

Toward A Reunion of Religion and Art

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ONE COMMON technique employed by all writers on religion and art calls for the opening remark that "all art is religious." With this the writer proceeds to display any visual material he may have to make his point, such point being to the effect that every artist has a philosophical and even spiritual point of view which he assumes when creating a work of art, with a proper attitude of reverence toward his materials and subject matter or, more recently, lack of subject matter.

While this technique has the virtue of giving infinite latitude in the choice of visual material, it has always impressed me as begging the question. Undoubtedly every serious painter or sculptor or printmaker does approach his work with a certain seriousness of purpose which might be called a religious spirit, but this would be religious only in the broadest sense, so broad as to be virtually meaningless.

Another approach is to show several examples of traditional church art, analyze them from the aesthetic point of view, inject a few humorous stories about what dissolute and immoral characters some of the artists really were in their private lives, and recapture a serious note by pointing out the inspirational value of good religious works of art.

Still another, and the simplest, approach is to give a brief historical survey of works of art which are religious in content.

I am not sure where I fit in because my main concern for some time has been with the wide gap which presently exists between the church, especially the Christian Protestant church, and the serious artist.

What God Hath Joined Together . . .

It has always struck me as strange that the artist should be so little concerned with religion in his work, and the church so little concerned with art, when the history of man is largely a record of how the two are bound together. The earliest cave paintings were surely religious in content, designed to invoke divine aid in the hunt so that food would be plentiful, or else calculated to bring divine protection from predatory beasts. And even so recent a religion as Christianity, in breaking with Judaism and its prohibition of images, almost from its origin used visual images as symbols of its faith and its doctrine. As a matter of fact, St. Paul refers to Christ as the divine image; in other words, the "ikon of God." In the catacombs, Madonnas dating back to the second century have been found. The early Christian Church found pictures and sculptures of inestimable benefit in carrying the Gospel to illiterates,

and except for the iconoclastic period of 116 years in the eighth and ninth centuries when the Eastern Church dominated Christendom, art was a vital part of the life of the Church until shortly after the Reformation.

Since the end of the Second World War, the Western World and especially the United States has experienced what has been described as a religious revival, marked not only by a great increase in church membership which could be attributed in large measure to the phenomenal population growth, but also by an increase in the ratio of church-members to non-members. For the first time since colonial days, the majority of the people of the United States are affiliated with one faith or another. That this resurgence of religious activity is not being reflected in the art which is now being produced seems, on the surface, surprising. Historically, art is alleged to be an accurate mirror of its age. Why, then, does contemporary art not reflect the current cultural phenomenon of increased church activity? To be sure, a few individual artists utilize religious themes, but nowhere is their evidence of a genuine art movement comparable to the "back to church" movement which has characterized post-war American society.

Why has a wedge been driven between the church and the artist? Part of the responsibility for the schism undeniably must be assumed by the artist. It is commonly agreed among virtually all artists that form is more important than content, that the contextual is subordinate to purer aesthetic considerations — and this is a view increasingly accepted by the ordinary citizen who is not an artist. Moreover, quite a large number of contemporary artists carry this concept several steps further and hold that content is of no importance whatsoever; indeed, that it may even hinder the aesthetic experience. This attitude obviously leaves little room for the utilization of religious concepts.

The Church's Responsibility

Even so, the bulk of the responsibility must rest with the Church which, for years, has been unresponsive to any contemporary art expression or, for that matter, to most serious traditional art. Even worse, when the Church does use art at all, it usually promotes the very worst kind — pictures that by no stretch of the imagination have any aesthetic quality and which are religious only in the bare sense that they purport to pictorialize Bible stories, utilizing people and scenes reminiscent of Hollywood in its most blatant mood.

Several times a month, in a church which I formerly

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attended, I used to go to the Fellowship Hall in the basement of the church for meetings of one kind or another. At one end of the hall is a picture with which I am afraid most Lutherans are all too familiar. It is a reproduction of Heinrich Hoffmann's picture of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, a copy of which also hung in our home when I was a child. This particular picture happened to be worse than most reproductions of Hoffmann's painting because it was illuminated by a light behind it. Not once — not even when I saw the original — has this picture inspired me. Nor does it say anything about the sufferings of the Christ who pleaded three times in Gethsemane, "Let this cup pass from me." Nor does it in any way express His willing acceptance of God's will, "Nevertheless, not my will, but Thine." Nor does it convey any sense of Jesus' abandonment by His sleeping disciples. I haven't even mentioned the fact that it is a bad painting; my point is only that it is theologically inadequate. Hoffmann does, indeed, through the external facts of this dramatic event, but he does so without the impact of the drama, with really no insight at all into the torment, the despair, the anguish, the noble acceptance of Christ. I am not please understand, passing any judgment on Hoffmann's personal sincerity or sincerity. But his "Christ in Gethsemane" caricatures that awful moment in our Lord's life.

In Sunday school rooms throughout the country are reproductions of Bible story pictures turned out by insensitive and cynical commercial hacks, printed in pastel colors that children are supposed to love. Some of these are published by reputable publishing houses which are concerned not with art but with illustrative material. But too many are published by companies without consciences. They do not begin to portray the drama of the events which they purport to describe, and they reveal neither truth nor poetry nor beauty. Siegfried Reinhardt, who judged the Best Title of Christ Show, put it very graphically when he said, "The most callous people in the country are making cheap church art by the ton; the most devoted people are sitting in front of it every Sunday, and somebody is taking in cash at the expense of good art and good people." This sounded like a strong indictment to me until I recalled the experience of one of our students who was graduated from the University of Nebraska and went to New York to study at the Art Students League. The scholarship he had being inadequate for his subsistence, he sought a part-time job. One ad sounded as though it were advertised, so he went to the address listed. There he discovered that they wanted him to sell cheap religious reproductions. My understanding his refusal for an anti-religious attitude, they then produced pornographic material for him to sell, disconcerting him even more.

So What?

Both the Church and the artist might well raise the

question: "Is it really necessary or even desirable to heal the breach between religion and art?"

From the Church's point of view, it might well be held that art has lost its usefulness for the Church. In the primitive Christian era, art had a didactic value as a teaching tool. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance art was an effective means of expressing dogma and served a decorative purpose as well. While the Reformation has been blamed by many for the lack of art in Protestant churches, as a kind of reaction to the dogmatic art in the Roman Church at that time, the fact is that Martin Luther made effective use of prints by the great Lucas Cranach to illustrate his translation of the Bible and had paintings in his possession that had been done by his friend Cranach.

Nevertheless, the Church might maintain that, in our present society, the commercial illustrations which I have maligned are adequate to reveal and foster Christian principles, and that inspiration can be gotten from other sources; that, in other words, Fine Art by our pragmatic standards is useless. Significantly, such utilitarian arts as architecture and the decorative crafts have fared quite well in the modern Church.

For his part, the artist might feel that he is freer now than the artists of the Renaissance and earlier periods. By and large, these artists were at the mercy of the Church itself, as chief patron of the arts, or of wealthy families that were willing to commission only religious works so as to find favor with the Church. Convinced that content is not important in assessing artistic merit, today's artist might feel relieved at not being compelled to confine his expression to a limited range of subject matter. Furthermore, the artist who is forced to work on commission only is reduced to being largely a craftsman. So secularization has served, in a sense, to emancipate the artist.

What Both Could Gain

And yet, both the Church and the artist have much more to gain than to lose by healing the breach between them.

The Church would gain a great deal by utilizing the best art of its time for liturgical purposes. In an article entitled "Religious Art and the Modern Artist" (*Magazine of Art*, November, 1951), Father M. A. Couturier, a French priest, explains why ten of the greatest masters of modern art were selected to decorate and design, with complete freedom, the church at Assy, the chapel at Vence, and his own church at Audincourt. The reason? Simply that they were the ten best painters and sculptors of their day. He goes on to say that those who made the choices believed it was their duty to procure for God and their Faith the best art of the present age. And so they went out for the best: Bonnard, Matisse, Rouault, Braque, Leger, Chagall, Miro, Lurcat, Lipchitz, and Henri Laurens. The only great European missing was Picasso. Of the ten, Chagall and Lipchitz

are Jews. Only the great Rouault had been a creator of significant Christian art, although Chagall had utilized the Crucifixion frequently as a sociological document. The others were mostly non-religious. Father Couturier defends their selection thus: "We have . . . believed and stated that the ideal way in which to revive Christian art would always be to have geniuses who happened to be saints . . . but under the actual conditions, since men of this kind do not exist, we believed that if we were to effect a revival of liturgical art it would be safer to turn to geniuses without faith than to believers without talent."

He continues: "We were tired of always seeing in our churches the most mediocre examples of painting and sculpture. In the long run . . . this mediocrity could only result in seriously altering the religious psychology of clergy and worshippers alike . . . Unbelievers, comparing these works to the great Christian art of the past, would inevitably question the vitality of a Faith and a Church that could remain content with them." These statements are all the more remarkable when it is realized that Father Couturier does not serve a sophisticated, intellectual parish but one composed largely of laboring people.

Aside from examining the liturgical possibilities of good art, the Church would enrich its knowledge of contemporary culture by studying the products of contemporary art, secular as well as ecclesiastical, evaluating both by and with Christian criteria. Contemporary man, a legitimate concern of the Church, can not be fully understood without some analysis of contemporary art. If the Church is concerned for political man and economic man — and it is — why should it not be concerned also for aesthetic man?

The artist, on the other hand, has a greater obligation to Society than simply to reflect his times or to paint in the manner currently in vogue. The significant artist is not consciously motivated by these external things, in any case. He is motivated by qualities within him. And if he is a Christian artist, why should he not work as does the Christian minister, the Christian doctor, the Christian carpenter, or the Christian housemaid — for the glory of God? This does not necessarily mean that he must work only with the symbols of the Church. He is not compelled to yield to the tyranny of working with specific and limited subject matter, and should not undertake to do so unless he wills it. But, by the same token, neither is he compelled by any tyranny to produce only works completely devoid of content. While it is accepted that content without form is aesthetically meaningless, it should be recognized that content is capable of being a vital ingredient, though not the end product, of art. For instance, the critic who wrote that an apple by Cezanne is better than a Madonna by Raphael was only saying that Cezanne had almost four more centuries of experience to utilize. The point would have been clearer if he had

said that Cezanne was technically capable of painting a better Madonna than Raphael. It is a pity that Cezanne did not feel moved to do so. It would be as great a pity if the contemporary artist were to continue to feel alien within the framework of religious expression.

The Core of the Quarrel

If the rift between religion and art is to be closed, it must be recognized that the quarrel is not between traditional art and contemporary art, between conservative art, and experimental art. The quarrel is simply between good art and bad. It is the Church's duty, on all levels of clergy and laity, to become aware of the significance that art has in our civilization and to attempt to attain a competence to assess artistic expression. The Church should assume leadership in this area no less than in other areas of social concern. The Church should be the first to realize that contemporary art is only the latest development in a major activity of man that had its beginnings, as far as we know, in the caverns of Spain and France. The Church should be the first to recognize that contemporary art is as much a reflection of our society as Renaissance art was a reflection of fourteenth-, fifteenth-, and sixteenth-century European society. The Church which now uses such modern tools as public address systems, television, and the airplane should not be fearful of contemporary art or contemporary artists.

The Church should also furnish inspiration for the creative artist as it should for every one of its children in his appropriate calling. It should reassume its historic position as a patron of art. It should encourage art that is not necessarily propagandistic or utilitarian. It should make use of art and of what the artist reflects of contemporary society to re-examine the Church's values.

If, by its rejection of art, the Church is incomplete as a social institution, certainly the artist is incomplete without faith, whatever its nature. The artist should not be afraid of expressing his convictions. Religious sources have by no means been exhausted, and the tools, techniques, and media currently available equip the modern artist to depict abstract religious concepts with far more conviction than any Byzantine artist.

This does not mean that an artist must use religious themes to prove his faith. The first right of any artist is to paint what he wants to paint in any manner that he chooses. But being a Christian is more than a matter of giving the tithe, more than a matter of worshipping regularly. A Christian's faith should be reflected in his work as well as in his worship. If the Christian surgeon prays before picking up the scalpel, why should the Christian artist not pray before picking up the brush, as did Fra Angelico? Or why does he not approach his work with the same reverence as did Giotto, who felt that every painting he created was an

offering to God? To paint for a specific audience with the idea of catering to it and therefore being patronized by it is to vitiate the creative process, and the end product can be no more than a commodity. But I hope I am not being maudlin in suggesting that a nobler alternative to painting for oneself is to paint for God.

Signs of a Rapprochement

There is, happily, some evidence that an attempt is being made to bridge the gap between religion and art. What is happening within Lutheranism is probably well enough known to readers of this magazine that I need not go into it here. Let me, therefore, cite only an example here and there from outside Lutheranism. The Methodist Student Youth Movement, through *Motive* magazine, has long been concerned with seeking solutions to this problem and has consistently been a mighty champion of good art. An increasing number of seminaries now require a course in ecclesiastical art — a step, though only a partial one, in the right direction. The National Council of Churches of Christ in America has formed a Depart-

ment of Worship and the Arts which has been investigating the problem and is seeking remedies. Such ventures are, I hope and believe, indicative of the Church's interest in repairing the breach between itself and the artist and his art.

Earlier I commented on the great increase in church membership since the War. I suppose that it would be fair to say that there has been an equally impressive increase in the number of artists, professional and amateur, that have cropped up since the end of the War. For that matter, all sorts and conditions of men have grown numerically since the war, from the greatest statesmen of our century to the alcoholics who are undergoing rehabilitation. Numbers in themselves mean nothing. But there is at least the hope that the vitality of the forces which have brought about the phenomenon of growth in church membership and in the number of artists may make possible a kind of renaissance which will, among other things, inspire artists more effectively to reflect man's search for spiritual values and perhaps create an audience appreciative of this effort. At any rate, any step in this direction is to be welcomed.

LEGEND

God was thinking, "Let there be
Something especially for Me —
Something made of earth and air,
Shaped and shafted like a prayer;
Some one perfect, lovely thing
To lean My heart against in spring.
It must have an earthly root
And bear the earth's rich pain of fruit,
And yet must be my very own
And in the garden stand alone."

God was thinking, "Let there be —,"
And then He spoke The Apple Tree.

— DON MANKER