Chapter 9

Religious Themes in Contemporary Art

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between art and religion, evident throughout the entire history of art, can be deciphered at two levels – that of the essence of art, and that of the actual theme the artist approaches. The mystical view on the essence of art, encountered from Orphic and Pythagorean thinkers to Heidegger and Gadamer, believes that art is a divine gift and the artist – a messenger of heavenly thoughts. But the issue of religious themes’ presence in art arises especially since modern times, after the eighteenth century, when religion starts to be constantly and vehemently attacked (from the Enlightenment and the French or the Bolshevik Revolution to the “political correctness” nowadays). Art is no longer just the material transposition of a religious content; instead, religion itself becomes a theme in art, which allows artists to relate to it in different ways – from veneration to disapproval and blasphemy. However, there have always been artists to see art in its genuine meaning, in close connection with the religious sentiment. An case in point is the work of Bill Viola. In Romanian art, a good example is the art group Prolog, but also individual artists like Onisim Colta or Marin Gherasim, who understand art in its true spiritual sense of openness to the absolute.

INTRODUCTION

A quick look at the history or art shows that over time the relationship between art and religion has been more than obvious and it can be traced at several levels. First of all, one can talk about an intrinsic religiosity of art, an essential religiosity of the artistic act. Secondly, the relationship between art and religion is revealed at the level of the artistic theme, and thirdly – that of the role or function acquired by a work of art. The three levels are not mutually exclusive, rather they complement one another. The first one is also the widest, covering virtually all art forms. The second restricts the discussion only to works which, in one way or another, deal with themes of religious inspiration, and the third level refers
only to works that, having a religious subject, acquire a specific function within an area or a religious ritual, in other words religious art itself.

This study will try to follow the three possible ways of linking religion with art, the first one conceived by philosophers and artists, the other two in the concrete analysis of works of art. But the distinction cannot be absolute, since each of these categories assumes the previous one.

THE INTRINSIC RELIGIOUSNESS OF ART

Regarding the first level – that of the essence of art – there are many theories aimed at elucidating this phenomenon. The way in which the origin of art is conceived also determines the views about its essence, and the various theories and interpretations that have tried to explain the artistic act (whether from a sociological, practical, ludic or even sexual, point of view) testify as to the importance attached to this issue. However, even if the assumptions are many, the most widespread conception on the origin of art among philosophers and poets (because they are the ones who have most reflected on art) is the mystical view, according to which art is rooted in the religious act itself. The religious sentiment, understood not as a stage in the historical evolution of human consciousness, but as a fundamental element of its structure (Eliade, 1971, p. 10) marks, from its inception, not only ritualistic moments, but all human activity, artistic manifestations included. Art, according to this view, is born as a side-line activity of religion and the relationship between art and religion throughout history often translates as a relationship between form and content, in the sense that art gives shape to the religious content.

This view has arisen from ancient times, from Orphic and Pythagorean thinkers, Plato and the neoplatonic through the Holy Fathers to the romantics. Hegel, Heidegger and Gadamer consider art to be a divine gift and the artist – a messenger of heavenly thought. Beauty becomes a key concept. For the Pythagoreans, *harmonia* is the intimate structure of the universe, and any music genre is a work of divinity (Tatarkiewicz, 1978, p. 137). For Plato, cosmic harmony is closely linked to the concept of beauty (*kallos*) which in turn is identical to good (*agathon*) and truth (*aletheia*). The artist is inspired by the gods in the process of creation, and true creation is a divine gift. In *Symposium*, the link between art and love of beauty is revealed in the analysis of beauty, which is considered a step up from physical beauty towards absolute beauty, namely that “it is ever-existent and neither comes to be nor perishes, neither waxes nor wanes” (Plato, 1925, para. 211a). The contemplation of divine beauty becomes a source of creative vocation of man, and creation is nothing but a revelation of the absolute (ibid, paras. 211e and 211a). In ancient thought, a true artist is the one who, through vision, reveals the transcendental essence of the visible world, rather than simply depicting the latter.

For Plotinus, beauty no longer relates to something in particular, rather it becomes a quality. Sensitive beauty stems from the nature of things, as a revelation of the spirit into matter as things get their beauty by communicating with reason coming from the divine. Perceiving the beauty of the soul is possible due to a resonance between its nature and the beauty that it looks upon. In order to be able to contemplate “true beauty,” one must possess “the tool” with which the soul looks upon beautiful things (Plotin, 2003, I, 6 (1), 2-4, p. 187). Dionysius the Areopagite develops a theology of beauty. For him, beauty is identified with absolute love; it is a cause, but also a purpose for everything: “it is called ‘Beautiful’ because It is All-Beautiful and more than Beautiful, and is eternally, unvaryingly, unchangeably Beautiful (Dionysius, n. d., p. 73). Therefore, beauty is the cause of genuine creation, and art reveals in the sense that it is a manifestation or an expression of divine love.