

Theology and Beauty

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I

Well, when I was foolish enough to accept to speak on the subject of theology and beauty, I was in delusion that I had clear ideas, even if they were not many, on the subject, but since then I have tried to improve my knowledge and I have been reading up on the subject, and I am in the miserable state of confusion in which one is when one has met new material and had no time really to integrate it. So I will make an attempt at speaking on the subject but I warn you that it will be a disappointment.

Many of you may have read a book by Paul Evdokimov entitled *Theology of Beauty*. This is about icons, and it is not my subject. I would like to speak of the two parts of it, theology and beauty, and try to relate them but not specifically connecting them with icons or even with religious art. First of all, when we think of theology, one can approach it either as a science or as an experience, and I think, in both ways one can think of theology in connection with beauty. When it is approached as a science, that is, in the

form of creedal definitions, of its expression in liturgical worship, in its expression in liturgical art, we can see clearly that there is harmony, structure and beauty. Also the God of whom we are speaking, the world which emerges out of His creative act, our calling to that fulfilment which is the Kingdom of God is a vision of beauty. On the other hand, when we leave aside all manners of expression, theological or artistic in sound or in line and colour, when we are faced with the Living God in an act of worship, of adoration, of prayer, when this act of worship reaches that depth which can be obtained only in contemplative silence, we are confronted with an experience which more than one writer defined in terms of beauty rather than truth or other ways or forms of speech, because we are too accustomed when we speak of truth, to seek an intellectual formulation, and when we speak of other forms of limiting them to material or earthly expression. Understood in this way theology can be defined, as indeed it has been by St Gregory of Nazianze, not as information concerning God but as a knowledge of God, and it is at that point when that

God may be seen as beauty, as holiness, as Himself.

Now, when we speak of beauty, we have got to try to understand what we are speaking about. One of my great hopes when I began to investigate written material, was that I would find something of value in the *British Encyclopaedia*. So I looked up the word “beauty” to discover that there is no such entry in *British Encyclopaedia*. Being curious by nature and cornered by the necessity to give this talk I thought that perhaps if I looked up “aesthetics”, I might have something concerning beauty, and indeed I discovered that older generations had thought of aesthetics as a theory of beauty or as a part of philosophy concerned with the subject but they were grossly mistaken, because aesthetics does not deal with beauty, beauty being a purely subjective notion which can neither be defined nor studied. And then there is great deal in the *British Encyclopaedia* which one can read with interest and probably to one’s great advantage concerning other aspects of aesthetics, but beauty seems to be completely out of the question. Aesthetics deals with the process of artistic creation, with its

social reasons, with the psychological and psychiatric effects of it on the onlooker, on what happens to the artist and so forth. But as I have already said, beauty doesn't come into the picture as being too subjective a thing.

Then I turned my hopes to other quarters and I thought that one might find something about beauty in a treatise on psychology, and so I turned to two good treatises in French and in German. I discovered that the word "beauty" is not mentioned, which struck me even more than I have been struck by the *British Encyclopaedia*, because I thought that subjective experience can conceivably be an object of study for psychology. I dare say that in my very poor vision of things psychology deals with a great deal of subjective experience.

Then I thought that perhaps metaphysics could help me. I happen to have only one good book on metaphysics, which is a German treatise, and I was rewarded in a way by discovering that there was a footnote on beauty in the book. Now, I am telling you all this not simply to fill time or to have an alibi

not to know anything about my subject, but isn't it a sign of our times that beauty has no place in a dictionary of some, well, a yard and a half, in which you can find a great deal of information about a great many things, that there is not one line on beauty in two treatises on psychology and there is just one footnote, I grant you, it's a long one—about a page and a half in an almost unreadable small print in a German book on metaphysics. Isn't that a very curious thing and doesn't it result from the fact that in the course of centuries we have come gradually to consider beauty indeed as nothing but a subjective experience without any other *raison d'être*, something which I can perceive, which has no objective basis, which has no criteria and therefore is irrelevant, almost an autistic activity? This autistic activity may very well be widespread. All of us may indulge in that kind of reactions, and yet it seems to be incommunicable and meaningless to the authors of these various books. And yet again it is such a common experience and plays such an important role in our lives because so many of our judgements are judgements of beauty

not only concerning the things, which we see, but even in our moral appreciation of things: we speak of beautiful behaviour, we speak in terms of beauty and ugliness about values, which are human values of another type than the perception of the outer world.

When you try to see what people mean by beauty, then you discover of course that there are great differences in the approach. I remember to begin with, two essays in the works of Edgar Poe, two essays on beauty, on his philosophy of beauty, on his conception of it. Both have one and unique theme that nothing can be called beautiful which is not on human scale, that anything, which is too small, gives a cramping feeling to the one who experiences it. It is too small, one can't breathe, one feels in a strait jacket and therefore one can not experience it as beauty. And at the other extreme, which I feel is much graver, anything which is too great or too big, anything that confronts us with something, which is greater than me, can not be called beautiful because it creates a sense of terror, of awe, it makes me perceive myself as being small, vulnerable and endangered and must

be ruled out. And in his two essays he describes two estates which to him are an expression of concrete beauty. The essays are fairly long and I found the estates extremely cramping and distressing so I will not give any details about their layout but the principle is that when there is an avenue, it should turn and have an end before you are afraid of space. When there is a height it must be such that you are in control of the sense of height, when there is a vision of space, it must be limited so that you are not confronted with any kind of sense of limitlessness, otherwise in other words, that at no moment, in no situation you should be confronted with the fact that you are small in the context of something, which is too vast, or too big, or too great for you. Well, this to me is the very negation of the role and the meaning of beauty not only in connection with God or theology but even with human dimensions, because if we accept that kind of approach and if we conceivably could create each of us for ourselves a setting, which will be totally satisfying in that sense—satisfying our eyes, satisfying our sense of limits, satisfying our sense of security, we

would create a monstrous world out of which there would be no issue whatever because we would have made sure that we are never challenged with either greatness or anything, which is different from us and endangering our sense of security and repose.

On the other hand, we have—and I am speaking now in a purely subjective way—we all had, I am sure, experience, the elating and inspiring sense of seeing things, which are frightening, which are beyond us and which are an inspiration for that very reason. Speaking of scenery, one of the examples which Edgar Poe gives is the devastating experience of seeing a thunderstorm because it is so frightening and one feels so helpless. Yet I am sure that many of us have experienced a thunderstorm in terms of beauty and have had a sense of the greatness of the world in which we live—the power of nature, the greatness, the vastness, the complexity of the cosmos in which we live, and have learnt something positive not only of our frailty but concerning our being part of a world so great and so full of mystery and vigour. On the other hand, we must all have had experienced

of the sea, of the plain, of the mountain, of the sky and all these experiences are in a sense too great for us because we can not contain them, we can not control them, they are limitless and they are confronting us with a strength, a power, which is beyond us. Isn't this, perhaps, one of the ways in which beauty meets us, confronts us and compels us to outgrow our own limitations?

On the other hand, to say that beauty is anything which gives us a sense of satisfaction is not enough because, I think, and I don't think I am mistaken in that, but the contrary of beauty is not ugliness. I think all of us, we have had experience of faces for instance, which are objectively ugly and yet which are arresting because there is meaning, significance, a message in them and if we were asked, is it beautiful or ugly, we would say: this is a beautiful face, because it conveys meaning that gives it a dimension of beauty. We may have met this also in literature.

I am afraid my knowledge of English literature is very limited but I am thinking at present of a poem by Charles Baudelaire called "La Charogne", "The

Carrion". It fulfils all the promises of its title. The poet had been walking along a path and he is confronted with the dead carcase of a dog. The dog must have died some good time before he landed on him because it is filled with maggots, surrounded with swarm of flies and so on. And he gives a description of what he sees but at a certain moment he moves on and says, "And that is what will happen to the girl I love."

Now, his description is extremely impressive by its realism but also by the beauty in which he vests the terms he uses, but the next move which confronts us with the human problem, which is ultimately the problem of human destiny, meanings, makes the poem not into something which is on the level of corruption and destruction but of meanings, and at that moment it becomes both a poem and beautiful.

I have been reading also a certain amount in the past and lately about mathematics. And I have read two essays which impressed me very much, the one by a man called Hardy, an American, who tries to write an apology for being a mathematician and for

mathematics in general; and the other one—by a Russian mathematician of whom some of you may have a notion called Igor Shafarevich, who is one of the most courageous men at present in Soviet Russia, who is a member of the Academy of Sciences, a professor of mathematics, but has made his concern and his job, as it were, of fighting for human rights and particularly for the rights of believers in the Soviet Union. He has delivered lately a speech on the meaning of mathematics to him and he points out that one can speak of beauty in mathematics only if mathematics have a meaning and his problem is this. When you think of medicine, physics, chemistry, any of the applied sciences, you can find quite easily a meaning in them because they are applied and because the meaning of the work of the researcher or the practitioner is to do something for the good either of mankind or of an individual person.

Mathematics seems to develop in an aimless way, it develops apart from a preconceived plan. If there are results applicable to physics, to chemistry, to astronomy, etc., it is a by-product. Mathematics are

not aimed at producing mathematical instruments or gadgets for other sciences to use or categories of thinking, or ways of approach. One may say that mathematics in that sense can be called pure art, art for art's sake in the sense that it is this a search for things, which are true and may be applicable or not, but the value of which is in their intrinsic truth, in their intrinsic significance, whether the results of modern mathematics are applicable to anything or not does not make them less significant or less important.

And so he raises the basic problem: can one give a ratio to mathematics if there is no way of applying mathematical research at a given moment or perhaps ever to a practical purpose? And he says, yes, there is a meaning and this meaning is in beauty and in ultimate significances, which he calls religion and God. For him as for Hardy the meaning of mathematics and the beauty of mathematics is rooted in the fact that a given proposition is true. All the mathematics were true to fact, say, ancient geometry dealt with spaces, older mathematics dealt with cal-

ulation, modern mathematics are much more an abstract science, a science which is unrelated to the material substance around them but in terms of intellectual logic, in terms of rational development, the findings of mathematics are true. And beauty, that is Hardy's point, increases in significance when a new formulation leads us to a more general a vision of things, a formulation that can hold together a greater number or a vaster space of truth acquires an increasing quality of beauty.

But then if you follow Shafarevich, you come to the point that if it is ultimate truth that are to be expressed, we can very well go to the Pythagorean idea that ultimately one could find in mathematics an expression of eternal verities, including God, and then one could hold the whole mystery of the created world in one mathematical formula inapplicable to anything because its purpose would not be to be applied but to be a perfect expression of the meaning, of the aim, of the significance of things so that they could be then broken up in secondary elements and become applicable but the final result, the greater

success of it would be not in the applied science but in the unique vision that would hold all meanings together.

Now, this is an approach to mathematics which one could also apply to other things. I remember Prof. Nissiotis visiting Russia a certain number of years ago. He was taken to see everything that was worth seeing—the exhibition of Soviet agriculture and industry, museums, churches and he was taken to the ballet. And he saw one of the great ballerinas dancing. I cannot remember what it was, but he said to me that when he looked at her dancing he said, “One could not dance (I think it was *Giselle*), one can not dance death as she did it, if it was not a pure religious experience.” The beauty of it conveyed a meaning which was beyond the human aspect of dying. It was a dying that had the dimensions of a meaning, of ultimate significance. And he said that this woman could not have danced this way if she had not prayed her dancing, and while he was looking at this dancing, he was sharing in her praying.

Now, I do not know the person who danced but if

a dance can convey prayer, if the beauty of the gesture, the harmony of it can convey prayer, then it means that beauty is not simply that satisfies the eye or the ear or gives a sense of nothing but created harmony. It is something that leads us one step beyond. And this step beyond was taken, o, a long time ago, in the 6th century, by Isaac of Syria who said in one of his writings that the dance is the eternal occupation of angels.

I am insisting on the dance because it is an unusual approach to things. We all have these pictures of heaven with angels playing the fiddle and the flute, which fill me with sacred horror, but if you think of king David dancing before the Arc, if you think of these words of one of the greatest ascetics of the Syrian desert, someone who did not live in Hollywood or in any such place; if you think of the meaning of dancing, if you think of even—what is it, a hymn, is it a song, is it a poem?—“The Lord of the Dance”, well, you can realise that the choreographic beauty of it is nothing unless there is beyond it a human experience, and beyond the human experience, an ex-

perience which is not personal, which is not autistic, which is not beauty as subjective response to things but which has the quality of a universal experience. It is not all of us who dance or who can express themselves in choreographic movement as it is not everyone of us who can draw or paint, or sing, or express beauty in terms that would be recognised as such readily. Yet we can perceive it and we can convey it if what we do has meaning, that is, if what we do has a quality of universality and ultimate goals, ultimate content.

Well, this brings us to something which I believe is of great importance—to the notion that beauty is certainly a subjective experience but a subjective experience about something objectively real and true. May I open brackets at this point and remark that the moment one speaks of an experience whatever it is, whether it is knowledge or physical experience, sensation or any other thing, which we can call an experience, we are speaking of something subjective because it is happening to me. If I discover or share in an abstract truth of mathematics, of physics, of

biology, of music, of dancing, of painting, of sculpture as long as the object remains nothing but an object, it is no experience of mine. The moment it becomes an experience of mine, it becomes a subjective experience. And in that sense the way in which we so often disparage the word “subjective” as though it was something autistic, born within me without any relation to anything objective, is false. Nothing objective can be perceived before it becomes a subjective experience. And in that sense—and here the bracket is closed—in that sense, however subjective the experience of beauty is, for one thing there is an element of universality in it. Even if a piece of painting or a statue or anything else could be created by one man and recognised by one person, it already possesses the quality of meaning because it has conveyed meaning to someone else.

I remember having discussed this abstract art once with one of the Russian abstract painters working in Paris, a man called Lansky. His vision of abstract art is of a language, which can be spoken only by one person and understood perhaps by four or five

according to the degree of abstraction, the uniqueness of the form of expression. But the moment you say that, you still recognise that there is between the one who creates and the one who perceives a link of meaning and understanding. If there was no meaning, you would look at the surface and see nothing but a surface coloured or not, but there would be nothing that could allow you to speak of beauty because to speak of beauty means what you see means something to you.

And that leads us to something which was expressed in a very elaborate and interesting way by the curator of the Boston museum, an Indian who claims that the true significance of art both from a Christian and from an Oriental point of view is not in satisfaction of the senses but in conveying of meaning and that in accordance with Plato and with the Upanishads and with a very vast experience of people both creative and perceptive, beauty is the attractive side of truth, that beauty is truth reaching us in one peculiar way, but not in a way which is different from itself, in the sense that when we speak of the

beauty of a scenery, we may forget or overlook the fact that it reaches us because we see a meaning in it. I don't mean an intellectual meaning, not something one can elaborate on and say, it means that, in the sense, in which we can translate a word from one language into another, but as something that holds the mystery of life and reveals it.

Now, when it is mathematics, the coincidence of beauty and truth is absolute in the sense that it is only in the same act of perception that I can read the formula, discover its meaning, begin to see in what direction it projects and be entranced by it. The cry of admiration and the contemplative silence of amazement coincide completely. Somewhere in the same line of relation between truth and beauty, between meaning and the ultimate, I think one could place the parable.

Now, we have a debased attitude to the parable because much too often we see in the parable an audio-visual aid to understanding a statement. And indeed when we read many of the "parables" which have been devised in the course of ages by teachers

who want to convey something, it really amounts very much to this—a truth too abstract, a formulation too difficult to grasp immediately is clothed in imagery. But this is not either the original nor the ultimate significance of a parable. I am sorry to be too mathematical perhaps for the taste of some, but there is a notion or a geometric figure which is called a “parable” in mathematics. If there was a blackboard, I would draw it to you, but I would try to express it in audio-visual terms. If you take a circle, it has, as you probably all know, a centre. Now, if you have a circle, which is not an imaginary one but a malleable object, a metal circle, and you press on it, it acquires gradually a flatness and it increases in size right and left, and the centre breaks up into two centres, which one calls the foci of an ellipse.

Now, if you press hard enough and the thing breaks, it doesn't break in mathematics but it breaks if you use the kind of material I am speaking about. What happens is this, you have a circle here with the centre, then as it was flattened it really amounted to two circles still united to one another, and therefore

they had two centres. If it breaks, the two arms do that, there is therefore one curve here with its centre and the two arms broken and open go into infinity.

Now, what is characteristic of a parable is that, say, the parables of the Gospel, is that you are given a formulation that applies to this centre, which is visible, which is still there within the curve, but this image, this parable is not an illustration of anything within the circle, it is a way of relating you inexperienced to the other focus that had now moved to the infinite, and the significance of the parable is that if you understand what is spoken of this point, and if you use your experience, and according to the type of the parable the experience may be varied, it is towards the infinite you are moving, not towards the understanding of a difficult statement but towards the infinite point or rather to the infinite, where there is no point at which you will stop. This is the meaning of all the parables of the Gospel. When we use them simply as illustrations of a theme, if we imagine that Christ gave these examples because the poor people around them were too dense to understand the statement,

and He would not have been in need of doing that with us because we are so sophisticated that any statement would be clear to us, we are grossly mistaken. The thing is that He gives us a point of departure, that there is no point of arrival except—except something we don't expect always: the end understood not as a point in space or a point in time but a Person whom we meet. Those of you who are learned and read Greek may have discovered without my help that in the Book of Revelation the author, contrary to what he should do in good Greek, uses not the neuter but the masculine when he speaks of the end, because for him the End is not the end of time or the end of space, it is meeting face to face with the Living God who is both the beginning, the end, the way and the door. And in that sense we are within the idea of the parable, we are given here a vision which must lead us to a meeting face to face with the Living God.

And that is where, I think, I can stop, this is where I see the link through the notion of beauty as in Plato, through the notion of beauty in mathematics,

through the notion of beauty in dancing, through the notion of beauty in everything visible or tangible, but also through this notion which supports and holds the whole thing together, which is meaning and nothing but meaning to the parable and theology, theology being the meeting with God, which gives us a contemplative, personal, absolutely subjective knowledge of Him, Who is the only One Who is absolutely objective, and makes us through this meeting in contemplation, meeting in communion partakers of the Divine nature, sharers of the life of God, objective through a subjective experience. Now, that is the end of this talk, and God help you and me, I hope I will find something to say in a second talk.

It's rewarding to see how glad you are that I have finished.



Answering a question:

Yes, what I really meant to say is that the opposite to beauty is meaninglessness, as I believe that the opposite of truth is not mistake but a lie. I think it

has got the same sharp quality of difference. I may be very unperceptive but I can not imagine that I could read beauty in something that means nothing to me, I am obviously speaking subjectively, and a thing that would be presented to us as a group if no-one could see any meaning in it could not be termed beauty. We could say there are lovely colours, there are harmonious lines and still remain unable to define it as beauty. And I think that in terms of truth, an approximation to truth is not wrong. So that it's not the approximation and the incompleteness that is in contrast or in contradiction to truth, but a statement, which is somehow a negation of it. And when I say "somehow", I mean to say that it is not as simple as saying "the contrary". To say "God exists", "God doesn't exist" is a pair of statements but it is not what I mean. There are ways of saying something more fundamentally untrue about God than that or about anything. And I think it's lying, which is the contrary of truth, and there is a moral connotation in truth as there is a, well, truth connotation in beauty.

II

I should like in this second talk to take up three of perhaps four points which are not very closely related but which I have no time to relate by passing bridges between them for lack of time. I will not mention them to you because it will allow me to take up the one or the other according to the flow of my meandering talk. The first question is this—related to beauty in its relation to God. In the beginning of Genesis we read that when God called one being after the other out of that radical absence, which we call the nought, He proclaimed them to be good, a word which from more educated people I understand to mean both in Hebrew and in Greek simultaneously good and beautiful. Now, the question which I want to ask is this: how can we conceive that what was good, what was beautiful, that is, in complete harmony with the divine vision and with the divine created word, could deteriorate into a fallen world? When we read the story of the fall of man, there are no problems because there is a serpent, but where does the serpent

take his serpentine evil quality? How is it that we can speak in Christian and in Hebrew theology of the fall of angels? What happens to good for it to become evil?

Obviously there are two ways of approaching it. We can either say that extraneous evil came into the created world, but then we must charge God with having created evil side by side with good, having created destruction, death and damnation side by side with the creation of beauty, harmony and a call to that fulfilment which we call the Kingdom of God; or else we have got to ask ourselves whether there is a way in which what is good can become evil somehow.

You probably know that writers have exercised themselves for a number of centuries on the subject. I would like to recall one only writer, and I cannot at this moment remember his name, who offers a solution which, I believe, relates to what we are speaking about. One of the ancient writers suggests that motion Godward, progress or growth from glory to glory, from beauty to beauty—because the word “glory” means “resplendence”, “splendour”—

from holiness to a new measure of holiness, does not simply imply a natural, organic, almost evolutionary growth. It means that at every step a creature who is called Godwards into the depth of communion with the Living God must be prepared to renounce the measure of beauty, of bliss, which is his, to divest himself of it to stand in the complete nakedness of becoming and move into the unknown. And the suggestion that was made which is the only one which to me makes some sense of the fall of angels without introducing either an evil created by God or a completely inexplicable way in which good can be corrupted into evil, the only explanation which I found is that the vision of the angels of God growing from glory to glory, from beauty to beauty and at a certain moment one or several of them looking at themselves, wondering at their own beauty and asking themselves, "Is it worth? Is it worth taking the risk of losing all this beauty, all this glory, all this splendence and splendour, to stand again in complete nakedness to move forth? And what if the next move is not what we expect it to be?"

In a sense it is akin to the problem raised many centuries later by Goethe in the *Faust* when Faust says, "Could I say to the passing moment, 'Linger, you are so beautiful' then," he speaks to Satan, "you are free to bind me in fetters, then may time stop for me, then I am prepared to perish." It is the same problem, the same attitude of mind: let time stop, let motion stop. What is achieved thus far is of such complete beauty that no more can be desirable. And here we find ourselves in a sort of dilemma because on the one hand it implies that we are called never to be satisfied, never to say "it is enough", on any creaturely level. Nothing at all is sufficient for a created being except the full communion with God, the partaking of the divine nature. And it is an obligation, a necessity of our vocation, of our calling at every step to say, "However beautiful, however resplendent, this is nothing compared with my true vocation and I must be prepared to renounce even the measure of holiness and splendour which is mine, in order to move onward wherever God shall lead me."

I think Faust's statement, this approach to the

fall is the only one that can explain that what was good, what was beautiful at the same time could be a beguilement if the creature possessed of it was not prepared, to use a phrase of St. Vincent of Paul, to abandon God for God. Or if you prefer a statement of the German mystic Angelus Silesius, he says, it is abandonment, surrender that allows us to possess God. Yet how pure are those who are prepared to surrender God Himself to be His own.

Now, from this I wish to move to a similar point on another level. I have said a moment ago that there is in all beauty, in all fulfilment an intrinsic possibility of renouncing one's vocation for the right reason because of a contemplative vision of this beauty, yet not coupled with the freedom of renunciation and of surrender.

Now, in the marriage service of the Orthodox Church there are one or two phrases, which I think are very interesting from that point of view. In the beginning of the service of betrothal after the first blessing and litany a short prayer is read, a prayer which asks God to grant the bride and the groom to

one another as He gave Isaac to Rebecca. Now, what is interesting in this parallel is not simply the mention of a prototype taken from the Old Testament because one could find in the Old Testament other prototypes of beautiful, glorious marriages. What is interesting there is that in the truest, in the most realistic sense Rebecca was given by an act of divine revelation to Isaac. You remember that when the servant of Abraham was sent to Mesopotamia to find a bride for his son, he was told that he would be shown this bride by a sign, and this sign was that this woman would come to the well carrying an ampulla, a pitcher of water. It was a sign, it was an act of God. Now, what is there which we can put in some sort of parallel in the marriage of two Christians? The Christians or non-Christians are not revealed to one another by any formal ritual or miraculous sign. What is then the sign? May I suggest that it is a sign which has the quality of a vision.

You know how often a group of people mill together, men and women, boys and girls, and how often one may see a person day in and day out without

ever having discovered anything peculiar about this person; and then one day one looks at a person and one sees this person, to use an image, which Nicolas suggested this morning, in the glory, in the light of the transfiguration. One sees this person not as one of the many but in a uniqueness which can not be put aside or forgotten. St. Methodius of Olympus says that before a man has loved a woman he is surrounded by men and women; when he has found his bride, he has got a bride and he is surrounded with people. And that I think, is an extremely interesting statement—a vision, the vision of the same person, which has not changed on that particular day, except that we see this person lit from inside or surrounded by the light of the transfiguration. We see a person with eyes that see, but this vision is not given us indifferently for one person or another and Goethe's statement that beauty is in the eye of the beholder holds here. God grants to the beholder to see what he sees always and all the time. But He gives to one beholder to see this miracle of the transfigured world in one person. And this is the sign which we call

“love”—which we call “love” but which implies that love is a revelation, an unveiling of beauty and of meaning.

Now, what happens next is not always identical to itself. We may meet the same person the next day and see that this person is again a most ordinary person, a person in no wise, in no way different from the others. There is no shining, there is no *Shekinah*, there is nothing happening; and then we can respond to it in two different ways. We may look at this person and say, “Yes, that vision was a delusion. I thought it was a glow-worm; now that I have put my torch on it, I see it’s simply a worm.” Or else, we may take an opposite line and say, “What I see today, the ordinariness of this person is a veil, the reality is what I have seen, and this reality is truer not only than appearances but also than evidence, the kind of material evidence which one can easily abuse to say, no, this person is not unique—it is untrue, it is a lie.

But what happens is perhaps something similar with the vision which we have of a stained glass window. And that is a point at which vision, the truth

about a person, the glory of the Resurrection and the beauty blend together. When the sunshine touches a stained glass window and flows through it, it reveals to us several things. It reveals to us the theme of this window. It may be the Resurrection, it may be the Transfiguration, it may be any of the other themes of the Old or eventually of the New Testament or of the history of the Church, but it reveals it in colours that have beauty, and it is the beauty and the resplendence of the window that attracts our attention, rivets it and makes us attentive to the theme and what it has got to say to us. Then it reveals to us, if we know, if we are capable of understanding, it reveals to us something more—that this beauty is not simply created beauty, because it wasn't there a moment before, it has come to life because the light beyond has touched it and flooded it. A moment later, several hours later if we came to the same place, we may discover that the sun has moved and that this stained glass beauty has no life and no existence anymore, just a grey patch in a grey wall. What is the truth about it? Is this stained glass window a revela-

tion of a theme, that is, a meaning, and of a beauty, or is it nothing and was our vision a delusion?

This is why perhaps, I believe, when in the previous litany we pray for bride and groom, we pray that God would give them faith, not only faith religious, faith in Him, but this quality of faith, which can be termed “certainty concerning things invisible”, perhaps seen but gone back and no longer visible, which will allow us having seen once to remember for ever, having seen once the beauty and the meaning and the truth never to depart from the certainty of this vision.

If you read the Gospel, you will find similar elements in the way in which Christ sees people. Peter meets Christ on the banks of the Lake of Tiberias, he has betrayed his Lord, renounced Him three times, for the first time he meets Him face to face, and Christ does not ask him whether he repents, whether he is ashamed, He asks whether he loves Him, whether he loves Him with the purity of complete love—the *agape*, and whether he loves Him as a friend loves a friend, the *filia*. Both are untrue as far

as the events can prove. He has proved an unfaithful friend and he has proved incapable of loving with the purity of perfect love. And yet, Peter telling the truth against evidence says, "I love You" three times, and on the third occasion, after the third question realising that all evidence is against him he says to Christ, "You know all things, You know that I love You. You know that I renounced You, and You know that I love You." How these two things coincide in the same heart, how they intertwine in the same life is another question, but both were true; but the truest of the two was not that he betrayed Christ, the truest is that he loved Him and the less true is that being afraid he did not stand within his love.

And the other example is that of the woman taken in adultery. This woman is brought to Christ, all material evidence is against her, there is no need of brushing aside appearances, it is certainty, she was taken in the act. The question is this: should one stone an adulteress? Christ does not say one should not stone an adulteress. What He sees that this woman who has been taken in the act of adul-

tery and is brought to be stoned has of a sudden understood the complete identity between sin and death, that sin means death, that sin is death, and at that moment, having understood this, we can assume without much risk of error, she probably thought, "Now that I have understood that sin kills, if only I was allowed to live, I would not sin." And it is to this woman that Christ says, "Where are those, who have condemned you? Go, I don't condemn you either." He does not make a statement of sentimental compassion that goes against the judgement of the Old Testament, He makes a statement about another woman who has gone through death and who now is brought by Him to a new life of the resurrection within limits of what could be lived at that moment.

This example I give you because there is in each person that reality which we do not see, because we are blind, but which is a reality of beauty, a reality of truth, reality of communion with the only One who is real, that is, the Living God.

But, as I have said in the beginning, there is something equivocal, ambiguous, dangerous in beauty and

in love because when we see the stained glass window, we may be enthralled, made prisoners in the true sense of enthrall, made prisoners, captives of its beauty and forget that the very condition for this beauty is the light beyond, that in itself this glass is glass that will be extinct the moment there is no light.

On the other hand, we may remember the light and forget the stained glass window. Both are equally wrong. Those of you who are interested in this correspondence between image and revelation, could well read the introduction of Charles Williams' *The Figure of Beatrice* in which he insists on the fact that it is only through the image that we can catch glimpse of the reality. But having caught glimpse of the reality we must be very careful not to discard the image because the image has a right to exist and has a reality of its own. Now, in the example which I gave you from the marriage service there are two dangers, the one is that having seen a person in glory and no longer seeing the glory, we discard it altogether and we discard the person saying, it was a mistake

of mine. Or else—the danger of turning the person into a self-sufficient beauty, otherwise into an idol, and beginning to concentrate on the person leaving aside, ignoring, rejecting the fact that apart from the light beyond there is no shining left in this person. And this is an extremely important element because this is the way in which we treat the people whom we love, this is the way in which we treat our friends, this is a way in which we behave to people all the time. We either reject them because they are extinct or we adore them because they have shone or are shining with light, and we forget that if they were not there, no light could be revealed to us. They have got their place in this economy of revelation, yet they are not the final and ultimate object of the revelation.

When we think in those terms, then we can see the correlation, which I am just vaguely indicating of course, because it would take much more time than I have. There is a correlation between the beauty perceived and God, there is a correlation between the vision and the fact that no vision can be given unless God reveals to me what He wants me to see. On

the one hand, the stained glass window is lit with the light, on the other hand, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, both are true simultaneously, but they remain true—unless we turn the vision into an idol in which case we renounce the vision of beauty and we renounce the truth about the person because apart from its relation to the light, this person has no light.

Now, I would like to turn to a third point. I know that I am just giving you sort of directions of thought and perhaps puzzling ones, but I want to speak of another side of things which is related to what I have just said and to my first point. I was asked this morning at the end a question that might really be the subject of a whole conference or certainly of one talk: what is the meaning of the word “meaning”? May I as an approximation say that an object, a person, a situation, anything of which we can speak, has meaning to the extent to which it relates to ultimate things; in my thought obviously and in yours, to God. Things ordered towards God or ordered away from God possess meaning. The one type of meaning may be seen in terms of beauty, holiness, perfection, the other

type of meaning may be seen in terms of sin, destruction, death; but in both cases that is meaning when it relates to something, which is an ultimate point, from which or towards which one can move, or from which or towards which one can reason.

But this being said as a general statement, in life we have got not only ultimate but proximate meanings to deal with. Things are not only related to ultimate goals or ultimate points but also to points or goals much nearer us. We may discover that meanings, which we have attached in that way, limited meanings, approximative meanings lose their significance from us and we must reconsider them. Now, usually when we think of reconsidering a meaning, that is, what was hitherto my certainty concerning one thing or another, we try to apply our critical mind, analyse its elements, criticise them, try to see the flaw in the model, which we have built or the theory, or the hypothesis. It may result in a correction and a better approximation, it may also result in the exploding of the model, it may correspond to building a model on opposite principle but this is all

within the same category of thought. It is no instead of yes, it is more instead of less, or less instead of more, but it is not something which is substantially different from the exercise before. If we want to try and rethink proximate meanings in the light of their ultimate significance, we must try to dislocate their elements and to go to a point where we can have a direct perception of the original thing instead of looking at the further expressions of it.

Now, I am aware of being extremely obscure and I will try to make it a little clearer. May I take an image or an example from physiology which is closer to me than philosophy as you may have already observed. When a human being or an animal looks for the first time at the world around, as long as an experience of this world gained through vision, touch and the total experience of life has not taught him to shape what he perceives into concrete wholes, what a being sees is a range of spots, of light and of darkness. This is all. It is only gradually through the total experience of seeing from different angles, of measuring a distance, of touching and perceiving a shape and so

forth that we begin from this flat mass of spots to disengage shapes and beings. Those of you who are interested in that kind of thing can read a book by Prof. Gregory who is a professor of physiology of sight in Bristol, called *The Intelligent Eye*. It's not a book for scientists but for people who are capable of reading and understanding, and he presents us with a series of photographs. One of them is very much to the point as far as what I am saying goes, is a photograph of a big Dane, one of those big dogs which are as though they have measles continuously. You know, a white background with... alright, I do apologise, well, a Dalmatian then, I apologise to everyone then, and this Dalmatian is standing on a piece of ground which is covered with small puddles of water. When you first look you see nothing but puddles of water or, if you prefer, spots of black and spots of white. It takes a comparatively long time to discern the shape of a dog because on this photograph as in life, the dog is not lined like this. He stands there melting into the background. And that is a very important thing—the attempt to go back not to see

things as I am accustomed to see them but with a sort of primeval directness. To begin with, what I see is that, now let me see what it means and what it is. And at times we may discover that it means or is something very different indeed from what I imagine. In the case of the Dalmatian dog it will be a Dalmatian dog again, but in so many other situations less primitive than just a dog against the background of puddles, we may discover it isn't what I thought.

Now, we can do that kind of exercise in two ways, and that's where perhaps abstract art could either help us or hinder me. You can look at things and try to dis-integrate its conventional meanings to dislocate the conventional shapes of what you see in order to see with the primeval, original glance, but if that is all you do, you are going back to the original chaos of the Genesis 1:1 one without a meaning, yet which contains, as it were, is pregnant with meanings but none of them is revealed and none of them is accessible. So they are attempts at abstraction that are nothing but dis-integration and a return to the chaos. Or else, if the artist is capable of it, having dis-

located the conventional vision he had, he can look enough to begin to discern a richer and a truer system of meanings or of shapes.

Now, what we do usually is to dislocate because we are usually like children who can undo a watch, rejoice in what they see and then leave the pieces separate. Very few of us are watch-makers in that respect. But there is a further danger with regard to beauty and to truth, and to God, and to man, and to what surrounds us—it is to replace something real by something perhaps more destructively unreal. When you read the beginnings of Genesis, you see that the whole of God's creation is chaos, and chaos may be understood in two ways: hopeless disorder, what happens when you intend to put right one of your drawers and empty everything on the floor, or a chaos which is simply not the end of order but a beginning in which order has not begun to appear. What we find in the beginning of Genesis is exactly this: a chaos possessed of all, all possibilities, and yet none of the possibilities revealed. And what we see in these days of Creation is a God who has called out

this complex of possibilities and who calls out of this chaos one after the other a new potentiality to take shape, to participate to reality and to start on their way towards fulfilment.

Now, we are usually afraid of chaos, material chaos worries us. When material chaos reaches a certain pitch, it frightens us. But when it is our inner chaos, the chaos of our mind, of our emotions, of our relationships, we are usually—and perhaps ‘usually’ is even too weak a term—we are almost always too frightened to accept the chaos within ourselves, forgetting what Nietzsche says so beautifully, that if we wish to give birth to a star, we must carry within ourselves a chaos. What God does about this chaos is to call out of it almost by incantation, almost calling until it comes out itself, it shapes itself, it moves under the voice that calls it, the various possibilities. What we do when we are confronted with chaos and are not afraid enough to shut our eyes and to do nothing, is to try to establish order. And order is the enemy of beauty more perhaps than the chaos itself; but the chaos can become, while humanly im-

posed order, a man-made order, will never lead to harmony. It is a frozen dawn, a petrified situation for which there is only one solution—to break it to pieces, to undo it, to melt it back into chaos. And this is one of the problems which I see in abstract art or in certain attempts at theological thought, the attempt that consists in undoing meanings while we are neither ready, nor capable of facing the chaos with sufficient patience, insight, humility and divine guidance to see new things emerging out of it.

My intention was as a last point to say something about images and perhaps something about icons, but I think I have spoken 45 minutes, I have probably exhausted your patience, and I think that probably I should stop here, because you have had a talk on icons and their meaning, and I would like to conclude. I have been speaking of beauty, I have been speaking of ultimate meanings. To me and, I think, in a Christian perspective there can be no beauty apart from ultimate meanings. Proximate meanings can not produce beauty; they can produce loveliness, they can be attractive or not, but there is always an ambiguity—

we can either lose sight of the beauty or turn it to become an idol that will enslave us and kill us ultimately. Meaning is related to beauty in that sense but also to truth because truth is a way, one of the ways in which objective reality finds expression. Beauty is not related to my emotions or is not related simply to my response, to the satisfaction I find in what I hear or what I see. It is a function of knowledge, it may be a knowledge of communion, as in contemplative vision, it may be the knowledge which is given us in the revelation by God himself, it may be the kind of approximate, approximative, translucent and transparent knowledge which the theological statement or the icon, or the prayer of the Church can give us. But ultimately theology and beauty are linked of necessity: beauty never being simply a beautification of things, not meant to be a way in which a church may become attractive or a service lovely or a statement acceptable. It is of the substance of the statement, of the substance of the act of worship, of the substance of the knowledge of God. It is one of the ways in which we speak of the same thing.

We have time for one brief question...

There are two ways of seeing the penultimate meaning smashed. You may see that someone else has done it, in which case you are in no obligation to accept the fact that the smashing is a progress, it may simply be a regress, a regression; or you may have smashed it. Well, at that point I think you are raising all the problems of a creative use of doubt, of *mise en question*, of looking at something which you assumed to be true and saying, "Now, I will see whether there is truth in it." And if you remember Descartes' approach to doubt, he said that scientific doubt, that is, the doubt of a scientific mind and not only doubt applied to science, must be systematic, it must be heroic because it shakes your own foundations, it must be humble because it is a listening, an attempt at discovering an ultimate truth or a less penultimate truth behind the penultimate you possess. And if we used doubt in our religious experience the way in which a scientist uses it in research, it could

be a creative thing. A scientist collects in a theory, in a hypothesis, in a model all the data which are available, in order to hold them together. But if he is an honest and a creative scientist, his first move afterwards will be to ask himself, where is the flaw of my construction; ask others what is the flaw in my construction; and if neither of the two can find it, then he will search not for the corroborating fact but for the odd fact that will give the lie to the finality of his model. And when the odd fact explodes his model, he will be grateful because it brings him in the ruins of his model to the possibility of making a move towards a less penultimate approximation. And what we do unfortunately in matters of faith is what the scientist doesn't do. The scientist says that my model is exploded and reality is still there, whole and approximated better and better and nearer. The believer usually makes a mistake. He says, "My model is exploded, God is no more." And that is a logical mistake, just silliness, and also the kind of timidity which is very characteristic of the believer nowadays.

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