# Protestant Houses of God: A Contradiction in Terms?

## Ronald Goetz, Ph.D.

Some years ago, the Dutch writer Gerardus van der Leeuw, with characteristic audacity, made the following sweeping generalization: "There is actually no such thing as Protestant church architecture" *(Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art,* [Abingdon, 1963], p. 200).[1] Let us be clear about van der Leeuw's point: It was that there has been no Protestant *church* architecture. Of course, there have been buildings built by Protestants to house their religious and other congregational activities, but by "church" van der Leeuw meant a building that was quite literally "God's house." Protestants have failed to achieve a characteristically "Protestant" alternative to the churches of medieval or Byzantine Christians, for example, wherein "God's presence" was the "focal point, and the form of the cross" was their design.

Van der Leeuw contended that if the only function of a Protestant church is to provide a forum for the hearing of sermons, then even the format of a theater provides too much structure for such an activity. He offered the forlorn claim that since theologians are afraid to touch the matter, architects themselves were taking the initiative and demanding to build houses of God and not "conference rooms." The issue that van der Leeuw was raising, though it has been largely ignored, is as theologically and historically significant today as when he wrote 20 years ago. I want to try to take up the challenge of his remark.

We should first examine several pre-Protestant buildings that are truly churches, in van der Leeuw's sense of the word. It is crucial to understand that there exists an intimate relationship between the architectural style of such buildings and the theology of the era in which they were built. After seeing this relationship illustrated in several great churches, we will be in a better position to see why there has been such a paucity of great church architecture in the Protestant tradition and why that paucity is a direct result of the tradition's theology. Perhaps van der Leeuw's call for a Protestant church tradition is as futile as trying to square the circle.

The great buildings we will look at share a common basilica plan. They are all buildings which feature a large central area, the nave, which is flanked on either side by

---

aisles which are not as tall as the nave. The upper walls of the nave (the clerestory elevations), since they rise above the aisles, can carry windows which light the nave. Characteristically, at the east end of the basilica, in the sanctuary, the building ends with a semidome, the apse. This simple but highly flexible building format served as a Roman secular building plan before the triumph of Christianity. From the period of Constantine on, the basilica style was widely adapted for church architecture, and it is the plan on which the majority of ecclesiastical masterpieces throughout the history of Christian architecture are based. In each succeeding generation, old forms were given new significance by the aesthetic reworking of their architectural elements in order to express the predominant theological *Zeitgeist*.



The church of Hagia Sophia (537 A.D.) in ancient Constantinople (modern Istanbul) is the supreme example of Byzantine Christian architecture. (It is now a museum.) Inside the building every effort is made to disguise its massive buttressing. Its profusion of windows, slender pillars, the subtle curves of its arches, minor apses, semidomes and graceful pendentives give the building an air of delicacy and weightlessness. Even the capitals are carved so as to look like jewel settings, seemingly denying their weight-bearing function. The enormous dome, surrounded as it is by windows, appears to float, hovering independent of the rest of the building, in apparent defiance of gravity.

Hagia Sophia was designed to evoke a sense of the "dematerialization" of its physical elements and to create in the beholder a very ambiguous sense of space. In contrast to the dynamic vertical thrusts of Western medieval church architecture—the powerful downward movement of Romanesque, the soaring upward movement of Gothic—Byzantine architecture creates a sense of serene spatial stillness. Hagia Sophia, despite its great height and
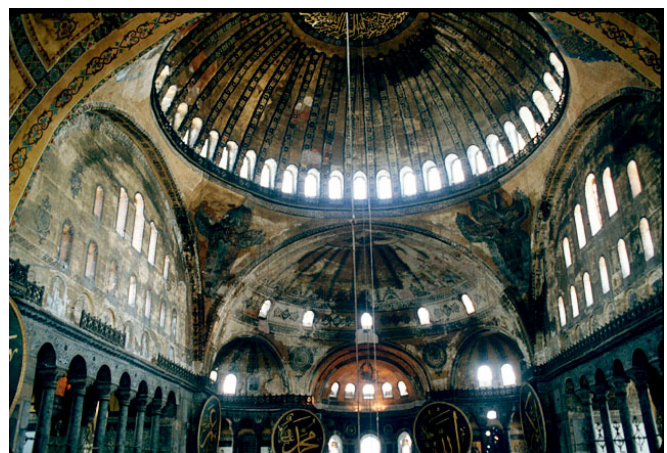
depth, permits the beholder seemingly to drift toward the apse through the miraculous delicacy and light which surround one.

What is this but an architectural expression of Byzantine Christianity's faith in salvation by deification? Christ became what we are that he might make us what he himself is. It is salvation by the cosmic transformation of flesh into spirit, time into eternity. Weightlessness and light are architectural expressions of the Eastern emphasis on spirit and eternity.



We are in a profoundly different world of faith when we enter a church like St. Etienne in Nevers (1083-1097). Probably the first achievement of the "mature" Romanesque style, it is a masterpiece precisely because of its almost brutal severity. There is no attempt to disguise the mass of the structure. The piers in the nave are powerful. The thickness of the walls is accentuated by the addition of galleries above the aisles.

The windows in the clerestory are very narrow and further accentuate the mass of the walls. The barrel vault running through the nave is given greater power by the heavy transverse arches that strengthen and emphasize it. The apse draws down upon its supporting structure, and the windows beneath the apse provide the light that emphasizes the gravity of the east end. There is a semicircular aisle—i.e., the ambulatory and radiating chapels behind the colonnade supporting the apsidal structure, but far from offering relief, these elements only further emphasize the physicality of the whole building.



To stand in such a church is to *stand under*. Of course, the eye goes up, for the nave leads up to the semicircular vault and necessarily the eye is drawn there, but with great force the eye of the beholder is driven down again by the massive arc of the vaulting. One's momentary visual ascent is profoundly reversed by the building's radically downward verticality. One is held down by the heaviness of the overbuilt piers and walls.

What sort of theology is portrayed in St. Etienne? It is a theology that is affected by a profound sense of our finitude, our earthbound and fallen state. True, we do by

3

nature aspire to God, and our initial glance is upward. But without the answering grace of God our striving is fruitless, and even when we are granted the grace for faith, we stand always in awareness of our earthbound dependence. Jaroslav Pelikan, in paraphrasing Whitehead's epigram concerning Plato, has observed that Western theology is "a series of footnotes" to Augustine. This was never more true than during the Romanesque period—the 11th and early 12th centuries.

The greatest theologian of the period was undoubtedly St. Anselm, who regarded himself as a thoroughgoing Augustinian. In his enormously influential doctrine of the atonement, Anselm portrayed the human condition in terms of an archetypal theological *Catch-22.* Humanity has sinned against the honor of God and must satisfy that honor. God cannot freely forgive us without granting sin an omnipotence equal to God's own. That would be inconceivable. We are so hopelessly in debt to God, however, that we cannot begin to pay for our sin. Therefore Christ volunteers to become the God/Man, and thus on the cross he makes satisfaction for sin as no mere human ever could. That Anselm's unique theory became instant orthodoxy is testimony of how profoundly the architecture recorded the theological predisposition of the era: humankind is helpless apart from the saving initiative of God in Christ.

The cathedral at Amiens, begun in 1220, achieves the very climax of the "High Gothic" style. It is 137 feet from the floor to the crown of the vault, and radical upward verticality drives the eye of the beholder up into the vaults—and there one stays. There is no question of the eye's being forced back down. The great height of the building accentuates the upward thrust. But it is clearly not a matter of height alone. St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, for example, is even higher, but its impact is totally different. The architecture at Amiens achieves this radical upwardness by the use of long, slender columns which are made more delicate by the addition of columnettes. The triforum—the delicate screen between the aisle arcade and the clerestory windows—creates an air of suspension. In the choir there are even windows behind the triforum, accenting its weightless delicacy. The windows of the clerestory are very tall; their height is emphasized by the slender, vertical stone tracery which supports the glass as

4

well as the upper rose windows. The building is almost too high for the eye to take in. The initial effect is dizzying.

In the early and High Gothic periods, roughly from the late 1130s to the 1230s, a new spirit was alive in Christendom. The early Augustinian style was shaped by two significant theological developments. First came a revival of mysticism and Neoplatonism, which led to the belief that by prayer and meditation one could rise to union with God. Second, there arose a new confidence in human reason. Though deformed by the fall, reason could nevertheless establish the existence of God. Reason was a gift of God in nature. Therefore some theologians were beginning to say that human beings did not require redemptive grace to establish God's existence; natural reason alone was sufficient.

Augustine was a passionate existential thinker, but he was not primarily a mystic. The older he grew the more his earlier Neoplatonism diminished and the more biblical and grace-oriented his theology became. Augustine's thought was filled with tensions, but at root he saw grace as a prerequisite not only for human salvation and virtuous action, but also for right reasoning about God. The Gothic period was an orthodox age, and the rejection of Augustine would have been unthinkable. Nonetheless, the age had a confidence in the natural capacity of human spirituality and reason which Augustine would have thought Pelagian.

Like intellectual historians, art historians on the whole show remarkable indifference to the theology of any era, no matter how theologically that era may have understood itself. The dominant philosophy of the Byzantine, Romanesque and early Gothic periods was Neoplatonic in cast. This fact alone leaves unanswered the fundamental question: How can the same philosophic mind-set have produced such contradictory architectural aesthetics? The variable that explains this great divergence of style is above all the theology of these eras: philosophy and architecture were both the handmaidens of theology.

By the 15th century, architecture had evolved into a style which gave expression to the "emotionalism of the Late Gothic mystics and nominalists" (Whitney S. Stoddard, *Art and Architecture in Medieval France* [Harper & Row, 1972], p. 288). It was a style that seems to have prophesied the coming of the Reformation. Taking somewhat different forms in different countries, this late "Baroque" Gothic was characterized by extremely elaborate vaults, windows and facades. Typically, the vertical flight of the naves and choirs of these churches was interrupted by horizontal elements, signaling a very tentative accent. Once the eye reached the vault it was not met by the visual calm of the simple High Gothic rib vaults. Rather, up above was the disquieting clamor of highly ornate, idiosyncratic geometric designs.

One is reminded of Luther's years in the monastery: the place could not give him peace. His religious passions were enflamed by the prudence and doubt that were endemic to his time—witness the instantaneous, widespread response to his call for reform throughout Europe. Luther's was an age that could still build in the Gothic style; although it could pretend to itself the unity of the original Gothic periods, it was in fact rent by a pluralism that was the necessary outcome of its nominalism.

Nominalism taught that only individual things exist; thus the universal forms of Plato and Aristotle were reduced to merely the names we give to similarities we observe in the endless parade of objects confronting us in the world. Small wonder that in such an era houses of God faltered in their unified upward ascent.

What do we learn of the theology of the age from the extravagantly detailed ornamental decoration which dazzles the eye while cluttering the mind? Reason cannot prove the existence of God because there are no self-evident analogies that can be drawn from a world populated by an endless array of individual objects. For Augustine it was human sin that made a full-blown natural theology impossible. The Augustinianism of the 15th century added to the sense of original sin a metaphysic that undercut the natural knowledge of God.

In such an era, faith and reason are inevitably polarized, and the foundation of religious conviction can only be brute authority or a mysticism that is too individualized to look to any authority. For those for whom authority was the basis of faith, whence did it derive—from the church or from Scripture? Once that question is voiced, the legitimacy of the medieval synthesis is questioned, and the whole civilization is placed at self-conscious odds with itself: church against state, theology against philosophy, Christ against culture.

Despite rich Christian diversity exhibited in pre-Protestant architecture, there existed a consensus on two issues without which the building of houses of God would have been inconceivable. These were the unquestioned authority of the Christian church in the world and a eucharistic theology that unequivocally affirmed the real presence of Christ in the sacramental elements.

When Europe was emerging from the anarchy of the Dark Ages, "about three years after the year 1000, the earth was covered with a white robe of churches," so wrote the 1lth-century monk Raoul Glaber. From small parish churches to great cathedrals and monastic edifices, Christendom was giving architectual expression to the Augustinian view that increasingly the church as the City of God was to replace the secular Earthly City and rule the world. Throughout the whole medieval period the church's rights and prerogatives as God's elect were concretely asserted through the prominence and splendor of its architecture. Clearly, those who with Augustine could claim that the "church even now is the Kingdom of Christ, and the Kingdom of God"

would not only find it illegitimate to build the houses of the heavenly King on earth but also to spend the enormous treasure that so grand a claim seemed to merit. The Byzantine church did not assert the same political rights as the Western church, but its claim to imperial privilege similarly supported an enormous confidence in its worldly prerogatives.

Protestantism was born of a rejection of the claims of the medieval church to political power and wealth. Christians were called out of the monasteries and convents to a commitment to God through vocations in the world. The Protestant instinct is to be dubious concerning the idea that the church should amass the resources necessary to build a great tradition of houses of God.

In addition to the self-critical "Protestant principle," which impels Protestantism to be suspicious even of its own successes, there are the economic implications of Protestant "worldliness." Exercising one's Christianity through one's secular vocation entails allocation of money in such a way that commitment to God is but one of a number of urgent budgetary concerns. To be in the world inevitably requires that one come to terms with the world's priorities. Huge capital expenditures on grandiose houses of God cannot help but seem wasteful to a consistent Protestant. Ironically, such frugality vis-à-vis the church is exercised in the name of the very God whose elegant houses the Protestant refuses to afford. The question occurs: If a Christian truly believes it is proper to erect a house of God, can such a Christian seek to do so thriftily? Wouldn't the building of God's house without lavishing one's treasures on it be a blasphemy? Protestants avoid the dilemma between impoverishing the world and impoverishing God by simply not building God a house.

Unless one holds the view that the incarnation is the prototypical justification for a high sacramentalism—perhaps including the veneration of relics, icons and images—then it is difficult to imagine just what would impel one to think in terms of churches *housing* God in the first place. It is true that Luther had a more Catholic view of the real presence of Christ than did Zwingli or Calvin, however, Luther's rejection of the medieval doctrine of transubstantiation was significant. For Luther, Christ's body was truly present "in, with and under" the elements of the Eucharist. But Luther never intended to subscribe to the quasi-magical logic into which the doctrine of transubstantiation led. For example, Lutheranism has never been scrupulously concerned over the question of what one does with the bread and wine that remains after the celebration of the Eucharist. As one Lutheran recently told me, for a Lutheran that is "a non-question." For Catholicism, however, the handling of the leftover elements and even the cleaning of the sacramental utensils was a serious matter. Great care had to be taken of every crumb, for every fragment was God's body.

Transubstantiation raised problems analogous to the disposing of radioactive materials—and presumably the "half-life" of the eucharistic elements was eternity.

Since Vatican II there has been a new mood in Catholicism, and such scrupulosity has abated, even if the doctrine of transubstantiation is still maintained.

Lutherans and Reformed Protestants are closer to one another, in their sacramental views than they are to pre-Vatican II Catholicism. Neither Protestant wing would find the locus of the sacrament in the relationship of the priest to the elements. It is what takes place through the elements in the gathered congregation, as the body of Christ that is crucial. The Reformed tradition insists on a *spiritual* "real presence," while Lutheranism holds to the miracle of a *physical* "real presence." But both regard the gathered church as the indispensable locus of the sacrament. Thus it is of the very essence of Protestantism to reject medieval Catholicism's veneration of the host, relics, etc. Byzantine Christianity—even without the doctrine of transubstantiation—similarly venerated the Eucharistic elements, together with icons.

If what I have argued is correct. Protestantism could not remain true to itself and aspire to a building "which has God's presence as its focal point." The focal point of



God's presence can only be the people of God gathered for worship. One example of what a consistent Protestantism *could* build was the 17th-century meetinghouses of the New England Puritans. They were severe, purely functional buildings. Their interior space was designed to center on the pulpit, yet they were also intended to be used for secular as well as religious purposes. This was consistent both with the worldly focus of Protestant righteousness and the Protestant sense that there can be no sacred space, just as there can be no sacred objects. As the New England meetinghouse evolved, it grew in size and gradually gave way to "churches" which were used solely for religious purposes.

The utter, stark simplicity of the early buildings also yielded to the elaborations of the English Renaissance style, supremely exemplified by the Anglo-Catholic architect Christopher Wren. Already the Puritans were finding it difficult to cope with the daringly severe implications of their own theology; church entrances, steeples and pulpits were now richly adorned in a style which, ironically,



8

developed from the Catholic Italian Renaissance. Nevertheless, the Puritan simplicity of church interiors was preserved, and the central pulpit was generally maintained. The Puritan style died slowly.

It is extremely difficult to maintain the Protestant worship life centered in the community of faith as the body of Christ. In our weaknesses and sins, in our individualistic pluralism, we look to either side of us in our church pews and perhaps even look within ourselves and wonder: Could such an aging, discordant, bourgeois, conservative, self-serving assortment of late 20th-century Americans be the locus of Christ's presence? The impulse to answer No is not a new one. It is recorded in the church architecture of the 19th century as well. We can deceive ourselves, but we can't escape from what we build; it reveals the truth about us.

The movement toward medieval revivalism, beginning in the Protestant church architecture of the 19th century, and evident in contemporary church architecture, was born of the same impulse to despair over the viability of Protestantism itself. Why would *Protestants* build Gothic and Romanesque revival buildings? Was it not an attempt to provide a sense of religious mystery to congregations that lacked the zeal and mutual discipline and upbuilding that would permit them even to pretend that they were themselves the body of Christ? It was an ersatz mystery to be sure, but somehow Protestants found ways to make such a mystery their own.

Van der Leeuw was right to claim that no medieval or renaissance revival church can express the Protestant vision. His statement that modern architects were demanding to build houses of God is revealing, however. For if Protestantism discovers a genuinely modern style that enables it to create a house of God or a "sacred space" that same Protestantism will have evolved beyond itself and will in fact no longer exist.

Look at prizewinning modern Protestant church architecture. Often such buildings reflect an attempt to create the sense of mystery van der Leeuw was calling for. Indeed, the sense of mystery created in such churches *does* evoke a feeling of awe.

Modern church architecture clearly looks "modern"; that is, it conforms to the sensitivities of modern style and uses modern materials and building techniques. Yet there is no consistent theological perspective. There is no unity of architectural expression that in any way parallels that of the Byzantine, the Romanesque or the several Gothic periods we have examined. The dynamics of even well-designed modern buildings range all over the place, as they thrust up, down, forward, sideways—or even not at all. Their "mystery" reflects the highly personalized expression of the individual architect, who may not even be a Christian. Just as much Protestant preaching is nondoctrinal, personal and even idiosyncratic, so modern Protestant church architecture reflects the radical pluralism and individualism of our age.

Protestantism has no vital theological center. Its architecture reveals this disarray. Our modern church buildings exhibit Protestantism's desperate attempt to provide a sense of mystery that will fill the spiritual void within our community of faith by creating some sort of sacred space around us. I am not pointing a finger at the schizoid tendencies of others. How can a Protestant who is obsessed by the beauty of medieval churches accuse anyone of inconsistency? The true genius of Protestantism is to make extraordinary spiritual demands on very ordinary people.

Protestantism provides no dwelling place in which to keep one secure. When the Holy Spirit is quiescent, Protestantism has no shelter from elemental doubts and the icy blasts of the abyss. Thus exposed, it is inevitable that it will seek protection and warmth from any roof that will provide it.