

RELIGIOUS ART IN A SECULAR AGE: IMAGING GOD ANEW*

Wessel Stoker

Stephan van Erp describes different types of theological aesthetics in his *The Art of Theology*. One of these is the view of theological aesthetics as ‘theology of art’.¹ I use this approach in my *Imaging God Anew*. It has to do with explaining religious art in a secular age: in such an age religious art is not self-evident. Jean-Luc Marion points to a crisis the secular image in general is undergoing in the modern age and offers his theory of the icon as an alternative. Paul Tillich points to the religious as the ultimate reality, especially in secular art. My theological aesthetics, like Tillich’s, includes not only Christian art that depicts God’s salvation but also secular art that is open to the religious transcendent. This article concerns Christian art reimaged and my religious theory of art in a secular age, as discussed in my *Imaging God Anew, A Theological Aesthetics*.² In doing so, I emphasise among other things the aesthetic character of religious art. This aesthetic element is not, as we shall see, limited to beauty as Urs von Balthasar claims. But first I will discuss a preliminary question in connection with religious or Christian art in a secular age. Has, as has been claimed, religious art come to an end? (I will use the terms religious and Christian art interchangeably.)

I The End of Religious Art?

In our secular age, religious art is under stress. The impetus behind my book *Imaging God Anew* was the exhibition *The Problem of God* that I saw in Düsseldorf in 2015. It was an exhibition of religious art on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council. The text written by the curator of the exhibition, Isabella Malz, surprised me: she wrote that the exhibition presents art in dialogue with the visual legacy of Christianity. It is not ‘religiously motivated art’ but has to do with ‘universal symbols that are now detached from their original context’.³ I began to wonder: Is Christian art no longer possible in our secular age? What reasons can be adduced for speaking of the end of religious or Christian art? I will present three different reasons.

1. *The Death of God and Christian Art*

The curator of the exhibition in Düsseldorf referred to the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, who argues that the God who is transcendent to the world is dead and that Christian art has come to an end. Is the *death of God* the reason why Christian art has come to an end?

Nancy deconstructs monotheism via the Christian concept of God. With his ‘absentism’, he wants to conceive of the divine in an inner-worldly way and perceives ‘an evaporation of all divine presences and powers’ (45). That, according to Nancy, entails the end of Christian art. He claims that the religious art image no longer refers to anything beyond the image itself: the only reality is the painting itself. The end of religious art is thus linked to the current philosophical and theological debate about the death of God: Is religious transcendence possible? (40-53)

¹* This lecture was held as In-fact lecture of the Faculty of Theology and the Institute of Philosophy of the KU Leuven University on 9 March, 2023.

S. van Erp, *The Art of Theology: Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Theological Aesthetics and the Foundations of Faith*, Leuven: Peeters 2004, 58-59.

² The references in the text refer to the page numbers of my *Imaging God Anew: A Theological Aesthetics*, Leuven: Peeters 2021.

³ I. Malz, *The Problem of God*, in: I. Malz, *The Problem of God*, I. Malz (ed.), Kunstsammlung NordRhein-Westfalen: Düsseldorf 2015, 311.

I assume that, contrary to Nancy's claims, religious transcendence is an option that has strong credentials. William Desmond points out in his *Art, Origins, Otherness*, that, after Kant, philosophy has failed to do justice to transcendence because it does too little justice to the radical otherness of transcendence. He notes in this respect that philosophy and art cannot be done without religion: 'Religion *lived* is our being in the porous happening of communication between ultimate transcendence ... and finite transcendence ...'.⁴ He speaks here of 'agapeic transcendence', which I myself have elsewhere called 'immanent transcendence'. This is a transcendence that both preserves the otherness of the transcendent and at the same time is involved in our world and therefore is also immanent.⁵ Christian art concerns art that is open to the religious transcendent. Paul Tillich, William Desmond, Jean-Luc Marion (I discuss Marions view in my *Imaging God Anew*, chap. 3) have elucidated, each in their own way, this kind of religious transcendence in connection with the God of the Bible. In this context, I will present my theory of hints and disclosure below. Thus, the claim that religious transcendence is impossible is not a convincing reason to speak of the end of Christian art.

2. *The End of Art and Christian Art*

Art experts like Hans Belting and Arthur Danto speak of a different end, namely, the end of art(history) in general. By this, they mean the end of the late 19th- and early 20th-century conception of art. According to that view, art is separate from all societal concerns and can only be viewed in its formally beautiful form. It is precisely the end of this conception of art that gives Christian art an opportunity. After Marcel Duchamp, a great deal of art is once again dealing with societal issues and functions in social practices like memory art, protest art, street art, and religious art as well. After the so-called 'end of art', religious art is possible, at least according to the current conception of art (chap. 1).

3. *Did Christian Iconography Die Out after Baroque?*

The question about the end of Christian art can also be asked from within the Christian image tradition itself. The art historian W. Schöne believes that Christian iconography became exhausted after the Baroque period because innovative impulses for contemporary religious art no longer exist.⁶

The title of my book *Imaging God Anew* already contradicts that: I present examples there of renewed religious art. I do so through the depiction of the Trinitarian God: God the Father as Creator; God the Redeemer: the person and work of Jesus Christ; and God the Holy Spirit as renewing and completing the work of salvation (Part II). To claim that the pictorial history of God depicted as Trinity in the West came to a standstill in the past is correct. Here is an example of this. Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI, a passionate advocate of sacred art, showed the fresco *Disputation on the Sacrament*, 1409-1410 by Raphael at a synod in 2005. In my opinion, this depiction of God the Father falls short as an image of God. Here, God is depicted as an old man, whereas Christ is depicted as a young man. Something similar can be seen in the *Trinity*, 1427-1428 by Masaccio. This fresco misses the mark because God is invisible, as the church father Irenaeus said: 'The Father is the invisible of the Son, but the Son the visible of the Father'. The Council of Moscow rightly stated in 1667 that representing God the Father in icons 'with a grey beard, with His only begotten Son on His lap ... is exceedingly absurd and unseemly, since no one has seen God the Father' (85).

⁴ W. Desmond, *Art, Origins, Otherness: Between Philosophy and Art*, New York: State University of New York Press 2003, 294.

⁵ Desmond, op. cit. 287, 6 and passim. W. Stoker, *Culture and Transcendence: A Typology*, in: W. Stoker & W.L. van der Merwe (eds.), *Culture and Transcendence: A Typology of Transcendence*, Leuven: Peeters 2012, 11-12 (5-28).

⁶ F. Boespflug, *Peut-on parler d'une mort de Dieu dans l'art?* in: D. Payot (ed.), *Mort de Dieu: Fin de l'art*, Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf 1991, 15-33.

What Christian visual art must do is respect the mystery character of God. To use the words of the art historian Didi Huberman: the visual (*le visuel*) must not degenerate into the visible (*le visible*) and the figurative into the readable.⁷ Here are two examples of imaging God anew that I believe meet this requirement: Van Gogh's *The Sower with Setting Sun*, June 1888 and Reinhardt's *Black Painting No 5*, 1962. The one shows God's activity in nature; the other sees God from the perspective of negative theology.

These examples show that Christian pictorial history has not been exhausted post-Baroque. This also applies to new depictions of the Holy Face in, for example, Rouault's *Holy Face*, ca. 1946 and Sutherland's *Christ in Glory*, 1962.

If Christian art is imaged anew in a secular age, how can this be elucidated in a theological theory of art?

II A Religious Theory of Art in a Secular Age

I discuss the following interrelated aspects of my theory.

1. *Religious Art as a Symbol in Two Senses*

How can a religious image show or refer to the visible of the invisible God? A first answer is: through its symbolic character. A symbol has an intrinsic (non-arbitrary) relationship with what it symbolizes. It unlocks a reality that cannot be unlocked in any other way. I understand a work of religious art to be a symbol in two senses. First of all, the image as a symbol is characterized as a place of becoming present of who/what is depicted. Religious art is thus seen as a *presentational symbol*, such as a relic that invites you to touch it or as the sacred portrait that, according to Marion, involves the crossing of the gazes.

The work of art as a religious symbol can also be interpreted in a different way than participation in the symbolized. The symbol can also refer to something through association and 'gives rise to thought' (Kant) about God, about ultimate reality, or about an existential life situation. Viewers are addressed by the work of art in their life orientation, and this gives rise to thought for them. I call this the *representative conception of symbols* (180-182). An example is the painting *Siena (Vleeswand, 1988)* by Marc Mulders. Mulders says: 'the Holocaust, the nuclear age, this period – I want to see in my work. ... The flesh shows more truth because it is also dismantled life' (146). Mulder's work shows also the prospect of liberated life. There is the beauty of order and rhythm in this work.

But characterizing religious art as a symbol is not enough: this characterization does not yet indicate its religious character. Secular art, such as art in the service of nationalism can also be seen as a symbol. Such art also points beyond itself to something inner-worldly, like the nation, or gives expression to an ideology. How does the aesthetic symbol differ from the religious symbol in art? This concerns my next topic.

2. *The Image Theory of Interaction, Hints, and Disclosure*

The core of a theory of the religious image is how it can clarify that an art image can be open to the appearance of the religious transcendent in the visible or how an art image can refer to the religious transcendent. This is primarily a matter of the becoming present of God in the image (art image as a presentative symbol) or a reference to him (art image as a representative symbol). The art image is the medium for this. I can elucidate this as follows.

A work of art cannot be viewed in itself but only in relation to its viewers. How a work of art is experienced is ultimately a matter for the viewer and the work in question in relation to what is depicted, embedded in a religious visual practice, determined by the

⁷ G. Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'image: question posée aux fins d'une histoire de l'art*, Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 16.

religious background of the person. It always concerns an *event*, an interaction with the viewer. Such an interaction presupposes a *religious disclosure* when it comes to religious art. To elucidate such a disclosure, I will expand the question: When can we speak of a religious situation in a secularized world? In his book *Religious Language*, the philosopher of religion Ian Ramsey gives a number of characteristics of religious language by which a situation can be indicated as religious. I will limit myself here to the characteristic of *odd discernment*. Religion is characterized by an odd discernment, that is, there are situations that are 'spatial-temporal and more'. For me, that characteristic of odd discernment is one of the keys to showing how a painting or other art object becomes religious in interaction with it. An odd discernment, a disclosure, is decisive in the interaction with the work if it is to be viewed as *religious*.

If I apply Ramsey's understanding of religious language to art, odd discernment has to do with the *hints*, the religious characteristics contained in a painting, certain pictorial elements in the composition as a whole. Hints in a work of art make it possible to determine if works of art are to be perceived as religious in their interaction with the viewer. This concerns situations that are spatial-temporal and more. See as an example the large yellow circle around the sun as an halo on Van Gogh's *The Sower with Setting Sun*.

In short, religious art, a religious material image, does not exist in itself but is an *event*. A work can be called religious only in the interaction between the work and the viewer if – consciously or not and with or without hints – there is a disclosure, a situation that is spatial-temporal and more (208-216).

3. *Beauty in Different uses*

There is a lot of discussion about beauty in theological aesthetics.

Christian art is the depiction of God's salvation in Christ and, according to Urs von Balthasar, Christian art is intended to show God's beauty. The Christologically stamped beautiful form as proposed by Von Balthasar is, in my opinion, much too oriented to the pre-modern world with its conception of a harmony of nature and grace.

In my view, a Christian understanding of beauty must be confronted how beauty functions in contemporary art. I make a distinction between the theological concept of beauty as a value and beauty as an aesthetic concept, as one of the forms that a work of art can take.

Beauty as a Value

If beauty is the 'last word', as Von Balthasar puts it, then it is about *beauty as a value*. Beauty as a value can be a theme in art. If you experience these works religiously, then you experience the beautiful as stamped by the good of God's creation (258) (See as an example Henk Helmantels, *Stilleven met schelpen*, 2006. But, as a value, beauty is under great pressure from formless natural evils such as natural disasters and moral evils like the climate crisis, the violence of war, or social abuses. Can we continue to talk about the beautiful in art? Adorno views writing poetry as a barbaric activity after Auschwitz. In my view, art, and especially Christian art, must certainly continue to present beauty; otherwise, the impression can arise that evil, the ugly, has the last word. As a value, the beautiful is to be considered eschatological rather than present in our current world. The beautiful as a Christian value, as harmony and unity, reminds us that the world is destined for the Kingdom of justice and peace, of shalom, of which the beautiful is a part.

Beauty as an Aesthetic Concept

How does beauty function as a form of the work of art? Beauty is not *the* form of a work of art, but one of the different forms a work of art can have. It does not have the first word, if by

that we mean the form of a work of art. It is one of many forms, as I show in my application of the aesthetic concepts of Monroe Beardsley's *Aesthetics* to Christian art. Let us look at Marlene Dumas, *Jesus Serene*, 1994. Its form is not beautiful. Using the term 'appropriateness' (borrowed from classical rhetoric), I ask: What design is appropriate for a certain representation or content (229)? I call Dumas' work *surreal*. Again, let us look at Graham Sutherland's *Study for the Northampton Crucifixion*, 1946. I call it *sublime* because it is an expression of God in his love identifying with the ugliness of death and sin and nullifying them in the resurrection of Christ (229).

4. *Visual Practice in a Secular Age*

Using the reader-response theory, my theological art theory focuses on the work of art in relation to the viewer. With this I emphasise the functional character of religious art. Religious art functions in different ways such as prayer or communication with the depicted; remembrance and teaching; prophetic protest and thanks and praise. In a secular age, a new function is added to these traditional functions of the religious image – that is, the image as a means of religious dialogue.⁸

Conclusion

In a secular age, modern Christian art is modest but impressive. It deals with the fundamental issues of life. Modern artists like Rouault, Sutherland, Dumas and others use new visual language to image God and Christ anew. Here, I have provided an impression of how my theology of art clarifies such art in my *Imaging God anew*.

⁸ W. Stoker, Presence in Contemporary Religious Art: Graham Sutherland and Antony Gormley, *In the Footsteps of the Divine Artist: on the Religious and Spiritual Dimension in Art*, Wessel Stoker & Frank G. Bosman eds., *Perichoresis* 2020, volume no. 3, 77-89.