Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste, by Frank Burch Brown

reviewed by David A. Hoekema in the October 17, 2001 issue

Frank Burch Brown is a writer capable of shifting his focus in the space of a few pages from the magnificence of Byzantine worship in tenth-century Constantinople to the Precious Moments Chapel outside Branson, Missouri, which opened to visitors 1,002 years later. In the course of this wide-ranging exploration of the relationship between art and religion, he offers perceptive critiques of John Ruskin's quasi-religious aestheticism, Immanuel Kant's defense of aesthetic autonomy and Mircea Eliade's analysis of sacred space. He also advances his argument for "critical pluralism" in the aesthetic realm by citing the music of Duke Ellington, U2 and the Indigo Girls. The religious dimension of the aesthetic, Burch shows, is no less evident in a story by James Baldwin or a poem by Sylvia Plath than in the music of the church.

Brown's book deserves a wide reading, not just among pastors and church musicians but also among laypeople, for its catholicity and concreteness. Since collections of serious essays in religious aesthetics are few, to say that *Good Taste* is among the best recent books on its topic is not to say very much. Nor does the author quite deliver on all of the promises made in his opening chapters. Still, the freshness of Brown's approach and the connections he draws between theology, aesthetics and culture make his book valuable.

As holder of a chair in religion and the arts at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, Brown has evidently listened carefully to students and colleagues who stand opposed in the worship wars--the stalwart defenders of Lutheran chorales firing verbal sallies against the advocates of synthesizer pop, those who are ready to take up their scourges and drive the drums from the sanctuary, glowering at their fellow parishioners who want to sell the organ for scrap metal. In this study he tries to rise above such skirmishes by embedding issues related to music in worship within a broader context of aesthetic experience and its relation to religious meaning and practice.

Despite the denigration of the arts in the history of the church, particularly in its Protestant branches, Brown believes they deserve a central role in any account of our religious life. He argues that "the evidence of scripture, tradition and experience all suggest that art can sometimes mediate not only a sense of life but also a sense of grace and of the mystery that we call God. And since art cannot mediate without the aid of esthetic imagination, response, and judgment--without taste, in short--we must consider the perhaps surprising possibility that taste at its most encompassing is no less crucial to religious life and faith than is intellectual understanding and moral commitment."

In his opening chapters, Brown seems to be working his way toward a systematic account of the nature of taste and its role in Christian life. He cites the sharply opposing views of Søren Kierkegaard, deeply suspicious of idolatry masquerading as religious art, and William Blake, who embraces all the arts as manifestations of the spirit of God. Brown looks for a middle way, which he eventually anchors not in Kantian or Romantic notions of art as wholly separate from other aspects of life but in "a genuinely integralist approach" foreshadowed in St. Augustine's and Dante's writings.

Augustine is right to see the world itself as a beautiful poem written in God's hand, Brown asserts, but he is wrong to insist that beauty must never be enjoyed for its own sake apart from what it shows us of God. After all, Brown writes, art can facilitate not just a "radical transcendence" that places us in the presence of the holy and a "proximate transcendence" of sacramental reality but also an "immanent transcendence" in which "the sacred is altogether immersed in the ordinary." In response to the murals of Diego Rivera or the photographs of Ansel Adams, Brown suggests, we show reverence for God when we acknowledge an "ineffable presence that is more than sheerly mundane." Contra Augustine, such an experience need have no explicitly religious content.

By the time we reach Brown's closing chapters we realize that what he offers is not so much a theory of the religious aesthetic as a set of guidelines for coping with aesthetic divergence. Taste, he urges, must be "critical yet plural," for "good tastes can conflict." He cites two influential reports on Catholic musical practices, dating from 1992 and 1995, that represent opposing poles: where one report affirms the liturgical appropriateness of every sort of religious music from every culture, the other calls for a renewed emphasis on musical training, established ritual and artistic quality.

Both stances, Brown argues, are incomplete. We cannot surrender to uncritical relativism, as the first report seems to recommend. Too often the attempt to create a style of "blended worship" by combining disparate musical languages yields a "variety show" rather than a coherent act of common worship. But neither should we appeal to the illusory notion of objective standards of taste. Taste is rooted in culture, and cultures exist through the lives of communities. To respect others' aesthetic preferences does not imply that we should seek to satisfy all of them at the same time.

In an especially interesting chapter at the center of this book, Brown offers an account of "Kitsch, Sacred and Profane" that seeks to explain why so much religious artwork can, it seems, be lumped under this derogatory term. The term refers, he suggests, to "that kind of successful work which most educated and disciplined artists in a given medium would be embarrassed to have produced" because "its success seems somehow cheap." Contrasting a novel by Lee Smith with two hugely successful series of bestsellers, the *Left Behind* novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins and *The Celestine Prophecy* and its sequel by New Age author James Redfield, Brown identifies some of the emotional devices that qualify the latter two as classic examples of kitsch. Yet he also acknowledges that Smith's more thoughtful depiction of her characters' spiritual lives might strike some readers as overly sentimental. To make such discriminations, he insists, is not to succumb to elitism, for "it is not elitist to believe that some aesthetic choices are better than others."

The 12 guiding assumptions that Brown presents near the end of the book turn out to be summaries of what has already been said--that there are many kinds of good taste, that not all forms of art befit worship, that the sacred often borrows from the secular, and so forth. Perhaps his most controversial assertion is assumption number 11, that "while relative accessibility is imperative for most church art, the church also needs art--including 'classic' art of various kinds--that continually challenges and solicits spiritual and theological growth in the aesthetic dimension." This theme is developed rather briefly in the last two chapters of the book. We shortchange ourselves and impoverish our worship, Brown argues, if we use the arts merely as a means to bring pleasure and foster a sense of unity. The aesthetic should also be a source of challenge and growth, and this implies a high level of dedication and discipline. "Submitting to artistic training and discipline," he notes, "can show a degree of humility that is all too often missing from programs of self-expression" and

from easy emotionalism.

Brown concludes with an extended appreciation of the 1987 film *Babette's Feast*, in which he discerns a level of theological insight that has probably escaped most viewers. *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste* is a less satisfying whole than Babette's great feast. It is more a varied buffet than a unified meal. Yet among its ingredients there is much that will appeal to any palate.