

Makoto Fujimura, *Art And Faith. A Theology Of Making*. 2020. 167 pages, including notes and index. Forward by N. T. Wright. Review by K. D. Kragen, KaveDragen Ink, kdkragen.org.



“Before the Fall, we were all artists and poets.” (*Art & Faith*, p. 64)
“After the Fall, we became actors and pirates.” (Linuxus Xianicus)

“Imagination, like art, has often been seen as suspect by Christians who perceive the art world as an assault upon traditional values. These expectation of art are largely driven by fear that art will lead us away from ‘truth’ into an anarchic freedom of expression. Yet after many decades of the church proclaiming ‘truth’, we are no closer as a culture to truth and beauty now than we were a century ago. I have spent the past two decades developing a path toward what I call ‘Culture care’ away from the typical culture wars stance. In this book I outline a path toward culture care via what I see as flowing out from a biblical model of flourishing toward the New.” (*Art And Faith*, p. 5.)

I come to this latest book by Japanese-American artist and philosopher Makoto Fujimura after pondering his previous work *Silence And Beauty* (2016), a panegyric on the novel *Silence* (1969) by renowned Japanese author Shusaku Endo, which in turn grew out of Endo’s learning of the 16th century Christian martyrs while researching the Shogunate period of late 1500s, when Japan drove out foreigners and "closed its doors" to the West for 250 years.

Art And Faith, builds upon Fujimura’s previous writings, yet stands alone as an updated and extended statement about “Culture Care” – as the artful Xian (Christian) contrast to America’s culture wars. Fujimura sees human creativity, the mysterious elements of the “theology of making,” as central and common to all human reality and experience.

In his article “The-500 Year Question” Fujimura lamented, “The contemporary church is the last place a creative genius [such as Renaissance artist Fra Angelico, 1395-1455] looks for art training. That statement alone reveals the extent to which we Christians have abdicated our responsibility to steward culture. Will we see another Renaissance in the days to come?” (“Art & Soul” column, PRISM Magazine, Nov/Dec 2006 issue.) Stewarding culture – this is the calling of *Art And Faith*. Fujimura sees utilitarianism and pragmatism, an outgrowth of the 18th and 19th century Industrial Revolution, to be mostly foreign to Christianity, breaching an environment unfriendly to the nurturing of artists.

For Fujimura, making, doing, creating, is utterly basic to being human. And the category “theology of making” appears to inform not just Fujimura’s philosophy of art (making) but also his general theology about knowing God. “The act of Making can lead us to coming to know The Creator personally, even though I realize that the ‘opening of the eye’ experience is not a guarantee of the personal knowledge” (p. 7). Knowledge of God is a gift from God, via the Word of God, special revelation. Yet one can better *know God* personally and intimately by participating with God in creating “the New” creation. “Making is a form of knowing” therefore, even as aesthetic perception is one way to access reality, both material and immaterial (or spiritual). Having considered Fujimura’s epistemology of making, I believe as interesting as that may be, it is secondary to the book’s main focus: *Culture Care*, healing and redeeming human brokenness, the role of art and human creativity in redemption, and participating with the Creator in making all things new.

Fujimura highlights two key concepts drawn from Japanese art and culture, Nihonga and Kintsugi – both serving as models and metaphors for how the Xian community can build and nurture an aesthetic ecosystem of culture care, compassion, justice seeking, and peacemaking.

The first, “Nihonga is part of the historical ecosystem of care and nurture of culture that the Japanese have cultivated for more than a thousand years, an integrated way of making that affirms the beauty of nature.... We can learn from Nihonga that the process of creating provides an organic,

hands-on and communal approach to knowing. The body of Christ provides the Christian ecosystem for teaching the New Creation, and this can happen if the church once again becomes a place of making, the heart of beauty in the world, and a witness to mercy” (p. 37).

The second concept is Kintsugi, “the ancient Japanese art form of repairing broken tea ware by reassembling ceramic pieces, ...likely to have been refined out of the tea culture of the sixteenth century and the aesthetics of Sen no Rikyu, the most important tea master of Japanese history” (p. 43). Kintsugi “creates anew the valuable pottery, which now becomes more beautiful and more valuable than the original, unbroken vessel” (ibid). This analogy between broken pottery and broken humanity seems profoundly natural and intuitive. Through compassionate love, suffering, sacrificial death, and resurrection Jesus redeems and renews us. “This act of compassion became the basis of Kintsugi, which added gold in the Urushi filled cracks, creating a work of beauty through brokenness” (p. 44). “The Christian gospel of the Good News, begins with the awareness of our brokenness.... The resurrected Christ still bears the wounds of the crucifixion.” And in a Kierkegaardian sense of paradox, “The Theology of Making [which flows from the analogy with Kintsugi] captures in part this paradox of destruction and New Creation” (p. 45). Paul says, in Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”

Even as Jesus is called the Great Physician, he is in a sense also the great Kintsugi Master. A *sixth dimension of creativity*: “the Kintsugi master searching for fragments and broken pots, not for the purpose of mending them, but for contemplation.... The ultimate act of a Kintsugi master is not to even attempt to fix the broken vessel, but to behold its potential, to admire its beauty. What kind of a church would we have, ...if we sought [this] sixth dimension in our churches? What kind of a church would we become if we simply allowed broken people to gather, and did not try to ‘fix’ them but simply to love and behold them, contemplating the shapes that broken pieces can inspire?” (p. 50)

This Kintsugi analogy with Jesus’s work of redemption and renewal presupposes a central reality of the Xian worldview, that humanity is “fallen” or broken, that is, we are sinful, and our rebellion *grieves our Creator*. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Xians participate with the Creator in making things new, through proclamation of the coming New Creation (evangelism), through art and creativity (Making), through justice seeking and peacemaking.

N. T. Wright delineates a three-fold path toward the coming New Creation, even in the midst of the present, old, broken creation: one, mercy and justice, peacemaking; two, beauty, artfulness, aesthetic creativity; and three, evangelism, speaking truth (N. T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope: Rethinking Heaven, The Resurrection, And The Mission Of The Church*, 2009) (*Art And Faith*, p. 55).

“The combination of the reparative (restoring the object’s utility) and the generative (increasing its beauty and value with gold) speaks to the deepest realm of Kintsugi.... When Making honors brokenness, the broken shapes can come into focus as necessary components of the New World to come. This is the most outrageous promise of the Bible, which is at the heart of our journey toward the New: not only are we restored, but we are to partake in the co-creation of the New through our brokenness and pain” (p. 59).

In *Art And Faith*, Fujimura brings his artist vision, Japanese tradition, and faith together, calling on us Xians to “create an alternate gift economy [rather than perpetuating the culture’s traditional market economy of profits and commodities], a generous river of creativity... full of gems of art and nature..., accompanied by a hybrid economy that combines capitalistic society with creative society” (p. 70. Cf. Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Creativity And The Artist In The Modern World*, reprint 2007).

“Just as it took generations of committed Japanese craft folks to develop the finest of papers..., it will take generations of committed craft folks of culture care to incarnate the fruit of the Spirit into culture” (p. 72). Here is the thread of beauty Making and truth speaking Fujimura weaves through *Art And Faith*, along with the call to churches and Xians for repentance and renewal, and an aesthetic ecosystem of creativity and Making, replacing our present culture wars and incivility with culture care.

Into the second half of the book, Fujimura asks a few crucial questions: What if “imagination is seen as necessary, and central, even a requirement for our faith journeys? What if what is central to God’s reality is not the mechanistic, utilitarian survival of species, but the exuberant abundance of Creation and New Creation? What if artists can lead in the way of such training, and artists were seen as invaluable parts of church leadership?” (p. 87).

Fujimura likewise makes a strong appeal to believers and churches: “What have the limited resources battles of the culture wars produced in our culture? ...Christians are seen in culture as promoting hatred instead of love, vindictiveness instead of joy, vilification instead of peace, alarmism instead of patience, discord instead of kindness, racism instead of goodness, prosperity instead of faithfulness, and the imposition of power instead of self-control.... We need to recall that historically it was often Christians who emphasized the importance of schools and hospitals, becoming generous patrons of education, mercy, and the cultivation of beauty. We must recover our call as makers into culture, positing the fruit of the Sprit as makers into the next generation” (pp. 88-89).

Art And Faith bares both reading and pondering and reading a second time. It is a fun journey into Xian possibilities in the present moment, looking to the aesthetic future of the New Creation.