

In Praise of Joy
The Fine Arts And The Christian
Gospel

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Flower Arrangement Depicting the Pentecost

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Though it has long since become a cliché to say that we are stepping over the threshold of a new age, few of us have done enough work on giving a new focus to our thinking, or on the shape of things to come. The disenchantment of youth with "The Establishment", and the rigidities and docility of their elders are obvious phenomena of our time. Scholars and leaders are trying to develop new images that the life of our time requires. One of the most brilliant and original criticisms of our culture appeared in 1964, "Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man", by Marshall McLuhan, who interprets the entire process of communication from the invention of movable type through the electronic age. It is incumbent upon us to grasp these new images and patterns, if we are to understand and appraise them. They are already far along in the making. Mr. McLuhan points out that: "Art is not just play but an extension of human awareness in contrived and conventional patterns. Sport as popular art is a deep reaction to the typical action of society. But high art, on the other hand, is not a reaction, but a profound reappraisal of a complex state." (2) Thus the pertinence of our giving attention to what is going on in the world about us. It goes without saying that the Fine Arts have always been among the richest sources of joy in human life, and the accelerated interest in aesthetics is perhaps the most appealing of the characteristics of our changing culture, which someone has called "Contemporary", lacking a new

name for the "Modern" period which is now ended. This is most welcome and serves to counterbalance, in part at least, the grim confrontations and negatives of the life about us: "The real question is whether any image of God still makes sense in the psychedelic world of computers, media manipulation, rationalized bureaucracy, organ transplants, interplanetary exploration and environmental spoilation. It is almost impossible for the contemporary artist to represent a human figure, much less divinity. The experience of our times has exploded our ancient categories of the meaning and dimension of both human suffering and human evil. The biblical authors do not fail to offer us a meaningful model because they lacked wisdom. They were incapable of anticipating the technological revolution of the twentieth century." (3) Those who have visited the Art Museum at Expo '70, and other exhibitions of modern art can readily understand what Mr. Rubenstein is talking about. Other theologians and secular writers are probing the nature of joy-play-wonder-fantasy in the contemporary scene. These aspects of life have played varied roles in the life styles of different ages. Many writers take the position that the modern age has not permitted the individual to find and express himself in full measure. The U. S. Congress has appropriated \$40million for the National Endowment for the Arts which is twice the amount for the previous year. The columnist Marquis Childs comments: "She made the case again and again that the arts are not something remote and esoteric to be cherished by a special few with rarified tastes. They are directly related to the quality of life. One of the chief aims of the endowment is to encourage this relationship in every way possible-to get the arts out of the stuffy environment of concert halls and into the parks and streets. Relieve the tedium,

the boredom, the emptiness of much of existence in a mechanized society-that is the principal objective of the endowment today." (4)

But joy is part of the endowment of the Judaic-Christian heritage. There was throbbing life and joy in the primitive dances of Israel, which may have been more like the African dances of Expo'70. "As they were coming home, when David returned. . . the women came out of all Israel, singing and dancing to meet King Saul, with timbrels, with songs of joy, and with instruments of music, (5); "You shall have a song as in the night when a holy feast is kept, and gladness of heart, as when one sets out to the sound of the flute to go to the mountain of the Lord, to the Rock of Israel." (6); "One cannot easily overestimate the importance of temple worship for Judaism. . . Three times a year they were expected to go thither to attend the great annual festivals. Those were seasons of great joy and festivity. On the given day the cry of the watchmen rang out," Arise ye, and let us go up to Zion unto Yahweh our God! (Jer. 31 :6), and the bands of pilgrims came from all directions. They were happy throngs, marching to the sound of the pipe (Isa. 30:29) and often singing as they went. We still have in our Psalter a charming collection of Pilgrim songs (Psalms 120-134), which had originally not been written for pilgrimages but which were used by the pilgrims on their march. . . A solo voice begins, clear and strong,

"If it had not been for Yaweh who was on our side. "

This was taken up and repeated by the whole chorus ("Let Israel now say")

"If it had not been for Yaweh who was on our side,
when men rose up against us ;
Then they had swallowed us up alive,

when their wrath was kindled against us:"

The memory of dire national peril lives in this song, but also the joy over God's help," (7); In his chapter on the Psalms Bewer points out that "The whole range of human life, its joy and its woe, its light and its shadow and its daily routine, is treated in the Psalter." (8) The exuberancy and elated joy of Psalm 150 shows us how different were the worship services in those days, and helps us understand the people who find the church services of today so boring and uninspiring!

"Praise him with trumpet sound;
 praise him with lute and harp!.
Praise him with timbrel and dance
 praise him with strings and pipe!
Praise him with sounding cymbals!
 praise him with loud clashing cymbals;"

As cultures became more restrained and conventional through the passage of the centuries, somehow the spontaneous expression of joy came to be frowned upon, and finally almost disappeared completely, both in institutional and individual life styles. There is no reason for not supposing that the present emphasis upon the experience of joy and fantasy is long overdue. As man rebels at the formal rigidities of both religious and secular institutions and life styles, he is going about the creating of what many critics believe are authentic and beautiful forms of expression. Appraisals of the new forms are affirmative and even enthusiastic: "An Italian group called The Berets began to translate part of the liturgy lyrically and musically into a form that would not only provide spiritual therapy for themselves but would also be attractive to young people every-

where. . . It should be edifying to the Establishment to find such an expression of faith coming from young people themselves. All over the world adults have been busy clutching their vested interests while viewing with alarm what they consider to be a lack of concern with spiritual and moral values by the new generation. What adults seem determined not to understand is that the young are trying desperately to find new ways of expression which relate to their own lives. With pop music has come a new spirit which proclaims the imperative for peace, the end of violence, freedom for all people and a struggle against injustice. . . Says Mr. Pitts: "When I first heard the *Messa de la Pace* I was immediately impressed with the beauty of the settings and yet the simultaneous primitiveness of the spiritual longing present in the rock rhythms and sounds".

“. . . And he is coming again in all
glory
To judge the world and all men
from the beginning
His Kingdom of Perfect Love will
never end.
I believe there is a Holy Spirit
Who lives in everyone if we let
Him in
Who is the same God as the Father
and the Son
And I believe in the One and Holy Church
Made up of men who live the
Resurrection
Which brings to all believing men
eternal life.”⁽¹⁰⁾

The same can be said of some of some of the fine music being produced by young people in the United States, where "Pop Festivals" have become the thing. The first, attended by 450 thousand young people, was held in Woodstock New York in the summer of 1969. An observer comments: "There is something new under the sun-under the moon too for that matter. It's called "Pop Festival". It burst like a sky rocket upon this country in August (1969) when 450,000 people crowded Woodstock. . . The old landmarks of musical, theological, and ethical certainty aren't quite the same now. . . What will the new outlook be? A new vision of man and community growing out of the youth subculture today. . . What is the meaning of the new experience of sight and sound, this pop festival phenomenon? I am not sure we really know. But the dialogue must begin. Let me make two points. First rock music appears to be not a passing fad but a new musical idiom of depth. Second there are analogues in the biblical (literature) tradition to the contemporary rock experience."

(11)

While I was in the United States, 1969-70, I found many innovations in the form of youth services, one of which I shall describe. This was at the First Presbyterian Church in Pasaedna, California. Between the sanctuary and the Christian Education building there is a patio. At the morning service persons who expected to come to the evening youth program were requested to bring a flower-just a flower. When I arrived at the church in the evening people were singing in the patio with guitar accompaniment. We then formed a procession and walked in to the sanctuary placing our flowers on the collection plates which were ready as we came into the church. The young people who were leading the service sat cross-legged on the

platform-a couple of them playing guitars. There were pretty lighting effects centered in the background. We were given rubber balloons and we were told to blow them up and sail them whenever we felt like it. After a scripture reading we were invited to come forward and receive a flower and candy which had been placed on the offering table. Then when we sang "I Am The Lord of the Dance", the young people began to skip and joining hands came to each row and had the audience join them in the singing and dance up the aisles of the sanctuary. Everyone seemed to be enjoying the festive occasion as did I. Youth services are much more joyful than they used to be when they were limited to discussions!

There is no little interest in Play on the part of serious theologians. Professor Neale who teaches Psychiatry and Religion at Union Theological Seminary in New York City has written "In Praise of Play: Toward A Psychology of Religion." (12) Tom Driver who also teaches at Union (Theology and Religion) reviews it and says in part: "Neale praises play in two fundamental respects: first, by telling us what it expresses of psychological wholeness; second by declaring it to be the fullest manifestation of genuine religion. According to Neale, play is the result of harmony between the two basic psychological needs of man: the need for the discharge of energy and the need for design. Most of the time these two desires are out of balance. The self is then in conflict, and whatever it does is work, if not a perversion of play. Sometimes, however, the two needs are in harmony, both being met at once. The result is play. . . The second major contribution Neale makes to the praise of play is The assertion that play is the proper expression of religion. I take this to be a very important insight, a healthy corrective to the tendency

of religious people to turn their worship and faith into matters of high seriousness, a tendency by which they corrupt the authentic character of faith and its encounter with the Holy. . . I have barely begun to scratch the surface of this book, which has many exciting implications for modern culture, religion, and theology. It takes its place in a growing body of literature which begins now to beckon us toward realms of consciousness that have largely been excluded from modern experience. We have come to the end of the "modern era" and have entered into a new one, for which as yet we have no name but "contemporary". One of its characteristics is that it finds in immediate experience deep grounds for hope, joy, and ecstasy, while at the same time it is not blind to the perils that increase about us. It is aware, as the "modern period" was not, that religion is openness to experience. We are being called to take ourselves less seriously than before, yet to experience ourselves and our world more fully than we have recently done. Professor Neale suggests that in the recovery of a high estimation of what it is we are doing when we play we may be ready to discover surprises in existence that point us beyond the profane toward the sacred. Without this quality, Christianity becomes a deadly form that makes its participants dull and obscures the radiance of the divine."⁽¹³⁾ This is exactly what is involved in the life of the church today. Other theologians are realizing it and writing about it. For one, Harvey Cox of the School of Theology at Harvard University, who has written a book called "The Feast Of Fools." ⁽¹⁴⁾ Of it he says: "The Feast Of Fools" is normative theology of culture. It criticizes the catastrophic decline of festivity and fantasy in a civilization that has enthroned production, performance, growth, competition and instrumental

values. It represents a kind of "catholic" input into my system from such diverse sources as Corita Kent, a summer in Mexico studying folk Catholicism, Johann Huizinga, the Esalen thing, Ivan Illich and primitive religion. . . . Religion began in the same crucible with theater, dance, mime and contest. The only reason that calling theology "play" seems insulting to us is that our culture has wrongly assigned play such a low place. But in this respect we are very provincial." (15)

In a review of Cox's book James Mc Graw has this to say: "The title of the book derives from a medieval celebration of the same name, during which both church and secular rituals and leaders were playfully mocked and parodied. Such parodies were never popular with those in authority; they were constantly condemned and criticized until eventually the Feast of Fools disappeared. The church began to take itself much too seriously for that kind of nonsense, became inextricably woven into the social and political fabric, and began to justify, rationalize, and bless national power plays. No place for jesters in pulpit or pew when you are engaged in that kind of serious business. Harvey Cox insists that the church really lost something when the Feast of Fools disappeared. Festivity and fantasy are vitally important to man's total being, but current festivities and rituals have become functional and compulsory rather than celebrative. . . Cox makes a good case for the place of festivity in church, society, and politics. . . "The festive spirit," says Cox, "knows how to toast the future, drink the wine, and break the cup. They all belong together." (16)

Another profound interpreter is the theologian Langdon Gilkey who has written "Naming The Whirlwind: The Renewal Of God

Language.”⁽¹⁷⁾ Tom Driver who reviews it has spotted the references to joy, and finds Gillkey too pessimistic: “The reader begins to wonder if there is any joy in Mudville. Or does Mighty Casey always strike out, then manage to carry on anyhow, even get a little hope? A few pages later the term “joy” appears, but even then you can't feel the emotion. In fact, the absence of feeling seems to be Gilkey's point: “. . . secularism leaves significant and real areas of experience ignored. The deep sources of joy and serenity in life. . . are unthematized and uncelebrated” (page305). . . I cannot imagine where Gilkey got such a notion (has he never heard of the Beatles) unless, of course, he is a modern and not a contemporary. In “modernism” joys tended to be muted, for that was an angst-ridden desperate culture, shoring fragments against its ruin. Its back was to the wall, and for its ultimacy did tend to appear, if at all, in corners, on crevices, and at the edge of bottomless voids. The miracle of contemporary culture is that it has learned to feel, express, and celebrate joy while remaining as secular as its predecessor. You have only to listen to the music of the age (soul as well as rock) to discern this. It is a playful age (while being also serious and revolutionary), and I suggest that its play is not just “escapive” but it is close to the center of its experience.”⁽¹⁸⁾

These exciting, timely books help us to begin to think about our experience of the past and present in a new way, and we are able to feel the new future breaking into our midst. Granted that now, if not all, most concerned persons are urging upon us more adequate ways of experiencing joy in our churches, and in our culture, it is even more to the point to take a look at what is actually being done. We have already mentioned Youth Worship services. Many do find

worship and joy through forms which have not changed for centuries. There are others who reject the old forms and welcome change. Asian and African Christians are frustrated by imposed forms of worship which do not accord with their culture. I have been told that drums were not permitted in African worship. This must have been a great source of frustration, if the Expo '70 African dancing and drums are as great a source of joy to the people as they seemed to be to those participants. New musical forms based on national forms are now being created and used in most of the younger churches.

Document V of the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches which met in Uppsala, Sweden, July, 1968 was "Worship In A Secular Age". Harold E. Fey reports on it: "Continuity in worship is found in Jesus Christ and Christian worship in every age, culture and situation is always "through Jesus Christ our Lord". Since we ask for and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, the giver of new life, "old forms can suddenly come alive in unexpected ways and new forms can emerge. From its Jewish historical setting and the synagogues, the Church began with elements adapted from that heritage. It has used art, drama, and bodily postures, gifts of poets, and composers, to reach the depths of man's being to bring him to know God and his Son. Christian worship should be related to culture to help persons be truly Christian and truly persons of their own culture." (19) Though this has been understood, generally, it is a wonder that, though the Fine Arts have always contributed so greatly to the air of joy and festivity in the Christian Church through the centuries, there is no greater use of them in the average church, though for some time it has been the concern and the work

of the Church at administrative levels. One of my friends has been the Secretary of Fine Arts for the Commission On Ecumenical Mission and Relations for some time until her her retirement in June. In a recent letter she writes (June 15, 1970): "It is entirely appropriate that a pioneer Christian voice speaking about arts and religion from a world perspective should come from Mexico and that it should be strengthened by close proximity to a theological seminary that is already interdenominational and rapidly becoming international. One of the convictions I brought back from Latin America is the urgent need for serious theological thinking on the relation between the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the arts, not only contemporary expressions but also those from earlier civilizations. Some groping toward the light is going on but unless every part of the ecumenical Christian world contributes significantly, we shall not come up with anything that can satisfy the younger generation in every country who must take over from us in a world that is hanging in space. Mr. Kennan spoke about an entity with an organizational personality. There can be no valid expression in ecumenical circles unless each regional or national assembly of artists has an organizational personality and is able to articulate clearly. This is where you come in. There are Christian artists and architects, musicians, poets and playwrights in your part of the world and Christian educators, art critics and historians. There are also those artists and others who are not members of a church but who are clearly identified with whatever things are "true-honorable-just-pure-lovely-gracious." How can their voices be heard and examples of what they have created be experienced by the rest of the world? In every country the way to get together will be different and only those who are on the spot can

decide what form a cohesive group should take." (20)

Who in Japan will respond to the challenge Mrs. Carruthers has presented for the future? Is it one of the obligations to which Christians are summoned today, in this new age-the "Contemporary". Much can be learned from those who have been pioneers in the field of the Fine Arts and the Christian Gospel. In India the Rev. Darius Lee Swann and Mrs. Swann have initiated training in and wider use of drama and the classical Indian dance forms in evangelism, Here in Japan there has been a special contribution in almost every field of the Fine Arts; The Hanayanagi Dance Group has made very beautiful and creative use of classical Japanese dance forms in producing Christian interpretive dances; An Osaka pastor, Mr. Nishihara of the Shimanouchi Church, was so impressed with what he saw being done with Christian Drama in the United States that he has introduced a drama program in his church. Dr. Henry Sloane Coffin, former President of Union Seminary in New York City said he believed that dramatic performances had equal power to the sermon in creating spiritual experience. Many churches have used classical flower arrangements effectively to bring joy in worship services, and symbolic flower arrangement with Christian motifs have also been used. Both Christian, and non-Christian choral groups are enjoying the rich musical heirtage of the Christian Church; There has also been a great interest in organ music, and NHK has a regular program of organ music which has featured splendid progams of the music of Bach and other Christian musicians with commentary. All these art forms have a great potential that has hardly been tapped by the local churches and lay people. One hopes that there will be much more openness to experimenting with these and other branches of

the Fine Arts for they have alwaysno contributed to the experience of joy in both Christian and secular life.

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