2001). “Art in churches, as well as private devotional guides, contributed to the goal of... union of the soul with God... achieved through ‘unknowing’, in which the soul leaves behind the perceptions of the sense as well as the reasoning of the intellect” (Dyrness 2001). In other words, visual art was meant to “lead the soul toward the contemplation of God, to stimulate... contemplative movement from the perceptible up to the conceptual” (ibid.). Dyrness explains that this “mystical theology” had an influence on both Eastern and Western Christianity, but “became dominant in the worldview Eastern orthodoxy” (ibid.). Images of Christ, the Virgin, and the saints were used for prayer in devotional practices throughout all of the church until the seventh century. Symbolic art was popular, especially Christ as the Lamb.

In 693 A.D., at the Council of Trullo, all symbolic art of the church was forbidden as such symbols were considered merely *typos* or types of figures of coming grace, which was fulfilled in Christ. This counsel also repudiated the narrative intent of Christian symbolic art, as well as any historical orientation of such art.

Throughout Christendom, the rise in the importance of the Incarnation created a new importance on Christ, the God-Man, but how to represent this differed greatly. In the East, the “central image, represented in timeless quality of the icon” was the norm, and in the West, “the central image of Jesus suffering on the cross, with the image of the lamb or chalice” became the focus (Dyrness 2001). Church leaders in the East didn't approve of the symbolic orientation of the West and Western leaders felt the use of images or icons marginalized the role of the Eucharist. The stage was set for a major division.

By 730 A.D., the iconoclasts were in control and set about destroying all images of Christ, his mother, and the saints, led by Emperor Leo III. A major turn-around happened by October, 787 A.D. When the iconodulists (supporters of images) again gained control. Empress Irene convened the Second Council of Nicaea which declared, “icons were to be venerated... for the more often they are seen in their pictorial representations, the more the beholder is excited to the recollection and desire of the ones represented and to offer them greeting and reverent worship” (Dyrness 2001). Icons were to be displayed in churches and home altars. They were intended to picture “the full humanity of Christ” (ibid.). This “Triumph of Orthodoxy” is still celebrated as a feast day in the Eastern Church.

It might be helpful to consider what the intended meaning of the icon was at that time (taken from Dyrness 2001):

1. It was more than an aesthetic image to grace the Church and stimulate holy thoughts.
2. Icons express deeply held theological convictions.
3. Icons were meant to move the viewer to love and serve God.
4. The practice of making an icon was accomplished through prayer and spiritual preparation.
5. It was theology in visual form.

6. The use of images was a part of holy devotion and belonged not to the artists but to the holy fathers of the church (this is why the artists' names are seldom known).
7. It was considered to be an affirmation of the ancient tradition dating back to Christ and the apostles.

According to Gervase Matthew, icons developed in three stages:

1. Veneration of the imperial image to represent the presence of the Emperor led to the Christ image and became a “proxy” for his presence.
2. The rise of funerary imagery in private devotion led to the claim that images of holy people produced miracles, which led to shrines being built and pilgrimages undertaken.
3. By the end of the seventh century, images of Christ and saints appear as isolated frontal figures to confront the viewer and thus be more easily invoked. By the eighth century, it became common to venerate these images, with the intent that honor paid to the image would honor the person or the character quality of the person represented (adapted from Dyrness 2001).

Icons had both private and corporate devotional use. Their emphasis was always the Incarnation—God dwelling in human flesh. They were also interpreted in sacramental terms as “Holy images charged with real spiritual power... serving as windows into heaven... as a means of grace” (Veith 1991). By the 11th century, the focus was “Christ is the source of power: the incarnation and glorification as the images central to salvation” (Dyrness 2001). John of Damascus, a monk in Palestine in the eighth century, produced a definitive statement regarding icons: “To venerate icons was not to venerate the object itself but the person represented;... it was wrong to worship an icon... worship belongs to God alone, but the presence of an icon could instruct and assist the believer in worship” (Brand 1999). According to St. Basil, “Honor shown to the icon passes to the prototype it represents” (Mathewes-Green 2001).

Icons were to be two-dimensional (to avoid being a “graven image” such is the statue). They were proscribed to have no humanistic perspective, romantic subjectivity, or to reflect the individuality of the artist (Veith 1991). The artist was expected to emphasize both prayer and personal holiness

as he endeavored to make an icon. The Orthodox developed an emphasis on “holy space” that would “provide a glimpse of heavenly splendor” (Dyrness 2001). This space, i.e. the Church, became an icon itself to lead people into God's presence (ibid.).

The official division of the Eastern and Western Church occurred in 1054 A.D., after years of theological and worldview separation. Interestingly, both sides claim to base their beliefs on the essential fact of the Incarnation. According to Eastern Orthodox tradition, “as God assumed flesh... material world is capable of expressing the infinite.... In the saints, God began the process of their glorification and continued it after the death” (Dyrness 2001). The image, or icon, was a channel to the person it represented. Jaroslav Pelican included, “The Jesus Christ who was the True Image was the one who had been made human, and thus physical and material, by his incarnation and birth from the Virgin Mary. Therefore a Christian icon was not an idol but an image of the Image; such was in essence the case for Christian art” (Bryans 1993).

In contrast, but still based on the Incarnation, the Western Church saw “creation as ‘enchanted’... because God's presence is both in nature and in the person” (Dyrness 2001). Art had the ability to reflect this reality and lead to further devotion of God. “Worship centered around a sacramental spirituality—in the notion that God manifests himself by means of tangible objects...(i.e.) the bread and wine of communion, and the water of baptism” (Veith 1991). Veith continues, “Crucifixes vividly impress upon their minds what Christ suffered on the cross... paintings or stained glass depictions of Bible stories recall the events recorded in the Word of God... if you're attention wanders, everywhere you look it's something to draw you back” (ibid.).

The further division of the Church occurred in the 16th century, brought to everyone's attention by Martin Luther. Because of the familiarity of this event in our Protestant background, I won't spend a significant amount of time on it, but I do think a few facts would be helpful. It is assumed by many that the early Reformers forbade all art in an attempt to rectify the perceived abuses within the Catholic Church at that time. This isn't accurate however. Margaret Mead asserts, “Iconoclastic attitudes and activities we're one of the least agreed-upon aspects of the Protestant

Reformation in Germany and Switzerland” (Bryans 1993). “Paintings and the sculpture were permitted—as long as they were not in the church building. Calvin and Zwingli even permitted religious art, such as pictures of Christ and biblical narratives, as long as it was not set up in a place of worship” (Veith 1991). (The one exception, according to Zwingli, was that he allowed stained glass in the church.) Calvin sought a “pure and legitimate use of sculpture and paintings” (Bryans 1993).

Luther was even more open to the arts as a devotional practice. “He agreed that our human senses can help us to contemplate God, which is why he welcomed the arts. At the same time, Luther rejected any veneration of images and the use of the arts that interfered with or distracted from God’s Word” (ibid.). The premise was that art should aid in the worship of God and not be distracting or worshiped. In his writings, Luther states, “according to the law of Moses no other images are forbidden than the image of God which ones worships” and in another treatise, “If it is not sin but good to have the image of Christ in my heart, why should it be a sin to have it in my eyes?” (Bryans 1993). In 1525, one artist of Protestant persuasion wrote, “The faults of idolatry lies not in the images themselves, but in the devotional practices of the viewers” (Cornelisse 2000). Unfortunately, some of the extremists in the Post-Reformation political climate did not reflect this moderate view and a serious breach regarding the use of the visual occurred, which continues to impact us today.

The Reformation birthed a new era of art, still meditative its inception. It was rooted in the realization of the *Imago Dei* in each individual. This meant God was to be glorified and evidenced in paintings of home or family scenes, portraits, and even landscapes. While this may have been true and has value, it hasn't produced an art generally usable for meditative or devotional practices. Artists such as Rembrandt, Durer, Lucas Cranach, and Hans Reinhart the Elder reflect the “Protestant iconography” and attempted to systematize it to be acceptable to the Protestant theology and practice (Seidel 2001).

Historical Examples of Art in Devotional Practices

The 2000 year history of the church is replete with examples of “visual aids” in private and corporate prayer and devotional exercises. It is interesting to consider a few of the most unusual, as well as some current examples found in the renewal movement of today.

The Irish “Book of Kells” are large-format manuscripts of the Latin text of the Gospels. Their origination place and date is uncertain, but between the seventh and ninth centuries they became very elaborate. The pages were decorated with portraits of the Evangelists, Christ, the Virgin and Child, as well as biblical scenes and symbols. They were meant to carry “different layers of meaning and interpretation... the images read in a number of ways simultaneously” (Meehan 1994). According to Benedict of Aniane, the entire effort was “meditative and allusive in intent” (ibid.). They were at their most basic function, prayerbooks.

The practice of meditating on Christ’s Passion was aided by altarpieces, paintings, prints, and many other forms of visual narratives, icons, and symbols. Focusing on Christ’s suffering was solely intended as a “process of meditation and contemplation, since looking upon a representation of Christ is ultimately to lead to the imitation of Christ” (Finaldi 2000). Churches, museums, and art galleries are replete with the examples of this type of devotional art.

In the Middle Ages, contemplation focused on the *Imago Pietatis* or “Image of Pity” which presented Christ taken down from the cross, with his wounds displayed (said to be based on a vision by Pope Gregory in the sixth century) (ibid.). Eventually, prayer and meditation became a practice of “sequential meditation” (ibid.). This was based on the liturgical calendar, rooted in the tradition of the pilgrimages to the Holy Land and focusing on sequential events of Christ’s Passion. This form of meditation is still found in the “Stations of the Cross” found in every Catholic Church. Prescribed sequences of prayers were recited while “meditation upon the episodes from the Agony in the Garden to the Crucifixion” (ibid.) was repeated. In the early 16th century, Albert Durer (1471-1528) printed three Passion series, issued in a book with devotional poems. Each person was instructed to look “upon the images and pray the Word” (ibid.).

Small “Passion polyptych” made of hinged wooden “boxes” with doors opening to display different scenes were used as devotional guides. Finaldi writes that “the very act of opening and closing these doors becomes part of the process of prayer; enabling devout viewers to delve ever deeper and with increasing sympathy into the suffering and humiliation Christ” (ibid.).

Devotional art need not always be representational to encourage meditation on Christ. An essential part of personal, private devotion included mnemonics—visual clues—such as the spear, cross, reed, sponge, and crown of thorns. These were *aides-memoires*, acting as “cues for meditation” (ibid.).

The familiar rosary was a form of sequential prayer aid, made popular by the Franciscans and Dominicans in the 12th century. These Catholic Orders were especially devoted to Mary and the word *rosary* derives from “Our Lady’s Crown of Roses” (ibid.).

In addition, by the 15th century, “prayer rings” with devotional symbols were worn to encourage meditation and remembrance. They were often called “wound rings”, as the images reflected the pain and suffering by Christ for our redemption. Prayer rolls made of parchment, depicting scenes of the Passion and other New Testament events were worn, even by women in labor (called “birth girdles”). These contained images and texts to encourage meditation and devotion. The “prayer sheet” was used in the 17th-century for the same purpose (ibid.).

“Painted Prayers” have been found on the walls of the Dominican Priory of San Marcos in Florence, Italy. These phenomenal paintings were probably created by Fra Angelico (c.1300-1455). These scenes were painted in individual, private devotional rooms and weren't intended to be public, nor “episodes of comprehensive narrative, but autonomous meditation pieces for the Dominican friar occupying a particular cell” (Heller 2000).

This list could go on and on. Even today we see a rebirth of the visual in devotional and worship experiences—in all forms of churches, as well as in private devotions. According to Dyrness, “Church renewals are often accompanied by a fresh use of the visual media” (Dyrness 2001). There

are many reasons for this renewal, all of which needs to be researched, studied and understood. It is true that the “arts, as communication of life and truth arranged in form and beauty, can minister powerfully” (Spencer 1998). Even in Protestant churches, paintings, murals, banners, stained glass and “electronic art” are being used effectively. The greater challenge is how to use the visual and “sacred space” in private devotions—as an aid for contemplation, meditation and prayers. That will be a search well worth the effort, both for enhancement of personal devotions, as well as for reaching this next generation for Christ and igniting a movement of worshiping, healthy, reproducing churches.

One such devotional practice that is growing in use today is *visio divino* or “visual prayers”. Included in this is meditating on a painting or piece of visual art, praying that God would teach you and open your eyes for His interpretation and then journaling the thoughts that come into your mind. Throughout the exercise, be aware of expressions of gratitude, supplication, wonder, lament, confession or praise that is evoked by this time of meditation.

Another example of today’s new nexus of art and prayers is the beautiful publication of the Gospels done to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the King James Bible. For the first time, an abstract artist, Makoto Fujimura, was asked to illustrate and illuminate the Scriptures. Personally, I find reading God’s Word and meditating on the accompanying abstract illustrations something that helps me embrace the transcendency and mystery of our God, while deeply worshiping the immanent Savior.

Concluding Thoughts

This has been a hurried journey through the history of the church concerning the nexus of the visual and prayer and/or devotional practices. It deserves a much deeper look. But, more than that, it demands action... embracing using the visual in personal and corporate worship. Many of our Protestant churches we have been impoverished for too long. I long see a reversal of the “visual anorexia” in our worship experience. Let's learn to worship with our entire being—mind, body, imagination—through all of our senses. To God be the glory.