Visual Images as Text?
Toward a Mennonite Theology of the Arts

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For most of our history, Mennonites have maintained at best a skeptical and at worst a condemning attitude toward the visual arts. In the midst of Reformation controversies, one of the key features that earned Anabaptists their label as "Radical Reformers" was their vehemently iconoclastic position. Apparently their pacifist tendencies did not extend to the inanimate objects that lavishly decorated the interior of church buildings. Ludwig Haetzer, writing in the sixteenth century, represents the prevailing attitude well:

> All the images on earth carried to one pile cannot by a hair make you more pious or more reverent or draw you toward God. For Christ speaks in John 6: No one comes to me unless God the heavenly father draws him. Why do you attribute to the wood that which Christ ascribes only to His heavenly Father. . . .Why then, you lubberhead, do you come to God through these idols. . . . Therefore let all Christians strive diligently to do away with idols without hesitation before God visits them with that punishment which he is accustomed to send to all those who do not follow His word.[1]

This sentiment would shape the predominant Mennonite view of visual art for centuries to come.

But obviously throughout the twentieth century Mennonites increasingly embraced the visual arts and religious images for their power to reveal truth and beauty about humanity, God, and the world we live in. Mennonites' affinity toward religious art has shifted so dramatically that recently the Mennonite Historical Committee commissioned the creation of iconographic paintings representing "saintly" figures from Anabaptist history.[2] While some may question the aesthetic integrity of these icons, few would question the ethical validity of creating these images. I suspect Haetzer, however, would not find any humorous irony in this shift.

In this paper, I will examine the shifting attitude toward visual art and religious images, and I will argue that visual art has the potential to function like primary religious texts. For Mennonites in the twenty-first century, visual art can enrich spirituality and shape theology in ways that are at least as revelatory as written texts.

Historical Treatment of Visual Images

Returning to the writing of Ludwig Haetzer, one gets a sense of the disdain toward visual images expressed by early Anabaptists. Haetzer was a Radical Reformer who worked closely with Hans Denck and wrote an influential tract denouncing religious images. His tract was published in Zurich in 1523 and informed Ulrich Zwingli's iconoclastic views. Historian Charles Garside outlines the content of Haezter's tract in two parts: first, Haezter organizes thirty-three biblical texts denouncing the use of images (all drawn from the Old Testament), and second, he states four of his own arguments against images.[3] The third argument in his pamphlet denounces the widely held opinion that religious images served as "books" for the laity (especially the illiterate).[4]

While there was no doubt some variety of opinion on the issue of images, Haezter's stance seems to have been the norm for Anabaptists in the sixteenth century. H.S. Bender also notes this, saying that "The Anabaptist-Mennonites, as more closely related to the Zwinglian-Calvinist phase of the Reformation than to the Lutheran, shared with the former their objection to the use of art in religious worship or in religious activity in any form. With their emphasis upon simplicity, sincerity, and humility, art seemed to them artificial and pretentious, often dangerous and wasteful."[5] This suspicion of danger and waste seems to have carried over beyond the realm of religious images to include forbidding the display of any kind of art in one's home and the creation of art professionally. Bender notes that this suspicion intensified for those groups who maintained a rigid theology of separation from the world. Conversely, visual art was more accepted in urban Mennonite communities or in ones that embraced some national culture (such as in Holland and North Germany).[6] Accordingly, in North America the prevailing attitude toward visual art changed as Mennonites developed institutions of higher education, began living in cities, and in general assimilated into the prevailing culture.[7] Presumably these cultural shifts led then to the later use of images in religious settings.

Many Mennonites in the twentieth century accepted visual art into both their worship and their daily lives. And one can find a growing number of Mennonites working in arts-related professions. But the suspicion of the arts as dangerous and wasteful still exists. One Mennonite artist laments, "I am beginning to realize how extremely rare it is to see an artist – particularly from the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition – who has not bundled his or her artistic talent together with a 'helping' profession."[8] She goes on to suggest

that "We tend to appreciate the arts in retrospect, not remembering that a subtle hostility in our culture may right now be preventing the emergence [of future Mennonite artists]."[9]

I maintain that counteracting this "subtle hostility" is vital to the livelihood of Mennonite theology and spirituality. We live in a global culture whose primary mode of communication, perhaps much like the Middle Ages in Europe, is visual, not written. I have heard our era described as post-literate or aliterate; one where nearly everyone can read, but many choose not to, whenever possible. Put simply, if we can get the message by only looking at the pictures or viewing the commercial, then we will. In his book *Artists, Citizens and Philosophers*, Duane Friesen articulates how theologians must respond to such a culture:

> Learning the language of visual communication is as important as learning verbal language. It is particularly critical in our society, where visual images play a powerful role in communicating who and what we are. . . . By its very nature, the gift of artistry challenges our conventions, for it is the essence of the creative process to call into question what is and to imagine what could be.[10]

As a necessary first step in this direction, we must recognize the power of visual images to communicate religious concepts as well as – or better than – words. Looking beyond the scope of Anabaptist/Mennonite scholarship, one finds many contemporary authors in conversation regarding the relationship between visual art and Christian theology and spirituality. Here I will highlight a few who compare the theological significance of visual art with that of religious texts.

Richard Viladesau articulates a traditional Catholic view: "First, the study of Christian art can serve as an important aid to the history of theology. . . . Second, art itself, precisely as art, can be seen as a mode of reflection on and embodiment of Christian ideas and values and, hence, as constituting a form of theology."[11] He also suggests that art can function as a direct revelation of God. "Insofar as it is beautiful, the art work evokes God as the object of desire, as what we are implicitly drawn toward by the Spirit through the dynamism of our innermost 'heart'. . . . Hence we may legitimately speak of beauty as an intrinsic element of both revelation and its tradition, and of sacred art as one of its primary texts or theological sources."[12]

Doug Adams and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, when introducing their collection of essays, *Art as Religious Studies*, claim that "The image's power constantly to engage and transform the viewer and admit new interpretations suggests another important facet of the work of art. [For us], works of art are primary documents in their own right. Just as a written text is a world in itself and simultaneously reflective of the world from which it comes, so too is the work of art."[13] Margaret Miles argues that visual images are just as influential as written texts, but she is quick to point out how what art communicate differs from what texts communicate. Acknowledging criticism of the way art communicates, she says, "Surely visual religious images are susceptible to an even more bewildering range of understandings and misunderstandings than are written theological formulations."[14] But she stresses that this ambiguity is exactly the value of images against texts. "Images do not stimulate the mind to greater precision of thought and expression. On the contrary, the contemplation of a religious image is more likely to rest the mind and to correct its busy craving for articulate verbalization."[15] Visual images are necessary, precisely because they call into question the supposed theological certainty of written texts.

Each of these examples compares visual art to written texts in order to answer a fundamental question. Phil Stoltzfus states it clearly: "Do the arts function simply to express Christian theology, or do critical advances in conceptualization sometimes appear first in artistic productions and are only later incorporated into our religious structures of meaning?"[16] The above examples answer the second half of his formulation of the question with a resounding yes. Art does more than illustrate pre-existing theology; it can be a primary communicator of original theological concepts.

Directions for Reflection and Research

If the visual arts play such a necessary role in twenty-first century Christian faith, how might Mennonites begin going beyond "subtle hostility" toward a theological perspective that appreciates the formative role of images? I will suggest three directions for reflection and research that would move toward a more comprehensive Mennonite theology of the arts.

First, we could gain much insight from a critical analysis of Mennonite visual culture. Is there a "canon" of sorts of religious images that uniquely

inform theology and spirituality in a Mennonite perspective? If images form our perception of the world as much as written language, then a study of the precise images that have helped form the collective worldview of Mennonites is long overdue. Brent Plate explains the need for such critical analysis: "Visual culture is engaged with the production and the reception of visual objects, the makers and the viewers. And in this mode of analysis, gender, sex, race, nationality, religion, family, and other forces of identification come to play vital roles in the construction of the way we look, and are looked at."[17]

Let me point out just one example from the Mennonite context. The woodcut print of Dirk Willems by Jan Luyken in the *Martyrs Mirror* is so widely recognized by Mennonites that it was chosen by the Mennonite Historical Committee as the first image to be rendered as an icon.[18] How many of us know the martyrs' story by way of the visual image rather than the written narrative? By it, generations of Mennonites have taken to heart Jesus' teaching to "turn the other cheek" in a deeply profound way practically unheard of in other Christian traditions.

While my suggestion to analyze more deeply the specific visual culture of Mennonites might veer too much toward a sectarian stance, the second direction I will suggest stands in corrective tension to such sectarianism. A widely cast Mennonite theology of the arts should seriously consider how the arts have been used by Mennonites across the international spectrum. The discussion up to this point, in this presentation and elsewhere, has tended to assume a North American or at least Eurocentric context. But images and symbols communicate different meanings in different cultural contexts. Therefore, in order to escape complete cultural relativity and be relevant to Mennonites around the world, a proper study of religious visual art should examine the experiences of faithful people from a variety of cultural contexts.

Consider, for example, the evolution of Mennonite hymnody during the last fifty years. The ethno-musicological work of Mary Oyer in Africa, not to mention experiences of countless missionaries and aid workers on all continents, has left a noticeable impression on the songs we sing in worship. Like music, visual art should be a bridge between various cultures and traditions, not a barrier defining whose experience matters in conversations about theology. Most recent scholarship about art and theology, from all sorts of traditions, has been miserably lacking in its treatment of both non-European

and non-white expressions.[19] A thoughtful analysis with such a cross-cultural focus would be a valuable contribution to the broader discussion of art and theology going on today.

A third direction aims at the pragmatic goal of communicating the role of visual art for Mennonite faith at the congregational level. I recently heard a womanist theologian comparing black theology with womanist theology. She explained that black theology was born in the midst of street-level struggle, while womanist theology evolved in the halls of academia. Because of this difference, black theology has been popular in African-American churches, while womanist theology continues to be treated with apprehension.[20] People more easily understand what touches their lives directly. Likewise, theological musings on visual art run the risk of staying stuck in academic dialogs that do not inform beliefs and practices at the congregational level. Art itself, however, is fundamentally experiential.

Mennonites are using art in worship and in the formation of their personal beliefs. Thus far, such activity seems to be happening in spite of a lack of theological guidance, rather than as a result of such guidance. Margaret Miles says guidance is crucial if we are to overcome the imbalance between the use of texts versus images in forming theology. "What is decisive in the virtually exclusive use of verbal texts in historical interpretation is the greater skill and training . . . in the interpretation of language than in the interpretation of images. If this imbalance between verbal and visual training were redressed, we could begin to learn the language of images, a language that compensates in affective richness for what it lacks in intellectual exactness."[21]

At this practical level, we might ask what constitutes formative religious art, for surely people have spiritually moving experiences with many different kinds of art in many different settings. For now, discussions of visual art for the congregational setting could include conversation about religious architecture, liturgical objects and symbols, and print material used in corporate and individual worship. These three offer particularly rich opportunity for theological reflection and insight.

To conclude, there is an obvious danger in comparing too closely visual art and written texts. I run the risk of sabotaging my own argument by saying that art and text are essentially the same things. But for those of us approaching theology from the text-heavy tradition of Anabaptism, this is a risk we must

encounter along the way toward celebrating the rich possibilities art offers. Our tradition has historically latched onto Luther's battle cry of *sola scriptura*, and therefore a critical step in acknowledging the power of art is to recognize that art has as much possibility for revelation as the written text. Once we do this, we can begin to explore the wide-ranging gifts for theology that art embodies on its own terms.

Notes

[1] As quoted in Charles Garside, Jr., "Ludwig Haetzer's Pamphlet Against Images: A Critical Study," *MQR* 34.1 (1960): 32.
[2] www.mcusa-archives.org/anabaptisticons/index.html (June 12, 2004).
[3] Garside, 21-2.
[4] *Ibid*., 30-31.
[5] H.S. Bender, "Mennonites in Art," *MQR* 27.3 (1953): 191.
[6] *Ibid*., 192.
[7] The gist of this paragraph is directly from Bender as cited above; however, I have independently assumed that cultural assimilation during the past century led to Mennonites now accepting art in worship and daily life. Regarding religious images, Reinhold Kauenhoven Janzen seems to suggest the same in "Door to the spiritual: The visual arts in Anabaptist-Mennonite worship," *MQR* 73.2 (1999): 376.
[8] Kara Hartzler, "Artist Myths and Beyond," *Dreamseeker* 1:1 (2001): 31.
[9] *Ibid*., 34.
[10] Duane K. Friesen, *Artists, Citizens and Philosophers: Seeking the Peace of the City* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2000), 177.
[11] Richard Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 124.
[12] *Ibid*., 145-46.
[13] Doug Adams and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, eds., *Art as Religious Studies* (New York: Crossroads, 1987), 4.
[14] Margaret R. Miles, *Image as Insight* (Boston: Beacon, 1985), 32.
[15] *Ibid*., 33.
[16] Phil Stoltzfus, "Performative Envisioning: An Aesthetic Critique of Contemporary Mennonite Theology," *CGR* 16.3 (1998): 86.
[17] S. Brent Plate, "Introduction," in *Religion, Art and Visual Culture: A Cross-Cultural Reader*, S. Brent Plate, ed. (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 9.
[18] www.mcusa-archives.org/anabaptisticons/index.html (June 12, 2004).
[19] For a notable exception, see John De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Social Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001).
[20] Dianne Stewart, "Womanist Theology for the Healthy City," (Envisioning the Healthy City: Africentric Approaches in Christian Ministry Conference, Pittsburgh, 2 April 2004).
[21] Miles, *Image as Insight*, 34.