

## FRIARS' BOOKSHELF



PIETRO DELLA VECCHIA - ST. DOMINIC AND THE DEVIL

## CHRISTIANITY & CONTEMPORARY ART

### PUTTING POLITICS ASIDE FOR BEAUTY'S SAKE

Gregory Wolfe, *Beauty Will Save the World: Recovering the Human in an Ideological Age*. Wilmington: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2011.

**T**he campaigns of 2012 are over, but the news remains saturated with talk of American electoral politics. Major media outlets are already assessing the impact of the outcome of the latest presidential campaign on future races as far off as the next US Congressional cycle nearly two years away. What affect does this fixation with politics have on our culture? In his

latest book, *Beauty Will Save the World: Recovering the Human in an Ideological Age*, Gregory Wolfe suggests that all of the attention that politics consumes restricts our culture's flourishing, and even contributes to its decay. Wolfe argues that beauty, not political discourse, will save the world.

A Writer in Residence at Seattle Pacific University, Wolfe serves as the director of the school's Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing program. He is well-credentialed for the position, being the author of several books, numerous essays, and the founder and editor of *Image*, a journal that introduces readers to contemporary efforts at synthesizing the concerns of faith with literature and the arts. Wolfe is also a convert to the Catholic faith.

While his work is now devoted to academia and the arts, Wolfe is no stranger to partisan politics. An interest in politics that began in his undergraduate days led him eventually to a short stint with the *National Review* in 1980. At the *National Review*, he was a part of an optimistic group of conservatives invigorated by the recent success of Ronald Reagan.

However, Wolfe confesses in his book that he soon became disillusioned with politics. His disenchantment grew as he witnessed the priorities and principles of political conservatives shift with their ascendancy. For example, Wolfe saw many conservatives abandon their former allegiance to smaller government as the prospect for wielding power increased. Behind this change of heart, Wolfe argues, is an attachment to government as a means for the exercise of influence. Rather than shrinking the size of government, a mere reallocation of resources from one department to another came to represent the preferred approach.

Wolfe explains in the early chapters of his book that he came to the realization that, all too often, political participation leads to an obsession with the acquisition of power rather than the nourishment and cultivation of the human person. Ultimately, he decided that an emphasis on politics as the means for cultural revitalization is misplaced. Beauty has a far greater capacity to reinvigorate the human spirit, and art, not argument, is its medium. But for

beauty to have its salutary effects, Wolfe argues that Christianity must exercise its rightful stewardship over contemporary artistic expression.

A skeptic might object to the art-as-antidote program that Wolfe proposes. After all, much of the art and literature of recent vintage celebrates libertine values. Not a few pieces mocking religion in general and Christianity in particular have appeared recently even in the halls of the most prestigious galleries and pages of the most esteemed journals of literature.

Wolfe is not ignorant of the amoral or even nihilistic views expressed by many modern artists. He is also keenly aware of art all too commonly being put to the service of sensationalism and propaganda as part of an effort to undermine traditional values. However, Wolfe does not lay blame for the growing scarcity of healthy Christian themes in art at a morally depraved society hostile to the message of Christianity. Instead, Wolfe offers pointed criticism at a stale traditionalism that has increasingly come to embrace something like a bunker mentality that shields itself from the culture at large. According to Wolfe, traditionalist Christians have, by and large, merely opted out of culture insofar as it pertains to the arts.

To be sure, Christians of the more traditionalist bent have not disappeared from the public square altogether. Wolfe argues, however, that they have ignored contemporary art and focused their cultural engagement on politics, especially that which treats of national concerns. This, however, is precisely the problem. Wolfe links his personal observations and experience with partisan politics to a broader phenomenon that consumes and redirects Christian engagement with public culture. The infatuation with politics contributes to the paucity of Christian themes in contemporary art.

Wolfe does not imply that traditionalist Christians ignore the arts all together. The problem lies in their being trapped in the past. He faults Christians of the conservative stripe for insisting that



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the heritage they prize is wholly distinct from the present culture. Only that which qualifies as “classical” art, both in content, style and age, is worthy of attention. Wolfe criticizes the assumption that Western art, in any felicitous form at least, died with the advent of the modern era.

What Wolfe refers to as a “suspicion of imagination” contributes to an impoverished appreciation for the arts in its variety of expression. The “suspicion of imagination” unnecessarily limits the manifestation of Christian truths within the arts to a narrow, and often stale, mode of artistic expression. The type of art that

this approach tends to encourage is the mere production of saccharine pieces placed at the service of pietistic propaganda. Mere reproduction of the past does little to address the problems of the present.

The Christian imagination, however, is capable of synthesizing modern concerns with the truths of Christian faith. Wolfe explains that while a more welcoming approach to contemporary art might trouble traditionalists unwilling to go beyond the treatment of 'safe' themes, unless Christians engage the problems of modernity, including the difficult and even taboo areas of life, art will cease to reveal the everlasting truths of Christianity in ways that reflect the changes that come with the passage of time. The Christian artist must, in the words of the author, "speak to his age in the language and forms of his time."

Wolfe holds up the imaginative minds of Catholic humanists Erasmus and St. Thomas More as examples from which Christians of today should take their lead. More and Erasmus, Wolfe argues, were able to answer the challenges to Christianity in their times through their contributions to literature, poetry, and drama.

Throughout his book, Wolfe introduces his readers to modern artists whose work follows in the path marked out by More and Erasmus. While he highlights the contributions of the leading figures of the "modern Catholic Renaissance" in literature (a group that includes familiar names, such as Leon Bloy, Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, Graham Greene, Flannery O'Connor, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton and Walker Percy), Wolfe focuses more intently on exposing his readers to artists that, aside from two notable exceptions (Evelyn Waugh and Wendell Berry), have received comparatively less attention.

Wolfe divides the section of his book that treats of individual artists into three parts. The first part includes six chapters devoted to an equal number of writers. In addition to Waugh and Berry, Wolfe surveys the work of Japanese author Shusaku Endo; Oxford don Geoffrey Hill; Andrew Lytle, a member of the Southern

Agrarian movement; and American novelist Larry Woiwode. Wolfe presents these writers, whose work spans the early part of the last century up to the present, as artists whose writing engages Christian themes within the context of modernity in critical essays, novels and poetry.

Wolfe devotes the next part to visual artists. Each of the three artists that Wolfe singles out for specific treatment—Fred Folsom, Mary McCleary, and Makoto Fujimura—practice their craft today. Folsom is a recovering alcoholic and convert to Catholicism who paints in what the artist describes as a Neo-Flemish post-Raphealite style. Wolfe highlights Folsom's work for its collection of "submerged allegories, obscure symbols, and surrealistic images" planted in scenes that portray the ugly underbelly of modern life. McCleary is a collage painter who lives and works in Texas. Wolfe draws particular attention to the use of contemporary figures to embody biblical characters in her work. Fujimura, whose exhibition of works titled *The Four Holy Gospels* appeared at the Museum of Biblical Art in New York in 2011, paints in a style that mixes a fusion of fine art and abstract expressionism with traditional Japanese style. Wolfe draws from reproductions of Fujimura's sequence of paintings entitled *Water Flames* to offer an example of the mystery and beauty of paradox in the visual arts.

Finally, Wolfe devotes a part of his book to four "men of letters." This group includes two public intellectuals that the author knew personally, Russell Kirk and Gerhart Niemeyer. Wolfe regards Kirk, the father of modern American conservatism, as a mentor. While he does not hesitate to criticize the former Hillsdale College professor's largely indiscriminate rejection of all modern art and literature, Wolfe praises him for a "moral imagination" that gave him "the ability to see the ordinary in the context of a moral, historical, and spiritual significance."

Wolfe lauds another former conservative political philosopher, Gerhart Niemeyer, for his prescience in warning of a growing "individualist rhetoric" in the conservative movement.

A third figure is the subject of Wolfe's 2003 book *Malcolm Muggeridge: A Biography*. Muggeridge, a Catholic convert and satirist, is described by Wolfe as a genuine representative "twentieth century man" whose early life as the child of a socialist politician and later work in journalism gave him a unique perspective on the moral struggles of the last century. Muggeridge's take on the great moral disputes of the preceding century, such as the relative merits of communism, sexual license, and the ascendancy of media power, ultimately found expression in his memoirs at the end of his career.

Wolfe's last subject, Marion Montgomery, receives special note for his critical essays on poetry and literature. While Wolfe recognizes Montgomery's own contributions as a poet and novelist, Wolfe locates Montgomery's "originality and significance" in his criticism of poets whose work follows modern versions of philosophical "sects" (Wolfe lists nihilism, naturalism and solipsism) in seeking to separate man from actual existence in favor of competing subjective "realities."

Wolfe acknowledges that some of the artists whose work he offers as examples of modern artistic Christian expression "may not be strictly orthodox on all aspects of doctrine, and many of them remain outside of the institutional church." Wolfe admits that Hill, for example, "can be thought of as a Christian poet only in a limited sense." Writer Annie Dillard, whose work receives favorable treatment in Wolfe's book, once identified herself as a convert to Catholicism but now lists her religion as "none" on her personal website. Nonetheless, Wolfe defends his selections when he writes that "it is fair to say that if this body of art was absorbed and pondered by the majority of Christians, the quality of Christian witness and compassion in our society would be immeasurably strengthened."

Yet aside from Wolfe's willingness to extend beyond a conventional definition of "Christian artist" in search of examples, readers of the Dominican persuasion will be pleased



to find the names of some of their familiar favorites scattered throughout the book. References to Saint Thomas Aquinas appear repeatedly. Students of Saint Augustine and the Angelic Doctor will read approvingly the following statement from the chapter entitled “Ever Ancient, Ever New: The Catholic Writer in the Modern World”:

Show me a thinker who has faithfully grappled with the achievements of St. Augustine or St. Thomas, and you will likely find someone who has the ability to grasp the real challenges of the modern world.

Craftsman, poet, and Dominican tertiary David Jones also receives favorable mention. Wolfe treats Jacques Maritain’s insights on the arts with sympathy. Readers will find Dominican priest Gerald Vann, who entered the English Province and departed life as a member of the US Western Province, quoted twice by Wolfe (once extensively in an excerpt that spans two pages).

One regrettable absence in the book is the lack of any effort to address music. Perhaps Wolfe regards the topic as one beyond his expertise. If he had taken up the subject, the opera *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, by 20th century composer Francis Poulenc, might qualify for treatment, especially in light of its timely theme. This 1957 piece unfolds within the narrative of aggressive government hostility and intolerance toward Catholicism by recounting the story of the suppression of a monastery of Carmelite nuns during the French Revolution.

The work of pop musician Brooke Fraser is perhaps another worthy suggestion. Fraser succeeds in integrating Biblical passages and Christian themes into her music with a delicate precision that allows her work to transcend the narrow category of Christian pop. Her 2006 album, *Albertine*, offers several notable examples of her unique talent.



Despite Wolfe's neglect of music and his sometimes questionably expansive parameters for those who might qualify as a Christian artist, the strength of Wolfe's book lies in his call for a Christian engagement with contemporary artistic expression. While Christian participation in the political sphere is necessary, the ability to change hearts and minds through partisan politics is limited. The arts offer a better medium for communication of the Christian message. But to engage the culture, a modern Christian response must involve more than an exclusive devotion to the art of an era past. Against the sentiment of suspicion for modern themes and forms of artistic expression, Wolfe's book is a convincing appeal for a greater emphasis on Christian works of art in a modern mode.

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