CHAPTER 21

Style for Better Understanding: A Buddhist-Christian Approach to ‘Truly Beautiful Spaces’

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Pause

Let us pause for a moment and meditate on what ‘a life in God’s style’ could mean and be like. Could we perhaps call Jesus’ life ‘an example and instruction’ for such a life? And did he not show us that, at their worst, those without style tend to crucify what is real and what is beautiful in life?

Does this sound artificial? Does it even sound heretical? Let us—before judging—take the German word *Stil* in its literal meaning: as a unique or concise way of acting and being. Originally, it referred to art and then to everyday culture as well. The English word style, on the other hand, and its connotations like ‘stylish’ referred to fashion and ‘youth cultures’ or to ‘design’ in a broader sense from the very beginning, i.e. shaping/contouring, drafting, patterning (“*Stil,*” http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stil).

But art and culture, art and design are not strictly separated any longer in postmodern times—and may never have been. There is no hierarchy between classic and popular, art and handicraft, so to speak. The artist in postmodernism is—and this all started with Romanticism and its ideas of the genius, of the lonely and yet to a certain extent divine subject—a rather melancholy fellow. Mario Praz describes its erotic sensibility as the other side of the longing for death, so to speak, as the most characteristic aspect of Romantic literature. (Praz 1978). And in postmodern or late modern times, the artistic subject is not only melancholy but no longer self-identical throughout time and times. The subject has to construct his or her identity in discontinuity and in the multiplicity of milieus, worldviews, and cultures in a world of ever-growing globalisation. Moreover, virtuality patterns a good deal of our daily world, and this virtuality does not know of an order past—present—future; everything seems to be repeatable and one in a (virtual) space. Then space itself does not know of any end or beginning, becomes far more the multidimensional reality of relativity and complementarity. McLuhan writes in his introduction to *Understanding Media*:

Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. (1964: 3)
In postmodern times space seems to win over time in the way we perceive reality and existence. A virtual or third space or the very concrete places of our life worlds and human encounter become most important. The former are a formal concept, the latter a materialised geographical and historical form.

Still, we consider those places and spaces as something we 'have' and where we 'are.' And where we 'have' whatever matters. But is it necessary and is it possible in late modernity (or postmodernity) to differentiate between being and having? Is it not far more the case, and especially so in the Anglo-Saxon context and its languages, that there is not as much of a difference any longer, i.e., the pragmatic comes very close to the ideal? Economy comes very close to art. The difference between lifestyle and the art of living (savoir vivre) (as, for example, W. Schmid writes about [1998]), between art and design, is not as great—and sometimes as artificial—as it used to be, in German idealism and its followers (for example, Erich Fromm and his differentiation between Haben and Sein [Fromm 2010: 37]).

There are cultural/religious contexts, where being is considered as misleading a delusion as having might be. The final criterion then is to judge reality in terms of neither time nor space and its sometimes rather esoteric and misleading concepts of 'oneness' instead of 'linearity.' Buddhism, for example, speaks of a 'space' beyond being and having: Emptiness, shunyata, nirvana, or whatever name we give it, borrowing the concept and naming from this non-theist thought system, i.e., some of its schools, mainly Zen. Shunyata, in any case, is different again from any 'third space,' be it a geographical, social, or religious/liturgical/artistic one. It is not social space as a social product either.1 Emptiness is far more the final reality underlying whatever we perceive, whatever is there. There is no such concept as final truth, being, etc. All that is—if taken as truth or being—is an illusion. All that is, however—as it is—has the right to be and its truth of interconnectedness. Hence, there is Emptiness at its ground. In a similar sense (though a social product),2 Foucault’s heterotopia is not a ‘third space’ then but could be seen, through Buddhist lenses, as the unsayable though real relation between is and is not, between Emptiness and suchness: space presenting itself in the pattern of ordering, filled with an array of arrangements of relations. External and internal relations seen in this light would be suchness, but still suchness nevertheless. Emptiness as final reality, however, experienced in meditation, in enlightenment as beyond space (and place/s),

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1 We refer here to Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) definition of (social) space as a (social) product, or a complex social construction, which is based on values and the production of meanings.

2 Then ‘Emptiness’ would be analogous to Foucault’s “utopian counter spaces” (Foucault 1992), as I may call his heterotopia here.