

## Religion and Æsthetics.

IN the October number of the *CHURCHMAN* appeared an article entitled "A Question of Æsthetics"; in which a plea was advanced for a larger recognition of Beauty in public Worship. The writer evidently felt the difficulty of his subject, and was most guarded in his advocacy. He laid great stress on the paramount importance of zeal and holiness, and even went as far as to admit "that a good and strong case could be made out for an attitude of entire renunciation of the Beautiful as expressed in Art."

To a plea so guardedly put forward it would, perhaps, be captious to take definite exception; and yet—and yet—in the actual sphere of Religion or Worship the difficulty does still remain as to whether the æsthetic element, Art, Beauty, is really helpful to spirituality. This difficulty has been felt in all ages, and is one of the hardest problems that beset us through life.

It is not intended here to suggest that there can be *no* place in a Christian community for the Beautiful—for the work of the Architect, the Painter, the Sculptor, the Poet. In refutation of such a theory the words of Hamlet immediately occur to one:

"Sure, He that made us with such large discourse,  
Looking before and after, gave us not  
That capability and godlike reason  
To *rust* in us *unused*."

But, whatever place or places there may be, it will always be a question as to whether, or how far Religion is one of them. Indeed, as the writer of the article under consideration points out, many of the most earnest souls, from Savonarola to the Scottish Covenanter or English Quaker, have quite made up their minds on the subject, and have decided that Beauty and Holiness do not mate.

In the present times the tendency is all the other way. The function of Art *in Religion* is exalted. Art is its "handmaid"; and architecture, decoration, painting, music, dress, are very "helpful to devotion."

But, is this so? One is loth to suspect an idea which has found favour in every age and among many pious people. But, is there not some fallacy here, some confusion between the sensuous and the spiritual, between emotion and devotion? Would not the

truer way of putting the case be rather this : that, at best, all these so-called aids may be, to some saintly souls, possibly not hindrances ? Pugin was so fascinated with Gothic architecture that he claimed for it the title of " Christian," in contrast with classical architecture which he stigmatized as " pagan." The very idea of building a classical *church*, or worshipping in one, was to him profanation. But he was oblivious of the fact that the first Communion was held in a " large upper room " (possibly of an inn), and that the first Christian " church " (i.e. the material building) was also an " upper room "—not much art or ornament about it we may be quite sure ; and further, that the plain Roman basilica and dismantled Byzantine temple furnished Christian churches for centuries before " Gothic," with all its beautiful accessories, was thought of.

We read in the Old Testament of the beauty of holiness, but never of the holiness of beauty ; and in the New Testament Art, and all its works, are not, I think, alluded to except with reference to their perishable nature, or indeed positive antagonism to the spiritual life. Curiously enough the word " beauty " does not even occur in the New Testament (English Version) ; and it has been often observed that our Lord Himself makes little or no allusion to it—at any rate to the beauties of Art, and certainly none as to their value and " helpfulness " in spiritual things.

" No mere multiplication of forms (wrote an eminent theologian), nor a more æsthetic arrangement of them, will redeem worshippers from callousness. Ritual and sacrament (and all material means we add) are to the living God but as the wick of a candle to the light thereof. They *may* help to reveal Him ; but the process is not complete unless they themselves perish utterly from the thoughts to which they are intended to be the means of conveying Him."

But who is able to say honestly that all these things—these material means—do perish utterly from his thoughts ? Must he not rather be compelled to admit that the beauty of pillar, vault, tracery, glass, music, exercise a fearfully distracting influence over his imagination and thoughts, and, far from assisting sincere worship, are actually often destructive of it ? . . .

With all its attractions and inspirations, Art is yet of the earth earthy, and in actual relation to religion, it is an embarrassing ally and an indifferent servant.