

Humanization of Christian Sacred Art and its Erosion as a Vehicle for Contemplative Intellection

I. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I will argue, against the background of the perennial philosophy that the humanization (the emphasis on individualism) of Western sacred art since the time of the Renaissance has led to its erosion as a vehicle toward contemplation of the divine and that sacred art needs to adhere to the inherent symbolism of a given religion. We would do well perhaps to first give a brief overview of the perennial philosophy from Aldous Huxley's influential book, *The Perennial Philosophy*:

The divine Ground of all existence is a spiritual Absolute, ineffable in terms of discursive thought, but (in certain circumstances) susceptible of being directly experienced and realised by the human being. This Absolute is the God-without-form of Hindu and Christian mystical phraseology. The last end of man, the ultimate reason for human existence, is unitive knowledge of the divine Ground—the knowledge that can come only to those who are prepared to “die to self” and so make room, as it were, for God. Out of any given generation of men and women very few will achieve the final end of human existence; but the opportunity for coming to unitive knowledge will, in one way or another, continually be offered until all sentient beings realise Who in fact they are.¹

The perennial philosophy is primarily concerned with the one, divine reality substantial to the manifold world of things and lives and minds. But the nature of this one reality is such that it cannot be directly and immediately apprehended except by those who have chosen to fulfill certain conditions, making themselves loving, pure in heart, and poor in spirit. The perennial philosophy works on the premise that man has two natures, “that of himself and that of an inner nature”; i.e., his Intellect.² It is by way of this inner nature that man can be united with the divine ground of reality, providing he is prepared to undertake certain steps to quash and put aside his egotistical nature, which more often stifles his ability to see beyond the self and the illusionary world that surrounds him.

Some well-known proponents of the perennial philosophy include René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, and the Anglo-Sri Lankan scholar and writer, Ananda Coomaraswamy, all of whom wrote extensively about it. What then is the role of sacred art and how do its aesthetics come into play?

II. THE ROLE OF INTELLECT AND THE IMPORTANCE OF FORM

Let us now turn to Schuon and his arguments concerning art. Schuon makes it clear that he is speaking about forms in art and not just forms, i.e., not abstract forms but things that are sensible in nature. Schuon avoids using the term “artistic forms” because the word “artistic” carries with it, in the modern sense, the notion of extravagance that he says is diametrically opposed to what he has in mind.³ Though he does admit that it is difficult to dissociate the form of art from art itself, as art is a principle manifestation of forms, it is necessary especially due to modern misinterpretations of the term. Sensible forms correspond directly to the Intellect.⁴ And, the highest realities are manifested in their remotest reflections:

In speaking of “forms,” there is a matter of terminology that calls for a few words of explanation: in speaking of “forms in art” and not just “forms,” but on the contrary, with things that are sensible by definition; if on the other hand, we avoid speaking of “artistic forms,” it is because the epithet “artistic” carries with it, in present-day language a notion of luxury and therefore of superfluity.⁵

The importance of Schuon’s argument is that traditional art has rules that apply to the cosmic laws and universal principles of the domain of forms. “If the importance of forms is to be understood, it is necessary to appreciate the fact that it is the sensible form that symbolically, corresponds most directly to the Intellect by reason of the inverse analogy connecting the principal and manifested orders.”⁶ Therefore when art ceases to be traditional it “becomes human, individual, and therefore arbitrary, that is infallibly the sign and secondarily the cause of an intellectual decline.”⁷

Schuon uses the example of religious art in the Gothic period having to give way to neo-antique, naturalistic, individualistic, and sentimental art, which he says contains nothing miraculous about it.⁸ He speaks mainly of the later Gothic period giving way to the Renaissance and of the art springing from this period as being quite unfitted for the transmission of intellectual intuitions. Such art has given way to no more than what Schuon terms “collective psychic aspirations” and as such is given to sentimentality only, a “sentimentality that debases itself in the measure that it caters to the needs of the masses, until it ends in saccharine and bathetic vulgarity.”⁹ The exhibitionism of the Louis XV period in France is given as an example of this vulgarity that helps to drive away souls from the church as they feel literally choked in such surroundings.¹⁰ The question might be raised, Can one condemn vulgarity or is it part of the cycle of the spiritual itself? And if so, is modern art an appropriate spiritual response to decline?

III. THE SHIFT AWAY FROM TRADITIONAL SYMBOLISM

Individualism and rationalization:

I will argue that along with the exhibitionism that Schuon condemns there is also the exhibitionism of self in later sacred art, which was alien to the majority of Mediaeval artists. Such individualism is contrary to intellection, for it is the Intellect as mentioned above that sacred art should be appealing to. This theme of the projection of self in sacred art is given much further weight when examined in terms of the depiction of the Madonna in the Mediaeval period in comparison with the Renaissance, in that one sees a projection of self on the part of the artist that had hitherto on the whole not been present.

One of the supporters of individualism, which I have alluded to, is the art historian and perennial philosopher, Coomaraswamy. When he laments the sentimentalization of Christian

sacred art he says “that the Crucifixions are made to exhibit human suffering, what happens is that we start to anthropomorphise abstract symbols of the deity which in turn fall into sentimentalisation.”¹¹ This, he argues, leads to the situation where one has the artist’s mistress posing as the Madonna and the representation of the baby Jesus as being a human baby of whom we can approve rather than a man-God.¹²

Examples of the individualism that is being alluded to can be seen when we frown upon the depiction of Christ as the man-God-child that we often see in mediaeval iconography and think of the lack of three-dimensional representation as a lack of skill on the part of the artist; we demand that things have a realistic representation instead of a light quality that Coomaraswamy calls the gnomonic *aorists* of the legend itself, and we forget that shadows belong to momentary effects.¹³ We forget that our perspectives serve representations that we are interested in; the divine is more than that.¹⁴ This is a serious argument, and it does not apply to only Christianity. If one takes the depiction of the Buddha on a lotus leaf, the latter, of course, is not really a leaf in the strict sense: “The Lotus on which the Buddha sits is not a botanical specimen but a universal ground of existence inflorescent in the waters of its infinite possibilities, so therefore then it would be inappropriate to represent him in the solid flesh precariously balanced on the surface of a real and fragile flower.”¹⁵ In the Hindu religious tradition it would be equally inappropriate to depict Brahma sitting on a life-size swan (*Hamsa*) when that swan is supposed to be a symbol of attachment to worldly tendencies. It is argued by Coomaraswamy that the anthropologist who is interested in studying the folklore or culture is better suited to studying such art than the art historian who is only interested in the aesthetic surfaces. To give some illustrative weight to our argument, one has but to look at the two pictures below, which show the Madonna and Child, and the explanations that follow them:



The Madonna with Canon van der Paele (detail)
1436

Oil on wood

Groeninge Museum, Bruges

Note the man-face features of Christ.

Picture courtesy of <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html> (Web Gallery of Art)



Madonna and Child with the Young St John
c. 1518

Oil on wood, 154 x 101 cm
Galleria Borghese, Rome

Note the more human depiction of the Madonna and the more human, joyous expression on Christ's face. Here we are moving from the Mediaeval period to the early Renaissance.

Picture courtesy of <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html> (Web Gallery of Art).

Madonna and Child explanation and aesthetic significance:

The *Madonna with Canon* is a good depiction of the traditional approach to sacred art because the representation of the Christ Child is symbolic, not humanistic or rationalistic, and suggests that the baby Jesus is much more than just human in the ordinary sense. Not only that, but the uncanny sadness of the Madonna is also uncommonly prescient—as though she intuits his coming sacrifice. This theme of uncanny sorrow is continued with flowing tears and the Madonna turning away from the Christ Child with a look of intense but gentle melancholia. Almost as though the Madonna were looking toward some ineffable sign that portends what is to come. The depiction of the Christ Child with an almost adult face intimating at the cares of the world, suggests one who is already aware of his responsibilities and though made man is yet more than man. I will argue here that this painting is a good representation of the traditional approach

because it is nonnaturalistic; it depicts a symbolic representation of metaphysical truth: the sadness, the turning toward Heaven—they are not ordinary signs.

I would argue that the second picture is not sacred art and represents a turning point in the depiction of Christian religious symbolism from the late Middle Ages to the early Renaissance; because, it is almost the complete opposite of the first illustration of the Madonna—a happy, playful looking mother showing human happiness with a joyous Christ looking adoringly at his mother in the way that a human child might look at his or her mother. It is almost a carefree depiction, sharing in the human temporality of mortal joy. This, it could be argued, is an individualist representation of what the artist may have seen in other families; ordinary signs of happiness, signs that do not transcend this physical realm or suggest any form of transcendence, whether naturalist, subjective, or anthropomorphic.

IV. A REDUCTION OF SACRED ART TO AN ACADEMIC SUBJECT

What then are the principles of traditional art? Well if one turns again to Schuon:

In order to give an idea of the principles of traditional art, we will point out a few of the most general and elementary ones: first of all, the work executed must conform to the use to which it will be put, and it must express that conformity; if there be an added symbolism, it must conform to the symbolism inherent in the object; there must be no conflict between the essential and the accessory, but a hierarchical harmony, which will moreover spring from the purity of the symbolism; the treatment of the material used must be in conformity with the nature of that material in the same way that the material itself must be in conformity with the use of the object; lastly, the object must not give an illusion of being other than what it really is, for such an illusion always gives a disagreeable impression of uselessness, and when this illusion is the goal of the finished work, as it is in the case of all classicist art, it is the mark of a uselessness that is only too apparent.¹⁶

If we take the aesthetic argument, beauty must conform to certain traditional rules like those advanced by Thomas Aquinas in his *Tria Requiritur*: “Three conditions of beauty—first, integrity or completeness, for broken things are ugly; second, due proportion and harmony; third, brightness and colour.”¹⁷

So, above is a clear definition of beauty from Aquinas stating that though everything shares in beauty it could be argued that when there is an adherence to the symbolic forms of a religion, the clearness and proportion of these forms is a greater spur to the Intellect than when they do not conform to an orthodox religious symbolism. It may also be argued then that Aquinas’ principles of beauty are in keeping with the theme of this paper that sacred art cannot go beyond the categories that spawned it because only among those exoteric categories can it be described as sacred art. I would argue that the more one allows artistic individualism into a given sacred work of art or any work of art that purports to engender a sense of pious spirituality, the more its aesthetic quality is likely to be less appealing to piety. Take for example the following quote from *Til Eulenspiegel*:

It is told of *Til Eulenspiegel* that having been engaged as court painter to a prince, he presented to the assembled company a blank canvas, declaring that whoever was not the child of honest parents would see nothing on the canvas.

Since none of the assembled lords was willing to admit he saw nothing, all pretended to admire the canvas.¹⁸

The implication of the above is that modern sacred art has gotten to the stage where even criticism of its form could well lead to the critic being accused of not being of honest parents in the sense that it seeks to enthrone itself on its own aesthetic arbitrariness. How much the above sums up the perception of modern art I will leave the reader to judge.

My next objective is to look at the sacred in modern art; the trouble with the task ahead is that there is no universally accepted classification of religious Western art in twentieth century. There are however elements of spiritualism that are referred to as being evocative of a religious nature, though not necessarily possessing a visual religious symbolism in the mediaeval sense.

V. MODERN SACRED ART

One of the tasks of the spiritual in art is to prove again and again that vision is possible: that this world, thick and convincing—is neither the only or the highest, and that our ordinary awareness is neither the only awareness nor the highest of which we are capable. Traditionally, this task falls under a stringent rule: the vision cannot be random and ephemerally subjective, but must be capable of touching a common chord in many men and women.¹⁹

In Delaunay's view "the goal of painting is to represent the Universe."²⁰ Delaunay's *Sun and Moon* from 1913 is an early example of abstraction, which Lipsey argues is diagrammatic and is similar to mediaeval diagrammatic in that it seeks to represent a reality. Their reality being churches, cathedrals, and the like, the diagram became a thing used for scientific rather than artistic representation. Delaunay was considered a pioneering artist in seeking to use the diagrammatic in art again. This was the beginning of a trend in modern art at the start of the twentieth century. Many abstract paintings of a spiritual nature would follow this trend and speak of representing a reality diagrammatically.²¹

I do not wish to argue that sublimity and the seeking of transcendence in twentieth century art, which purports to be sacred in nature, is nonexistent. The individualist, ephemerally subjective approach is more liable to be arbitrary and therefore misleading to the seeker of the divine along traditional religious lines. Perhaps one might not be too bold in saying that the attitude of Kandinsky, mentioned in Lipsey's book on the spiritual in twentieth century art, seems to imply that an artist who cared for the spiritual in art would have an aversion to organized religion and conventional sacred religion and take a more theosophical view to creating sacred art.²²

Lipsey argues that Kupka's *Disks of Newton; Study for "Fugue in Two Colours"* brings to his mind "the undeniable manifestation of spirit in art."²³ Spirit, perhaps, but surely not one of a religious nature? What about the spirituality in art by chance? Jean Arp wrote, "the law of chance, which comprises all other laws and surpasses our understanding (like the primal cause from which all life arises), can be experienced only in a total surrender to the unconscious."²⁴ He claimed that whoever follows this law will create pure life. Today, as in the days of the early Christians, the essential must become

known. “The artist must let his work create itself directly.”²⁵ Contrast Arp’s *Collage Arranged According to the Laws of Chance*, 1916, with the premises laid out by the perennial masters. It might possess spirituality of an individualistically designated kind but not the kind that is likely to spur one on to the divine; it may induce a self-perpetuated catharsis for some, but it certainly possesses no outward religious form.²⁶ Consider the following statements:

In sacred art genius seems hidden; what dominates is a vast, impersonal, mysterious intelligence. The sacred work of art has a perfume of infinity, an imprint of the absolute.²⁷

Sacred art is made to convey spiritual presences it is made at the same time for God, for angels and for men; profane art on the contrary exists only for men, and by that very fact betrays man. Sacred art helps man to find his own centre, this centre which by nature loves God.²⁸

The previous two quotes sum up what sacred art should be and how it should not just appeal to man’s rationality, but to the whole vastness and mysteriousness of the Intellect—which is the uncreated part of man that is attached to the sacred.

VI. CONCLUSION

In the examples above, especially from Delaunay onwards, we have instances where the traditional aesthetic notion is distorted by the individualism of the artist and as such distracts from the traditional notions of sacred art as advocated by the perennial school of thought. Moreover, that such art is not conducive to the intellection of which I spoke earlier and that it would be hard pressed to follow the Thomastic notions of beauty and form, the aesthetics of sacred art must be in keeping with the symbolic forms of the religion from which it springs.

The purpose of sacred art is for it to act as vehicle for the seeker of the divine. To do this effectively it must appeal to that something in human beings that is uncreated and is linked to the divine—the intellect. I feel that this is best done through an appeal to simple piety, which should be brought about through sacred art being as un-academic as possible. Sacred art should be instantly recognizable as being sacred art, and as such is not something that needs an explanation from an art expert as to what its symbolism is supposed to represent in terms that treat it as a secular work of art created for artistic purposes only. If such an explanation is necessary then it has already failed as a piece of sacred art. One of the main principles necessary to bring about that sense of piety which we are all capable of recognizing is that individuality not be projected; the artist should be as anonymous as possible so that the piety of the work may speak for itself, as in the case of *the Madonna with Canon*. The way forward is to reconnect with the tradition of sacred art as religious rather than artistic symbol; one which encompasses and encourages a contemplative spirit, which should be at the heart of all sacred art. Without this

contemplative aspect and function the purpose of sacred art is lost and all that remains is an exercise in humanization and individualism under the guise of an aesthetic genre.

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¹ Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (London: Harper Collins, 1946), 29.

² Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2005), xxxi.

³ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xxix-xxx: “In reality, the transcendent character of metaphysic makes it independent of any purely human mode of thought. In order to define clearly the difference between the two modes in question, it may be said that [modern] philosophy proceeds from reason (which is a purely individual faculty), whereas metaphysic proceeds exclusively from the Intellect. . . . There is something in the soul that is uncreate and uncreatable; if the whole soul were this it would be uncreate and uncreatable; this is the Intellect.”

⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Gothic art here refers to painting, sculpture, and architecture from western and central Europe that was prominent in the mediaeval period. The term stems from Italian writers of the Renaissance.

⁹ Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, 63.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Ananda Coomaraswamy, *The Transformation of Nature in Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 45.

¹² *Ibid.*, 44.

¹³ The term “aorist” comes from the Ancient Greek *aóristos* (indefinite). It expresses a manner of action that is pure and simple. See [ἀόριστος](#), Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* at [Perseus Project](#), Frank Beetham, *Learning Greek with Plato* (Bristol Phoenix Press, 2007), 362. See also Maria Napoli, *Aspect and Actionality in Homeric Greek: A Contrastive Analysis* (FrancoAngeli, 2006), 67.

¹⁴ Coomaraswamy, *The Transformation of Nature in Art*, 41–47.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁶ Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, 71.

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, trans. the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Rev. Daniel J Sullivan. Great Books of the Western World vols. 19–20. (Chicago, IL: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1925): 77, quoting 1122 *Summa Theologica*, 1a. xxxix. 8.

¹⁸ Frithjof Schuon, *The Essential Frithjof Schuon*, ed. S. Hossein Nasr (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2005), 514. Not too dissimilar to the *Emperor’s New Clothes*.

¹⁹ Roger Lipsey, *The Spiritual in Twentieth Century Art* (New York: Dover Publications 1988), 92.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 94.

²¹ Delaunay’s *Sun and Moon*, 1913.

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/e/ea/%27Simultaneous_Contrasts-Sun_and_Moon%27%2C_oil_on_canvas_painting_by_Robert_Delaunay%2C_1912-13%2C_Museum_of_Modern_Art%2C_%28New_York_City%29.jpg.

²² Wassily Kandinsky, “The Spiritual Revolution” in *Concerning the Spiritual In Art*, trans. Michael T.H. Sadler, URL = <<http://www.semantikon.com/art/kandinskyspiritualinart.pdf>> See notes below on Kandinsky’s *Black Lines*. There is no denying the spirituality of his 1913 painting *Black Lines* in

<http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/show-full/piece/?search=Vasily%20Kandinsky&page=1&f=People&cr=5>.

²³ Lipsey, *The Spiritual in Twentieth Century Art*, 103.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ See *Collage Arranged According to the Laws of Chance*, 1916 at <http://jama.ama-assn.org/content/300/16/1850.extract>.

²⁷ Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (Bloomington, IN: Perennial Books, 1969), 47–48.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 36–37.

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