

Religion and Art: A Review Article

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Thomas R. MARTLAND, *Religion as art: An interpretation*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1981. 219 pp. \$14.95.

In this book Professor Martland, who teaches at the State University of New York and is in charge of religious studies, presents his thesis that "religion does what art does," and that art and religion present the collectively created forms of perception and meaning by which men interpret their experiences. Both namely open up new vistas, make visible and audible what had been imperceptible before, create new ways of seeing, listening and thinking, thus providing for a new future

As a practicing artist in various media with an abiding preoccupation with the "transcendent dimensions" of existence—however aware of my inadequacies in both respects—Dr. Martland's thesis did not exactly strike me as a revelation from on high. What for the artist is self-evident easily becomes a "problem" for the philosopher. The author states that in order to function as art and as religion, a work, an act has to arise in the cultural context where it has a chance to communicate. But this too is part of what is self-evident to the artist, whose paintings, whose books often came either a year too early or a month too late . . . In what Martland calls his "Overture" ("in the sense of the operatic Overture, which since Wagner not only incorporates material from what is to come, but also sets the mood"), he reassures us that his book is written for "simply everyone who is preoccupied with religion and/or art," but in the same breath he avows that he has especially the philosopher in mind, "because this study uses philosophical tools and appeals to philosophical tradition without apology," and gives as an example his adherence to Strawson's distinction between "sen-

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tences” and “statements.” It is therefore with a deep blush of shame that this reviewer must confess not to know Strawson from Adam.

Still, I found the book quite enjoyable, for it is well composed in that idiosyncratically elegant essay style, now quite rare, that used to delight me in the quality products of well-bred literary craftsmen imported from England in the thirties. By way of example:

The various systems of activities to which we refer as art and religion, are not variations on the essence art or on the essence religion. Like bursitis and the weather, art and religion are useful abstractions elicited from certain frozen phenomena which exist in certain places and in certain times, but they themselves no more exist apart from the phenomena they classify, than does the Aristotelian logic of subject and predicate, or the common sense logic embodied in our familiar parts of speech.

Part of the delectation of this very academic work of 150 pages plus 50 pages of footnotes, is its scaffolding on choice quotations, of which there are so many that one may enjoy the book primarily as an anthology of quotes by the great quotables, starting with Abraham, then to mention just a few, Aristophanes, Augustinus, Aquinas, Asvagosa, Apolodoris, G.L. Austin, Tom Altizer, Anaxagoras of Clazomene, via Courbet, Harvey Cox, Croce and Cyril of Jerusalem, Geertz, Gay, Geyl, all the way to Zeno and Zen, not to forget Kahlil Gibran . . . until seven chapters after the “Overture” we reach the “Reprise” (“in the sense of recapitulation or possible reiteration, certainly not in the sense of repetition that in music, it is true, may complete or may give rise to further expectation, but equally true may do what I am afraid would happen here: simply saturate . . .”).

Well, it does, it does. But as its arguments unfold, this study notwithstanding its preciosity, succeeds in clarifying here and there what cannot ever, for the “engaged” artist, be drawn into consciousness enough, even if only in the one who writes this, it provoked thought and hence served to exercise that logical,

intellectual, verbalizing hemisphere of the brain that in the artist is likely to be as pitifully recessive as it is pitifully dominant in the philosopher. One of these thoughts is of course the questioning whether this dominance makes the philosophical brain the ideal interpreter of symbol, myth, sign, poetry and painting

Since art and religion are not abstractions which exist in themselves, Martland posits, they can only be understood through certain phenomena. Legitimate examples of what religion and art "do" as cultural manifestations are not necessarily identical to what they do as personal experience. Since nothing is artistic or religious by nature, "everything which is artistic or religious is artistic or religious because it functions artistically or religiously" and this function, the author posits, is to release forces that lead to what will be, instead of simply summing up images or ideas that have already found acceptance. From the point of view of convention therefore they break taboos, as indeed they have to in order to open new vistas, to transmit new values and relationships. The author quotes Clifford Geertz's dictum that in contrast to philosophical and scientific beliefs, religious and artistic ones are not conclusions from experience but patterns of meaning or frames of perception prior to experience. The world "provides not evidences for their truth, but illustrations of it." Interesting thought. Although no one less than Leonardo da Vinci felt that to find one's inspiration in art instead of in nature is a sign of decadence.

Nevertheless one would gladly agree that minor art does not so much dictate to experience as it tends to be a conclusion drawn from experience. One may wonder how the unquestionable art of the Nō actor fits this frame of reference, or the dictum of Deguchi Onisaburō, founder of Ōmoto, a great and original ceramist who declared that "the practice of the traditional arts may be the equivalent of meditation and prayer" and who regarded art as "the mother of religion," which, without being an Ōmoto follower, I tend to agree with. Surely, in Western perspective art was neither the mother nor the sister of religion. It was reduced to the role of handmaiden, and hence a vital religious art has been

hamstrung by ecclesiastical interdicts. Ever since Nicea “the composition of religious imagery is not left to the initiative of artists, but is founded on principles laid down by the Church and by religious tradition. The execution alone belongs to the painter.” The artist here is reduced to the status of a craftsman, who as Thomas Aquinas realized, “is moved to action by the end, which is the thing he wrought, a chest, a bed.”

The Church was equally anxious to dampen the creative urge in theology, which talks about the Tremendum while often being itself wholly devoid of it, and thus stands to religion as no more than counterpoint exercises stand to music. The artist and the creative religious spirit, in contrast to craftsman and magician who are both characterized by possessing the know-how to achieve a planned result, have no such know-how. Both the authentically religious person and the authentic artist are much like Abraham who “went out not knowing where he wanted to go.” They are “distancing,” as Martland says, “themselves from the old, detaching themselves from the past.”

I see a figure like John XXIII as such an authentically religious one: the man who, faithful to tradition as he was, had the insight to know that the given, the stereotyped understanding of timeless verities was in need of being at once preserved and freshly relived, so as to maintain the continuity of a great tradition—as opposed to convention—while at the same time breaking its hermitic seals, making itself creatively open-ended, so that it might yield fresh, living meanings for people who are alive now, and who may carry it into the future. It was not a matter—as the “magicians” and “craftsmen” feared—of destroying the given, but of blowing new life into concepts that had died, to open up a new world of understandings. “The artistic and religious world is that which artists and religious people make of it.” The artist in contrast to the craftsman and the magician, the prophet in contrast to the soothsayer, is blessed with an indestructible innocence and absence know-how. The artist’s effort results in something that was not

there before. Neither he nor his audience was able to see it. The fetters of the past are broken, something new emerges. In their activity artist and religious person put on "a new self."

Dr. Martland quotes T.S. Eliot: "... each venture is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate" Craftsmen, soothsayers, magicians never raid the inarticulate.

The great religious traditions abound in *upaya*, those clever stratagems of the Spirit, that may lead the endarkened to some degree of enlightenment. The man of faith, aided by these stratagems, succeeds to penetrate into the unknown, to places not yet explored. Faith hovers in Tremendum, always on the brink of the not-yet. Belief is content to idolize what has been long established. Artist and man of faith extend the given beyond these established limits, create by their openness a personal gnosis that leads to new discriminations. They are creative instead of being mere mannerists who indulge in stylistic exercises based on what previous generations have left us.

In an interesting improvisation on a theme of Dewitt Parker, the author says that each individual person is a mere fragment. He may or he must choose among his many unrealized potentialities. The function of art—and religion—may then be to compensate for the individual's longing for what he did not become ... One wonders whether, or to what extent, in conventional Christianity Jesus becomes a projection, such a surrogate for what is not realized, a vicariously lived New Adam, and whether all the intramural praise for "Christian love"—so singularly difficult to detect by the outside observer—might not be a compensation (much like the contemporary Japanese "love of nature," and contemporary "English craftsmanship") for something that is conspicuously absent. Mystics, Sufis, poets and Zen masters have always banished stereotyped imagery, so that religion and art might function beyond the already known. I have the impression that Professor Martland indulges in glorifying "the new" as such, as the important contributions of religion and art.

Qualifications are needed here! To favor the Dragon of Chinese

lore, that symbol of the terrifying responsibility to move into the terra incognita of the yet-to-be, so consistently over the Tiger, the defender of the status quo ante, is not enough. To reconcile the two, however demanding a task, seems to be our real assignment. The emphasis on "the New" as better or best may be a relic of a progressivism which lies mortally wounded since Auschwitz and Hiroshima. In contemporary art, and to a lesser degree in "religion," such an exaggerated premium has been placed on "the New," on pseudo-originality, on avant-gardism per se, that we are drowning in kitsch, be it often in High Kitsch of surprising technical sophistication and elegance.

The new glorified is not necessarily more nourishing than the old. I use the word glorify, and am happy to report that Martland in concert with Heraclitus, Pindar and Heidegger finds that to extoll, to glorify, to reveal is the essence of art, of poetry and religion. It may be the crux of the matter. If it was Renoir, who glorified those pink little girls with blushing apple faces that had hardly existed before he glorified them, and Corot who glorified and created the viridian featheriness of trees, and the little peasant boys who seem to exist only to wear the vermillion little cap that set them off, it was Rembrandt who created Emmaus and Leonardo the Last Supper in their glory. And it was Bach—not Oberammergau—who created the Passion of Our Lord, and glorified it—at least as powerfully as the Gospel account itself. I violently, by the way, resist Martland where he tries to "explain" Bach out of Monteverdi. I read this nonsense immediately after playing the 18th Prelude and Fugue in Book II of the Welltempered Clavichord, and so I dare declare solemnly that Bach was not so much influenced by Monteverdi but by God Himself, and only by coincidence spoke with a Baroque accent.

If Monteverdi, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin and Brahms wrote music, then what Bach wrote was something else, just as the Prologue to Saint John's Gospel and the Bhagavad Gita are not literature, but something else.

I write this down with some trepidation—for only a non-professor

could be so rude as to say such things in a well-groomed academic milieu

Still, I am grateful to Professor Martland for stressing that art and religion are activities which are “true to” the open-ended cultural context in which they operate and that this open-endedness it to a great extent due to . . . religion and art. And that these are destined to change with every fresh creative breath. I am also grateful for his emphasis on the fact that the Christian claim that faith is based on history is only validated insofar as Christians accept this history as believably factual, thereby making it real, for it is the religious and artistic fact that moves men religiously and artistically. It is also useful to be reminded that art and religion can only have meaning for those who do not assume a neutral stance, or as Kierkegaard expresses it, “only who descends into the the nether world rescues the beloved.” We must be capable of artistic and religious experience to be in a position to evaluate art and religion. For art to be art and religion to be religion, I understand Martland to say, it must be “culturally fruitful” . . . In a culture that makes as much noise as ours, and of which the members are likely to become so blunted as to become color blind and tone deaf . . . this might mean the disappearance of art and religion, if not of much more

Before that happens let me hurry back to the silence of the 18th Fugue