

SCIENCE, ART AND CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

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This article intends to explore briefly the relationship between art, science and the Christian identity. Art and science are presented as activities where the human person owns his/her autonomy in the effort to explain the world, the universe and life in all its aspects. The Christian identity is to be understood as a reflective and committed interpretation of the changes in awareness and self-representation as the result of both, the scientific insights and the artistic expressions.

Firstly, the author argues that scientific findings stimulate the believers to clarify their religious thinking and attitudes and to deepen the dynamic nature of a religious identity. Secondly, it is argued that also art transgresses boundaries of (religious) self-representation, introduces people into new sensitivity and awareness, and inspires a creative relationship with the self-revealing God.

The author refers to the historical evolution and to contemporary events to illustrate the dynamic interaction between sciences, art and the Christian identity.

Keywords: art, science, religion, consciousness, social context.

Introduction

What do these words stand for? And what is their relationship? Looking back at history, it is obvious that these three fields are interdependent. The Catholic church no doubt had an ambiguous relationship with science. On the one hand, the church stimulated the development of scientific thinking. Christianity played an important role in the emergence of modernity, took decisive initiatives in the area of (school) education and health care, initiated a centralised, bureaucratic management system and international diplomatic relationships. On the other hand, the church condemned Galilei, opposed the evolution theory, put the works of Theillard de Chardin on the list of forbidden books for years. The scientific insights and technical possibilities challenge the church's position about the control of the beginning and the end of life.

Understandably the church wants to keep its moral and doctrinal autonomy to discern the truth about human life in reference to the "revealed truth" and the ultimate promise of God's kingdom.

Similarly, the church's involvement in the development of art often causes confusion. Because of the hegemony of Christianity in Europe, for many centuries, art was identified with "Christian art". The artistic wealth was to be found in churches, abbeys and religious orders. Abbeys had the specialised monks, the craftsmanship and the infrastructure to produce the manuscripts and to invent its illustrious illuminations, to organise the libraries and spread the works throughout Europe. The visual representations of the Christian mysteries were imagined, ordered and paid by the Christian aristocracy. As the church set the standards for identifying art, the confrontation with modern secular forms

of art created a lot of tension. Only fifty years ago, in 1952, Pius XII declared that the quality of art depended upon the personal faith of the artist: good art was to be religious art. In the first half of the 20th century, Servaes's "Way of the Cross" (1919), too expressionistic, and Germaine Richier's "Christ of Assy" (1959), she was a 'communist', were banned from the church, because they did not match the normative institutional interpretation of art of the time.

So, the relationship of the church with these two domains, where the inventive activity was obvious, was at times highly problematic. Did indeed the scientific and artistic evolution put the Christian identity at risk? Were the time-bound biblical interpretations and the doctrinal representations absolute and eternal criteria for judging the scientific observations and theories or the artistic expressions? As time went on, both, science and art became autonomous fields with their own authority. Their obvious innovative influence upon religious consciousness and the interpretation of its sources created the space for a renewal of the understanding of Christian beliefs. Religion gained an authority of its own and was helped by the sciences to study its own object in due terms. The relationship between religion, science and art is dialectic. Representations and interpretations, formerly taken for granted, are constantly questioned because of the evolutions in either of these fields.

1. Science and Christian identity

I still remember vividly some scenes from the beautiful film (Tarkovsky, 1966) about the Russian Icon painter Andrei Rublev (1360?–1430). It was a powerful illustration of the painting of icons as a religious act. Icons are intimately related to the orthodox Christian identity and indispensable for the liturgical celebrations and

devotional faith profession. But the episode I want to recall is more related to the changes occurring in the social context in which Rublev was living and working. The film also shows the sacred act of melting metals for casting the bells for the church. It all was close to magic. But above all, in those days, some people succeeded in making a hot air balloon. They managed to lift themselves above the ground and to move in the air. The image of a balloon moving through the air is so familiar for us; it does not pose any problem. But for the people at the end of the Middle Ages, the hot air balloon caused incredible consternation and indignation. It was seen as contradictory to the mental image people had about life on earth, about what was possible and what not. To transcend these representations and sacred limits, due to insight and technical craftsmanship, was associated with heresy.

A break through of this kind was revolutionary indeed. And similar events were going to be repeated without end. I remember the first flight to the moon. Even the images on TV were not powerful enough to convince certain people of the reality of men actually being able to walk on the surface of the moon. As other people cannot accept that fossils, as we find them in rocks, are authentic proofs of the existence of vegetation and animal life millions of years ago. The hermeneutic conflict between the scientific observations and technological progress on the one hand, and the biblical language and discourse on the other hand, becomes really spectacular when we compare the findings and hypotheses about the origin of matter, of the earth and solar systems in particular, with the biblical stories of the creation of the human being. It is beyond imagination and beyond belief. It is just another way of imagining and thinking.

What is to be underscored is the impact of scientific findings and thinking upon our worldview, upon our way of looking at the reality. Looking at the so-called reality in a different way makes us see different things. And this is the starting point for having access to different representations and images. This may be an aspect of a misunderstanding among certain Catholics from Central and Eastern Europe and the Westerners as regards the changes in religious practice and beliefs in Western Europe. "What have you done, that many Catholics do not go to mass any more or do not receive the sacraments as they should...?" Perplexing question, because what people did – stated negatively – was not the result of an intentional, planned pastoral intervention or of a failure to do so. It was more related to a changed consciousness among Catholics – and Protestants, Jews, Muslims and communists alike – about life. The new insights and self-awareness seemed to be incompatible with the established religious images and rituals, devotional traditions, doctrinal or biblical interpretations and religious language. At once, it all collapsed, an implosion. And there was no alternative available. Some tried to re-animate the dead body in starting the charismatic renewal, the Pentecostal meetings, the new religious movements... Initiatives like these may offer relief, comfort, personal peace; they intend to be a new start of an enthusiastic religious commitment. But, for how long, and at what price? The therapeutic process of discovering the origin of a religious faith in the life of a person and of its basic structure, takes a lot of time. The outcome is not sure. Some people can discover that they, in fact, while practicing their religion regularly, were unbelievers, a-religious persons and the decline of religious practice was just a logical implementation of that reality. Other people may discover the impact of circumstances upon their relationship with the Christian tradi-

tion, the lack of clarity in their attitude, or a kind of "childish" religion they identified with, etc. Hence the problem of practicing a religion became the starting point for a more personal inquiry into a truly adult religion. But nobody escaped the confrontation between the reproductive, uniform, universal, static form of being a believer and the progress in consciousness, reflection and representation of what this life on earth is about.

The sciences – although stimulated by the church – contributed a lot to the questioning about the taken-for-granted religious convictions and practices, which in fact became contradictory to the original intuition of the Christian faith and its roots in the Hebrew tradition. The content of the word "religion" then is to be reviewed. What kind of profession? What kind of practice and rituals, prayers and celebrations? At the Catholic University of Leuven, an interactive website was launched about the dialectic relationship between science, ethics and religion. Students, and whoever is interested, can ask questions, provide answers, information and comments. It is an open space where people can be helped to clarify their representations and opinions about various issues at stake at the moment and evaluate the conflict between religious images, ethical thinking and scientific data. It is an ongoing confrontation which of course is essential for the development of a Christian identity among intellectuals involved in the academic research.

2. Art and Christian identity

Art has to do with sense perception: the seeing, the hearing, the touching. New sense experiences are at the root of a new self experience, a new self image, a new consciousness, new insights, a new representation of one's identity.

2.1. *Sense perception*

Throughout history of culture, the search for meaning has been associated with particular senses. Some old cultures had no written language. Their whole tradition was expressed through oral communication: stories, sagas, songs, myths, artefacts, signs... The hearing was the central focus of their cultural heritage: the communication of interiority, more so than the seeing (colourful decorations, artistic expressions), or the touching (dances, objects, sculptures and artefacts). The speaking and the hearing as a bodily communication; waves transmitted by air, actually affecting the physiological system of a person, offering the direct access to emotion and awareness. With the written culture, communication became a visual experience, although still related to the auditory perception: texts were to be read aloud. But to read a text, written by somebody who is not present, is a different experience. The writer composes a very particular form of expressing thoughts and emotions; the reader is alone with the parchment or the book volume in deciphering the characters and trying to imagine the reality the author is referring to. Relying upon the seeing of texts, the reader has to re-integrate the other forms of sense communication. The printing technique changed the pattern at a more fundamental level. The same text now can be produced many times, and many people can read exactly the same formulation, simultaneously, at different times and places, at a different rhythm. The reader now isolates himself or herself to read the text in silence. Reading, as a visual sense experience, is an autonomous act of the individual person. When publishing a text, the author becomes a public figure; the publication has a juridical status. The impact is beyond the control of the author, publisher, printer.

The readers start to react from their (pluralistic) perspective and re-construct a book, independently of the intentions of the author. The publication of printed texts and reading them contributed in a decisive way to the emergence of the "individual" as the cornerstone of modern society. The audio-visual techniques, and more recently the electronic system, integrate again the different sense perception, but as a different kind of experience all together. Sounds and visual signs go together; but the speed of handling information is beyond imagination. The person lost contact with the original bodily experience of processing information. The immediacy of being related to another person (the oral culture) seems to be excluded from modern electronic communication. Each person interferes with a complex environment of interactive networks. To enter into this world and acting upon it, is called "communication". The outcome is open and accessible for further development. Nobody controls the process; nobody owns the endless and ever-growing volume of information. In reaction to this highly sophisticated form of communication, people obviously need to go back to the basic forms of sense experiences. Sharing interiority through talking or watching people talk; the importance of multiple forms of music; of artistic expressions, of experiencing the body, amplified with cosmetic supports, fashioned clothing, controlled food programmes and health care, exploring transcendental dimensions of corporeity through yoga, meditation or sports.

2.2. *Religious communication*

Each shift from one cultural communication structure to the next one caused a cultural crisis and particularly a crisis in religious communication. Communication systems were bro

ken down and new systems emerged. The cultural, social, political and religious continuity was disturbed. The Reformation process, e. g., relied essentially upon the printing technique to communicate the difference of Christian interpretation they wanted to introduce. Printed catechisms, hymns, pamphlets, books, translations of the Bible, were an ideal tool for introducing a different Christian identity. The uniformity of the formulation of Christian ideas was a powerful technique to reach a new consensus among the 'protesters' and to emphasise the opposition. The Counter-Reformation used exactly the same mediation. For each transition it took a long time for the harmony to be found again. At the present time, we just started to recognize the nature of the disturbance caused by the recent shifts in sense experiences, the related change in self-consciousness and communication systems.

The different phases of the cultural development coincide with different types of sense experience and different self-representations. This becomes obvious in the history of art. Throughout the phases of cultural evolution, artists used different materials and expressed their perception in different styles. Art also had a different function in each of these periods. While guaranteeing the continuity of a Christian tradition, at the same time the artists confronted people with a variety of new sense experiences and mental processes leading towards a different self-consciousness.

Today, the art of the past centuries is admired with different eyes and for different purposes than at the time of its production. Recently (1994–1995) the Rijksmuseum of Amsterdam organised an exhibition with objects of private devotion, produced between 1300 and 1500. Although beautiful, the original, small sized paintings, booklets or sculptures were meant to support the personal devotion of (aristocratic) people. Today, collected

in a secular museum, they are admired for their artistic value, separated from a specific religious context. The objects themselves are no longer used for devotional purposes. And the visitors of the exhibition are not necessarily keen on living devotional practices. Similarly, old Romanesque, Gothic, baroque churches are restored in their original shape and beauty. Some are still used for liturgical celebrations. But the dissonance between the historical architectural style and today's religious sensitivity is obvious. Whatever liturgy is performed, it is difficult for participants to relate the roman, gothic, baroque worldview with today's reality and religious consciousness. During the 20th century, people were offered many new opportunities to enter a different kind of sense experiences and to grow into a new self-awareness. Art was and is one of the most powerful spaces where the profound shift can be "sensed", communicated, reflected upon, integrated. Artists express in the first place in what way they themselves have been affected by the unexpected changes. They confront the spectators with dissonances and invite them to do a similar kind of transforming exploration.

2.3. Art and Christian worldview

It is about time to re-visit the evolution of art and its relationship to the Christian tradition in the 20th century. This is a remarkable story. Many exhibitions played a decisive role in emphasizing the changes and supporting a worldwide movement. Many well documented catalogues, comments, interviews, biographies, videos and documentaries allowed artists to express their insights and creative views about the religious or the sacred dimension of life, of the human person in particular.

The most impressive event was certainly the exhibition of the National Gallery of Victoria (Melbourne, Australia). *Beyond Belief. Modern Art and the Religious Imagination*. (1998). Artists from all over the world – if still alive – were invited to contribute by sending in one of their works which they made at moments in their lives when they were asking themselves a religious question, that is, a question about ultimate meaning. The selected works of 72 artists covered the whole of the 20th century from many countries and cultures, including indigenous artists. The curator, Rosemary Crumlin, notes in the Introduction that “At the beginning of the century, the iconography of religion and spirituality was usually Judaeo-Christian, narrative and figurative. By the close of the century, the interest is not so much narrative and scriptural as diffusely spiritual, questioning, and focused less on a life after death than on a spirit that swells within the body, the earth, and – more rarely – society.”

One of the visitors stated: “the exhibition has ‘rattled the cage’ – and helped make it possible to think without prescription ... these great works on exhibition touch the marrow of true feeling, of being human; of being in a small boat in the eye of the storm.”

Art changes with the changing society and expresses the changing sensitivity for the meaning of life, for worldviews and life visions. The depth intuition for what is authentically human – as experienced in the daily life experiences – is a basic inspiration for the understanding of what is originally expressed in religious beliefs and rituals.

2.4. *What is art?*

The most striking definition is: “this is art”!
But then, what is “this”?

By refusing to give a standard definition, artists own the whole space for themselves for being creative. The initial plan of R. Crumlin’s exhibition had been for “an exhibition of some of the most familiar icons of the twentieth century, works so familiar through reproduction that they are easily recognizable.” This would have been a dramatic failure. Confidence had to be given to the artists, to “great art”, and not to the familiar “religious content”. To include works from different cultures demonstrated well that “the power which great art has to explore the very depths of human yearning is universal and beyond the boundaries of any one group of people” or any particular type of religious iconography. This is what one visitor expressed when stating: “Mostly, when contemplating the religious images that have been standard fare, I have thought, ‘No – it doesn’t feel like that.’”

Great art transgresses boundaries and introduces people into a different sense perception, a different self awareness, a different work view, a different perception of the religious identity.

Most people suppose, though, that there is a clear-cut concept of what art means. People are looking for a product, which corresponds to (universally) established characteristics. Precisely this attitude prevents the understanding of what Art stands for – the clear-cut definition and the list of fixed characteristics... is a trap. Similarly, as regards religious or Christian consciousness, too narrow descriptions of what the human or the religious mystery stands for prevent people from owning the original response to their deepest experiences and intuitive understanding. Too strictly figurative reproductions – often illustrations of a particular doctrine – prevent people from having access to the symbolic reality represented by the images and new interpretations.

Art is a systemic process. The production of a piece of art represents a moment in a spiral movement with multiple types of interaction. The artist is part of a broad human and social reality; his/her work is a specific language, which takes on a specific role in the discourse of the community. His/her work is a creative response and stimulates people to react as well. The artistic work is never finished.

Art emerges as the result of an intense interaction of the artist with the surrounding world; art is about the artist's attention for the impact events, circumstances, experiences have upon him or herself. Art is the expression of a transformation process; a purification – similar to what the “alchemist” wants to achieve – leading towards new expressions and images

A few examples may illustrate this:

- G. Baselitz states: “painting is about colours and texture, not resemblance, not illustration; to make clear and explicit images which prevent the classical interpretation or association; the artist takes new freedom to solve the problems proper to “making art”; creating new images, the artist encourages the spectator to do something new and different with the images...”
- F. Bacon says: “I paint a figure in motion – that is all I have to say; it is not about meaning; I do not reflect upon what I am painting; art only has meaning for the very particular interpretation the spectator gives to the paintings. I make images without any purpose or intention. I don't have any philosophy; I do not believe in anything. Life for me has no meaning.”

Art is an open expression and uses whatever kind of material, texture, form, technique for the expression to be authentic.

Art disturbs, moves beyond boundaries, transgresses, creates semantic differences. Typical examples are also the billboards of Less

Levine. He hires spaces on the billboards along the highways or the metro coaches in order to create a difference – using the same language, though – and make people think about the images they are constantly confronted with.

Art has a social and political function – it becomes a challenge for the spectator and can be the beginning of a long process of deconstruction / destabilisation of standard images and representations / meaning, and reconstruction of new meaning...

Art does not accept fixed rules, norms, doctrines, control. Art intends to point out dysfunctional aspects of the human condition, intends to innovate, to draw the attention to alternative ways of perceiving, feeling, thinking, acting. Art stimulates people to work as meaning givers, as interpreters.

Art is situated between experiences and stories, between traditions and habitudes as regards the interpretation of experiences, on the one hand, and the promise, the hope for a future or questions about it, on the other hand. Art mainly affects people at the level of the questions ‘who am I’, ‘what is my life about?’, ‘where am I going?’, ‘does it all have meaning?’... This becomes obvious in exhibitions which offer a retrospective overview of an artist's work, from centuries ago or recent work.

2.5. *The educational function of art*

As art “emerges”, one has to observe the response of people to the “unexpected” art. Giving attention to art, people live a process with several inter-related steps:

- Art raises a feeling of awe, amazement, perplexity, admiration. a questioning process;
- Art leads people into confrontation between someone else's impressions and images, metaphoric and symbolic language and one's

personal 'imaginary, metaphoric, symbolic equipment';

- Initiates people into different types of associations and representations, calls for the potential of new imagination;
- Leads people into new horizons;
- Nurtures creative reflection and meaning;
- Starts a new praxis.

In retrospect, art represents an educational process. But in order to be an educational event, art has to be informal – the educational strength of art is informal as well: an unexpected, overwhelming experience which makes a difference and orients people into a different direction. The educational process can be nurtured, supported; whether and when it is going to happen cannot be controlled; it depends upon the coincidence, the arbitrary interaction between uncontrollable and controllable aspects.

2.6. Religious art

Again the question can be raised: Does “religious art” exist? Does Christian, Orthodox, Muslim, Buddhist, art exist? Is painting the Christ figure, or the Buddha therefore “Christian” or “Buddhist” art?

Or is art just “art”, with, accidentally, images, symbols, and representations, which can be associated with aspects of the Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, traditions...? When does art receive the connotation “Christian”? And what does it mean?

It is a complex issue to which artists over the centuries have given many different answers. Until recently, the expression “religious”, “Christian” art was very common. Pius XII addressing the artists in 1952, referred to artists as believers: the closer they are related to God, the better artists they are. Painting Icons is considered as a religious act; art and

faith, devotion are intimately related, cannot be dissociated because Icons have a liturgical meaning and function, they are essential for the content and the practice of faith itself. “Religious” art is often considered as an “illustration” of the divine mysteries.

An important shift occurred though during the 20th century. The immanent approach to the sacred value of life asked for a different kind of material, a more sensitive expression for supporting and nurturing the process of religious symbolisation, as distinct from the illustrative approach, referring to a doctrine. Art then is seen as art. The link with the religious (Christian) dimension of life is left open for free association, for imagination and interpretation by the faithful or people searching for meaning. This orientation became obvious with the emergence of “abstract” art in the first place, in a different interpretation of figurative art as well, as a result of this new interest. Some people now are still looking for the classical figurative ‘illustrative’ kind of art. Other people go for secular images with a “religious density” or for art with religious images... and intend to do a lot of work by themselves as a way of interiorising the mysteries of faith, relating them to their personal life story.

The, above mentioned, exhibition of R. Crumlin drew the attention upon the deep impact modern art has upon young adults – who in most cases grew away from the institutional church. At the end, Rosemary Crumlin had eight volumes with commentaries by the visitors about their response to the 94 paintings from all over the world, representing the evolution of religious imagination in art during the 20th century. When responding to the invitation (widely covered in the press, on TV...) people – mostly in there twenties or thirties – responded to something they had recognized as similar to their experiences and

their effort to find meaning. Their disturbed relationship with the established, institutionalised void religious representations, was met adequately by the artists and encouraged them so adopt a different attitude towards religion. A form of reconciliation occurred as they discovered the promise of new life, the hope to find something original, something which would meet their personal search, questions and answers.

Conclusion

Sciences and Art are disconcerting disciplines. The development occurring over the centuries

in both areas constantly creates dissonances, which invite believers to rethink the roots of their religious belonging. Both are also complementary.

Scientific understanding highlights the different nature of the religious discourse in comparison to the rationally planned investigation. Artists offer access to a free and daring imagination of the human reality and of the divine universe as the basis for the discovery of the true God. Both disciplines are essential – among other dimensions as e. g. social commitment and human solidarity – for spelling out the specific features of a Christian identity in contemporary society.

MOKSLAS, MENAS IR KRIKŠČIONIŠKASIS TAPATUMAS

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Santrauka

Krikščionybė reikšmingai prisidėjo ir prie mokslo, ir prie meno raidos. Vis dėlto religijos, mokslo ir meno pokalbis judrus, kai visos trys sritys išsivystė savitą apimtį. Naujos išvalgos, sąvairmonė ir visuomeninė kaita visose religijose bei kultūrose atitolino nuo tradicinio žvilgsnio į mokslą, meną ir religinį gyvenimą. Moderniais laikais pasikeitė ir julinis pasaulis, vis labiau traktuojamas kaip komunikacija informacijos gausoje. Tik reformacija, tik kontrreformacija nauodo tradicinius būdus skleist savo nuostatas ir da-

bar drauge susitinka šių dienų pakitusia savisamone ir bendravimo būdais. Keitėsi ir meno sąvoka – nuo reprezentacinės į simbolinę, todėl nebėra visuotinių meno supratimo dėsnių, o menas skatina naujas išvalgas, kurios sukrečia ir išjudina, ugdo vaizduotę ir mąstymą. Tai yra meno šviečiamasis vaidmuo. Labiau imanentinis gyvybės versmės supratimas reiškiamas religine simbolika, kuri nebėra reprezentacinė, tačiau susijusi su žmogaus asmeniniu ieškojimu, klausimais ir atradimais.

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