Art and Religion: Felicitous Tension or Conflict?

RELIGION bends the knee but art makes man walk erect on his two legs. Precisely here we encounter basically antithetical drives in these two fundamental aspects of human existence. This essay addresses itself to the tensions and conflict attendant upon religion as worship and art as making. The reader is cautioned that I am not using the word “art” as did the Renaissance and Humanist tradition. The distinction of art into fine and useful, while itself useful, is too narrow and blocks any successful confrontation with art in the broad sweep of its meaning and power. What is art in the most universal sense of the term? Aristotle, in posing the question, noted that art is marked off, fenced away from, everything that goes under the rubric of nature.1

The Stagirite pointed to an evident truth of human experience, needing no validation from anything more fundamental than itself: i.e., whereas nature possesses its own principles of activity immanent to itself; whereas nature gets that way not because of anything that man does, a work of art has its principles imposed upon it by man. Wood in a tree is natural; the same wood worked into a rowboat is art. Aristotle’s observations remain perennially true but their application today is blurred enormously and this blurring began when man first took to himself the task of civilizing nature, bringing it to heel, and putting it to his own service. For those of us who live in a civilized order and not in the jungle, we rarely encounter what old fashioned romanticists called “raw nature.” The nature civilized man knows has been domesticated and converted into art. We simply need to call to mind a well-ordered farm with its rows of wheat; its growing corn; its domesticated animals; its cross-bred fruits: the mark of man is everywhere. In this sense of the term, nature is not obliterated by art but is fulfilled by art thus completing the scriptural injunction that man take unto himself the task of fulfilling creation.2

We do not fall into the pathetic fallacy when we note that there is something in nature that demands that it be perfected by art. Within this zone of reality art shock nature, enters into tension with nature, a tension that can be either fruitful and friendly or hostile and even bitter. The ecologists today have noted a backlash in a nature genuinely abused by four hundred years of mechanical technology. The romanticists among us—and there ought to be, I imagine, at least a dose of romanticism in every sane man—bemoan the loss of forests and their conversion into houses or boats or furniture. The forest certainly has its beauty and can bring out virtues that are often lost in the city, but if these considerations were pushed to an extreme, if Rousseau were given his head completely, there would be no houses or furniture or wooden boats.

The good inherent in pure nature, nature unworked by man, is essentially a good to be contemplated. Essentially this good

---


2. Genesis, ch. 1 and 2.

Dr. Wilhelmsen, professor of philosophy and politics at the University of Dallas, is author of Man’s Knowledge of Reality, Omega, Hilaire Belloc, The Metaphysics of Love, and The Paradoxical Structure of Existence.

The Intercollegiate Review—Spring, 1975 85
does not belong to the moral order (although it can have moral consequences). Man's awe before a nature untouched by his own hand is aesthetic. Following Aquinas who insisted that the beautiful is that which pleases when it is simply contemplated, I judge then that the delight which man takes in nature as it comes forth from the hand of God is principally disinterested and hence properly aesthetic. The experience of natural beauty is a status, not an exstatus; experiences of this type freeze action, and the will and emotions are halted in joy simply because something exists and exists as it does. Man marveling before the splendor of the universe is content with merely "letting-being-be." Heidegger's sein lassen: it is good that this tree or brook or flying fish simply be and man thus blesses, as with a benediction, the mystery of a world which he has not brought into being.

But the drive of art in man comes from another source. At its most primitive, a primitiveness that is never surmounted even in highly developed civilizations, art answers the need in man for self-preservation and for betterment. All art, all techne, is an extension, as Dr. Marshall McLuhan has noted, of man's sense powers as is the hammer an extension of the arm and the wheel of the leg, the telescope of the eye, the telephone of the ear, and the atomic bomb of the fist. Man thus extends himself initially in order that he might survive and prosper. If man contented himself with sitting by the side of the road contemplating the glories of the world, he would perish. And he would perish even in some mythological Tahiti. Secondly, man is simply built physically in such a way that he literally stands on the earth and takes it in his hands. Crawling on all fours is awkward for any artist. But man takes the world in his hands by imposing formal patterns or meaning on matter. Art is, therefore, to borrow a title from a book by Karl Rahner, Geist ins Welt, spirit in the world.

But "spirit in the world" must be understood delicately and with philosophical precision. If by spirit we mean, again following Aristotle, "the return of the soul upon itself" in reflective activity; or by spirit we mean the taking-of-man-in-hand-by-himself, consciousness, then man's spirit is unlike The Spirit of God or the spirit of God's messengers, the angels. God's spirit certainly is in the world but it is not of the world. The spirit of God makes the world be and outside of this creative act there simply would be no world at all. The angelic spirit, according to the scriptural tradition, can be sent to the world but is again not of the world. But man's spirit, his soul in intellectual and volitional activity, is spirit constituted in the world, spirit enlashed. Man's spirit does not sigh through the body as though it were some transcendental ghost but exists and operates in and through the body, in the world itself. These propositions, the formal defense of which would take me away from the business at hand, I offer nonetheless as principles for an understanding of man as homo faber, as "making man." We all know that bees make hives and that spiders spin webs but they do not know what they are doing and hence their activity lacks that precise element of self-consciousness and of freedom that marks true art and makes man a maker. Given that this constitution is man's very nature, in man nature fuses with art: the artist is the man.

In a very true sense man can fashion himself, at least to a degree. Health is natural but when achieved through medicine health becomes what—art or nature? Is the "Six Million Dollar Man" of television tame a natural spectacle or an artistic one?

3. Thomas Aquinas. "Pulchra dicatur quae visa placant," (Summa Theologica, 1, Q. 4, a. 4, ad 1.): "Pulchrum dicatur id quam ipsa apprehen-

sio placet." (Summa Theologica, 1, Q. 27, a. 1, ad 5).


5. Aristotle, De Anima, 417. b. c: Metaphysics, B. IX, 1046 b. 18-1049 b. 34. Cf., my discussion: Willemen, Frederick D., The Metaphysics of

Frederick Wilhelmsen

The mastery of nature and its transformation into art by man follows man's very utilitarian drive to survive and to survive well. And it is exactly here where we encounter a zone of danger capable of revealing a sharp tension between art and religion. This tension... lies close to the heart of historic conflicts between religion and art. (F.D.W.)

The question seems bizarre but it is less so than the situation it attempts to probe. Today the entire cosmos is being converted into an art form. Nature is being absorbed so thoroughly into art that often it is difficult to determine, according to Werner Heisenberg, where man leaves off and nature takes over. Heisenberg's remarks pertain, of course, to contemporary physics whose mental constructs, artefacts, so mesh with the atomic and sub-atomic world they attempt to understand, that any understanding we do have of that vast sub-microscopic universe is achieved only within our own scientific and hence artistic patterning.


Historic Conflict Between Art and Religion

If art is initially a human necessity, a utility in the deeper sense of the term, religion is not initially useful at all. Religion wells up from another source in human existence. The word "religion" is used here in its broadest sense to cover every religion in the sociological and anthropological meaning given the word. At this point of the discussion the difference between revealed and non-revealed religions is not pertinent. Religion is universally natural but too little attention has been given by philosophers and others to the very concept or intelligibility of natural religion. My exploration here follows the pioneering work down by the Spanish philosopher, Javier Zubiri. In part my reflections depend upon certain conclusions achieved more recently in Gestalt Psychology. The synthesis, nonetheless, is purely personal.

The word "religion" semantically suggests a "binding back" of some reality to a source or ground of being: religare. Initially the imagery that swarms into the imagination is spatial. Trees and bushes are grounded in the earth. By a refinement of meaning the purely spatial connotations

can be eliminated. We need only think of the wings of birds in flight that are "bound" by the laws of aerodynamics. An "unbound" being, so far as human experience is concerned, is simply not to be found anywhere, look as hard as we might. Everything is relegatum, bound back to some source. In this sense everything that exists is "religion." But only man consciously and deliberately binds himself "back" (te) to a source of existence. All things are contingent and dependent but man takes this contingency in hand, lives it—most especially in moments of crisis and anguish and danger—and this makes of him not merely a being conditioned by relegation but constituted thereby. Man is religious by his very nature. The ground to which man refers himself is what Zubiri has called "the divine." Let the term "the divine" refer to the ground in which man stands, or—to void again the spatial metaphor—the source of his existence. This is no so-called "proof" for the existence of God. Such a proof comes later, if it comes at all. I am simply pointing out the evident truth of experience that man is naturally religious in that he experiences no inner anchor to his being and that he spontaneously seeks to anchor himself in "the divine" in one or another fashion. Relegation itself makes atheism a philosophical and practical alternative to theism. Atheism is essentially negative and is made possible by what it denies. The young Karl Marx once wrote that any man who attends to his contingency must admit the existence of God but "this question is forbidden to socialist man." The admission is startling in its candor. If you attend to, meditate upon, your contingent or "grounded" status in being you must admit that you are dependent on The Independent, God. Personally, I do not hold that a mere attendance upon contingency of itself and without the introduction of other considerations leads ex ipso to the affirmation of God; here Marx goes faster than I do, but I do agree that such an affirmation will begin with just this awareness of contingency.

These considerations cross Aristotle’s insistence that only a beast does not know awe. To be bound back and experience the self as contingent, as floating and unanchored in the real, to be a ship at sea with neither sails nor motors nor anchors, to be in the air without a parachute, is to palpate the truly ultimate mystery of existence, human and even non-human. The last mystery to which all religion is an answer was well summed up by Heidegger when he wrote: "why is there, in general, being rather than nothing?" To which I add: at first blush it would seem far more reasonable that there be nothing rather than something because nothing grounds its own being. Existence is a scandal to pure reason.

But although a scandal to pure reason, existence is a joy to man. From these experiences there have grown up all the festivals and feasts of pagan antiquity and of Christianity, indeed of men everywhere. The being-bound-back yields awe which then gives way to thanksgiving to "The Divine," to the gods, to God. Dr. Josef Pieper in his little gem of a book, In Tune with the World,11 has pointed out that the feast, the festival, while not necessarily always religious, is bound up with social ritual. The ritual festival consecrates a time and a place and ordains that man cease his working in order that he might rejoice in the goodness done him by the gods and, in his affirmation of anything at all at ritual time, man implicitly affirms the totality of that which is.12 "Ubi certas gentes ibi est festivitas—where charity rejoices, there is festivity."13 In festivals man offers up his arts in the service of the divine.

12. Ibid., pp. 10-17.
Necessity and Transcendence in Art

BUT this very offering, in one specific and deep dimension, runs counter to what seems to constitute the inner dynamism of art itself. Have I not insisted that art prim- itively grows out of man’s drive for self-preservation? Have I not insisted that man simply dies unless he becomes what he already is potentially—a homo faber? Through his art man transforms the universe and thus makes himself its lord. All art, understood in this strict and somewhat narrow—but important—sense renders man independent of his surroundings, of his environment. Art is nervous, active, domineer- ing, and in so being art tends to overcome man’s contingent state, to chisel away the ontological bases that make him dependent, to challenge fate, to release him from the bondage of a very precarious existence. Even the art of the actuary and the insurance agent tries to circumvent death and I am reminded of the morituri that issues credit cards: “One call answers all.” Art is the enemy of necessity.

Religion recognizes the necessarily contingent state of human life and eventually comes even to celebrate it through acts of thanksgiving. Religion, as mentioned earlier, is the bending of the knee. Art is man walking through the world on two legs, knees not bent at all. Art independizes; religion independizes. The contrast is made as sharply as possible for the sake of illustrating a hidden tension and a possible source of conflict. To insist that there are antithetical drives in man as artist and man as religious is not to insist that these dynamisms are necessarily opposed as are enemies. Art and religion do, however, grow out of differing needs found within man. Therefore they can be in conflict with one another.

Through a kind of catalyst worked at the heart of human existence religion and art reveal themselves to be supremely human but there is a kind of impersonal humanity, if the term be permitted, that characterizes art and that never marks religion. Even in the savage cruelty of Aztec religion the offer-

The Intercollegiate Review—Spring, 1975
Divine mode of operation. St. Thomas Aquinas brought this home in his discussion of God's knowledge. God does not know something, let us say myself, because I am there to be known the way in which someone knows me because I am there before him to be known. God knows something by making it exist, by loving it into being, and before he makes it exist, "it" is simply not there to be known; "it" is not a Platonic idea hovering in God's mind; "it" is simply nothing at all. Therefore, concluded Aquinas, God's knowledge is better compared to the knowledge that an artist has of what he makes than to our speculative awareness of what exists in independence of ourselves. The artist knows the artefact in bringing it into being and unless he knows it by producing it, the artefact will never be known because it never will be. Inventions not thought through and poems unwritten are non-inventions and non-poems. Artistry emerges thus as novelty. Strictly speaking the boat is not potentially in the wood of the tree; left to itself the tree will never convert itself into a boat. The boat—as a form of human transportation—is engendered in the fertility of human reason.

A poem is not in its materials—metaphors, stories, symbols, etc.—not even potentially; these raw materials must be integrated, synthesized, and that act of integration is productive, creative. The artist thus mimics God by making things he but with a profound difference. God makes things exist totally out of nothing; the artist must use pre-existing materials. Human creativity depends hence on man's contingent status.

And here again we encounter a possible conflict between art and religion. Art both imitates and makes but art would make without reference to the world could art do so. There is a magical quality to all art but when fully released from dependence on the real, magic bewitches—or would bewitch—a new order of being into existence. Magic would make something be simply by

---

14. Thomas Aquinas, *In 1 Sent.,* d. 19, q. 3, a. 1, ad 1 et 2 et 3; d. 19, q. 19, a. 2; d. 19, q. 5, a. 5.

The Pseudo Self-Liberation of Modern Art

Art today—all art or *technē*—aspires to such a total dominance over the world that the cosmos itself, to the most distant star and to the last frontiers of our galaxy, will be cradled in the hand of man and thus dependent totally for its being on a new ground of being, a new "divine principle"—Man. Any modest acquaintance with the history of technology constrains the intelligence to affirm this truth but the same intelligence must judge that the dream of total dominance is gnostic; it cannot be pulled off because man cannot create out of nothing. But although mankind is doomed in
advance as it lives this Promethean dream. Mankind still marches forward with it. Our technology today, under electric conditions, does not "work the world over" but our technology sweeps the world into itself, converting it—in McLuhan's words—into an "art form," a new stage.² This has produced in man of us, individuals as well as societies, a forgetfulness of contingency, a gradual fading away of the natural religion that is consubstantial with human life, a dimming of the need to offer thanks, a damping of all the feasts and festivals of what was once Christendom. The marks of this are everywhere: the conviction that every problem has a technical solution; the impatience we sense before limitations placed on our activities by chance and contingency; the contempt we have for societies that do not run on time, that have not mastered creation as we have; the reduction of death to a social and medical problem; the refusal to see any good in pain and suffering; the withering away of the sense of awe; the loss of mystery. (The revival of the Occult in the United States is a conscious reaction against technology, but at bottom the occult manifests the same desire to bind the Powers From Beyond to the will of man.)

Promethean art promises liberation. The truth that it has enslaved and enslaved in no more striking way than in robbing man of his sense of the divine need not be labored here. The truly grave problem facing man today is not so much the denial of God. The truly grave problem is that man in industrial technologized societies does not sense any need for God. Contemporary art, both as technology in the accepted meaning given that word and as "art" in the sense of imitation, would render the divine superfluous.

But the artist can transcend the inner finalities of his own art if he consciously puts it at the service of the Divine. Art in one dimension deviates in its finality from what religion does in its inner dynamism. We have explored this tension. But an art that self-consciously attends to its inner dynamism tends to be bad art just as a boxer who overtrains is likely to lose in the ring. The fanatical functionalism of European art between the two World Wars is an instance in question. We are all aware of the contradiction contained in an art that parodies its own practicality and utilitarianism. Such art forms end in sterility and have thus mocked their own goal of supreme usefulness. We are all also aware of art forms that were, true enough, designed specifically to be supremely practical but that nonetheless delighted the hearts of men by their beauty: we need only think of the silversmiths of colonial New England and of the sheer splendour of the hull of the American clipper ships designed by Donald McKay. But with all this said—and I do not now intend to gainsay it—the intrinsic dynamism of *technē* is towards that which is useful, to man's *eun* and to his *bene esse.*

All art that looks to man's "well being" as opposed to his mere survival tend to surpass themselves. They contain a kind of overdrive in their inner dynamism and this overdrive symbolizes and more often than not what it symbolizes is sacrilegious. This is obviously true of the didactic arts in a conventional sense of the term but it is also true that all arts of this type tend to overflow their own limits and thus to be didactic in that they say something which transcends their own formal structures and finalities. This is very true in homely familial situations, in which an attractively decorated cake, a delight in itself at a birthday celebration, becomes a symbol of the celebration of life, of the bonds knitting together the family, of gratitude for still another year of life. This is even true of the world of advertising. Did not G. K. Chesterton once write that only an illiterate could appreciate the beauty of Times Square? When the specific content or import of the neon signs is suppressed, something remains—and it is poetry.

Now this "something beyond" in all

---

works of art, even the needle-work of a grandmother making a dress for her grandchild, must not be reduced to the merely psychological. The psychological is present and does deserve our serious attention. But the "beyond" spoken of here is substantial with art and finds its true home only when art is dedicated to the service of religion. This "more than itself" found in every artistic act (but subdued or even suppressed in arts of mere survival), even if it be but a gesture or a song whistled by a boy on a country road, is burnt into the very artistic act itself. Art thus transcends its own immediate end which is to produce something, but art does so not by offering itself to man as a contemplative object but as inviting, signalling man, to lift himself beyond the work to its ultimate Home, its Patria, the Land of the Lord. There is, of course, a danger in this transcendence. The danger consists in reducing the work itself to a mere symbol—to fail to see it as it is. This is bad enough but it is even worse to fool yourself into thinking you have grasped—even loved—a reality because that reality symbolizes something beyond itself. Nobody can really appreciate a Rolls-Kroyer who sees it as nothing more than a status symbol. The reduction of the world to a tissue of symbols is a kind of subtle Manicheanism whose advocates are incapable of understanding anything under foot or at hand on its own terms. Human experience teaches us that unless you grasp the reality "in-itself," in its own dignity and worth and function, you cannot understand it as a "more than itself," as a symbol. At the risk of oversimplification I suggest that Byzantium overly symbolized whereas our technocratic and secularist society undersymbolizes. Between these two dangers lies the truth and the road to sanity.

Art in Service of the Divine

All art imitates, as pointed out, nature. All art imitates God's creative activity. This imitation, rooted as it is in artistic activity as such, is both an act making an artefact to exist and an act flashing beyond itself, through imitation, to God. The theory here grows out of historical observation. We need only return to the religious or sacrilegious sense of the festival pointed out by Dr. Pieper. The festival—I follow Pieper's reasoning on this point—cannot be reduced to mere play, to a simple suspension of the world of day to day work. Play, understood rigorously, is activity which is done purely and exclusively for itself. Play involves a delight taken in any activity merely because the activity exists and as it is. We need only contemplate children at play or watch the greyskull playing chess in a public park. But even here we can easily trick ourselves: the waves lap over the sand castles made by children and we sense something about the littleness of all things human: we experience this transcendence but the children who made the sand castles did not; they were just playing. Play needs no justification: play is play and is thus self-justifying. Hence the same Chesterton could write that God does not work: He plays. But the festival, which is playful, involves a significance and is a sign pointing beyond itself. The festival offers thanks, celebrates some moment in man's life and thus celebrates the Lord of life.

In so doing art surrenders—better yet, offers—its internal dynamism which is factious to something beyond its essential structuring art reveals itself to be a kind of "plus" or "excess" that is proper to being as such. Art weds religion by surrendering its pretensions to autonomy in the service of the work of man. Every religious festival involves using up a surplus. We eat more

19. Sacrifice and holocaust come together in this instance that the fruit of the earth be consumed; thus differ in that in holocaust the victim literally consumes himself in sacrifice which is not a holocaust the victim is consumed, of course, by those who offer up the sacrifice.
nullight in the afternoon is, of course, as secular as at other times, but it is the Corrida del Corpus. 20

Art in occasions such as this is put deliberately to the service of what is not art—festivity; festivity in turn always looks beyond itself and thus signifies or signals something deeper than itself. Man affirms the goodness of creation and in so doing affirms a Divine however he might articulate that transcendent source of his being.

Art as secularized is stripped of this movement towards self-transcendence and art thus bends back narcissistically upon itself. The early Harvey Cox, in his The Secular City, advanced as desirable what in truth is a frighteningly drab vision of the world, of a civilization whose artistic structure is totally stripped of the divine. In this completely secularized world the cribs at Christmas are chased from the lawn at city hall, the bells are silent, the churches swept bare of statuary. The historic marriage between art and religion is annulled on the grounds that Christian faith is so transcendent that it can never enter into union and enflesh itself in the public artistic structure that forms the life style of a culture. 21 Cox’s secularized “Christian” is as lonely in his faith as was the anonymous Christian of tomorrow sketched by Romano Guardini in his The End of the Modern World: alone, some secretary in a vast clinical office with two hundred other girls pounding on typewriters or tending computers slyly signals her Christian adherence to some other lonely Christian at the far end of the office.

and we drink more on festival days. The fruits of labor are consumed. Now consumption belongs to the essence of sacrifice. Every feast sacrifices something by consuming the fruits of man’s labor: hence, Thanksgiving Day. Art sacrifices itself in order to be “more than itself.” Pieper exemplifies this through a description of the Feast of Corpus Christi in Toledo:

_The Streets, carpeted with canvas, are transformed into a vast festive tent whose walls are formed by the tapestry-decked façades of the houses and whose floor is strewn with rosemary and lavender, which gives a stronger perfume the more they are walked on. High Mass in the Cathedral is followed by the procession: a musical performance, military parade, social display, and Exposition of the Sacrament._ The

---

The synthesis of art and religion is nothing forced or dictated: it is a natural condition found in both pagan and Christian societies and even in iconoclastic Islam is not absent. The divorce between art and religion harms the artist because it refuses to his art that superabundance, that pouring of art outwards beyond its own proper formality that in itself—I grant that the assertion is bold—is constitutive of artistic activity if not of artistic essence or nature. By this I mean that a movement towards the transcendent cannot be discovered in artistic structures studied abstractly but that this movement is rather observed in artistic achievement—and it is observed in all cultures. The divorce between art and religion also harms the believer because the believer can only encounter his religion initially in art. The proposition is so evident that it is almost embarrassing to formulate it. I receive the Message of God, The Good News, through words. We hear the Word of God. Words are fashioned into sentences and sentences are artifacts, both logically and rhetorically. There is no possible way that an adult can affirm the faith that is in him outside of some symbolic, artistic structure, the most fundamental of which is language. The proposition is epistemologically valid, but it has a peculiarly theological significance in the context of Christianity: in Trinitarian theology, the very work of creation is done in the Word by the Father: "work," "word"—both lie at the heart of all artistic production; no product comes into being until it has been "expressed" by the artist. Even logic, according to the classical tradition, is an art. The divorce of religion from art in the name of secularization is not only an undesirable ideal; it is also contradictory in itself. If the enemy of religious art and art in the service of religion is successful in his polemic, it is due to the artistry of his rhetoric. In a word: all discussion about religion, for being discussion, involves its incarnation in art.

Art is the instrument of evangelization. This is true not only of the Catholic tradition with its emphasis on visual art, but it is also true of the Protestant tradition with its emphasis on song. In all religions we discover artistry at work in fashioning sensibilities and molding cultures that reflect convictions that transcend this world. Frightening consequences follow on the artist's conscious separation of his art from religion. (I am not suggesting, of course, that all art ought to aim at being religious; if art simply follows its own bent it will signal beyond itself to The Whole of Being.)

Art exists thus in tension and it can flourish only within this tension. As a mastering of the materials of being, art liberates man from the tyranny of raw nature and thus diminishes his contingency. As a "more than itself" art adumbrates the Divine which recalls man again to his contingency and which brings forth his private and corporate thanksgiving for the gift of being and of life. Art, as indicated, does not have to intend its own overdrive consciously. If man will only let art have its way, art will heal the wounds of contingency even as it hallow a very precarious world. Blessings and sacraments are works of art. But then so too is God's creation.

DID YOU ESPECIALLY LIKE A PARTICULAR ARTICLE?
A limited amount of reprints of articles and reviews in this and recent issues are available for classroom distribution and similar use. Drop us a note with the article and quantity desired or use form on page 120.

PHOTO CREDITS