

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

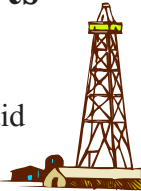


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Should culture and the arts matter to Christians?

“America’s priorities were wrong,” said a representative of a Christian organization recently on TV. “We saved Iraq’s oil wells but not its museum.” Was he right? Without more details, it’s hard to say. But when so many key milestones in human history end up as “collateral damage,” maybe it’s time for Christians to look again at our own priorities.



Iraq’s cultural history, scholars say, goes back 10,000 years. Mesopotamia gave birth to many aspects of civilization, including cities, legal systems and written language. This war’s coalition forces made laudable efforts to protect mosques and archaeological sites. However, objects such as statues, tablets and early copies of the Qur’an were not protected. The world watched in horror as museum and library collections were looted and rare books, manuscripts and records were burned.



Why should Christians care? At its best, human art reflects divine creation, bearing witness to God’s spirit at work in the world. Art reminds us that God calls us to use our own creative power to bring meaning out of chaos, to nurture beauty instead of destruction, and to affirm life in the face of death.

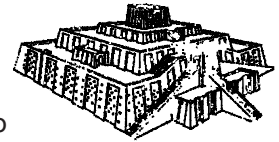
Surprise—some Bible places are in Iraq

From recent war news I’ve been surprised to find that many places I learned about years ago in Sunday school are in present-day Iraq. The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers had seemed unreal and distant, as had Babylon (Psalm 137), Abraham’s homeland Ur (Genesis 11), and the city of Nineveh (Jonah 1), but they’re in Iraq. The more we know about such ancient heritage, the more motivated we may be to protect it.



Humans reach for the divine

The remains of at least three ziggurats are in Iraq. A ziggurat is a huge step-shaped structure thought to have been an important part of ancient Babylonian religion and culture. A ziggurat would have been the most visible building in its city, with a temple to the city’s god on top, making it an important civic building as well as a religious center. The great ziggurat of Ur, whose restored remains are in Iraq, may be associated with the Tower of Babel, and some scholars suspect that the “ladder” in the biblical story of Jacob’s dream may have actually been a ziggurat.



Like other structures built for worship throughout history, ziggurats were built tall to take worshipers closer to the heavens, where the gods were believed to live. Remains of Greek and Roman temples built high above cities reflect similar efforts. This imagery also appears in many accounts of religious leaders or gods speaking from mountain tops. We still see it in the Bible stories of the Ten Commandments, the Transfiguration, and the Sermon on the Mount.



Rethinking “shock and awe”

What ziggurats did is what all art is meant to do. Such creations testify not only to God-given talent, but also to our human need to aspire toward the divine. The scholarly work that unearths and identifies them further highlights the divinely inspired human ability to find connections among people and cultures.

Recently some Christians have focused instead on cultural differences, as if the God of Islam were as foreign to us as the gods that ancient ziggurats and temples were built to worship. However, I believe it is more constructive to look for cross-cultural similarities, and to remember why images of the sacred appear in all cultures including our own.

If we focus on those achievements that best reflect artistic aspiration across all cultures, maybe we will once again be amazed at God’s creative power within us all. We humans are meant to be in awe of temples, not bombs; books, not guns; love, not war.

What can we do?

Many treasures from Iraq may be impossible to save now. But what might we do to avoid similar disasters in the future? And what can Christians do to promote artistic achievement and cultural understanding in our own communities?



■ Avoid war when possible

War is profoundly destructive. The losses we've seen in Iraq bring back sad memories of the cathedral of Coventry and the magnificent civic buildings in Dresden, all bombed in World War II. Military forces often try to avoid damaging important religious and architectural sites. But when opponents use cultural sites for shelter or storage, and when leaders decide, rightly, that things are less important than people, destruction happens.



One constructive response is to count the cultural cost more carefully beforehand. Some wars are unavoidable, but many are not. When we debate the justification for a war, we must decide whether, as some observers already suspect of the recent Iraq conflict, it will be remembered centuries later not for political change, but mainly for the loss of unique treasures of human creation. Does your church urge members to consider alternatives to war?

■ Separate culture from conflict

Despite its life-enhancing claims, religion has often failed to preserve cultural creation. Culture fell victim again recently when the Taliban demolished two huge ancient Buddhist statues in Afghanistan.

Judeo-Christian culture is not immune to such religious tribalism. In the Old Testament we read about the Israelites wrecking statues and shrines used in pagan worship. Muslims and Christians have long ravaged each other's sites in the name of religious triumph, especially in the Holy Land, with its bitter history. Early Christians demolished Greco-Roman buildings and artifacts, and Protestants vandalized much Catholic art during the Reformation.

Even today, religious conflict can endanger culture in more subtle ways. Evangelical churches may lose the in-



tellectual depth of complex liturgy and music. Main-line churches may lose the emotional intensity that all forms of Christian art once evoked. Does your church seek to protect enduring cultural values despite theological differences?

■ Learn about cultural history

Education helps defuse potential conflict. Getting better informed about world history, including non-Christian religions, is a good place to start educating ourselves. The creativity that comes from God's spirit has been at work for thousands of years, even in the lives of people we think of as primitive or pagan. In order to see it, we have to approach the vast sweep of human creation with the desire to find God wherever we can. We must avoid assuming that what seems foreign, whether geographically or culturally, is automatically worthless or evil.

Refreshing on the role of art and culture in Christian history can help connect Christians to the larger world. When I took a class on early Christian art, I was amazed to learn how many of the same symbols recur in many religions and cultures,



with similar meanings. Could your church (or a group of churches) sponsor a mini-course on Christian painting, sculpture and architecture?

Christian literature and music also reveal connections among people and cultures. Writers such as C. G. Jung and Joseph Campbell show the literary similarities in all human stories, including those of the Bible. Choral works such as those of Palestrina, Bach and Mozart testify to God's greatness in a way that speaks directly to the hearts of Christians and non-Christians alike. Today, through books and compact discs we can broaden our cultural horizons whether we live in a city or a small town. Could your church offer more opportunities for group study and cultural appreciation?



■ Make churches beacons of culture

Cultural history reminds us of all that we have in common with the "foreigners" who, in today's world have become our neighbors. Such study bears fruit if it leads us to cultural and religious exchanges in our own communities.

Art and music can be useful tools to help bridge gaps in communication. A talk on Jewish folklore or Islamic calligraphy can foster connections among people despite theological disagreements. A chamber music recital or art exhibit may draw people from the secular community who would never otherwise have visited a church. Does your church leave such events and topics to secular groups? Could it seek out and promote the offerings of professionals as well as knowledgeable amateurs?

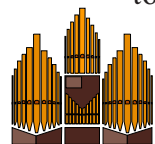


■ **Preserve church landmarks**

Financial considerations sometimes doom beautiful buildings and historic treasures. Restoring and maintaining older buildings can be a heavy burden on church budgets, and compared with other needs, cultural spending can seem relatively impractical. While many European churches bear the cost (often with state help) of maintaining valuable paintings, artifacts, and documents for the benefit of the community, many American churches have trouble just keeping the roof from leaking.



Many churches face the question of whether to preserve a deteriorating building. When church buildings and furnishings have little or no artistic value, the best answer may be to mourn the loss and move on. But when top-quality pipe organs and historic stained glass convey unusual beauty and creativity, it's worth taking even extraordinary measures



to preserve them. How strong is your church's financial commitment to history and culture? Is it willing to preserve and create artistic investments that will benefit future generations?

■ **Keep creating new works of art**

Cultural investment is not only a matter of preserving tradition, but of creating new spiritual value. If we see culture itself as a sacred trust, then we put our money where our mouth is. When we build new churches or renovate older ones, do we employ artists who show as much painstaking dedication to detail as the artisans who built the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, or Europe's great medieval cathedrals? Are we willing to support visionary, even risky new ideas in art and architecture?



Similarly, when we seek new forms of worship, do we include the artistry of trained poets, composers and musicians? Are we ourselves willing to do the hard work of artistic interpretation—to see newly inclusive images of God, read new metaphors for the sacred in modern life, and hear new musical styles that are challenging, not just comforting?

■ **Remember that culture reflects sin, doubt and pain, not just faith and joy**

In political history, we study the bad as well as the good, in order to learn from our errors. In cultural history as well, one of the key roles of art is to remind us of enduring truths that are not beautiful.

Preserving records of tragic events, not just joyful ones, can be important. Holocaust museums and Vietnam War memorials may help to show the need for avoiding war, just as the Columbine, Oklahoma City, and World Trade Center memorials speak of the need to prevent other kinds of senseless killing.

But war and terrorism are not the cultural evils ordinary Christians are most often called to confront. If modern churches are to bear honest witness, we

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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make voluntary financial contributions, but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

must reflect the blind spots of our own cultural history, including racism, sexism, and other sins.

What more can your church do to help preserve reminders of times when members of its community—including church members—have been unjust, unkind, or unthinking? How can it display its own history in a way that honors positive contributions, but also invites sober reflection on past failures?

Perhaps most important of all, what more can your church do to promote open discussion in its community, about the cultural values that bind us together as humans? Through its history, its music, its art and architecture, and its community events, what is your



church saying about whether it is on the side of the powerless, the oppressed, and the minorities that Jesus continually called his followers to defend?

Whatever the religious beliefs of the artists may be, artistic creations help us to recognize and celebrate human creativity and spirit, qualities that reflect God's image in human beings. Such creations thus deserve our attention and care.

Barbara

(This issue of *Connections* reflects invaluable help from my daughter, to whom I send my enthusiastic thanks.)



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What makes a thing or a place sacred?

Can physical objects be sacred? Primitive humans saw the sacred in the natural physical world.



In ancient religions, images of gods inspired worshipers with fearful awe. Guardian spirits of trees, hills and rivers had to be placated; certain animals and foods were taboo, others magical and holy.

Since the Enlightenment of the 18th century, religious believers have tended to feel awe toward more abstract representations of the sacred, through art, music, and even science. Yet some places and things still inspire awe, from cathedrals to communion elements.

Is the Holy Land still a sacred space? How does that affect its chances for peace? How should we weigh human needs against the value of places and things, however sacred?