
Chapter 18

Art and the Aesthetic: The Religious Dimension

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18.1

A standard part of the canon used for introducing students to aesthetic theory of the twentieth century is the first section, titled “The Aesthetic Hypothesis,” of the opening chapter of Clive Bell’s *Art* (Bell 1914); one finds this section reproduced in almost all the standard anthologies. What is never reproduced is the third section, “The Metaphysical Hypothesis,” or the opening section of the second chapter, “Art and Religion.” As good a way as any into our topic is to consider what Bell says in these two sections. We have to begin, though, with the opening section.

Bell begins his line of thought in the essay by ringingly affirming that there is an aesthetic emotion: “All sensitive people agree,” he says, “that there is a peculiar emotion provoked by works of art.” He does not mean, he adds, “that all works provoke the same emotion. On the contrary, every work produces a different emotion. But all these emotions are recognisably the same in kind; so far, at any rate, the best opinion is on my side” (Bell 1914: 17). As he proceeds, it becomes clear that the emotion Bell has in mind is a species of joy – or as he rather often calls it, “ecstasy.” Likewise it becomes clear that one experiences the aesthetic emotion when one’s mode of engagement with a work of art is contemplation.

The question Bell asks in the opening section of the book is, then, what it is in works of art that evokes, upon contemplation, that joy which is the aesthetic emotion. Answering this question, so he says, is “the central problem” of aesthetics. Furthermore, if we can find what it is that evokes the aesthetic emotion, we will also “have discovered the essential quality in a work of art, the quality that distinguishes works of art from all other classes of objects” (Bell 1914: 17). The answer to the central problem of aesthetics will be at the same time the answer to the fundamental question in theory of art.

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Bell's well-known answer to his question is that *form* is what evokes the aesthetic emotion. Sometimes he calls it *significant* form. But by the adjective "significant" he just means form that evokes the aesthetic emotion in qualified percipients. So his thesis is simply that it's the form of a work of art that evokes, upon contemplation, that particular species of joy which is the aesthetic emotion.

Content of whatever type – representation, symbol, expressiveness – is irrelevant to the aesthetic emotion. There's nothing wrong with content; Bell is not arguing that only abstract art is truly art. "Let no one imagine that representation is bad in itself; a realistic form may be as significant, in its place as part of the design, as an abstract. But if a representative form has value, it is as form, not as representation" (Bell 1914: 27). Nor is there anything wrong with enjoying the content, or enjoying such reveries as may be evoked by attending to content – or indeed, by attending to form. To do so, however, is to "have tumbled from the superb peaks of aesthetic exaltation to the snug foothills of warm humanity. It is a jolly country. No one need be ashamed of enjoying himself there." But "let no one imagine, because he has made merry in the warm tilth and quaint nooks of romance, that he can even guess at the austere and thrilling raptures of those who have climbed the cold, white peaks of art" (Bell 1914: 31).

That last passage makes clear Bell's evaluation of the worth of aesthetic emotion. It is, he says, one of "the most valuable things in the world" – "a gift beyond all price." So "valuable, indeed, that in my giddier moments I have been tempted to believe that art might prove the world's salvation" (Bell 1914: 32). What accounts for this high value is that attention to form puts us in touch with a "world" that transcends the ordinary practical concerns of human beings. "Art transports us from the world of man's activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation. For a moment we are shut off from human interests, our anticipations and memories are arrested; we are lifted above the stream of life" (Bell 1914: 27). We "inhabit a world with an intense and peculiar significance of its own; that significance is unrelated to the significance of life. In this world the emotions of life find no place. It is a world with emotions of its own" (Bell 1914: 28).

The language Bell here uses to develop his "aesthetic hypothesis" carries unmistakable echoes of religious language; indeed, it *is* religious language. "A gift beyond all price." "The world's salvation." "Lifted above the stream of life." "Out of life into ecstasy." A world "whose significance is unrelated to the significance of life." The thought that lies behind the religious language comes to the surface in those other two sections of *Art* that I mentioned, "The Metaphysical Hypothesis" and "Art and Religion."

Bell opens the former of these two sections by posing what he calls "the metaphysical question": why do certain arrangements and combinations of form move us so strangely? Form moves us, so he begins his suggestion, "because it expresses the emotion of its creator" (Bell 1914: 43). And what sort of emotion is that? Very often, it's the emotion the artist felt upon contemplating certain natural objects as *pure forms*. The emotion the artist expresses is of the same sort as that which we feel upon contemplating his work. "The emotion that the artist felt in

his moment of inspiration he did not feel for objects seen as means, but for objects seen as pure forms – that is, as ends in themselves . . . [I]n the moment of aesthetic vision he sees objects, not as means shrouded in associations, but as pure forms” (Bell 1914: 44–5).

To see objects “as pure forms is to see them as ends in themselves” (Bell 1914: 45). So the question becomes, in turn, what “is the significance of anything as an end in itself? What is that which is left when we have stripped a thing of all its associations, of all its significance as a means” (Bell 1914: 45)? Bell professes to be somewhat shy about offering his answer; but his hypothesis is that what’s left is “that which philosophers used to call ‘the thing in itself’ and now call ‘ultimate reality’” (Bell 1914: 45).

If an object considered as an end in itself moves us more profoundly (*i.e.* has greater significance) than the same object considered as a means to practical ends or as a thing related to human interests – and this undoubtedly is the case – we can only suppose that when we consider anything as an end in itself we become aware of that in it which is of greater moment than any qualities it may have acquired from keeping company with human beings. Instead of recognising its accidental and conditioned importance, we become aware of its essential reality, of the God in everything, of the universal in the particular, of the all-pervading rhythm. Call it by what name you will, the thing that I am talking about is that which lies behind the appearance of all things – that which gives to all things their individual significance, the thing in itself, the ultimate reality. (Bell 1914: 54)

So back to the question: why are we so profoundly moved by contemplation of form? Because, says Bell, we are responding to an artist’s expression in form of an emotion felt for that ultimate reality which reveals itself through form. Significant form is

form behind which we catch a sense of ultimate reality . . . [T]he emotion which artists feel in their moments of inspiration, that others feel in the rare moments when they see objects artistically, and that many of us feel when we contemplate works of art, are the same in kind. All [are] emotions felt for reality revealing itself through pure form. (Bell 1914: 46)

That art is “a means to a state of exaltation is unanimously agreed, and that it comes from the spiritual depths of man’s nature is hardly contested . . . Art is, in fact, a necessity to and a product of the spiritual life, . . . to which it gives and from which . . . it takes” (Bell 1914: 59). It is for this reason that, for some, anyway, art “makes life worth living” (Bell 1914: 59).

Art is thus kin to religion. The physical universe for the mystic, as for the artist, is

a means to ecstasy. The mystic feels things as ‘ends’ instead of seeing them as ‘means.’ He seeks within all things that ultimate reality which provokes emotional exaltation;

and if he does not come at it through pure form, there are . . . more roads than one to that country. Religion, as I understand it, is an expression of the individual's sense of the emotional significance of the universe. (Bell 1914: 62)

Both art and religion “have the power of transporting men to superhuman ecstasies; both are means to unearthly states of mind. Art and religion belong to the same world . . . The kingdom of neither is of this world” (Bell 1914: 63).

“Between aesthetic and religious rapture there is [thus] a family alliance.” “Art and Religion are . . . two roads by which men escape from circumstance to ecstasy” (Bell 1914: 68), twin manifestations of man's “religious sense” – provided we mean by this, man's sense of ultimate reality (Bell 1914: 69). Art is not the expression or manifestation of any particular religion. To think thus would be “to confuse the religious spirit with the channels in which it has been made to flow” (Bell 1914: 69). To be sure, “many descriptive paintings are manifestos and expositions of religious dogmas”; there's nothing wrong with that. “But in so far as a picture is a work of art, it has no more to do with dogmas or doctrines, facts or theories, than with the interests and emotions of daily life” (Bell 1914: 69). Art is related rather to “that universal emotion that has found a corrupt and stuttering expression in a thousand different creeds” (Bell 1914: 69). The mystic and the art lover represent “twin manifestations of the spirit” (Bell 1914: 63).

18.2

A number of the particularities of Bell's discussion mark him as very much a theorist of the modern period. I will shortly be taking note of some of those particularities. But before I do so, let me call attention to the fact that there's a long lineage behind Bell's suggestion that what ultimately accounts for the character of aesthetic joy is that in experiencing such joy we are in touch with ultimate reality. We are all acquainted with Kant's thoroughly secular account of aesthetic delight. The source of aesthetic delight – or pleasure in beauty, as Kant describes it – is the delight one gets from the free play of one's cognitive faculties. Nothing of the transcendent here! But behind Kant there was an older tradition; and it was this older tradition that Bell was carrying on in his own way – whether wittingly or not, I do not know.

The topic of *Enneads* I.6 of Plotinus is beauty. The account as a whole is very much reminiscent of Plato's discussion in the *Symposium*. Rather than beginning at the top, as it were, Plotinus begins, as did Plato, at the bottom, with physical manifestations of beauty. What is it, he asks, “that attracts the gaze of those who look at something, and turns and draws them to it and makes them enjoy the sight? If we find this perhaps we can use it as a stepping-stone and get a sight of the rest” (I.6.1). Beauty is that which, by definition, gives delight in the contemplating. If we can discover what it is that gives delight in the contemplating, we

will thereby have discovered the nature of beauty. The similarity of Bell's question to this of Plotinus is striking!

The answer of the Pythagorean-Platonic tradition to this opening question was that beauty consists in due proportion of parts. Plotinus dissents. Among the things that are beautiful are some in which there are no perceptually discriminable parts related to each other in some proportioned way – colors, for example, and the light of the sun, gold, stars, lightning in the night. All of these are, or can be, beautiful, the proof of which is that they give us delight in the contemplating; yet there's no due proportion of perceptually discriminable parts. And when it comes to non-perceptual things, like beautiful ways of life, beautiful characters, beautiful modes of thought, beautifully developed laws, the concept of *proportion of parts* just seems to have no application – no *literal* application, at any rate.

With the Pythagorean-Platonic account out of the way, Plotinus again poses his question: what constitutes beauty in bodies? We know that it's "something which we become aware of even at the first glance; the soul speaks of it as if it understood it, recognizes and welcomes it and as it were adapts itself to it." Accordingly, the explanation he will develop, says Plotinus, is "that the soul, since it is by nature what it is and is related to the higher kind of reality in the realm of being, when it sees something akin to it or a trace of its kindred reality, is delighted and thrilled and returns to itself and remembers itself and its own possessions" (I.6.2).

What then is that "higher kind of reality" of which beauty in bodies is a "trace," that trace evoking in us a delight and thrill because it reminds us of what truly belongs to us? *Form*, says Plotinus; "the things in this world are beautiful by participating in form." More specifically, *unity*. "Beauty rests upon the material things when it has been brought into unity" – be it the unity of a complex or the unity of a simple.

Having begun with beauties present to the senses, Plotinus proceeds along the path of a classic Platonic ascent to beauties revealed only to the intellect – until, going beyond even the Forms, we arrive finally at the One, God, "the good which every soul desires" (I.6.7). What we discover along the way is the beauty of a unified self, and wherein lies that beauty. As with everything else, "the soul's becoming something good and beautiful is its being made like to God, because from Him [comes] beauty" (I.6.6). A beautiful unified self is perforce a moral self; hence ethics is revealed to be a subdivision of aesthetics. At the same time it's revealed to be a condition of aesthetic ascent; for what we discover is that we cannot advance far up the scale of beauty without ourselves becoming beautiful. If anyone comes

blear-eyed with wickedness, and unpurified, or weak and by his cowardice unable to look at what is very bright, he sees nothing, even if someone shows him what is there and possible to see. For one must come to the sight with a seeing power made akin and like to what is seen. No eye ever saw the sun without becoming sun-like, nor can a soul see beauty without becoming beautiful. You must become first all godlike and all beautiful if you intend to see God and beauty. (I.6.9)

As one ascends this scale of beauty, the joy one experiences in the contemplation of beauty becomes ever more intense. Plotinus' language is rhapsodic even when speaking of our enjoyment of the beauty of sensed objects. "Whenever there is contact with any sort of beautiful things, wonder and a shock of delight and longing and passion and a happy excitement" are the consequence, he says (I.6.4). But when contemplating beauty in things that cannot be sensed but only known intellectually, we are not just delighted and excited but "overwhelmed" (I.6.4). And when finally we arrive at the One, if we ever do, what we experience is a "shock of delight" and a desire for union. "The man who has not seen it may desire it as good, but he who has seen it glories in its beauty and is full of wonder and delight, enduring a shock which causes no hurt, loving with true passion and piercing longing" (I.6.7).

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I have skipped over many of the details of Plotinus' exposition – for example, his contention that in one way God (the One) is paradigmatically beautiful whereas, in another way, God is beyond beauty – because my purpose on this occasion is not to engage in Plotinus exegesis but to indicate that Clive Bell represents in the contemporary world a long tradition in the West of regarding beauty (or aesthetic excellence) as in one way or another related to "the Transcendent," and of regarding the delight we experience in our contemplation of something beautiful (or aesthetically excellent) as grounded in some sort of intimation of this Transcendent.

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Many of us, when listening to some piece of music, looking at some painting or sculpture, experiencing some work of architecture, have had a strange, mysterious feeling of exaltation. It's that experience that those who appropriate and participate in this tradition of transcendental accounts of beauty begin with; they are convinced that purely secular accounts, such as that which Kant offers, are inadequate. How they proceed from that beginning depends very much on their particular metaphysic and theology. Plotinus was working with a generally Platonic picture, according to which things in this world are beautiful on account of their resemblance to, and participation in, the paradigmatically beautiful being – viz., the form Beauty, and behind that, the divine One. Bell, by contrast, was operating with a pantheistic picture, according to which God, or Ultimate Reality, is manifested in form. And these are but two of many.

One's evaluation of a particular transcendental account of beauty will depend very much then on one's evaluation of the theology. My own theology is closer, in the relevant respects, to Plotinus than to Bell: I regard God as the paradigmatically excellent being, and I hold that what accounts for some entity other than God being excellent in some respect is that it stands in some excellence-transmitting relation to that paradigmatically excellent being. The contemporary

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fashion of trying to account for excellence in terms of counterfactual desire-satisfaction seems to me a dead end. But I am not persuaded that this metaphysical account of excellence – God alone is intrinsically excellent, everything else is extrinsically excellent, having its excellence transmitted to it by virtue of its relation to the intrinsically excellent being – has much of anything to do with our experience of excellence in entities other than God. This work of music that I'm listening to is excellent, more specifically, beautiful; though its excellence has been transmitted to it from something intrinsically excellent, nonetheless it is now itself excellent. How does the metaphysical fact that its excellence is extrinsic explain the exaltation I feel in listening to it? How does that metaphysical fact intrude itself, as it were, into the experience, so that in some inchoate way it's God – the paradigmatically and intrinsically excellent being – that I'm delighting in? I fail to see that it does. Yet I too feel that secular accounts don't explain my feeling of exaltation. The suggestion that I'm just enjoying the harmonious working of my faculties strikes me as a non-starter!

18.4

We saw that in his discussion of art and religion, Bell dismisses with a wave of the hand any consideration of the relation between art and *actual* religions. When we're dealing with actual religions we're dealing with "doctrines and dogmas," creeds, claims to historical fact, "metaphysical fancies" – that sort of thing. Often art does have such things as its content. But content has nothing to do with the aesthetic emotion, and nothing to do with the essence of art. It's Bell's formalism that steers him away from consideration of how art and religion do actually engage each other.

Bell's approach is, in this regard, like that of a good many of those theologians of the contemporary period who have systematically discussed the relation of art to religion. Let me cite the two that seem to me the most significant, Gerardus Vander Leeuw and Paul Tillich.

Vander Leeuw was an extraordinary Dutch polymath who spent the first third of his career as an anthropologist of religion, the next third of his career as a theologian and aesthetician, and the last third as a theorist of liturgy. The great, endlessly fascinating, book from his middle career, in which he probes the relation between art and religion – or as he puts it, the beautiful and the holy – is *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art*. Like Bell, Vander Leeuw acknowledges all sorts of "external connections," as he calls them, between the beautiful and the holy. None of those is of any interest to him, however. What he's after is "the essential continuity." To get at that we must "protect ourselves against the external continuity which forces itself upon us. Nine-tenths of the 'religious works of art' which we know evidence no inner, essential continuity between holiness and beauty, having only a purely external connection, which admittedly can be very

refined, violating neither art nor religion, but not proclaiming their unity" (Vander Leeuw 1963: 230). What grips Vander Leeuw's interest is not the aesthetic emotion and its religious significance, however, but rather those cases in which a work of art is intrinsically *expressive* of the holy. Whether Bell would be sympathetic to this approach is not clear, since it's not apparent from his discussion whether he regards expressiveness as a feature of form.

Paul Tillich was an eminent German theologian who emigrated to the United States shortly before World War II. Alongside his systematic theology he developed a theology of culture; it was within this that he discussed the relation of religion to art. In Tillich's case it was more his understanding of religion than his commitment to artistic formalism that led to his lack of interest in the actualities of the engagement between religion and art.

Religion, he says, can be understood as "activities within a group of human beings who have a set of symbols and rites, related to divine powers." But it can also be understood as "the state of ultimate concern about something ultimate" (Tillich 1987: 172). If it's religion in the first of these senses that we have in mind, "then the religious dimension of art could only mean the use by art of the symbolic material provided by a historical religion. In this way, the arts have used as subject matter the story of the Christ, the legends of the saints, the mythical symbols of creation, salvation, consummation," and so forth.

As a theologian of culture, this sort of art is not of concern to him, says Tillich. In the contemporary world it comes to very little. Given the decline of religion thus understood in the face of the heavily secularized character of our contemporary "encounter with reality," religion in this sense "provided an astonishingly small amount of content for the visual arts" in the twentieth century (Tillich 1987: 172). We must not assume, however, that the emergence of contemporary secularism means the disappearance of religion in that other, broader sense. Quite to the contrary. Secularism

does not deny the question of the ultimate meaning of life. With respect to the larger concept of religion, secularism is indirectly religious. Just as religion in the narrow sense has many forms, so secularism exhibits many forms in which the question of the meaning of life is asked, not only intellectually, but with a total concern and an infinite seriousness. (Tillich 1987: 173)

Accordingly, when looking at art of the twentieth century – and indeed, art of any century – it will be with the religious dimension *thus understood* that he will be concerned, says Tillich, his thesis being that all creative art, including then the art that emerged from the secular culture of the twentieth century, "is an expression of an encounter . . . with 'ultimate reality.' [All art] contains an answer to the question of meaning" (Tillich 1987: 173). It was Tillich's view that what's determinative of the subject matter of art is *style*, and what's inherent to art is *expressiveness*. Hence it's to the religion of which the style is expressive that Tillich proposes to attend; it's through the expressiveness of style that "the religious dimension is manifested."

18.5

There's something very strange about the approach of the thinkers I have cited – and they are only a sampling – to the issue of art and religion. Surely the way in which icons function in the religious practices of eastern Orthodoxy, the way in which chant functions in the religious practices of Judaism, and the way in which congregational hymns function in the religious practices of Protestantism – to mention only a few examples – represent to the people involved in these practices an extraordinarily important engagement of religion with art. Yet all such modes of engagement are dismissed by these thinkers as not worthy of their attention. The reasons offered are in each case slightly different; but the result is the same. The only mode of engagement that's of interest to them is *contemplation*; such alternative modes of engagement as veneration of icons and congregational singing of hymns falls outside their purview. Furthermore, whereas the representational content of the painting hanging in the church is of great concern to the Orthodox worshipper, as are the words sung by the cantor in the synagogue and by the congregation in the Protestant church, this too is of no interest to these thinkers. What's of interest is only the formal features of the artwork and its expressiveness.

What is it that accounts for this strange lack of interest in the actualities of the way in which religious people engage the arts, and in the representational and symbolic content of the works they engage? As already remarked, the reasons given for the dismissal of representational and symbolic content vary a bit from thinker to thinker. What's striking, however, is that none of them offers any reason at all for focusing entirely on the contemplative mode of engagement. The propriety of this is simply taken for granted. I suggest that what this indicates is that all of them accept without question the grand narrative concerning the place of the arts in human existence that emerged in the eighteenth century and has remained the dominant narrative in the West ever since.

Here, on this occasion, I must content myself with stripping down the story line to its essentials. It goes like this. Once upon a time the arts were in service to all sorts of interests extraneous to the arts themselves: to ecclesiastical interests, to political interests, to the interests of the aristocracy, to commercial interests, even to magical interests. Then in the eighteenth century the arts began to be, to a significant extent, liberated from these extraneous interests and allowed to come into their own. Artists were freed to follow out the internal dynamics of the art in question, rather than being in the service of princes, bishops, entrepreneurs, and so forth; the arts became autonomous, self-normed. And we the public were likewise freed to treat works of art *as* works of art rather than as means to worshipping God, evoking rain, or whatever. We were freed to treat works of art as ends in themselves. To treat them thus is to concern ourselves with their internal qualities and relationships, rather than concerning ourselves with how they relate to one thing and another outside themselves. Our concern is now with their “internal rationality.”

That's the heart of the grand narrative. I submit that it's because they accept the narrative without question that Bell, Vander Leeuw, Tillich, and their cohorts focus exclusively on the contemplative mode of engagement with art in their discussion of art and religion, without even bothering to give a reason for such exclusivity. What to their mind is worth considering is only whether, when we're concerned with the religious dimension of art for contemplation, we should attend to such representational and symbolic content as may be present or should concern ourselves exclusively with form and its inherent expressiveness.

There's much that's strange about the story, taken for granted though it usually is. Let me take note of just one oddity. Works of art, like chairs and shovels, are human artifacts, produced with some purpose in mind – that purpose normally being some intended use. Chairs are made for sitting on; they “come into their own” when thus used. They can be put to other uses, or to no use. They can be displayed in art museums or stored in attics without ever being used. But in such a case, the chair isn't “coming into its own.” And as for the sort of art on which the grand narrative has its eye: such art is made for contemplation. It can be used for other purposes; a sculpture made for contemplation can be used as a door stop. But when thus used, the sculpture isn't “coming into its own.” It's “coming into its own” when people engage it as an object of contemplation.

Now consider the Orthodox icons. They come into their own not when they're hung in an Orthodox church and venerated, not when they're displayed in some art museum and engaged as objects of contemplation. They can function in this latter way; many of them do so function. But when so functioning, they aren't “coming into their own.” So too with the Jewish chant and the Protestant hymns: they come into their own when they function liturgically, not when Joshua Cohen and his Boston Camerata record them on a CD disk.

The moral should be clear: if it's with art “come into its own” that we are concerned, then, when considering the relations between art and religion, we will have to look beyond art meant for aesthetic contemplation. The point is not that there's nothing of interest to be said about the religious significance of museum paintings, concert-hall music, and reading-room poetry; the point is that those who have focused exclusively on that have neglected the thing of first importance, namely, the actual ways in which the religions of humanity have engaged the arts.

18.6

Suppose we embrace the broader perspective. What will we then take note of? We will take note of the fact that for the religious person poetry is often not so much contemplated as interiorized, so that the words of the poet become words the person uses to express her own feelings, convictions, apprehensions, and so forth. We will take note of the fact that for the religious person stories often function not as objects of aesthetic delight but as narratives into which one's own life and

that of others are fitted. We will take note of the fact that for the religious person music often functions to enhance one's praise of God rather than as an object of contemplation, be it for aesthetic or other purposes. We will take note of the fact that symbols regularly function for the religious person as *reminders*; remembering is fundamental to most religions. And so forth, on and on. And having taken note of this diversity of ways in which religious people engage the arts, we will try to understand them theoretically.

Of course, once one notices the diversity of ways in which art functions in religious practice, the thought quickly comes to mind that many of these have their close analogues outside of religion as well. Attending to the ways in which art and religion engage each other can be of service to theory of art in general by freeing us from the narrowness of vision induced by the grand narrative. Contemplation, and in particular, contemplation for the purpose of aesthetic delight, is just one of a multiplicity of ways of engaging the arts – just one of a multiplicity of *worthwhile* ways.

It is of visual images that Bell, Vander Leeuw, and Tillich were especially dismissive in their discussions of art and religion. So let me take the bait, descend from the high level of generality of the preceding paragraph, and say something about the role of images in religion. To understand that role we need a far richer understanding of how images function than the constricted view one typically finds in modern and contemporary theories of art; that richer understanding, once acquired, will prove in turn to open our eyes to things we overlooked in the role of images outside of religion.

To prevent my discussion from becoming too diffuse I'll have to focus on just one of the ways in which images function in religion, and on just one religion. The religion I will focus on will be the one I know best, namely, Christianity; the reader will easily be able to generalize to other religions. (An excellent historical introduction to the role of images that I will be discussing is Hans Belting's *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* [1994].)

Fundamental to what it is that makes the Christian tradition distinct is that those who identify with the tradition tell a story of God's dealings with human beings – a story that begins with narratives contained in the Christian scriptures and then continues from there up to the present. As one would expect, the story told by one individual and by one subcommunity is somewhat different from that told by another; strictly speaking, then, we should speak not of *the* Christian story but of the *family* of Christian stories. But for my purposes here there will be no harm in speaking as if there were just one Christian story.

With the fact firmly in mind that the Christian tradition has a Christian story, suppose one looks at the representational visual art produced over the centuries by and for members of the Christian community. What then strikes us is that a great deal of this art, if not most of it, represents important individuals and incidents from the Christian story.

How should we understand this? I suggest that the function of such art is understood as what I will call *memorial* art. Let me explain. Fundamental to the lives

of human beings in general is *commemoration*. All sorts of things are done by us in commemoration, and all sorts of things are produced as commemorations: coins are struck, stamps are issued, fireworks are shot off, speeches are given, trees are planted, cities are founded, academic conferences are held, etc. Evidently something deep in us comes to expression in our surrounding ourselves with commemorative objects and in our repetitively engaging in commemorative activities.

What is that? Well, for each of us there are certain persons and events that we regard it as important for us and our community to remember. In fact, however, we find ourselves and our community often forgetting what we think it's important to remember; or if we don't actually forget, we find that we fail to keep those things clearly in mind. Commemorations serve the function of keeping alive the memory of someone or something that we want not to forget. Commemorations enhance memory.

And why do we find it important to enhance memory? No doubt for many reasons. But especially prominent among our reasons for wishing to enhance memory is the desire to praise or honor: we issue a coin in commemoration of Susan B. Anthony not just to remember her but to honor her. Indeed, I am inclined to think that if we look closely enough at commemorations, we will always discern some element of honoring – though that's not always what first catches the eye.

A great deal more could be said about commemorations. But let me restrain myself and move to the application: among the sorts of things produced as commemorations, works of visual representational art are prominent. Upon the retirement of its president, the university commissions a portrait so as to commemorate him; the United States commissioned the Lincoln Memorial, with its imposing sculpture, so as to commemorate the Great Emancipator. Both of these are cases of memorial art, of commemorative art. Yes, one can contemplate them so as to discern, evaluate, and perhaps revel in their aesthetic qualities. But that's not why we have them, nor is that how they function for most viewers.

Very much of the visual representational art produced by and for the Christian community is memorial art – as, for example, is a great deal of the visual art produced by and for the Buddhist community. It became common in western medieval Christianity to say that the point of the images in the church was to instruct the illiterate. That seems to me not so much false as incomplete. The sort of instruction that the images performed was that of *reminding* the faithful of important persons and incidents in the Christian story. But they did more than merely remind; they commemorated. And their commemorative function was as relevant to the literate as to the non-literate.

Art has often stirred up controversy, and does so yet today. However, no controversy over art has ever matched the length and ferocity of the Byzantine iconoclast controversy, lasting for roughly a century and a quarter from its beginnings around 725. Late in the controversy, an empress who found herself on the opposite side of the issue from her son had his eyes gouged out; our contemporary controversies pale before that.

The controversy was over memorial art; in fact, rather often the defenders of the icons spoke of them as “memorials” of holy persons. There were several distinct flash-points of controversy. The opponents of the icons, the so-called “iconoclasts,” had their doubts about the worth of composing images of Christ and the saints; they argued that it was far more important to image the saints in one’s soul and life than on wooden boards. And they accused the defenders, the “iconodules,” of implicit heresy in the icons of Christ. But one of the main points of controversy concerned the proper mode of engagement with these iconic memorials. The iconodules insisted that they should be venerated by means of such gestures as kissing them, kneeling and lighting candles before them, and so forth. The iconoclasts insisted that nothing of the sort should be done; veneration was tantamount to idolatry.

As part of their argument in defense of veneration, the iconodules developed theories of the iconic image according to which in looking at an image of a person one sees the person – provided the image has been produced as a rendering of the person. And since surely it would be appropriate to offer gestures of veneration if one were looking at a saint in the flesh before one, how could it be wrong to offer such gestures when one was seeing the saint by way of looking at an icon of him or her?

This raises fascinating and complicated questions. I dare say that most of us would be reluctant to say, when looking at a portrait of the current president of the United States, that we were seeing the president; yet it would come naturally to us to say that we saw the president on TV. Well, if we can see him on TV, how about seeing him in a photograph? And if in a photograph, why not in a painting?

Be all that as it may, however, what I want to highlight is that act of veneration around which the controversy swirled. If we’ve been seduced by the modern grand narrative of the arts into thinking exclusively of contemplation as the way of engaging the arts, veneration will seem like a by-gone piece of magic. But not so. Most of us would be reluctant to stomp on a picture of our mother – unless we hated her. Why is that? And the feeling of horror that we would experience if we saw a Rembrandt being slashed – how exactly is that different from what an iconodule would feel if someone spat at an icon? There is, indeed, one crucial difference between these last two examples: in the case of the Rembrandt, it’s the painter that we venerate; his subject is pretty much indifferent to us. In the case of the icon, it was the subject that the iconodule venerated; he seldom even knew who had painted it. But veneration has by no means disappeared from our engagement with works of art.

18.7

Let me close by suggesting, without on this occasion exploring, yet a third approach to our topic of “Art and the Aesthetic: The Religious Dimension.”

According to the modern grand narrative of art that I briefly discussed earlier, art in the eighteenth century finally freed itself from service to religion. What strikes anyone who follows out the various tellings of the narrative, however, is how often this liberated art is described in religious terms, and how often religious hopes and expectations are lodged in it. I described Bell, in his transcendental account of beauty, as continuing in his own way a long tradition that goes back to Plotinus, and back behind that to Plato. At the same time, however, Bell is thoroughly modern. The modern narrative of art was caught up by the Romantics into their even grander narrative of modernity, according to which modernity in the polity, in the academy, in the economy, in institutional religion, represents the fragmentation of what was once-upon-a-time unified. Art, however, provided it's liberated art, art produced purely for contemplation, represents the great social exception: here we still find unity. Perhaps, just perhaps, the unity that we still find in art will prove salvific.

In his excellent article, "Art-as-Such: The Sociology of Modern Aesthetics," the literary theorist M. H. Abrams first takes note of some formulations of the Augustinian tradition of "the selfless and gratuitous contemplation of the ultimate beauty of God" (Abrams 1989: 156), and then notes how much of the language used in that tradition both for the act and for the object of contemplation was borrowed by art theorists in the latter part of the eighteenth century and the first part of the nineteenth century to articulate their defense of the priority of engaging the arts contemplatively. Here, for example, is a passage that Abrams quotes from Karl Philipp Moritz, writing in 1785, that is redolent of Augustinian language:

While the beautiful draws our attention exclusively to itself . . . we seem to lose ourselves in the beautiful object; and precisely this loss, this forgetfulness of self, is the highest degree of pure and disinterested pleasure that beauty grants us. In that moment we sacrifice our individual confined being to a kind of higher being . . . Beauty in a work of art is not pure . . . until I contemplate it as something that has been brought forth entirely for its own sake, in order that it should be something complete in itself. (Abrams 1989:156)

An exploration of this eminently modern religious understanding of art and its powers would take us into such nineteenth-century figures as Schiller, Schopenhauer, and Matthew Arnold, and into such twentieth-century figures as Heidegger, Marcuse, and Adorno.

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