Art and Religion in the Modern West:
Some Perspectives

SIR CHRISTOPHER FRAYLING

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SIR CHRISTOPHER FRAYLING was until recently Rector of the Royal College of Art in London, the only wholly postgraduate university of art and design in the world, and Chairman of Arts Council England, the largest funding body for the arts in the UK. A historian, a critic, and an award-winning broadcaster on British network radio and television, he has written eighteen books on the arts and popular culture—among the most recent being *Ken Adam: The Art of Production Design, Once upon a Time in Italy, Henry Cole and the Chamber of Horrors, Horace Walpole's Cat,* and *On Craftsmanship.* At the Royal College of Art, as Professor of Cultural History from 1979, he founded such postgraduate courses as The History of Design (with the Victoria and Albert Museum), Curating Contemporary Art (with the Arts Council and Tate), and Conservation of the Arts (with the Victoria and Albert Museum and Imperial College, London). He has been Chairman of the British Design Council, Chairman of the Crafts Study Centre, a governor of the British Film Institute, a founder-member of the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and the longest-serving Trustee of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Sir Christopher was knighted in 2000 for "services to art and design education."

He is currently Professor Emeritus of Cultural History at the Royal College of Art, a Fellow of Churchill College Cambridge, an 1851 Commissioner, and Chairman of the Royal Mint Design Advisory Committee.

LECTURE I.
AN INSTINCTIVE SYMPATHY?

When the letter arrived from the president of Clare Hall—about eighteen months ago—inviting me to give this year's Tanner Lectures in Cambridge, on some aspect of contemporary "learning in relation to human values," I must say I felt at first like saying, as Ernest Bevin is credited with having said when receiving a letter from the Quai d'Orsay in Paris, "When you open that Pandora's Box, you never know what Trojan Horse is going to jump out." Only mixed metaphors would do, I felt, to express my mixed emotions of excitement at the challenge and terror at the possible consequences. And, of course, gratitude for being asked. Particularly since for many years, as rector of the Royal College of Art, my lectures have tended to be aimed in the direction of art students and researchers, rather than in the direction of a Cambridge audience for such a prestigious series of lectures as this one. Which reminds me of an incident that occurred at the Royal College of Art many years ago. An eminent professor of aesthetics had come to the college to give a series of four lectures to the students of painting. At his first lecture, there were twenty students present—the full-year group. He gave what can only be described as a very dense lecture—full of abstract ideas, quotations in several languages, and with no pictures. At his second lecture there were ten students, at his third five students, and at his final lecture there was one solitary painting student. The philosopher said to the painter, from the podium: "Look, there doesn't seem to be much point in proceeding with this lecture just for one person. Why don't we have a cup of tea and talk about it?" To which the student replied: "I do wish you *would* give the lecture. I've been trying to *draw* you for four weeks." It is a reminder of the great gulf that so often

exists between the scholar who writes about art and the student or artist who practices it. Part of my aim this evening is to try to bridge that gulf. But "learning in relation to human values": it is an unusually broad brief.

And as I was thinking about it, a series of sharp—and linked— memories came into my mind on "*art* in relation to human values." There was the conference on Caravaggio at the National Gallery in March 2005—accompanying the blockbuster exhibition of Caravaggio's late works dating from 1600 to 1610[1]—where the papers seemed to be divided into two distinct camps. They were *either* by theology scholars about Counter-Reformation thinking after the Council of Trent (and the artist's place within it: to look at the worst, said one of the speakers, as Caravaggio did, may itself be an act of trust in God in such a context, rather than being "profane, base, and obscene," in the language of the day) *or* by art historians about his technique (the thickness of his paint, the lack of preliminary drawings, the extreme optical style, the increasing use of darkness) and about the artist's sexuality—a sort of sex and drugs and rock and roll, late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century style. And the two camps had very little to say to one another. In the discussion that followed, it seemed that the latter camp had remade Caravaggio in the image of the modern avant-garde, as a secular figure implacably opposed to all things respectable—and the institution of the church in particular. After the conference, a young research student sidled up to me and asked, shyly, why, since her lecturers encouraged her to look at works of art for their political and social implications, for their "take" on gender and the politics of identity, and for their technique—an approach that used to be known as "the new art history"—did no one ever mention their relation- ship with religion? Even if it were just another context, one more thing to study, that would be something. But art and religion were not, it seemed, even just another context. It was as if the subject had become embarrass- ing, or—more charitably—beyond the expertise of most of today's aca- demic art historians.

And the memory of the Caravaggio conference linked in my mind to a much more distant memory—of my one and only conversation with the painter Francis Bacon, at the Royal College of Art, with a small group of postgraduate students in December 1979.[2] He had been ambushed and

1. For the catalog, see Ferdinando Bologna and others, *Caravaggio: The Final Years* (Naples: Electa Napoli and the National Gallery, 2005).

2. For much more extensive conversations with Francis Bacon, see David Sylvester, *Inter- views with Francis Bacon,* rev. ed. (1975; reprint, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1987). See

rushed into talking with them—he detested teaching, and he did not much like art schools, either—shortly before the performance of a pantomime I had written. Don't ask. The evening continued with Bacon having a shouting match from the stalls with the pantomime dame, a tutor of creative writing who was dressed in drag at the time. The conversation before the performance, as I remember it, and I may well have given it more shape than it originally had, drifted toward why on earth Francis Bacon felt so drawn to religious subjects: a series of Crucifixions in 1933, 1944, and beyond, and his celebrated screaming popes—screaming with pain and rage and maybe sadomasochistic pleasure, too—after the portrait of *Pope Innocent X,* by Velázquez, originally painted in 1650. Bacon had painted *his* popes between 1949 and 1953. Why, as a confirmed atheist—a fact he so often and so publicly proclaimed—did Bacon keep returning to two of the most potent and resonant images of the Christian faith? Well, he replied with a characteristically mischievous and evasive look on his face, first of all there was the formal, technical reason. The Crucifixion displayed or elevated the human body in distorted form in a raised space that isolated it from its visual environment, which he felt had been useful to him: distortion, or the human figure in extremis, was the only credible way to make human anatomy interesting again, in the visually overstimulated world of the twentieth century. Then there was the Crucifixion as a well-known example of bestial behavior, of what people are capable in their darkest moments of doing to one another. I think the phrase "man's inhumanity to man" may have been used. Not to God or the Son of God but to man. Oh, and the Crucifixion in art always reminded him of what he called "the great hall of death"—by which he meant not some dreadful historical massacre but the Food Hall at Harrods in Knightsbridge just down the road from the college and the rich marbled colors of the sides of meat hanging up there, which fascinated him: sometimes, as he walked around the Food Hall, in the butchery section, he wondered why he was not hanging up there, instead of the animals. After all, as one of the students observed, his name *was* Bacon . . . Nervous laughter. In any case, he had since become fed up with the Crucifixion theme and moved on: at the start of his career as a painter, when he was absorbing the lessons of late-1920s Picasso, it had evidently seemed a useful image on which to hang his feelings about life and about himself, but latterly it was beginning

also Hugh M. Davies, *Francis Bacon: The Papal Portraits of 1953* (San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2002); and Michael Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon: Anatomy of an Enigma* (London: Constable, 2008), for biographical background.

to dry up for him. Even domestic Crucifixions, which had become part of his focus since the 1950s. So could we change the subject? Well, what about the screaming popes on their hot seats and in their cages—some of which he was reputed to have actually painted in the Royal College of Art studios in Exhibition Road? Everyone, he replied, kept going on at him about these—and their relationship with Velázquez—and he was thoroughly fed up with discussing *them* as well. The critics were obsessed with them. They had become overrated, not because of what they were but because people always wanted a story to latch on to, wanted to turn art into illustration all the time, which it was not. But placing the images side by side—a postcard of the Velázquez and a postcard of one of the Bacon versions—could he perhaps tell us something about the transformation that had taken place? Maybe from Velázquez the believer, who evidently also understood all about worldly power, to Bacon the nonbeliever, who had often said—with a nod toward Sartre, then very fashionable—"For we who believe in nothing, there is only existence"? There was a pause. But how on earth did we *know,* he then said, that the original portrait of 1650 was painted by someone who had religious beliefs? How did we *know* what was going through Velázquez's mind? And what did it matter? All we had to go on was the picture. And the picture was as much about the painter as it was about the sitter, if not more so. Couldn't we see that?

Francis Bacon concluded with the cheery thought that art schools could not do much for young artists these days—though they could, he conceded, perhaps introduce them to useful contacts, and that chaos, or mess, was an underrated element in painting, and the students' studios these days looked much too tidy for his liking. Time to go to the pantomime. It was called *Snow White and the Seven Vampires.* Bacon misbehaved throughout. At one point, he was escorted from the auditorium.

Now, these comments, this conversation even, were not particularly new. Or surprising. Bacon had once gone on record—for example—as saying that Cimabue's great *Crucifixion* of 1272–74, of which he had a reproduction in his studio, when held upside down reminded him of a worm crawling down a piece of wood. Bacon had said many similar things in his early interviews with the starstruck critic David Sylvester, whose portrait by the artist had in fact—somehow, goodness knows how—started the whole cycle of screaming popes. But his observations stayed in my mind, partly because I had heard him saying them and because of the strange circumstances in which he said them. Bacon as atheist who used some of the great images of Western religion in order to affirm his distance from

FIGURE 1. Francis Bacon, *Head VI,* 1949. (The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved. DACS 2010. Painting in the collection of Arts Council England.)

them: for example, his *Studies for the Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* in 1944, a time of national rejoicing. Bacon as atheist who fetishized "the sacred." Bacon, the man who never ever answered questions about his work directly, who cleverly deflected all explanation—which David Sylvester was happy to allow him to do—who very successfully controlled the interpretation of his own work throughout his lifetime and who in the end believed passionately in the mystery of art and the mystique of artists. He was almost superstitious about not giving anything away. If

he could explain it, why paint it? What came over most strongly from our uncomfortable conversation was that Bacon was not mocking these images but possessing them. And his paintings were about the institutions of religion more than about spirituality.

And then there was the memory of my wife, Helen, teaching a group of foundation-level students in a West Country art school, Christmas 1983, and testing their knowledge of art history by showing some seasonal slides of work dating from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. After a series of nativity scenes, were there any questions? Yes—this from an angry-looking girl in the back row: "Why's it always got to be a boy baby?" And after showing Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*—from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel—another question, this time from a boy at the front: "Who's the geezer with the gray beard?" Where, Helen thought, do you start? These were not facetious questions for facetious sake. They were simply evidence of the fact that most of today's art students no longer reject or ignore religious faith through a conscious decision; they simply do not encounter its subject matter at all, except in commercial forms, as we will see. Some people to whom I have mentioned my wife's experience have wondered if it is really some kind of urban myth. It is not. When thinking about art and religion today, this predominantly secular context must always be borne in mind.

And *this* links to another memory, of being the member of the high-level "Litmus Group" responsible for the Faith Zone in the Millennium Dome—in London's Greenwich—in the autumn of 1998 to January 1, 2000, during which time it changed midstream from being the Spirit Zone—as in "Mind, Body, and Spirit," the original idea—to the Faith Zone, centering on Christianity. After all, what was the Millennium about? I always thought "Faith Zone" sounded like the name of a 1950s pop singer, and as for the "Litmus Group," as someone said, "It turned red or blue according to which political party was in power!" I remember phoning my brother Nicholas, who was at that time the Anglican rector of Liverpool, and asking him if, on this rare occasion, I could count on his theological advice. "I'll give you my theological advice," he replied. "Don't touch it with a barge pole." The responsibility did indeed involve many strange experiences. Checking with senior representatives of the nine main faith communities in Britain that participated, about whether selected quotations from the New Testament—to be featured on stylish graphics on the wall—might possibly be considered offensive to them:

in general, and predictably, statements from the Sermon on the Mount about the poor in spirit, the peacemakers, the meek, and so on were received much better than statements about theology. So we added the heading "How Shall I Live?"

But the strongest memory where the Millennium Dome is concerned is of commissioning the great American installation artist—and explorer of light—James Turrell to create a public meditation space, called *Night Rain,* as the climax of the Faith Zone. This would be an enclosed tented room—a large room—made of tightly stretched fabric, with benches around its perimeter, a funnel-like top, and very subtle changes of light and color, from pink to purple. And silence, at least in theory. No sound, no imagery, no story, no explicit historical references, no quotations: just a space that enclosed the visitors and controlled their perception of light, while encouraging thoughts about the nature of the space.[3] A neutral space where if you sat in it for long enough—James Turrell was later to suggest it was a form of "slow art": "There's a slow food movement. Why not a slow art movement?"—you forgot whether your eyes were open, and you might enter a gentle state of meditation, or trance. It was a little like the experience of standing or sitting in Mark Rothko's octagonal chapel in downtown Houston, dedicated in 1971, only without the fourteen canvases on the wall: without the despair, the withdrawal from the world, without the sense that the artist is controlling the space for you. So *Night Rain* was even more personally enveloping in some ways.

Sometime after the event, in early July 2001, I had the opportunity briefly to discuss this installation with the artist himself, who is a life-long Quaker. He was about to receive a well-earned honorary doctorate at the Royal College of Art. Part of the point, he said, was to ask people to think about valuing light as much as they value physical objects, and to remind visitors of another way of seeing. We talked of "slow art," and I reminded him of the celebrated cartoon in the *New Yorker* of June 1956, by Barney Tobey. A couple of harassed tourists is shown rushing up the steps of the old entrance to the Louvre and saying to the security man at the top: 'Where's the *Mona Lisa*? We're double-parked!" Was *Night Rain,* and other similar installations, a form of religious art, would he say, one without images and the historical memories and resonances they bring with them? Well, he would probably be guilty of a terrible hubris

3. On James Turrell's installation in the Dome, see *The Official Millennium Experience Guide* (London: Booth-Clibborn Editions for the New Millennium Experience, 2000), 24–27.

if he dared to label it *religious art,* he said, treading cautiously. Let's just say it was something that *could* remind people of the way they are when thinking about things beyond themselves—a reminder, maybe, of "these kinds of experiences." But the installation could and did raise the question: was it about "faith" at all in the setting of the Faith Zone—or about a more secular form of spirituality, more individualized and diffuse and New Agey? And did *this* matter? Well, he replied, to some, the qualities of light did have a long history of religious associations, didn't they?

As it turned out, in an overall Millennium Experience that, fatally, lacked a grand narrative to hold it together, here was at least one attraction that seemed to many visitors to have a point to it—not least, I am afraid to say, to get away from the brashness and noise of the rest of the Dome. Incidentally, my brother was quite right. That fifteen-month period of my life felt like fighting the Hundred Years' War every Tuesday evening.

A final memory, dating from the mid-1990s when the Arts Council of England was first charged with distributing National Lottery funds—a million pounds a day at its height, earmarked specifically for the arts as one of the good causes—to capital projects submitted by arts organizations. And I can still remember how the atmosphere in meetings would change whenever an application from a church or a cathedral or a temple was presented. The arts professionals and consultants, of whom there were legion, simply did not know quite how to judge these applications— we had to have a full council discussion on this very theme—since they were so far out of their usual sphere of experience, their intellectual comfort zone. Museums and galleries, yes—and some people, even then, were calling these institutions the new cathedrals. But where *real* cathedrals were concerned, there was that upward cadence of the voice and the sense that this surely was not the responsibility of an arts council; in any case, could the work be *critical* and *challenging* enough if it was to be presented in a sacred space? Wasn't one of the purposes of contemporary art "to break the flow," to encourage viewers to stop and think, to be ambiguous, indeterminate, and open-minded? And didn't church people still cling to a naive and uncritical, pictorial-naturalistic sense of painting and sculpture? To certainties rather than doubt? At precisely the same time, over in America, the recent former editor of the very influential contemporary art journal *Artforum* was confessing, "My only disappointment as editor was the cynical derision that met any religious reference [in submitted

articles or reviews].” The snickers of the secularized arts world, he said, sometimes alienated him mightily.[4]

So all those experiences and memories were going through my mind as I thought about the subject of these lectures—“modern and contemporary art in relation to human values.” In particular, the apparent inability or unwillingness of art critics, most art historians, and most art students in the West to engage these days with the theme of art and religion. Of course, the theme is a huge and very unwieldy one, and as a result, in the literature—such as it is—it tends to go by many different names: the adjectives alone include *religious, ritual, sacred* (the preferred term in church documents), *ecclesiastical, church, liturgical, holy, devotional, materially religious, traditional,* and, of course, *spiritual* (the favorite among curators)—a Polonius-like array of prefixes, each with a subtly different perspective. Plus, of course, in multicultural, multifaith societies, things have become even more complicated.

To give some idea of the complexity, here is a poem in translation by the German kinetic sculptor Heinz Mack—who, like James Turrell but in a different way, is very interested in the properties of light *and* who has had much experience of trying to work in and with Catholic chapels in Germany:

Church art is not always art.
Art that happens to be placed in church, is art in the church,
But not Church art.
Church art that is shown in museums, remains church art in museums.
Art for the Church is not always regarded as art by the Church.
The Church does not always want art.
Art is art without the Church.
Great Church art is art in the church and for the church.[5]

As if *that* was not complex enough, there is the ever-present danger of essentializing or universalizing the subject, a trap into which a number of

4. See James Elkins and David Morgan, eds., *Re-enchantment* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 77; and the article by James Elkins “How Some Scholars Deal with the Question,” in ibid., 69–78.

5. See Grete Refsum, “The French Dominican Fathers as Precursors to the *Directives on Art* of the Second Vatican Council” (dissertation lecture, National College of Art and Design, Oslo, 2000), 26. I have slightly retranslated the poem, from the dissertation version.

commentators have fallen. As one commentator has recently and wisely observed: "Any history of 'art and religion' does well to acknowledge the deeply modern and Western character of the subject. Although all cultures have fashioned artefacts for use in ritualistic practice, it remains problematic to call the artefacts 'art' and the rituals 'religion' without critical reflection on the modern character of these categories. . . . Understanding this cultural history is crucial for situating the rubric of 'art and religion' within its proper context."[6]

I am not a theologian, or a historian of religion, or an expert in the liturgy, or a philosopher of aesthetics. I am a cultural historian, who specialized at Cambridge in the history of ideas. What I am going to attempt in these two lectures—which I have deliberately titled "Art and Religion in the Modern West: Some Perspectives"—is to bring the subject down to earth, where it is possible from the point of view of the artist or practitioner to look in particular at the relationship between the modern artist and some institutions, I hope with wider implications beyond the particular examples I have chosen. And I will be doing this partly because the subject is so neglected, partly because it has almost become taboo, partly because I want to join up all those memories, and partly because "art and religion" or "culture and religion" definitely seem to be in the ether at present—unless I have been particularly drawn to examples while sensitized to them by these lectures. As I write this, I have just eaten a salad in a restaurant called TGI Friday—Thank God It's Friday—and walked past a poster advertising the *Evening Standard* (London) with the punch line "Evening Prayer" and another poster that asks, in large letters, "Does God Exist? Yes/No/Probably," perhaps reissued as a reply to Richard Dawkins, but I do not have time to take in exactly what it is advertising, this after reviewing on BBC Radio Charles Saatchi's interview book about why he collects contemporary art, *My Name's Charles Saatchi and I Am an Artoholic,* in which he is asked, among many other things, about his exhibition of 2006 called *USA Today,* notoriously featuring a peeing Madonna. Was he drawn to transgressive art of this kind? His reply was one I have encountered a lot in art education: "[Do you] think that anything there is truly more tasteless than so much we see around us every day?" So that's all right then.[7]

6. See Elkins and Morgan, *Re-enchantment,* 25; and the article by David Morgan "Art and Religion in the Modern Age," in ibid., 25–45.

7. See Charles Saatchi, *My Name's Charles Saatchi and I Am An Artoholic* (London: Phaidon Press, 2009), 87, on Terence Koh's "peeing Madonna."

And then to Paddington Station, where a woman stands in the concourse singing Gounod's *Ave Maria*—amplified through the station's PA system—in aid of charity. Actually, there has even been a book published about the phenomenon of Christian imagery in public places, and it has the provocative title *Addicted to Mediocrity: Twentieth Century Christians and the Arts*. On the train from Paddington, I see that someone is reading Simon Jenkins's best-selling gazetteer, *England's Thousand Best Churches*—in which he tries to secularize them as heritage sites, uncoupled from their original purpose: the nation's museum of community history, "a dispersed gallery of vernacular art." "I have lost count," he writes in the introduction, "of the number of church guides which assert, 'This building is not a museum, it is a place of worship.' I disagree. A church is a museum, and should be proud of the fact." This church is brought to you by English Heritage. It is about the memory of faith, not the experience of faith.[8] The gazetteer reminds me of those many art historians who, writing about altarpieces, divorce artistic technique from the impulse that brought them into being. I see that someone else on the train is reading an article on the arts pages of a newspaper about whether the experience of entering the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern and viewing its amazing commissions—the best-attended modern art installations in the world—has become a kind of "corporate spirituality," an example of "the society of the spectacle." As people bow down before Olafur Eliasson's *Weather Project* (2003), a giant orange sun, or slide down Carsten Höller's silver *Test-Site* (2008), the article asks, are they really sharing a quasi-religious experience in a secular cathedral (this image has *really* caught on), or is it all a corporate confidence trick? As I say, such questions seem to be in the ether.[9]

My starting point is the enthronement address by Dr. George Bell, on the day he became bishop of Chichester, June 27, 1929, in which he famously expressed his commitment to a much closer relationship between the Anglican Church and the arts, as a way of giving faith to faith:

Whether it be music or painting or drama, sculpture or architecture or any other form of art, there is an instinctive sympathy between all

8. See Simon Jenkins, *England's Thousand Best Churches,* rev. ed. (London: Allen Lane, 2009), esp. vii–xxviii.

9. On another aspect of this kind of secularization, see Jonathan Meades, "The Adjective of the Age: Iconic," *Intelligent Life* (Spring 2009): 68–73.

of these and the worship of God. Nor should the church be afraid to thank the artists for their help, or to offer its blessing to the works so pure and lovely in which they seek to express the Eternal Spirit. Therefore I earnestly hope that in this diocese (and in others) we may seek ways and means for a reconciliation of the Artist and the Church— learning from him as well as giving to him and considering with his help our conception alike of the character of Christian worship and of the forms in which the Christian teaching may be proclaimed.[10]

It is still stirring stuff. George Bell's achievements in reassociating the Artist with a capital *A* and the Church—as he put it—were many (and in some cases very significant), including the commissioning of T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* in 1935 for the Canterbury Festival of that year performed less than a hundred yards from the scene of the actual murder. Hence the title of my *second* lecture.

But, happily acknowledging his many achievements, I want to start by questioning some of the assumptions behind Bishop Bell's enthronement address, which he also expressed in an important article, "The Church and the Artist," in the *Studio* magazine in September 1942. These assumptions were (1) that there is indeed in the modern world "an instinctive sympathy between [visual art] and the worship of God"; (2) that modern and contemporary artists do indeed tend to produce works that are "so pure and lovely in which they seek to express the Eternal Spirit" (a reference to Philippians 4:8: "Whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report . . . think on these things"); (3) that the spiritual poverty of the increasingly mechanized culture he saw around him could be much improved if people paid more attention to "painters, sculptors, and every form of artists," much of whose work had been—in the past—rooted in religion; (4) that asking for the help of artists—learning from them as well as giving to them—would be a relatively unproblematic transaction, a civilized communication that would work both ways; and (5) that by the same token, contemporary art could be an aid to worship—could help to shape the *character* of Christian worship, as he put it, to give faith to faith—and even to proclaim Christian teaching, doing the work of the

10. On Bishop George Bell, see especially Rachel Moriarty, *George Bell, 1883–1958* (Chichester: Chichester Cathedral, 2007) (the enthronement address is quoted on 31–32); Ronald C. O. Jasper, *George Bell: Bishop of Chichester* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), esp. 121–34; and Andrew Chandler, "The Church, the Writer, and the Artist in the Face of Dictatorship: Bishop Bell and His Allies in Britain," *Contemporary Church History* (Göttingen) 20, no. 2 (2007): 298–315.

church as an institution rather than always doing the work of the artist. So this would not be—or would not just be—about decorating the church or the altar and expressing the taste of the priests; it would also be about the liturgy of community, too, about art as part of a collective experience. In general, Bell liked to look back to a time when there was a shared symbolic order that in turn helped, in his view, to support spiritual unity before the fragmented age of the modern, and his tastes in art seemed to lean toward the last great attempt to reconnect art with religion in mid- to late-Victorian times—the Pre-Raphaelites and the Nazarenes, one of the very few legacies of romanticism to work *with* the established church.

He also looked back much further to the deep historical connections that seemed to exist between religious and aesthetic life in the West, roughly from the fourth century to the seventeenth, when—whatever the arguments and debates about visual legitimacy, and there were, of course, many of them—Pope Gregory the Great's famous words from the late sixth century were always there somewhere: "Those who do not know letters may at least read by seeing on the walls what they are unable to read in books." It was a historical era when believers must have felt that hearing the Word of God through scripture with their ears was not enough; they needed to use their eyes as well in order to learn more of what was meant by "the Word became *flesh*" through Jesus Christ, in pictorial or symbolic form. For much of this era—roughly up to the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, the time of Giotto—the art was symbolic rather than naturalistic, based as often as not on pattern books rather than observed experience. Theological rather than photographic. The question of what the events of the New Testament may have looked like did not enter into it. What did enter into it was the real subject matter: the wonder of the Incarnation. The Pre-Raphaelites and the Nazarenes, much later in Victorian times, were obsessed with what those events may have looked like, even though they harked back to the period before Raphael. But for Bishop Bell, they too were part of the "instinctive sympathy" between art and the worship of God.

In all of this, Bell seems to have been influenced by the writings of John Ruskin about the relationship between art, in all and any ages of the world, as he put it, and the religious life.[11] For Ruskin, as we know,

11. On Ruskin and Ruskinism, see Peter Fuller, *Images of God: The Consolations of Lost Illusions* (London: Hogarth Press, 1990), especially the essays on Henry Moore (148–84), on an exhibition called *Prophecy and Vision* (187–93), and on John Ruskin (277–90). A useful anthology of Ruskin's thoughts on art—derived from the thirty-nine volumes of his

the supreme value of a work of art lay in the ways it disclosed through work or craft spiritual and ethical insights that could not be reached in any other way. Visual art was especially good at taking us to other worlds while striking chords about this one; it also connected the living world to the human mind, again through work. "I say that the art is greatest which conveys to the mind of the spectator, by any means whatsoever, the greatest number of the greatest ideas." He longed for an art that made great claims on us—not just titillating our senses but demanding a response from our whole spiritual and moral beings. The artist's finest purpose—he thought—was to depict the truth of nature, and through this to reveal the truth of God. In an increasingly secular age, when as Arnold put it the sea of faith was ebbing, art—and the whole aesthetic experience—could at its best provide a moment of transcendence. Like the seascapes of J. M. W. Turner, which for Ruskin were as near a revelation as an artist could get—at least until doubts began to creep in from the late 1850s onward and his "unconversion" when "my evangelical beliefs were put away," and he began to write of "the nakedness of the shingles of the world" and their separateness from the "Sea of Truth." In such moods, he could not eventually bear to look at Turner's paintings.

Ruskin's thoughts on art and transcendence have been crudely paraphrased more recently as "all art involves an encounter with the invisible," and thus religion must be integral to art, and art to religion.[12] Some have written, building on Ruskin and the works of the French neo-Thomist theologian Jacques Maritain and followers, that there is an unavoidably theological element in *all* artistic labor—because art engages us in an unforeseen pattern of coherence, giving depth to surface events and attempting to do some justice to the visible world. This is art as that "something more," something more than mere instrumental or mundane thinking. Others have observed—again, following Ruskin—that the absence of a shared symbolic order of some kind, and of reverence, has led people to see nature as alien, as "other," unworthy of ethical or aesthetic consideration, with disastrous consequences for both art *and* nature. Whence come "reverence for life" and "reverence for nature"? If God was not in nature—and the world was shaped by experience, mind and senses profoundly joined together, as philosophers post-Shaftesbury

works—is contained in John D. Rosenberg, ed., *The Genius of John Ruskin: Selections from His Writings* (London: Routledge, 1979). Graham Howes, *The Art of the Sacred: An Introduction to the Aesthetics of Art and Belief* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), has some useful commentary on Ruskin's legacy today.

12. On such forms of "sub-Ruskinism," see Howes, *Art of the Sacred,* 92, 158.

had contended—then maybe nature was not "out there" at all. Maybe beauty was discovered there by people, not implanted there by God. George Bell seems to have had versions of these insights and debates in his mind as well, within his concept of "instinctive sympathy." In linking art and transcendence, Ruskin himself reserved his highest praise for "whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report," and was completely unself-conscious about using the term *beauty* to describe this visual experience, as was Bishop Bell.

So the religious experience of the numinous and the aesthetic experience of the beautiful[13] were—for Ruskin and Maritain as for Bell—much more than just analogies. They actually resembled each other. They may even be interconnected. It was in some ways like a theological version of the Arts and Crafts movement—when as the hymn says:

> Craftsman's art and music's measure
> For thy pleasure
> All combine.

Was this true of Bishop Bell's era, is it true today, and indeed was it even true of the Arts and Crafts period, in late-Victorian England? Or was it even then a form of nostalgia, of revivalism—neo-Gothic, neo-Romanesque, neo-Byzantine, looking back to when the world seemed coherent, and when pictures, decorative motifs, and symbols seemed to have wide resonance in society? These are, as I say, big themes, and all I can hope to do is to ask a few questions about them: about the relationship between modernism, the contemporary, and religion—between in short some modern practitioners and the institutions of the church.

Let us go to the heart of the art establishment, in 1949, at the Royal Academy in Piccadilly, the first annual summer dinner for ten years that had as its guests of honor the archbishop of Canterbury and the newly elected extraordinary member of the academy Winston Churchill. The main speech of the evening was given by the outgoing president of the academy, seventy-one-year-old Sir Alfred Munnings, the successful painter of horses, whether on the turf or at the hunt.[14] In those days the main speeches were broadcast live to a huge domestic audience on the BBC's

13. The phrase is Graham Howes's. Ibid., 158.

14. Thanks to the Royal Academy archives, London, for supplying me with an audio recording of Munnings's after-dinner speech and with contextual background. Munnings scarcely mentions the incident in his autobiography. He may have been ashamed of it, or he may have forgotten all about it.

Home Service. A debate about the merits of modern art had been raging in the press for the past few years crystallizing around the reputations of two artists in particular: Henry Moore and Pablo Picasso. Francis Bacon had not really been noticed yet, except by a very few. So public interest in the Royal Academy dinner was unusually high that year, and the speeches were covered by all the serious national papers as well as some of the less serious ones. The speeches began with the archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Fisher, on the view of art from over the bridge at Lambeth Palace: "I am," said Dr. Fisher, "totally allergic to a picture unless the meaning of it is obvious at once." Chorus of "Hear, hear." "I am here this evening," he went on, "as chaplain of the Royal Academy—the first-ever time an archbishop has held that office." Laughter. "In the Middle Ages," he continued, "the question was sometimes asked, 'Can an archbishop be saved?' My question tonight is, 'Can a Royal Academician be saved or not?' Fortunately, neither answer rests with me or my office." Laughter and applause. Sir Alfred Munnings then stood up. He had evidently made the most of the many toasts he had had to propose as the outgoing president, and when he stood up to speak he left the notes he had prepared in his pocket, which turned out to be a mistake. His theme was that the academy should take a firm stand against "this *so-called* modern art," unfamiliar art, and in favor of technique, craftsmanship, well-made paintings, and—where subject matter was concerned—the beauty of nature and landscape.

Then, after some very rude remarks, seemingly endorsed by Sir Winston—about if he met Picasso coming down the street he would kick him in his something, something, something—Sir Alfred turned his attention to the sculptors, and to a notorious commission that was still very much in the news:

> Here we are in this Academy—and you gentlemen assembled in the Octagon Room. There was a woman cut out there in wood, and God help us if all the race of women looked like that. [Laughter.] The sculptors today are sinking away into a fashion of bloated, heavy-weight, monotonous *nudes,* and I have been with people who've [been to see them]. I've asked them questions, and they were disgusted and angered, just as they are when they see this *Madonna and Child* in a church at Northampton.
>
> I happened to be up there at a horse show and, being no very great rider—I was one of the judges of the hunters . . . and I said to my wife . . . "Let us find this masterpiece which the *Times* eulogized

during the war and gave photographs of," and we found this church
after going to several churches . . . and we walked up the aisle, and
there sat this graven image. Well, Canon Hussey or whoever he was—
he wished for this thing and other gentlemen may have suggested it,
but I would like to ask everybody here if they could, if they have a
day or weekend to spare, to travel up to Northampton and see this
statue of the *Madonna and Child* in this church. I am speaking plainly
because my *horses* may be all wrong—we may all be wrong—but I'm
damned sure *that* isn't right! [Laughter.]

It is interesting that Munnings used the phrase "this graven image"—
taking his audience back to the Second Commandment and to the Protes-
tant Reformers' preference for the word over the image, a preference for a
kind of religion that has had most of the sensuality taken out of it. In parts
of British visual culture, maybe many parts, this went deep. Also interest-
ing is his suggestion that it was not Canon Hussey himself but "other
gentlemen" who were really responsible for the commission. Perhaps the
canon had been led astray by the pundits and curators of the art world.
Anyway, Munnings's speech led directly to the resignation of several aca-
demicians, stimulated Herbert Read to write the book *What Is Art?* in
reply, and led to an extensive debate in the newspapers. A whole genera-
tion of artists—among them Henry Moore, Lucien Freud, and Francis
Bacon—turned their backs on the academy as a result. Ernst Gombrich
included a celebrated reference to Moore in his *Story of Art* (1950), per-
haps as a result: Henry Moore was not trying "to make a woman out of
stone but a stone which suggests a woman."[15] The Royal Academy has in
fact only quite recently recovered. The following morning, Munnings was
unrepentant: "I merely said what everyone *thinks,* but doesn't dare to say
out loud." The Lord Mayor of London, bumping into Munnings at the
private view, added, "You not only want a hanging committee; you want
a public executioner." A letter to the *Times* concluded that such modern
works as the Henry Moore "find far greater favour in artistic circles than
with ordinary Christians, who are conservative in their religion and look
for *the familiar* in Church art and architecture." Munnings had not even
felt able to mention Henry Moore by name.

The "*Madonna and Child* in this church" was of course Walter
Hussey's commission—and it *was* his commission—of a sculpture in

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15. See Ernst Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1950), 453.

Hornton stone by Henry Moore for St. Matthew's Church, Northampton, a not particularly distinguished Victorian Anglican Gothic church, though it was much admired by John Betjeman, consecrated in 1893 in a style described by Pevsner as "big and prosperous." Traditionally, art in churches tended to be associated with great or virtuoso buildings, and this certainly was not one of them. In 1942, Hussey—whose own taste inclined gently toward modern visual art—had gone to an exhibition of pictures by official war artists, on the bare walls of the National Gallery, including Henry Moore's *Shelter Drawings* commissioned by the War Artists Advisory Committee between the autumn of 1940 and the summer of 1941, which had been first shown to the public the year before Hussey's visit. They showed rows of people—some skeletal, some wrapped in shroudlike fabrics—sleeping in an underground station during the bombing of London. Hussey left the exhibition feeling strongly that Moore's *Shelter Drawings* had "a dignity and force that is desperately needed [in the church] today."[16] At first, Moore was by no means sure whether he "could or would want to do it . . . [and] whether or not I should agree with your theology. I just don't know. I think it is only through our *art* that we artists come to understand your theology." But he did eventually agree to produce, for Hussey, a sculpture on the "Madonna and Child" theme, which he personally chose—"Mother and Child," in various treatments, having been a favorite sculptural subject since Moore was a student at the Royal College of Art under William Rothenstein in the early 1920s. In fact, more than a quarter of all Moore's sculptures since then had been on this theme. It was, said Moore, the most "fundamental obsession."

By now, Hussey had acquainted himself with Henry Moore's earlier work and its development through the 1930s toward abstraction and had been warned that the artist would be unlikely to go back to an earlier stage in his personal development—more naturalistic, less abstract; more figurative, less fragmented and violated—and, further, that he was likely to be "fantastically obstinate" about this. That was fine, responded Hussey. He did not want something conventional "into which some of the faithful could read their own thoughts [but] negligible as a work of art"; he

16. See Walter Hussey, *Patron of Art: The Revival of a Great Tradition among Modern Artists* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985), esp. 23–73. This autobiography includes generous quotations from the Moore-Hussey correspondence, both ways, and from the Sutherland-Hussey correspondence, too. See also Herbert Read, *Henry Moore: A Study of His Life and Work* (New York: Praeger, 1966), 151–87. The Hussey book is a rich source on the commissioning process.

wanted a work that had something fresh to say, that would *last*. But he also wanted more than a "Mother and Child"; he wanted a "Madonna and Child."

Meanwhile, Henry Moore reiterated from his studio at Much Hadham that he still was not certain whether, from the point of view of his reputation in the art world, he even wanted to make this commission: "One knows that Religion has been the inspiration of most of Europe's greatest painting and sculpture—and the Church in the past has encouraged and employed the greatest artists, but the great tradition of Religious Art seems to have got lost completely in the present day, and the general level of Church Art has fallen very low (as anyone can see from the affected and sentimental prettiness sold for church decoration in Church Art shops). Therefore I felt it was not a commission straightaway and light-heartedly to agree to undertake."

But Moore did in the end agree to produce a series of clay models—and the next stage was to show the models to the Parochial Church Council (PCC). As Hussey put it to Moore, it was important to keep these models under wraps until the last possible moment—and only then could they be put on the agenda: "I should be loath to try to *force* through anything which the simple folk who use the church and who are represented by the Council, felt offended their religious susceptibilities." Continuing in this rather patronizing vein—a very long way, incidentally, from Bishop Bell's views on the Christian community and art—he felt that "something 'not exactly what they would have chosen' or which they could not quite understand, I do not think would matter, because they would be willing, with encouragement, I feel sure, to accept it and wait for its beauty to grow on them in the future." Where would the encouragement come from? Well, in a more deferential age, Walter Hussey used his weighty establishment contacts to find this encouragement, and to give himself confidence, in the "other gentlemen" referred to by Munnings—and being Walter Hussey, he aimed high. Kenneth Clark, for example, then director of the National Gallery and surveyor of the King's Pictures, following a visit from Hussey, wrote in characteristically patrician terms, "It is of the utmost importance that the Church should employ artists of first-rate talent instead of the mediocrities usually employed. . . . I am sure that [this] will shed great lustre on your church." And he had reassured Hussey, after looking at all the models, "It really is a Madonna and Child you've got there—not just a Mother and Child." Clark had acted as intermediary between Hussey and the artist.

His second encouragement was Bishop George Bell, "the only bishop I knew of who was very interested in the arts and might be sympathetic." Bell wrote that, although he had not yet seen the models, he was sure the artist would give "something which would be a real help to the church and its congregation." This made up for Hussey's own bishop, who was not quite so sympathetic. His third was the writer and critic Eric Newton, who had very publicly defended Moore—as a sculptor who was fully the equal of the Renaissance masters—on many occasions, on radio and early television and in print. Newton was fed up with being "defensive and apologetic" about Moore. It was time the artist became "accepted currency." Here was an opportunity.

In the event, this being 1942, how could the PCC refuse? The models were shown, the right one was duly selected—the most naturalistic one—and the sculptor was by now happy about that. Henry Moore got to work and to thinking about exactly where the sculpture should be sited, within the North Transept.

The key, he wrote, was to produce something "which would be satisfactory as sculpture and also satisfy my idea of the Madonna and Child theme." He continued:

> And I began thinking . . . in what ways [does] a "Madonna and Child"
> for St Matthew's differ from a carving of just a "Mother and Child" . . .
> how in my opinion [does] religious art differ from secular art. It's not
> easy to describe in words what this difference is, except by saying in
> general terms that the "Madonna and Child" should have an austerity
> and a nobility and some touch of grandeur (even hieratic aloofness)
> which is missing in the everyday "Mother and Child" idea. From the
> sketches and little models I've done, the one we've chosen has, I think,
> a quiet dignity and gentleness. And I have tried to give a sense of com-
> plete easiness and repose, as though the Madonna could stay in the
> position forever (as, being in stone, she will have to do).

After much to-ing and fro-ing, and several postponements so that the sculpture was not ready for the church's Jubilee as originally planned—Moore worked without an assistant—the great unveiling eventually took place. Walter Hussey had preached a sermon the previous Sunday—with a thinnish cloth veil still draped over the sculpture—in which he said that although the sculpture did not have a specifically liturgical function, "it is no mere artist's design. Before beginning, and during the whole time

when [Henry Moore] was working on it, it meant, he said, prolonged meditation on the 'theology of the subject.'" The result was about the Holy Child, who could be imagined growing into "all that we know the Christ to be," the Incarnation, and a child bonded to his mother, "conceived as any small child would in essence think of his mother, not as small and frail, but as the one large, secure, solid background to life." Humanity in its highest dignity.

> The work may not be, probably will not be, what we expect. If it were, then, as Mr Moore says, it would be unworthy of its place in the Church, because it would only be what you and I could already imagine, and in that case we had better do without the statue and simply use our own imagination. . . . Nearly all church and religious statuary that we see today is not sculpture at all, but sentimental plasterwork, corresponding in the realm of music to the religious ballads of the end of the last century, such as *The Lost Chord* or Liddle's setting for *Abide With Me*. . . . [Please] do not let us think there is anything "high-brow" about our statue . . . [but it does provide an opportunity to] put aside preconceived ideas and expectations, often studying the statue—as it was certainly given and carved—to the glory of God.

On the day of the unveiling, February 19, 1944, Sir Kenneth Clark in his speech spoke of the importance of contemporary living art for contemporary living religion—the church must not look backward for its style *or* its substance. He spoke of art that is not "immediately understandable to everybody," which does not have obvious colors and smooth, pretty faces—that kind of obvious appeal was now the function of the cinema, he said. Art should do much more than that in the current era. "The figure which I have the honour to unveil may worry some simple people, it may raise indignation in the minds of self-centred people, and it may lead arrogant people to protest. But I am sure there will be many people in this building, who do not pretend to any great familiarity with . . . the modern idioms of art who will feel every day more and more the fundamental beauty of this figure." Clark ended with the hope that this would herald the era of a genuinely contemporary art in churches.

"Arrogant people" indeed. Looking back, one is tempted to ask who was being the arrogant one on this occasion. Be that as it may, as Clark predicted and as Munnings recalled with some relish in his speech, local reactions in the press were extremely hostile. They were none too struck

FIGURE 2. Henry Moore, *Madonna and Child,* 1944. (Author's photograph.)

by the quiet dignity and gentleness, or by the differences between a Moore *Mother and Child* and this particular *Madonna and Child.* Here is a selection: "An absolute insult to our intelligence." "If this is an example of modern art, I think it is as well to preserve the old ruins and monuments." "An insult to every woman [and] a grave insult to the one it is supposed to represent." "This sculpture may be great art without beauty, or it may be beautiful in the eyes of an initiated few, but it warps a mental picture of an ideal which has remained unchanged for 2000 years." "The churches are slipping from soul-saving to idolatry—manmade constructions are becoming more important than the soul of man." "Hoping that this important piece of sculpture will be removed by public demand." Surely, this was more about the taste of the priest in charge than the community. Others went even further: the Madonna seemed to have elephantiasis, she was wearing jackboots, and she would have worked better as a doorstop than as a sculpture. Herbert Read, who was one of those who rushed to the sculpture's defense against Sir Alfred Munnings, wrote that this was indeed a major work—but that if you looked closely at what Moore himself had said about it, his words could apply to formal values in *any* great work of art, secular as well as religious. What distinguished the specifically *religious* element of a work of art, wrote Read, was its luminosity, the beauty of holiness to a biblical phrase. The trouble was that you could not tell just by looking at a sculpture whether it was the beauty of holiness or the holiness of beauty. More important to Read, Moore's *Madonna and Child* was "human and accessible," about motherhood and the bond of tenderness of the infant-child relationship, with the features just sufficiently stylized to make them universal. It was simply a great sculpture of a mother and child, and that is what mattered. Francis Bacon, meanwhile, who had exhibited with Moore in the autumn of 1933, rather grumpily started talking about Moore as not having the answer at all. "He has a false idea about a false humanity." Big kind of semiabstract stuff was not the way to go. And he did not much like Munnings either, even though he had grown up among horses in Ireland.

Another defender was Nikolaus Pevsner, who disagreed with Read about this: "Any man from slum, suburb or farm could at once recognise the human and divine meaning of it." Both the extremity of the local reactions against and the condescending quality of the metropolitan reaction in favor now seem a long time ago.

Well, Walter Hussey did not, of course, remove the sculpture. He stood firm and waited patiently for its beauty to grow on his parishioners

in the future, which took a little time. It is now an object of veneration in itself—its knees shiny through kissing and touching—which just goes to show. And Hussey immediately went on to commission an equally controversial painting for the plain Bath stone wall of the South Transept, to balance it—a painting from Graham Sutherland, at his friend Henry Moore's suggestion. Sutherland had attended the unveiling of the *Madonna and Child,* and he had evidently seen Hussey's bulging scrapbook of press cuttings, so he was understandably anxious about another modern commission for the church, about what it might do to his reputation, and about whether he would produce a work and word would get around that it had been rejected, or alternatively that "it will be left on my hands." He also worried about "the gulf between the public and contemporary works [that] has been too long and too wide. . . . The difficulty has been . . . in confusing unfamiliarity with what is thought to be ugliness." Usually, this was the result of ignorance of what constituted the purpose and boundaries of art. Lack of familiarity and lifelong habits of mind: "I'm afraid this happens so much nowadays."

Walter Hussey's original idea had been to commission an "Agony in the Garden," but Sutherland persuaded him to let him try a "Crucifixion" instead—and, as he added, if that did not work, they could always fall back on a "Way of the Cross" or an "Agony," both of which were in his view easier subjects to handle. "Well, that would be fine," said Hussey. The theme of the Crucifixion had "long been in my mind," the artist said. In fact, Sutherland was actively discussing it in detail with Francis Bacon at the time. So, despite anxieties, Sutherland went ahead with his Crucifixion, "a symbol so familiar that the Act it stands for must have become to many almost unreal." He would try to make it real again by adopting a "psychological or psychic treatment" and "a real (though not necessarily naturalistic) one." Not an abstract one, because it was about human embodiment, the Incarnation. He would concentrate, in short, on Christ's great physical suffering as Grünewald and the early Italians had done before him. "Nothing too soothing," he said, and if possible an avoidance of visual clichés. He was aiming for a note of human tragedy, without being *too* realistic, an idiom that would rob the subject of its symbolic and religious meaning. It would not be "beautiful" in a conventional sense, he warned, but beauty was not an absolute value. His first-ever religious painting on a large scale would be about pain.

When Hussey first saw the final sketch, he was worried about precisely this. In the case of Moore, his worry had been whether the artist could cope

FIGURE 3. Henry Moore, *Madonna and Child,* 1944, in place today. (Author's photograph.)

with the religious implications of the subject. In the case of Sutherland—a Catholic convert, as a young man—his worry was different: whether the artist had the technical stamina to work on such a large scale, and whether the result would be too unsettling. The advice Hussey was given by some experts from the art world when he articulated this—including Eric Newton—was to try to "trust the artist." Had Sutherland found the subject particularly difficult? "The only real difficulties I encountered were those of grappling with my own emotions and my own means of expression." The painting went through the PCC—with more letters of support from Kenneth Clark and others—but the chairman of the Diocesan Advisory Board did not like it at all. An elegant solution was agreed: the chairman would write saying that since the painting was movable, it did not actually require his permission after all. Technically, only fixtures and fittings required his permission. A very Anglican solution.

When the Sutherland *Crucifixion* was unveiled in November 1946, there was nothing like the outcry that had greeted the Moore *Madonna and Child* of only two years before. The chosen anthem—"O my people, what have I done to thee? . . . Have mercy on us"—was maybe a little rash, but there was surprisingly little controversy. This may have been because it was the second modern work to be commissioned—and also because the "distortions" in the picture, as Hussey explained, had a more visible "psychological justification." Someone asked if it might frighten the children, but his reply was that it was much more likely to frighten the grown-ups. He went on, "It was a profoundly disturbing work, but so also was the event that it depicted. It would be impossible to point to most modern representations of the Crucifixion . . . and to tell, for example, somebody who had been in Belsen concentration camp that Christ knew about and had experienced human suffering." The terrible pictures of the concentration camps had, indeed, first been published when Sutherland was thinking about the Crucifixion, and they must inevitably have influenced him. Plus, of course, Sutherland's own experience of the war. And his recent conversations with Francis Bacon.

The story of the Northampton commissions shows how idealistic George Bell had been, in his enthronement address in 1929. And how out of date the conventional debate about art and religion had become. *Pure* and *lovely* are not adjectives one would immediately apply to either the Moore or the Sutherland. Sutherland was at that time a close friend and supporter of Francis Bacon, who was working on his *Studies for the*
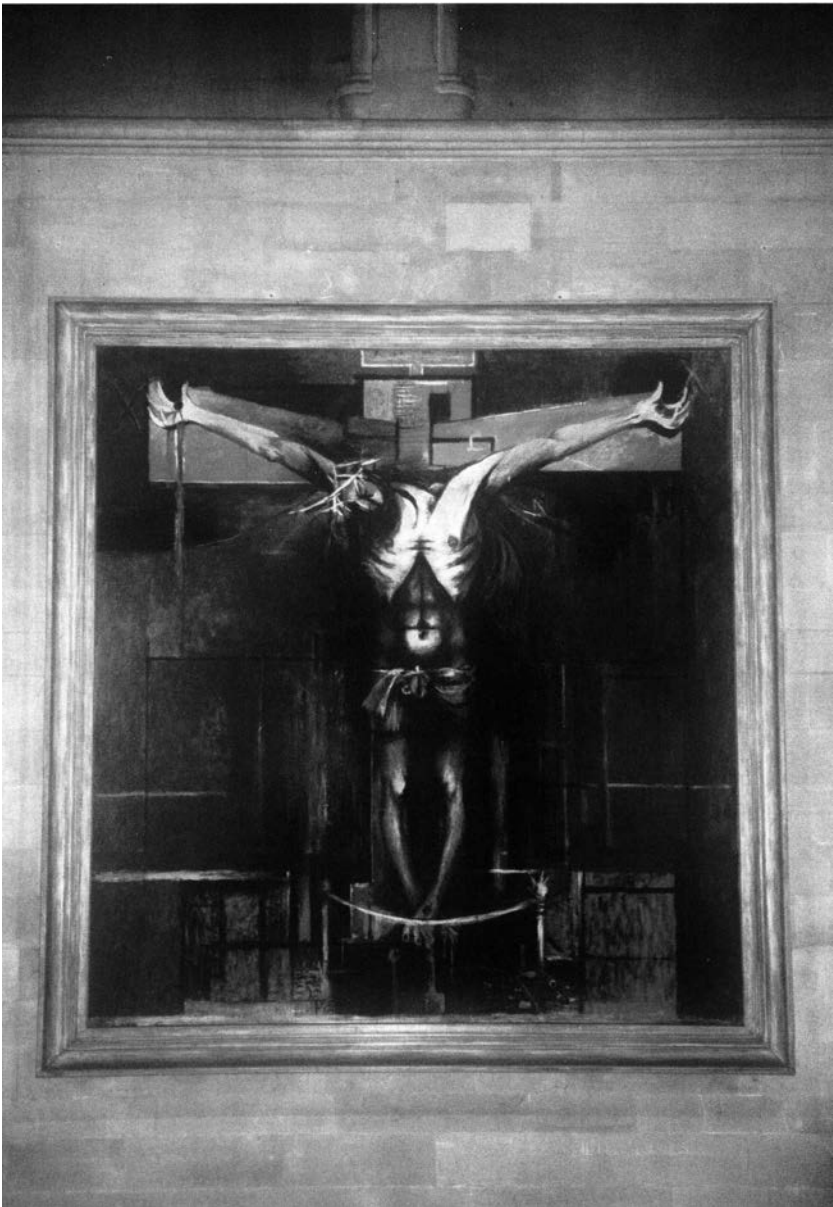
FIGURE 4. Graham Sutherland, *Crucifixion,* 1946. (Author's photograph.)

Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion, having produced his own *Crucifix-ion*s in 1933, as we have seen. It was seeing one of these *Crucifixion*s, in reproduction, that first encouraged Sutherland to get in touch, and to help launch Bacon into the conventional art world—by finding him a dealer and introducing him to Kenneth Clark, who it is said took one look at Bacon's work in progress, said, "What extraordinary times we live in!" and promptly left the studio. Sutherland was shocked and fascinated by the power of Francis Bacon's imagery, and there is no doubt that his own *Crucifixion* reveals this: the lack of a sense of time and space in the background—just a scaffolding of black lines set in a kind of no-man's-land; the debt to Grünewald; the physical distortions, putting the pain back into painting. In some ways, the two men could not have been more different: Bacon the atheist, flamboyantly gay, the risk taker; Sutherland the Catholic, committed to marriage and a conventional existence. Yet as they talked about the development of their work, they described their *Crucifixion*s and their visual preoccupations in similar ways. Bacon said of his, over and over again, that they were at some level self-portraits. And he was by no means alone in this. Several expressionist artists had identified—in their work, at least—with Christ on the cross. And there was Sutherland saying of *his Crucifixion,* "The only real difficulties I encountered were those of grappling with my own emotions."

When Bacon saw a reproduction of Sutherland's *Crucifixion* in the magazine *Picture Post,* he said he thought it looked "most awfully good" and that the use of color "sounded very exciting." Neither artist at the time was much interested in purity and loveliness, or in beauty. Poet and critic Guillaume Appolinaire had written way back in 1913, in a famous early review of cubist paintings, "Nowadays we like ugliness as well as beauty—the monster beauty is not eternal." Beauty was, he said, not only a changing concept but a worn-out one, not useful to critics or artists anymore. And the commissions from Moore and Sutherland certainly were not about a shared symbolic order—as the public reaction showed. Or about the community embracing a work of art as a way of shaping the character of their worship. As to the instinctive sympathy between artist and church, in the age of the avant-garde, the artist tended, on the whole, to be more concerned with pushing the frontiers, with sincerity rather than working within a tradition, with his or her own self-development, with ego, with finding a personal "means of expression," with getting a reaction (maybe of shock), with exploring the socially unacceptable, with

not turning back, more concerned with these than with working to some-
one else's brief or agenda, or reassociating with any institutions apart from
those of the art world. Long gone were the golden days when new *styles* of
art were produced in work especially created for the church, after the age
of the icon—Gothic architecture and the High Middle Ages, baroque
painting and the Counter-Reformation, the Lutheran liturgical tradi-
tion and the singing of the Passion—and when the connections between
religious and aesthetic life in the West shaped its principal architectural
forms, helped to sustain its ornamental systems, and inspired much of its
iconography.

As a recent critic has justly written, in the West from the late nine-
teenth century to the present—in other words from the invention of
the artistic avant-garde onward—"nearly all important developments
in painting, sculpture and architecture have taken place largely outside
the religious sphere, and their very existence [has often been] perceived
as a challenge to the primacy of religion [and especially religious insti-
tutions] in spiritual, moral and social matters."[17] Art could even be, for
this first time in Western history, deeply opposed to the church. This was
true before Bell made his speech, and it is of course true today. And it
has always to be borne in mind when thinking about art and religion or
religious art, post-1900. Arts and Crafts nostalgia—Ruskin-style—is too
easy. Artists since cubism, at least, have been about personal exploration,
personal expression, personal concepts—not about doing someone else's
bidding.

In one sense, though, George Bell was absolutely right. The correspon-
dence between Walter Hussey and Henry Moore is a model of civilized
dialogue—with self-confidence and resourcefulness on both sides—"not
too impertinent, not too timid," as Hussey put it. Certainly not too timid,
although the relationship with Sutherland seems to have been a little
more one-sided, with the artist setting the pace. It was important for the
church to understand the art world—and for the art world to understand
the church. And, as several critics pointed out at the time, there were les-
sons for both in Hussey's experiment. Some concluded that if the artist
was not doing the church's bidding as an institution anymore, then after a
commission the church might be turning into an art gallery or a museum.
Which was not supposed to be the point.
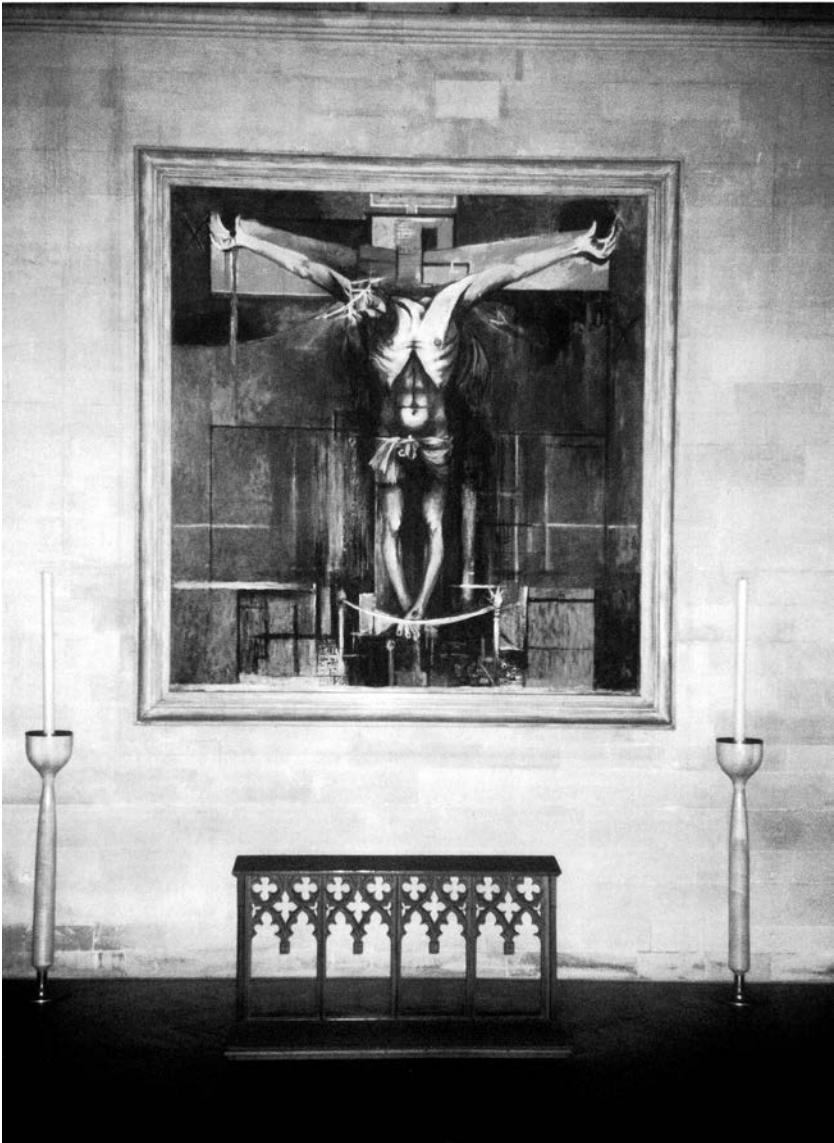
17. Howes, *Art of the Sacred*, 24.

FIGURE 5. Graham Sutherland, *Crucifixion,* 1946, in place today. (Author's photograph.)

Plus there was the *stance* of some of the most serious contemporary artists working in Britain at the time. The final issue of the journal *Horizon,* in 1949, had featured an editorial by Cyril Connolly, which has often been quoted since: "From now on an artist will be judged only by the resonance of his solitude and the quality of his despair." Connolly did indeed have in mind, when he wrote this, the "horror-filled canvases" of Francis Bacon, which were featured in the same issue, and most likely the recent *Crucifixion* by Graham Sutherland as well.

LECTURE II.
TO DO THE RIGHT DEED FOR THE WRONG REASON

While Walter Hussey was commissioning Henry Moore and Graham Sutherland in Northampton, on the other side of the Channel Father Marie-Alain Couturier—himself a trained fresco and stained glass artist—and a group of committed French Dominicans were curating the iconographic program in the newly built Notre-Dame-de-Toute Grâce, in Assy, near a tuberculosis clinic just across from Mont Blanc, high in the French Alps.[1] In their periodical *L'Art Sacré* (Sacred Art), these Dominicans, artists, and theologians had already prepared the intellectual ground by discussing some of the key issues, from 1935 onward: the role of modern art in a post–world war world of despair and materialism; the divorce between modern art and the nonspecialist public (what could be done about it?); the proliferation of industrially produced cheap images, incapable of communicating the truth of the Gospels; on the other hand, how to refresh a visual tradition that seemed to have gone to sleep; abstraction and the pictorial (why were people scared of abstraction?); whether the art of the avant-garde needed verbal explanation, as a guide for the perplexed; the relative contributions of impressionism, expressionism, cubism, surrealism, and abstraction, with a theological preference for expressionism; whether art can ever be heretical; what could be done to encourage priests to appreciate contemporary art; if contemporary artists—even atheists—should be permitted to express religious themes in sacred settings, according to their individual creative capabilities, in dialogue with local priests and bishops; and above all, the work of the neo-Thomist theologian and teacher Jacques Maritain, whose *Art and Scholasticism* had attempted to relate the writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas to modern culture. Art as "that something more," and a modern art that is "faithful to its own inner truths," freed from all kinds of instrumental thinking. Between 1946 and 1950, the church at Assy became what has been called "a practical laboratory for experimenting with modern art in a church—a way of demonstrating that Church art could be

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1. On the Assy project and ensuing controversy, see William Rubin, *Modern Sacred Art and the Church of Assy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961); Grete Refsum, "The French Dominican Fathers as Precursors to the *Directives on Art* of the Second Vatican Council" (dissertation lecture, National College of Art and Design, Oslo, 2000); Daniele Menozzi, ed., *Les images: L'Eglise et les arts visuels* (Paris: Le Cerf, 1991), esp. 247–92; Marie-Alain Couturier, *Sacred Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989); and Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1949).

modern." Couturier commissioned the artworks there piece by piece—a complete break with the usual way of decorating a new church as a program planned in advance. He started with a thickly leaded stained glass window in expressionist style by Georges Rouault, well known to be a devout Catholic, although this was his first official commission from the church; then a mosaic for the facade by Fernand Léger and a tapestry of apocalyptic vision for the apse by Jean Lurçat, both known to be Communist sympathizers and atheists; then Marc Chagall for the baptistry, with some scenes from the Old Testament that he as a Jew—it was felt—could produce with conviction; a baptismal font by Jacques Lipchitz; and more windows based on Rouault's paintings. The commissioners did approach Picasso, but his work since *Guernica* was thought to be a bit too strong, and not that suitable even if he had agreed. Quite apart from the resulting art, the choice of artists was about reconciliation and the settling of differences: Catholics, Jews (Chagall and Lipchitz), and Communists (Lurçat and Léger). Interestingly, the original idea at Assy was for there to be a Virgin in Majesty as the focal point in the chancel, but Couturier concluded that none of his contemporary artists could be expected to cope with this subject, so the focal point became the cosmic struggle for the Apocalypse instead. Contemporary artists were safer with Apocalypses than Virgins. And in general, "the limited liturgical possibilities that modern artists could sincerely render," as he put it, led to an emphasis on the heroes of the church—saints who were associated with sickness or cure rather than Jesus Christ, Mary, and traditional biblical narratives. The one exception was the final commission—a green bronze Crucifixion sculpture by Germaine Richier, which was cast in situ and placed above the altar, a distended, twiglike figure without recognizably human features on a thin, dark rough-cast cross—think Giacometti, in some ways—installed in 1950, and then, following a very public row, removed in April 1951, officially at the request of the tuberculosis patients in the congregation but in fact because conservative groups in the church hierarchy had become extremely upset by it. This Christ on the Cross, it was said, "suggested nothing of redemption or of the *spiritual* meaning of Christ's suffering on the Cross." It was about the artist and about human suffering—and that was unforgivable in such a setting. The bishop of Annecy, who ordered its removal, called the sculpture "a caricature representing nothing." A much-quoted article about the controversy by Stanislas Fumet was provocatively titled "A Studio Christ Cannot Be the Christ for the Church." The piece was not reinstated until twenty years later, in 1971.

The criticisms soon became official. There had already been a series of papal pronouncements reflecting the growing unease of the Vatican about contemporary developments in church art and the spread of modernism. In 1921 the Holy Office had publicly condemned Belgian expressionist artist Albert Servaes's illustrations *The Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (published in Paris the previous year) because of their stark realism and neglect of the wonder of the Incarnation. Servaes's intense and tortured style was explicitly indebted to Grünewald. The condemnation led to the removal of his paintings from a number of Belgian churches. In October 1932, at the inauguration of the new Vatican Pinacoteca Gallery, Pope Pius XI took the opportunity to speak in a discourse of "that kind of art which is called new" that seemed to be regressing to the crude forms of the Dark Ages and was therefore unfitted for the service of the church: "Such an art ought not to be admitted into our churches, and even less to construct them, transform them or decorate them; but open all doors and offer the most sincere welcome to all just and progressive developments within good and venerable traditions which [have existed] throughout so many centuries of Christian life."

Then, in November 1947—when the program at Assy was under way—Pope Pius XII famously wrote in an encyclical letter on the sacred liturgy that modern art, "the art of our time," should be given free range in the due and reverend service of the church, its buildings, and its sacred rites, provided the art kept a correct balance between extreme realism and excessive symbolism. *But,* and it was a large *but,* "the needs of the Christian community [should always] be taken into consideration rather than the particular taste or talent of the individual artist. . . . We cannot refrain from deploring and condemning those works of art, recently introduced by certain people, which seem to be a distortion and perversion of healthy art and which at times are even repugnant to Christian piety and taste."

This was, of course, mainly directed at Couturier and the Dominicans. Art, they were being reminded, should always be subordinated to religion. Then, in August 1950, the church at Assy was consecrated, followed by a major exhibition of modern sacred art in the National Museum of Modern Art, in Paris—which attracted a lot of international attention, including in the United States. *Time* featured two high-profile articles. At the end of the first International Congress of Catholic Artists in Rome, which happened to follow that same autumn, Pope Pius XII and his advisers tried hard to find a middle ground. Some papers at the congress had even, at one extreme, called for an Index of Forbidden Art, while others,

at the other extreme, had supported, with some reservations, the Dominican renewal project. The pope, in his *Discourse to Artists*—or, to be more precise, his discourse to "figurative artists"—reminded his listeners: "The Roman Pontificate has never ceased to appreciate art, to surround itself with works of art, and to make of art—within just limits—a collaborator in its divine mission." He spoke of "a certain intrinsic 'affinity' between art and religion, which makes of artists in some sense the interpreters of the infinite perfections of God and particularly of their beauty and harmony." That instinctive sympathy, again. And he encouraged artists to "seek God here on earth; in nature and in man, but above all in yourselves; do not try in vain to represent the human without the divine, or nature without the Creator." Pius XII added a warning against any art that had to be explained to congregations in verbal or intellectual terms—which the traditionalists took as support, until *L'Art Sacré,* in its review of the congress, retorted that abstraction did *not* in fact need explanation in words. It was a form of experiential art.

The crucifix was removed from Assy shortly afterward, which stimulated some furious debate in the art world. The curator of the National Museum of Modern Art wrote that modern art had three big enemies: Hitler, Stalin, and the pope. The journal *Arts* observed that the crucifix had been removed because of "ideas defended by the partisans of mediocre art, by those who refuse the Church the possibility of finding the means of expression our times demand." Others pointed out that the twiglike, faceless Christ had had placed next to it a placard with a quote from Isaiah 53: "For he shall grow up . . . as a root out of the dry ground; he hath no form nor comeliness." So the piece had biblical legitimation, whatever one felt about it. Finally, at the end of June 1952, the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office issued its *Instruction on Sacred Art* that, without naming names, was in effect an official condemnation of what the Dominicans had been trying to achieve at Assy. The *Instruction,* after citing various definitions, directions, prescriptions, and codes dating from the Middle Ages to the present day, warned against distortions and unusual images that "do not conform to the approved usage of the Christian church," "images of false dogma, or which lack decency and honesty," and could therefore "spread dangerous error to simple, unlearned, people." Its main purpose was to remind bishops to exercise more control over the kinds of religious images that were being introduced into their churches and to do what they could to sustain and protect traditional iconography. If in doubt about this, consult the Commission in Rome. As

the *Instruction* saw it, there were two main challenges: one was "the new art," and the other was "the numerous statues and images of little value, usually mass-produced," that were being exposed too often without order or taste. Where "the new art" was concerned, "You should only entrust works of painting, sculpture and architecture to men of exceptional competence, and who are capable of expressing a sincere faith and piety—which is the purpose of all sacred art."

Meanwhile, Henri Matisse's chapel at Vence—inspired by Father Couturier—had been consecrated in the summer of 1951, and plans were well under way for a new pilgrimage chapel at Ronchamp. Matisse famously said, "My only religion is love of the work to be created, and total sincerity," and "Do I believe in God? Yes, when I work." The momentum of the Sacred Art movement was becoming difficult to contain. When the commission for Ronchamp went to Le Corbusier, Father Couturier responded to criticism that he was not of the faithful, or the pious, by writing, "Spiritual gifts may be purer from the outside than in the faithful, even the clergy. . . . This fact may be irritating, but it is undeniable. The Spirit breatheth where the Spirit will." And when Ronchamp was completed in 1955, this time there were complaints from artists that there was not *enough* new art and that the architect had completely taken over. There have been many similar complaints since.

The issues raised by Assy—which boiled down to (1) in the end who was the final arbiter: the artist, the bishop, the priest, the congregation, or the authorities in Rome? (2) was art that was challenging and ambiguous ever likely to be permissible? (3) did the artist's personal beliefs really come into it? (4) could avant-garde contemporary artists be trusted with the holiest of images? (5) what did "fitted for the service of the church" really mean? (6) how could traditionalists, and the pious, ever come to terms with "the new art"? and (7) how could a conversation even be started?—in some ways mirrored those raised by Walter Hussey's slightly earlier commissions in Northampton, only in magnified form, and with much more intellectually grounded debate surrounding them. They were passionately summarized in the issue of *L'Art Sacré* for May–June 1952, in a "dossier of the quarrel." P. (or Pie-Raymond) Régamey, in his article "The Difficulties of the Hour," wrote of "the deep mismatch between religious habit and piety, and a living form of art—whatever the 'tendency' of the artist," and warned that "the works of art which try to express 'habitual' and pious states of mind (compromised architecture, a whole host of mediocre artists—modern or not) are creating a horrible mask for

the Church, which puts off well-intentioned people." He concluded with
the thought that when a "living work of art" scandalizes the "habitual
Christian," it is too easy always to blame the artist: maybe the church, and
even the liturgy, is sometimes at fault. "The 'non-believer' may be more
qualified than a very holy man, even one who has artistic gifts." Couturier,
in his article "The Reasons for Decline," reminisced about "the greatest
artistic monuments of Christianity," how they were often controversial
at the time and took great courage to commission, contrasting these with
the attitude of today's powers-that-be: "dazzled by secondary, medio-
cre talents so that the greatest monuments—Lourdes, Lisieux—are the
worst, and 120 churches have been built around Paris without consult-
ing a single great French architect," a tendency that came to be known
as "the art of Saint Sulpice." The explanations for this, he added, were in
the end simple. The responsible ecclesiastical circles—and the equivalent
civil ones—no longer knew much about contemporary art. The church
had retreated from all domains of contemporary cultural life—was scared
of them—with the result that artists had felt themselves more and more
estranged from it. The influence of backward-looking academics on the
high clergy had created a barrier between the church and creative prac-
titioners. The very rapid, and thus disconcerting, evolution of art itself
from around 1850 onward—during which art had increasingly examined
its own aesthetic values—had tended to separate great artists from "the
preoccupation and tastes of the public." What was needed was a new
dialogue, with "co-adaptation" on both sides—so that artists could truly
understand the possibilities and priests could allow themselves to experi-
ence the realities of the new art.

The Assy project took place within an ecclesiastical structure that
was very different from the Northampton project—not least because of
the emphasis on official written documents and statements, a long way
away from Walter Hussey quietly arranging letters from his establish-
ment contacts and working out an elegant solution with his Diocesan
Advisory Board. In the case of Northampton, Henry Moore and Graham
Sutherland actually chose their subjects, and the subjects were the holiest
of the holy; in the case of Assy, this could not possibly happen. What is
particularly interesting in retrospect about Assy, though—*and* Vence and
Ronchamp, and the surrounding debate—is that, through Father Coutu-
rier and Jacques Maritain, they had a significant influence on the working
documents that became the *Directives on Art* from the Second Vatican
Council of December 1963. These concluded, "In a modern church one

would expect to find a genuine Christian modern art"—four words about which, as one might expect, a great deal has since been written. Pope Paul VI, in May 1964, as part of a major statement titled *The Church and Art,* encouraged a much more open and sensitive dialogue, asked bishops to promote in churches "a noble beauty" without specifying a particular artistic style, and regretted that "we have imposed the rule of *imitation*—on you who are living creators with countless ideas and countless innovations." Can we, he concluded, make peace again? This was, in the context, a real breakthrough. Pope Paul VI in fact knew, and was impressed by, several contemporary artists, including Giacometti.

Back in England, Walter Hussey's commissions in Northampton certainly did a lot for the church's cultural reputation *in the art world*—the Alfred Munnings and Dr. Fisher tendency excepted. As singer Peter Pears observed, "If only all vicars had been so understanding . . . I don't believe the Church would have lost so many of her artist sons." And the same went for Coventry Cathedral, dedicated some sixteen years later in 1962 and an event of national, not just ecclesiastical, significance—involving as it did Sutherland's tapestry, John Piper's baptistry windows, Jacob Epstein's sculpture of Saint Michael and Satan, Britten's *War Requiem,* and Michael Tippet's *King Priam.* John Piper wrote that the whole Coventry project was "clearly indebted to" Walter Hussey and his early commissions. Sutherland agreed that he would never have been involved with Coventry had it not been for Walter Hussey. Northampton was the reason he was selected. There was a *completeness* about the artistic program at Coventry, very different from Assy—and from post-Coventry developments. It was carefully planned as a totality.

   In 1962 at Coventry there really did seem to be some sort of reassociation going on, even if it was not to last very long. The Church of England still seemed to have a key place in British visual (and musical) culture. Admittedly, this was partly about what was happening in the art world, in the immediate postwar years, when a generation of British painters and sculptors—known collectively as "the neo-romantics" (Paul Nash, Moore sometimes, Sutherland, Piper, John Minton, Keith Vaughan, Ceri Richards, and others)—searched for a lost Eden amid the ruins of the contemporary landscape: who wanted to depict its desolation while striving to reach beyond it, who felt it might soon be closing time in the gardens of the West, and who thought of the pastoral as one of the few remaining symbolic ideas in the culture from which to draw hope. This

movement sometimes chimed with the aspirations of the postwar Church of England.[2]

After the cathedral had opened in May 1962, an illustrated interview book was published, explaining in detail Graham Sutherland's thought processes as he prepared his vast tapestry *Christ in Glory* from the Book of Revelation, for the great wall at the east end of the cathedral (geographically the north end, because it was in fact built on a north-south axis, next to the ruins of the old Gothic cathedral).[3] The book raised many of the questions these lectures have looked at so far: a contemporary artist getting used to "being governed by specific requirements"—on work that is "isolated now . . . [because] the subjects are religious ones," like the string on a kite, said Sutherland; difficult negotiations with the ecclesiastical authorities *and* with architect Basil Spence, over a period of ten years this time, from 1952 to 1962; and working within a tradition of iconography, while trying to express the artist's own ideas, and give it renewed life, as part of the development of *his own* work. Sutherland was particularly vivid when describing the sometimes heated discussions that had taken place with the commissioning committees about what should be depicted in the lower part of the tapestry, beneath the figure of Christ. Scenes from the life of the Virgin Mary? These would not work. The Twelve Apostles? "Too hackneyed—could so easily become a conventional piece of ecclesiasticism. . . . Not right for today." Three scenes from the life of Christ? "I didn't like the look of this solution. . . . I never worked it out very far." In the end, Sutherland persuaded the authorities to let him produce another Crucifixion—which he wanted to try again: "Having lived through the epoch of Buchenwald and the rest of twentieth-century violence and cruelty . . . [this seemed right to me]." Could the huge figure of Christ in Glory perhaps be in a position of blessing, as had been traditional in mosaic domes since Byzantine times? "For me, this was too hackneyed a pose, dusty with too long worship." Besides, tenderness was very difficult

2. The best of the recent general accounts of this tradition, a tradition that is currently being seriously reevaluated, is David Mellor, ed., *A Paradise Lost: The Neo-romantic Imagination in Britain* (London: Lund Humphries in association with the Barbican Art Gallery, 1987), the catalog for a major exhibition at the Barbican, London. The label *neo-romanticism* has been traced back to critic and writer Raymond Mortimer in 1935, who saw it as reconciling modernism and tradition, surrealism and old mythology. In the postwar years, landscape was added to the mix.

3. See Andrew Revai, *Sutherland: "Christ in Glory" in the Tetramorph; The Genesis of the Great Tapestry* (London: Pallas Gallery for the Redfern Gallery, 1964). John Piper, *Stained Glass: Art or Anti-Art?* (London: Studio Vista, 1968), which argues the connection between stained glass and antinaturalism, is a useful companion to it.

to achieve without resorting to "an art of banal and empty sentimentality." So, there would be no blessing.

But above all, there was the problem Henry Moore had encountered with the *Madonna,* and Sutherland himself with the Northampton *Crucifixion.* How could the figure be a "palpable presence" and "hieratic"—as they both called it—at the same time? As Sutherland said, in his view the fundamental test of a work of religious art—not confined to Christian art—was that it should somehow express the relationship between mankind and his god or gods: between the visible and the invisible, the seen and the unseeable, the material and the spiritual, the natural and the supernatural. After all, the root definition of religion was "religio"—the bond that existed between every creature and God. This had to be more than just a large portrait—not least because there was no physical description of Jesus in the New Testament. In explaining himself, Sutherland turned to a favorite quotation from Charles Baudelaire, writing about the Paris Salon of 1859:

> Religious writers . . . naturally tend to make beauty dependent on belief and more than one religious writer has attributed to a simple lack of faith this difficulty of giving expression to the things of faith. This error could be philosophically demonstrated if the facts did not show us sufficient proofs to the contrary, and if the history of painting did not offer us examples of impious and atheistic artists producing excellent religious work. Let us simply respond that since religion is the highest *fiction* of the human mind . . . it will require the most vigorous imagination and the most concentrated efforts from those who devote themselves to the expression of its acts and its sentiments. . . . The only concession to those who hold the theory of faith as a unique source of religious inspiration is that, at the moment of executing his work, . . . the artist must believe in the reality of what he is representing, fired as he is by necessity.

"It seems clear to me," Sutherland explained while quoting this passage, "that there are various kinds of artists who, whether believers or not, have produced or could produce what could be called religious art both today and in the past . . . [such as Matisse at Vence, "slight though this is," and Picasso]. These artists come to mind because deep-rooted in them there is a genius for expression, a largeness of spirit, great perspicacity and curiosity, to say nothing of technical invention and a passion close to the sentiment which could be called, properly I think, religious."

Despite the tensions, Coventry really *does* seem to have been one of those moments of reassociation and sympathy—maybe the last in Britain on a grand scale. As theologian Gilbert Cope wrote in the *Listener* magazine, shortly after the opening, "The new cathedral at Coventry is a symbol of many things—for example, the will to live and the collective desire to rebuild after destruction—but it is also a symbol of concern for Christian art. One of the reasons why so many thousands of people go there is because it contains striking examples of how some modern artists express their religious convictions. [The works of art] all serve to focus attention on the problems of sacred art . . . a series of questions rather than a pattern of answers."

Where the history of British visual art in the century as a whole is concerned, I paid a visit a couple of months ago to the National Gallery's Bookshop in London—the large section devoted to religion and art. And I looked at the chapter—in all the survey books—about the twentieth century. Fifteen survey books in all. Over and over again, there were references to Moore in Northampton, Sutherland in Coventry, Craigie Aitchison in Truro—he painted many versions of the *Crucifixion* from 1957 onward—and Bill Viola in Durham Cathedral.[4] Plus, outside the church rather than commissioned, there is always Salvador Dalí's *Christ of St. John of the Cross* (1951), which has recently been called "the most celebrated and reproduced religious painting of the 20th Century." At the time it was purchased by Glasgow Art Gallery, the *Daily Express* had a rather different view: it concluded that it "has about as much religious feeling as *Through the Night of Doubt and Sorrow* played on the Wurlitzer in the interval of a leg show." And Stanley Spencer's *Resurrection, Cookham* of 1924–25, about which the artist said, "As it is heaven, there is no hurrying to be off," and "it is about the resurrection that happens when we arrive at . . . a state of being in love." A way of saying "ta" to God. And that's about it. When you think of the richness of European art since the onset of modernism—all the great "isms," pop, and beyond—this is a pretty thin list, and mainly clustered around the twenty years of 1942 to 1962.

There is an interesting little postscript to Coventry. Some of the stained glass windows at Coventry—still known today as the Royal College windows—were created by Geoffrey Clarke, Keith New, and Laurence Lee at the Stained Glass Department of the Royal College of

4. On several of these paintings, interpreted as within a long tradition, see Gabriele Finaldi, ed., *The Image of Christ: Seeing Salvation* (London: National Gallery, 2000), esp. 193–206.

Art. When the designs were first exhibited, Winston Churchill found them "too modern"—but they have certainly lasted well. In the fullness of time, the Stained Glass Department at the RCA was to turn into Coloured Glass, then Coloured Light, then Environment Media, then Performance and Video Art. I remember talking to someone who had walked past a rubbish skip in Jay Mews, South Kensington, just after I first arrived at the college, in 1972: poking out of it had been a portfolio of drawings that turned out to be versions of some original designs for the Coventry Cathedral windows. The performance artists at that time—the Coloured Light people—were not too interested in looking backward or indeed in instinctive sympathy with anyone. They were far too angry for that. The portfolio had been wedged behind a filing cabinet, at a time of academic regime change.

So far in these lectures, I have been looking at questions raised directly by Bishop Bell's "instinctive sympathy" between the artist and the worship of God and his hope for a long-term reconciliation, a reassociation, mainly from the point of view of *figurative* artists. But the issue of abstraction has kept on intruding—inevitably, since we are talking about the twentieth century: whether Henry Moore should adopt an abstract or a more traditional approach to his Madonna at Northampton; figurative art, the Incarnation, and the deep suspicion of abstract work; whether abstraction is comprehensible in religious terms without verbal explanation, or even compatible with the requirements of the Church; the assumed preference among Christian congregations in the West for pictorial-naturalistic approaches (their favorite box of chocolates, as someone once put it); and, on the other hand, the possible connections, argued among many others by the Sacred Art movement in France, between abstraction and spirituality.

Well, all *these* questions go back, in the end, to a very specific experience—sometime around 1911, when Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky visited an exhibition of religious works, landscapes, portraits, and still lifes in Munich, had a very bad time, and wrote about it in his hugely influential book usually translated as *Concerning the Spiritual in Art,* first published—almost simultaneously in Germany and Russia—in December 1911.[5] He wrote:

5. See Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art,* translated by Kandinsky's friend Michael Sadler, first published in 1914 and republished by Dover Books (New York) in 1977, especially "General Aesthetic: Introduction to Part One." See also Hartwig Fischer and Sean Rainbird, *Kandinsky: The Path to Abstraction* (London: Tate, 2006), esp. 77–158.

Imagine a building, large, very large, small or medium sized, divided into various rooms. All the walls of the rooms are hung with canvases of various sizes, perhaps several thousands of them. By means of the application of paint they represent bits of nature in colour—animals in sunlight or shadow, or drinking, standing in water, or lying on grass; a Crucifixion of Christ, by a painter who does not believe in Christ; another by one who does; then flowers, and human figures, sitting, standing or walking, and often naked; there are many naked women often foreshortened from behind; apples and silver dishes; a portrait of Privy Counsellor So and So; sunsets; a woman in pink; flying ducks; a portrait of Baroness X; flying geese and so on. A huddle of objects painted with varying degrees of skill, virtuosity and vigour, harshly or smoothly. All this is carefully reproduced in a catalogue complete with the name of the artist and the title of each picture. Catalogue in hand, people go from canvas to canvas turning the pages, reading the names. Then they leave, neither richer nor poorer, immediately absorbed once again by their own affairs, which have nothing whatever to do with art. . . . Connoisseurs admire the "technique," as one might admire a tightrope walker; or enjoy "the painting quality," as one might enjoy a pâté. *But hungry souls go hungry away.*

Instead of *this* form of art, which he called "the nightmare of the material," Kandinsky went on, which in artistic terms he likened to realism, instead of the homely reassuring family metaphors through which artists had domesticated Western ideas of the spiritual, how about a form of art that seemed nonmaterial, which was not rooted in the images of everyday life, which tried to break through crude realism to another level, which expressed the quest for the spiritual from *within* rather than from *without*? What if the *appearances* of the physical world were a kind of obstruction? "I want people to see finally what lies *behind* the paint." In short,

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Kandinsky's book was one of the main inspirations for *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890–1985,* a huge exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (1986–87), with an equally voluminous catalog edited by Maurice Tuchman (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985). This opts for "theosophy" rather than "Christianity," where Kandinsky is concerned: indeed, Christianity is generally demoted in exhibition and catalog. Both were extensively criticized by Peter Fuller in "Beyond the Veil," part of an issue called "Abstract Art and the Rediscovery of the Spiritual," in *Art and Design* (London) 3, nos. 5–6 (1987): 66–72. This issue of *Art and Design* also includes an interesting essay by Catherine Cooke, "Kandinsky: Establishing the Spiritual." Parts of Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual* have been reprinted in Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, ed., *Art, Creativity, and the Sacred* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 3–7, which contains other key extracts discussing matters arising.

how about a form of art that tended toward abstraction—to do with bold lines, shapes, spaces, and, above all, colors and their resonances rather than with representation or with description? Which involved an abstraction from normal everyday space into some experiential realm he called "the spiritual." The assumption that the strivings of the soul always had to be compared with our experience of the real world down here, he concluded, reminded him of the physician who said, "I have dissected many corpses, but have never yet discovered a soul inside any of them." The statement was overliteral, and typical of the materialist early twentieth century. The true value of a work of art lay in the extent to which it reached out for, and altered something in, the viewer's "soul"—like the experience of music. In the exhibition he described, there was "a neglect of inner meanings, which is the life of colours," the direct impact of colors. Artists would somehow have to rediscover a form of visual language appropriate to this world of inner meanings—and the best of Kandinsky's work is about what that language might look like. To put this another way, in the absence of a genuinely *living* tradition of religious iconography, the spiritual would have to be expressed through new formal means—turning to the forms and conventions of art itself in the search for a spiritual dimension. This journey was the subject of Tate Modern's 2006 exhibition *The Path to Abstraction.* The pictures retain some figurative elements—but, as the artist put it, they have moved from the facts of everyday life to inner visions in the form of bold lines and colors. His titles at this time included *The Deluge, The Last Judgement,* and *All Saints.*

Kandinsky had of course been brought up in the visual traditions of Eastern Christianity—where religious symbols were not presented naturalistically, where icons in their original sense tended to be emblematic representations of holiness, windows onto the Divine, objects of devotion—rather than in a tradition where paintings aimed to be realistic lights of the world or mirrors of what is around us. These icons did not have perspective and vanishing points, and part of their role was to project the viewer into a world much more expansive than the one we usually inhabit. The original coloring of Russian medieval icons had recently been revealed by restorers and scholars when Kandinsky wrote *Concerning the Spiritual in Art.* Kandinsky concluded the book—which has some very difficult sections in it on "the triangle," "the pyramid," "the role of music as creative stimulus," "the psychological impact of colour," "the language of pure colour and form," "the theory of harmony," not made any easier by his strange use of terminology—with the optimistic thought that such

an art could affect the viewer in an unmediated way "without the necessity for any prior preparation," with no need for elaborate explanation or curatorial catalog entries. And this could well be a way of reaching a "commonality through the inner view of life," of reconnecting art with society, no less.

Recently, there has been a heated debate among art historians about whether all this arose out of Kandinsky's flirtation with theosophy or out of his Christian beliefs, out of a private language or a public one. The challenge of *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*—the word *geistige* of course means "intellectual" and "philosophical" as well as "spiritual"—may be specific to debates that were happening among artists in Germany and Russia just before and during the First World War, but they are still very much on the agenda today. It was mirrored, shortly after the First World War, by early Bauhaus painting exercises for Johannes Itten's Preliminary Course in the 1919–21 period, which explored the visual connections between popular or folkloric sacred artifacts and abstraction: altars, embroideries, and visual and geometric analyses of anonymous altarpieces and of Grünewald's *Crucifixion,* in search of the timeless abstract laws that might lie behind the narrative and the imitative.[6] Also, perhaps, part of an urge to revisit more "innocent," premodern times, for artistic solutions. Itten's classes would begin with physical exercises, to relax the students and loosen them up, followed by a showing of monochrome lantern slides of traditional paintings, often with religious themes. The Bauhaus was launched in 1919 with a manifesto or program, on the cover of which was an expressionist deconstructed cathedral ("crystalline symbol of a coming faith") by artist Lyonel Feininger. The first words of the manifesto, written by Walter Gropius and aimed at painters, sculptors, and architects, were, "We must all turn to the crafts." Interestingly, the word *turn* has nearly always been translated into English as *return,* as in "We must all return to the crafts." Where manifestos with cathedrals on the cover are concerned, we seem much to prefer *return* to *turn.* But Gropius meant *turn,* in a contemporary sense.

It is also interesting to note that the first known jokes about abstract painting had a religious theme. Alphonse Allais exhibited in Paris between 1882 and 1884, at the Salon des Arts Incohérents, one pure white sheet of paper and another deep red. The white one was captioned "First

6. See Barry Bergdoll and Leah Dickerman, *Bauhaus, 1919–33: Workshops for Modernity* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009), esp. 65–111. Also, for the same historical period, see Tuchman, *Spiritual in Art.*

communion of anaemic young girls in the snow." The red one was captioned "Apoplectic cardinals harvesting tomatoes on the shore of the Red Sea." The impressionists who visited the show much enjoyed the joke, apparently.

I am not suggesting that all abstract art, after the pioneers of early modernism, is about this general search for a reality behind or beyond surface appearances, about a "longing after that which we cannot see." Much of it is simply about itself, about the laying on of paint and of color rather than the laying on of hands. But I *am* suggesting that this is how it all started and, further, that there is a bond of common purpose that unites Wassily Kandinsky and the European pioneers of the 1910s via the Bauhaus with some of the American abstract painters of the 1950s and 1960s, such as the greatest of them all, Mark Rothko, who did indeed call his work "an anecdote of the spirit," a silent visual quest.[7]

Rothko, born in Lithuania, was brought up in a Jewish household and was ten years old when the family emigrated to America—fleeing from the pogroms. In New York, he was influenced first by social realism, then by the American desert landscape—then by expressionism, then surrealism, then by Jungian ideas of the cultural memory and the collective unconscious, which were in the ether at the time. Quite a journey. As he wrote in the early 1940s, "The known myths of antiquity are the eternal symbols on which we must fall back to express basic psychological ideas. They are the symbols of primitive fears and motivations. The myth still holds us because it expresses to us something real and existing in ourselves."

He did not mean by this the formal visual language of classical Greece—everything in proportion—but some inner chord of truth about humanity encoded in the myth, and he searched for this by stripping away and simplifying, until at the end of the 1940s he arrived at what we know today as the Rothko form: a series of washes of color, thinly painted and blending into one another through blurred or frayed edges, on very large canvases. He wanted to create in this way haunting visual images that became a luminous *presence*—and that enveloped the viewer in a sense of awe by taking the viewer out of him- or herself. Rothko called this process "spiritual" or "elemental" or "like confronting your soul"— a totally absorbing experience, he thought, that would make you forget

7. See James E. B. Breslin, *Mark Rothko* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), esp. 459–86 on the Houston Chapel; and Robert Hughes, *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America* (London: Harvill Press, 1997), 465–97.

everything else, enveloped by color, the tones of color, and the sheer presence of the canvas—like the presence once associated with the depiction of the ancient gods in art, only this time without the human figure getting in the way. The experience of standing in front of these canvases was intended—as Robert Hughes has pointed out, in his survey of American art—to be just like the experience of Ishmael, the wandering mariner, when he arrived at the Spouter Inn in New Bedford, at the beginning of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. Ishmael has just stumbled on a large picture in his room through the gloom of the night: "a long, limber, portentous, black mass of something hovering in the centre of the picture over three blue, dim, perpendicular lines floating in a nameless yeast. A boggy, soggy, squitchy picture truly, enough to drive a nervous man distracted. Yet was there a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity about it that fairly froze you to it, till you involuntarily took an oath with yourself to find out what that marvellous painting meant."

Well, was there any fixed meaning? Robert Hughes in *American Visions* reckons that, in the end, not quite. Yes, he says, the paintings are ravishingly beautiful, and yes, Rothko's own abandonment to feeling can sometimes lead to a letting go by the viewer as well. But "is this enough," he asks, "to constitute a major religious utterance?" No, he concludes, because as the eye searches for form, seeks its nuances, and extends its response time, the expected epiphany never comes, and the paintings cannot quite support the weight of meaning Rothko wants them to carry. Modernism gets in the way.

I do not agree, actually—if we see Rothko's work as a spiritual quest, which is how he liked to see it. There have been times when I have become so absorbed in his paintings that I really have forgotten everything else—in a state of mind that is akin to meditation: not a moral message but an experience, comparable with the James Turrell piece I mentioned earlier. Rothko himself felt he never reached his goal. But at the Tate Modern exhibition of the late Rothko a couple of years ago, I must say I convinced myself while I was there that he had.

Rothko's paintings do serve as a reminder that one basic difference between Kandinsky's 1910s and the 1950s is that, by the 1950s, much of the optimism of earlier generations had gone, and the images produced by Rothko—especially the late dark images—have become the visual equivalent of a voice crying in the wilderness: as the theologian Hans Küng put it in *Art and the Question of Meaning* (1981)—maybe even, critic Peter Fuller suggested, with Rothko in mind—there is a sense in which

the sea is drunk up, the horizon is wiped away, and the earth has become unchained from its sun . . . the three powerful metaphors with which Nietzsche announced the arrival of nihilism more than a hundred years ago: "Do we not feel the breath of empty space?"[8] The Rothko Chapel in Houston—which does not have any windows, at the artist's insistence—confronts the visitor with the east triptych of rectangular black murals. They were created, between 1964 and 1967, for a Catholic chapel, a site that had turned into an ecumenical chapel at another place by the time it was dedicated in 1971, after Rothko's suicide. They seem, when you are there—as many have pointed out—to be a complete renunciation of the world. The octagonal shape was supposed to be reminiscent of Byzantine architecture—and the whole project was partly inspired by Vence. But the overall "ambiance"—as Rothko put it—was not so much of a sanctuary as of an isolation, a shutting off.

What, meanwhile, of those paintings—and their ilk—that Kandinsky saw at that exhibition in Munich in 1911? What has happened to them in the intervening years? Well, for my final perspective, I would like to reconstruct for you part of an important lecture given by the Italian-Scots sculptor and collage artist Eduardo Paolozzi in the autumn of 1988, at King's College, London, and the Royal College of Art, titled "Jesus and the Volkswagen."[9] I have recently rediscovered all the images used by Paolozzi on those evenings—in the order he screened them—which has enabled me to attempt a reconstruction for tonight. It helps that I was present the first time around, as well. Like all Paolozzi's lectures, this one originally consisted of two carousels of slides—projected side by side— images from art and everyday life, shuffled like a pack of Charles Eames playing cards, with soft jazz music piped through the lecture theater's

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8. The metaphors are from Hans Küng, *Art and the Question of Meaning* (London: SCM Press, 1981), 28–29. They are adapted from the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche. In his article "Beyond the Veil," Peter Fuller makes the connection with Rothko (72). For Hans Küng's work in context, see John Dillenberger, *A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities: The Visual Arts and the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1987), esp. xii–xiii, 215–49.

9. See Robin Spencer, ed., *Eduardo Paolozzi: Writings and Interviews* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), esp. 223–330. See also André Malraux, "Museum without Walls," in *The Voices of Silence* (London: Paladin, 1974), 11–128; Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* vol. 3, *1935–1938,* ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), the second version of "The Work of Art," 101–33; Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 211–44; John A. Walker, *Art in the Age of Mass Media* (London: Pluto Press, 1983); and John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972). Berger did much to popularize Benjamin's essay in the early 1970s. Unfortunately, at that stage the title of the essay had been mistranslated as "Mechanical Reproduction." Benjamin was writing about *potential* applications. His essay was intended to be part of a much larger project about reproducibility in a range of media and its implications. Sadly, he never completed the project.

public address system, which I am afraid you will have to imagine for this evening. The visual experience—for that is what it was, as much as a lecture—was intended to encourage a new kind of nonlinear interpretation, close to the way in which we navigate for ourselves the disparate images that bombard us as we walk around the modern city and invention fills the gaps. The megavisual landscape, it has been called. A delirious kind of information overload, like something out of *Neuromancer*. "I'd like to find another word for metaphor," said Paolozzi, "but an awful lot of this is, I feel, like good poetry."

Author J. G. Ballard once observed that Paolozzi's collages and reference materials were like "clay tablets unearthed in a sunken empire town." Paolozzi's jottings for the lecture have also survived. He began with some scene-setting thoughts about Walter Benjamin's essay, written in Paris, in the autumn of 1935, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility." In 1988 this essay was still known as "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." The meaning of works of art, said Paolozzi citing Walter Benjamin, had a lot to do with where and when and how they were displayed: from caves, where they had a cult or ritual function; via cathedrals, where they instructed and celebrated; to galleries, where eventually they became a form of currency; to the high street—in the age of the lithograph, following the ages of the woodcut, the engraving, and the etching. And in the high street, works of art had to compete with the products of mass production and mass communication. When art reproductions are available to everyone—as postcards, posters, illustrations, or increasingly as films—the originals they refer to take on new meanings. If we know the story already, then when we directly confront a work of art, are we merely looking at the details, the surfaces, the close-up zone that the reproduction cannot reproduce, the presence of the work in time and space? Paolozzi cited the classic example of the *Mona Lisa* to explain this. According to Walter Benjamin, the original work of art has a certain *aura* about it—a slippery term, which for him combines the work's presence, the physical fact of it, its location, its uniqueness, its scale, its authority, its tradition, its living energy, and its ritual function. "That which withers in the age of technical reproducibility is the *aura* of the work of art"; for the first time in world history technical reproducibility "emancipates the work of art from its dependence on ritual." Benjamin, as a socialist, was not quite sure whether he approved of this. It had huge potential, but he felt much was being lost in the process. Paolozzi added that the main theme of his lecture, in light of this, would be the work of religious art in

relation to its reproductions. "If you are in art education," he said, "you get this curious feeling that not only is the work being done a reproduction of a reproduction, but those involved in doing it are reproductions of a reproduction. 'Art students' in inverted commas. This is a very modern condition." Or words to that effect.

Then, he added, there was the famous story of Francis Bacon, who worked from reproductions of Velázquez's *Pope Innocent X* for a long time, including postcards lying around his studio. When finally he got to Rome, Bacon was asked if he wanted to see the original of the portrait in the palazzo where it hangs. "What's the point?" he said. He did not want to see what he had been tampering with. He was almost superstitious about it. Paolozzi went on to talk briefly about André Malraux's essay "Museum without Walls," published in 1947—and in some ways an elaboration of Benjamin's essay. Malraux had met Benjamin in Paris in the midthirties. In the modern "museum without walls," wrote Malraux, in the age of reproduction, even a religious icon becomes merely a "picture"—losing all its aesthetic, social, and historical significance in the process: a picture placed next to any other picture, and all of them about the same size. A miniature becomes the size of an altarpiece, a panel the size of a skyscraper; a fragment or detail becomes a "fictitious work of art," a new work created by reproduction. The work of art thus reproduced has become something else. Malraux was more certain than Walter Benjamin that this was a fall from grace. Then Paolozzi turned to Amadée Ozenfant's book *The Foundations of Modern Art,* first published in 1929 and a great favorite with the artist. He liked to give copies of it to all his friends. By juxtaposing disparate images, wrote Ozenfant, or by distorting well-known appearances, you could jog the mind out of its habitual associations. Juxtaposition, distortion, simplification, modification: all are ways of arriving at new visual metaphors. By these means, concluded Paolozzi in introducing his lecture, works of art have inexorably turned into *images,* which is where they are today.

So it was in 1988 quite acceptable to mention secular and religious images in the same breath. Both were now called "icons," changing the original meaning of the word. And they had all become visual clichés— part of the vast, rich image bank of contemporary reproduction. Paolozzi recalled that having been brought up a Catholic, in 1930s Edinburgh, with a reproduction of Leonardo's *Last Supper* on his bedroom wall, this still gave him pause for thought. He then showed a slide of a line drawing of his, based on a photograph of a Passion play in the 1880s. "You can add

your own figures to it," said the artist. "You can make the background an autostrada if you want. This becomes a Fellini-like world, and you can combine it with another landscape with figures. Working graphically like this is like making a bizarre film in Hollywood. But the amazing thing is—that nothing is absurd any more." You can even add Mickey Mouse if you like.

Then came the visual experience of "Jesus and the Volkswagen." Here is part of it:

- the white Jesus statue in Rio/a traffic jam, with ox-drawn caravan trapped in it
- the dashboard of a car, with Crucifixion image on the windscreen/ painting of Boy Scouts admiring Holman Hunt's painting *The Light of the World*
- Dalí's *Christ of St. John of the Cross*/archive photograph of Volkswagen Beetle on a garage forecourt
- two Mexican folk-art Madonnas/advertisement for a Volkswagen Beetle in Monument Valley
- Polaroids of Leonardo's *The Last Supper*/the dust jacket of Ozenfant's *Foundations*
- Paolozzi's drawing of the Passion play/archive photograph of piles of crushed car bodies, with ladders and figures standing on top
- multiple photographs of an actor playing Jesus in a Passion play/a heavily customized VW Beetle
- a brightly colored painting-by-numbers face of Jesus/the Paolozzi print *Blueprint for a New Museum*

The final slide of this sequence—on the right-hand side—was Paolozzi's monochrome lithograph and screenprint called *Blueprint for a New Museum,* dating from 1980–81, in which a satellite, an American bomber aircraft, an action-man figure, some printed circuitry, a mechanical fish, three bikini-clad girls riding a bomb, a bicycle, and a group of Hellenistic sculptures all floated in the seemingly zero gravity of Cologne Cathedral. Paolozzi's alternative title was *My Cologne Cathedral.* He was teaching in Germany at the time.

In the Senior Common Room at the Royal College of Art hangs an oil-on-board painting called *Christ at Emmaus* by Patrick Caulfield—a British painter of the pop generation, still very influential. The painting dates from Easter 1962, when Patrick was set a student project—they did
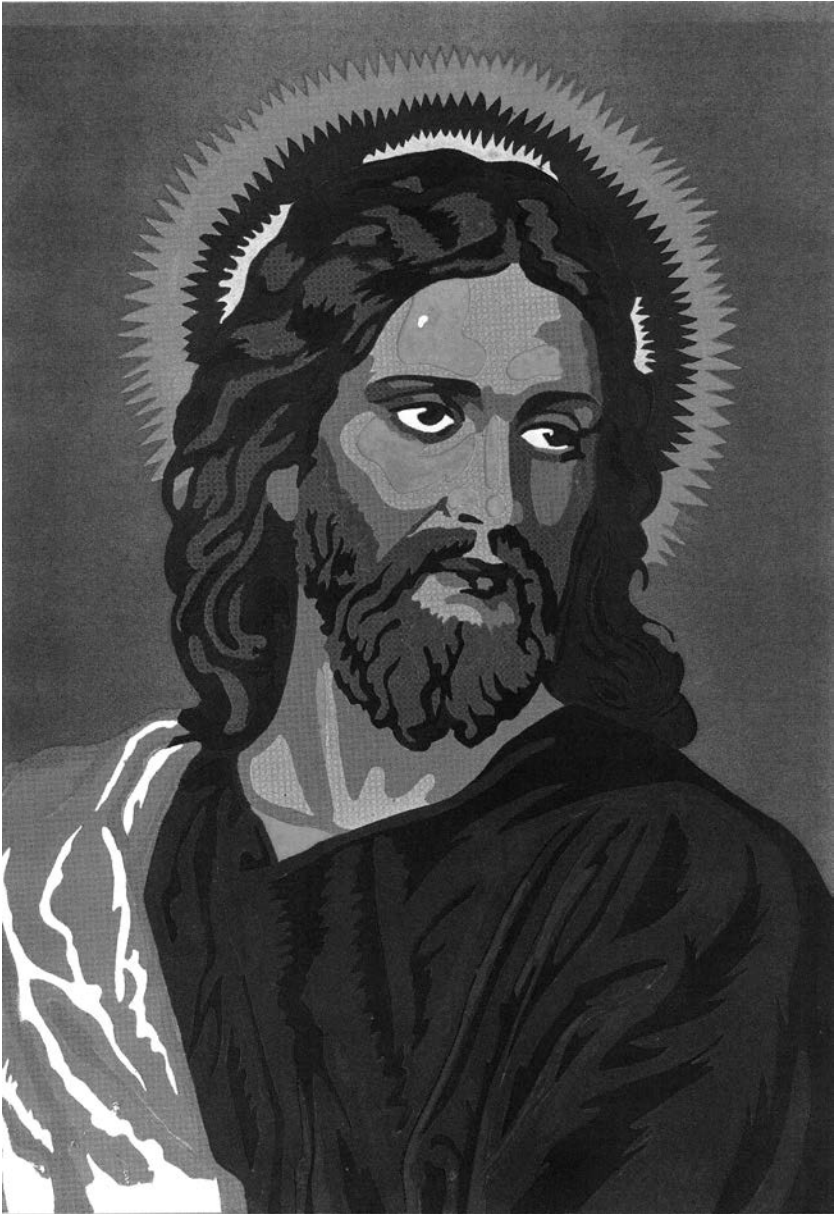
FIGURE 6. Eduardo Paolozzi, *Jesus Color by Numbers,* 1965–70. (From General Dynamic FUN, with permission of the Paolozzi Trustees.)

that in art schools in those days—to paint a scene from the Bible. Earlier examples of the results of this exercise include Peter Blake's *Preparation for Entry into Jerusalem* (1955) and David Hockney's *Myself and My Heroes* (1961). The resulting Caulfield picture shows a monk in the desert, standing by a palm tree, with next to him a figure on a horse with flowing hair and a beard. The border consists of a series of vaguely Islamic patterns. When asked about the meaning of the image after the term began again, Caulfield admitted—in true pop fashion—that he had actually taken it from the lid of a box of dates. And why not, because there was no physical description of Jesus in the Bible? It has generally been agreed that Caulfield's painting is really about celebrity and a pop image rather than about the Bible. A few years ago, we launched at the Royal College of Art the wonderful new design and typography by Derek Birdsall of the Anglican *Common Worship* prayer books, a design process that I had chaired. And we launched it in the Senior Common Room. A senior figure in the Church of England—who shall remain nameless—said at the launch, "I do believe that's the only equestrian portrait of Our Lord I've ever seen." I hadn't the heart to tell him it came from a box of dates!

But this issue of celebrity and image has been key to the so-called Young British Artists of the "Sensation" generation, who emerged in the early 1990s. So figures from the Christian story are presented in all sorts of unlikely settings for no deeper reason, it seems, than to create an effect, to be outrageous—to exploit the celebrity of the subject in art, and of course to exploit its sensitivity—to get a reaction, as Eduardo Paolozzi predicted in 1988, only with tongue firmly in cheek: a kind of comic nihilism, which is sometimes deliberately clichéd. In a saturated visual landscape where you can no longer assume that there is any kind of shared symbolic order, and where the artistic avant-garde in the sense the modernists used the phrase has reached the point of no return, there has been a strong tendency to revisit the past and its symbols, this time around with irony. Second-order meanings rather than first-order meanings. Humor as a way of dealing with the emptiness.

So what we are presented with are smart, ironic statements about well-known religious artworks—notably Leonardo's *Last Supper,* Michelangelo's *Pietà,* the Turin Shroud now that has been proved to most people's satisfaction to be an artwork, Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus,* and even Renaissance Calvaries. Recognizing the past—unlike Kandinsky—but revisiting it with the intention of causing a sensation. Maybe this began with Andy Warhol's *Be a Somebody with a Body* (1985), or his Warhol
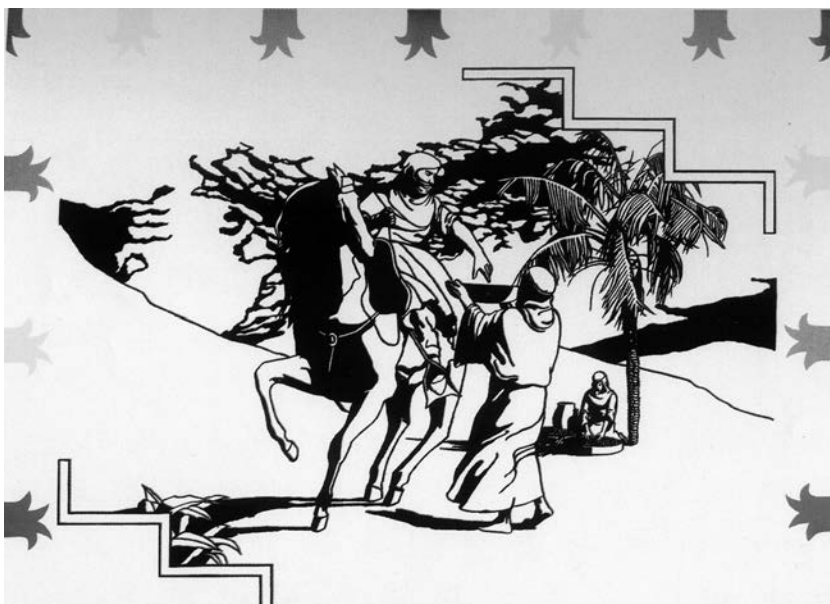
FIGURE 7. Patrick Caulfield, *Christ at Emmaus,* 1962. (Royal College of Art Collection, with permission.)

Raphael (1985), from a Sistine Madonna in a nineteenth-century encyclopedia on art, or his *Christ 112 Times* (1986).[10] Or even with his screenprinted Marilyn Monroes, which do resemble the veil of Veronica. At the time of his death, Warhol was working on a pop-art image of *The Last Supper.* The memory of his Catholic upbringing was evidently much stronger than most art historians have allowed.

There have been many examples of postmodern iconography produced by young British artists from the 1990s onward. Recent ones include Damien Hirst's meat *Crucifixion* of 2004—a literal version of Francis Bacon's remarks—or his *Last Supper* of 2003, with its references to baroque religious imagery. "I saw what was going on with religion," he said at the time, "and that it was bound to fail, then as a lapsed Catholic I tried to turn art into an alternative or something." Or the Chapman Brothers' *Hell,* of 1998–2000, with its updated vision in miniature and in glass vitrines of a medieval inferno, only this time populated by Nazi troops. Or Chris Ofili's notorious *Madonna,* made up of pornographic magazine images and dung. Or Grayson Perry's *Medals of Dishonour,*

10. See, for example, Jane Daggett Dillenberger, *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol* (New York: Continuum, 1998).

shown in the British Museum in 2009—which showed Christ as a consumer, covered in logos and brands. Or Tracey Emin's neon piece *I Felt You and I Knew You Loved Me*—an ambiguous sentiment, to say the least—which was placed in Liverpool Anglican Cathedral in 2009, while the cathedral bells played the opening bars of John Lennon's "Imagine" as a way of encouraging thoughts beyond the mundane, as part of an arts festival. No heaven? Think about it. The dean appeared on BBC Radio 4 saying that the cathedral staff had agreed to feature "Imagine" because the song "draws attention to religious conflict in the world today" and encouraged thoughts about that. Plus, to ask people to imagine there's no heaven is to imply there might *be* a heaven. The awkward squad of British art has, in fact, visited religious imagery many times.[11] One basic question is: among these neoconceptual artists, as many critics have called them, what is the concept? Just swearing in church, then giggling? Or what?

And that is in the gallery, on the plinth, and in the cathedral. What about in the high street—where Benjamin's predictions have come true with a vengeance, in ways he could not even have conceived in 1935? The Advertising Standards Authority in Britain, and equivalents overseas, receive more complaints about the use of traditional Christian religious imagery for advertising purposes than about any other trend in advertising, and this has apparently been a growing tendency since the mid-1990s. "It started just at Christmastime," says the ASA—"Be a Wise Man This Christmas," and so on—but "now happens all the year round." There is even a name for it in the trade: Godvertising. Recognizable iconography, even today, and therefore "presold": recognizable by the age group being targeted. A strong reaction, which draws attention to the product. The aura of the imagery harnessed to selling. Constructing new meanings around traditional images. The idea that the product is a classic, priceless, a masterpiece, an inspired creation. It's only a joke, after all, isn't it? Some of these advertising images have in fact been withdrawn following complaints—especially from evangelical groups. Characteristic examples, mainly from Europe, include a nativity scene used for a brand of lager with the slogan "It's a girl"; another, for a newly launched car: "Be there first"; the Virgin Mary wearing labeled jeans; Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus*

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11. See, for example, Norman Rosenthal and Simonetta Fraquelli, eds., *Sensation* (London: Phaidon Press, 1997); and Gregor Muir and Clarrie Wallis, *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida* (London: Tate, 2004). For some more international treatments, see Nissan N. Perez, *Revelation: Representations of Christ in Photography* (Jerusalem: Merrell Publishers in association with the Israel Museum, 2003).

reworked to promote a brand of pizza; Leonardo's *Last Supper* to promote a catering company, and on another occasion an Irish betting shop; a crown of thorns transformed into the logo of a computer game company; a reenacted Crucifixion, emphasis on the feet, to advertise sports footwear; Pope John Paul II in a safety helmet, with the slogan "Eleventh Commandment: Thou Shalt Always Wear a Condom"—this, from the British Safety Council; and a school nativity play, during which a woman called Mary gives birth on the stage, to the horror of the parents, while the presiding vicar calmly eats a mince pie (the advertisement is for the mince pie). Maybe such advertisements are not as recent a phenomenon as one might imagine. There was an article in the *Times* of London, in the spring of 1967, about the use of Holman Hunt's *Light of the World* in a comedy sketch on BBC Television's *Late Night Show,* where the mouth in the picture moves—advertising a brand of paraffin, for the lamp. Following complaints, the then chairman of the BBC, Lord Normanbrook, issued a carefully phrased public apology, saying, "Those responsible for the programme overlooked the fact that many people who care deeply for this particular picture because of its association as part of their upbringing with religious beliefs, extend to the picture itself their respect for those beliefs. As a result, a number of viewers were much offended." Was the program satirizing some real-life advertisements or predicting what might happen in the future?[12]

My final painting is by a young British artist called Graham Hudson, and it is called *Crucifixion* (2002).[13] It was painted some eight years ago, and I am interested in the ways in which it is trying hard to cope with the visual environment I have been describing. Also in the fact that it is *serious.* Here are Graham Hudson's own words about it:

> It is about converting images into text, into information. The idea of crucifixion is not a bedtime story—the Romans refined it as a form of extreme torture: it took the longest amount of time to suffer and die. There are entire medical websites devoted to it. What I wanted to do was to filter all this down into language. The image of

12. I am grateful to Judith Brockhurst, expert on Holman Hunt, for sending me the *Light of the World* reference. For some different perspectives, see also Carma R. Gorman, "Religion on Demand: Faith-Based Design," *Design and Culture* 1, no. 1 (March 2009): 9–22; and Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

13. On Graham Hudson, see Jemima Montagu, *Graham Hudson* (London: Jerwood Artists Platform, 2004).

crucifixion has become a visual cliché and lost a lot of its power: so I wanted to re-energise the image through language. And the lettering I used was that of a "club flyer" or advertisement or rock band line-up. The cause of death, asphyxiation, is in the middle. The painting starts with the head at the top; then the medical details are listed from top to bottom—from pathopsychological exhaustion (head) to paralysed deep perineal nerve (feet), with the symptoms made large or small according to how much they contributed to the cause of death. When I got to the metatarsal (as in pierced second metatarsal bone), everyone asked me what this was—and then David Beckham's foot started appearing in the papers at the same time, so we all knew. The bright pastel colours are Miami Beach, or Changing Rooms or fly-poster pastels—domestic colours, as if in a piece of home decoration which are about home comforts. The religious aspect—the big subject—is tricky to talk about, but a reverend e-mailed me to say it was one of the most moving things he's ever seen. For him, it reanimated the image, which was part of my point.

When I showed a slide of Hudson's *Crucifixion,* as part of a recent lecture on "spirituality and contemporary art," a member of the audience made the interesting comparison between this and Holman Hunt's *Light of the World.* Both are concerned with the empirical facts, the surface data, the outward signs of the subject matter. Neither *The Light of the World* nor *Crucifixion,* said the member of the audience, tells us much about the spirit within. But that, too, is part of Graham Hudson's project: to create a text piece for the instant information age out of one of the most important moments in Western history. Figurative approaches to the Crucifixion have in the early twenty-first century become "visual clichés." The imagery is so well known, he says, that it is taken for granted and always compared with earlier treatments rather than with the original experience. At the same time the words have become dissociated from their original biblical setting, from their religious context, and they are even dissociated from the reality of pain. But for him the Crucifixion regains a sort of "power" through informational graphics alone. At a time when many of his contemporary British artists, not to mention advertisers, use the visual image of Jesus simply as an image of great celebrity— and use it in ways that shock, on the assumption that gallerygoers will think of the subject matter as taboo—Hudson starts from a less certain position.

FIGURE 8. Graham Hudson, *Crucifixion,* 2004. (Author's collection.)

Even celebrity has been drained of meaning. What we are left with is information, lifestyle, and consumerism. In this barren context, Hudson is trying in his own way to reenchant a set of images that are in danger of losing their meaning altogether.

We have come a long way since Bishop Bell's "instinctive sympathy" between visual artists and the worship of God, his hope that the generality of artists would in future produce works that are "so pure and lovely in which they seek to express the Eternal Spirit." Such seriousness, such high-mindedness, has all but disappeared from the art world as usually defined. And in such a context, it is tempting to see *any* artworks that try in some way to get beyond a commonsense surface view of the world as at some level statements of faith—but that may be clutching at straws. For several twentieth-century theologians, visual art can still be "the dimension of depth"—the state of being ultimately concerned, disrupting the appearance of things, giving a dimension of depth to reality and maybe revealing a new unity. For the artist *and* the viewer. But equally, this could just be about the artist's subjectivity, rather than about "that something more." I say "just," but when does a Mother and Child become a Madonna or a Crucifixion become more than a man in extreme pain? When does an abstract painting become a spiritual experience? Telling the difference, in a convincing way, is not at all easy, as I have tried to show in these lectures. And can the "aura" of more traditional images survive much longer in a world of mechanical reproduction? Is there still life in them, in any meaningful or deep sense? Misuse of these images still makes us squeamish—or some of us—which is, I suppose, something. But *why?* They are only paintings and sculptures. *Only?* Is it because of a nostalgia for some kind of shared symbolic order in the past—one that may never have existed as we now imagine it to have done? Keith Thomas's book *Religion and the Decline of Magic* would suggest that it was never really "shared," even the first time around, at least in Britain. There was a sense that there was a body of knowledge that existed somewhere, but that the many did not have access to it. Eamon Duffy has more recently challenged this, in his book *The Stripping of the Altars.* The question remains an open one. If the modernists had problems with confronting the traditional iconography, what about the postmodernists? Irony, detachment, and humor—though a very fashionable and, according to some philosophers, the *only* stance—are missing the point of this, surely. Is it possible anymore to do the right deed for the wrong reason? After the trial and the wasteland, when things have fallen apart, I finish as I began with a series of questions and memories rather than a pattern of answers.