

Overture¹

THE CHAPTERS which follow will consider religion as art. In them I argue that what art does, religion does. They both provide directions on how to see and indirectly on what to do. More specifically, the thesis of this study is that art and religion present collectively created frames of perception and meaning by which men interpret their experiences and order their lives. To follow a cue from Nelson Goodman, each presents something akin to the tailor's cloth swatch or sample, which displays the fabric itself rather than points to or illustrates another fabric that exists somewhere else. Art and religion, like Goodman's sample, display the swatches of 'reality' by means of which men see what 'is,' and from which they create their world. Rather than serving as illustrations which describe men's world, art and religion contribute the fabric of new worlds which men now come to see and understand as their world.²

My thesis is related to the rather frequently defended observation that art and religion are human enterprises by which individuals deal with their experiences, especially those experiences which, as Peter Berger points out, are "at the marginal situations in the life of the individual," where death is the "marginal situation *par excellence*."³ But I will take this observation in the opposite direction. Whereas more traditional research has focused upon how artists and religious people adjust to what already is, my findings, derived from classic formulations and expressions of art and religion, suggest that their activities create what is. As such, they are initiating actions, rather than reactions. The common religious rite of initiation is an example. As the word suggests, it is a way to begin, to commence, to originate. This is the import of Goodman's swatch, which is a sample. Art and religion

provide the swatches with which men and women go out into the world, the standards against which they measure everything else. For those who use them, art and religion in a sense contribute the first forms to Plato's "receptacle" (*he hypodochē*), to that *tabula rasa* upon which the new world is to write. (*Timaēus* 50D-51A) Our conscious world is populated by Roman ruins and Italian landscapes ever since Claude Lorrain; by northern landscapes since Jacob van Ruisdael; by Dutch windmills since Jan van Goyen. Claude is a particularly good example, for it was his paintings which taught the English and which in turn influenced Americans to see the formal gardens in the style of Versailles as "artificial" and thus encouraged us all to construct in their place the "more natural" English park.

I will garner the supporting evidence for my argument from within the traditional limits of what ordinary language brackets together as 'religion', that is, from those six currently available social and historical systems or patterns of meaning and regulation around which have gathered a multitude of supporters—Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam; and from within the traditional limits of what ordinary language brackets together as 'art', that is, from material which since the middle of the eighteenth century men classify as the five fine arts—painting, sculpture, architecture, music and poetry in addition to the dance, theater, literature, and the opera.

1. For the most part, in this study I shall employ object-language in talking about art and religion; my concerns will be of the first-order variety. In other words, I shall talk about art and religion and not talk about talk about 'art' and 'religion'. I shall argue for the thesis that art and religion present collectively created frames of perception and meaning by which men interpret their experiences by citing evidence garnered from art and religion.⁴

But methodologically speaking this is no simple matter, for two reasons: first, as I have already implied, art and religion as such, unlike talk about 'art' and talk about 'religion', do not exist in any place or at any time. The various systems or activities to which we refer are art and religion, they are not variations of the essence Art, or of the essence Religion. Like bursitis and weather, art and religion are useful abstractions elicited from certain chosen phenomena which exist in certain places and in certain times, but they themselves no more exist apart from the phenomena they classify than does the Aristotelian logic of subject and predicate or the commonsense logic embodied in our familiar parts of speech.

The second methodological difficulty is that even when the labels

'art' and 'religion' are usefully applied and do point out something, that which they thus designate does not constitute a single finished or continuing event or a functioning whole. Art and religion are open ideas or concepts, achievements perhaps, and most certainly ideas or concepts with their own histories. Closed concepts, on the other hand, like essences, are taken as given—as subjects of history perhaps, but not as the possessors of histories.⁵

These two difficulties are related. Whereas the first is that art and religion are abstractions which do not exist in themselves and therefore are doomed to being understood through certain chosen phenomena from which they are abstracted, the second difficulty is that even after they are so understood, identified, and labeled, they still are not discrete continuing entities in the way that the Great Depression, for instance, is for the historian. The certain chosen phenomena constituting their base have spaces in their togetherness, which is cemented, it is true, by talk such as the discussion in this book; but obviously such cement is of a different epistemic level from the phenomena which it causes to cohere.

2. For these reasons I shall develop my argument through analysis rather than through synthesis, by way of thesis to evidence rather than by way of detail to summary. For example, I argue that art and religion are similar and therefore must each be doing such and such, rather than that since art and religion do such and such, they must be similar. I acknowledge what already is the case, that as far as art and religion are concerned, meaning takes precedence over description. We cannot say what art and religion do until at least a tentative agreement has been established as to what they are, and this agreement is derived from substantive and methodological interests. Certainly, what is a legitimate example of what religion does, understood as a cultural manifestation, is not necessarily identical to what is a legitimate example of what religion does, understood as a personal experience.⁶

In essence this study does not effect a Husserlian *epoché*, or bracketing off of values. Values are there from the beginning. But this realization points up another difficulty. It is a commonplace that answers and evidence for answers are formed by the questions which we ask. "What is the soul?" inquires Derinda in Dryden's *Tempest*. "A small blue thing," replies her lover Hippolito, "that runs about within us." "Then I have seen it," concludes she, "in a frosty morning Run smoking from my Mouth." (act 5, lines 106-109) Since what constitutes evidence for my thesis is formed by the way in which art and religion are defined, I may be prescribing and not describing, like that ichthyologist of whom, I am

told, sir Arthur Eddington spoke. When the ichthyologist set about studying sea creatures, he made a net of strong cords, knotted at two-inch intervals, and after trawling, ranged the catch on the deck to study its characteristics. Not unexpectedly, his first conclusion was that all sea creatures were at least two inches long.

My defense against such a blunder is this: first, to recognize that without theses we will catch nothing; but second, to recognize that though theses provide meaning, they do not prove meaning. Art and religion are infinitely dense concepts. Given the impossibility and even the undesirability of illustrating religious and artistic phenomena by presenting a full-scale inventory of all their cultural and historical contexts, I narrow my focus here to a legitimate facet of their designated character; in short, I choose to collect *representative* data. This move is not unusual. History, too, without general structural schemes to classify, order, and organize its data, would lose itself in a boundless mass of disconnected facts. As Pieter Geyl attests, "Every historical narrative is dependent upon explanation, interpretation, appreciation. In other words we cannot see the past in a single, communicable picture except from a point of view, which implies a choice, a personal perspective."⁷ As such, Eliade, the historian of religions, compares his situation with that of the depth psychologist. "One, like the other," he writes,

is obliged not to lose touch with the given facts; they follow empirical methods; their goal is to understand 'situations'—personal situations in the case of the psychologist, historical situations in the case of the historian of religions. But the psychologist knows that he will not arrive at the understanding of an individual situation, and consequently cannot help his patient recover, except insofar as he can succeed in disclosing a structure behind the particular set of symptoms. . . the historian of religions proceeds no differently.⁸

From the standpoint of information theory, though the boundless full-scale inventory of facts has high information content, it has little communication value until the information becomes predictable, until its randomness is structured by finite and ordered systems of probability relationships.

But we must also remember our second qualifying point—that theses, though necessary, are not sufficient. Saying something does not make it so. Theses do not of themselves prove their meaning. Though Ramakrishna speaks approvingly of that fabled species of birds called Homa—birds which live so high up in the heavens that they never touch ground—and compares the likes of Nārada and Jesus to them, I

myself in this study must constantly be in touch with the ground.⁹ In arguing with and for a system of probability relationship I must constantly refer back to the evidence and continually appeal to fresh data which arise independently of those from which my thesis is derived. Eliade concurs, going on to note that "the psychologist improves his means of research and rectifies his theoretical conclusions by taking into consideration the discoveries made during the process of analysis," and points out that "the historian of religions proceeds no differently."¹⁰

3. These methodological observations make clear why I characterize this study as an interpretation: it displays only the essentials which its thesis entails, and does not pretend to be an inclusive description or summary of art and religion. For example, I will not introduce those aspects of art and religion historically unique to particular societies. Although I am aware that primitive cultures, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance, have a very different understanding of what it is that art and artists, religion and religious people do, and very different conceptions indeed of their relative social positions, these considerations contribute little toward my argument that religion does what art does. What we need is evidence of a different sort, evidence relevant to the nature of the thesis.

This selective displaying of appropriate evidence in defence of a thesis is characteristic of interpretations. Consider Peter Gay's historical study, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*. His very first sentence declares, "There were many philosophes in the eighteenth century, but there was only one Enlightenment."¹¹ A few pages later, he defines that one Enlightenment as "the dialectical interplay of their [the philosophes] appeal to antiquity, their tension with Christianity, and their pursuit of modernity" and sums it up with the assertion that "the Enlightenment was a volatile mixture of classicism, impiety, and science; the philosophes, in a phrase, were modern pagans."¹² Appropriately, he spends the rest of the book arguing for his thesis; first, by pointing out the philosophes' appeal to antiquity; second, by pointing out their tension with Christianity. He ends with a discussion of David Hume, "The Complete Modern Pagan," who "more decisively than many of his brethren in the Enlightenment, stands at the threshold of modernity and exhibits its risks and its possibilities . . . Hume makes plain that since God is silent, man is his own master."¹³

In studies such as Gay's, however, where the subject under scrutiny can be determined to exist in a particular place and at a particular time, and therefore constitutes a single finished or continuing event or a functioning whole, appropriate evidence is statistically indispensable

and can once and for all prove or disprove his thesis. On the other hand, in studies such as mine, where the subject under scrutiny is not a single or continuing event or a functioning whole, and does not exist in any particular place or at any particular time, I have to deal with what Gallie calls "essentially contested concepts," and the appropriate evidence is at best individually indispensable.¹⁴ This limitation does not vitiate my claim to objectivity. The evidence advanced for my thesis—that art and religion do present frames of perception and meaning by which men do interpret their experiences—is taken from the appropriate data. The evidence is neither imposed nor prescribed. Nevertheless, since it is true that the concepts of art and religion are essentially open and contestable there is always more than can be said; disagreement may arise on the basis of the weight given to the evidence. The question of weight is important, and more will be said about it in section 6.

4. My search for individual and indispensable evidence also allows the omission of certain important developments in art and religion, for example, that seventeenth-century Dutch trend, made general with the Industrial Revolution, during which art—but not religion—became free from service to ecclesiastical patrons and land owning nobility, only to find itself subject to the whims of a public taste. In religious affairs, Luther's advice to the German princes to oppose the 1524-1526 Peasants' Revolt (which called for certain religious privileges, such as freedom to elect their own pastors) makes especially clear religion's lack of such freedom. Although at first glance this evidence would appear to damn my thesis, it is actually peripheral to the argument. As I explore the implications of my thesis in the first chapter, the necessary and indispensable data for supporting it will turn out to be demonstrably of a different sort.

What distinctively marks art and religion is not their serving things past, but their providing necessary equipment to move into the future. In chapter 1 I shall argue that art and religion are guides for action, certain ways of approaching or looking at the world. Thus what makes certain activities artistic or religious is the way they are used, what they do. We take them as patterns of meaning, frames of perception, or paradigms, by which we interpret our experiences and draw conclusions about the world. As such, Clifford Geertz points out, religious beliefs—and, we add, artistic beliefs—in contrast to scientific or philosophical beliefs, for example, are not conclusions from experience but patterns of meaning or frames of perception prior to experience. The world, he says, "provides not evidences for their truth but illustrations of it."¹⁵

What is expected of artists and religious people is akin to what Proust tells us we expect of oculists: each is to provide us with a new pair of glasses with which we can see the world, and these glasses are quite satisfactory, "until the next Geological catastrophe is precipitated by a new painter or writer of original talent."¹⁶ Art and religion are those kinds of activity that intervene in the world, or, following J. L. Austin, that "perform" (see below, chapter 5).

Consequently, we must look at the arts and the religions themselves, and at what they do. We must examine the socially available, constructed patterns of meaning which they offer to men and in terms of which men order their lives. William Gass dramatizes this very well:

Think, for instance, of a striding statue; imagine the purposeful inclination of the torso, the alert and penetrating gaze of the head and its eyes, the outstretched arm and pointing finger; everything would appear to direct us toward some goal in front of it. Yet our eye travels only to the finger's end, and not beyond. Though pointing, the finger bids us stay instead, and we journey slowly back along the tension of the arm. In our hearts we know what actually surrounds the statue. The same surrounds every other work of art: empty space and silence.¹⁷

In this sense it is irrelevant whether a work of art is the result of a donor's commission or an attempt to sell a commodity on the open market, whether a religious utterance is a result of an individual feeling of glorification or a communal feeling of impotence. What counts are the activities themselves and what they do.

5. Much of this relates to how we attend to the conservative aspect of art and religion, that aspect which does anything *but* move into the future, which does in fact serve those feelings, goals, or techniques which men *already* sharply understand and already have defined. Both art and religion obviously do, to some extent, serve structures and needs men already know. Many of man's most important religious activities are simple attentions to gods and customs which he long has loved and cherished. Occasionally such conservatism even dominates a total religious expression, as it may have done in ancient Egypt.¹⁸ In any case, it is always present. For example, although the Israelite Old Testament records that by the middle of the eighth century B.C., devotion to Baal—a god not unlike the Greek Dionysus, a god to whom votaries "cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances until the blood gushed out upon them" (I Kings 18:38)—dominated the land of Canaan, other Near Eastern texts suggest that though the people may have belonged to Baal, Prince Lord of Earth,

nevertheless it was El the King,—a god not unlike the Greek Apollo—The Father of Man, The Creator of Creatures, who reigned supreme.¹⁹

The pervasiveness of this conservative element is no less marked in art. Schiller, for one, finds room for such conservatism in his recognition of what he calls naive poetry written by the “realist” (Homer, say, or Shakespeare) who revels in a nature already accepted, as contrasted to sentimental poetry, written by the “idealist” (not surprisingly, himself) who revels in elevating that nature via free spontaneity. He concludes that “in the final analysis, we must nonetheless concede that neither the naive nor the sentimental character, each considered alone, quite exhausts that ideal of beautiful humanity that can only arise out of the intimate union of both.”²⁰

A readily available example which gives substance to his concession to conservatism is furnished by the Gothic cathedrals of Europe. First there is the twelfth-century choir of the French abbey of Saint Denis, “the edifice that became the prototype of the Gothic cathedrals. Its builder, the Abbot Suger, sensed the significance of his achievement; he attempted to define its meaning for the benefit of his contemporaries and of posterity. To this end he composed a treatise in which he described the new building and interpreted the important elements of its design.”²¹ Immediately followed Notre-Dame of Paris, Bourges, and Laon, and by the early thirteenth century the Gothic as a type was perfected with Chartres, Reims and Amiens.

How then do we attend to these data? Negatively. We use them to suggest how art and religion can fall away from doing what we argue they do. If “decadence” still suggests a falling away from a standard—in this instance, a falling into a reliance on a formula or fashion which art and religion are unable or unwilling to expand further—then a “naive” or a conservative art and religion could be considered decadent if they have little power to transform or create their world. An example would be that after Amiens we have Cologne, after Reims, Westminster Abbey. As I will suggest in chapter 3, however, such a falling away is a matter of degree. Thus we speak of these artistic and religious activities which fall away from creating their world as minor or secondary; they are activities that tend to cling to the prior ideas or life styles which encapsulate them. In these cases Geertz’s observation is challenged; minor or secondary art and minor or secondary religion do not so much dictate to experience as they tend to be conclusions drawn from experience. Gass’s striding statue no longer stands in empty space and silence.

A great deal of the foregoing is elaborated upon in chapters 2 and 4. There I consider art and religion not as cultural components actively functioning in society but as carriers of other meanings or purposes beyond themselves, to the 'given' which they 'represent;' to the feelings, goals, or techniques they wish to conserve. Notice though, what is at the root of my negative evaluation. With an art and religion dominated by these concerns the focus of our consideration has shifted from what they actually do, to what they intend to conserve, to what they might have intended to do before they did what they did; and these two are not necessarily one.

6. The matter of weighing the evidence, broached in section 3 above, now comes into play. Because my accumulated evidence is selective, and because I am dealing with first-order material whose subjects are at root open and "essentially contested," my thesis is vulnerable to the counterexample. No single example can be decisive in proving or disapproving it. For this reason it is more accurate to speak of inference than to speak of entailment, to think of justifying the thesis rather than verifying it. As such, my logic is closer to that used in everyday situations than the idealized kind found in the classroom: "Does she love me or doesn't she?" "Is this dirt road passable?" "Should I take the job or shouldn't I?" Likewise, I ask, "Does religion do what art does?"

John Wisdom adduces a broad social example from courts of law, in which the judge settles questions such as whether somebody "did or did not exercise reasonable care, whether a ledger is or is not a document, whether a certain body was or was not a public authority." These are cases where there is "a presenting or representing of those features of the case which *severally co-operate* in favor of the conclusion, in favor of saying what the reasoner wishes said, in favor of calling the situation by the name which he wishes to call it."²² Lawyers selectively cumulate independent and inconclusive premises which cooperate in favor of a particular decision; the judge then weighs the premises' massed effect, his decision compelled by their weight. The "massed impact" clarifies the situation; yes, we say, the road *is* passable. At its best the clarity is considered a justifiable one, never irrational, even for those who still disagree and had thought the drift of the argument was ambiguous or even going in the other direction. This is in part what it means to say there will always be reasons or counterexamples for thinking otherwise than my thesis indicates. But once someone sees a given argument or makes a certain decision, these other reasons have little weight for him

and no longer count. There is still a sensitivity to observables; but those observables that count come to do so through the cumulating argument, which, if determined to be true, establishes a base for further selective observation.

Of course, I am suggesting that the thesis that art and religion do provide frames of perception and meaning by which men interpret their experiences is to be argued in this way. The massed impact of the accumulating evidence will make things clear. My method will be not unlike that of the proverbial detective who begins with an important clue which others have overlooked, around which he constructs a tentative hypothesis, which he then proceeds to defend by massing evidence in its support. What follows in the chapters ahead is his second step. The clues have already suggested the formulation of my thesis, and I am now intent upon cumulating evidence which fits and reinforces it. It remains for the reader to consider the thesis and its evidence, and then to decide whether it is well founded. My parallel with the detective will hold even if the reader judges the cumulative evidence to be of insufficient weight, not cooperating sufficiently in favor of the hypothesis. As good detectives go back to the beginning once again to look for clues of a more substantial sort, so will I. Just as lawyers do not die with their clients nor doctors with their patients, neither shall I die with my theses. But this does not mean I will let go of them prematurely. As long as they have any life left in them I will fight to their death.

7. One final observation remains. If the truth of the thesis is to be determined by the weighing of accumulated evidence which only cooperates in favor of a decision, that decision itself becomes a cooperative venture which also involves the individual who makes the decision. Once again we are reminded of the impossibility of bracketing off values so far as art and religion are concerned. Not only are we involved in the selection of evidence and the manner of accumulating it, but we are also involved in deciding whether its weight is sufficient to carry the thesis. Arguments of this sort do not resolve themselves. We decide. The accumulation is or is not a compelling accumulation, the weight is sufficient or it is insufficient, only given a willingness on our part to go along with the accumulation, to weigh, and finally, to decide. What this means in the pages ahead is that we can never be like that sailor on the *Bounty* who when awakened from his sleep by the noise of the mutiny, lay still in his hammock quite undecided whether to take part with the Captain or to join the mutineers. "I must mind what I do," said he to himself, "lest, in the end, I find myself on the weaker side."

Finally, on hearing that the mutineers were successful, he went up on deck, and seeing Bligh pinned to the mast, he put his fist to the Captain's face and declared his position. We cannot be like him because without us there will be no stronger or weaker side. The argument needs our participation in order for us to approach a conclusion.

8. With all of this said and done, for whom is this book written and what is the significance of its thesis? Who are the 'we' who are fated to be on deck from the beginning, and just what will 'we' accomplish by contributing that kind of provisional receptivity without which there will be no accumulating argument?

In a technical sense, 'we' means philosophers, because this study uses philosophical tools and appeals to philosophical traditions without apology, for example in the already obvious adherence to Strawson's distinction between 'sentences' and 'statements'—sentences as combinations of words which are meaningful or meaningless, and statements as cognitively significant sentences.²³ More inclusively, 'we' means simply everyone who is preoccupied with religion and/or art and wishes to incorporate an understanding of these activities into a comprehensive world view.

Still, the 'we' will not include everyone who is preoccupied with religion and/or art. Just as there are certain philosophers who are preoccupied with topical disputes clearly defined in aesthetics and philosophy of religion—for example, "Is a deductive causal demonstration of God's existence possible?"—for whom this book will be irrelevant, so there are certain anthropologists who are preoccupied with anatomical evaluations of African face masks; certain bishops who are preoccupied with the impact of religious education on moral behavior; or certain Marxists who are preoccupied with the benefits which art brings to the masses of the people, for whom this book will be irrelevant. Their interests encourage them to fight on a different deck, as it were, with weapons forged to deal with current questions they have already defined whether with clearly distinguished terms or with what I referred to in section 1 as closed concepts. Whereas we might be on the bridge arguing with the Captain concerning which harbor art and religion will enter to have their keels overhauled, certain historians might be in the engine room arguing with the Chief Engineer on how art and religion came to be where they are, or certain psychologists might be in the galley arguing with the Cook about whether art and religion supply sufficient nutrients on board to keep their crews fit, or certain sociologists might be in the chain locker arguing with the First Mate as to the effect of dropping anchor here, or possibly there.

This may be the key. This book and its thesis is of immediate interest only for those who are working with art and religion as open concepts, for whom the question of overhauling and refitting bears significance. For the others, this book will be of interest only if we succeed in pinning Bligh to the mast, only if my thesis makes its way and I successfully raise new questions about art and religion and how they function in society. For example, an anthropologist interested in studying art among the Australian aborigines might well focus his attention upon particular found combinations of line, mass, color, that seem capable of arousing aesthetic responses. It is clear that he has already hypothesized what 'art' is—doubtless rather arbitrarily, but perhaps necessarily. In aboriginal Australian languages there are no separate words for 'art', or for that matter, for 'artist'. Either our anthropologist arbitrarily defines 'art' and begins his research, or he looks for evidences of it in its relation to other activities such as religion or economics, and in terms of its social implications. But what is this 'it' for which he looks? It is here that my thesis is relevant, if, as I say, I succeed here and now in pinning Bligh to the mast. I suggest a direction in which he can look; not toward those activities that express things past, which, I will argue in chapter 4, may be merely crafts executed by technicians, but toward those activities that lay out the roads leading into the future.

My thesis says that art and religion do not so much express fundamental feelings common to mankind as determine these feelings; they do not so much provide explanations for phenomena which men cannot otherwise understand as provide those data which men have difficulty understanding; they do not so much provide security or ways of adjusting to phenomena which men cannot otherwise handle as interpret the world in such a way that phenomena are delineated which men seem not to be able to handle. As I have said before: art and religion provide the patterns of meaning, the frames of perception, by which society interprets its experiences and from which it makes conclusions about the nature of its world. They tell us what is; they do not respond to what is. It is incorrect to think that they provide stone axes with which to enter the forest, whereas the sciences, for example, provide steel ones; to think as if the two are doing the same thing, albeit one more efficiently than the other. My thesis suggests a priority, not a parallel: Art and religion come first; the sciences follow. The first declares or determines what is, perhaps secondarily declaring or determining what needs to be done; the second responds, and does.²⁴

But saying all of this does not make it so. I must argue my thesis. Let me begin.