



# ART, RELIGION, and RELATIONS

Five considerations, which show the interplay between art and religion, support the thesis that the two—although not interchangeable or identical—frequently parallel each other or converge. First and most evidently, one may appeal to their long-standing historical association. That religion and art are universally present in societies is obvious from a turn to different cultures in different eras. Agreeing with the view that when religion diminishes art declines, the Islamic scholar, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, remarks: “. . . whenever there has been a decay or eclipse of the spiritual dimension of Islam the quality of Islamic art has diminished.”<sup>1</sup> Positively speaking, one might add that art and religion prospered together in the Gupta period of India, the medieval era of the West, or the Sung dynasty. Again, the so-called axial age of Confucius, Lao Tzu, and the Buddha gave rise to such monumental aesthetic achievements as the Great Stupa in Sanchi. Historically, religious motifs, themes, insights, figures, practices, and values have enriched and animated world art; and it, in turn, has facilitated the transmission of sacred scriptures, doctrines, sermons, experiences, and prayers. Cross-culturally, art reflecting religion, energized by religion, or in the service of religion has frequently prevailed.

For a recent illustration of the ties between religion and art, one may turn to the “God is dead” theological movement of the mid-1960s. A *Time Magazine* cover, dated April 8, 1966, arrestingly declared: “God is dead,” thereby introducing to popular culture a doctrine that some trace to Nietzsche. In God-is-dead theology, worse than deceased, God was found to be insignificant. Humans were

said to be operating in an increasingly “God-free” way, since God no longer seemed to play a vital role in the daily lives of his creatures. It was as if artists had usurped God’s creativity and scientists had stolen God’s omnipotence. Radical thinkers argued that the church must go on without any concept of God at all; others concluded that the idea of God as “an old man in the sky” was empty and that humans needed a more meaningful conception. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran theologian who became a martyr at the hands of the Nazis, predicted during World War II that: “We are proceeding toward a time of no religion at all.” At the same time, God had nearly vanished from the canvas of twentieth-century Western art. For all the images of God depicted in previous centuries by the Master of Flemalle, Hubert and Jan van Eyck, Mathias Grunewald, Michelangelo, William Blake, and Albert Pinkham Ryder, there is only the occasional depiction by a contemporary such as Paul Klee. Of course, this is not to say that paintings that carry no obvious references to God are devoid of spiritual import. No less an exponent of nonrepresentational art than Kandinsky titled his classic monograph: *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Because his paintings are not literal depictions of any deity, but suggestive, evocative compositions, the Chinese Taoist as well as the Christian can find them to be spiritually meaningful.

Not surprisingly, also in the 1960s, a correspondingly critical turn appeared in art; the cry “Art is dead” meant that art had run its course; it was empty of creativity, just as religion was empty of spirituality. On Western painting in the 1960s, John W. Dixon, remarks:

All signs of the artist’s personality are effaced. . . . Sculpture becomes pure geometric forms. . . . The work of art is reduced to pure objecthood . . . the artist works hard to cancel out “interest,” that is, any sensuous quality or any complex of internal relations that can give pleasure or direct our attention in time. . . . Here is the artistic statement of the death of God. . . . The minimal art of the 1960’s; the color painting of Stella, Louis, Olitski, and the art of many others, make this same affirmation.<sup>2</sup>

Also flourishing in the twentieth century, the anti-artist Marcel Duchamp exhibited “Fountain,” an ordinary urinal, in an art museum, leading some critics to conclude that art was effete. Discussing anti-art, Nicholas Wolterstorff interprets Duchamp’s action, “What counts is the gesture, along with the reasons for the gesture,

not the object with which the gesture is made. In such gestures there is a repudiation of the aesthetic."<sup>3</sup> Interestingly enough, in the last third of the century, the eminent theologian Paul Tillich wrote an essay entitled "The Overcoming of the Concept of Religion in the Philosophy of Religion."<sup>4</sup> In one of his last lectures on art, he talks about non-art and non-religion:

[T]here are fascinating artistic elements, expressive elements in this new art; but at the same time, one finds an element of something that is "non-art." In other realms of culture, similar phenomena are emerging. There is a religion of non-religion, a religion which has nothing to do with the religion of individuals or groups in the traditional sense. There is a theology that makes use of a language "without God."<sup>5</sup>

Continuing, Tillich complains about contemporary music that neglects the muses and is content to merely link noises. On the disappearance of religion, he notes that psychology, which originally meant knowledge of the soul, has lost its spiritual associations.

Martin Buber, perhaps the most distinguished Jewish philosopher-theologian of this century, wrote about the "eclipse of God" and the "obscuring of eternity." The eclipse occurs not in God but between us and God. To grasp Buber's contribution to aesthetics in particular or to religion and philosophy in general, one must understand his fundamental distinction between two different relationships or orientations toward the world: the I-Thou posture and the I-It posture. With the former stance, one regards the other as a Thou, i.e., as a person rather than as a thing, as free rather than as determined. With the latter perspective, one regards the other as an object that is as determined as are all other mere things. If one adopts the I-It posture he cuts himself off from any divine light. Describing the Nazi regime as an age of the eclipse of God, Buber steadfastly maintained that the dawn would break.

To many, God and art were "dead" in the sense that both had reached a dead end, being displaced respectively by science and a retrogressive pseudo-art. In a recent book, *Beauty and Holiness: the Dialogue between Aesthetics and Religion*, J. A. Martin Jr. offers two chapters that analyze contemporary discussions of the termination of the activities, goals, or concepts of art and religion. Perhaps the "death" of art and religion occurred when the isolating concepts of "fine art" and "religion" displaced genuine art and spirituality and all their rich entanglements with every strand of cultural life. Interestingly enough, in Asia, where art and religion are

conspicuously interfused, there was no death of, say, Japanese Buddhism any more than there was a death of Japanese art.

In recent times, pluralism, i.e., the view that one's own group does not have a monopoly on the truth, has dramatically affected—some would say infected—art and religion. The dizzying varieties of contemporary art, with no obvious paradigm for cross-cultural choosing, appreciating, or evaluating, are paralleled by the unprecedentedly bewildering plurality of religions today. Leaders in world religions have entered into dialogue with each other; journals such as *Buddhist Christian Studies* are now multiplying, but, as yet, the typical practitioner of a faith remains puzzled and intimidated by the implications of greater contact with religions other than his own. Concerning interfaith dialogue, one may wonder about the purpose of such conversation. After all, neither party is apt to convert the other in such exchanges. Moreover, the dialogue is sometimes between parties who are quite well versed in each other's religions and are not likely to enlarge their theological education. Perhaps the true value of such dialogue lies in the love or fellow-feeling that it may foster, since genuine dialogue involves being open, receptive, or loving toward the Thou. When Tolstoy affirms that the true value of art is to promote solidarity, brotherly love, or spiritual union, one can scarcely imagine a greater value.

At times, the average person is unable to make sense of the myriad kinds of art that abound, and even critics cannot agree upon aesthetic criteria—whether the six canons of traditional Chinese painting, Greco-Roman ideals, or contemporary manifestoes. From an I-Thou perspective, one should enter into dialogue with twentieth-century artists and their works, not view them from afar as "Its." Similarly, a member of one religion can engage those of other faiths in dialogue in order to understand, evaluate, or temper his own feelings and beliefs. Those who bring nothing but doctrines, dogmas, or propositions to the dialogue situation will fail. Success requires an intuitive receptivity and an existential posture—one that engages the total self, i.e., intellect, heart, and will. Unless one presents her whole being, she is not in a position to affirm the integrity of the other.

Religious claims of exclusivity—"We have the one, true way"—appear less compelling today than they did before recent encounters between and among the world religions. For example, the Christian vision of other religions as unfulfilled spiritual expressions that can only find their culmination in Christianity, has not been corroborated through a significant number of conversions from Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, or Judaism. Nor has Islam's vision of

itself as the fulfillment of Judaism and Christianity been realized. In fine, however well the doctrine of "survival of the fittest" serves the biologist, it does not seem to obtain among the major religions. When pluralism prevails, neither the world of religion nor that of art can be monolithic. Rather than one religion, there are many robust religions; rather than one prevailing school of art, there are more than ever. One can fruitfully compare religions to artworks, for both, at their best, are particular expressions of universal truths. Indeed, some would ask if one religion would be any more desirable than one world art. They might also propose that one religion or art would diminish the diversity, creativity, or fecundity of the human spirit. Generic religion is idolatry and generic art is counterfeit art or debased craft. Thus, particularity, individuality, or uniqueness figures as importantly in religion as it does in art. Naturally, if one enters into dialogue with members of other religions and identifies with them, this can threaten allegiance to her own tradition. Likewise, the artist who is in commerce with other artists risks losing his originality or style. The contemporary writer Anne Roiphe poses a related question: "I am wondering if one feels a primary identification with all the boat peoples afloat on all the waters of the globe, can there ever be a return to the particular group again?" Like a painter who genuinely appreciates other styles but retains her own, a devotee of a religion may respect other religions, but remain committed to her own. Vivekananda, one of the most celebrated of modern Hindus, liked to ask: "If God wanted one religion, why are there so many?" Rather than view different religions as contradictory, Vivekananda viewed them as complementary. Of course, one may also apply such an outlook to the varieties of art. Tolstoy saw the parallel and railed against the exclusivism that marked his time: "The artists of various sects, like the theologians of the various sects, mutually exclude and destroy themselves."<sup>6</sup>

As pluralism in art recognizes the aesthetic values in diverse schools, genres, movements, and cultures, pluralism in religion affirms that there are insights in all faiths. But skeptics argue that when religions contradict each other, they cannot all be right; therefore, they may very well all be wrong. Pluralists, of course, concede that all religions may be wrong some of the time, but this does not entail that all religions are wrong all of the time. They may all be right some of the time, as when they embrace an ethical principle such as the golden rule. Just as different countries, with their respective strengths and weaknesses, united to create the United Nations, different religious traditions, with their respective strengths

and weaknesses, have united to form a Parliament of the World's Religions. Religions may glean truths from each other and, just as importantly, rediscover the significance of truths within their own tradition. Of course, the skeptic who holds that all religions are wrong invalidates the point of any such dialogue, and the Philistine who repudiates all of contemporary art does likewise.

It is not difficult to marshal reasoning in support of religious pluralism. For example, one may enlist Descartes's proof that there is an external world in order to defend the value of multiple religions. He argued that if reality consists of only minds and ideas, then God would be deceiving us, for there surely appears to be an outside, independent, physical world. But since to be a deceiver is to be imperfect and since God is perfect, he cannot be deceiving us about the existence of the material world. Similarly, one could ask: If there is but one true religion, why would God deceive us with so many tempting or even convincing counterfeits? Each of the world religions attracts with its art, miracle stories, accounts of revelation, moral codes, sacred spaces, saints or gurus, great thinkers, ascetics, and humanitarians. Indeed, students of comparative religion are prone to discover that the more they study different religions the harder it is for them to elevate one over all others. Any religion that purports to be supreme must come to terms with, for example, the fact that Hinduism has its spiritual masterpiece, the *Bhagavadgītā*, Christianity its New Testament, and Taoism its *Tao Te Ching*. Each text is at once a religious and an aesthetic classic that espouses moral principles of the highest order. People repeatedly turn to an artistic masterpiece, because it forever invites new understanding and appreciation. They also repeatedly turn to familiar scriptural passages, because they forever encourage fresh interpretations and analyses. Since every generation discovers fresh meanings, values, and insights in artistic classics and sacred texts, one may attribute their inexhaustibility to the inspiration of an unconditioned source. William James spoke of the absolute as a "more," and some would add that religious and artistic classics testify to the existence of this "more." Ironically enough, every successful articulation of a sacred text produces an awareness that some inexplicable import remains. It is hardly a coincidence that the writings of the world's religions are great artistic achievements, whether the narrative drama of the *Bhagavadgita*, the poetry of the *Tao Te Ching*, the parables of the New Testament, Sufi stories, or the Hassidic tales of Judaism. One wonders exactly why and how all these writings originated if all members of humanity were to adopt one religion. Since, for example, Hinduism contains ethics, monotheism, a descent form of God, monu-

mental art, and a bewildering number of philosophical schools, one wonders on what precise grounds it can be relegated beneath Judaism, Islam, or Christianity.

Of course, exclusivism, i.e., regarding one's own view as supreme, may be understandable on the personal level, as when a parent declares, "My daughter is the best child in the world." Nevertheless, it is controversial on a social level when humans seek to communicate as equals. If one proclaims that her religion is the one true path, she may be making a psychological statement. After all, if any religion has an epistemological justification for its superiority, one wonders what the evidence is and why there has not been a rush to conversion. One tastes the foods of other cultures directly, but she tastes their religions twice, once directly and once more subtly—if sometimes more forcefully—through their arts. Witness how many American university students are drawn to Zen Buddhism precisely because of the evocative power of its arts. After all, if the food of other cultures nourishes one's body, and if their art moves one emotionally, their religions may have the capacity to stir one spiritually. In fact, Tolstoy suggests that it would be as erroneous for a people to think that their art was the only genuine art as it would for religious people to hold that their religion is the only true one.<sup>7</sup>

Taking religious pluralism to its ultimate conclusion, not only are there multiple religions, and multiple sub-sects, but, in a sense, each person has her own religion, for she brings different understandings and experiences to the faith that she embraces. An individual always filters the elements of any religion through his unique consciousness, thereby yielding one's own personal religion. Similarly, the creators and the appreciators of art bring unique backgrounds to their respective projects, thereby encountering a unique work at every turn. If a painting has five successive owners, it is, in a sense, five different artworks. With each member of humanity holding a distinctive perspective, it is no wonder that new religions, like new currents in art, are always appearing.

Pluralism in religion is appealing because the great religions complement each other; thus, a Hindu perspective on animals may enrich Christian ethics. Mahatma Gandhi learned from the New Testament and the Trappist monk Thomas Merton from Chuang Tzu. Likewise, pluralism applied to art holds that no single theory suffices; thus, theories are complementary rather than antagonistic. An expressionist theory, which puts a premium upon human emotions, represents one important aspect of art. However, a representational theory, with its broadly cognitive thrust, represents

another important facet. Again, formalist theory, in which form or structure is paramount, identifies a third fundamental element of art.

For another recent, historical tie between religion and art, one may turn to George Dickie's institutional theory of art in *Art and the Aesthetic*,<sup>8</sup> in which he argues that any man-made object can become an artwork through a kind of "baptism." An artist, critic, or mere appreciator need only declare that an artifact is worthy of apprehension. Understandably, critics attack this account as unilateral, because the focus is upon the proclaimer and not upon any inherent properties that may belong to the object. Dickie's theory applies to religion, too. There is a parallel in the proliferation of so-called new religions, for it appears that one need only declare his cause a religion—no objective properties or ever-present attributes need obtain. One group worships Satan, another a mother goddess, a third has meditation instead of worship, and still another may equate spiritual life with the right dietary or scientific practices. As one may fault Dickie for focusing exclusively upon the beholder at the expense of any intrinsic qualities that the object itself might possess, one may criticize any completely open concept of religion.

A second tie between art and religion arises because the latter, with its quest for the real, can lend weight to art. In short, religion may confer the possibility of revelation, not simply decoration or ornamentation, upon the artist's work. Like science, religion, and philosophy, great art pursues truth. Associating the religious with profundity, Tillich speaks of religion as ". . . the dimension of depth in all sections and levels of culture . . ."<sup>9</sup> For him, to remove religion from art is to arrive at a diminished art, what Tolstoy described as counterfeit or insincere art. At its best, such art can only deliver probable truths or the conditioned truths of the sciences. But artists who are religiously motivated seek abiding, unconditioned truths about the self, others, nature, and the divine. Ideally, the artist sets forth a world view that illumines some aspects of the human condition, e.g., birth, maturity, and death. Artists often condemn as superficial any works that yield only pleasure rather than insight into the significance of life, i.e., the meaning of existence. A Schleiermacher commentator, William E. Horden, elaborates on this theme: "All great art and literature has a concept of the totality of the universe, and this is, whether recognized or not, an experience of God."<sup>10</sup> Of course, one need not turn to monumental works or epic literature in order to sense the boundless, cosmic quality of art. She can, for example, intuit it in a line of poetry from Alfred Tennyson: "Flower in the crannied wall . . . If I could



understand What you are, root and all . . . I should know what God and man is." To have this unfettered vision is often the dream of the artist and saint alike.

A third illustration of the relations between art and religion lies in the capacity of art to render religion articulate: art confers the power of speech upon religion. Given its elusive nature, religion inevitably turns to art as a chief means of self-expression. Religion, for example, cannot exist without the art form of humor; therefore, a turn to the great religions reveals rich treasuries of wit. Indeed, one might regard a "humorless religion" as a contradiction in terms. Compare the sobriety of certain contemporary cults to the comic spirit in major traditions such as Zen Buddhism with its endless anecdotes, Judaism with its Hasidic tales, or Christianity with the ironic humor of Jesus, e.g., "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of Heaven." Not only is humor of great instructional value for religion, but it can also play a role in the most profound religious encounters themselves. Complaining to God about her problems and sufferings, Teresa received this reply from her Lord: "Teresa, this is how I treat my friends!" To which she responded with the humor of sarcasm, "That is why you have very few." If the abstractions of theology and philosophy represent the outer layers of religion, then spiritual art represents its otherwise ineffable core. Whether to communicate concepts, intuitions, or feelings, religion needs such art. It enlivens the concepts of theology and philosophy and, ideally, art also fosters a direct, transformative encounter with the divine. In his spiritual aesthetics, Kandinsky affirms the capacity of the artwork to convey "emotions subtle beyond words."<sup>11</sup> Religion without art would be like a sublime silence without the sound that complements and dramatizes it. Religion can be as silent as the contemplative monk, but it is through art that one's I-Thou dialogue with the divine becomes a dialogue with other humans. Through hymns, chants, painting, sculpture, architecture, poetry, and other literature, one meets her fellows spiritually as well as aesthetically. Ludwig Wittgenstein's claim that what cannot be talked about must be passed over in silence is refuted by great music that transmits what ordinary language is powerless to communicate. Indeed, if Tolstoy is correct, one can only communicate his emotions through art and his ideas through language.

When questioned about the relations between religion and art, Huston Smith, the eminent American authority on world religions, replied concisely, "Art can help religion." Indeed, religion is speechless without it. Perhaps religion needs art, because, as Cardinal

Paul Poupard once remarked: "The good needs the beautiful to express itself." One need not be articulate to address God, since God knows one's innermost thoughts and intentions, however ineptly one expresses them. Nevertheless, one enhances dialogue with others to the extent that she draws upon the power of art in order to articulate her ideas. Moreover, artistic expression even benefits one's encounter with the eternal Thou, for it is through art that one sometimes finds himself, the I that meets any Thou. Naturally, such self-discovery allows for greater engagement with any other.

A fourth link between art and religion is evident when they commingle in certain profound experiences, thereby helping to explain the ancients' reluctance to distinguish between the aesthetic and the religious. The awe and sublimity felt in beholding a mountain may be equally aesthetic and spiritual. To see the two merge in the most intense experiences of birth, life, and death is to see their ordinary interrelationship writ large. On the everyday plane, hearing sacred music may trigger religious thoughts. More dramatically, the beauty and religious power of a ritual, such as baptism, are of one piece and include: the innocence of the child, the eloquence of the priest, the symbolism of the water, the sequence of motions, and the solidarity of the congregation praying in concert. Through the moving ritual of a Hindu funeral procession to the Ganges, participants aesthetically transmute death and loss. When van Gogh draws an infant who is aesthetically enjoying the sunshine, the artist glimpses something spiritual in this young child: "I think I see something deeper, more infinite, more eternal than the ocean in the expression of the eyes of a little baby when it wakes in the morning, and coos or laughs because it sees the sun shining on its cradle. If there is 'a ray from on high,' perhaps one can find it there."<sup>12</sup> Demonstrating that the sacred and the mundane interfuse in ordinary life, Zen Buddhists speak about finding enlightenment in the midst of such ordinary activities as carrying water and chopping bamboo. Dramatic everyday illustrations of the intersection between the spiritual and the aesthetic include: the Oriental tea ceremony, Native Americans smoking the peace pipe, the Thanksgiving feast, and the Christian sacrament of communion. Ideally, ". . . the self . . . becomes a medium whereby the spiritual world is seen in a unique degree operating directly in the world of sense."<sup>13</sup> Given such cases of profound interpenetration between art and religion, it is perhaps not surprising that some, like Coomaraswamy, identify the two.

Not only are the spiritual and the aesthetic joined in various ways, but they are features of life itself. A religious wedding cer-

emony is not about life; it is life itself; indeed, it is one of the most important parts of it. The aesthetic, in the form of, for example, religious music at a wedding, is not about the wedding so much as it is an aspect of the wedding. In short, some of the most vital art is not confined to museums or theatres, but is connected to life in the larger world. Marc Chagall refuses to disengage his art from life: "There are hundreds of moments in life which are linked together by art, and turn into paintings I dream about quite outside any kind of realism. It's life itself, and it's got nothing to do with realism or naturalism."<sup>14</sup> Asked to describe his ceramics and pottery, he responded, "They're a continuation of life."<sup>15</sup> Of course, that art or religion that is most continuous with life will be the most vital. The Japanese Buddhist Bon dance, which honors the dead, is not just about the deceased; it is a part of life in which all ages participate in a whirling web of motion, color, chanting, and music. Here, as religion and art manifestly coalesce and vivify life itself, one may sympathize with Coomaraswamy's assertion, "Art is religion, religion art, not related, but the same."

Like ethics, art and religion are axiological spheres; and this provides a fifth basis for relations between the two. They supply the values or standards by which one judges everything else. As religion offers spiritual and moral values, art offers aesthetic values, e.g., when the elegance of a theory compels a scientist's assent. Since one can hardly isolate various kinds of values from each other—witness the relations between moral and aesthetic values in the case of a forgery—if humans are to be whole, they must interrelate various values and integrate them within themselves.

Because art and religion are sometimes threats to each other, their coexistence can be intimidating. Nevertheless, even when the two meet, one need not necessarily overwhelm the other. For there is an obvious alternative: art and religion can be complementary. Indeed, it is the coalescence of the two that can produce the poetry and religious fervor of a Teresa. Of course, if art and religion are sometimes interdependent, this does not entail that they are indistinguishable.

### Is All Art Religious?

The various relations between art and religion may lead one to think that every artwork has a religious dimension—however concealed it may be. In other words, one might conclude that all art

is religious. I will now critically analyze three considerations that dispose one toward this thesis. First, the doctrine of the omnipresence of the divine apparently entails that non-religious art is impossible. In short, divine omnipresence entails that all things, including artworks, can evoke wonder. A capacity for wonder is especially evident in the child who reaches out in fascination to any new object, perhaps not just because it charms with its unfamiliarity, but because it speaks of being and of potential answers. Celebrating the child, who beholds ordinary things as wonders, religious leaders—from Christ and Lao Tzu to Ramakrishna—enjoin their disciples to become child-like. Of course, to be a wonder is also to have aesthetic import, because the aesthetic is always “trans-mundane,” i. e., a departure from the prosaic. Even something as functional and “frill free” as a pencil can be thematic in an aesthetic experience. One can perceive it as a vividly colored band or a streamlined form—whether or not its lead is of the right kind for the purpose at hand. Here, many adults could learn from children, who express delight on receiving a first pencil. Part of their satisfaction is undoubtedly aesthetic, since they have not yet become preoccupied with the practical concerns that can extinguish aesthetic enjoyment. As is illustrated by Mu ch’i’s celebrated painting of six persimmons, the great religious artwork frequently hallows the plain and simple.

While Albert Schweitzer held that anything that is alive is sacred, some would add that even inorganic objects have a spiritual essence. Taoists, for example, locate *ch’i*, i.e., vital force or the vibrations of Tao, in stones as well as the blades of grass that grow up between them. In Federico Fellini’s film *La Strada*, the actor Anthony Quinn, picks up a rock and declares: “If this stone is useless, then everything else is useless!” The thirteenth-century Dominican priest, philosopher, mystic and poet, Meister Eckhart, whom some compare to Samkara in India, once stated: “The being of a stone speaks and manifests the same as does my mouth about God . . .”<sup>16</sup> And again, “with such an attitude [spiritual outlook] you could tread upon a stone, and that would be a more godly thing to do than for you to receive the Body of our Lord.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, in his sculpture of David, Michelangelo extracted the “Thou” that was latent in the stone. The Nobel Prize-winning novelist, Isaac Bashevis Singer, also considers the lowly stone in his *Love and Exile: An Autobiographical Trilogy*, when he comments on the Kabbalah books, “I realized that their particulars weren’t as important as was their concept that everything is God and God is everything; that the stone in the street, the mouse in its hole, the fly on the wall, and the shoes on my feet were all fashioned from the Divinity.”

An anecdote from Zen Buddhism suggests that the sacred is present in every artifact. A visitor asked a Zen priest: "If one can discern the Buddha-nature everywhere—in unraked stones as well as raked ones—why do you so meticulously fashion your rock garden?" The priest replied tellingly: "Yes, the Buddha-nature can be discovered everywhere, but we try to make it a little easier to see." As a theist might put the point, God's omnipresence ensures that all things merit appreciation, but not that they are all equally expressive of the divine. In one sense, all persons are not equally admirable spiritually, since some, for example, have achieved greater moral cultivation. From the perspective of the Infinite, every thing may be on the same aesthetic footing, but humans find that some objects more greatly reward their aesthetic attention. Great religious figures are those whose lives embody or "incarnate" the divine to an optimum degree and great religious artists are those who communicate the divine to an optimum degree.

If God is everywhere, it follows that all art is religious, but it also follows that everything else is religious as well. Thus, it would remain to characterize the distinct being of art objects in order to mark them off from other kinds of entities. If everything is religious, it conveys little to assert that all art is religious. Moreover, the list of possible counterexamples is formidable, for few would say that every contemporary novel, all popular music, each piece of modern sculpture—no matter how trite—and every presidential portrait are religious in character.

Of course, to be spiritual, art need not partake of explicitly religious content or symbols. For example, van Gogh's painting of a peasant's shoes transmits something of the sincerity of honest labor. Tolstoy saw such art as religious, because it conveys the nobility of the artist's soul, raises questions about the meaning and value of life, and unites viewers in a feeling of brotherhood or love, as in the *agape*, i.e., spiritual love, of Christianity or the fellow feeling (*jen*) of Confucianism. From this perspective, content is rendered rather accidental. "It is indeed possible to see in a still-life of Cezanne, an animal painting of Marc, a landscape of Schmidt-Rotluff, or an erotic painting of Nolde the immediate revelation of an absolute reality in the relative things . . . they have become 'sacred' objects."<sup>18</sup> Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that their sacred dimension is now transparent, for religions hold that all things are already sacred, the profane appearing only in the eye of the beholder. Because much traditional religious art adheres closely to entrenched conventions, so-called secular art—such as Paul Klee's abstract painting—with its freedom and spontaneity, may strike one with greater religious force. One can also regard the artist as

religious when he, like a monk, commits himself to a certain life style, dedicates himself to his "calling," and works to discover and disclose something of ultimate reality.

Tillich posits a second reason to regard all art as religious: art expresses being and a confrontation with being is always spiritually significant. After all, spiritual reality is the source of being and permeates all being. Reflection on the different qualities of being and their hierarchy—from good to better to best, from unattractive to pretty to beautiful—led Aquinas to posit God as the axiological absolute or summit. God's all-pervasiveness ensures the inherent goodness of being; thus, the medievals affirmed that being or existence is better than non-existence. Art is not only a kind of being but it is expressive of being. This is just to say that things can often remain unnoticed until art expresses their being. Ideally, religious art has a threefold significance; it imitates divine creation, communicates human being, and expresses something of the supreme being.

That a thing exists, i.e., has being, rather than does not exist, has religious significance, since it can inspire awe. To ask why things exist at all is ultimately a religious inquiry, for—if there is an answer—it can only be in terms of a metaphysical absolute. Other answers invariably address a how, not a why. It is the ultimate inexplicability of existence that renders it religiously awesome. Hence, painters seek to hint at it in their works and poetry begins after prose fails. As the stark existence of a thing can be evocative of the numinous, it is not surprising that a contemporary Chinese philosopher finds that such existence is also aesthetic, "Existence itself is poetical."<sup>19</sup> It is the brute existence of a thing that strikes, for example, existentialist philosophers with awe, a state that straddles the categories of the aesthetic and the religious as do the concepts of the sublime and the numinous. Existentialists ask: Why is there what there is rather than nothing?—a question so fundamental as to guarantee its religious import. In a discussion of Martin Buber, Maurice Friedman remarks:

Again and again, natural objects "blaze up into presentness." . . . Before we grasp what is over and against us as an object, compare it with other objects, classify and analyze it, and register it in the structure of knowledge, we see it with the force of presence and thereby grasp it in its incomparable uniqueness. . . . Along with the perception of the senses and the categories of the mind, we feel the impact of real otherness.<sup>20</sup>

If natural things have such “presentness,” would not artworks have a “redoubled” presence? Outstanding artworks reveal the consciousness of the artist as well as the thusness, i.e., concrete reality or givenness, of media like paint, sounds, and stone. To the disclosures of nature, art adds the revelations of human nature. Even the worst art manifests something of the human spirit and, if humans are sparks of the divine, such art manifests some degree of spirituality as well. Failed artworks are religious in spite of themselves, i.e., religious as things rather than as aesthetic things. Zen Buddhism affirms the presence or suchness of things, each with its peculiar ontological identity. Of course, only someone with the proper mental set can detect the individuating “this-here-nowness” of a thing. Unlike the artist or religious person, most individuals do not grasp a thing in all its concreteness and vivacity. Thus, the enemy of the aesthetic is not ugliness but lackluster observation. For the poet, as well as the religiously disposed, nothing is ever categorically trivial. Hence Chuang Tzu, the lyrical sage of Taoism, observed that a seemingly inconsequential mustard seed, floating in water, can become a boat. Grasping the immediacy of the moment involves seeing things in their “thusness” or “suchness.” They are plain and simple; yet, nothing could be more profound, for all things pose the existential question: Why do things exist rather than not exist at all? Clearly, the fact that a thing exists, rather than does not exist, also carries aesthetic significance, for the mysterious is as much an aesthetic category as it is a religious one. Rose Slivka, a prominent crafts critic, holds that the search for “presentness” occurs in crafts as well as arts, because dedicated craftspeople are on a “quest for a deeper feeling of presence.”<sup>21</sup>

Commenting on the vitality of a peasant painting by the Dutch artist Jan Steen, Tillich declares, “. . . everything which expresses the power of being is indirectly religious.”<sup>22</sup> To express something of the power of being is to express something of ultimate reality; and Tillich believes that Toulouse-Lautrec accomplished this even in his supposedly perverse art. For Tillich, artworks lose their secular status by virtue of their power to manifest ultimate reality. The test of this power lies in the beholder’s experience of the work, not in claims about a creator’s intentions. Whether an artist’s intentions can render a work religious is highly controversial. Biographers of Johann Sebastian Bach report that he wrote “Soli Deo Gloria” (to God only be the Glory) on his evolving manuscripts, including the scores many now classify as secular.

For Tillich, art that lacks any explicitly religious subject matter can still be religious: “Everything in human culture has a

religious dimension if it points to the holy, that is, to that which is the ground and aim of everything that is."<sup>23</sup> An artwork is religious if it illumines the meaning of life: "... every cultural creation has a religious dimension insofar as it contributes to the answer of the question of the meaning of our existence and existence universally."<sup>24</sup> Tillich often identifies Picasso's *Guernica*, a painting that expresses the violence and horror of war, as a piece that poses fundamental questions. When Tillich says that "Ultimately no irreligious art is possible,"<sup>25</sup> he means that divine omnipresence entails that even the most "secular" artwork points, however obliquely, to the holy. Like other religious thinkers, he turns to the stone for a model of something that, at first, seems to be spiritually insignificant. He also recognizes the artist's style as pointing "... to the answer he consciously or unconsciously gives to the question of the meaning of life."<sup>26</sup> Not surprisingly, contemporary philosophers, who reject religion, are also prone to deny that there is any "meaning of life." Rather, they believe that there are only particular meanings in life, but no overarching, general meaning. To the contrary, Tolstoy says that in every era and culture, there is a grasp of the meaning of life that reflects the best thought of a people, a comprehension of the highest good to which the best thinkers of society aspire. He equates such understanding with what he terms the religious perception and adds: "... it is by the standard of this religious perception that the feelings transmitted by art have always been estimated."<sup>27</sup> That Paul Gauguin was also concerned with fundamental questions about the human condition is evident in the title of a painting that he completed in 1897 and thought that he could never surpass: *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?*

There are, of course, serious problems in Tillich's aesthetic speculations, e.g., in his idea that art expresses being or manifests ultimate reality. Since he believes that one's direct experience, rather than reason, verifies whether a work of art succeeds in conveying being, the revelatory capacity of art remains an experiential rather than a demonstrable truth. Often, Tillich's assertions are simply too broad, as when he says of the artist, "He cannot escape religion even if he rejects religion, for religion is the state of being ultimately concerned. And in every style the ultimate concern of a human group or period is manifest."<sup>28</sup> Such generalizations proceed from a singular view of art, but artists sometimes preoccupy themselves with light, color, and sensuous surfaces instead of with hinting at a deeper underlying reality. In addition, art as propaganda demonstrates that the intense concern that motivates a group may be political rather than spiritual. When Tillich submits that



“Everything in human culture has a religious dimension if it points to the holy,” one wonders what does not point to the holy. A Hindu anecdote relates that someone once criticized a woman, who was resting, because her feet were pointing toward a temple that contained the image of a divinity. Asked to reposition her feet, she said: “Gladly, if you will tell me in which direction God is not to be found.” Relating the artist’s style “. . . to the answer he consciously or unconsciously gives to the question of the meaning of life,” Tillich offers another generalization instead of any one artist’s specific answer to questions about the human condition.

Nonrepresentational art provides a third kind of support for the claim that all art is religious. Of course, many laymen today fail to find any sense in non-figurative art, much less religious sense. Still, both Easterners and Westerners have contended that even abstract art is religious. Of course, one can ask if there is any truly abstract art. Discussing Plato’s imperceptible forms, Coomaraswamy insists that

[A]ll the arts, without exception, are representations or likenesses of a model; which does not mean that they are such as to tell us what the model looks like, which would be impossible seeing that the forms of traditional art are typically imitative of invisible things, which have no looks, but that they are such adequate analogies as to be able to remind us, i.e., put us in mind again, of their archetypes.<sup>29</sup>

In short, nonrepresentational art can be a vivid, poetic reminder of that which transcends direct representation. Moreover, as Nicholas Wolterstorff says, “If he [Gerardus van der Leeuw] means . . . that works of art—even works of abstract art—can be more or less closely fitting to the holy, then I think he is right. . . . Perhaps this is how we are to understand Mark Rothko’s and Barnett Newman’s abstract works for the chapel in Houston.”<sup>30</sup> Newman’s nonrepresentational *Stations of the Cross* (1958–1966: Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.) seeks to communicate Christ’s suffering. If there is a sense in which there is no abstract art—it always communicates specific feelings or moods and conveys particular ideas or intuitions—there is also a sense in which there is no abstract religion, for concrete experiences, rather than the abstractions of theology and philosophy, energize the religious life.

Kandinsky, a father of nonrepresentational painting, asserts, regrettably without any elucidation: “A triangle . . . has a spiritual

value of its own."<sup>31</sup> Perhaps he agrees with Plato, for whom the absolute beauty of the immaterial forms of the circle and triangle contrasts with the relative beauty of changing, physical things. Possibly the distinction between Nirguna Brahman (ultimate reality as supra-personal) and Saguna Brahman (ultimate reality as personal) corresponds to that between nonrepresentational and representational art. The abstract expressionism of painters such as Kandinsky was "wholly other" in a way that greatly challenged many viewers. While such art seemed to be quite removed from secular as well as religious life, some viewers saw in it the lyrical, mystical quality of paintings by a Taoist master. Such appreciators experience Kandinsky's paintings not as retreats from the objective world into pure subjectivity, but as insights into a deeper, spiritual realm that grounds and interpenetrates the mundane world. Some found the spirituality of Zen Buddhism in paintings by, for example, Mark Rothko. Such discoveries should not be surprising, since artists universally turn to nonrepresentational art, no less than representational, in order to convey the numinous. Amish quilts, with their simple geometric patterns, have long served as workaday *mandalas*, i.e., designs that are thematic for meditation in Hinduism and Buddhism. Sue Bender noted how art triggered her spiritual pilgrimage:

Twenty years ago I walked into Latham's Men's Store in Sag Harbor, New York, and saw old quilts used as a background for men's tweeds. I had never seen quilts like that. Odd color combinations. Deep saturated solid colors: purple, mauve, green, brown, magenta, electric blue, red. Simple geometric forms: Squares, diamonds, rectangles. A patina of use emanated from them. They spoke directly to me. They knew something. They went straight to my heart. That was the beginning.<sup>32</sup>

As Tillich stated, "Of course, one cannot show ultimate reality directly, but one can use basic structural elements of reality like line, cubes, planes, colors, as symbols for that which transcends all reality—and this is what non-objective artists have done."<sup>33</sup> Of course, some non-objective artists have used "cubes, planes, colors" non-symbolically and, hence, non-religiously. On a more grandiose scale, one may consider the simplicity of the pyramids and their profound impact upon the beholder. Asians never embraced the realistic, representational art which Westerners can trace to Greece, Rome, and Egypt. This may explain why Chinese art, as Rudolph Otto

says, expresses the numinous, the mysterious, the supra-personal rather than the personal. The Tao, after all, is neither male nor female, but beyond all such personal categories. Weiss also champions the spiritual potential of nonrepresentational art:

[T]he religious painting is articulated by what is comparatively dark, divisible, and stable. From this it would appear that modern abstract painting should prove to be singularly appropriate for religious art, provided that the painter, no less than the spectator, makes the work reveal and point to God as omnipresent.<sup>34</sup>

Of course, there is some force to Weiss's point; still, one might ask if representational painting—which has prevailed in many world religions—is any less appropriate a vehicle. Formalists, such as Clive Bell and Roger Fry, have argued that the misdirecting life associations connected with representational art pose problems for one who wishes to savor the unique aesthetic emotion. Tillich comments on the stained-glass windows of Chartres Cathedral: “. . . to the degree in which these windows are not figurative—the figures are so small that you cannot distinguish them as figures—they have the power to mediate the feeling of transcendent blessedness.”<sup>35</sup> Here, Tillich regards non-figurative art as an asset, but one should not forget that much of the world's art is representational and that this variety of art has evoked a rich gamut of religious sentiments, including “transcendent blessedness.” Moreover, non-figurative art has produced a vexing problem for certain contemporary artists. One who wishes to transmit her ethnic, religious, cultural, or national heritage, and who elects to do nonrepresentational work, faces a curious challenge, a kind of “identity paradox.” One twentieth-century Chinese painter is illustrative. Growing up in China, she came to love Chinese calligraphy, poetry, painting, music, philosophy, religion, and cuisine. For years, what she cherished influenced her paintings. Eventually, however, she wanted the freedom to depart from traditional artists, schools, and canons. When she began to paint abstractly, the paradox arose: Even if one has appropriated a rich tradition, the yearning for freedom can drive her to create art that is not obviously Chinese. Few, if any, can distinguish abstract paintings as “Chinese,” “German,” “French,” “British,” or “American.” At first, a beholder may conclude that none of the abstract artist's entire tradition is manifest in her art. On reconsideration, however, the beholder may decide that it is dubious that an artist could completely suppress all of her rich

heritage, even when she paints abstract works. Perhaps aspects of her culture are more subtly present. An abstract painting by a Chinese artist may contain yellow bands that are traces of bamboo as rendered by traditional masters. Whether one's art is representational or nonrepresentational, she may communicate her own spirit as well as the ideas, intuitions, and experiences that sustain her tradition.

Not only is art often religious, but it sometimes serves as religion. It is no wonder that social philosophers, such as Andre Malraux and John Dewey, have characterized art as a surrogate religion. Some beholders approach artworks, which cost millions of dollars, with the reverence and whispers that befit sacred objects. It is as if moving from one painting to another on museum walls has replaced walking the stations of the cross, a devotion in which Anglicans and Catholics meditate and pray before fourteen representations of Christ on his final journey from praetorium to tomb. In 1934, Dewey had two salient observations about art museums as shrines. First, he said that these buildings, which displaced cathedrals, were erected as status symbols, signs of "cultural good taste," or as "a kind of counterpart of a holier-than-thou attitude." While there are exceptions, as in the case of the recently completed National Cathedral of Washington D.C., contemporary museum architecture generally overshadows that of churches, cathedrals, temples, or mosques. The museum has become the place to pause, contemplate, search for meaning, and discover something about one's self. As untouchable as the holiest of holies, the artwork is beyond our reach. Second, Dewey states that the isolation of museums, opera houses and galleries from ordinary life shows: ". . . that they are not part of a native and spontaneous culture."<sup>36</sup> Lamenting the compartmentalization of art and religion, he points to the ironic possibility that the grandeur of imposing edifices, be they art museums or cathedrals, may be inversely proportionate to the actual state of aesthetic or religious sensitivity in the societies that erect them.

It is, of course, possible that art is not replacing religion at all. Indeed, art may just be a disguised form of spirituality. Rather than speak of art as usurping the role of religion, it may be more accurate to assert that religion appears under the guise of art. There are "saints" in both domains—ascetic monks and starving artists; alongside faith healing, there is artistic healing through catharsis; and, for the religious pilgrimage, there is, say, a journey to the Louvre. Occasionally the museum and the temple intersect. In 1992, the art show "Mystic Visions" drew substantial crowds to

the Virginia Museum of Fine Art, a state institution in Richmond. When the Tibetan Buddhist monks, who were creating a sand *mandala*, engaged in prayer, there were no vocal complaints to the effect that such activity violated the separation of church and state. Apparently, the exotic appearance of the monks, coupled with their artistic activity, rendered them harmless in the eyes of those who are normally eager to preserve the separation. It was as if the aesthetic could somehow neutralize the religious.

### ALL RELIGION IS ARTISTIC

Even if not all art is religious, it remains to consider the corollary: all religion is artistic. Every religion has its artistic expressions—however understated or subtle they may be. Devoid of art, religion would be a kind of blind plodding—lacking in the vision of the artist—and, therefore, correspondingly inexpressive. Historically, the religious life invariably issues in art, whether in the luminous poetry of a Francis of Assisi, the sublime landscape paintings of the Ch'an Buddhist Mu ch'i, or the lyrical calligraphy of Islam. Since all religions have some art, even the austerity of the Amish and Shakers does not prevent them from creating respectively the strong, simple beauty of their quilts and the lean elegance of their furniture.

In the lives of the saints, deeply felt religious experience often crystallizes in the form of an aesthetic prayer. More to the point, one wonders if there can even be a genuine prayer that is not aesthetic. Every authentic prayer meets Tolstoy's requirements for art: however plain and simple, it must be a sincere communication and it must be a transmission of emotion. Like the actor who wishes to feel something of the emotions that he intends to convey, one who prays must participate emotionally in order to avoid routine recitations with their stillborn emotions. Perhaps if prayer is to be a "fine art," rather than a mere means to some end, like the boat one uses to reach the other shore and then discards, prayer must be an end in itself, as when one is completely content to rest in God.

It is no accident that, for example, the *Bhagavadgītā*, like many other religious classics, is an artistic masterpiece, for aesthetic expression, not ordinary discourse, is the language of religion. Witness the poetry of the *Tao Te Ching*, the Jataka tales of Buddhism, the epic of the *Ramayana*, the narratives of the Sufi, the

parables of Jesus, the allegories of Chuang Tzu, the dialogues of the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavadgita* or "The Song of God," and the colorful mythologies of every tradition. And what would Hinduism be without the magnificent hymns that are the Vedas or Catholicism without the drama that is the Mass? For that matter, no religion could exist without poetry, calligraphy, architecture, painting, music, sculpture, or dance. To illustrate the relevance of drama, for example, according to Ignatius Loyola, one cannot read scripture as a detached observer; one must become a participant and plunge into the "drama," as a method actor identifies with his character. Specifically, Ignatius directs the reader of scripture to exercise his imagination in order to envision, and thereby create, a detailed, living, diorama of persons, places, and events.

Nicholas Wolterstorff wonders: "must a good hymn be aesthetically good?" In other words, if a hymn effectively praises God, must it also be aesthetically significant? He replies affirmatively, reasoning that although art is not the ultimate value in a religious setting, artistic merit is nonetheless a value that enriches the gestalt of worship.<sup>37</sup> As Wolterstorff points out, not all artworks are equally appropriate for a particular religious occasion. Depending upon the circumstances, some works may disturb, misdirect, or distract one significantly during a religious moment. Voluminous music, no matter how evocative of religious awe it might be in the setting of a Christian cathedral, would be out of place in a Chinese tea ceremony.

All religions need art, for it is the art of world religions that first draws individuals to them and then sustains their religious life. Consider the aesthetic simplicity of the Chinese landscape painting, the entrancing complexity of a gothic cathedral, an elegantly sensuous sculpture of the gyrating Shiva, or the hypnotic quality of the Bon dance in Japanese Buddhism. Again, it is the austere beauty of Zen Buddhist flower arrangements that leads one to inquire into the spiritual tradition itself. In *The Catholic Myth: The Behavior and Beliefs of American Catholics*, the priest and sociologist Andrew M. Greeley contends that the appeal of Catholicism lies in its poetry. By poetry, he means art in the broad sense: music, stories, architecture, folklore, rituals, customs, paintings, sculptures, and poems, together with such sub-categories as parables, metaphors, and symbols. In effect, Greeley argues that Catholics like Catholicism because of its aesthetic components, the poetic appeal being so great that they are willing to remain Catholics in spite of doctrines, rules, and officials that they dislike.

That art is essential to religion, rather than simply a helper, is apparent in the need for intermediaries. Every religion affirms

the existence of angels, bodhisattvas, avatars, incarnations, saints, or *sefirot* who mediate between humans and the absolute. Because humans usually perceive a great gap between themselves and the divine, they posit transitional figures. The extent of the gap is evident in that God is all-powerful, but humans struggle, for instance, to open modern, plastic packaging. God is all-knowing, but even Socrates declares that his wisdom lies in recognizing his own ignorance. God is all good, but humans do not even wish to be good; so, Augustine, feeling guilty over his entanglement with a mistress, prays: "Lord, Give me chastity—but not just yet!" Considering the chasm between humans and God, the need for a bridge is obvious. Accordingly, religions recognize spiritual intermediaries who serve to tie humans to the divine. In India, the avatar links the human and the divine. In Ethiopia, an orthodox hymn to the Blessed Virgin Mary declares, "And it was through thee that created human nature was united in indivisible union with the divine Being of the Creator." Interestingly enough, this hymn continues by contrasting the mundane artist with the supreme artist: "What an unheard of thing for a potter to clothe himself in a clay vessel. . . . What humility beyond words for the Creator to clothe himself in the body of a human creature." In Japan, there are the *Nirmānakāya* (earthly body of the Buddha), the Bodhisattva (one who turns back from the brink of nirvana in order to aid others), and the *Sambhoghakāya* (visionary body of the Buddha), all of which stand between humans and the invisible *Dharmakāya*. To these, Judaism adds the *tsadik* (a figure whose exemplary righteousness renders him a conduit between God and ordinary men) and the *sefirot* (ten divine powers, "beings," or "personal aspects") that radiate from God.

Religious artworks are also intermediaries, "avatars," or "incarnations," as it were. It is dubious that humans can, for example, really know God without a song or poem—however basic it might be. Art may partake of the divine in two senses. First, one may expect a trace of the divine inspiration that infected the artist to be evident in the work. If great art involves a divine transmission, i.e., if afflation is true, then the work would necessarily be spiritual. Second, the artist herself is, in a sense, divine, since she possesses a soul, *atman*, Buddha-nature, or transcendental self that is of the same substance as the absolute. As the incarnation or avatar is the coincidence of the human and the divine, the ideal artwork embodies a union of the mundane and the transcendental. A striking candidate for this synthesis exists in the icons of Byzantium, i.e., devotional images that, in the Orthodox Church,

serve as channels between the devotee and the sacred personage who is represented. To fully confront one of these arresting portraits is to have an I-Thou meeting in which the presence of the painted figure engages one head on, face to face; and one "meets" the being whose spirit animates the painted image. Whether one confronts a human, the divine, or an artwork, the I-Thou relation involves encountering a particular presence rather than a generalization or an abstraction. This may help explain the aversion that many art lovers feel toward the sale of artistic masterpieces and the disdain that some have toward art criticism. Does not Kandinsky insist that a painting express the inner spirit of the artist? Because no one should own or possess a person and because an artwork carries the Thou of its artist, one may wish to safeguard even this sort of personhood against the wrong sort of private ownership or hoarding. That masterpieces sell for great amounts and that their creators often lived under austere conditions only exacerbates the situation. Again, those like Tolstoy, who view art as an irreducibly social phenomenon, naturally resent art collectors who refuse to show their masterpieces.

Coomaraswamy speaks eloquently to why religion needs art when he addresses beauty, one of the most central concepts in aesthetics. In its highest expressions, art yields a beauty that is inseparable from the spiritual vocabulary of illumination or enlightenment. In short, beauty is tantamount to lucidity, intelligibility, illumination, and revelation, concepts that apply equally to a religious awakening. Since beauty pertains to clarity or enlightening radiance, ugliness belongs to vagueness, failure to communicate, or the inarticulate.<sup>38</sup> In the end, religion can no more dispense with art than it can with truth. Ugliness corresponds to the uninformed or shapeless, to that which does not convey its essence or form. For Coomaraswamy, everything, from a sea shell to a painting, is beautiful to the degree ". . . that it really is what it purports to be, and independently of all comparisons; or ugly to the extent that its own form is not expressed and realized in tangible reality."<sup>39</sup> The fulfillment of a thing's being is religiously significant, for the greater the actualization of an individual being the more it approximates the fully actualized absolute. Given the above considerations, when a religion suffers from a paucity of great art, one has grounds for suspecting a commensurate lack of spirituality; and, when art does not point beyond itself to that which occupies religion, e.g., ultimate truths, universals, insights into human nature, unchanging realities and verities, one has grounds for judging such art to be penultimate.



## Religion and Art as Essential Aspects of the Human Condition

Because religion and art are universal, pervasive, interacting forces, one can neither understand nor appreciate a culture without some understanding of its spiritual and artistic expressions. Although an individual might repudiate religion or art—and even this is dubious—there is no civilization that is quite bereft of them. Just as human beings are sexual and cognitive animals, humans possess aesthetic and religious sensitivities and impulses. As Epicureans realized, if some members of society refrain from sexual activity, society can survive, but if all members refrain, society ends. Although an individual may not participate in the aesthetic or the spiritual, if all people were to avoid participation, such creatures could not satisfy the present concept “human.” When cave dwellers started painting pictures and engaging in spiritual practices, they took two of the major steps to becoming human beings.

One can also argue that the inexhaustible richness of art and religion renders them immune to rejection by the individual. Were someone to state, “I reject all art,” he would be making a manifestly uninformed and wholly unwarranted statement, for he could not renounce that with which he was unacquainted. Obviously, no one can be familiar with the entire gamut of world art from antiquity to the present. One could hardly rule out the classical Spanish guitar, jazz piano, opera, haiku poetry, ballet, Fellini films, Mark Twain’s wit, Sung dynasty landscape paintings, a still life by Cezanne, all cottages, huts, skyscrapers, residences, mosques, temples, and cathedrals, Picasso’s classical, blue, rose, surreal, and cubistic periods, all literary masterpieces from all cultures, and all sculpture from primitive to postmodern. Such a list is endless, for it would also include what some consider non-art, as when the Balinese people resist distinctions between art and non-art. Clearly, no one knows enough to assert, “I renounce all art.”

One can develop a parallel argument for religion. Suppose a person disavows Christianity in the form of conservative Protestantism. To totally repudiate Christianity, one would also need to know all other forms, such as: the pietistic Amish, the liberation theologians of Catholicism, Christian feminists, the mystical gospel of a Teresa of Avila, the Christianity of a more recondite and scholarly mystic like Meister Eckhart, the abstract theology of Paul Tillich, Augustine’s extensive writings, and Thomas Aquinas’s voluminous, architectonic exposition of theology and philosophy. As if rejecting Christianity, with its two to three hundred, variegated

denominations, not to mention their sub-groups, were not problematic enough, rejecting other world religions and their sub-divisions poses insuperable problems. For example, one should master Sanskrit, Chinese, and Japanese in order to study Buddhism. Given the inexhaustibly diverse expressions of art and religion, no one can know, much less thoroughly evaluate, the varieties of either. After all, even the atheist may find merit in such non-theistic religions as Confucianism and Theravada Buddhism. While the wholesale rejection of all varieties of religion and art is impossible, one need not remain neutral. Affirmation is possible, because everyone has some religious stirrings—evoked by, for example, the starry heavens above—that allow her to feel a rapport with the most spiritually accomplished souls; and everyone has some aesthetic sensitivities that allow her to appreciate and feel oneness with some of the most gifted artists of her culture.

After condemning aristocratic art, Tolstoy wonders: “How could it occur that humanity lived for a certain period without real art, replacing it by art which served enjoyment only?”<sup>40</sup> Tolstoy answers that only a small portion of humanity—the upper classes of European Christian society—appreciated it. Meanwhile, according to Tolstoy, most human beings depended upon what he considers to be genuine art: the epic of Genesis, the Gospel parables, folk songs, and fairy tales. For him, “. . . to say that a work of art is good but incomprehensible to the majority of men is the same as saying of some kind of food that it is very good, but that most people can’t eat it.”<sup>41</sup> He reasons that if art is a truly important matter, rather than an idle pastime or superfluous ornament on life, it must be essential for all mankind. In other words, whatever is fundamental should be available to all. Moreover, he finds art to be “. . . one of the indispensable means of communication, without which mankind could not exist.”<sup>42</sup> Therefore, he reasons that so-called art, which is not understandable to all, is not art at all. In addition, if true art is intelligible to all humans and if humans are also religious creatures, then to speak about a religion that can only address a select number is to speak about an impostor. Accordingly, a classic in mystical literature, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, describes contemplation as: “. . . a practice so simple that even the most uneducated peasant may easily find in it a way to real union with God in the sweet simplicity of perfect love.”<sup>43</sup> Tolstoy praises straightforward artistic expressions, because they are sincere, unaffected but affecting transmissions of feeling that elevate the human spirit, inspire wonder toward the grandeur of life, and foster rapport with one’s brothers and sisters. Criticizing hedonistic art, he claims that

our human nature puts limits upon what we can enjoy, but our spiritual mission, i.e., the advancement of humanity, is unlimited.<sup>44</sup>

Parallel to the religious dictum "Seek and you shall find," there is the aesthetic invitation: "Practice art and you shall achieve." Tolstoy, who believes that art and religion are basic to human nature, inspires the thesis: "All can have a modicum of success in either art or religion." Both religion and art are integral to the human condition and if nothing in nature is in vain, steadfast responses to their respective impulses will be rewarded. Just as one may believe that every soul who searches for religion has some capacity to receive it, Gauguin affirms the aesthetic capacity of humans, "Perhaps I have no talent, but—all vanity aside—I do not believe that anyone makes an artistic attempt, no matter how small, without having a little—or there are many fools."<sup>45</sup> In fine, there is no one who cannot sketch, paint, write, sculpt, dance, sing, play a musical instrument, compose, or frame a simple poetic line; nor is there anyone who is unable to recite a traditional prayer, meditate, sing, chant, lose herself through absorption in nature, or be spiritually moved by liturgy.