

Towards a Sacred Aesthetic: Laying the Ground

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1. Introduction

What is the nature of the aesthetic act through which the Sacred is approached and made manifest, through the creation and appreciation of Sacred Art and Architecture? Are there universal aesthetic principles that accord with the presumed absolute nature of that Reality? By discerning these, might one therefore elucidate an absolute aesthetics of the Sacred?

The Center may first be considered as the archetypal spatial form of the manifestation of the Sacred. But the Sacrality associated with this form is neither determined, nor limited by it. By analogy, this extends to any Sacred form. Therefore, the use of what is termed Sacred form does not ensure that the product or process will in fact be Sacred. To see form itself as Sacred is idolatry, mistaking the vehicle for the essence. How then is it possible to approach the Sacred?

I argue that to encounter the Sacred, it is necessary to pass beyond form. The paradox of phenomenal form mediating the Absolute is therefore resolved, by penetration into essence. To achieved this, is to follow the light within, and beyond, form. Deep meaning then arises in the direct apprehension of Ultimate Reality, beyond the socio-cultural world of humanity. Thus the theory and practice of Sacred Art and Architecture is primarily spiritual activity.

The need is recognized for this theory and practice to be situated within a comprehensive Sacred Metaphysic. Elsewhere, I therefore advance a harmonic field Metaphysic.¹ This suggests that the spiritual path is harmonic in nature. The import of Sacred Art and Architecture is the facilitating of the process of spiritual realization, and the potential of Harmonic Architectural Composition then arises. But it appears the design of authentic Sacred Art and Architecture can only proceed through persons in a state of Grace.

Although the Sacred may be approached through form, it is necessary to pass beyond that form, by proper attending towards the essence that lies beyond. The nature of the Sacred artistic and aesthetic act is found to be devotional, in submission to the Will of God. In so far as there is an absolute Aesthetic of the Sacred, it is that which lies in Tradition.

2. On the Impropriety of Defining the Sacred

How might the Sacred be defined? According to Eliade,² the Sacred is pre-eminently the Real, a wholly other Reality that does not belong to this world, even though it is manifested in, and through it. By contrast, the profane world is the unreal, uncreated, and non-existent.

Schuon gives a definition of the epithet 'Sacred':

*'...that is sacred which in the first place is attached to the transcendent order, secondly possesses the character of absolute certainty and, thirdly, eludes the comprehension and power of investigation of the ordinary human mind... The sacred is the presence of the center in the periphery, of the motionless in the moving; dignity is essentially an expression of it, for in dignity too the center manifests at the exterior; the heart is revealed in gestures. The sacred introduces a quality of the absolute into relativities and confers on perishable things a texture of eternity.'*³

To attempt to define the Sacred more closely is improper. To confine the Godhead to our construction and image, is to attempt to name God. That is not our privilege. In the First Article of the Summa Theologia, Aquinas speaks:

'Objection 1. It seems that no name can be given to God. For Dionysius says that, "Of Him there is neither name, nor can one be found of Him"; and it is written: "What is his name, and what is the name of His Son, if thou knowest?" (Prov.XXX.4).

*Reply Obj. 1. The reason why God has no name, or is said to be above being named, is because His essence is above all that we understand about God and signify in words.'*⁴

Saint Bernadine of Sienna preaches, in 'A Sermon on the Glorious Name of Jesus Christ':

*'When the human mind makes bold to speak of the name of Jesus, and of its praise, it finds itself deficient; the tongue cleaves to the palate of the mouth and all speech dries up. Indeed, this name is so great, so much more profound than the very oceans, that no human intellect is fully capable of expounding it; this is why Saint Isidore says "the spoken Name is like a well of wisdom that makes things known to us". Now it is the nature of names to specify that which is named, and the Name of Jesus instructs us in an incomprehensible manner. Who is able to explain the incomprehensible? Is it possible to reveal the infinite? And what man can possibly express in mere words the meaning of the Incarnation – God-man?... Absolutely no one, unless his lips be "circumcised".'*⁵

Meister Eckhart approaches the same problem in his sermon 'Distinctions are lost in God'; and again in his Latin Sermon IV, 1:

*'If we say that all things are in God, we understand by this that, just as he is without any distinction in his nature, and yet absolutely distinct from all things, thus also all things are in him in the greatest distinction, and yet not distinct, and first of all because man is God in God ...'*⁶

The problem extends to that confronting the would-be architect of the Sacred, with respect to the status of Sacred forms. The Sacred cannot be sensibly defined, named, expressed, or imaged; yet that Presence can be known. How is this to be achieved in the work of Art? To clarify that question, it is necessary to move beyond form, and glimpse what lies beyond Creation.

3. Approaching the Question

Questions regarding the creation and apprehension of Sacred Art, and the status of the Sacred Art-object, cannot be satisfactorily treated in isolation. They need to be considered in relation to their cosmological, metaphysical, ontological, and in particular spiritual contexts. Yet paradoxically, it is only through such parts that the context as a whole becomes known.

Geometric explorations and discoveries, in an earlier foundation work of the author,⁷ have sustained aesthetic contemplation, generated spiritual insight, and furnished a frame-work of understanding. These suggest a metaphysical totality, within which the place and purpose of Sacred Art and Architecture can be described.

Thus the motivations for such work have been primarily spiritual, and the work undertaken as a spiritual discipline, indeed as a pilgrim's quest. Govinda observes, in a study of the mantra,

*'A merely historical or philological interpretation ...is indeed the most superficial and senseless way of looking at it, since it takes the shell for the kernel and the shadow for the substance; because words are not dead things, which we toss at each other like coins and which we can put away, lock up in a safe or bury underground, and which we can take out again unchanged even after centuries, when it pleases us. They are rather like symbols or hieroglyphs of a steadily growing and expanding consciousness and field of experience ...'*⁸

Thus in this work, the presence of the Sacred has been the guiding light, and it is suggested that an approach of this kind is essential, if any such work is to be valid. This

Presence, bearing the status of an undeniable Reality, cannot be presented directly, though it be the very “substance” of Sacred Art. It is intangible, and can only be indicated through the outer formulations through which it has appeared, remembering always that those forms are not the “thing-in-itself”.

But this merely restates the central dilemma of Sacred Art from the view-point of humanity. How are we to know that which is beyond all knowing – which bears, embedded within, our minuscule searching and immense ignorance?

A problem frequently encountered is the on-going status of a particular illumination, whether conceptual or expressive. An illumination occurs in consciousness of the Divine; later it loses that sense of the Sacred. Or it receives that sense, subsequent to its mundane contemplation. An illumination may contradict another. How then is the artist or aesthete of the Sacred to proceed? If the supremacy of transcendental being is recognized – as I believe it must – what then is the proper stance to assume in respect of one’s work? Can the “Will of God” be discerned in these matters, and if so how? In this regard, can anything be known or expressed?

Two primary sources are recognized. These are Gnosis,⁹ and Revelation, as enshrined in Tradition.¹⁰ The earlier work proceeds mainly by the way of Gnosis, through exploration, contemplation and illumination. This has led to discovery of the significance of Tradition, which authority has on occasion confirmed the process.

4. On the Structure of the Field of Inquiry

The nature of the field of inquiry has implications for research and presentation. The field is non-linear, non-hierarchical, and in one sense interactive. It is therefore foolish to attempt to straight-jacket knowledge into a form imposed upon it from without. The primary stance should rather be one of receptivity, of responding to the form and inner life of the material as it appears.

Research and the growth and development of consciousness are interactive with their field of inquiry. Observer, act of observing, and observed cannot be conveniently separated in a sensible manner. Understanding arises towards the end of such a work, and is not to be imposed at the beginning.

The modern Western *Weltanschauung*, at least prior to the recent rise of ICT (Information and Communication Technology)¹¹, tends to view knowledge as the accumulation of discrete bits of information. Research is assumed to consist of proving or disproving just one such bit. Disciplines similarly are presumed to operate independently of one another, and one is expected to confine oneself within one such system. But in fact, different parts overlap, interpenetrate, and interact with one another (ICT is revealing ever more complex and subtle patterns of the ways in which this might occur). Thus the complexity of knowledge and of knowing is of higher order than that of naive accumulation. This is evident from a consideration of harmonic complexes, which reveal higher order fields and configurations. The approach taken has therefore been metaphysical and holistic – for Truth exists prior to our poor images of it.

Similarly, not only have linear and hierarchical modes been found inappropriate, but also formal modes in general. Although the Sacred may be mediated in particular historic forms, it is never those forms that are in themselves Sacred. To assert that is idolatry, mistaking the vehicle for the essence. This understanding marks the boundary between exoteric and esoteric religion, and the formal from the essential.¹² In using religious terms or images, an attempt is made to point towards, deal with, and express that which is ever beyond cognitive speculation or formal expression. Yet as Patañjali teaches,¹³ that may be realized, in finding and in knowing God.

The spiritual path is the realization of the Sacred. It carries one in a sense outside culture, certainly far beyond and deeper within.¹⁴ The key portal is passed when one moves from constructing an image or idea of God, to realizing (albeit grossly imperfectly) Divine fabrication of oneself. The complexity of the field far exceeds one's image of it. An effective way of dealing with that complexity is pattern recognition, and realization of an integral holism that proceeds "from above". This is characteristic of the realization of spiritual states of consciousness, which may only be attained through Grace. It is through the harmony of spiritual development that the evolution of human consciousness occurs.

Thus the earlier work is structured more as a harmonic entity, than a linear sequence or hierarchy. The various strands of thought and awareness interact in a manner which precludes separate consideration. The final arbiter in ordering the work has been spiritual discrimination.

The primary vehicle guiding that work has been, appropriately, a *mandala* – a traditional source for revealing Unity within Diversity.¹⁵ Contemplation of a particular mandala, the Polar Zonagon, led to geometric, aesthetic, and spiritual discoveries emanating from that source. These comprise a complex of insights into a field of knowledge of Sacred Aesthetics that might well be described as “Harmony Through The Center”.

The Polar Zonagon Mandala provided a compositional and analytical icon. It suggested that whilst one may certainly distinguish various architectural dimensions, they cannot be regarded as being distinct from one another, nor from their spiritual significance. To alter the state or value of any one dimension, is to affect the values of the other dimensions, and of the whole. This indicates the necessity for a holistic approach, suggesting the need, and a means, of working in harmony with the Cosmos. It provides a suitable schema for harmonic dimensional and inter-dimensional composition, and thus the potential to cope more effectively with the richness of being in which humanity is immersed.

5. Geometrical Aspects of the Explorations Conducted

The geometrical content of the earlier work provides a disciplined approach to the composition and analysis of Sacred Art and Architecture, tempered by the aesthetic and metaphysical essays and speculations.

The primary cosmogonic movement of Creation proceeds from the Void – the nothingness beyond the One. Thence arises the oneness of Unity. This then differentiates to produce the multiplicity of diverse forms, through a descending notion of harmonic fields within harmonic fields within harmonic fields... By this process, dimensional range becomes more limited, higher order consciousness virtually fragmenting into separate beings, objects, and processes of consciousness. But this separation and distinction is apparent, and not Real.

The fundamental purpose of being, the localized condition of consciousness in which the individual finds him- or herself, is to reattain complete integration into Cosmos. That purpose is to become one with God. In that the primary cosmogonic differentiation is harmonic in nature, the task of reintegration, the pathway to the Absolute, is found through harmonic structuring; i.e.

< Harmonic Cosmogony begets Harmonic Reintegration >

Sacred Art and Architecture are vitally concerned with the expression of the Beyond, and the guidance of the individual. In essence, they are provided as a means of escape from the illusory play of forms. They are means of reintegration, through revealing the inner Light within experience.

Geometrical harmonies together with the potential they offer for composition, provide a rich metaphor and vehicle for that reintegration through the creation and contemplation of the Sacred Art Object. But this harmonic structuring is not absolute. This is because of, firstly, the relative ignorance of the beholder. Secondly, harmonic structuring addresses the interplay of phenomena and form, and not that which lies beyond. Thirdly, there is the problem of the reification of the Truth. That which on occasion illuminates, may later be found to be mistaken, no formulation of the Truth being Truth in itself.

An investigation of harmonic behavior in regard to the theory and practice of Sacred Art suggests the potential contribution Harmonic Architectural Composition might make – in serving to clarify the *Light of the Beyond*.

As a consequence of wide-ranging explorations, the necessity is discerned, at both geometric and metaphysical levels, of harmonic composition proceeding from the more embracing integral field, to the specific consideration. Ideally, elements and relations are derived as harmonic properties of a harmonic field.

For future work, some techniques and the implications of centralized, and decentralized harmonic spatial fields to the composition and analysis of Sacred Art and Architecture will be presented, in further papers. These are the Cyclic and the Pythagorean Harmonies, as explored in the author's dissertation.¹⁶

6. References

- ¹ Robert C. Meurant, *The Aesthetics of the Sacred*, PhD thesis, University of Auckland: School of Architecture, 1984. Subsequently published as: *The Aesthetics of the Sacred: A Harmonic Geometry of Consciousness and Philosophy of Sacred Architecture* (3rd Edn.), The Opoutere Press, Boulder and Auckland, 1989 (available from the author).
- ² Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane – the Nature of Religion*. Harcourt, Brace and World, New York, 1959.
- ³ Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam*. Unwin Paperbacks, London, 1976, p.48.
- ⁴ Anton C. Pegis ed., *Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas*. The Modern Library, New York, 1948, p.97.
- ⁵ Rama P. Coomaraswamy, transl., “‘A Sermon on the Glorious Name of Jesus Christ’ by Saint Bernadine of Sienna”, *Studies in Comparative Religion*. v.14, no.1-2, 1980, pp.34-61.

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- ⁶ Quoted by Jeanne Ancelet-Hustache in her *Men of Wisdom: Master Eckhart and the Rhineland Mystics*. transl. Hilda Graef, Longmans, London, 1957, p.56.
- ⁷ Robert C. Meurant, op. cit.
- ⁸ Lama Anagarika Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*. Rider and Company, London, 1973, p.255.
- ⁹ See Frithjof Schuon, *Gnosis – Divine Wisdom*. Perennial Books, Middlesex, 1959. Here Gnosis keeps its original meaning of ‘*Wisdom made up of Knowledge and Sanctity*’. The critical distinction is made in the Translator’s Foreword between ‘*knowledge acquired by the ordinary discursive mind and the higher Knowledge which comes of intuition by the Intellect, the term Intellect having the same sense as in Plotinus or Eckhart*’.
- ¹⁰ Again, Tradition is used in the same sense as in Schuon, and in Burckhardt, Coomaraswamy, Guénon, et al. For example, ‘*...traditional man, ...whose life and thought are moulded by a set of principles of transcendent origin and who lives in a society in which these principles are manifested in every sphere...*’, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Living Sufism*. Unwin Paperbacks, London, 1980, p.107.
- ¹¹ See Robert C. Meurant, *Recent Papers in Applied Linguistics and the Convergence of Information Communication Technologies*. The Opoutere Press, Boulder and Auckland, 2010 (available from the author).
- ¹² See Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*. Perennial Books, Middlesex, 1981. Schuon elsewhere draws the vital distinction between Religious and Sacred Art.
- ¹³ George Feuerstein, (translator) (1989), *The Yoga-Sutra of Patañjali: A New Translation and Commentary*, Inner Traditions International, Rochester, Vermont, 1989.
- ¹⁴ A clear exposition of the Traditional relationship between Culture and the Sacred is Paul Younger, *Introduction to Indian Religious Thought*. Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1972.
- ¹⁵ For an informed discussion of the mandala, see Giuseppe Tucci, *The Theory and Practice of the Mandala*. Rider and Company, London, 1974.
- ¹⁶ Robert C. Meurant, 1984/89, op. cit.