University of Rhode Island
DigitalCommons@URI

Senior Honors Projects | Honors Program at the University of Rhode Island

5-2006

The Concept and Use of Beauty Within the Church

Patrick Greene
University of Rhode Island, pjgreene@gmail.google.com

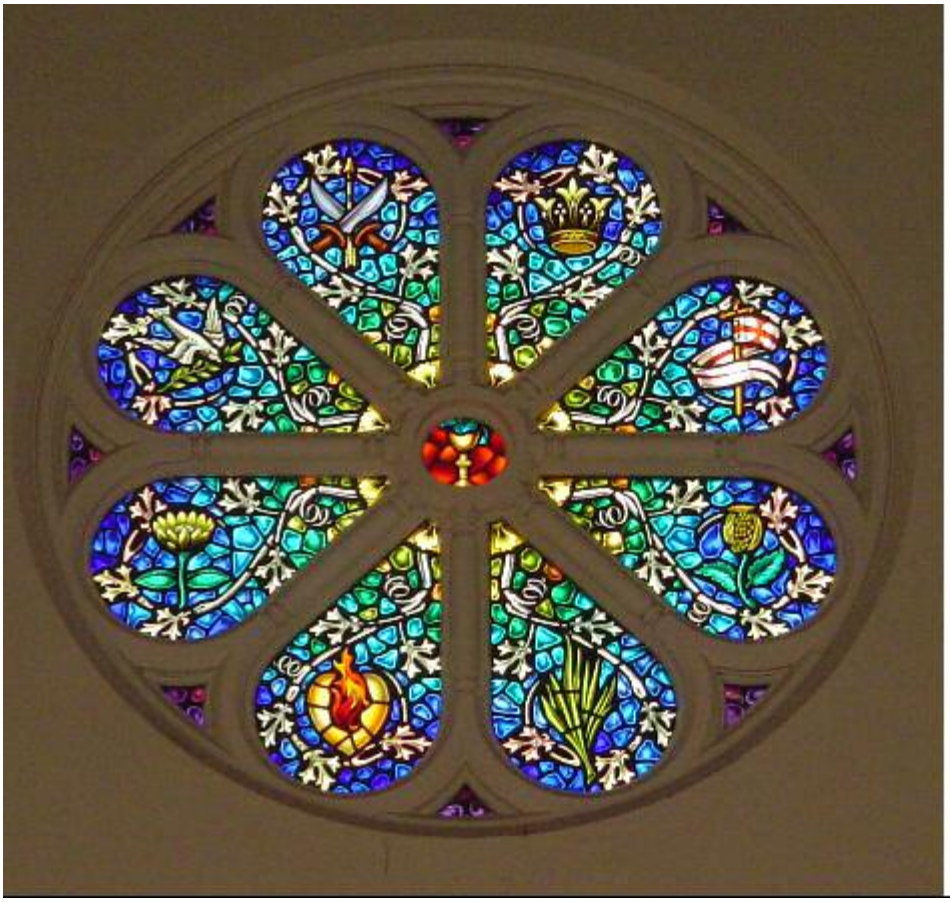
Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/srhonorsprog

Part of the Art and Design Commons, and the Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
Greene, Patrick, "The Concept and Use of Beauty Within the Church" (2006). *Senior Honors Projects.* Paper 8.
http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/srhonorsprog/8

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors Program at the University of Rhode Island at DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu.

The Concept and Use of Beauty
Within the Church



Patrick J. Greene
April 27, 2006
HPR 401

Marshall McLuhan wrote "the medium is the message" in his book *Understanding the Media: The Extension of Man* (McLuhan 7). Nowadays, this is easy to see in a society where Super Bowl commercials are glorified for how they are selling their product, rather than what their product is. Does this statement, however, hold true outside of beer and car commercials or other aspects of the advertising world? Does it hold true for forms of communication predating the advent of television and modern media? In a church does the form of the service take priority over the content of the service? Or, is the form of the service understood as just a method for communicating God's message? These five words had profound impact upon the understanding of our culture as it was developing into the age of advertising. Even today, they raise important questions about all occurrences of the transmission of messages. Through this project I plan to come to a better understanding of the importance of the form of a church and church service and how these relate to the overall meaning and purpose of the church and church service. More specifically, I plan to focus upon the importance and use of beauty within the church.

Before I begin I think it is necessary to make a few clarifications involving the two key terms of my paper, being beauty and church. Immanuel Kant defined beauty as a disinterested pleasure distinct from pleasure in the good or the agreeable. It should be disinterested in the sense that the perceiver should not be concerned with anything beyond their perception of the object. He believed beauty to be a quality between the object perceived and the perceiver. It is not a specific quality possessed by an object, but rather it is a type of experience between the perceived and the perceiver. The distinction between the other two forms of pleasure is that pleasure in the good or agreeable have an

attached aim or purpose. Pleasure found in the beautiful is free from these, this pleasure does not need a specific aim nor does it need to be understood (Wenzel 23-26). Different aspects of the church are hard to place upon this spectrum of pleasures. They have purposes and aims, but at the same time they can be enjoyed just for themselves, in a completely disinterested way. Free from association with the church, which is certainly good and agreeable, different aspects of the church can be seen as beautiful, it is these associations with the church and it's purpose that the different aspects are taken to be a pleasure in the good or agreeable. In themselves, these aspects would fall into the category of pleasure in the beautiful

Beauty, in this sense, is much more than a visual or aural quality; much more than just things seen and heard, but also feelings and thoughts. With this definition the topic opens up to many different aspects of the church. I plan to address such topics as the ambiance, the music, stained glass windows, the liturgy and other forms and aspects of beauty found within the church.

To think about partaking of a project of this nature with an open understanding of "church" scares me; it is just too big. With all the different religions including their different denominations there are countless examples to choose from and my project would be much too large to undertake. In light of this, I plan to focus on actual elements within the Episcopal Church and more specifically I will be looking at St. John's Church, my home church in Barrington, Rhode Island. Further, I will be using the word church in two different senses. Church with a capital C will mean the overarching Church, as in the Episcopal, Anglican, or Roman Catholic Church. Lower case c church will be used to address a non-specific church building.

God's Beauty as the source of all beauty

Upon starting my research, I had not thought that the general topic of my paper would be so rooted in Platonic forms. The majority of my initial research focused on the idea of beauty originating from God's Beauty. I looked through the books that I had acquired and realized that even though this was not something I had thought about or desired to address when I had chosen my project I would nevertheless have to address this matter in light of the prevalence it shows in the available material.

John Navone wrote "God is Supreme Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, the norm and measure of all dependent or participated truth and goodness and beauty" (*Toward A Theology of Beauty* 27). This short quote has two very important points. First, plain and simply, God is supreme Beauty. There is nothing more beautiful than God. The second point, all other instances of beauty not only depend upon God's Beauty but also participate in this Beauty. To illustrate this point imagine looking at your reflection in a mirror. The reflection upon the surface is easily seen as depending upon your being present in front of the mirror. It can also be seen as participating with your being present in front of the mirror in that it is a reflection of light emanating from you. That is how Navone is presenting particular beauty, it is a reflection of God's Beauty, and it depends on God's presence and participates with that presence.

To prevent misunderstanding of exactly what this means to me it is necessary to have a brief understanding of my conception of God[*]. To me, God is constant and unchanging. In the Old Testament there are accounts of events that could be seen as God

[*] I make it a habit to try and not make statements about the nature of God and always feel awkward when I do so. I have certain ideas of His Being, but they are believed by me as a matter of faith. To me they are as good as fact but I still recognize the possibility that they may be incorrect. I am not a theologian nor do I claim to have any special revealed knowledge of God. What I present here are my beliefs that are based upon my experience in the Church and my understanding of the Gospels and other Biblical texts.

changing His position on the outcome of Israel and mankind in general. I, however, believe that to be a superficial understanding. God is constant and unchanging love. These accounts, I believe, show a God who will take drastic measures to keep His people as they are meant to be. It seems very odd to say that plagues, floods and invasions are acts of love and the logical part of me runs straight into a wall when trying to justify these acts. I openly admit though, that the logical side of me does not even come close to understanding God. Despite my lack of a rational understanding of how God could have eternally constant love for His creation and still allow and even cause horrible things to happen I nevertheless believe that God does indeed possess and show this eternal love, in the same way that I believe my parents loved me even when they had to punish me.

I felt it was important to add that explanation of my belief in God's nature of being eternal and unchanging because seen from that light God's Beauty must be seen as being constant and unchanging. Although God is an active and moving God, His Beauty does not change. Like Him and His love, it may be misunderstood or misinterpreted by mankind but it is always a reflection of the same Beauty.

For the church and its many aspects this philosophy has a few important meanings. First, stained-glass windows are beautiful because they resemble God's Beauty. Likewise, hymns are beautiful because they resemble God's Beauty. All the different aspects of the church that are perceived as beautiful are so because they resemble God's Beauty. This continues even farther, all things in the world that are perceived as beautiful are so because they resemble God's Beauty.

The second important point that this philosophy presents is that by including beautiful things within the church the service is actively participating in God. If all

beautiful things are actually participating in God's Beauty then their use in church services would be a method of creating and maintaining God's presence in that church. At first glance, this philosophy can be very comforting. There are, however, some problems with it.

When I began my research I was struck with the amount of material that addressed the philosophy of beauty stemming from God's Beauty. As I have mentioned this is not what I initially intended to research so at first I was a little taken aback and not sure about what to do. I eventually put thought into it and came to the conclusion that although there were some comforting and seemingly good points I did not agree with or like this philosophy.

It is a comfortable philosophy, having all beautiful things connected directly to God, but comfortable is not always right (in my experience it rarely is). The first problem I found with this was the universality of beauty that it would demand. If things are beautiful because they resemble God's Beauty then they must always be so. I know that there have been times when I have found a particular psalm or hymn to be very beautiful and then the next time I came upon this psalm or hymn I was completely unmoved by it. This inconsistency presents a big problem to me, if it were initially beautiful because it resembled God's Beauty, and nothing about the psalm or hymn changed then it must still resemble God's Beauty. The psalm or hymn, however, was not seen as beautiful, if it resembled God's Beauty I believe that would be a consistently evident characteristic.

This line of inquiry led me in two different directions. First, maybe it is possible that the object can be seen as resembling God's Beauty one time and not at another.

Maybe the change is not with the object being perceived but the subject perceiving. I have certainly attended church in the wrong mood and not been moved by anything there. This has not always been the case though, I have often experienced this discontinuity of beauty even though there was no change in the object nor was there a reasonable change within myself to constitute my not perceiving the beauty that reflected the Beauty of God. I immediately thought of God hardening the Pharaoh's heart in the Book of Exodus (Exodus 4:21), but, (as already stated, I admit I do not even pretend to understand God's will and this is just my belief) I fail to believe that God would harden my heart over a psalm.

The second problem is similar to the previous. While thinking about this I could not account for the subjectivity of beauty in a larger sense than myself. Different people hold different things to be beautiful, and often have conflicting views as to what is beautiful. This draws up problems for me, for one, whether as just mused some people may have their hearts hardened and are thus unable to see the Beauty of God in the particulars. Or, maybe only certain people are able to perceive the resemblance of God's Beauty. I cannot even begin to fathom what would explain why someone could find something beautiful that another person, who was "in the right" when it came to perceiving God's Beauty, found to be quite the opposite of beautiful. Once again, I do not claim to understand God's will, however, I fail to believe that these are qualities that the Christian God would have instilled upon humankind.

In regards to these problems, I feel that if beautiful things are beautiful because they resemble God's Beauty than that would be a very overwhelming quality. Accounts of God's presence in the Bible are accounts of an overwhelming and awesome, in the

strictest sense of the word, presence. If something were to reflect this presence I feel that no matter how obscured it would be evidently noticeable to all.

The conclusion that I came to about this was that, yes, God may be the pinnacle of beauty, fully deserving of having capital B Beauty, whereas all of his creations only could be given lowercase b beauty. This, however, does not mean that things are beautiful because they resemble God or God's Beauty. Seen in light of the Kantian understanding of beauty these objects would more likely fall under the category of pleasure in the good if they were directly connected to God. Pleasure in the beautiful is more subjective than that; it is a relation between the perceived and the perceiver. This understanding, beauty resembling God's Beauty, makes beauty an objective quality, it is the presence of a resemblance to God. I believe that beauty, and the perception of beauty is a subjective quality and that along with freewill God gave us the gift of free perception. We perceive beauty in different things because God created us as unique beings and thus we have unique perceptions. The following understanding of beauty better accounts for the subjective nature of beauty and the individual's perception of beauty.

Beauty as a Means to Opening Oneself to God

Another prevalent understanding of the use of beauty within the church was that beauty is used in services to insight a certain mood or state of mind that is conducive to having a genuine religious experience. The beautiful things in the church would not be there only because they are nice to look at or sound nice, but rather by their being appealing they help to cultivate the religious experience. They set the mood for the church.

Frank Burch Brown wrote that religion "is not itself the object of devotion and faith" and that it "helps one to place, comprehend, and attend appropriately to distinctive kinds of objects, processes, and experiences" (Brown 112). Brown is saying that the service itself is a means of opening oneself up to something greater than itself. The service is a method of pointing the individual towards the divine. Beautiful objects are seen as tools to aid this. They, beautiful objects and experiences, are there to make sure the laity and clergy are receptive to the religious experience that they have come for.

Brown's account for the presence of beauty in the service accepts this presence as useful but seems to diminish its importance at first. He, however, goes on to write:

> One may claim, of course, that none of this counts except the Eucharist itself and that Christ's presence depends not at all on the incense and music and loft space. Yet, as even a theology of objective Real Presence will admit, Christ's presence is not efficacious for the partaker unless one is properly receptive. If the prospective communicant despairs of ever approaching God, communion may be declined; if the communicant is proud, or alienated from the larger community of the Church, the heart may be hardened. The aesthetic milieu of the Mass works against these attitudes. God must be very great and awe-inspiring to warrant such extraordinary art and ceremony; one therefore is humbled in God's presence. (Brown 124)

This paragraph shows that although in the ultimate sense of things these beautiful things are not that important, they still are a very important aspect in the individual's experience of God. Brown sums up their importance in this sentence, "The truth seems to be that in practice the arts (broadly conceived) have helped grant to all the faithful, in varying degrees, access to the Church at its very heart, and to a God who wills to approach and be approached" (Brown 125).

The many different elements of the church service thus serve as indicators to something far greater. "One is reverent and seeking a due object for reverence, directing it toward objects that point toward the final and truly fitting object, directing it toward the

sacred in anticipation of the holy" (Keickhefer 101). Importance is placed upon the different elements of the service because it is through them that we come to the divine, to the holy.

This method of understanding beauty, as a means of opening oneself up to a religious experience, has support from the Book of Wisdom, one of the deuterocanonical books of the Bible. In chapter thirteen the author writes:

> Surely vain are all men by nature, who are ignorant of God, and could not out of the good things that are seen know him that is: neither by considering the works did they acknowledge the workmaster; But deemed either fire, or wind, or the swift air, or the circle of the stars, or the violent water, or the lights of heaven, to be the gods which govern the world. With whose beauty if they being delighted took them to be gods; let them know how much better the Lord of them is: for the first author of beauty hath created them. But if they were astonished at their power and virtue, let them understand by them, how much mightier he is that made them. For by the greatness and beauty of the creatures proportionally the maker of them is seen. (Wis. 13:1-5 KJV)

This excerpt states that the beauty and majesty of all things in this world should point the individual towards God. It clearly says that beautiful things themselves are not to be worshipped but are rather supposed to tell of the Beauty and Awesomeness of their maker. The last line states that the maker is seen proportionally, as in the maker must be much greater than us and His whole creation if He is able to create such things, He is not said to be seen by a matter of resemblance or reflection.

Personally, I find this understanding of the use of beauty within the church to be a better one than the previous mentioned idea of beautiful things resembling God's Beauty. Compared to the aforementioned understanding this understanding has one drawback but it possesses one very important point that the other lacks.

First, this understanding eliminates the direct presence of God in beautiful things that was so comforting in the first understanding. I admit that this does appear to be a

drawback, but I feel that the problems I mentioned earlier eliminate this from being to serious a drawback since I do not agree with the previous understanding. My viewing it as a drawback probably comes from desire to have a comfortable understanding of my religion.

The aspect that this understanding possesses that the other lacks is that it accounts for the subjectivity of beauty. All beautiful things do not have to resemble God but they can still all help the individual to acclimate oneself towards God. The problem with this is that most churches are pretty standard in their appearance and inclusion of beautiful things within the services and church itself. This, however, just shows the degree to which the Church has been institutionalized. It in no way means that only these things are beautiful in the eyes of God, or that only these things are able to point one towards God. It simply shows that the Church is an institution and that long ago they figured out what worked for the most people and stuck with it.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote "everything happens in the human world of perception and gesture" (Johnson 103). This quotation very shortly sums up this understanding of beauty. There is no connection to the divine in the beautiful object, beauty is a quality in the "human world of perception", beauty occurs in our perception of the object, not in the object itself. In talking about painting Merleau-Ponty said that "painting is no longer for faith or beauty, it is for the individual" (Merleau-Ponty 88). His understanding of beauty in art fits very well with this understanding of beauty within the church. Beauty is a quality that occurs in the individual's perception, not a quality present in the object being perceived. Beauty is also for the individual in that it serves the purpose of opening the individual up to a religious experience.

As a product of human perception it is much easier for beauty to make it possible to have a religious experience. With the understanding that objects are beautiful because they resemble God's Beauty, there is no direct connection between beauty and ones experiencing the object. Experiencing beauty would be akin to experiencing red, or smooth, it would just be a passive factor about the object. With the understanding that beauty happens in "the world of human perception" beauty is an active experience. It is not as easy as simply looking at an object and seeing it is beautiful. How we look at the object, the frame of mind we approach the object with, the conditions surrounding the object, these aspects all alter how we perceive the object and thus how we perceive beauty in the object. It is easy to see experiencing beauty as preparation for a religious experience. Experiencing beauty is similar to the religious experience, only their objects are different and the religious experience generally reaches deeper into the self.

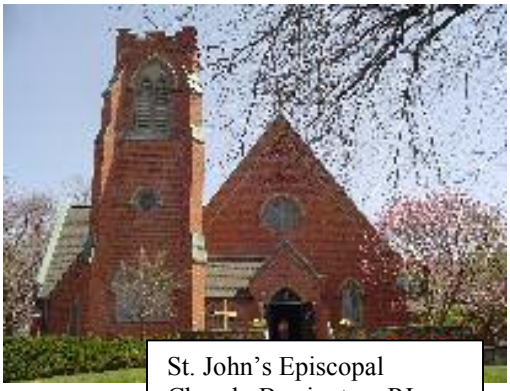
The Architecture

"The aesthetic impact of a church is the dimension that impresses itself most forcefully at once on entry" (Kieckhefer 98). The architecture of a church plays an immense role in the aesthetic encounter that the individual experiences within its walls because it defines the space of all that happens within the church walls. It does not simply define the space in which this experience takes place but it also helps to generate this experience. "The experience of the holy by the kind of space the architect has created is what must be intended, even before anything else happens within this space" (Tillich 221). Tillich is saying that unless the space in which the service is occurring begins to generate the religious experience everything that occurs in this space is fruitless. As was explained about Merleau-Ponty's understanding of beauty, the

conditions around the object being perceived play a role in our perception of that object. This carries over onto the religious experience as well, the space must be perceived as holy if what occurs in that space is also to be perceived as holy. The actual building itself should begin to foster the sense of reverence necessary for the service.

In *Theology in Stone* Richard Kieckhefer discusses three types of churches, the classic sacramental church, the classic evangelical church and the modern communal church. The three different types have different aims with their architecture, respectively: creating a "space for a subtle interplay of transcendence and immanence", creating a "dignified environment for edification" and creating a "hospitable setting for celebration" (102). The three different types use different means to accomplish their particular idea of what their church should be.

St. John's in Barrington, RI would fall under the category of the classic sacramental church. It is an old, nearly one hundred and fifty years old, brick church, which, being constructed of brick, Kieckhefer says leads to an "atmosphere of graceful simplicity" (110). That is the best way to describe the structure of the building, it is gracefully simple. It is not an elegant building but it deserves to be called beautiful. It sits upon a hill overlooking the center of Barrington, with a rolling lawn and lush flora surrounding it. The church gives a sense of strength and safety but continues to point the mind and the heart towards the divine.



St. John's Episcopal Church, Barrington, RI.

Within the classic sacramental church there are three features: height, light and acoustics, which are given much importance both in construction and theology. The

three aspects are so important that they not only shape other elements of the church but also have a direct effect upon the phenomena of these different elements (for instance the affect of acoustics upon church music). Due to their shaping of and direct effect upon other elements of the service it is important to discuss these aspects before the other elements.

Height

The first aspect of the classic sacramental churches that Kieckhefer discusses is the height of the building. The height of the church is so important that in the thirteenth century architects would construct churches to heights that they were unable to support, often leading to churches collapsing (104). The height is important because it suggests "a spirit of aspiration" (103). It suggests our desire to achieve communion with the divine.

Before modern architecture churches were generally the tallest buildings in their communities. This prominence had multiple effects. First it gave the church a sense of importance and made it a defining point within the community. More importantly, with the church towering over the community the eyes of the community are raised up and thus reminded of God.

Height also comes into play on the inside of the building. Having a higher ceiling than necessary gives the church much more open space than it would have with a ceiling of average height. "The volume of a spacious interior calls to mind that one is present in—and in relationship too—far more than one's immediate surroundings, the small corner of the world one could turn toward and touch" (Kieckhefer 105). The immense space surrounding the individual leads to a sense of awe, which leads to reverence.

St. John's accomplishes these features in two ways. First, it has a strikingly high bell tower and high peaks. These reach heights many of the surrounding buildings and most other buildings in Barrington do not. On the outside this leads to the towering presence of the church, while the inside is opened up to more space than would be expected for its size. That the church sits upon a hill also gives it the appearance of towering over the surrounding community. The hill is not much higher than the main road, but it is enough combined with the height of the tower and roof to cause the onlooker to glance heavenward.

Light

The second important aspect that architecture is supposed to foster is light. The architecture of the church is supposed to utilize light in a way that is familiar to churches but uncommon elsewhere. The manipulation of available light is done to "evoke a sense of mystery" (Kieckhefer 103). There are many ways of accomplishing this; some churches strive for an abundance of light whereas some minimize the available light, while still others might not be preoccupied with the amount of light but rather upon the manipulation of their light.

The following quote explains the significance and amount of thought that is put into the use of light for the church:

> Darkness is akin to silence in that it creates an environment in which the spirit may attend to itself. Here it must be said that the dark must be qualified enough to be awesome, not enough to be frightening. This means that dark in high recesses or far from this very place of the pilgrim would be unthreatening though awesome. Absolute dark is hardly what is sought but that soft light which can be penetrated by candles. (McNally 80)

This shows that there is a certain equilibrium between darkness and light that the architecture of the church often aims to achieve. The level of lighting present during a service is by far anything but arbitrary.

The nave at St. John's

In the nave of St. John's there are an abundance of stained glass windows but no clear paned windows. The windows present do not do much in terms of illuminating the church so the lighting comes from the front door when it is open and the artificial light produced within the church. There are hanging lamps, which strongly resemble lanterns, that rest above the pews producing a soft glow within the nave. This level of lighting is enough for practical purposes, it however does serve to create a dark and mysterious atmosphere.

Another important aspect of the lighting occurs in the chancel of St. John's. Kieckhefer writes that:

> The complexity of the interior is crucial for creating an alluring sense that there is always something further than what is immediately seen: that chancel, transepts, and perhaps tower open out into spaces present and partly visible but extending beyond one's view. (Kieckhefer 111)

Chapel Window at St. John's

On the south side of the chancel there is a small chapel used for overflow and small services. From the nave it is just possible to see that there is no wall closing off that side of the chancel and that it is an open area. In this small chapel there is a clear paned window that sheds light onto the altar. From the nave it is not possible to see this window, but its effects are clearly seen upon the altar either as an abundance of natural light or sometimes, in ideal conditions, as a ray of sunlight, with all

the illuminated dust particles in the ray seeming to be glorifying the altar and what is happening upon it. The light pouring through this window helps to create the sense of complexity and mystery that Kieckhefer says is so important to the make up of the church because the window this light is coming through remains out of direct sight.

Acoustics

How the physical nature of the church affects the sound also plays a large role in the architecture of the church according to Kieckhefer because it "suggests timelessness" (103). He further explains this in saying "the sense of sound lingering in the air is evocative of a spiritual presence, the presence of the numinous, or perhaps of past generations that have worshiped in this space" (110). Sound echoes and carries in churches in a way not found in many other buildings. It keeps the sound alive, in fact Kieckhefer refers to it as live acoustics.

The acoustics have a series of important effects. First they help to generate a sense of community. This happens because sound is able to carry across the church making it possible to hear individuals from across the church. Good acoustics also help to create a sense of energy. With the sound of what is happening sharp and clear the people present are more able to stay focused and intent upon why they are there which generates this energy. The acoustics also connect the liturgy with the actual church.

> The building itself is clearly experienced as participating in the creation of a distinctive sound, one not often experienced in secular environments, and is thus easier to identify as sacred; the building is perceived as a kind of extended organ for the production of sacred sound. (Kieckhefer 110)

The interplay between the sound of the service and the actual physicality of the church serves as a strong connection between the two and lends a certain credence to the building.

The main purpose, as previously stated, however, is "the evocation of timelessness, the creation of echoes that sustain each note beyond the measured time in which it is sounded, the overlapping of moments in music that suggests a release from the linearity of time" (Kieckhefer 111). This is so important because it first of all correlates with the eternality of the sacraments happening within the church. It also serves to enhance the present moment, to make the present moment into its own eternity.

The Ambiance

After stepping into the actual church one of the first things noticed is the feel of the place. It is similar to walking into a museum or library but still much different from either of these. There is a great sense of importance and holiness when one enters, regardless of time or what may be presently happening in the church. This sense of importance and holiness is the ambiance of the church and it plays a major role in opening oneself to and directing oneself towards God and the religious experience. As already mentioned, the architecture plays a vital role in determining different elements of the church. This however does not mean that they are the same thing.

Silence

In his essay "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" Merleau-Ponty writes "The signification without any sign, the thing itself—that height of clarity—would be the disappearance of all clarity. And whatever clarity we can have is not at the beginning of language, like a golden age, but at the end of its efforts" (Merleau-Ponty 119). Earlier in the essay he wrote that the story is not what is most important but rather the silence after the story (113). This silence is where we are able to go beyond what is said or signified. It is in silence that we are truly able to understand what we have been told or what we

have seen. This carries over from literature and painting to our lives and the church. The silence found in the church lets us better understand ourselves and what we are going through. The silence found in the church lets us go beyond what we have perceived, it gives us time to make what we have perceived our own.

When I began to think about this for my project I was instantly reminded of a verse of a song by Rage Against the Machine. The verse has nothing to do with church, nor is it that beautiful, but I still felt that it was linked to my thoughts and was very moving. "Silence, something about silence makes me sick. Cause silence can be violent sort of like a slit wrist" (Rage Against the Machine). At first glimpse the violent imagery detracts from the meaning within the words, it does however speak volumes. A large part of the ambiance of the church is the immense silence that can be found within its walls, and in a sense this silence can be violent.

The song lyrics struck me so strongly because of the purpose of silence as a part of the ambiance of a church. In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells Nicodemus "no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3 NIV). Later, in Paul's Letter to the Romans he wrote that those who believed that Jesus was the Messiah died with Christ when he was crucified and that they were given a new life through the Holy Spirit (Rom. 6 NIV). Both of these quotes show that a new life is to be gained by becoming/being a Christian. If there is a new life to be gained, the old self then, the old life, must die.

Being present in a silent atmosphere removes many interruptions, which creates a better environment for understanding oneself and what oneself is doing. This is where the lyrics I mentioned came into my thought. In silence one is more able to contemplate

and truly make the internal movements required of becoming/being a Christian. In doing so the old self is being destroyed or killed off. Silence better enables us to 'kill off' the old self. Jean-Francois Lyotard, in writing about the sublime, said that "Shock is, *par excellence,* the evidence of (something) *happening*, rather than nothing" (Lyotard 205). Silence is very shocking in the hectic world we live in, where cars, televisions and countless other things supply us with constant background noise. When this background noise is removed we are shocked and we are more able to tend to ourselves. Silence can be violent "sort of like a slit wrist" but in the Christian religion this slit wrist leads to a new life rather than death.

A quote I previously used from Dennis McNally about lighting and darkness said "darkness is akin to silence in that it creates an environment in which the spirit may attend to itself" (McNally 80). The spirit attends to itself by severing ties to the physical world. Silence is an amazing presence (or lack thereof), which leads to the growth and development of the individual. This however, sometimes comes at a price which is destroying the old self.

Aside from creating a better state of mind to make the movements towards a new life in Christ, I believe that silence can be one of our strongest connections with the divine. I say this because true silence seems to be so immense. It is almost crushing to sit in a truly silent room, and the larger the room the more crushing the silence feels. In *The Sublime and the Avant-Garde* Lyotard writes that the "aesthetics of the sublime" are "a pleasure mixed with pain, a pleasure that comes from pain" (Lyotard 203). The feeling of being crushed by silence exemplifies this, we are shocked and overwhelmed by this silence but it gives us the pleasure of connecting to the divine. This crushing feeling

comes from the complete lack of sound and this is what I think is the connection to the divine. This *complete* lack, not much in the world can be said to be complete.

In reference to language Merleau-Ponty wrote "the absence of a sign can be a sign" (Merleau-Ponty 81). This works for more than just language; the absence of background noise, the absence of music, the absence of distraction, these all are signs of the presence of God. The silence we can perceive, however, is not absolute silence, but to me it is one of the closest things we have to perceiving an absolute. In church the silence seems to echo into eternity. As a near perception of the absolute I feel silence to be a near perception of the divine.

These qualities alone do not at first appear to fit in the category of beautiful aspects within the church. With the understanding of beauty as a form of pleasure, silence can be seen as an aspect of beauty within the church because it helps to create the ambiance of the church which certainly accomplishes that pleasure.

Candles

Another big aspect that makes up the ambiance of church is the lighting in the church. The electronic lighting is often regulated and placed to resemble candlelight. I worked, for years, at my church on Sunday mornings unlocking doors and getting the building ready for the coming services. I know firsthand that the artificial lighting used is regulated with dimmer switches to an exact degree. Too much light, as well as too little, can throw off the ambiance of the entire church. The desired light is very similar to the soft glow of candlelight.

Even though electronic lighting makes candles unnecessary, they are still consistently used in churches. They are used for an array of uses, for many different

reasons. In St. John's it is the norm to see processional torches, the Sanctuary Lamp, the Paschal Candle, altar candles, votives and various seasonal specific candles. These different types of candles are used in different ways, for instance the Paschal Candle is lit throughout the Easter Season and during baptisms (Taylor 33). Whereas the processional torches are carried into the service by acolytes and remain lit only through the service. The continuation of the use of candles lets us know that there is something about candles that cannot be achieved by artificial lighting regardless of how it is regulated. I find that this quality the candles possess to be the ability to have an affect upon the ambiance of the church.

I find candles to be very amazing. Even in a well-lit room their presence has an effect upon the ambiance of that room. In a softly lit room, their presence is incredible. In the church candles are said to have multiple reasons. First they signify the presence of God. In the chancel there is a candle, called the Sanctuary Lamp, that is always burning to mark the constant presence of God within the church. Having a visual indicator of God's presence certainly creates a change in the way the individual perceives the environment, it changes the ambiance of the environment.

Sanctuary Lamp in St. John's Chancel

Candles also can have a much more personal affect upon the ambiance of a church. Many churches contain a pricket stand, simply a stand made for placing votive candles during prayer. In St. John's the pricket stand is placed in an alcove on the northern wall of the church. It is a very small and personal space, giving off a very personal atmosphere. The use of candles serves to mystify the alcove, giving it a holy ambiance. It is shown with a large bouquet of flowers because the picture was taken on Easter Sunday. Normally there is a just the pricket stand and a prayer stand, which create an inviting space for personal prayer.

Pricket Stand at St. John's

The candles clearly help to create the ambiance in this alcove. It is normally lit much less than the rest of the church allowing whoever uses it to control the degree of lighting by use of votives. The use of multiple votives creates a constant but flickering glow that strongly creates the feeling of something greater than oneself. The ambiance created by employing this personal sanctuary is incredible, to me it exemplifies the potential that candles have for affecting the ambiance of an area.

Ritual

The final aspect I will discuss about the ambiance of church is the ritualistic sense it gives. I cannot be absolutely positive whether or not it is from a form of mental association of ritual and the building since I have experienced the building for years as a place of ritual. Despite this possibility I nevertheless believe that the building itself gives of a sense of a place of ritual, which combines with my own associations of what goes on

within the church walls. This sense of importance or ritual also plays a part in creating the ambiance of the church.

As previously mentioned the larger than normal volume of open space within the church is important in the architecture of the church. This gives credence to my belief that the space itself gives the feeling of a place of ritual. That does not explain it fully however, many places have vast space within their buildings but do not give of this feeling. Of course, the lighting and acoustics have an affect and show that the architecture is important in creating the ambiance of the church. There is more however, my knowledge of what goes on within the walls certainly sharpens this ambiance, but there still remains an unexplained aspect of the ritualistic sense that the space gives off. I believe that the rituals invoke the constant presence of God into the church in a much greater degree than would be present without these rituals and thus sharpens the ambiance of the space.

Ambiance Wrap Up

The ambiance itself can be seen as an aspect of beauty being a pleasurable quality. I feel, however, that the ambiance plays a stronger role in creating the atmosphere which allows the individual to more fully experience all the beauty that the church has to offer. It creates a sense of awe that can heighten the effect of all things perceived. Analogous to how the beauty within the church helps the individual to open oneself to the divine, the ambiance of the church helps this process as well, directly by opening the individual up to the divine and indirectly by opening the individual up to the beautiful within the church.

Music

A project on the beauty of the church that excluded the use of music would be very far from complete. Music is not only one of the most striking forms of beauty within the church but it is also extremely prevalent in and important to the service. “Music transforms ordinary action into ritual action” (Kieckhefer 110). This quote briefly says what many books could be written on, but it is true, music transforms the ordinary into ritual. The procession is a ritual and not just people moving, it could be seen as people walking from one end of the building to the other, the presence of music however clears any chance of doubt that it is not part of a ritual.

Church music is said to be analogous to God and the understanding of Him that the Church employs.

> Music, existing in time, is the art most congenial to the imagination. It participates in the "environment" of a person’s space without taking up space. As such, it does not "crowd" belief by the risks of location or space or thing-ness. Therefore, it is most congenial to the Judeo-Christian sense for the non-spatial character of God. But because it is formed by natural organs, such as voices, brass, wood, and animal skins, it also participates in the natural, spatial world as well. (Trotter)

This quote does a superb job of expressing the similarity of God and music. The presence of music in the service can thus be another reminder of the presence of God in our lives and our world even though we believe Him to be not of this world. This is a valid similarity but it is not one many people are likely to make.

Song has always been a form of praise in the biblical tradition. The phrase “I will sing praise to you”, or close variants, occurs more times in the psalms then I would like to count, occurring eight times within the first thirty psalms (Psalms NIV). Music and singing is thus one of our oldest forms of praise. Its beauty and evocative power are clearly seen, in sacred as well as secular atmospheres. The beauty of church music is not

in question, what is to be looked at is if there is a more evident reason for its use within the church beside its beauty and similarity to the concept of God.

Singing and making music as a form of praise is so old that it could be argued to be our natural form of doing so. Nothing is needed but ourselves, no altars, candles, or buildings, just our voices. C.S. Lewis wrote briefly on this subject in his book *Christian Reflections*. "An excellently performed piece of music, as natural operation which reveals in a very high degree the peculiar powers given to man, will thus always glorify God whatever the intention of the performers may be" (Lewis). He believed that music was a natural operation, because of that it is by default a form of praise because it reveals "the powers He has given them"(Lewis). Lewis goes on to discuss the importance of the intentions behind the people singing and making music. Even though he feels that the intentions are very important for the individual he still believes music to be a natural operation and thus a natural form of praise. As such it makes perfect sense to have music contained within the church service.

That explains the inclusion of chanting and a capella music, which perfectly enough means "in the style of the chapel" (*Primarily A Cappella*), in the church service. What about music with instrument accompaniment? Predominantly the music at St. John's is accompanied by the organ. I believe that this can be justified simply as a means to show God is worthy to be praised beyond our natural abilities. The organ has an incredibly rich and beautiful sound which makes it a natural choice as accompaniment to the music of the church.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist

The purpose of the church is to create a space for celebrating the sacraments. The most prevalent sacrament would be the Eucharist. If the beauty displayed in the church is there to open the individual up to the divine, this is what they are being opened up for. Not meaning that the Eucharist is the divine, but it is the most real connection to the divine in the service. Whether you believe that the bread and wine are actually the body and blood of Jesus Christ or just symbolic of His body and blood does not change the fact that by receiving the Eucharist you are making a real movement of faith.

All the beauty within the church leads to this. This is it. With this in mind it makes perfect sense that the liturgy would make extensive use of beauty. The words used, the silences between those words, the motions made, every aspect of the liturgy is overflowing with beauty.

> It is to be expected, therefore, that the Catholic liturgy of the Eucharist would regularly make use of abundant aesthetic means of mediation: bells and incense, gestures and processions, poetic or (formerly) archaic language, vocal and instrumental music, and often impressive architecture. Even if many of these aesthetica never draw attention to themselves individually, they collectively and cumulatively create a rich sensory and imaginative milieu that contributes to one's awareness of sacramental presence. (Brown 124)

This quote clearly expresses how all the beauty feeds into the liturgy and that the liturgy makes full use of the beauty at its disposable to point to the divine.

If the liturgy of the Eucharist is the center of the church then the altar is the center of the Eucharist. It is here that the bread and wine are made ready for the congregation. The altar rarely is presented as just a table. There is usually a decorative altar cloth as well as ornate candles upon the altar. The

Altar at St. John's

presentation of the altar is very important at St. John's. There is an altar guild which is in charge of keeping the altar looking its best.

Aside from meticulously caring for the presentation of the altar there is also deeper reasoning for the presentation of the altar. The color of the altar cloth is indicative of the mood of the different seasons (Taylor 15). The above picture shows the altar on Easter Sunday, a white altar cloth is used during Christmas and Easter season. The white signifies the purity of Jesus, and thus it is used during the season of his birth and his resurrection. The decoration of the altar not only serves to make the altar look nicer but it also serves as a reminder of the tone of the service and the exact religious experience that is being aimed at by that specific service.

The liturgy itself also incorporates beauty in its presentation. In the Book of Common Prayer there are two Rites for the Holy Eucharist and within those two Rites there are six different Eucharistic prayers. The difference between the two Rites is that Rite One uses an older more outdated language, for instance the beginning of Eucharistic Prayer form one in Rite One starts off with "It is very meet, right and our bounden duty, that we should at all times, and in all places, give thanks unto thee, O Lord, holy Father, almighty, everlasting God" (BCP 333). Whereas the corresponding part in Rite Two Eucharistic Prayer A reads "It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth" (BCP 361).

The two excerpts are both saying pretty much the same exact thing, the meaning stays the same, just the form of how it is presented has changed. All the changes throughout the different forms of the Eucharistic Prayer are for the most part just changes

in form. That the differences are predominantly in the form and not the meaning speaks of the importance that the form plays, the importance that the beauty of the service plays. If the form of the service were not important it might make sense for there to be two different Rites for the Holy Eucharist, because Rite One uses outdated language and Rite Two uses much more contemporary language. There are, however, four different forms of the Eucharistic Prayer in Rite Two. If the form were not important there would be no reason for having these alternate forms.

The form is important. The four different forms of the Eucharistic Prayer in Rite Two all express the same meaning but do so by using different imagery and by focusing upon different aspect of creation. Despite their differences they are all saying that we are a part of God's creation and that Jesus was one with God and gave himself up for us. One form references the creation of the entire universe and narrows down into humanity, another form simply focuses on humans having been made in God's image.

I believe that the different forms of the Eucharistic Prayer are perfect examples of how beauty serves to generate an appropriate inwardness for having a religious experience. I can remember when I was younger form A in Rite Two was predominantly used at my church and I quickly had it memorized. During the Eucharist I was not thinking about church or Jesus giving up His body and blood, I was mindlessly reciting the words along with the Priest. The words were stagnant to me, they were jaded and lifeless. I do not remember when it was that I first heard form C, the form that uses imagery of the entire universe to indicate God's creation. I do however, remember being astonished by it.

The use of different forms keeps the liturgy from becoming old and stagnant. It keeps the liturgy fresh and alive. Whereas the use of beautiful imagery, like that of God creating "the vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses, and this fragile earth, our island home" (BCP 370), within these different forms makes the liturgy more appealing. They are not just different ways to say the same thing, the different forms are all beautiful.

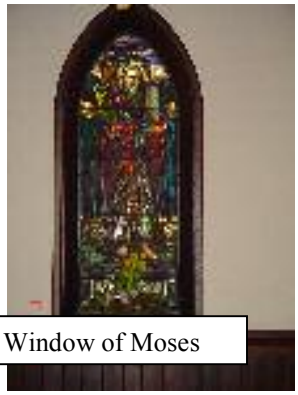
The liturgy of the Eucharist is meant to bring those participating in the Eucharist closer to God and closer to each other. Often referred to as Communion, it is a ceremony of unity. As I have said this is where the desired inwardness is finally sought. It is here that the service aims at achieving the religious experience and as such it must use all its resources to enable its parishioners to achieve this experience. "The climate of liturgy is 'one of awe, mystery, wonder, reverence, thanksgiving and praise', requiring nothing less than 'the *beautiful* in its environment and all its artifacts, movements, and appeals to the senses'" (Kieckhefer 97). In the church beauty is aimed towards a degree of inwardness conducive to experiencing the divine, and the liturgy of the Eucharist fully employs beauty to achieve this.

Stained Glass Windows

When beginning to think about doing this project I was very excited at the idea of being able to write about stained glass windows. Unfortunately I was unable to find much relevant textual material about them. There is a lot written about the history of stained glass windows as well as material on the process involved to make them. Beyond these two areas I could find nothing of worth written on stained glass windows (except

for one advertisement online about bees wax candles, but I could not bring myself to use an advertisement).

Stained glass windows are clearly an important part of the physical makeup of churches. In light of this paper I can clearly see their function as a part of the architecture by regulating the light. Architecture regulates light not only by minimizing or maximizing the available natural light, but also by manipulating it. Passing it through colored glassed does just this.


Window of Moses

There is, however, more to stained glass windows than just a manipulation of light. If they were only there for their ability to manipulate light they would be a lot less complex and prevalent. The decrease in their complexity would be due simply to the fact that the manipulation of light could be achieved in much simpler ways and if that were their only benefit or purpose there would be no reason for their complexity. Their prevalence would also decline because not all stained glass windows are placed in areas of direct light. There is a window portraying Moses at St. John's on the north wall which does not receive direct light making it hard to distinguish detail. It would be foolish to spend the money and effort on the window if it were only to be used to manipulate the light when it rarely if at all received direct lighting.

Stained Glass Windows, aside from altering natural light, give a sense of importance. Windows are commonplace items and as such can easily fall into the background of our perceptual experiences. Stained glass windows are less likely to do this, they demand attention. Their complexity, elegance and richness of color give the

impression of being somewhere important, somewhere out of the ordinary. What the window depicts also helps to set the mood of the church. It is not just a pretty design, but more often than not a relevant image to the religion or specific church. Whether it be a dove to symbolize the Holy Spirit or a shepherd's crook to symbolize Jesus, what is presented is a visual cue for what one is there for. The church makes use of these amazingly beautiful windows to not only manipulate the light but also to serve as indicators of the purpose for the church.

St. John the Evangelist, Patron Saint

Conclusion

Throughout this paper I have been discussing beauty as a tool that the church employs to achieve its desired goal of a genuine religious experience. Despite the importance it plays, I have not attempted to clarify what exactly this experience is. I believe this experience to be very personal and extremely difficult to describe. I could tell about my own religious experiences but it is such a personal matter it might be highly different for someone else. The reason I have not discussed the religious experience in terms of my own experience is that I have been going through a spiritual desert, as I like to call it. Any experience that I would be able to discuss in the depth or detail necessary was too long ago for me to do so to the degree that I would desire. I will try and explain this experience to the best of my ability however.

In "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde" Lyotard writes that the sublime feeling is "undoing the presumption of the mind with respect to time" (Lyotard 211). There are discrepancies about what different people take the sublime to be but I feel that this

definition comes close to explaining the religious experience. It is such an overwhelming feeling that transcends beauty and sense perceptions; it penetrates into one's innermost being. The religious experience, unlike Lyotard's sublime, is not just timeless, but at the same time it is eternal. Once again, this is something that jars my reason, but I understand it through faith. This experience seems to remove one from time while connecting one to all that is, has been and will be. As with the experience of beauty, this is a very personal and subjective experience. It is a feeling of love and awe and mystery.

This feeling is strongly impacted not only by one's connection to the divine, but also by the surrounding conditions. This is why the phenomenological experience of beauty is such a good preparation for this experience. As already mentioned, this experience is structurally similar to the experience of beauty, the difference is that with this experience we are able to go beyond sense perceptions and are able to perceive eternal truths about reality. Experiencing beauty serves as preparation by familiarizing the individual to the process the experience employs, making it easier to experience something far less certain than beauty.

This experience is very hard to elaborate but so distinct when experienced. I am not talking about anything too far out, I am not talking about mystical experiences or a direct witnessing of the divine. I am talking about the experience, the feelings that reinforce one's belief. The experience that leads one to believe that their religion is real and that what that person is doing in church is real. This is the experience that I believe the church uses beauty to open the laity to.

I would like to close with this thought. Although I have been talking about the use and reasoning of beauty within the church I have only focused on one aspect of it. I

have been discussing how beauty helps the congregation, the people perceiving the beauty. There is another very important function of the beauty that I have not clearly addressed. This is simply that the beauty is present as a form of praise to God. We create and make use of beautiful things because beauty often demands great skill and we should offer our best to God. So, as much as beauty helps to open the individual up to God, it is important to remember that the beauty is also present as a tribute to God.

Works Cited

Brown, Frank Burch. *Religious Aesthetics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989

Kieckhefer, Richard. *Theology in Stone*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Lewis, C. S. *Christian Reflections.* Grand Rapids, MI: Wb. M. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995.

Lyotard, Jean-Francois. "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde." The Lyotard Reader. Andrew Benjamin. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989.

McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1964.

McNally, Dennis. *Sacred Space: An Aesthetic for the Liturgical Environment*. Bristol, IN: Wyndham Hall, 1985

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence." The Merleau Ponty Aesthetics Reader. Galen Johnson. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993.

Navone, John. *Toward a Theology of Beauty*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996.

The Holy Bible, King James Version. http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/wisdom.html

The Holy Bible, New International Version. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996.

Taylor, Richard. *How to Read a Church*. Mahwah, NJ: HiddenSpring, 2005.

Tillich, Paul. *On Art and Architecture*. New York: Crossroad, 1989.

Trotter, Thomas. *A Theology of Church Music*. April 22, 2006. http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=513

Wenzel, Christian Helmut. *An Introduction to Kant's Aesthetics: Core Concepts And Problems*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005.