33 *EE*, p. 51. Significantly, this is basically the same position found in Hick's pre-Copernican days (and nevertheless universalist!) in *Evil and the God of Love* (Fount,1979. First ed. 1966).

34 *DEL*. p. 464.

35 ibid. p. 464.

36 Hick, *Theology* op. cit., p. 338.

37 *Theology, Religious Studies* and the *Scottish Journal of Theology* have all printed articles on this debate in the last year (1982—83). *New Blackfriars* last January printed an article by Dan Cohn-Sherbok suggesting a Copernican revolution in Judaism. Hasan Askari has proposed a similar Copernican shift in Islam, and both these scholars acknowledge their debt to John Hick. So far three doctoral dissertations have been written on Hick's theology of religions, and another is in progress.

Religious Art and Religious Belief

Graham Howes

A paper presented at the International Symposium on Sociology and Theology, Oxford, January 1984.

Few sociologists of religion have been tempted to explore the visual dimension of religious change. The problems—both theoretical and methodological—are formidable.

In the first place, when scrutinizing religious art in any culture we have to be very careful about our assumptions concerning the iconicity of religious symbols and the so-called creative character of visual images. Richard Wollheim, for one, has argued persuasively that when we discuss iconicity in any cultural setting we have to take account of the relation of the sign to the sign-user as well as what is represented by the sign, i.e. the referent. It is, he says, "when signs become for us ... 'fuller' objects, that we may also come to feel that they have greater appropriateness to their referents".[1] The problem for sociologists of religion is just how to tease this kind of sense data from respondents.

Secondly: as Hugh Duncan has noted, "the problem is not that of asserting that there is a reciprocal relation between art and society, but rather of showing *how* this relationship exists".[2] 'Proof' might be arrived at by establishing either valuative congruence, social structural influence or interpersonal influence within the artistic vocation itself. But here we also need to postulate a psychological mechanism through which the individual artist transmutes social, cultural and credal themes into tangible artistic statements, as well as a theory of perception and

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symbolic process to account for art's effect on the disposition and behaviour of the audience.

Thirdly: there are real difficulties in distinguishing between religious art as a set of cognitive symbols giving information about the content and salience of religion in a given society irrespective of individuals' interest in or proximity to it, and those same artifacts functioning for *individuals* as a symbolic reflection of affective or cultural meaning.

Fourthly: similarly, there is the problem (a relatively common one among anthropologists) of distinguishing between the physical representation of the sacred as an art product and as a cult object—a problem which is particularly acute when the production process of such objects is speeded up.

Finally, there is the traditional problem of whether to regard religious art—along with religion itself—as a separate category of ideas and experience, or only as an epiphenomenon of economic, political, social or cultural activity.

With such difficulties in mind I will try to establish four distinct and identifiable dimensions to the relationship between religious art and religious belief. I will label them (i) *iconographic,* (ii) *didactic,* (iii) *institutional* and (iv) *aesthetic.* Although analytically separable they are historically and culturally inseparable, converging and diverging, fusing and differentiating within the major religious traditions. I shall discuss each in turn, with especial reference to Christianity.

(i) *The iconographic dimension*

The icon is not simply a useful adjunct to worship, but a vital element in it. For an icon painter the execution of an icon is not an assertion of his own individuality but a magical act. He is setting up a field within which power forces can operate. If he strays too far, then the magic will not happen. The icon is a symbol which so participates in the reality which it symbolises that it is itself worthy of reverence. It is an agent of the real presence. The icon is not a picture to be looked at, but a window through which the unseen world looks through on ours. As St. John Damascene put it 'they contain a mystery and, like a sacrament, are vessels of divine energy and grace ... Through the intermediary of sensible perception our minds receive a spiritual impression and are uplifted towards the invisible divine majesty'.[3] Today, the Orthodox Church regards icons as one of the forms of revelation and knowledge of God, and as 'one means of communication with Him. As channels of grace like the Cross and the Gospels, icons are sacramental, different from ordinary material objects yet not in themselves holy. The icon both depicts and shares in the sanctity and glory of its prototype and thus is worthy to receive *proskynesis,* veneration, but not *latreia,* adoration, which is reserved for God alone'.

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Yet, as Campbell,[4] Kenna[5] and others have shown, when theologians' statements about icons and the remarks and behaviour of Greek islanders are taken together, discrepancies become apparent. The islanders do not seem to recognise the theologians' injunction that the icon as a channel of grace is not powerful in itself and must not be treated as such. 'Escalation' occurs, and they certainly speak of and act towards the icon as if it *were* powerful in itself. The tissues and pieces of cotton wool with which church icons are dusted are kept for amulets and for use in the household cult of icons. Furthermore, neither Orthodox theologians nor social anthropologists really tell us precisely why one icon is regarded as more powerful than another. Campbell, for example, tells us that the Sarakatasani, transhumant shepherds of N.W. Greece, insist that 'with respect to the relation of one saint to the many icons of that saint ... one revelation is more efficient than another', but the shepherds 'do not explain how or why'. Campbell's own comment goes a little further: In 'these ideas we see the refraction which even divine energy suffers when it enters the material and sensible world'.[6] But it is not enough to say that divine power is refracted. Why is it focused on some material objects and not on others, and why concentrated more in some of these than in others?

The second issue here is a theological one—more specifically a Christological one—namely, the idea of man as made in the image of God. The classic example of this is the iconoclastic controversy of the eight and ninth centuries. The iconoclasts objected to any attempt to portray Christ on the ground that to do so would presuppose that he was only a human being. They argued that his divine nature would be ignored (since representation of this was impossible) and so visual portrayals were a most misleading way of presenting the God-man. The opponents of the iconoclasts, the iconophiles, defended the practice of painting Christ on the ground that this was the obvious way of taking the Incarnation seriously. For them, not to seek to embody Christ in a picture or sculpture betrayed a residual disbelief in the genuine historicity and humanity of Christ. In this sense the controversy was supra-aesthetic. It was about something crucial to Christian belief—the reality of the Incarnation. Out of the clash came not only what Ladner has called 'two normative approaches to the human body—the incarnational and the spiritualised',[7] which have been in tension throughout Christian history, but also two attitudes towards the arts which have played a dominant role in church-history and art-history ever since. The iconophiles in the end won the day, and with it the theology which they had developed. It was the Incarnation that legitimated Christian art, making possible the visualisation of God. As such, art could be legitimately used, indeed exploited, in the interests of the Church's teaching mission.

At the same time, there may be a genuinely religious art which

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does *not* set out to be iconic; its function is different though not related. 'I want to paint man and woman', wrote Van Gogh, 'with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolise, but which we now seek to confer through the actual radiance of our colour vibrations'.[8] Even more self-evidently the work of a Rembrandt, or especially a Rouault, may achieve something of what the icon achieves, but their function is still other. They may set out to enflesh and communicate a transfigured and transfiguring Christian vision, but what they are doing is not liturgical and ecclesiastical in character. And here, perhaps, we touch the heart of the problem. It might, indeed, be argued that Western Christianity has abandoned iconic art completely since about 1300, since the intimate union of visual art with *liturgy,* which survives in the East, has never been entirely taken for granted in Western Europe, and has lived on only in a very debased form, if at all. There is a genuine debate here over the nature of the liturgy itself. The key question is whether the partial divorce between visual art and liturgy has been an unmitigated disaster for the Christian (and secular) imagination of the West. Of course, we are currently faced with the prospect of a total alienation of liturgy from art of any kind, but it is nonetheless a simple fallacy to deduce the proposition 'all art should be liturgical' from the proposition 'all liturgy should be artistic'.

(ii) *The didactic dimension*

Both art and theology have been described as 'raids on the inarticulate', referring to attempts to extend the basic experience of faith into new fields. In the Latin West, as opposed to the orthodox East, a key question has remained. 'How far', in Ruskin's phrase, 'has Fine Art in all or any ages of the world, been conducive to the religious life?'[9] Ruskin's own point of reference was, of course, European Gothic art and architecture of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, where both served as powerful didactic instruments. Indeed, as early as 1025 a Synod at Arras had already proclaimed that 'art teaches the unsettled what they cannot learn from books'.[10] Yet recent scholarship has increasingly underlined the degree to which the Gothic functioned as more than a mere visual aid. It also served as a medium for religious insight and spiritual awareness, with a specifically sacramental function in the worship of God. As Émile Mâle[11] so brilliantly demonstrated, there is a close connection between the anonymous and iconographical (as opposed to the individualising) character of the Gothic, and the medieval sacramental conception of the world, especially the conception of man as a receiver of faith. Yet we also know, indeed from Abbot Suger himself, for example, that French cathedral Gothic was felt to be just as important for its technical excellence, as a feat of intellect, as it was for its spiritual and

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culturally reflexive qualities. Here God was worshipped most highly in his attributes of light, measure and number. Here the didactic functions of religious art were, in a sense, intellectualised, and a principle of cultural exclusion seems already at work. Edgar Wind[12] has shown a similar fate overtaking Renaissance Art, where, in time, certain Biblical themes became increasingly esoteric in their visual references, and served increasingly as instruments of social differentiation rather than as popular instruction. In the case of the Gothic, the didactic and the sacramental maintain a somewhat unstable equilibrium. (William Golding's novel *The Spire* illuminates precisely this issue). Such art was in truth designed to instruct all believers, but how far was it made for the believer and how far for the God whom that believer worshipped? To paraphrase Mâle, was the Gothic cathedral a sermon in stone or a gratuitous act of faith? What mattered more in it, the worshipper or the worshipped?

But perhaps the most profound tensions within the didactic dimension of religious art come not from sacramentalism nor from intellectualism, but from the almost total victory of the verbal over the visual. It has not always been so. If we return to the Gothic for a moment, we find Bonaventure defining the visual in these terms. First, as an open Scripture made visible through painting, for those who were uneducated and could not read. Second, as an aid to 'the sluggishness of the affections', for our emotion is aroused more by what is seen than by what is heard. Third, as a transitory character of memory, 'for the things we have seen remain with us more than the things we have heard'.[13]

Today that situation is reversed, at least in the West. The culturally ignorant can now read scripture, but not paintings or stained glass windows, while recent revivals of faith and devotion have tended to come from words rather than pictures. Among cultural and ecclesiastical elites the presumption is usually that while religious art may have some aesthetic or didactic value it has no cognitive function. It is useful for those who cannot read and need pictures, but not for the literate who, having mastered discursive reasoning and the manipulation of abstractions, have no need of the image. Indeed, as the Bishop of Bristol—who clearly differs from many of his peers in this respect—recently remarked 'Christians have surrendered with amazing ease to the notion that the image is a lesser form of truth than the concept, as if image and concept were alternative ways of saying the same thing, except that the image helps those who have more imagination than logic'. One can, he says, detect 'a secret preference for language, words, speech, writing, as the appropriate and only satisfactory way of expressing theological truths and communicating the Gospel'.[14] Yet the central question remains. It is whether art is a way of seeing and knowing which is as truth-bearing in its way as

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philosophical and scientific method. It is unsurprising therefore that as institutions the Christian churches have so often shown a marked ambivalence in their attitude to the arts. This ambivalence is what we focus on next.

(iii) *The institutional dimension*

Art-historical evidence reveals that religious institutions served for many centuries as relatively undemanding patrons of religious art because they had not, until very recently, felt it necessary to demand 'sincerity' from the artist. In medieval society, as in many primitive societies, they could take his work for granted. Essentially 'tradition-directed', the artist did not have to worry about 'feeling'; he was given his assignment—his Crucifixion or his Virgin—and he knew perfectly well, down to the last gesture and the last fold of drapery, what he had to do. The religious form was accepted by both parties. This ecclesiastical framework continued to function and to provide an adequate reference point for the artist long after he had ceased to take it for granted that the chief part of his work would be religious, and long after he had developed sufficient spiritual autonomy to acquire a quite personal notion of sacred art. In the fifteenth century the Church seems to have found no difficulty in accepting sacred art that was completely frivolous and worldly in treatment, and, in the High Renaissance, paganism established a comfortable modus vivendi with Christianity. It was not until after the Counter-Reformation period that the Inquisition raised some objections to Veronese's translation of the New Testament into the proud and flaunting opulence of Venice, and even this was a relatively unemphatic protest. How completely the social situation changed may be judged from the fact that from about the mid-nineteenth century, a period in which many exceptional artists flourished and in which many of them were intensely religious, there is hardly one instance of a great master being asked to decorate a church. For the first time in history a great aesthetic movement developed without at any point making contact with organized religion. Indeed, if one were to write a history of religious art of the last hundred years it might be summarized as the virtual extinction of such art as a significant activity by significant artists. In fact the scenario has been a little more complicated than this. It would appear that many of the works of greatest interest today, from an artistic and religious point of view, are works executed by artists spontaneously and independently, outside the churches, commissioned entirely for themselves. There are also works commissioned by the churches but ultimately rejected by them as somehow lacking in some important respect, from the point of view of their faith.

Assy, in Eastern France, is a revealing case. There, in 1945, a

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church was constructed and decorated largely through the stimulus of a French Dominican painter, Father Couturier, who knew the artists personally, and invited them to collaborate in a large enterprise of religious painting and sculpture. His idea of commissioning artists who were not primarily concerned with religious art, for a project of religious decoration and expression, met with great resistance within the French Catholic Church. The main objection to this kind of art was not that the men who executed it were atheists or communists (although some were in fact both), or that their perceptions of religious themes were somewhat notional. It was rather that, in a deeper sense, they were unable, because of their commitment to a modern style of art, to approximate to an idiom of religious art that had arisen under very different conditions, an idiom which had its own values and tradition of representation and symbolism. For example, it was objected that the Christ on the Cross by Germaine Richier 'suggested nothing of redemption or of the spiritual meaning of Christ's suffering on the Cross'.[15] It was said that the work of Rouault 'was itself so ugly that it would evoke in the pious observer a disturbing sense of the body and its deformation rather than transmit a spiritual message'.[16] It is interesting to note that Rouault, the one painter of the twentieth century who was a deeply religious man and who almost alone among the advanced painters of his time continuously represented religious themes, especially from the life of Christ, received no recognition from his own Church except from isolated individuals. One the other hand, Cézanne, who in the last fifteen years of his life was a faithful church-goer, never undertook a religious theme. Hence on the one hand we observe an art with a religious content produced by men who are not identified with religious institutions; on the other hand we have the indifference of such institutions to members of their own faith who, in a sincere way, undertook to produce religious works of art.

The explanations seem relatively clear. One is simply that churches are in one sense social institutions, and many artists tend to employ an idiom that is not socially acceptable. For hierarchy and laity alike the work of modern artists can sometimes shock in relation to its sincerity. Secondly, one can account for this dissonance between religious institutions and religious art by noting a more general decline in the cultural role of the churches and in their failure to suggest and maintain what is new and fertile in the social and cultural life of the time. It has not always been so. In art-historical terms new styles of art were often, if not always, produced by artists working on tasks for the Church. Gothic architecture arose in the course of constructing churches. Similarly, it was not in secular art but in religious art (i.e. new programmes of church decoration) that Romanesque sculpture arose, and the same may be said of the art of stained glass. In the

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nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, all important developments in painting, sculpture and architecture have taken place outside the religious sphere and in tasks of such a nature that their very existence has been a challenge to the primacy of religion in spiritual, moral and social matters. Hence the Church has had to ask to what extent would the adoption of these new styles of art, created in contexts so foreign to the interests and mode of thinking of the Church, be a kind of counter-infection, a virus, introducing into religious thinking and feeling secular conceptions incompatible with basic religious beliefs. This is the essential problem that has distinguished religious art in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from the situation in previous centuries.

(iv) *The aesthetic dimension*

The aesthetic consequences of the institutional crisis outlined above are readily distinguishable. Most visible perhaps is what Tillich so caustically called 'sentimental, beautifying naturalism ... the feeble drawing, the poverty of vision, the petty historicity of our church-sponsored art is not simply unendurable, but *incredible* ...It calls for iconoclasm'.[17] It will not suffer it, however. For one thing, we continue to live at a time when the normative forms and images of the Judeo-Christian tradition are still accessible to many at the level of nostalgia, is not as a living presence in their lives. For another, and especially, if not exclusively, within Roman Catholicism, religious art carries its own crude inner logic. Such art is art useful to the Church, and art useful to the Church must be unambiguously catechetical. This is the slightly Platonized aesthetic which lies behind both the vulgar and banal pictures of Christ now in general circulation, and also the cheap icons of Mary which pervade Italy, Spain and South and Central America.

Yet the alternative, for many twentieth-century artists, usually involves deliberately sidestepping any literal depiction of the Gospel because the prevailing aesthetic is usually too narrow to permit it, proceeding, as it does, away from all literary content towards the 'universal' art of abstraction. Such abstraction, while it remains the dominant cultural mode, will continue to present to the churches an art without symbols or imagery (and with any ambiguities 'de-symbolised, out of it), and therefore without any specific doctrinal allusion. At the same time, for many lay consumers, as Harold Rosenberg and others have argued, much of *all* abstract art remains psychologically inaccessible to secular Man, not only because he continues to think of art as presentation or ornament, but also because, as Rosenberg puts it 'the central language of modern art has entered his consciousness indirectly, by way of the popular arts—advertising, TV etc. But since it is indirect, and quite detached

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from those orders of society to which he overtly feels committed—Church, politics, class formations etc.—the great images of modern art are never available for his inner nourishment'.[18] Such an argument provides a powerful and pessimistic counterpoint both to facile aesthetic progressivism (not unknown in the Anglican establishment) and the fashionable Jungian heresy that the archetypes by which spiritual realities express themselves are both available to modern man and *'constantly clothed in the forms of modern art'.*

Yet there remains one way in which contemporary abstraction in art has some genuine credal resonance. It is one to which Hans Küng repeatedly draws our attention in his 'Art and the Question of Meaning'. What, he asks, 'if in the course of modern development the idea of a pre-existing divine order of meaning has been increasingly shattered and this meaning itself has become more questionable?' Can the work of art still be meaningful when the great synthesis of meaning no longer exists? Küng's answer is that 'in a time of meaninglessness, the work of art can symbolise *meaninglessness* very precisely in a way that is aesthetically completely meaningful—that is to say inwardly harmonious—and does so to a large extent in modern art'.[19] If he is right, then the most appropriate role model for today's artist is not necessarily to profess a specific confessional commitment, nor to try to lift the current aesthetic taboo against explicit narrative content. It is, rather, to profess a self-guided religious imagination which no longer merely reflects existing religious tradition but creates and expresses new spiritual perceptions which we are all invited to share. It was Gauguin who urged that 'painting should return to its original purpose, the examination of the interior life of human beings'.[20] It was Max Weber who affirmed that it is 'the profoundest aesthetic experience which provides an answer to one's seeking self'.[21]

1 Richard Wollheim, *Art and its Objects.* Penguin, 1970. p. 64
2 H.D. Duncan, *Communication and Social Order.* O.U.P., 1968. pp. 138f.
3 quoted in J. Dillenberger, *Style and Content in Christian Art.* Abingdon Press, New York, 1965. p. 18.
4 J.K. Campbell, *Honour, Family and Patronage—a study of institutions and moral values in a Greek mountain community.* O.U.P., 1964.
5 Margaret Kenna, "An Anthropological Approach to Icons", paper presented to Lancaster Religious Studies Colloqium 1977.
6 Campbell, op. cit. p. 344.
7 quoted in Dillenberger, op. cit. p. 44.
8 M. Roskill, ed., *The Letters of Van Gogh.* Collins, 1972. p. 151.
9 John Ruskin, *Pre-Raphaelitism.* J.M. Dent, 1906. p. 21.
10 Dillenberger, op. cit. p. 34.
11 Emile Mâle, *The Gothic Image.* Harper, 1958.
12 Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries of the Renaissance.* Penguin, 1967.
13 quoted in M. Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death.* Harper, 1951. p. 87.
14 in P. Burman and K. Nugent, *Prophecy and Vision.* Bristol, 1982.

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15 W.S. Rubin, *Modern Sacred Art and the Church of Assy*. Columbia U.P., 1961. pp 71f.
16 Rubin op. cit. p. 122.
17 Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*. O.U.P., 1959. p. 74.
18 Harold Rosenberg, *Tradition and the New*. Scribner, New York, 1960. p. 210.
19 Hans Küng, *Art and the Question of Meaning*. Hodder, 1981. pp. 12ff.
20 Paul Gauguin, *Letters to his wife and friends*. Saturn Press, 1966. p. 224.
21 Max Weber, *The Rational and Social Foundations of Music*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1957. p. 117.

Reviews

DISCERNING THE MYSTERY: AN ESSAY ON THE NATURE OF THEOLOGY, by Andrew Louth. *Clarendon Press, Oxford 1983* **pp xiv + 150 £12.50**

The Chaplain of Worcester College, Oxford, seeks to redefine the recent history of theology in the West. The opening chapter argues that confidence in tradition as the chief bearer of truth was destroyed at the Renaissance. The rediscovery of the Classical world showed people a reasonable and humane alternative to medieval Christendom. The exposure of the False Decretals sapped many people's confidence in the traditional ecclesiology of the Catholic Church. The text of the New Testament which Erasmus brought out in 1516 opened people's eyes in a comparable way. By the time of Descartes (*Discours,* 1637) and Locke *(Essay,* 1690), the search was on for a method that would guarantee certain knowledge of truth independently of the deliverances of all tradition.

From early on, however, an alternative existed. The second chapter traces the anti-Enlightenment line from Vico (1688—1744) through Dilthey (1833—1911) to Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960). The chapter concludes with the reflections in Collingwood's *Autobiography* (1939) on the anti-historical 'realism' among the Oxford philosophers of his day. That is the main point—the neglect of *history* as a form of knowledge is the characteristic mark of the Enlightenment line. Gadamer is taken to have shown that the methods of the sciences are not the only way of getting at truth.

Against this background, is theology a science or one of the humanities? Starting with a critical look at Torance's *Theological Science* (1969), the third chapter takes up Michael Polanyi's emphasis on how scientific ways of knowing depend upon tradition, as expounded particularly in *Knowing and Being* (1969). This opens the way back to St. Cyprian's famous formula: "He who does not have the Church as mother can no longer have God as Father". The fourth chapter, deploying St. Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* to great effect, but with the help of Congar and Lossky as well as many other patristic references, spells out how tradition, as carried in rites, practices and life as well as beliefs, is the milieu that creates the kind of receptiveness for Scripture to become the word of God.

The fifth chapter is where all this has been heading. Mr. Louth's prey is the theologian who takes his stand on *sola scriptura* and scientific method—"an alliance between the Reformation and the Enlightenment" (page 101). A great deal of modern western theology, it is clearly suggested, springs from this ignorant contempt for the

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