

A Defense of the Arts for Christians

“He has set eternity in the hearts of men...” So begins chapter three, verse eleven, of the book of Ecclesiastes. I bet everyone sometimes falls into the habit of thinking that the only real things are those things we grasp with our five senses, but I would also wager that we have all experienced the angst and restlessness that shows that our rat race lives cannot provide us all the satisfactions we need. Christianity would offer another interpretation for that unsettled feeling: it is homesickness.

Humans uniformly experience moments of dissatisfaction, even when they have their every material need met. Christians know that this is because we have been made in the image of God and he has made us in such a way that, unlike the beasts, we can never have rest apart from being in His full presence. Unfortunately, though we were made for that relationship, it has become fractured and broken. Nonetheless, we feel in our very bones the desire for that relationship restored. Christianity offers the good news that God has put in place a plan that will achieve just that.

Why does an apologetics ministry such as Athanatos Christian Ministries, which I am the executive director of, think in these terms?

To answer, I think back to one of my years teaching a religion class for seniors. The topic was ‘love,’ and we began by taking a survey on what these young Christian men and women believed on the subject. After they returned their answers, I did two things. First, I showed them how nearly all of them could be traced back to a Disney movie, sometimes verbatim. Secondly, I challenged them to show that the Bible supported any of their beliefs on the subject

of love and romance. You can guess how that turned out.

Through the years, I have engaged in all of the typical activities that apologetics organizations get involved in. There have been lots of appeals to reason, evidence, and argument. There has been a lot of writing and research and quite a bit of teaching. Through it all, however, it has remained apparent that Story is often the critical element in shaping the beliefs and attitudes of a person. The Story could have been apprehended in a movie, in a book, in a picture, or even in music. People are moved by Story. Argument rarely has the same effect.

This isn’t necessarily a good thing, but it is however the reality. Coming to grips with the ‘reality on the ground’ has been shaping how ACM carries out its ministry. In short, it has become apparent that God has set inside our hearts a longing and desire that mankind has attempted to fill in any number of ways, and if one’s task is to defend the one faith that claims to have the definitive answer on how to satisfy that longing, Christians have to wade into the fray and set their answer before people in a way in which they will respond.

To this end, ACM has been holding writing contests and having online conferences discussing how to use the arts in the promotion and defense of the Christian faith.

Though this has been our new emphasis, it is worth remembering that the arts have been the domain for Christians for hundreds, if not thousands of years. It is only in our own time that secularists have laid hold of creativity and attempted to make it its own. For centuries, the best music, art, and books were produced by those within the Christian church or at the very least within the Christian culture.

It is disappointing that in some quarters today you can find Christians looking down on the arts. Oh, they mean well, and sometimes their concerns have a reasonable basis. Their mistake is twofold: they forget that we are made in the image of God and that we have been made with ‘eternity’ set in our hearts. Our God is a God of order, yes. He is a just God, indeed; loving, absolutely. But he is also a tremendous artist. He is a creator, an author, and a painter. Long before humans ever perceived that something was beautiful God himself was creating and enjoying beauty. This is the God whose image in which we are made.

This is not a minor point. Over the last few centuries the trend has been to try to provide naturalistic explanations for all facets of human experience. Beauty resists this reductionist program. What is the naturalistic explanation for the awe we feel in our hearts when watching a sunset or gazing down from the mountain heights? And if we are nothing more than the products of naturalistic processes, why can’t people be satisfied with what nature has to offer? Why sing songs, write stories, watch movies, paint murals, or even go so far as to invent religions? Mankind is in rebellion against naturalistic explanations that attempt to reduce humans to mere beasts. One cannot put their finger on an argument, here, yet it is nonetheless an indisputable facet of human experience.

When Christians malign the arts, they do nothing less than malign God himself, who created us to take intangible joy in them.

Yet having said that, it doesn’t follow from what has been said that we should embrace the arts without wisdom and discernment. Christians know that history is chock filled with good things that have been twisted and abused. Still, this is no cause to dispense with good things when we find them! It is written, “Test everything. Hold on to the good.” (1 Thess. 5:21)

Employing the arts in the cause of evangelism is nothing more than re-claiming ground that has been abandoned to the world over the last two centuries. Yes, it is true that young people will still come of age having taken much of their worldview from the movies they watched growing up, yet the making of movies and the watching of them is nothing less than participating in the joy of creation itself, even if it is only a shadow of that joy the Creator himself felt and feels. This joy has the ability to confront people with their own nature and drive them to consider the conclusion that they truly are made in the image of a creator.

For the Christian engaged in the arts, the questions are many: should the Christian message be explicit or implicit in our movies, stories, and music? If there isn’t an explicit or implicit Christian message, is it still worthy of attention by Christians? Can Christians enjoy art just for the sake of art? Are there limits to what a movie can accomplish? Are there boundaries to what books should discuss? Let us ask the questions, but never forget that we are doing nothing less than probing what it means to be made in the image of God. If we can drive those who are the image to consider what it is they reflect, we will have gone a long way in helping people come to terms with what it means to have eternity set in one’s heart.

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