

Can beauty lead to truth?



In the Herald's Charterhouse column last week, Piers Paul Read asks "Can beauty obscure truth?" under the heading "Art can't save your soul". He concludes that cultured people today have replaced religious faith with art or music (or literature, it might be added). We are familiar with TS Eliot's lines: "In the room the women come and go/talking of Michelangelo". Read mentions Alain de Botton's book, *Religion for Atheists* in which de Botton, himself a cultured atheist, yearns for secular "cathedrals" to satisfy the spiritual aspirations of fellow atheists. But as Charles Moore pointed out in his review of de Botton's book, what matters for believers is not that their faith is aesthetically pleasing but that it is true.

Yet one might also pose an alternative question to Read's: "Can beauty lead to truth?" Of course it can, as beauty is an attribute of God – and God will seek out souls in the way most suited to them. Journalist and Christian convert Peter Hitchens, about whom I have blogged before, testifies that it was gazing at an old master's depiction of hell while on holiday in Venice that made him, then a non-believer, entertain the hair-raising notion that hell and heaven might be real.

I also read recently the moving testimony of a convert from Islam, whose journey into the Church was aided by Michelangelo's Pieta in St Peter's. Again, the French (secular) Jewish philosopher, Simone Weil, was deeply influenced by the metaphysical poets in her own journey towards acceptance of Christianity (though she chose not to be baptised). There are numerous other examples. So I think Art, through the action of divine grace, can help to save your soul – as long as pride doesn't get in the way. When I was struggling with belief in God during my own youth, I often quoted to myself those

enigmatic words of the metaphysical poet, George Herbert, in “The Pulley”. He describes the riches God has bestowed on man then concludes: “Yet let him keep the rest/ But keep with them repining restlessness/Let him be rich and weary, that at least/ If goodness lead him not, yet weariness/ May toss him to My breast.”

Piers Paul Read also mentions the Bible, citing his favourite translation as the Jerusalem Bible of 1966 with all its scholarly footnotes. I like it, too, though I have always needed a magnifying glass for the footnotes. I also read the Navarre New Testament and Acts in Lent, not so much for its footnotes which are generally different from the JB’s, but for its paraphrases of the Gospel texts; these are often pointed and illuminating. And last week the CTS sent me an attractive large pocket edition of the New Testament and Psalms; it is only £9.95 – amazingly good value, with its imitation leather binding, colour maps and clear typesetting (even though I now need glasses for the text as well as the footnotes).

By coincidence, and for the first times in many years, two Jehovah’s Witnesses came to our door on the day I received this latest copy of the Scriptures. When they asked me, with cautious politeness, if I read my Bible I was able to say “Yes” and that I had three translations to hand on my desk. Prepared to be toe-crushed by a godless household they were a little taken aback by this response – but recovered themselves sufficiently to ask with a hint of tendentiousness, “Ah, but which Bible do you read? Translations are very important; some are not as accurate as others.” I replied that I read the Bible as it was put together in the earliest centuries after Christ’s death by the authority of the Catholic Church founded by Christ. They sighed, decided I was a lost cause and we parted on cordial terms.

Francis Phillips - Catholic Herald