

Farley, Edward. *Faith and Beauty: a Theological Aesthetic*. Burlington, VT: Routledge, 2001.

In the late 20th century, art like Picasso's *Guernica*, Schoenberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw*, or Richard Serra's sculptures was enjoyed, if not revered. I could never understand why, because these could never compare to Da Vinci's *Last Supper*, Handel's *Messiah*, or Michaelangelo's *David*. The reason was differing views of beauty. Moderns and postmoderns doubt that beauty exists, and if it does exist, can't agree about what it is. As a Christian, I believe that beauty is a key characteristic of God. God's beauty is appealing, it promotes the Fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), and it is simple yet complex. The beauty of creation, including nature and the human body, shares these characteristics. Beauty is an inherent part of the beautiful thing, regardless of what other humans think about it, because it was placed there by God. He is the judge of reality; the only judge that matters. Ultimately beauty is in the eye of the beholder only if the beholder is the Lord.

The book *Faith and Beauty, A Theological Aesthetic* by Edward Farley attempts to survey important views on beauty and then posit a Christian one. Postmodernism replaces beauty with marketing, discontented relativism, violence, and superficial silliness.¹ The Church through the ages has likewise been ambivalent about beauty; appreciating its role in the person of God but worried about its power to induce idolatry and lust. In 2,000 years of Christian history, theologians have had little to say about it.

Nevertheless, beauty remains a constant part of human experience, from the sunset to the nude. As Pythagoras felt that music was beautiful because its mathematical properties stimulated pleasure, so the ancient Greeks felt that inherent characteristics such as simplicity and symmetry made something beautiful. Beauty was being.

With the Renaissance came attempts to understand beauty apart from God, the ultimately beautiful one. Some thought that beauty was sensibility, located not in the object but in the perceiver. The playwright William Shakespeare (1564-1616) and the theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) found beauty in benevolence. Others found beauty in self-transcendence. Both views have a basis in Scripture and can certainly be considered characteristics of beauty (Proverbs 31:10-31, 1 Timothy 2:9-10). Twentieth-century Protestant theologians speaking on beauty often contrasted carnal, fleeting beauty of Eros with the pure, godly beauty of Agape, or some variation thereof.² Catholic theologians were more complementary towards earthly beauty, rarely being as anti-aesthetic as the Protestants. Another view is that human redemption is the ultimate example of beauty, an idea similar to that of finding beauty in benevolence and self-transcendence. Finally, beauty is a source of emotion and joy.

Conclusion

Faith and Beauty, A Theological Aesthetic, describes prevailing historical views on beauty from secular and Christian religious perspectives. The book was good, and certainly worthwhile for a Christian studying the topic of beauty. It was disappointing to learn that Christian thinkers over the centuries have been so ambivalent about beauty, but encouraging to remember that no matter how confused man becomes about beauty, God still gives it to us. His grace overcomes our confusion, and His mercy surpasses our sin.

¹ 5.

² 69.