

SACRED, HOLY OR RELIGIOUS ART?

DESMOND CHUTE

THERE is a very real sense in which everything that is sacred. We say, or at least said, that life is sacred; motherhood is sacred, and so on. Far be it from me to deprecate this usage. For does not the root evil of our time, the secularization of life, lie precisely in atrophy of the religious sense? It was this very tendency of the historical process which caused voices to be raised amid the wilderness of nineteenth-century industrialism, reaffirming the holiness not only of God's creation but also of the works of man.

Holy: holiness: here we have *le mot juste*. We say God is holy. The word is inadequate but not erroneous. It would never occur to us to say God is sacred: not only would that be erroneous, it would be absurd. Sacred to what? This question alone is enough to make it clear that whereas the concept of holiness is absolute, that of the sacred is relative. It might be said that *holy* is predicated of God and of his gifts to us, *sacred* of our gifts to him.

Whatever is sacred is holy, but not all that is holy is sacred, save in the very diluted sense of meriting our respect. Be it clear from the outset that in these pages the word is not used in this its most generic meaning but in the truest and most positive sense by which *sacred* signifies *set apart by man for the worship of God*.

Moreover, the *profane* may in a certain sense be *holy*; it can never, by definition, be *sacred*.

If those distinctions are valid, it will follow that a cow barn or any other artifact made under fully human conditions may indeed be *holy*, but it cannot in any strict sense be *sacred*, unless perchance it be destined to house sacred kine.¹

A thing may derive its sacred character either (1) from a rite, or (2) from use, or (3) from its essential nature. Thus, (1) 'holy water' derives its sacred character from a *ritual blessing*.

(2) If a persecuted priest celebrates Mass in secret, using for purificator a handkerchief and a tin lid for paten, these objects will be sanctified by *use*.

¹ The reference is to 'Elements of Sacred Architecture', by Graham Carey (*Catholic Art Quarterly*, XI, 3). It may here be pointed out that *sacred* is perhaps not the most accurate epithet to apply to the kind of culture in the author's mind, which might more rightly be described as *hierarchical* or *theocentric*.

(3) But to find the typical example of the *sacred*, we must pass on to the last category, for it comprises all objects natural or artificial destined to the worship, public or private, collective or individual, of the Divinity.

What do we ask of artifacts destined to the Divine worship?

First of all, that they be adequate to their function; in other words that their form be proportionate to their use. This is the minimum requirement; still it suffices to give them a character at least potentially sacred.

Then, if 'art is the well-making of what needs making',² since these are of all objects the most worth making, it behoves them to be beyond all others well made.

Moreover, we shall insist that in such objects, matter be proportionate to form and form to matter. In other words, we exact that they be not only adequate but *ideally adequate* to their function. Thus such artifacts, besides being *sacred*, will also be *holy*, as every work should be which comes from the hands of man. We shall glorify God with the homage their perfection renders to the matter created by him as well as with the form imparted to them by man. Over and above this, God will be glorified by the exercise of that sense of proportion which infinite wisdom has deigned to implant in man as craftsman—*rationale nostrum obsequium*.

The *sacred* is of its nature religious, but not all that is *religious* is sacred. The concept of the *sacred* is objective and implies collective worship, that of the *religious* is subjective implying personal piety.

Hence, it is obvious that *sacred* and *religious* are not interchangeable terms. When speaking of 'a sacred person', we mean something quite distinct from a religious man. There is a like difference between religious writing and sacred books. We speak of a chalice as a sacred vessel: no one would dream of calling it religious. Thus far there can be no hesitation.

But if we try to apply the same distinction to works of art, to what are called the Fine Arts, shall we be so sure of our answer? Into which category shall we put such paintings as the frescoes

² This definition, often quoted by Eric Gill together with another—'a work of art is simply a thing well made'—is derived from the late W. R. Lethaby.

of Giotto and those of Michelangelo? a crucifixion of Grünewald or a *sacra conversazione* of Titian? a vision of El Greco or an allegory of Rubens? the biblical subjects of Tiepolo, Rembrandt, Goya? Such music as Bach's *Matthäus Passion* or Mozart's Masses or Verdi's *Requiem*? Such architecture as San Vitale, flamboyant Gothic, Borromini's Sapienza, or the Theatinerkirch in München?

And, most important, the products of our own day: a Le Corbusier church, Stravinsky's Mass, Stanley Spencer's 'Christ in the Wilderness'?

The rightness of our answer depends on two elements, one of which is aesthetic and the other philosophic, viz., the reliability and delicacy of our perceptions and the truth of our standards. On the former depends the sureness, on the latter the worth, of our judgment.

Broadly speaking, we may define *religious art* as the making of things reflecting man's consciousness of his relation to the Divinity, and *sacred art* as the *making of things destined to the Divine worship*.

In sacred art the approach is direct, objective, and issues in the creation of articles of cult. Henceforth we shall here restrict the use of the adjective *religious* to those artifacts inspired by religion but *not sacred*, i.e., not directly dedicated to the Divine worship. In these the approach is less direct, more reflex, subjective, self-conscious.

Imaginatively we may impersonate *sacred art* in the figure of the *Ecclesia orans*, erect with arms outstretched and palms upraised, and *religious art*, in the second sense to the medieval believer who 'worships best on bended knees'. It is the difference between '*Popule meus, quid feci tibi?*' and the *Dies Irae*. Both are liturgical compositions having their rightful place in the Church's official worship. But there is in the latter a new accent, a note of conscious pathos, of *Weltschmerz*, absent from early Christian art. In the course of time, the objective, sacred element will be found to wane and the pathetic and subjective to wax, with a rhythm which may be approximately gauged by soundings taken roughly every two hundred years and which mark the increasing oscillation, let us say, from the Byzantine icon to Cimabue, from Giotto to Roger van der Weyden, from Fra Angelico to Bernini, from

Gregorian Chant³ to Orlando di Lasso, from Palestrina to César Franck.

An honest observer may indeed be surprised to note how singularly devoid early Christian art is of all subjective feeling or of anything we conceive today as religious, in the sense of *devotional*, sentiment. In fact, sacred art of the first centuries is devoid of any sentiment whatever: it is almost as frigid and lifeless as is the contemporary and very mundane art of Pompeii, which not even obscenity could galvanize into vitality.

The explanation lies in the fact that art, like culture itself, is a *social phenomenon*, upon which the spiritual factor works surely but slowly and imperceptibly. It is true that right thinking influences expression, but obviously not in the sense that the most orthodox thinker at once becomes the best stylist.

By the Peace of the Church the leaven had begun to work. Only then does what has hitherto been tentative or borrowed iconography speak with the assurance of art. In the Baptistery of Constantine, at Sta Costanza, in the *Basilica Liberiana*, we see beside the grandeur which was Rome a new spirit beginning to clothe itself in fresh forms.

These are sometimes symbolical, sometimes direct, but always objective. Take the various representations of the Good Shepherd from the Catacombs. Their religious significance is wholly symbolic. They breathe no sentiment we might call devotional: we find here nothing subjective or touching. Look at the earliest representations of the Crucifixion, e.g., on third-century gems or on the wooden doors of Sta Sabina on the Aventine. Here is no hint of pathos, hardly of piety: just the hard fact, summarily carved on one of the panels framed by elaborate borders of foliage.

Mr Christopher Dawson has well stressed the eschatological aspect of primitive Christianity: the appeal it made to the Roman world was apocalyptic rather than ethical.⁴ It is precisely this aspect we see expressed in the first thousand years of Christian art from its birth, at the Peace of the Church, in the Christs in

3 Here, as elsewhere, the word *Gregorian* is used with precise reference to the reform carried out under the auspices of this Pontiff, as distinct from the pre-Gregorian chants of the fourth and fifth centuries as from the Greek chants followed and from the still later style of the *Kyriale* and of the Sequences, all of which is indeed Plainsong (or chant), but which it only makes confusion worse confounded to describe as *Gregorian*.

4 Cf. his *Religion and the Modern State* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1936).

glory illuminated in early codices, enshrined in apses or carved amid the tetramorph in the Dooms over the west doors of early French cathedrals.

A more tender, pensive, self-conscious, or at least subjective, approach to the mysteries of religion belongs to a later age and appears also to predominate in more northerly climes. Mediterranean art tends to be more objective, ritual, concrete; northern art to be meditative, intimate, pious, fraught with pathetic overtones. Contrast the Sieneese with the Flemish Primitives. Humanity has travelled farther from the East, and a century of heresy, schism, fratricidal strife and treachery had made of the Christian of the Middle Ages a sadder, if not a wiser, man. The second coming no longer seems imminent or, if it does, is foreseen more as an awful doom than as the Advent of the Kingdom. The infinite mystery of the Incarnation takes on new and iridescent lights. Mankind yearns to feel the companionship of God made man at every hour of the day: *Mane nobiscum quoniam advesperascit*.

At first, this element of pathos quickens and enriches the sacred approach to art. To this union of public worship and private devotion we owe all that is best in medieval art, from the *Salve Regina* to the *Stabat Mater*, from the sequences of Notker Balbulus to the hymns of St Thomas Aquinas, from the Lorenzettis to Memling, from Giotto's epics to the Pietàs of Tura, Grünewald and van der Weyden. Seldom were the two elements so equally blended as in the painting of Fra Angelica.⁵

But gradually the subjective pathetic element overflowed and submerged the objective concrete principle. The output of sacred art grew scantier and that of pietistic art more abundant, though less and less religious in character. Genuine inspiration could still be found in single artists, but even these had lost hold of the same principles of art.

Their works, however beautiful and devotional, are idiosyncratic: no longer mouthpieces of a common idiom, they address

⁵ A convenient example, in so far as in his case fame is commensurate with merit. Martin Schongauer and Andrew Rublev, roughly his contemporaries, run him close in this, if somewhat behind in that. Nor must one ever forget the anonymous masters and pupils in all ages to whom the bulk of sacred and religious art is owing, notably, in the present instance, the many unidentified Flemish, and such German painters as the *Meister des Peringsdörffer Altars*, whose *Vision of St Bernard* embraced by the crucified Saviour is one of the most perfect, as it is one of the latest, examples of a medieval art at once devotional and sacred (reproduced in *Die Altdeutsche Malerei*, Ernst Heidrich, Jena, 1909, bei Eugen Diederichs).

themselves to an aesthetic élite. Hence, in music, a wholesale disregard of rubrics and of the sacred text, as in the Masses of Haydn and Mozart, and in painting, a complete inability to extend existing forms convincingly to new concepts.

Of this sterility we have a striking instance in the case of devotion to the Sacred Heart, which, widespread and indeed universal as it became, has never to this day found adequate formal expression. The art of the period had already discarded the heraldic technique, attempted with charmingly amateurish sincerity by Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque, while the eclectic naturalism then prevalent in the representation of the human figure in general, and of our Saviour in particular, makes every treatment of the Heart itself, whether heraldic or naturalistic, equally abhorrent.⁶

It has been reserved for our own time to witness the complete bankruptcy of both sacred and religious art. Machine-made artifacts, devoid of all semblance of holiness, are made sacred only by the rite of blessing. It is tolerated that some cheap unidentified metal alloy, indistinguishable in form save as a vaguely triangular blob, represent the central tragedy of history, the triumphant death of God made man. *Quomodo obscurantur est aurum, mutatus est color optimus.*

Categories. If sacred art, in the abstract, consists in making well the gifts man offers to God, in the concrete it is the sum of all the good things man has made for his service.

Such gifts fall into two categories determined by their scope: the useful and the decorative. They embrace respectively *crafts* of what are called applied arts, and *fine arts* in so far as these or those are dedicated to the service of God. We will here distinguish them as the *liturgical* and the *decorative* branches of sacred art. Although the works which, no doubt, will leap to the reader's memory belong to the second class—the great fresco cycles of Giotto, Masaccio, Angelico, Piero della Francesca, Signorelli, Michelangelo, Byzantine mosaics, Romanesque and Gothic sculpture—it is the former which is the more important, comprising as it does whatsoever artifacts are needed for the celebration of Divine Worship.

⁶ Can this inadequacy be altogether extraneous to the difficulty so often met with today of making this devotion acceptable, more especially to catechumens and converts?

Whereas the trophies of decorative sacred art are to be seen in any European museum or on the walls of those churches they originally adorned and which today are often little more than museums themselves, the treasures of liturgical art and craft, once to be seen in daily or regular use in any large church, can now be studied only in such specialized museums as the *Musée de Cluny* in Paris or the Victoria and Albert in London—save where the ‘Treasure’ of some cathedral or abbey church or some small local collection allows one to admire in comparative quiet as at Pienza the superb cope of Pius II, or the marvellous display of early medieval vestments at Castel Sant’Elia.

Examples of Sacred Art. How many sacred objects of the past satisfy our demands? A complete answer would necessitate our being present in every time and place of Christendom. Perforce content in this post-Christian epoch to examine the remains crumbling away in our churches or embalmed in our museums, what shall we find? An endless amount of work of marvellous loveliness, of things holy—but of sacred art a much smaller proportion.

Let us take two examples of specifically liturgical artifacts.

A chalice is essentially a sacred thing, twice, thrice hallowed: by intention, use and blessing. Is or is not this or that chalice a work of art? That depends neither on intention nor use nor rite but on *form*, on the way it is conceived, shaped, wrought by the craftsman. Is it such that during the Divine Mysteries it can be filled, offered, consecrated, adored, elevated, emptied, purified with decorum, with grace, with dignity? Does the very sight of it make us cry out: *Calicem salutaris accipiam et nomen Domini invocabo?*

Again, what more sacred than a church? Is it enough that it be a building in which the faithful may assist at the Eucharistic Sacrifice, join in the Divine Office, hear the word of God preached? No, it should be such that we cannot set foot upon the threshold without breaking into song: *Laetatus sum in his quae dicta sunt mihi: in domum Domini ibimus.* Then alone will sacred art be justified of its works.

How many of our churches come up to this standard? How many chalices make our fingers itch to use them in the Sacrifice of the Mass? Even allowing for the penchant of museum directors for the extreme, the eccentric, the ornate, and for the prevalent

tendency to exalt works of named artists at the expense of the humble and more normal perfection of anonymous craftsmanship, is it not remarkable, even in the ages of Faith, how soon ambition triumphed over service and ornament mocked use? How many a knop wards off the fingers that fain would grasp it! What a lot of superfluous bulges and inopportune spikes, how many cups impossible to empty and wipe! In how brief a space sacred art waned while the waxing ambition of the artist usurped the place of the believer's awe! The profane has overrun the sacred.

Idioms. (1) Liturgical and decorative art cannot, of course, be divided into completely watertight compartments. Building soon blossoms into sculpture; altars and tombs have from time immemorial called out for ornaments. One requisite for the Christian Sacrifice has, since the close of the first millennium, invited the collaboration of Fine Art: the altar crucifix, originally processional, later fixed.

The altar itself, from an early stage, was lavishly adorned; witness the superb silver and golden altar at Sant'Ambrogio in Milan (c. 835), and the famous golden and jewelled retable of St Mark's, Venice, known as the *Pala d'Oro*, made in Constantinople in 1105:

Whereas in the beginning of such elaboration, the crucifix was conceived as part of the altar and both as works of applied art, the crucifix and, later, other details tended to break away from this unity of craftsmanship and to be considered as things apart and complete in themselves.

Striking examples of both stages of development were to be seen at the 1948 show of Danish Art in London. The Lisbjerg 'Golden Altar' (c. 1150) is essentially church furniture: the crucifix, though older and on a somewhat larger scale, forms part of the general scheme.⁷ The Tirstrup crucifix, on the other hand, though from the same workshop and of about the same date, already displays signs of more conscious art. The thirteenth-century Herlufsholm crucifix is an independent work of fine art, entirely complete in itself, such as the crucifix was to remain, for good or evil, during the next four or five hundred years,

⁷ Cf. *Danish Art Treasures throughout the ages; Catalogue illustrated*. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1948.

until the more thoughtful makers of our day reintegrated it with the altar.

(2) Today, if throughout the whole range of Christian iconography we seek to instance an effigy of our Divine Lord as peculiarly sacred, as a particularly suitable focus for collective worship, the debonair Christs of the Italian Renaissance will not delay us, certainly not Michelangelo's 'New Adam' in S. Maria sopra Minerva, nor yet the Man of Sorrows depicted with such contained grief by Flemish and with such harrowing realism by German painters, nor even the smooth '*beau Dieu*' of Amiens. Rather shall we prostrate ourselves before the noble Saviour of fifth- and sixth-century mosaics in Rome and Ravenna, before the Pantokrator of Byzantium, before him who treads on the lion and the basilisk in the apses of Monreale, Pisa and San Miniato or sits enthroned in majesty between the four living creatures in the tympana of Le Mans and of St Trophime at Arles, the Pentecostal Christ in the narthex of Vézelay, the *Judex districtus* of Beaulieu and St Denis, the *Rex tremendae majestatis* of the west porch at Moissac, the serene King who reigns from the façade of Chartres.

In like manner, if we seek a corresponding image of our Blessed Lady, what comes to mind will not be the winsome grace of Memling's Madonnas nor the tender domesticity of van Cleeve's nor the wistfulness of Botticelli's nor the comeliness of Raphael's nor the mannered charm of Correggio or Parmigianino, nor the redeemed ingenuousness of Rubens nor the conscious simplicity of Carlo Dolci or Sassoferrato, nor the frigidity of Ingres, but rather the noble gravity of our Lady '*Salus Populi Romani*' in the Borghese Chapel at St Mary Major, or her sister of Aracoeli, the jewelled and impassive splendour of *la Nicopeia* in St Mark's, Venice, the meek motherhood of our Lady of Vladimir, the incomparable majesty of *Notre Dame de la Belle Verrière* at Chartres; or, to take an example known to the Catholic faithful throughout the world, the thoughtful dignity of Her of Unfailing Help, *B.M.V. de Perpetuo Succursu*.

(3) If we ask what it is that dictates our instinctive choice, will not the answer be: a feeling akin to awe in us evoked by a certain transcendental quality in the work, which we may, after Professor Otto, call *numinous* (from *numen*—divinity), because in some mysterious way it conveys a sense of otherness and thus of the divine. Sublimity has also been conveyed by raising human dignity to a

supereminent degree as in the fourth- and fifth-century Roman School and in early medieval Northern art; it then tends to merge into the *heroic*.

The makers were not interested in aspects but in essences, not in what our Lord may have looked like but in what he *is* yesterday, today and forever. Consequently they grip us not by appearances but with a two-fold reality, on the one hand concrete and aesthetic—the formal reality of the artifact; on the other, ideal or poetic—the conceptual reality of the idea. In other words, they present spiritual truth by *analogy*, through the material perfection of the work itself.

A CATECHISM FOR ADULTS

I.—‘I believe’

IAN HISLOP, O.P.

AT first sight there is something arid about a creed. But a Christian ignores the creed at his peril. It is fatally easy to drift along in a tide of emotional devotion, and precisely because our devotion is not disciplined by the rule of faith, to become stranded on the sands of sentiment. No individual has sufficient balance or insight to receive the full content of revelation, and each individual tends to inject some personal bias into his formulation of the faith; the tendency is to interpret in terms of our own psychological structure and interests. This is seen even in the great Saints and Doctors of the Church, but they, since they are holy, accept the correction of their bias from the Church, and receive, within the Church, a life that complements their insufficiency. This is even more markedly the case when the individual is living on his religious emotions, on unregulated devotional responses, which, since they lack the defining and purifying influence of the creeds, very easily degenerate into mere superstition.