TRADITION AND TRADITIONALISM

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JACOB'S ladder leads from earth to heaven: but the angels in his vision ascended *and* descended. It was a two-way traffic that he saw. The patriarch's vision and its sequel were crucial for the destiny of the Jews. But they are, too, a primary statement of what the sacred means. The episode provides a cardinal text for the rites of consecration in the Roman liturgy, for Jacob, when he awoke from sleep, poured oil on the stone on which his head had rested and called the place Bethel, the house of God. A vow is made, and the symbol of it is the anointed stone, 'set up for a title' in the place where God has been.

The sacred, in this primeval sense, always speaks of God to man. Something has been set aside and offered to God: something sealed and ratified, usually by rites of consecration. It declares now a reality other than its own, for the thing—metal, stuff or stone—has been taken out of the context of profane use to point to a mystery itself inaccessible to man.

St Thomas, in his long and perceptive discussion of the ceremonial precepts of the Old Law,[1] points out that 'the divine worship regards two things: namely, God who is worshipped; and men, who worship him. Accordingly God, who is worshipped, is confined to no bodily place; wherefore there was no need, on his part, for a tabernacle or temple to be set up. But men, who worship him, are corporeal beings, and for their sake there was need for a special tabernacle or temple to be set up for the worship of God, for two reasons. First, that through coming together with the thought that the place was set aside for the worship of God, they might approach thither with greater reverence. Secondly, that certain things relating to the excellence of Christ's divine or human nature might be signified by the arrangement of various details in such a temple or tabernacle.'

This sense of vowed subordination is, then, necessarily part of any sacred art. The thing made is consciously ordained to the end of worship: it recalls a mystery of faith, and does so in the setting of the house of God and of the rites that are done there. Furthermore, the work of art bears *witness* to the faith, and above all to the *modalities* of faith at a particular time and within a particular culture.

[1] *Summa Theologica*, 1-1. cii, 4 *ad* 1.

A sacred art—whether architecture, painting, mosaic or music—expresses the faith as it is lived by the society we call the Church: but, too, it itself forms and influences the faith of believers. Roman basilica, Gothic abbey, Baroque church, the mosaics of Ravenna, the glass of Bourges, the carvings of Compostella, Giotto's frescoes, Bernini's bronze statues—all are alike in this: they proclaim a truth that is to be mediated to men, they point to the mysteries, and this they do within and about the very place where those mysteries are daily to be renewed.

The sacred speaks primarily of God to man, it serves a tradition which altogether transcends this or that style (the product of a time or place): it is a language, so to say, that is eternal, however various its individual accents may seem to be. That is why one can properly distinguish the 'sacred', in the sense of its embodiment of tradition, from the 'religious', which can have a much wider connotation. Any artist's achievement is religious, in so far as he seeks to express with fidelity his own vision of the reality of created good. A Cézanne self-portrait, so profound in its account of what it means to be human, is a deeply religious picture. But even with a halo you would not call it sacred. The sacred is the guardian, first of all, of the true tradition, of the truth man seeks to utter about God—a truth that needs to be re-presented to every age. It is a recalling, a remembering that makes available yet again the truth it recalls.

It must be admitted, of course, that the sense of art as recollection can hardly be confined to an art that is professedly sacred. Any poem, any painting, as David Jones reminds us, is an *anamnesis*, the effectual re-presenting of a reality once known, a love once experienced. But the sacred thing is more than a personal recalling: it is ordained to an end that was determined long ago, and, further, that end is acknowledged as having the right to impose a language and its limits.

The language and limits are those that any tradition must necessarily imply. Jacob's stone is the constant: it may be there, on the roadside, or enshrined in Sancta Sophia or Sancta Sabina—adorned in one age, stripped in another. But what is essential remains unchanged. For the tradition which the Church exists to declare and to preserve is in terms of an actual intervention of God's mercy. The incarnation is a fact—you could mark the place on a map, note the moment on a calendar—and Christian worship is always the recalling of a *fact*: the work of redemption that was achieved on a cross on a hill, two thousand years ago. It is the sacramental renewal of this happening that is the sacred constant. And the restrictions on this re-presentation are not dead restrictions. There is no

question here of academic pictorial orthodoxy or the canonization simply of style. And while the language—to use that analogy—of a sacred art must faithfully express the word once uttered (that is what it is *for*), yet its vocabulary must always be intelligible to the generation to which it is addressed. The limits are those inherent in a function that does not change. The apocalyptic message, 'Behold I make all things new', has its enduring truth for the artist who serves a sacred tradition. For the sacred is always the articulation of the mystery of faith. Church, altar, image: all seek in their measure to illuminate it, to make it present and to make it new.

It is in architecture that the sacred purpose is most readily seen, for the very structure of a church is directed to a single use, to enshrine a sacred action which determines the place and purpose of all that is contained within. The norm, therefore, is the liturgical rite to be enacted. A sacrifice is to be offered, and all else is secondary to that: secondary, but not without its true significance. St Thomas has much to say that is illuminating here. He remarks[2] that under the Old Law the place of sacrifice (i.e. the Temple) was one and distinct from the place of teaching (i.e. the synagogue). The Christian Church takes the place of both Temple and synagogue, since the sacrifice of the Church is a spiritual one. The unity of the church—where work and word are one—gives an essential unity to the building itself, and the parts are subordinate to, but not independent of, the central stone. The function which the Church ensures is not susceptible to change, and its instruments are therefore always within her jurisdiction. That is why the Church always reserves to herself the right to modify anything that relates to the liturgy and its presentation. Pope Pius XII was only the most recent authority to remind reformers, in the Encyclical *Mediator Dei* and in his address after the Assisi Congress in 1956, that this right is absolute, relating as it does to the very nature of the Church as the custodian of the truth and of its mediation to men.

It is in the light of this theological understanding of the sacred as serving the Church's tradition that one can most fruitfully consider the evolution of a Christian art. The tension which exists between the invariable function and the setting in which it is realized is always there, but it is a healthy tension because the plastic forms of altar or image are the reflection of the artist's freedom—itself God's gift—to express the sacred *thing*. But it is a relative freedom, which may not betray the essential order of the thing made as subserving the central stone. The altar, the living stone, gives dimension to all; marked with its five crosses, it symbolizes the radical Christian

[2] I-II. cii, 4 *ad* 3.

mystery, which the daily sacrifice renews. It is as it were a paradigm of all else that is made to serve the end of worship. The alternations of taste and style can flow freely about its feet so long as they do not invade it or overwhelm it. And it is precisely this that can happen when the architect, and even more obviously the painter whose subjective opportunities are more easily seized, forgets that his purpose is always to achieve a place for the offering of the sacrifice, the work of man's redemption which the Mass daily renews.

And so the sacred themes emerge, at first in catacombs and house-churches, as yet veiled, speaking outright only to those who are able to read their signs. Here is the Shepherd, the girdled boy from the Roman hills, bearing the lamb on his shoulder; here is Ichthys, the fish that spells the name of the Saviour and tells of salvation by the waters of baptism, for—Tertullian says—'We small fishes, named thus after our great Ichthys, are born in water and only by remaining in water can we live'. And as the Christian faith climbs out of the catacombs into the light, the signs grow stronger. The debt to pagan art is there of course: the sacred has taken the thing that was profane, has baptized it and made it new. So the basilica, the Roman hall of assembly, becomes the place of assembly for the people of God. And in the basilicas of Rome or Ravenna the candid light falls on simple surfaces that enclose an altar now. The coloured clusters of mosaics, advancing along the nave of San Apollinare Nuovo, speak in their own right indeed—here are the miracles of Christ, here is his Last Supper and his Agony—but they lead you to the central stone of sacrifice. And the grave processions of the white-robed martyrs and virgins advance towards the Redeemer, through the paradisal fields: their eyes are fixed on a horizon that is hereafter. Or, in San Vitale, the angels lift garlands of flowers and fruit, and in the middle is the Mystic Lamb, white against the blue sky and its stars. Type and anti-type, the sacrifices of Abel and Melchisedec, prophets and evangelists: the vast hierarchic pattern is rooted in the single, sacred theme.

It may be that it is in churches such as these, unambiguous in their statement of what is to be done within, that a sacred art can be seen at its purest. But beneath the complex evolution of Christian architecture, whether the rounded harmonies of the romanesque, the soaring splendours of high Gothic or the fantasies of baroque, the tradition is sustained. It would be to impose the illegitimate category of style to say that, for instance, the noble basilica of Sancta Sabina is more traditional than the restless ardours of the Gesù. For the sacred is expressed in the idiom of a time and place: the gifts that men offer to God are those they have at hand. 'The form remains',

one might say, to quote Wordsworth in another context, 'for the function never dies.' But the sad state of the sacred art of our own times, and indeed for three centuries now, is precisely due to the weakening of the sense of its function. For fifteen centuries the artist was at home in the Church. With whatever reservations of personal taste, he saw no conflict in offering his gifts in subordination to a sacred end. That is as true of the anonymous, grave mosaic of angel or heavenly lamb, as of the Sistine chapel frescoes, where the individual utterance of Michael Angelo is not to be gainsaid: but he was allowed to make it, and he chose to make it. And it is surely important to remember, as one wanders through the Uffizi or the National Gallery, Berensen in hand, that whatever judgments are to be made of the plastic values of a Fra Angelico altar-piece or of the composition of a Leonardo, these pictures—and all the buildings, carvings, metalwork and glass besides—were destined to serve the sacred tradition: they belonged to the house of God. The sacred is always subordinate to what worship demands.

It is this primary acceptance of the liturgical norm that in every age marks an art as truly sacred. For the Liturgy is the perennial offering of praise: but it is incarnationally offered, that is to say it uses the whole range of human making to proclaim the new dimensions of human hope. Voice and gesture, stone and stuff and paint —all is used, for all has been engraced. But not anyhow. The subordination of the work of man's hands to the purpose of his making, and of his re-making through grace, is absolute. The thing made, the song sung, is relative only: it is not achieved for its own sake, but for the sake of God and of man's need of God. And it is with the characteristic signs of liturgical worship that the sacred tradition can be discerned. Discipline, therefore: the avoidance of the trivial or the assertive, lest the solemn re-presenting of the Christian mystery should be at the mercy of modishness or mere fancy. An economy of means: for the artist's making is relative only, and what is adored is not the thing but the mystery of which it speaks.

The virtual divorce of the artist from the Church, which reached its culmination in the nineteenth century, has too easily been attributed to a change of patronage: then it was the Church, now it was to be the wealthy individual, and later the art gallery. But the isolation of the serious artist was from society itself: his function was indeed alien enough to the values of an industrialized society. And the Church itself, cut off so largely from its co-ordinating place in society by the new secular assumptions, too easily confused tradition with traditionalism. Thus the architecture of the nineteenth century

became a pathetic attempt to recover a glory that was nostalgically seen in a Europe that was in fact gone for ever. There seemed to be nothing new to say—and there were in any case few artists willing to say it—so the sacred themes were re-statements, mechanically repeated and often mass produced, of the spontaneous utterances of what were thought to be the ages of faith. The pointed arch became the accepted symbol of the sacred. It was the age of the ecclesiologist, and Gilbert Scott and Viollet-le-duc were its prophets.

Recent years have seen a revival, however uncertain—and in the circumstances it could hardly be otherwise—of an art that is in intention sacred, placed at the service of worship. If the examples I give are confined to France, that is because they seem to provide a coherent body of evidence for us to judge. Such things as Matisse's chapel at Vence, and Le Corbusier's pilgrimage chapel at Ronchamp and priory at La Tourette, have of course created an interest that is more than religious: they have very soon become starred attractions on the tourist track. But what is remarkable first of all is that such artists—as well as Braque, Chagall and Leger in other places —should have been asked, and should have agreed, to undertake works that are confessedly sacred in intention.

Matisse spoke of his chapel as 'the result of a life devoted to the search for truth'. It seems a large claim, but the candour of this building is its justification. Matisse once said that painting was a language, and nothing but that, and at Vence he found the words to give to this simple place of prayer the peace and sense of pardon that the house of God should give. 'I would like to feel', he said, 'that those who come into my chapel should feel themselves purified and freed of their burdens.' The innocent light of the chapel, the feeling of freedom that flows from the linear designs on the walls: all evokes the humble submission of a great artist to the central reality of the place. It is a re-statement, wholly personal—with Matisse's signature plain in every gracious leaf and curving limb—of the ancient truths: made alive and alight again. Ronchamp is no less eloquent, though here Le Corbusier has been concerned primarily to re-build a place of pilgrimage, open, on a mountainside. Rough plain surfaces; the sweeping sail of the roof; the white of the limewash and the grey of the concrete: all is designed to affirm that this is a place where men have come from afar to worship. It belongs to the soil: is made of it, and the astounding vision of the architect has used these humble things and made them sacred. At the inauguration of the chapel in 1955 Le Corbusier said that in building it he had wanted to create a place of silence, prayer, peace and interior joy. 'It was the sense of the sacred that inspired what we did', he went on. 'Some things are

sacred, and some are not—whether they be religious or not.' In making this distinction the architect was reaffirming the truth that lies at the heart of any making that is offered to God, and at Ronchamp—as in his new Dominican priory at La Tourette—Le Corbusier has given his authority, as an artist of unquestioned genius, to a contemporary statement of what the sacred should mean in terms of today.

At Vence and at La Tourette we are in a real sense back in the beginnings—not indeed in any antiquarian sense, but rather in the sense that once more the sacred has been freed from the irrelevant, and often deceptive, conventions of a mere traditionalism. The featureless face of Matisse's Virgin, drawn on the wall, is perhaps as enigmatic as some of the early frescoes were—and are. For sacred signs are not decorative things: their purpose is not pleasure. And it may need the spare purity of Matisse's line, or the uncompromising strength of Le Corbusier's concrete masses, to recall us to the mystery in itself once more—to the work that is to be done each day about the stone.

There is a necessary postscript to any account of the revival of a sacred art in our time. It is to pose—if not to answer—the difficult question of the artist's own religious faith. Must he be a believer in order to give valid utterance to the sacred? Must he personally assent to the tradition he claims to serve? In the ages of universal faith, when religion and culture were in essence one, the artist—however weak his own response to faith might be—worked within a unity that created no cleavage in his mind as a maker of things to be offered to God. It is not so today. Ideally, the artist's faith should be explicit, a direct acceptance of the mysteries he seeks to serve. Fra Angelico could say that 'in order to paint the things of Christ you must live with Christ'. It must surely be true that the artist, however deep his own spiritual conflict may be, in accepting the task accepts the subordination that the sacred implies. This initial act of humility—for such it is—is at least an implicit act of faith, and the artist can fairly be judged by what he achieves. Matisse's answer, when he was asked whether an artist without faith could create a sacred work, was to say: 'You need only look at the work. Does it invite you to recollection? Does it bring you peace?' The artist who is technically an unbeliever may, however unconsciously, be a more faithful interpreter of what is sacred than the believer. And the reverse of the argument has to be remembered: faith is no insurance against artistic ineptitude. The artist of integrity knows the limits of what he can accomplish: he has never uttered the last word, and, in virtue of that 'interior order' which Rouault declared

to be the test of the artist's truth, he can serve the Truth itself. In humbly acknowledging that the tradition, while it binds, yet sets him free, he can be that 'good and faithful servant' whom the Bishop of Nice praised in Matisse, at the end of his life turning to things divine creating the work by which he asked to be judged.

ISLAM AND THE WEST

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THE attitude of Christendom towards Islam is part of a story much older than either of the two religions concerned; though Christianity being one of them gives the story certain important differences. Nevertheless, one of the fundamental, and also invigorating, factors of early civilizations was their habit of holding themselves superior to any other culture: of seeing themselves as the unique bearers of all that was best. This sense of superiority might be deemed essential to the process of advancing civilization at all: the process of wresting an area of order, and of grace, out of the mists of errant wildness. It was based on an obvious truth: one's own patch was cultivated; so far as could be seen, the rest was not. Moreover, the rest was inimical. The patch of enlightenment and perfection needed protection. For this it had its exclusive deities. In course of time, associated with the obvious superiority of the area of life they guarded, these deities became The Deity in the mind's of their protégés. When there was awareness of other patches of civilization, rivalling the one which had been thought unique, each considered its god the only True God, for now the gods were at war. Contests and comparisons between civilizations were contests between religions and, as the degree of polemic fervour in favour of the one civilization against the barbarisms without, of the one religion that is true against the others that are false, is indicative of the vitality of the polemicists's cause, in later ages the sterner Christian attitude to its rival may be taken to show a degree of advancement in Christianity absent from Islam. For Islam saw alien faiths from the beginning as sources to be borrowed from and imitated; as institutions to be temporized with; and, not very much later, as populations to furnish funds in a poll-tax; and then, in a more decadent phase, as hunting-grounds for slaves. Islam never saw other religions as the expression of an alien barbarism, to be fought