Aesthetic Experience as a Spiritual Support of Homo Post-Secularis

Victor Bychkov

RAS Institute of Philosophy, Goncharnaya St. 12/1, 109240 Moscow, Russia; vbychkov48@yandex.ru

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Abstract: The essay begins with an analysis of the cultural situation of humanity after its transition to secular mentality and a gradual disenchantment with secularism, which leads to the formation of post-secular mentality. It further suggests that aesthetic experience traditionally served as a bridge between the secular and the religious/spiritual and can serve in this capacity again in the post-secular age. It outlines the main traits of the post-secular person (homo post-saecularis). Two aspects of aesthetic experience are emphasized: its in-depth penetration into nature in an attempt to achieve unity with it, and the aesthetic observation of artworks. In pursuing both of these aspects, the post-secular person attempts, just as Romantics and Symbolists previously, to grasp something invisible beyond visible forms and escape from banal reality into higher spiritual realms of being, ultimately experiencing him- or herself as having a place in the universe. Aesthetic experience, if it is correctly understood and practiced, can give all this to the present-day post-secular person. The rest of the essay is devoted to a brief history of twentieth-century views of art, mainly in French and Russian thought, that foreshadow its post-secular role, and to the author's authentic theoretical framework for understanding art and aesthetic experience, as well as his, equally authentic, program of how to achieve the post-secular function of art in practice for a present-day person.

Keywords: culture; faith; secularism; aesthetic experience; wonder; art; beauty; theurgy

1. Culture and Post-Culture

The past century and a half has been marked by a turbulent, if not explosive, movement of all cultural and civilizational processes that have affected the spiritual world of the human being. By the middle of the twentieth century, Culture with the capital “C” (high culture) has been replaced by post-culture. Culture, as I understand it, stands for a period that spans many thousands of years, during which humanity developed under the sign of faith in the existence of the Great Other (the God of monotheism for the Judaeo-Christian cultures of the most recent times). During the period of the Renaissance, this faith began to weaken; secularized culture took over and, approximately by the middle of the past century, the creative segment of “Western” humanity, in both Europe and the New World, entered the period of post-culture. This segment of human kind rejects faith in God and assumes a faith in scientific-technological progress, which is, from its point of view, the only worthy aspect of our civilization. At this point in time, homo saecularis—a group of creative and talented people (above all, in the areas of natural sciences and technology)—reach the high point of their development and continue to show off their superiority over the remaining part of humanity.

At the same time, traditional religiosity still exists in rather large groups of European and New World populations. However, in the overwhelming majority of these populations, religiosity has withered into formal ritualism, and the spiritual-mystical foundation of traditional religions, which also served as the foundation of high Culture, has disappeared. Today, a trip to a church is purely habitual: our parents used to go, the majority of the neighbors go, and it feels awkward not to go. So,
in reality, even this layer of the population already belongs to post-culture. People of deep faith have not determined the spiritual atmosphere of the inhabitants of Europe and European settlers around the globe since the mid-twentieth century (if not from the early 1900s). Imperceptibly, Culture has been replaced by civilization, which has scientific-technological progress for a king or god, and the Humanities are dominated by the ironizing tone of postmodernism.1

However, it is not that easy to believe in the results of the relentless stream of scientific-technological discoveries as in something exclusively positive. The radical secularism of post-culture has led humanity to an anthropological crisis, which one feels sharply both in religion and, more broadly, within the scientific-technological civilization itself. Human beings have lost their link to their deep spiritual roots. It is not by chance that as far back as the middle of the past century many prominent scientists in leading branches of natural sciences and technologies began to sound an alarm. They realized that the path that scientific development had taken can cause catastrophic consequences for humanity, for the humanistically oriented public began to lose control over many areas of scientific-technological research.2 These warnings have been heeded by a rather wide circle of people worldwide. The enthusiasm for the supposedly salvific function of scientific-technological progress has significantly lessened. Enter the age of homo postsecularis.

2. A Dialog between Religious and Secular Mentalities

Presently, there are different concepts of the postsecular.3 First, after a dialog of sorts at the threshold between the past and present centuries between, on the one hand, Jürgen Habermas, who rejected radical atheism, and on the other hand, pope John Paul II, who paid a special attention to the interrelation of faith and reason,4 postsecularism is conceptualized as a dialog and a tendency toward mutual understanding between the religious and secular mentalities, which could be mutually enriching. This path is not straight-forward, and therefore, in my opinion, aesthetic experience can become, on the one hand, one of the important ways of containing radical secularism, and on the other hand, one of the conduits of the postsecular worldview. In fact, it is precisely aesthetic experience that has served as a bridge between religious faith and secular mentality since secularism made its appearance during the time of the Renaissance. At least until the mid-twentieth century, both believers of various confessions and the secular public readily perceived art (which is the concentrated form of existence of aesthetic experience) as a significant spiritual phenomenon.

Together with this idea of postsecularism, we are also familiar with the postsecular person. The postsecular person basically rejects traditional religiosity of any kind and traditional gods, including the Christian God—although, perhaps, still habitually attending traditional liturgies. At the same time, the postsecular person has not lost faith in the high spiritual principle and is in search of a path towards it. Today, the search follows two directions: neo-religious (the search for and creation of new religious forms of ascent to the Absolute) and completely non-religious, in the traditional sense of religiosity. It is precisely following the latter direction that the mid-twentieth-century predecessor of the postsecular person had faith in the progress and salvific mission of science—however, the postsecular person has rejected even that faith.

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1 Translation from Russian by Oleg Bychkov. See more on the spiritual and aesthetic aspects of postmodernism in Mankovskaya 2016b.
2 The well-known Humanist manifestos of prominent scientists and public figures of the past century (the Humanist Manifestos of 1933, 1973, 2003 the most complete manifesto appeared in 2000 under the aegis of the Council for Secular Humanism [Kurtz 2000]) call upon humanity to refocus the efforts of our civilization on human beings, their life and well-being, but seldom is scientific research aimed in this direction.
3 On the concept and origin of the postsecular as relevant to the topic of the present essay, see Warner et al. 2010; Taylor 2011; Bennett 2001.
3. Aesthetic Experience as a Path

The postsecular person’s search for spirituality is associated exclusively with a new understanding of the phenomenon of life itself and with non-utilitarian forms of contact with life, its origins, and cosmo-anthropic being. Here, we see the increasing role of the phenomenon of wonder, which, notably, is also present in aesthetic experience. Therefore, one of the main directions in the search for postsecular spirituality could be the contemporary person’s renewed interest in the area of aesthetic experience; in its two main aspects: (1) its in-depth penetration into nature and its pursuit of unity with nature; and (2) aesthetic contemplation of art works. Pursuing both of these aspects of aesthetic experience, the contemporary person, just as the Romantics and Symbolists did previously, attempts to grasp something invisible beyond visible forms, to escape into higher spiritual realms of being from day-to-day reality, and finally to feel like human beings have their place in the Universe. If the contemporary postsecular person correctly understands and practices aesthetic experience, it can provide him or her with all this.

At this point it is worth recalling that during the period of the waning of religiosity and spread of secularism at the end of the nineteenth century, there were lively discussions about the high spiritual potential of art among the French Symbolists. One of their spiritual masterminds, Joséphin (Săr) Péladan, felt the crisis and decay of religious consciousness sharply. Art and religion, he claimed, had the same divine origin and, therefore during the period of spiritual decay, art could replace religion: “Art is the last form of religiosity during periods of decay; if it is extinguished, putrefaction accelerates” (Péladan 1898, p. 96). Péladan was convinced that art and aesthetics led the human being toward the same ideals and the same God as religion; however, in the contemporary world, artistic experience is foregrounded. In an anti-religious atmosphere, “those who no longer enter churches frequent museums”, where they search for “sacred emotions”, for the “ideal”, “mystical”, and “lyric” (Péladan 1905, p. 91). During the period of expectation of the coming of the Holy Spirit—i.e., his own period, according to Péladan—art and beauty become the most important ways to God. According to the contemporary scholar of Péladan’s thought, Nadya Mankovskaya, he “sets the goal of restoring the lost (so he thought) knowledge and ideals of Catholicism. Tradition will serve as the foundation of this restoration; art will serve as its platform; and beauty will be its means. Beauty that is expressed in works of art is capable of leading humanity to God and preparing the coming of the Holy Spirit. True art is charged with the divine mission of elevating the human soul” (Mankovskaya 2016a, p. 82). During the period of the rise of secular tendencies, Péladan’s pathos is quite understandable. In the beginning of the twentieth century, the aspirations of the Russian Symbolists, such as Andrei Belyi, Vyacheslav Ivanov, and others, were close to those of Péladan. They were developing the theory of theurgy, which amounted to art transcending its traditional boundaries and becoming part of real life in order to co-create it together with God according to aesthetic laws.

4. Theurgy

In ancient times, the term ‘theurgy’ signified sacred and mystical communication between chosen individuals and the divine world in the process of special ritual actions, with the resulting acquisition of secret knowledge from the gods. Vladimir Soloviev, a Russian philosopher of the late 1800s, conceptualizes theurgy as the ancient “substantial unity of creative activity, which is consumed by mysticism,” whose essence lies in the unity of earthly and heavenly elements in the process of sacred creativity. In particular, he singles out the contemporary stage of theurgy, which he designates as “free theurgy” or “holistic creativity”. He sees its essence in conscious and mystical

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5. On the concept of wonder, especially as relevant to aesthetics, see: Costa 2011; Vasalou 2015; Willmott 2018; Levine 2006.

6. Today, more and more frequently one hears voices in favor of giving aesthetic experience and aesthetics as a discipline a higher rank in human cultural hierarchy compared to the past centuries. For example, Wolfgang Welsch thinks that, today, aesthetics is turning into a “universal philosophy” (Welsch 1996).
“communication with the heavenly world by means of inner creative activity”, which is based on the organic unity of the principal constitutive elements of creativity: mysticism, “fine art”, and “technical artistry” (Soloviev 1966, p. 286). This sort of understanding of theurgy and theurgic creativity resonated both with the Symbolists and with many Russian religious thinkers at the beginning of the twentieth century. Poet Vyacheslav Ivanov specifically focuses on Soloviev’s idea that the art of the future must freely establish a new link with religion, when artists (theurges) themselves will consciously control “earthly realizations” of the religious idea. According to Ivanov, theurges, as bearers of divine revelation, are true creators of myth and symbolists in the highest sense, and theurgy is the “action that is imprinted with the seal of God’s Name” (Ivanov 1974, p. 646). Although theurgy has not been realized in its full sense, it is precisely theurgy that inspires the Russian Symbolists in their creative activity.

As the highest stage of creative activity, theurgy, which is understood as life itself as assisted by the divine energy of Sophia, the Wisdom of God, and the original Symbol itself (Christ), is also very important to Andrei Belyi. He discerns “pursuit of theurgy” in Nietzsche’s wisdom and considers Vladimir Soloviev’s statement about the “joining of the heights of symbolism as art with mysticism” as the most precise definition of the essence of theurgy (Belyi 1994, p. 218). Human creativity at its height consists, to use Belyi’s terminology, of three ascending “acts”. The first act is the creation of a world of the arts. The second act is the “creation of oneself in the image and likeness of the world”—i.e., perfecting oneself—which happens in the process of a vigorous struggle against one’s inert “I”–or the “guardian of the threshold”, who blocks one’s access to the kingdom of freedom. Here, a tragic discord resounds within a person when the artist leaves his or her art. The third (future) act is the entrance of persons into the kingdom of freedom and the “new link between unconditionally free people for the purpose of creating a community of life in the image and likeness of the new names that have been secretly inscribed in us by the Spirit” (Belyi 1994, p. 465). It is precisely this final act that, according to Belyi, corresponds to the level of theurgic creativity (or existence) that is founded on an inspiration from above.

The idea of theurgy is developed in Nikolai Berdyaev’s book, Smysl tvorchestva. Opyt opravdaniia cheloveka (The Meaning of Creativity. The Experience of the Justification of the Human Being, 1916): “Theurgy is the kind of art that creates another world, another existence, another life, beauty as something existent. Theurgy overcomes the tragedy of creative act and directs creative energy at the new life.” Theurgy puts an end to all traditional art and literature, all division of creativity; it completes traditional culture as a product of human effort and begins “superculture,” for “theurgy is human action together with God—or God-action, a creativity of God-Man” (Berdyaev 1985, p. 283).

Contemporary reality so far has given us no reason to get our hopes up as far as the symbolist and theurgic ideals are concerned. However, the aspirations of symbolists and theurgists to secure a position of prominence for art in spiritual culture during the period of secularization should make us pay close attention to art even now: after all, art has functioned in Culture at the same time as and in complete harmony with religion. And, even today, art can give us much more than mere wonder and amazement.

5. Art as a Postsecular Phenomenon

Therefore, in what follows, I would like to provide a more detailed account of art as the quintessence of aesthetic experience as a whole, which promises new spiritual perspectives to the contemporary person. On the basis of the experience of the previous generations, homo postsaecularis intuitively feels that one can reach spiritual heights by way of mastering and experiencing high art. As a rule, however, they do not know nor care to articulate what exactly this experience provides for them. Therefore, we remind ourselves here of the metaphysical foundations of art (upon which, as a matter of fact, all world religions have leaned from time immemorial).
So what is art as far as its essential foundations are concerned? At present, we can provide a more or less articulate answer to this question on the basis of the almost three-hundred-year period of existence of aesthetics as a discipline, which has been mostly devoted to searching for an answer to this notoriously difficult question.

Art is an event.

It is an event that is tremendously important and vital for the human being. It is not an accident that art, together with rudimentary forms of religion, appeared at the very dawn of the existence of *homo sapiens* as a species and remained with us over the entire period of our history.

The main significance of this event is that, in it, the aesthetic experience of the human being and humanity as whole is expressed and manifested in a concentrated form during particular periods of human history. It appears that this experience, as well as religious experience (it is not an accident either that the two have been intertwined since times immemorial), has participated, over many thousands of years, in the formation of the human being, of the human psyche, its mentality, and Culture itself.

(I should like to note, as an aside, that aesthetic experience should not be reduced merely to art; it permeates almost all aspects of human life. However, in this particular case, we speak of art where aesthetic experience is expressed in a concentrated form; essentially, art appeared in order to express this type of experience.)

The essence of aesthetic experience as far as art is concerned, i.e., the essence of art itself, can be reduced to several key functions:

1. The entire system of artistic devices expresses certain meanings that are vital to human beings. These meanings in principle cannot be verbalized; they cannot be expressed or grasped by the human being in any other way. This method of expression rests on artistic images and symbols, which constitute artistic language.
2. At the instant of aesthetic perception, art thereby performs an anagogical function by lifting human beings from their day-to-day life and elevating them into other, higher worlds. This is accomplished by means of immersing them into artistic space.
3. Art contributes to creating harmony: within the human being; between the human being and society; and even between the human being and the Universe as a whole. Art thereby induces a feeling of fullness of being, of one’s participation in this fullness, and therefore of one’s self-worth in the Universe. (‘The Universe’ here stands for the cosmoanthropic whole, within which the human being exists.) This fullness of being means that, with the help of art and through art, human beings are really plugged into the cosmoanthropic creative process and feel themselves as equal partners in it.
4. Finally, art is one of the principal conveyers of one of the most important values: beauty. By and large, artworks from times immemorial were cherished precisely for their beauty (or, to use current parlance, for their aesthetic quality). It is well known that it is precisely beauty that many eighteenth-century philosophers considered the subject of aesthetics. Charles Batteux, a French thinker and rhetorician, even introduced the term *les beaux arts* (lit. “beautiful arts”) to describe art as an aesthetic phenomenon, i.e., to express the essence of art. And it is in this sense that the arts were understood, both in aesthetics and in habitual references to the arts, until the middle of the twentieth century.

In many respects, art performs all of its principal aforesaid functions (expressive of vital meanings, anagogical, harmonizing) precisely thanks to the fact that it both expresses and creates this value, i.e., thanks to its axiological function.

It is quite clear and commonly known that, historically, art did not seem to have emerged in order to actualize this value. Almost always, art has performed most important non-aesthetic functions in Culture: religious, political, social, ethical, narrative, etc. It is first of all for these reasons that art has been highly valued in society and paid for by clients.
6. The Aesthetic Essence of Art

However, art has been able to perform all these other functions exclusively with the help of its aesthetic nature. It is only high-quality (i.e., highly aesthetic) art that was capable—by purely artistic means—of effectively performing those non-artistic functions that society assigned to it. Therefore, the high artistic (read: aesthetic) quality of the artwork is its essential characteristic. It is clear that historically not everybody, and it was not always (and for the most time hardly anybody and infrequently), understood why art functioned so effectively in religion, politics, and so forth. At the same time, most felt very strongly that it would be difficult to manage those areas of culture without the support of art, no matter how unclear the reasons of its effectiveness were. It is precisely for this reason that, from ancient times onward, art has been so tightly wedded to religious practices all across the world. Moreover, those historical forms of art that we have known from time immemorial all the way to the mid-twentieth century have been created by human beings with religious mentalities, who believed in the existence of the Great Other, or God. One would be well advised not to ignore this fundamental fact when one thinks about the essence of art today.

Now, this high artistic quality, i.e., the aesthetic “matter” of art, is so subtle and beyond the grasp of reason that humanity is yet to say something convincing about it despite persistent attempts to understand this quality throughout time. This is all the more surprising given that this high artistic quality of artworks is strongly felt intuitively—and with some degree of agreement—within communities of professional artists, art critics, and aestheticians, i.e., people with a highly developed aesthetic taste who are steeped in aesthetic experience on a regular basis.

However, let us return to my definition of art as an event.

Is Leonardo’s Gioconda that simply hangs on a wall in the Louvre not art? No, it is not. I call art an event precisely because it is a specific, unique process of communication between the recipient, the artwork, and something else that stands behind the latter.

7. The Event of Art

In order to realize the event of art fully, four critical components are required.

1. An artwork of high artistic quality.
2. A recipient or subject of perception of art who is aesthetically prepared.
3. A stance to perceive this artwork precisely aesthetically, and not in any other way.
4. Conditions that are conducive of the realization of this perception.

Beginning with ancient times (at a theoretical level, with Aristotle and Longinus) and until (more or less) the middle of the twentieth century, few people who had any connection to art doubted the first requirement. An artwork must possess a number of objective characteristics, which can trigger a process of aesthetic perception of the work in a recipient. (Not all of these characteristics—such as [to take painting as an example] certain color combinations, visual rhythms, compositional relations, etc.—can be verbalized, but they are distinctly felt by an aesthetically trained eye and ear.)

It is another matter that the availability of highly artistic work is totally insufficient for an event of art to occur. For example, if a religious pilgrim prostrates himself before Andrei Rublyov’s icon of the Trinity exhibited in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow and attempts to kiss it, no event of art has taken place here. For this pilgrim, the icon of the great iconographer is merely an object of religious veneration, and does not represent an aesthetic value. Alternatively, if an art dealer poses in front of a Corot and begins to evaluate the price of this canvas, no event of art has taken place here either. The artwork functions here merely as an object of commerce.

Therefore, in order for an event of art to occur, perhaps the most important requirement is the second: an availability of a subject who is aesthetically prepared. This means that an artwork is engaged by a person who possesses a rather developed aesthetic taste and is proficient, to a certain extent, in the artistic language of the type of art that she is about to appreciate.

Let us recall that the category of taste was introduced into aesthetics in the eighteenth century in order to designate the human faculty that perceives the beautiful—or, to broaden the category, aesthetic values. According to Kant, it is precisely the faculty of taste that performs (non-verbal!)
aesthetic judgments (including judgments of artworks) on the basis of the feelings of pleasure or displeasure. The eighteenth-century greats all but exhausted the subject of taste, and the main aspects of their understanding of taste remain relevant even today.

The presence of taste, certainly, is the principal and most crucial requirement in the subject of aesthetic perception. However, a knowledge base of the peculiar artistic languages of different historical periods, ethnic groups, and types of art is also essential. One must study these languages by perusing expert literature, attending specialist lectures, but first of all by engaging actual artworks regularly. This is because this type of knowledge is of a special kind: it is non-discursive, practically impossible to articulate, but is acquired in the process of training one’s perception while perceiving actual artworks.

For people who do not possess a particular level of taste and are not trained to engage specific types of art, i.e., for those who do not “know” (intuitively) the language of art, art does not exist. To be sure, they look at an artwork—this is the purpose of their visit, after all!—but they do not see it, and no event of art happens in this case.

The last two requirements—a stance to perceive an artwork aesthetically, and conditions that are conducive of the realization of aesthetic perception—are, of course, also important. It is essential that the subject comes to a museum, concert hall, or theater with this sort of stance. For example, it is important that he perceive Surikov’s “Lady Morozova” as a work of the art of painting, and not as an illustration from the life of a well-known Old Believer.

Aesthetic perception also requires certain favorable external conditions of perception. These are particularly difficult to provide these days in famous museums that contain artistic masterpieces, each of which is surrounded by a large crowd of selfie enthusiasts eager to take a picture. An event of art will hardly happen successfully for a subject of aesthetic perception under such conditions. He will gaze with sadness over the heads of the selfie-taking crowd at the same Gioconda and move on to adjacent galleries, where one could find less famous, but no less aesthetically valuable artworks. There, he will immerse himself fully in their perception, which requires a rather long and quiet period of contemplation.

The main indicator of an occurrence of an event of art is spiritual joy and aesthetic pleasure, which the recipient experiences in the process of perception and contemplation of an artwork (the latter constitutes the principal stage of aesthetic perception). This pleasure is precisely an indicator, and not the end of the aesthetic perception of art (or of anything else). However, most recipients do not understand such theoretical subtleties and often crave to experience artworks precisely for the sake of this pleasure, which was recognized as early as in ancient Greek thought.

To sum up what has been said, one can provide one of the currently possible definitions of art as an aesthetic event that immerses the contemporary person into the spiritual depths of being.

Art is an event (in the sense of “happening”) of an expression (which is most fully given in history and perceptible by the senses) of aesthetic experience; this event is most fully realized in the spiritual world of a subject who has been prepared aesthetically and has a stance to perceive an object aesthetically; this subject is adequately situated to perceive artistically significant artworks. The latter include works that have been created following the principles of imagistic-symbolic representation or expression of any reality (metaphysical, spiritual, natural, material, artificial, social, psychic, etc.) and that help the recipient to plumb the depths of meaning of the reality that is being expressed, of the object that is being represented, or of the artwork itself—the depths that are inaccessible by any other means of cognition and that often extend far beyond the limits of what is being represented or the images that are used to represent it. In the course of this event, the recipient acquires new knowledge, is elevated to alternative levels of being beyond our day-to-day existence, and is ideally harmonized with the Universe and feels the fullness of being. The aesthetic pleasure that the recipient experiences serves as a witness to the realization of the event of art.

If one understands and treats art—and, broadly speaking, aesthetic experience as a whole—in this way, it becomes, perhaps, the most adequate and effective way of elevating the contemporary person to the highest rungs of the spiritual world. It is clear from what has been said, that in order to have proper aesthetic experience—especially the experience of art—the recipient must spend many
years and apply a considerable spiritual effort preparing for it, constantly honing their spiritual
(aesthetic, in this case) abilities. There is nothing unexpected here. The proper way to have a spiritual
experience requires this sort of preparation and training. However, unlike other spiritual disciplines,
aesthetic experience in culture remains the most universal, accessible, and historically possessed—to
some extent and in some elementary form, which can always be developed further—by the majority
of average people. And the postsecular person’s yearning to develop this experience in themselves is
still strongly felt even today.

8. Contemporary Art Practices

It is another matter that contemporary art, which alone claims to be relevant today, provides
virtually no opportunity for an aesthetically sensitive person to have an aesthetic experience. For the
most part, this sort of “art” merely calls itself that, but has jettisoned the essence of art: its aesthetic
or artistic quality. Contemporary art practices, including various non-artistic experiments with classic
art, can be called anything but art in its classic interpretation that is laid out in this essay. In any case,
one thing is certain: they contain, in themselves, no spiritual-aesthetic potential (or, at most, merely
primitive elements or simulacra of spirituality) that could satisfy the spiritual cravings of the
postsecular person. Art practices and artifacts that currently fill contemporary museums and
exhibition spaces, as well as so-called “performances” that crowd stages of theaters and concert halls,
rather cater to the needs of the person of the secular age, which are devoid of any kind of spirituality.
As a whole, they, as it were, foreshadow some sort of a spiritual—if not total—catastrophe that awaits
humanity. To be sure, all these artifacts and performances can arouse wonder and amazement, too,
but only of a negative kind.

At the same time, postsecular people are not prone to apocalypticism. They have faith in life, in
its spiritual foundations, in humanistic ideals, and in the ability of human rationality to go beyond
its human boundaries. And aesthetic experience—provided one calls on it—can effectively assist
them with this attitude.

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