

The 2012 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture "Create" † Introduction

Today's young people are awash in a sea of brand logos, movies, advertisements, and pop-culture icons. These forces shape them to be consumers. In the midst of the noise, the Church is called to immerse young people in the waters of their baptism, unleashing the creative power of the Holy Spirit who has called them by name and commissioned them to "go into all the world." Christ calls young people (all people, really) to share the Gospel with their God given creative abilities.

The theme for the 2012 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture is "Create". The lecturers include an artist, New Testament scholar, professor of communications, theologian, and film studies expert. Each lecturer contributes their expertise to a conversation about the Creator, creation, creativity and the creative potential of young people as builders of the Kingdom of God. They tackle questions such as, "What does it mean to understand God as Creator, and what does it mean to be made in God's image?" "How does the increasing influence of the entertainment industry communicate values to young people, and how should we respond?" "How might aesthetics and artistic expression grow and deepen ministry with youth?" We hope the insights offered in each lecture will fuel your own creativity and strengthen you for ministry.

Faithfully Yours,

Dayle Gillespie Rounds
Director, Institute for Youth Ministry
Princeton Theological Seminary

2012 Lectures

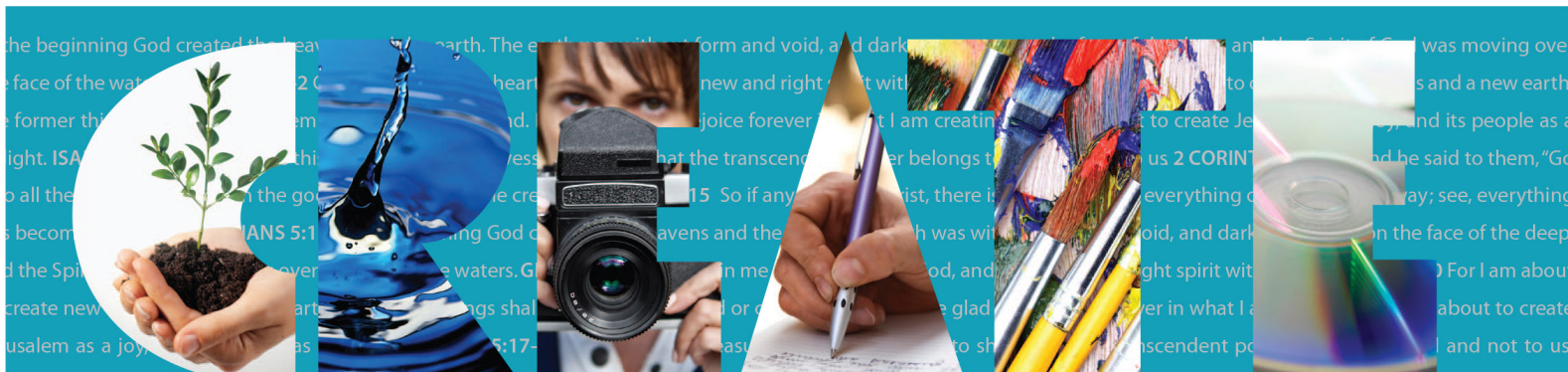
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Taking Back the Aesthetic † Cecilia González-Andrieu

I am a theologian who works primarily in the field of aesthetics, and, if you are like me, the common response to hearing the word “aesthetic” is to have images flood your mind. What we may not notice is that most of these images are often connected to elite cultural products and attitudes. This is because the questions of beauty and of the human sensory relationship to reality are so primal and central to human creatures that they have historically been a battleground. The winners, those with power and influence, have often claimed the battlefield. Aesthetics is a site where power-dynamics are played out, and if those of us concerned with the religious formation of youth don’t participate, we have already lost.

In what follows, I want to take us through a three-part analysis. First, I situate us in the context of aesthetics as a frontline where real battles are fought that have serious consequences for our young and our culture. Second, I ponder Jesus’ own relationship to aesthetics, and finally, I conclude by suggesting three ways to understand the creative power of the aesthetic for our growth and the good of building the reign of God.

Part One: Aesthetics as Contested Space

Although intellectual reflection on aesthetics goes back at least to Plato (427–347 BCE), the concept was not defined as a discrete area of study until the eighteenth century. The German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten first used the term in relation to how it is we human beings come to know reality through our senses, and later expanded it to refer to one way in particular that sensual knowledge reaches us, our experiences of beauty, especially in the arts.¹ We do not have the space to go through the complex development of the field of aesthetics, but what does concern us is that this is probably the most basic category of human knowing. What we know, and some would argue what we know best and most completely, reaches us through our senses.²

I mention Plato because, for better or for worse, he is the most influential thinker in Western culture. For better, Plato introduced Socrates (470–390 BCE) to the world and with him the idea that knowledge is best attained through engagement and discovery, what we have come to call the Socratic method.³ As Plato presented him, wise old Socrates walked around humbly proclaiming himself to know very little and inviting those around him to question what *they* thought they knew. In giving us dialogue as the basis of true learning, Plato provided us a model for dynamic knowing and engaged education.⁴ But, like many thinkers throughout history, Plato bequeathed us a mixed bag. For worse, I count his legacy of mind/body dualism. In many of his ideas, Plato constantly reinforced the view that what was truly real was only what was grasped

Cecilia Gonzalez-Andrieu is assistant professor of theological studies at Loyola Marymount University and is a leading scholar in developing the field of theological aesthetics.

by the enlightened mind, which he equated with reason and maleness. The earth and all that was in it was but a poor imitation of the real, the world of the forms where the idea of something existed. In doing this, Plato separated the body from the spirit, the senses from the mind, and embodied experience from abstract thought. However, it isn't just that Plato separated these realms in his philosophy but that his separation was not neutral; he granted worth to some ways of knowing and devalued others.⁵ We are still dealing with the aftermath of this separation that, as Church historian Justo González points out, has been extremely problematic for Christianity. In order to show their contemporaries that Christianity was reasonable, many Christian theologians in antiquity modeled their ideas of God on the "Supreme Being" posited by Plato, a deity that was impersonal and quite removed from human reality. The result was two-fold: Christianity lost touch with the deeply personal, involved and loving God of Jesus and Judaism and learned to be suspicious, oftentimes even antagonistic, of the body and the senses. If God's reality was "other" and "over there," then what was "ours" and "here" was inherently of little value.⁶ In theological terms, Plato's idea of God morphed into a highlighting of transcendence and speculative thinking in Christian theology and left behind the incarnational and concrete at the center of Jesus' own preaching.

This suspicion and denigration of the sensual is the other part of Plato's problematic legacy. In his enormously influential book *The Republic*, the philosopher insists on the banishment of the poets from his plan for the perfect human society because the poet "excites and feeds and strengthens this worthless part of the soul, and thus destroys the rational part."⁷ The part of the soul he sees as worthless is that part which feels and which Plato equates with weakness and femaleness. Plato considers it most unmanly that anyone should ever express emotion in public. But beyond this profound devaluing of the affective and, of course, of women, there is another agenda. This agenda has to do with power. Plato considers artists dangerous because their work appeals to what he calls the "uninformed multitude."⁸ The artists are to be banished from his republic because they can persuade and influence their communities.⁹ Plato's desire to remove poets and playwrights tells us that their work had broad appeal *because* they could move people. This is the reason they were seen as a threat to the centralized power of the elite class that Plato and many of his later followers wanted to reinforce. Indeed, this possibility of broad appeal in the arts is the reason why censorship and the control of creative production is always one of the very first acts of dictators and strongmen. Today, it is a strategy that is also well understood by business. Do we not need to resist?

Centuries after Plato, Russian Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) made a similarly unhelpful evaluation of the arts—but this time from the side of the artist. In Plato's work, the way to consolidate power in the hands of the elite is to silence artists because they have ways to communicate with the broader community. As an artist, Kandinsky wants to accomplish the same kind of elite separation that Plato advocates; this ensures the survival of artists in a society that thrives on class separation. Kandinsky's idea is that the artist must never appeal to the masses who, as Plato shows us, are feared by the ruling elite. Even more, through cultivating a lack of broad appeal so that only the connoisseurs can make sense of what they see, artists like Kandinsky give those in power a way to segregate elites from non-elites. Kandinsky thus insists that true artists are at the apex of the pyramid of culture. These artists are geniuses who can be readily identified as such because they are alone and misunderstood. As the artist stands atop the pyramid, he does so precisely because his work has absolutely no appeal to the lower and thus wider portions of the pyramid. Even more, as Kandinsky insists, if the work has broad appeal, then this is a sign that what this artist is doing is not truly art. Kandinsky, not completely ahistorical in his analysis,¹⁰ allows that the pyramid is always slowly moving, such that eventually the lower portions may catch up with what was only understood at the apex. Yet the artist must continually make the effort to remain at the apex and alone. For Kandinsky, the total autonomy of the artist from his society and its concerns is what makes him a genius. The artist thus is an active collaborator in a system

predicated on strict class separations and the privilege this protects. In exchange, the artist receives the title of genius, and is allowed to work and to profit from his work; we are now squarely in the world of modernity.¹¹

What we can notice here is a de facto capitulation to Plato's banishment. To remove art from the possibility of influencing society in any way makes it more palatable, engendering no opposition and reaping the rewards of fame without any responsibility to the masses. One result of modernity's infatuation with the artist as genius is that by association it also defines those who "understand" the art as close to genius (at the top of the pyramid in every way).¹² In modernity, understanding art (and even better collecting it) becomes a sign of status and conspicuously creates discrete spaces and discourses in which only the most elite can participate;¹³ this is not aesthetics, it is aestheticism.¹⁴ The result is art only as status symbol, having lost all relationship to a community's symbols. Much of the art of modernity and of post-modernity perpetuates this rarefied, ethically unengaged and exclusive role for art.¹⁵ Yet there are many artistic movements that see the role of the artist as completely the opposite, and many artists who champion for the radical accessibility, ethical engagement and appeal of the arts.¹⁶ To sum up, then, the aesthetic realm, what reaches us through our sensory engagement, has been sidelined in contemporary affluent societies, relegated to the same realm as yachts and sports cars, a sign of status that dare not relate to the world and its troubles.¹⁷

For Christian theology, the problems with this view of the arts are many because this instrumentalizes beauty, making it one more commodity for sale. It also separates us from the beauty of the everyday by valuing only what has a prestigious signature or a high price tag.¹⁸ But there is more to the aesthetic than the arts; aesthetic experience is indeed about sensory knowing and its power, wherever it can be expressed and harnessed. Where else is the contested space of aesthetics engaged?

Clearly when we observe the two characteristics of the aesthetic that Baumgarten noted, its relationship to the senses and its acute concentration in the experience of beauty, we can imagine that the life of young people may be steeped with aesthetic questions. One could argue that every generation thinks they are the coolest and most beautiful, that they invented rebellion as a way to erase the ugliness of the past, and that what they have to say is much more enlightened than what was said before by previous generations. Let's tease out this central, if often unexamined, tenet of culture. I don't say "contemporary culture," because this way of expressing youthfulness appears to have been with us in some form or another for as long as we human creatures have had something we can call "culture."

As philosopher John Dewey tells us, cultures are like organisms: "...Culture is the product...of prolonged and cumulative interaction with environment."¹⁹ Culture is dynamic, multiple, in flux and constructed through experience. In our contemporary context, some of the ways that the ethos of rebellious youth is focused can be at best self-indulgent and at worst dangerous. On the self-indulgent side, the "coolness factor," youth culture, and the commercial and consumerist side of being young can be very problematic. Tapping into youth's paradoxical desire to fit in by standing out is one way to feed the consumerist monster. The phalanx made up of manufacturers and advertisers know this is how they can sell us hugely over-priced material goods, like the "Deluxe Haven" denim shirt that costs over \$300 featured in the aptly named "Highsnobeity" website;²⁰ one example, and clearly not the most outrageous, of wanting to be conspicuously beautiful while appearing utterly casual.

Tragically, while much of the world teeters on economic disaster, the top luxury brand in the world, Louis Vuitton, reported a growth in revenues of thirteen percent last year and the company is valued in the tens of billions. And so, in the midst of the worst economic climate the world has seen in decades, *The New York*

Times reports a luxury store with a waiting list for a Chanel tweed coat that sells for over \$9,000.²¹ When we get to these levels of spending, we have gone from the self-indulgent to what I would term the dangerous. We are clearly in peril when a society is completely obsessed with consuming what we don't need and what contributes nothing to us except to alter how others perceive us.²² Such blindness to our desperation and loneliness has led to the creation of false systems to offer the placebo of material goods as the cure to our desperate search for acceptance. The value of the Chanel coat is entirely fictitious, based on what scripture might characterize as covetousness. Those on the waiting list want what others have, or even worse, want to create envy in others, which perpetuates the sin. In most cases what is coveted is also purchased with fictitious money, made through the kind of financial sleight-of-hand that plunged the world into our current economic chaos.

A consumer culture is founded on making us feel inadequate and then offering us what we think we lack, which we must buy. Such purchases, meant to enhance our self-esteem, hang conspicuously on our walls and in our closets, but in our time have grown into the promise that we can alter our very selves. Today young people, and the not-so-young who want to pass as young, are encouraged to change their noses, their breasts, their lips, their hair color, their eyes; money will buy them a new "self."²³ The beautiful, the truly beautiful, which Francis of Assisi saw in the humility of the water that was "useful, and humble, and precious, and pure"²⁴ disappears when it is painted over by the glamorous and faux beauty that is purchased for the reason of covering up the emptiness in the human heart.

The misuse of youth's desire to fit in and be loved through the answer of consumerism is dangerous ethically, especially because the industries that profit from it are aiming at younger consumers every day. The global ethics involved call for an examination of the misuse of finite economic resources. However, the danger is also emotional and spiritual, as it legitimates a search for community and meaning in the idolatrous worship of money as the answer to our spiritual emptiness. "One more \$700 handbag, one more sports car, just one more cosmetic surgery, and then, then...I will feel fine."

But of course, we *don't* feel fine; we find no answer to the emptiness inside this circle of hollow pleasure seeking. Consequently, what is truly beautiful, what can make sense out of the beauty of "laying down one's life for one's friend" (John 15:13) becomes unintelligible. The words of the Gospel no longer make sense in this kind of world. My proposal is this: the church needs to take back with all the force of our ancient wisdom and practices the realm of the aesthetic, and we need to re-orient it.

Jesus of Nazareth was not Plato, he was probably the most unlike Plato that we can imagine. Where Plato posited a distant and remote Supreme Being, Jesus spoke of his most loving Abba (Mk 14:36, Gal 4:6); where Plato thought emotions to be debased, Jesus openly wept (Jn 11:35, Lk 19:41). Where Plato would have us deny the truthfulness of our embodied reality for the world of ideas, Jesus used reality at its most beautifully simple as the best way for us to understand and to know. For this let me move us to the second part of my inquiry.

Part Two: Jesus and the Role of the Senses and of Beauty

Can we trust what our senses tell us? There is a passage in the Gospel of Luke that sets up this question and then answers it. After the evangelist has related several stories about Jesus' interactions with the surrounding community, especially the centurion (Lk 7:1–10) and the widow from Nain (Lk 7:11–17), he leaves Jesus' side to give us another perspective. The perspective is that of John the Baptist and those who followed him. It is not difficult to imagine the confusion among John's disciples when suddenly, and apparently

out of nowhere, the name of an unknown teacher from Galilee is on everyone's lips (Lk 7:17). Who is this person? And so, we are told that John suggests they go ask Jesus himself. Their question is pointed, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" (Lk 7:19) Jesus's answer is also to the point, not philosophical or veiled or evasive or abstract. He tells them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them" (Lk 7:22). This answer is perfect and complete.

First, Jesus asks John's disciples to trust their senses, to have confidence in their experience of him; they should not rely on rumors or notions, not even on *his* answer. They must know for themselves. What have they seen and heard, what have they witnessed? There, he tells them, is their answer. Second, he gives them a way to evaluate what they have seen and heard by measuring it against their tradition, by the light of their community's collective wisdom. Is what he is doing coherent with what they expected? Repeating the theme Luke first introduces in the Synagogue in Nazareth (Lk 4:18–19), Jesus recalls and recasts the reading from Isaiah 61:1. However, what we have now is the *evidence*, not just the *possibility* that he announces in the Synagogue. John's disciples are witnessing what is happening and they must judge it in light of their sacred scriptures.

Finally, the grounding in the real, in a radical engagement of wakefulness in the world and not away from it, becomes apparent by what Luke highlights in Jesus' work among the people. Jesus is involved in restoring sight, a theme repeated in physical and in allegorical terms throughout the gospels.²⁵ All that Jesus has been doing and that Luke stresses to answer the question of "who precisely it is that we have in Jesus?" has to do with our embodiment. After the wakefulness of seeing, the next effect of encountering Jesus is noted in the restoration of our ability to walk and to move forward. The cleansing that allows the shunned one—the one covered in ugliness, the leper—to rejoin the community follows this healing. So far Jesus gives us sight, movement, and clean and healthy flesh. As the text continues we next notice the renewal or enlargement of the ability to hear, which in the gospels is often a code word for understanding²⁶, the return of the dead to life, which means the reversal of death and the beginning of God's reign²⁷, ending with Jesus' particularly beloved poor, who from his lips are now hearing of God's love.²⁸

The short little passage in Luke summarizes what Jesus believes his work to be. Luke gives us a view into his heart and it is about a love so deep that it can awaken us back into life. The aesthetics of this moment are powerful: Jesus's actions tell us of the precious nature of the human creature and of human life. Jesus, who wrote on the sandy soil with his finger, used his own spittle to cleanse, shared wine and food with his friends and with those no one else would befriend, this Jesus was not about concepts; he was about *living*. In another descriptive moment about his ministry in the Gospel of John, Jesus sums it all up: "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (Jn 10:10). This is our charge, then, as Christians and especially as teachers and ministers tasked with the formation of the young. What must we do to help young people embrace Jesus's presence in the midst of life? How do we truly have life in abundance and make that life possible for others? When I stand in a classroom, with a sea of young faces looking up at me I wonder: how do we help them to open their eyes, encourage them to walk, aid them to hear and send them out to proclaim the good news to the poor? One way was well known by our forebears, but we have oftentimes forgotten it, and that is to harness the transforming power of the aesthetic. I believe Jesus left us some clues about just how to do this.

Part Three: The Role of the Aesthetic in the Church

I don't think the young are entirely wrong in their desire to rebel, to rewrite, and to be "other" than those who went before them. There is some truth and goodness to this attitude, and I would characterize this as the factor of "newness." As philosopher Martin Buber reminds us, "Every hour the human race begins." Buber continues, speaking of each birth as "a creative event if ever there was one, newness rising up, primal potential might...the reality *child*: this phenomenon of uniqueness, which is more than begetting and birth, the grace of beginning again and ever again."²⁹

How do we balance this constant newness with the traditions that have sustained communities of faith through millennia? One of the greatest artists of the past century, the Russian Jew and mystic Marc Chagall (1887–1985), recounts in a short meditative autobiography written when he was only thirty-five, the moment of his coming of age in pre-Revolutionary Russia:

As each year passed I felt myself moving towards unknown thresholds. Especially from the day when my father, wearing the talis, recited above my boyish, thirteen-year-old body, the prayer of the transfer of moral responsibility. What should I do?
Remain an innocent child?

Pray morning and evening and everywhere I go, whatever I put in my mouth and whatever I hear, immediately say a prayer? Or flee from the synagogue and, throwing away the books, the holy vestments, roam the streets towards the river.³⁰

What Chagall is awake to, and what our young are discouraged from facing by a consumer society, is the complexity of becoming. If approached as a choice between extremes, either constant prayer or constant amusement, the young person becomes bewildered and may choose to walk away "from the synagogue." What Chagall eventually works out is that he doesn't have to choose between these two options: he can infuse his prayer with creativity, and he can infuse his creativity with prayer. It is by bringing together that he can reach his potential. He also recognizes creativity, embodied and earthly, as a gift from God as he asks, still somewhat unsure, "Will God, or somebody else, give me the power to breathe into my canvasses my sigh, the sigh of prayer and of sadness, the prayer of salvation, of rebirth?"³¹ When his hometown is destroyed and all his relatives are dead, Chagall writes, "May God help me to shed real tears only before my canvases! There my wrinkles, my pale face will remain fixed; there my fluid soul will be imprinted forever."³²

Through bringing together his faith and his creativity Chagall finds his vocation as the paradigmatic witness to his community's suffering, to their life and to their beauty. This is the gift he bestows on humanity in his works: "Somewhere down there, waiting for me, are green rabbis, peasants in their baths, red Jews, kind, intelligent, their staves, their sacks on the streets, in houses and even on roofs. They wait for me, I wait for them, we wait for each other."³³

The artist does not give up on his faith, and he does not give up on life. It is this creative and prayerful wakefulness to everything that helps him make the road from the young boy he had been, through the threat of nonbeing of the poverty and violence of life, to the new being that begins to take shape in him.³⁴ As he grows up and faces the difficult task of raising a young family, there is a luminous wakefulness in him that nothing can diminish.

The young Chagall remembers the hours spent in line and then riding the train to see his young family:

At last when towards nightfall the icy train slowly got under way,
songs, plaintive and boisterous, resounded in the smoke-filled car.
It seemed to me I was going up to heaven through birchwoods,
snow and clouds of smoke, with all those plump women, those
bearded peasants tirelessly making their signs of the Cross.³⁵

It is this quality of being radically present to life that makes Chagall's art great, and his art in turn gives us a glimpse of the depth of beauty that permeates all life. Had he given up on either his faith, or on his desire for life, Chagall may not have survived, but he did. His life and art provide ample evidence that this kind of complexity is what we should be paying attention to in forming youth. The need to be awake, critically engaged, and able to express that engagement in a thoughtful and creative way needs to be cultivated. If we allow the aesthetic realm to be only the stuff of museums, of advertising, and of fashion, we will have to ask ourselves if the strategy to completely sideline the arts first expressed by Plato has won. Has the radical separation of art from any community exemplified by Kandinsky, found its most complete expression in a comment like this from the *Wall Street Journal's* investment section: "The sale [of a Giacometti sculpture for \$104 million] shows that after a weak year, the wealthy are once again 'parking their cash in art'?" As satirist and cultural commentator Steve Martin puts it in his novel *An Object of Beauty*, the world has paid a very high price for turning objects of beauty into objects of profit. The world, more precisely, the affluent part of the world, has lost the sense of beauty.³⁷

By contrast, there is this story told by Pedro Arrupe, the visionary superior of the Jesuits during the latter part of the twentieth century. Arrupe tells us how he was visiting an impoverished village in Latin America, and after the official event with the community one of the campesinos came up and invited him to come to his home; there was something he wanted to give him. Arrupe joined the man, walking along a dirt road up one of the hills covered with small ramshackle dwellings. Arriving at the top, the man asked him to turn his body in a certain direction and then to wait. Within minutes, the golden-orange orb of the sun began to descend in front of them, like in a magnificent command performance. The man explained, perhaps saying something like, "I am a very poor man and have no gift to give you to thank you for coming to visit us except this." It was one of the memories that remained with Arrupe his entire life, that one man's ability to see deeper, more completely, more fully, the extraordinary gift of God's beauty in the world.³⁸

The Jesuits have two maxims coming from Ignatius of Loyola's radically awake Spanish imagination that are meant to guide our spiritual journey. The first is to find God in all things, and this poor man certainly knew how to do this. The second is the result of the first: *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*. Everything we do must always be done with only one purpose, "to the greater glory of God." Perhaps what every generation has expressed as rebellion and as breaking existing forms is an expression of this search for God in all things, even if they cannot come close to expressing it. The young seem to be searching for experiences that will allow them to discover a life-changing newness, so that they can actually see past what has become commonplace or that threatens them with nonbeing. The Christian church needs to take back the aesthetic for their sake.

So to conclude, there is one event in the Gospel of Luke that speaks directly to the formation of a critically engaged imagination. For this I want to take us on the road to Emmaus, as Jesus teaches us about the role of aesthetic awakening as it leads us into abundant life.

On the Road to Emmaus

If you recall, when this Gospel text begins, two of Jesus' followers are returning to Jerusalem following Jesus' execution. How did they feel? Can we imagine for a moment their utter devastation? They had hoped he would be "the one to redeem Israel" (Lk 24:21), and now he was dead. With him all of their hopes had also died. The text does not tell us that these two people were actual witnesses to Jesus' execution, only that they knew it had happened. But this text is infinitely complex, because in it they also reveal that their total lack of hope and desolation is persisting against a background where some of their women have reported something astounding to them, "that they had indeed seen a vision of angels [at the tomb] who announced that he was alive" (Lk 24:23). The stranger who has joined them on their journey—and this is key, Jesus meets them on their own road of despair, rather than beckoning them to him—must find a way to help them see the truth, that the women were right. In this text, interpreted through a theological aesthetic lens, we can discern Jesus as the consummate teacher.

As he walks up to them, Jesus encounters two people who have so bought into the status quo that they cannot see or believe anything new. We begin with the premise that there was an execution; all of Jerusalem was talking about it. It was over, that is what happens when there is an execution; *that is why they have executions*.³⁹ It is what it is, an irrevocable end. The voices of the women (and here I hear an echo of Plato's misogynist devaluing of the affective part of human knowing) are drowned out by what is understood to be logical and rational. The man Jesus was hung on a cross. He is dead. How could anyone believe these women? Jesus then sets out to help the heartbroken travelers jettison the status quo and open themselves up to questions, *fides quarens intellectum*.⁴⁰ To examine what we believe and why it is that we believe it, will lead either to a confirmation of the truth claims of the experience, or to unmasking it as false. The two people on the dusty road to Emmaus have supplanted the faith they had first placed in Jesus with the propaganda of a totalitarian state and those who did its bidding. If the two travelers are ever to recognize Jesus, they will only do so after first experiencing their faith anew.⁴¹

How does Jesus help them move from the doubt of their despair to a mature faith? If we look carefully at the drama playing out on that afternoon walk toward Emmaus, we can notice how aesthetic experiences have been working in the Christian church for the past two thousand years. As we notice these, we can then take them up again with intensity.

The Resource of Tradition

The first thing Jesus must do as he hopes to turn the travelers from a state of numbness and acquiescence to a state of seeking and then of hope, is to remind them of the resources they already have and know well. To do this, Jesus asks the two travelers to revisit their religious tradition, to ponder their sacred scriptures, and to see the connection between the wisdom contained in them and this defining moment in their lives. This is the first function of the aesthetic in any religious context, not just Christianity. Creative expressions, what today we would call religious art, text, song, ritual, space, are all meant to transmit the vitality of a religious tradition from generation to generation. Stained glass windows, prayer rituals, the highly aesthetic and creative practices of baptism or communion, the decorations of the earliest Christian holy places with images from Scripture or of their teachers in the faith—all of these instances work to pass along and make present what the community has treasured as disclosive of God's revelation for generations.⁴² In this very first step, which we can emulate, Luke tells us that Jesus invites the travelers to revisit their community's stories, their collective wisdom, what has been given, or, in the words of Saint Paul, what we have received.⁴³

The Practice of Wrestling

However, this is just a start, because almost every single creative religious utterance we have made as communities of faith whether in text, song, image or ritual, does not only pass along a tradition but re-invents it and re-invigorates it, wrestling with its meaning in a new context. A second function of the creative realm in the human community (and now I have stepped beyond only speaking about the church, or about religious art) is to wrestle with difficult questions of ultimate meaning. In a Christian context, our creative works ask us to ponder an abundant excess of profound questions: Why does Jesus die for us? Are we constantly crucifying him? Where in our contemporary world is the crucifixion happening again? What is the Eucharist? Is it about pointing out the sinners by excluding them (Judas), or is it about regaining community and celebrating Jesus' presence in our midst? How do we deal with death? Is it the end or the beginning?

Different communities ask the questions differently because the questions arise out of a particular context, and thus they are new; they are always new. The challenge is to be willing to see them and to articulate them. Jesus invites the travelers to really wrestle with what they think they know (their present context of grief over Jesus's execution) in light of both their tradition (scripture) and their experience (the women's witness to the resurrection). On the road to Emmaus, this act of wrestling and seeking truth becomes so productive and invigorating that it prompts the travelers to ask the mysterious stranger to stay with them and talk some more (Lk 24:29). This part of their journey illustrates the role of creativity in deepening our engagement and offering productive interlacings that help us weave new connections. As they walk, exploring, debating, arguing, and questioning, the travelers are led by Jesus to the kind of engagement that theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez sees as the authentic work of theology which is to carry out "critical reflection on historical praxis illuminated by the Word."⁴⁴ Creative works, as produced and received, reflect such critical reflection, and in them we might discern what theologian Alex García-Rivera calls the "traces of a spiritual struggle."⁴⁵ Consequently, when we engage the aesthetic realm at this depth, we are opened up to new possibilities in our questions and perhaps brought to realization of our own contradictions.⁴⁶ We walk toward a more mature faith that we can now fully own as ours, just as Jesus asked of the Baptist's disciples, because it is not "innocent"⁴⁷ in avoiding the painful truth that Jesus did die in Jerusalem. The truth of Jesus' death confronted in its complexity is the only road toward the truth of his resurrection because what is waiting to be revealed is that "God's love is stronger than death."⁴⁸

The Experience of Wonder

This takes us to the very final function of the aesthetic in the life of the world. This is that moment in Luke's gospel when the glory of God becomes manifest, when something so truly awesome happens that we come to recognize the presence of God in our very midst. If, as our creeds tell us, Jesus is "light from light, true God from true God," then, after they have recovered the wisdom of their tradition, after they have wrestled deeply and honestly with the questions of their experience of bewilderment and confusion in light of the tradition, after all that, sometimes—and I stress here sometimes because even walking with Jesus these travelers were blind to him—we will catch a glimpse of God. The aesthetic can overwhelm us, knock us back, make us weep, make us shake, inhabit our heart with such force that, like the travelers sitting at table with Jesus, suddenly our eyes are opened! (Lk 24:31) What I also find so important about this text is that what is recounted is a sudden momentary burst, an insight, and then "he vanished from their sight" (Lk 24:31).

This is the most demanding expectation we can make of the creative and aesthetic, to bring our heart to a state where it “burns” (Lk 24:32) with such delight or heartbreak, or with the indescribable mixture of the two (Jesus is alive, yet now he is gone) that we are renewed. Through this renewal we are brought to living more abundantly, because we are brought to realizing Christ’s purpose for us. The travelers rush back to Jerusalem to tell the others what has happened: the proclamation of the Gospel has begun (Lk 24:33–35). Like Arrupe witnessing the poor man’s gift of the view of the sunset from his shack, or like a stunningly insightful film, or a Bach cantata, or a soaring church spire, or the light of one small candle representing both loss and hope, each instance of such wonder will unfold in us in different ways and through different means. Wonder, *asombro*, is a state that defies description; yet, when we have experienced it, we know it.⁵⁰

The aesthetic and creative realm is probably the most personal, most intimate, most assuredly unique expression of our innermost being as it encounters the profound mystery that is God through our embodiment and our history. Whether in passing along the beauty and depth of the Christian tradition, wrestling with theological questions, or leading us to experiences of wonder, moments of creativity, both as making and as receiving, are urgently needed in the world, and I would add even more critically needed by the young. In whatever measure we can, those of us who work with youth should work actively to make such moments possible, to meet our young companions on that elusive road to Emmaus as the beautifully blazing sun descends on the horizon.

So to end, let me offer my translation of one testimony to such a moment of wonder-making mystery from an extremely unlikely source. The power of the aesthetic is such that it can even overtake a highly rational, highly modern man, full of the most elite views on art and on society. The power of wonder is such that it can reach even him. To close with a highly aesthetic piece about aesthetics at work, I translate here a short tale from philosopher José Ortega Y Gasset:

I am a Spanish man, which is to say I am a man without imagination...and the worst part of it is that the other day I walked into a Gothic cathedral. I did not know that inside a Gothic cathedral there is always a raging whirlwind. The fact is that I had barely set my foot inside when I was snatched away from my own weight on the Earth—this good earth where everything is firm and clear and where one may touch things and see where they begin and where they end. Suddenly, from a thousand places, from the highest dark corners, from the chaotic glass of the windows, from the capitals, from the remote signs, from the interminable angles, there leapt on me a myriad of fantastic beings, like imaginary and excessive animals, griffins, gargoyles, monstrous dogs, triangular birds, and others, inorganic figures that in their accentuated contortions, in their zigzagging physiognomy, could be taken for incipient animals. And all of this rushed upon me in an instant; every single thing was waiting for me in its hideaway or its angle as if knowing I was to arrive at that very minute on that very afternoon, alertly keeping watch, neck outstretched and muscles tensed, prepared for the jump into the emptiness. I could give a more conventional account of that commotion, of that mobilized *pandemonium*, of that self-propelled and aggressive reality; every thing, in effect, reached me through a breathless aerial race, exhausted, urgent, as if wanting to give me the news in accelerated phrases, halting, yearning, of I don’t know what terrible event, boundless, unique, decisive, that had taken place a few moments before, there above...I undid the step taken, closed the door behind me and found myself sitting outside, looking at the Earth...then I remembered that obeying just for an instant the madness of the inhabitants of the temple’s interior, I had looked up there to the most high, curious to know the supreme event that was announced to me....⁵¹

I wish all of us many moments like this, for the good of the world.

1. Robert E. Wood, *Placing Aesthetics: Reflections on the Philosophic Tradition* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999), 33. Wood provides a comprehensive look at some of the key philosophers in the development of aesthetics beginning with Plato and ending with Heidegger. Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's text is *Aesthetica*, published in 1750.
2. "Art celebrates with peculiar intensity the moments in which the past reinforces the present and in which the future is a quickening of what now is." John Dewey, *Art As Experience* (New York: Perigree, 2005), 17.
3. In the group of Plato's writings sometimes referred to as the Socratic dialogues "Socrates appears in his historic role as the questioner and deflater of spurious claims to knowledge." Anthony Kenny, *An Illustrated Brief History of Western Philosophy* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 38–39.
4. The pattern set by Plato in these dialogues has Socrates encountering someone who thinks themselves in possession of a particular knowledge. Socrates then engages that person or persons in a series of questions which eventually "shows up the pretended knowledge as mere prejudice." Kenny, 39.
5. For more on this see Celia Gonzalez-Andrieu, *Bridge to Wonder: Art as a Gospel of Beauty* (Baylor University Press, 2012), 17–21.
6. Justo González and Zaida Maldonado Pérez, *An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 15.
7. Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Reginald E. Allen, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 384. I am always troubled by the history of reception of *The Republic*. I find much of what Plato posits profoundly dehumanizing and problematic; yet, in many circles there is little critique and instead great appreciation for the book.
8. Plato, 379.
9. Dewey, 6.
10. Without the possibility of broad appeal developing eventually, Kandinsky would not have had any way to account for the greatest works of art of Western culture.
11. Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (New York: Dover, 1977), 7.
12. A similar and highly elitist argument is made by philosopher José Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955) in what he calls the "dehumanizing of art." In his analysis art must only be about art and have nothing to do with life, which is the concern of the masses. Art that is only about art will only appeal to those in the know, and because of this, "pure art" works well to separate society into the distinguished and the vulgar. Jose Ortega y Gasset, *La Deeshumanizacion del arte y otros ensayos esteticos*, (Madrid: Ediciones de la Revista de Occidente, 10th edition, 1970), 25. This highly influential text in the philosophy of art was first published in 1925.
13. For a helpful analysis see Alejandro García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003), 28–30.
14. Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life* (New York: Oxford University Press), 65.
15. The examples of artists whose work is classified as "commodity art" are too numerous to mention, but for instance see the work of Jeff Koons (American, 1955) in H.H. Arnason and Elizabeth C. Mansfield, *History of Modern Art* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall), 726–27.
16. One outstanding example is John August Swanson (American, b. 1938) whose works are in the collections of the Smithsonian and the Vatican and represented in an extensive collection at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, see <http://www.candler.emory.edu/about/swanson/index.cfm>.
17. See Daniel Gross, "Painting for Profit," *Slate* (June 21, 2006). Online. Cynthia Freeland, *But Is It Art?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 90–121.
18. "...generally speaking, the typical collector is the typical capitalist. For evidence of good standing in the realm of higher culture, he amasses paintings, statuary, and artistic *bijoux*, as his stocks and bonds certify to his standing in the economic world." Dewey, 7.
19. Dewey, 28.
20. <http://www.highsnobiety.com/> , accessed 2012.
21. Stephanie Clifford, "Even Marked Up, Luxury Goods Fly Off Shelves," *The New York Times*, August 3, 2011 <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/04/business/sales-of-luxury-goods-are-recovering-strongly.html>, accessed 2012.
22. "Vuitton trades brilliantly in the stuff of desire and ego." Carol Matlack, "The Louis Vuitton money machine," *The Independent*, March 14, 2004. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/analysis-and-features/the-louis-vuitton-money-machine-6172675.html>, accessed 2012.
23. An intriguing resource for opening up this question is the inventive short film "Plastic" (2011) by Sandy Widyanata. Available at <http://vimeo.com/13638814>
24. Francis of Assisi, Francis and Clare of Assisi: *Selected Writings* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 6.

25. See John 9:1–40, Matthew 15:29–31, Mark 10:46–52.
26. For instance in Mark 7:31–37 and John 18:33–37.
27. "... humanity in the person of Jesus enters into a life with God that makes death, not an end point, but a transition to a new life." Thomas P. Rausch, SJ, *Who is Jesus?*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press), 193.
28. The great theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez refers back to Felipe Guamán Poma (1535-1615) and his understanding of Matthew 25:31–46. Poma, one of the earliest chroniclers of life after the conquest of Peru communicated "a profound Christian insight...[as he wrote] 'It is important to know with the complete clarity of faith that where the poor are there is Jesus Christ himself, and where God is there justice is.'" Gustavo Gutiérrez, *La Densidad del Presente* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sigueme, 2003). 45.
29. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 83. Emphasis original.
30. Marc Chagall, *My Life* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1960), 46.
31. Chagall, 65.
32. Chagall, 146.
33. Chagall, 96.
34. My debt here is to theologian Virgilio Elizondo who names this three-part process from secure being, to non being, to new being in his own journey as a Mexican-American child in the United States. See Virgilio Elizondo and Timothy Matovina, *Spiritual Writings* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2010), 51
35. Chagall, 167.
36. Kelly Crow, *Wall Street Journal*, February 3, 2010.
37. Steve Martin, *An Object of Beauty*, (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2010).
38. Dorian Llywelyn, SJ, "Address to the First Arrupe Scholars at LMU," (Loyola Marymount University, January 22, 2008), 5.
39. "Such a shameful death was not even to be talked about among decent people. Jesus, then, was executed as a political rebel." Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1985), 113.
40. "Faith seeking understanding," is a way to define the work of theology that dates back to St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–11–09). The phrase restates what Anselm argues in a short passage from his book *Why God Became Human*, here translated by R. Viladesau. "Just as the right order of things demands that we first believe in the mysteries of Christian faith before daring to examine them rationally, so likewise it seems to me that, once we have been confirmed in faith, we would be neglectful if we did not attempt to understand what we believe." Richard Viladesau and Mark Massa, *Foundations of Theological Study* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1991), 68.
41. Rausch, 120–23.
42. "...the best narrative art depends on the viewer's ability to elaborate or project the whole sequence of events from a single scene. The viewer must imaginatively recall, connect, or even create levels of meaning to give significance to the image presented." Robin Jensen, *The Substance of Things Seen: Art, Faith and the Christian Community*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 40.
43. 1 Corinthians 11:23.
44. Gutiérrez, 14.
45. García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art*, 34.
46. Ro Austin, *In A New Light* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 11.
47. I find Justo González's exhortation to practice what he calls a non-innocent reading of history and of Scripture very helpful. Justo González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press: 1990), 75-80.
48. Rausch, 124.
49. Rausch, 4.
50. González-Andrieu, 25–44.
51. José Ortega y Gasset, "Arte De Este Mundo Y Del Otro," in *La Deshumanización Del Arte Y Otros Ensayos De Estética* (Madrid: Revista de Occidente en Alianza Editorial, 1981), 92.