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SEEING AND BELIEVING:
REFRAMING CHRISTIAN IMAGERY IN SECULAR SOCIETY

ABSTRACT. This paper examines some of the central sociological issues relevant to the state and fate of religious images in a secular age. Focussing on a Christian (or post-Christian) context, it considers: (1) the process by which familiar sacred images become invisible or obscure; (2) the replacement of representational and narrative imagery by non-representational or abstract forms; and (3) the possibilities inherent in a “reframing” of traditional imagery prompted by the quasi-sacred status of the artwork in contemporary society.

Introduction

Conscious of representing a reputedly iconoclastic scholarly discipline, the sociologist entering the realm of religious imagery is well advised to offer immediate disavowal of any intent to debunk, distort, disfigure, or demolish images whether they take the form of archetypes, icons, idols, talismans, or fetishes. The notion of the sociologist in such a context as akin to those Henrician inspectors of monasteries who purportedly revealed the crude mechanics of “miraculous” moving statues covertly, profitably, and malignantly manipulated by wily monks is entirely inappropriate. With no mandate to talk directly about God, the sociologist of religion is no more qualified to make or break divine images than to distinguish divine decree from profane pronouncement. These tasks appropriately remain the prerogative of theologians who themselves wisely undertake them with increasing caution. Yet, if the quest for a rich, rigorous, controlled and connected sense of social processes “has nothing to do with finding the finger of God,” it is surely the case, as David Martin observes, “that the act of describing, interpreting and ordering (human) activity, that is sociology, can be used to circumscribe how we talk about God” (Martin: 2).

Preliminary Considerations

It is gratifying to report that, in recent decades, this insight has repeatedly been endorsed well beyond the disciplinary borders of sociology through intensified utility of social-scientifically derived conceptions of symbolism, social structure, and culture in scholarly studies of religious
phenomena. Thus, the following pronouncement from a distinguished medieval historian would not only find few dissenters among sociologists of religion, it would in fact be generally interpreted as a reiteration of conventional sub-disciplinary wisdom:

Religion can be best understood if it is not set apart from the social, not seen as an entity sui generis but rather as a culture, a system of meaning which represents and constructs experience and imagination. And in treating it as such we will also find that approaches which fix culture as a neat expression of other determinants—econonic, environmental, gender-linked—fail to interpret and explain the ways in which culture not only communicates difference but also negotiates it. (Rubin: 7)

A sociological sketch of religious imagery will inevitably draw upon those sub-disciplines which focus on religion, art, knowledge, and culture and will, in the currently interdisciplinary climate, undoubtedly overlap with the perspectives of scholars in such fields as art history, cultural studies, religious studies, church history, and theology. Committed to the notion of the “social construction of reality,” it will embrace neither materialism nor idealism as a causally determinant viewpoint but will assume the interdependence of socio-cultural factors and their varying causal significance in diverse geographic and historical contexts. Rejecting reductionist formulas which decree that religion is really something else, it will examine religion’s social origins, attributes, and impact while stressing the powerful reality of religious symbolism as a force shaping society. Though religious symbols unquestionably bear the imprint of society, social reality itself is constituted in large measure in conformity with past or present religious belief, doctrine, practice, and imagery. Moreover, society is itself a shared image defining notions of self and identity (Martin: 6).

Clearly cognisant of the centrality of the symbolic, sociologists have, with few exceptions, limited their investigation of the role of religious imagery in apparent conformity with the precept: “In the beginning was the word.” Focusing primarily on oral and written components of religious culture, they have paid inadequate attention to the meanings and imagery communicated by such means as painting, sculpture, architecture, music, song, and dance. At best this merely reflects a greater fluency in the spoken or written word. More regrettably, it may imply an assumption that the language of visual and musical arts is always translatable into speech or writing. Non-reductionist investigation of sacred imagery must therefore acknowledge thoughts and feelings which are verbally inexpressible but communicable by other means. Theophany is surely the most appropriate context for ineffability even from a sociological standpoint.

Sacred Images and Society

Nothing confirms the power of religious imagery more than the periodic recurrence of iconoclasm in various religious traditions (Kippenberg). Indeed, the permanent proscription of certain kinds of images in specific communities of belief serves paradoxically as a constant reminder of their potential impact and influence. Although no comprehensive overview of its myriad forms is possible here, some notable attributes and functions of sacred imagery, especially in Christian settings, will be briefly delineated.

From prehistoric times, human beings have struggled to give material shape to their religious ideals through the medium of art. If all art, in a sense, seeks “to make the invisible visible,” this is so a fortiori of specifically sacred or religious forms of artistic expression such as the unrivalled multiplicity of images devised for the perpetuation of the Christian faith (Clark: 63). Religious images are incomprehensible in isolation: their meaning must be extracted (often with great difficulty) through frequently complex iconography which articulates an overarching mythological system. But a sacred cosmos permeated by symbols and images is also rooted in social life and culture, its meanings moulded by and mediated through social institutions, class, status, gender, and ethnic strata, collectivities, movements, communities, and specific conceptions of the self, and the ties which bind the individual and the social. Images are, in a sense, texts whose meanings evolve, multiply, tarnish, and evaporate through the vicissitudes of history, the shifting of social structures, and the inexorable accumulation and displacement of cultural innovation. Images persist but their meanings are changed or lost, to be retrieved only with difficulty. The shining image dulls, the revitalising image petrifies, and while academic hermeneutics may re-cognise and reconstruct original intent, the spell-binding power of such pristine signification has long since vanished together with those religious communities which contrived and sustained it (Pirth: 70).

Whatever their “authentic” intent, sacred images resemble Rorschach inkblots in their potential for reinterpretation in different times and places. Such multivalence underlies their capacity to be both universal and specific, inclusive and exclusive, authoritative and subversive, according to circumstance. It also permits their transmutation from religious objects to artefacts or art (Malraux: 13-16; Grimes; Akrich). Just as it is necessary to distinguish official doctrine from popular belief, so formally sanctioned religious images must be distinguished from unauthorised vernacular attempts to represent the divine in material form. This is not to suggest that theological differences are inevitably expressed or that official imagery lacks widespread societal appeal. It is simply a reminder that religious
imagery and its reception must be viewed in the context of diversity, hierarchy, and the power relations governing such social segmentation (Rubin: 1-3, 266-267). From this point of view, differential interpretation of the same image among various social strata is a distinct possibility.

No typology of religious imagery carries universal conviction, but the various formulations exhibit considerable consistency regarding the most pertinent categories (Strong; Joy; Durand). Among believers, images are viewed as human or divine creations: either the product of identifiable or anonymous artists or artisans, or the direct and miraculous physical result of divine fiat. They may be mimetic, symbolic, analogical, or metaphorical in form and range in their intent and interpretation from the representational through the iconic to the idolatrous, depending on the manner in which they are believed to describe, reflect, evoke, signify, encapsulate, or embody a divine presence. The history of Christianity is replete with examples (such as various controversies concerning iconoclasm) which underline the image's actual and potential mutability of meaning (Cook; Elkins 1999). Sacred images function in a variety of frequently overlapping ways: they may be didactic, edifying, commemorative, narrative, historiographical, magical, sacramental, or iconic. While promoting knowledge, prayer, meditation, sanctity, or devotion, they may also induce ecstasy, revelation, or miracle. Thus, while the intellectual aspect of images must not be ignored, their real power frequently resides in a capacity to evoke, intensify, and sustain a range of strong emotions. This is particularly significant because the functions of sacred imagery are by no means restricted to a sacred, liturgical, or ecclesiastical realm. By igniting emotions or recharging dormant sensibilities, images can conjure commitment to both belief and belonging. Such confirmation of conformity and community, however, is likely to overflow the hieratic and engulf the civic and political as well. In some cases, of course, certain sacred images do not just implicitly reaffirm and reinforce the legitimacy of existing social and political structures; they become explicitly and inextricably emblematic of specific communities of varying size and complexity (Wolf).

**Durkheim and Representations**

No sociological discussion of religious imagery can proceed far without recourse to the insights of the French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) and it is appropriate at this point to consider why this is so. Durkheim's work remains controversial and, in particular, the precise meaning of his theory of religion is still debated (Pickering 1984). The relevance of his thinking, however, requires no wholesale endorsement of his particular interpretation of totemism or his subsequent identification of God with society. Observing an inherent tendency of human beings to give material form to abstract conceptions of the sacred, Durkheim explores the role of the totem as an arbitrary physical emblem of the social collectivity. Perceiving it as the flag or coat of arms which simultaneously represents both a divine impersonal force diffused through nature and the human community which reveres it, he proclaims that a totem is "only the material form under which the imagination represents . . . immaterial substance." Even more forcefully, he arrives at "the remarkable conclusion that the images of totemic beings are more sacred than the beings themselves" (Durkheim: 156). Durkheim's conception of the connection between image and reality is rooted in a conviction that "a human institution cannot rest upon an error and a lie." Thus, religious images "hold to reality and express it." They are all "true in their own fashion" because they articulate, in different ways, "the given conditions of human existence" (ibid.: 14-15). Reality, as Durkheim conceives it, is of course social reality. Religious beliefs, rites, myths, and images then "translate some human need, some aspect of life either individual or social," a proposition succinctly conveyed in the statement that "religious representations are collective representations which express collective realities" (ibid.: 14, 22).

From a Durkheimian standpoint, images in both the mental and physical senses are understood through the concept of "representation" which refers to mental projections constituting the chief components of individual minds, the essential ingredients of communication, the bases of all social reality, and the means by which society is reproduced (Pickering 2000). Although Durkheim distinguishes private "individual representations" from shared "collective representations," his primary interest in the latter is evident from his famous depiction of religion as a "system of ideas by which individuals represent to themselves the society of which they are members and the obscure but intimate relations that they maintain within it" (Durkheim: 257). The complex of collective representations central to such a notion is "the result of an immense co-operation, which stretches out not only into space but into time as well" (ibid.: 29). Thus, while simplistic reduction of all religious imagery into totemic terms would surely be unproductive, Durkheimian insights and the responses they still animate may provide a broad avenue for exploration of the complex ways in which sacred imagery simultaneously reflects and affects society.

**Christian Imagery**

Though the Christian religion has been ambivalent in attitude, it has inspired an immense multitude of images, many (or most) of them intend-
ed for public display and collective recognition (MacGregor 2000a: 7; 2000b: 6). Crafted in most cases in contexts of limited literacy, they have taken the form of paintings, frescoes, mosaics, metalwork, sculpture, tapestry, carving, and stained glass in every conceivable artistic style. Their contents include divine portraiture, scriptural narrative, ecclesiastical history, lives of the saints, and theological doctrines all transmitted in direct or codified form. Such sacred images have been variously regarded, according to circumstance, with admiration, awe, love, servility, curiosity, indifference, and hostility. They have, accordingly, been contemplated, venerated, idolised, ignored, denigrated, and destroyed in specific times and places.

No effort is made here to document in detail the explicit or implicit social character of sacred imagery at various stages of the long Christian journey. The inherent worth of such a project is accentuated, however, by the difficulty of providing concise summary assessment of the sociological significance of the Christian image which does justice to the many exceptions which prove the rule. The predominant themes of Christian imagery strongly affirm the intrinsic and inextricable connection which Durkheim discerns between religion and the "moral community called a church" (Durkheim: 62-63). Whether in Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant contexts, the content and form of Christian art (at least up to the eighteenth century) presumes to a high degree the unity of belief and practice in a church (Bieling). Indeed, the complex interconnectedness of its images is incomprehensible without such presumption. Nor is it intelligible without an assumption of the essential overlap and mutual interdependence of the sacred and secular communities within which it emerged. Images of earthly and heavenly community abound while the links between them are as apparent as in comparable depictions of hierarchy in this world and the next. Representations of God the Father, God the Son, the Holy Family, or the Virgin and Child appropriate and transpose the most elementary components of earthly community into a divine key. By contrast, depictions of the Eucharist and the Holy Ghost offer symbolic versions of community which seem to invite Durkheimian analysis (Rubin; Clark: 64). The holistic character of Christian iconography, however, expresses a sense, not merely of strong social ties, but of a cosmic community binding humanity to an incarnate God. Though often aniconic in form, Christian art struggles to render the invisible visible in precise ways. Through human imagery in particular, it captures the richness of everyday life and the perennial reality of the human condition in both its individual and collective aspects. It does so, however, within a visual framework which depicts the human within the divine, the divine within the human, and the conjoining of the

seen and the unseen by priestly and kingly mediation. While individual experiences and emotions are graphically portrayed, they are embedded in a precise theodicy and assume a version of human character in communion with a divinely sanctioned collectivity.

Although Durkheim is often accused of overestimating social consensus, he undoubtedly views social integration as inevitably imperfect, dependent as it is on a sharing of collective representations which is never fully accomplished. The notion of individual representation, in fact, underscores the limits of the socialization process and the permanent potential for deviance. While overestimation of accord in the interpretation of Christian imagery must necessarily be avoided, there is little doubt that most of it has appeared under conditions of greater social and cultural homogeneity than are typical in modern industrial and post-industrial societies. Thus, even where such images have been inspired by a need to reaffirm orthodoxy or re-ignite ecclesiastical communal sentiment, their iconography takes for granted high degrees of intellectual and emotional convergence among the faithful.

It would be entirely wrong to suggest that Christian art has not survived or responded to the erratic but inexorable decline of organised religion in the Western world. The occasional brilliance of Christian artistry is displayed, however, in circumstances that are often indifferent or hostile to Christianity or, for that matter, any religious tradition. Christian imagery, especially when exhibited in ecclesiastical locales, now ordinarily resonates, intellectually and emotionally, only among a minority of the population (MacGregor 2000a: 7). While this is due, in large measure, to widespread ignorance and confusion concerning Christian belief, it must also be attributed to the attenuation and disintegration of religious communities. Where "belief without belonging" is a prevailing characteristic of the religiously committed, an iconography permeated by intimations of the communal will be predictably delimited in its allure (Davie). Nowhere is the success of secularisation more palpable than in the metamorphosis of once sacrosanct Christian images and ritual objects into the artefacts and artworks which enrich museums and galleries, confront curators, and enchant aesthetes. Whether reversal of this process is possible, and in what manner it might occur, is undoubtedly a crucial question. It may best be pondered, however, after brief contemplation of another matter.

Contemporary Abstractionism, Religion, and Spirituality

It is instructive to consider traditional Christian imagery in conjunction and juxtaposition with the abstractionist creations of a number of
twentieth-century artists because the latter display an undeniably religious or spiritual dimension. Though it may surprise some gallery visitors, the proposition that abstractionism is often explicitly religious in intent is widely endorsed among art critics, theologians, and other scholars (Tekiner; Crumlin; Küng; Rahner). Beginning with the work of Mondrian and Kandinsky and revealing its roots in Romanticism and Symbolism, abstractionism's character as a mystical search for spiritual truth is readily apparent in the creations of a number of its most renowned exponents (Rosenblum). Originally imbued with theosophical ingredients, abstract art also draws upon the potent symbolism of the Judaeo-Christian tradition in its fractious struggles to forge a language of symbols which links the self to a universal consciousness of reality and addresses cosmic issues of existence and meaning. Of special interest in a religious or spiritual sense is the work of the American Abstract Expressionists Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and Jackson Pollock whose works are frequently regarded as enterprises which, by delving into the innermost recesses of spirit and psyche, explore the boundaries of human experience (Goethals: 85-97; Taylor: 49-95; Jasper).

Abstractionism "has created the possibility of a broadly Christian iconography without recognisable subject matter" and, in the last hundred years, has been utilised increasingly in transmission of the Christian message (Cook: 63). For the most part, however, it expresses a primal and diffuse spirituality rooted in the sublime, drawing syncretically on many mystical traditions and forcefully repudiating materialism. It is difficult to determine precisely what is represented in abstract art, but its profound rejection of figuration seems to imply the removal of material barriers to self-expression, spiritual self-realisation, and the disclosure of the numinous. Enraptured by the non-objective, abstract aspects of primitive art, twentieth-century abstractionism resembles a revitalisation movement dedicated to the restoration of a lost world of primal emotions, spiritual intensity, and visionary quests (Wallace). Thus, aroused by "experiences of awe, boundlessness and divinity," American Abstract Expressionism evokes intense terror of the unknowable while endeavouring to impart cosmic meaning and spiritual consolation (Tekiner: 60-61).

As in all mystical ventures, abstract art attempts to unite the individual with the collective by fusing specific and universal in a vision of ultimate reality. This is especially evident in American Abstract Expressionism's efforts to translate such visionary experience into redeeming imagery. Abstractionism's collective dimension is apparent from its first efforts to express the sublime and inaugurate a universalistic era of world history. For abstract artists, increasing abstractionism inevitably accompanies widespread spiritual awakening and a greater collective consciousness of eternal truth. This perception, of course, heavily indebted to the notion of a universal language of symbols as well as to Jungian concepts of the archetype and the collective unconscious. Thus, the haphazard painting technique of automatism is seen not merely as a means of individual emotional expression, but as a dramatic articulation of the collective unconscious and a reaffirmation of the orderly and holistic nature of the universe.

While such collective themes must be noted, the underlying orientation of abstract art is individualistic in its assertion of "the priority of inner psychic transformation" over social or political schemes to redeem humanity (Tekiner: 51). Abstract art is thus usually perceived as "notable not for creating public symbols, but for exploring personal visions and emotions" (Goethals: 100-1). While its authenticity is presumed to derive from individual rather than communal experience, it is often criticised for communicating private symbols rather than social values. In many accounts, abstract art primarily involves the depiction of a radically individualistic search for an authentic and autonomous experience of the self in its uniqueness. By freely plumbing the depths of subjectivity, it harnesses the profound feelings of both artist and viewer in the service of self-awareness and self-realisation.

Conventional wisdom seems to suggest that abstract art aims to represent a formless, diffuse divinity accessible through the individual psyche. Engaged in a solitary spiritual journey, the artist is a shaman and a prophet who imparts his vision to other individuals, inviting them to embark upon their own personal quests. In Durkheimian terms, therefore, abstract art appears to invite interpretation in terms of individual rather than collective representation and in magical rather than truly religious terms. For Durkheim, magic is essentially an individual matter, for while it may be widely diffused, it fails to bind together its adherents into "a group leading a common life" (Durkheim: 59-60). There is no church of magic and, seemingly, no moral community grounded in the imagery of abstract art. So, although individuals may weep on encountering the works of Mark Rothko, they do so alone (Elkins 2001; Putnam).

Conclusion

Of course, any stark contrast between the collective sentiments surrounding traditional Christian imagery and the highly individualised ethos of twentieth-century abstractionism is open to doubt and qualification.
Clearly, medieval responses to sacred images emerged in part from the intimate details of personal biography just as the modern reception of abstract art occurs within a collective cultural context profoundly imprinted by individualistic ideology. The perils of overstatement must, therefore, be borne in mind during any meditation on the likely fates of traditional and abstract religious imagery under contemporary conditions of post-modernity (Melior and Shilling; Flanagan and Jupp). If the future of religious art hinges on the changing character of religion which, in its turn, is bound to broaden transformations of social structure, then presumptive prophecy is easier than painstaking prediction.

Current sociological assessments of advanced western societies stress their high degrees of heterogeneity, fragmentation, and privatization as well as their rapid rates of change, realignment, and mutation. In like manner, religion (under conditions of surging secularisation) is described as diffuse and fragmented: a broad cultural resource rather than an authoritative institution (Beckford; Tschannen). In a society where belief is increasingly ephemeral, idiosyncratic, and progressively divorced from belonging, abstractionism appears to be a compatible form of spiritual expression, although one unlikely to encourage the formation of a religious community. For example, the fervent reaction of the crowds of Americans who have transformed the minimalist abstraction of Washington's Vietnam War Memorial into a national spiritual shrine arrayed with votive offerings seems to have resulted less from what Durkheim calls "collective effervescence" than from thousands of discrete, singular, and intensely private journeys of the bereaved in remembrance of a particular person (Durkheim: 245-51; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz).

If the character of contemporary sociation and religiosity is broadly receptive to abstract representation, it would appear inhospitable to a legacy of unequivocally Christian imagery rooted in elapsed consensus and community. Nearly half a century ago, the theologian Paul Tillich clearly discerned the religious potential of the abstract art which elicited such strong reactions from the patrons of art museums. At the same time, he lamented a situation in which the Christian art inheritance, which he loved and revered, remained meaningful to so few people (Tillich; MacGregor 2000a: 7). In many post-industrial societies, such imagery has become as unfamiliar as the cadences of holy writ or the doctrinal disputes which energised our ancestors. Ironically, however, there is evidence that the finest Christian images may still exert a momentous impact even though they "have been removed from the churches or domestic settings for which they were intended and hang now in the chronological sequences of the gallery, not to the glory of God, but as part of a narrative of human artistic achievement" (MacGregor 2000b: 6; Fintz). The way in which images, originally crafted to inspire specific versions of faith and devotion but long since translated into aesthetic objects, nonetheless retain a capacity for religious communication is strikingly illustrated by a recent widely discussed exhibition mounted by Britain's National Gallery. Devoted entirely to displaying diverse images of Christ, Seeing Salvation provoked an intense and enthusiastic public response seemingly inconsistent with conventional post-Christian indifference to religious phenomena. Scrutiny of curatorial intentions and spectators' reactions suggests that while iconography remained remote and ecclesiastical sentiment unrevived, many of the exhibits succeeded in stirring unusually strong sympathies among individual viewers. Naturally, multiplicity of images (e.g., Christ as victor, victim, king, shepherd, judge, or child) incited an array of individual intellectual and emotional responses. But many images also evinced an ability "to address the universal questions through the intelligence of the heart" by exploring "truths not just for Christians but for everybody" (MacGregor 2000b: 7). This was possible because, at least for the great Christian artists, the representation of God's incarnation was never a matter of mere historical documentation but rather an imparting of timeless truth with immediate relevance.

Many spectators untutored in Christian beliefs discovered that certain images which painstakingly depicted the Son of God were also brilliant elucidations of the human condition. Through great art, therefore, the events and aspects of the life of Jesus were transformed into archetypes of all human experience:

The Virgin nursing her son conveys the feelings every mother has for her child: they are love. Christ mocked is innocence and goodness beset by violence. In the suffering Christ we encounter the pain of the world, and Christ risen and appearing to Mary Magdalene is a universal reaffirmation that love cannot be destroyed by death. (MacGregor 2000b: 7)

While they could no longer transmit a dogmatic creed to individuals whose lives were untrammeled by centuries of religious belief and practice, the images displayed clearly retained the power to awaken that empathic awareness which is so central to the Christian message. Whether such secular re-animation of an always implicit humanistic element constitutes revival of dormant spirituality or re-enchantment of an art object into its previous religious form will not be investigated here. Such unanticipated rediscovery of the human face of God will doubtless remind theologians of
the nineteenth-century arguments of Ludwig Feuerbach and the voluminous “Death of God” debates of the twentieth century (Feuerbach; Fenn). Sociologists will inevitably recall Augustine’s pioneering vision of a “Religion of Humanity” as well as Emile Durkheim’s prediction of an emergent “Cult of Man” dedicated to the sacredness of the individual human being (Wright; Westley). To what extent a humanism rooted in a re-examination of Christian figurative imagery might provoke genuine interpersonal contact and the reconstitution of community, rather than an ineffectual generalised goodwill harnessed to a private mystical sense of oneness with humanity, is open to question. Indeed, in this respect, traditional Christian art remains as problematic in its regenerative potential as abstractionism. What seems clear is that whatever private or public forms religion and spirituality may take in the future they will almost inevitably find expression, not only in words and actions, but in some sort of physical imagery.

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