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A ‘benevolent Trojan horse’: Sacred values in a secular setting

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Introduction

Creative professionals, working in secular settings, can contribute in unique ways to the mission of the Christian Church. This includes the transmission of values and an understanding of the beliefs that underpin them, to those who would not normally be receptive. These creative professionals can take on a role similar to a Trojan horse that gets the Church’s message to places otherwise not accessible to it. This is not a Trojan horse that carries destruction in its belly, but one with benevolent intent that is unwittingly granted access. Not without some justification, the Church is sometimes very restrained in its recognition of those who are highly creative, and cautious in entrusting them with carrying out its mission. However, some examples will show the potential of professionals who are committed to the Church and working in secular settings, to transmit its values. A case study will demonstrate that the ‘benevolent Trojan horse’ model can be helpful in attempting to integrate the sacred and secular in daily practice.

The Church and creative professionals

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has a long history of privileging certain professions. The work of pastors, missionaries, evangelists, teachers, administrators, doctors, nurses, even media producers, publishers and musicians is routinely celebrated in Adventist literature. These professions tend to define the shape of the Church.

The Church, however, does not find it easy to acclaim or patronise the work of other creative professionals. Where are the great symphonies commissioned by the Church to celebrate significant events? How many acclaimed works of Adventist art or sculpture are to be found in the great galleries of the world? The number of serious award-winning, leading-edge works of Adventist architecture is miniscule; none are in the texts on architecture. It

appears that the Church views these activities as merely secular at best, but more often, given the imminence of the Second Advent, as irresponsible diversions of time, money and talents from its core business.

Students of Adventist history will know of J. N. Loughborough, a pioneering Adventist preacher and administrator, but few will have studied the contribution to the early Church of his brother W. K. Loughborough, an Adventist architect who practised in Battle Creek and later built and managed Pacific Press in California. Little is known of William Sisley, planner and architect of several Adventist colleges (Union, Walla Walla and Keene, now Southern Adventist University, in the USA and Avondale College in Australia) as well as some significant buildings in Battle Creek, Michigan. Sisley was a close confidant of Ellen G. White; the one to whom she turned to manage her publishing business concerns during part of her seven-year stay in Australia.

Searching for ‘architecture’ in the live version of the Adventist yearbook produces zero results; the same search in the Adventist Directory achieves identical results. A search for ‘building’ is also rewarded with limited entries. Most of the links are to do with names of buildings or building up the Church. Only a few are concerned with the ministry of constructing buildings, none with designing them architecturally. Architects and architecture are clearly not in the foreground of Adventist thinking; they appear to have little to contribute to the Church’s perceived mission. The same is probably true of various other creative professionals. Must this be so?

The ‘benevolent Trojan horse’

The following examples illustrate the ability of creative professionals, like a benevolent Trojan horse, to penetrate areas that would otherwise be impenetrable to the Church’s message and messengers. In each case those concerned had

“The Church does not find it easy to acclaim or patronise the work of other creative professionals”

never heard of Seventh-day Adventists and would not be kindly disposed to the Church's normal approaches. However, they were open to deep discussion on religious matters with a professional colleague; one who shared with them the same cultural and creative concerns.

In London, a senior architect in one of the world's largest practices confronts a young, Australian, Seventh-day Adventist architect. In the middle of an open-plan office he demands to know if and why the new recruit really believes in the Bible, a personal God, the Sabbath and more. The questions and answers continue for some time to the amusement of many, but some reflect seriously on what they have heard and continue the conversation privately. As winter approaches, the young architect, upon requesting permission to leave work prior to sunset, enjoys an extended discussion on his beliefs and values with the founder of the firm.

In another instance, the senior partner of the international firm of architects that won the design competition for Australia's New Parliament House, with some interest, considers the Seventh-day Adventist architect's reasons for declining to design the Members' Bar.

A 'benevolent Trojan horse' case study

The possibilities, illustrated by these examples, of extending the Church's mission in the secular setting are readily observed and occasionally acknowledged. However, they tend to be instances in which the proclamation or defence of beliefs and values is carried out in an overt fashion in response to *ad hoc*, infrequent opportunities. Perhaps the transmission of values can be better achieved through a less self-conscious, gentler way in which a religious framework, including practice, concepts and even vocabulary, is seamlessly and continuously integrated with everyday secular activities. Why lock up the potential riches of spiritual experience in a sacred-only box? Why pigeonhole the greatest ideas and themes in the universe for one-day per week use? Why not routinely apply intellectual and experiential spiritual-religious knowledge to all endeavours, sacred or secular?

A manifesto project for final year architecture students will serve to illustrate how the frames that define secular and sacred can be merged or overlapped to facilitate values transmission and discussion of the belief system that sustains them.

In the first two years, students are given the basic tools of design. But on reaching third year, aspects of the roles of architects and their values systems or ethical stances are introduced in the context of designing. Students are confronted with questions such as 'would you be prepared to accept a lucrative

commission to design a brothel, maybe a casino or an expensive house for a known drug lord?' This 'hardens up' the discussions that link values and architectural design. In the fourth year students need to research the positions of leading architects and finally in their fifth year they are required to write their own manifesto. In this project students must articulate a comprehensive personal position with regard to the theory and practice of architecture; it must be supported by a values system or ethical stance. It is titled 'manifesto' because it is about making known or manifest while simultaneously being detailed and complete like a ship's manifest. To foster a genuine and intense discussion of values, the manifesto project is not assessed. The values expressed in each manifesto belong to their authors and cannot be gainsaid. However, a number of sessions are scheduled in which the group is encouraged to vigorously test individual positions.

At the beginning of the project, the course coordinator makes a presentation of a personal manifesto. As a working model for students to observe, it provides an ideal vehicle to explore, with a captive audience, the integration of sacred values with the secular practice of architecture. Students are candidly informed that the manifesto is based on a position that has changed. Initially it was dogmatic, characterised by certainty and an intellectual approach to a limited range of concerns and by a master/servant attitude to teaching students how to do architecture. However the position has evolved and become non-deterministic, non-linear, non-reductivist, characterised by inclusivity and lack of certainty, more idiosyncratic than normative; a position that acknowledges the mutual benefits in the teacher/student relationship. It is a position that no longer defines intuition pejoratively as the knee-jerk actions of feeble intellects but affirms that architecture becomes transcendent when all God-given faculties, particularly intuitive and intellectual processes, are evident. This aligns with Yehudi Menuhin's view that music can be created and appreciated intuitively or intellectually but can only be sublime when created and appreciated intuitively *and* intellectually.

Reference is made to Leon Battista Alberti, a famous 15th century Renaissance man well known to most students of architecture, who instructed architects to absorb whatever might supply a useful model to facilitate the process of conceptualising. Students are then invited to consider religious beliefs as providing such models. It is suggested that two useful models are related to the Genesis account of origins and an attempt is made to apply aspects of the sacred to contemporary architectural theory and practice.

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In this model humans are accountable stewards of creation as opposed to its masters

It is proposed to students that creation and creativity are linked because the creation story, in the first chapters of the text, introduces, among other things, two issues of direct relevance to the production of architecture. First, a picture is painted of the omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and infinite One who brings order or cosmos out of chaos. This is particularly relevant given that the order versus chaos debate in architectural theory, begun almost five millennia ago, remains current and is linked to Coleman's prerequisites of true aesthetic experience namely, transpractical appreciation, transmundane significance and transchaotic structure. Second, the supreme product, humankind, is invested with a duty of responsible stewardship in the care and nurture of creation.

The consequences of being a part of the creation of the infinite Creator are then discussed. Chaos theory, loosely appropriated in the service of a visual art, is introduced in this context because it emphasises the complexities of nature and the limitations of our observations. At close quarters nature appears totally chaotic. No two leaves of the billions that exist are the same even within the same species; similarly no two trees are the same. But at a distance a different kind of order becomes apparent. The order of leaves becomes an order of trees that becomes an order of forests, only becoming clear with increasing distance. The whole world dissolves into a single order from a distance. The classical Platonic fear of chaos, understood as lack of order, has been tamed by revealing a new homogeneity or unity evidenced by a 'perfect' randomness that produces regular samples. Beauty is now more clearly discerned in the chaos of nature and natural phenomena; and the simultaneous desire for regularity and irregularity, at different scales, is more readily understood. The ultimate order of the universe is only observable at the appropriate distance by the infinite, omnipresent Creator, but humankind is unable to be in creation and simultaneously sufficiently distant from it to fully comprehend its order. The essential quality then of human interventions may involve inspiration from nature but not a vain attempt to imitate it, as to do so would be both futile and maybe even blasphemous in its presumptuous challenge to the infinite Creator.

Students are asked to consider the idea that humanity, invested with an apparently chaotic individuality by the infinite Creator, will produce work which is also rich, beautiful and natural in its apparent randomness but which, from the correct distance, may reveal a special kind of order. This prevents any theoretical position from becoming dogma.

It is also proposed that a further consequence

of being a creature, made by and in the image of the infinite Creator, is the realisation of a resultant moral obligation, firstly to the Creator and then, by extension, to all creation. In this model, humans are the accountable stewards of creation as opposed to being its masters. The difference is fundamental to the way architecture is approached and in the establishment of relationships with others. At a basic level, this means that architects will take seriously not only issues of environmental sustainability, but among other things, the need to work within the limits of clients' budgets and, insofar as it is compatible with other aspects of their architectural and personal values, respect clients' preferences and wishes.

Two subsidiary issues flowing from the Genesis account are canvassed. First, it is in the area of imagination that the image of the infinite Creator is discerned. Humanity is finite in all aspects of existence except for imagination; it is therefore probable that in the acts of creativity, imagination occupies the highest office. Second, reading of and attempts to understand the text lead to exegetical approaches rather than those that are more speculative or tacit. Further, the influence of theology is centripetal; centre-seeking. However, much contemporary architectural theory appears centrifugal, centre-fleeing, although it is acknowledged that the margins might provide a realm in which creativity flourishes.

Faith is also discussed by reference to Kierkegaard who developed the notion of faith as a leap across the chasm at the limits of knowledge, or rationality resident somewhere in the subjective and absurd. However, it is proposed that almost 2000 years ago, faith was better defined as the substance of things not seen, based on those things and ideas which are knowable through rational, intellectual, experiential and intuitive processes. This provides a useful model because architecture is an act of faith in the ability to solve seemingly unsolvable problems; a forward projection of the seen to that which might be, at once objective and subjective. Faith in architecture then leads to a rejection of some recent nihilistic architectural positions.

The manifesto model presented to the students also includes a range of technical and process concerns and is concluded by reference to Sebastiano Serlio, a 16th century Italian architect. In his treatise, patterns and rules are extensively and prescriptively propounded while paradoxically he constantly returns to the notions of the architect's discretion and licence and the necessity of regional variation. These concepts are linked to a summary of the manifesto, a position that seeks verities while simultaneously asserting individual discretion and

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responsibility for actions.

Conclusion

In two decades of integrating sacred beliefs, values and vocabulary into teaching at secular institutions, attended by students of many beliefs, there have been no negative repercussions. On the contrary Adventist values and beliefs, a little like the Trojan horse, have been welcomed behind some otherwise impenetrable walls. By this means, students have had their values, and the beliefs that give rise to them, challenged. They have also been encouraged to carefully consider that, contrary to popular opinion, Christianity provides an excellent foundation for personal values development. **TEACH**