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# CONNECTIONS BETWEEN ART AND RELIGION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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(Received 18 October 2012)

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## **Abstract**

By taking into consideration the manifestation of the relationships between arts and religion during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the research herein studies the general frame of artistic representations and approaches realized in the influence space of the religious field. By selecting some of the most representative artistic creations of this period, this study treats the idea of religiousness transmitted by art. Thus there are analyzed some of the main issues that the artists of the last century based their creations on, issues that marked a certain separation, already experienced by the previous periods in the field of arts and Church. Regarding artistic achievements, the 20<sup>th</sup> century meant a permanent attempt to replace past expressions, knowing the affirmation of a great variety of artistic trends and guidelines, which, in spite of the more intense process of laicization of society, nevertheless continued to assure a special space and interest to religious themes, although very different from the ones in any periods of the history of arts.

*Keywords:* art, religion, pluralism, modernism, postmodernism

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## **1. Artistic context**

Regarding the field of artistic creation, the 20<sup>th</sup> century marked an especially important period in the general context of the history of arts. This is due to the great number of movements and artistic directions that represented a very influential breakup regarding the conceptual horizon of creators of art. This period represents an especially troubled time as far as historical, social, cultural and artistic events are concerned. Referring to the last aspect, the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the moment of a permanent attempt to replace, renew and even reinvent the artistic expressions of the past, this fact has as a result the appearance of a big number of trends, orientations and artistic movements such as Fauvism, Expressionism, Cubism, Abstract Art, Dada, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, Informal Art, Kinetic Art, Op-art, Pop-art, Minimal Art, Conceptual Art, Hyperrealism, Video Art, new media and others whose length practically covers the entire temporal space of this century.

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By noticing the large number of these artistic directions which are permanently in search for their own ways of expressions, the fact that the 20<sup>th</sup> century already underlines an older tendency of reduction in time of artistic eras which was extended during millennia, centuries, decades and years and even months and sometimes days. This fact has as equivalent a specific validation process for pluralism of artistic opinions [1] – which became a real symbol of the 20<sup>th</sup> century art, consisting in the possibility of individualization of a large number of artists, each of them participating by his own creation and style to the process of defining and strengthening of the cultural-artistic specificity of this period.

By analysing this complex period of artistic creation, we believe that the motivation of this fact is to be found in a specific tendency which became more and more frequent for the discussed period, that is the modification and permanent reconsidering of philosophical, scientific, artistic and even religious models of the creative artistic processes. Furthermore, another factor that we believe it influenced the appearance of this situation is the presence of the two world wars and of the various military, political and social confrontations that deeply marked the history of this century, including the schedule of cultural and artistic events.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century is special by a continuous dispute between modern forms and traditional ones, between conservative and innovative ones. Regarding the plan of establishing a creative direction, the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is part of a general predilection for the idea of new and novelty regarding the topic of artistic creation. This is the root of a multitude of associations of this period with the notion of ‘modern’, modernism being understood as that capacity of using innovation, by tearing the artistic present apart from the values of traditional art. Another association of this term is that of the meanings of transgression of traditional artistic values, thus understanding the defection from established models of bidimensional chromatic volumetric or figurative representations of the previous period [2]. Gaining momentum, these changes also envisaged, as it could have been predicted, artistic creations inspired by religion.

But, starting with the second half of this century, the progressive model of previous periods started to fade away. This moment would validate a new attitude regarding the traditional values of art, to whom the following decades would pay a special attention regarding artistic creation. This tendency of rediscovery of the artistic spirit of the past, without blaming the one of the present, encapsulated in that notion of post-modernity plays a terrifically special role regarding the artistic creation of the past few decades [3]. By foreshadowing a step of re-debate of the problems exposed in the modern period, starting especially with the 60’s of the past century, postmodernism is defined as an analysis period of specific aspects of modernism [4]. In this respect, postmodern art is characterized by a perpetual transformation of creative forms and expressions, fighting for originality and impressing by the multitude of affirmation possibilities in the field of art. Postmodern art thus reveals its interdisciplinary and eclectic approach, contemporary times offer the proof of a

multitude of connections established between different fields of present socio-cultural life and of arts in particular. Thus, on the floor of different artistic appearances, different creations make their presence known, being specific both to modern and postmodern trends, the diversity of directions and styles being one of the main features of this period. In various situations, the idea of new is reached in contemporary art by a sort of recontextualization of the artistic attempts of the past, therefore contemporary art becomes a space of reviving them [5].

Briefly presented, these are only a few of the main features that characterize the contemporary artistic context. Together with these, we shortly mention a series of other phenomena that took place and were felt at a global level, such as globalization, consumerism and secularization, we will not insist on them in this context, but they have a sure influence on present processes of creation.

## **2. Religious context**

Talking about this topic regarding the time that we refer to in this study seems to be a very difficult thing to do, given the multitude of religious directions that exist in the world now. The diversity of religious pluralism represents a reality of contemporary times [6], the coexistence of different forms of religious expression is the proof of a native preoccupation of human kind, irrespective of one's culture, ethnos or religion that one has, in connection to one's spiritual status. In this respect, religion must be understood as a form of reference of human being to the divinity [7], the theoretical approach of the religious phenomenon reveals itself from the beginning as an especially important and complex act.

Based on this assertion which gravitates around the notion of *assembly*, we will try to develop our thesis referring to the connections established between art and religion over the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When one speaks about religion, taking into account the envisaged period, the theoreticians bring forward series of terms such as *relativism*, *syncretism*, *religious fundamentalism*, *secularization* [8], *atheism* and many others which individually provide an image of the level of understanding and religious experience of the society. The diversity of religious directions, reflected also in the confrontation between tradition and modernism has brought new phenomena to light, proved at a theoretical level and by the enrichment of the religious vocabulary. By becoming aware of the grandeur of this phenomenon, we notice the fact that the envisaged vocabulary varies in its complexity, ranging from the purest expressions of perceiving the religious experience, with all the understood cult and institutional implications, to what some authors call „*the exit from religion*” [9]. This phenomenon refers to an accumulation of symptoms, among which the remarkable ones are the replacement of the religious traditional feeling with another one which is different from the religious type, the separation of the Church from the state, the loss of religion's ability to shape social behaviour, the inability of religious

institutions to permanently impose their authority regarding dogmata and faith, the individualization of faith [9, p. 12-17] and even the "dissolution of the sacred" [10]. Moreover, according to Marcel Gauchet, the paradox is created by the coexistence of this phenomenon of the exit from religion with another one of "reinventing religion" [9, p. 20]. In this respect, the last decades sociologists underline a process of return to religion, nowadays, it is discussed even the notion of "postmodern religiosity" [11], referring to the idea of a spiritual life detached from the Church, deinstitutionalized and even secular. This notion tends to encapsulate a series of attitudes or rediscovery of the values of esotericism, mysticism and oriental spirituality, of the occultism, irrational, paranormal and of this type of ideas, discovering different forms of alternative spirituality which reproach to Christianity a "retrograde vision of life" [6, p. 415] supporting the need of a synthesis of different religions [11, p. 239].

Religious liberty and diversity, supported by the above-mentioned aspects, are also associated in practice with some hostile attitudes, at least in the space of the western culture, such as those connected to the eternal problematization of God's existence which is more and more debated given the conditions of the last scientific discoveries, from the old saying „the death of God” announced by Nietzsche, but almost permanently updated through different fields of the socio-cultural life or by the potential lack of interest of the future human being towards Him [10, p. 216]. In this respect, seeing secularization as a normal step in history and even as a challenge addressed to the Church to remember its essential status, the opinion of certain researchers is that late modernism is the moment when the divinity takes action through His most unpredictable ways of epiphany, thus impelling human kind to an 'apophatic' reading of Him [12].

We believe that all these are capable of creating confusion in the mind of contemporary people, the mentioned phenomena and processes envisage deeper consequences and meanings than those expressed or which are due to the understanding of the notion of secularization [13]. This is why, searching for solutions to these dilemmas, various personalities of the social, cultural and religious life have stated the necessity of the instauration of a interreligious dialogue, based on the intention of the rediscovery of spiritual meanings of modern times, this mission should take into account both the importance of being a Christian and the respect and trust which should be offered to the other religions [6, p. 28]. Given the situation and also the amplexness of the subject we are trying to debate, we will continue by presenting some of the aspects which define the domain of artistic-religious connections of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, referring to the influence space of the Christian religion.

### **3. Artistic-religious interconnections in the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

Having as a starting point the idea of an interreligious dialogue, that we have previously talked about, this time we are going to extrapolate this idea towards the dialogue that has existed for centuries between the fields of religion and art. Since ancient times, religion and art have been two essential sides of

human spirituality, the first of them representing the connections between human beings and divinity, while the other – the possibilities of creative expression, as an impulse having divine roots. The artistic-religious interconnections, as a reference to people's spiritual life, can be better understood if one perceives religion as an art of inner life of a human being [14], the connections between religion and art make themselves known visually many millennia before the appearance of Christianity. In this respect, some authors have understood art as a follow-up of the loss of the beauty of paradise [15], the creative activities of human beings reflect a permanent search for the divine perfection and an attempt to satisfy spiritual and aesthetic needs. From this point of view, the connections between art and religion and obvious, religion is the one which inspires and proliferates art, while the last one serves religion by the creation of works having a deeply religious character [15, p. 97].

The art of a 20<sup>th</sup> century cannot be regarded in a detached manner compared to the art of previous periods. It represents, at least historically speaking, the consequence or the result of a pursuit of the art of the past, thus reflecting the artistic and aesthetic spirit of the present. In its connections to the field of religion, the art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century reflects this search, the diversity of forms and artistic expressions offers the proof of their intensity and of the way of understanding and perceiving the religious feeling. Being a century of the pluralism of values, both religious and artistic, we believe it is natural the fact that among all these expressions, one can find both traditional forms of the artistic-religious bonds (*sacred art*), and some revolutionary expressions of these connections, permanently searching for the breakup from tradition, innovation, the interpretation and the re-discussion of these aspects at the level of understanding which is due to the discoveries of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We have here mentioned the concept of *sacred art* which, given the present conceptual horizon, finds a variety of meanings, reaching for diverse significance, its usage in different contexts and referring to different branches of artistic creation shows this diversity of implications. Thus, we believe that this term also is affected by the mentioned pluralism of values, sacred art can refer, in the context of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both to art which has a purpose in itself to serve the religious cult, and to an art created by predominantly secular artists who envisage only aesthetic purposes and for whom this notion can have extended meaning or very different from those connected to the topic of the religious field. The multitude of artistic creations of the envisaged period leads us to approach this notion trying to encapsulate its complexity of meanings and present usages [J. Cottin, *Peut-on parler d' "art sacré"?*, online at <http://www.protestantismetimages.com/J-Cottin-Peut-on-parler-d-art.html>].

In Europe, through the means of the new aesthetic movements, the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would mark a fissure from the academic conventions and a real "*aesthetic revolution*" [16] directed against the classic order of the artistic world. These changes have had concrete effects including the artistic creations of religious inspiration, since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and even before this moment, social classes felt a deeper "*religious void*" [17], they

would find in art the possibility of filling up this emptiness. In the world of art, the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century will mark an important moment, a bid for reviving the dignity of Christian art [17, p. 218], symbolism being one of these movements, oriented towards spirit and imagination, treating subjects which had were inspired by the Bible. One must notice the fact that, despite the great number of artists that made themselves known in this period, those who were associated with the idea of sacred and religious art were less and less. The explanation of this fact consists in the fact that, except for a multitude of factors, religious indifferentism grew stronger and the Church promoted a conventional type of iconography at that time which lacked originality [17, p. 218].

Despite this, the period that we refer to would be fruitful, for it would be the time of emergence of valuable artists, preoccupied with the importance of religious topics whose expressiveness would be reflected in the works of art. Thus, in the first half of this century, we can recall here names such as James Ensor (*The man of pain*, 1892; *Christ's Entrance in Bruxelles*, 1889), Edvard Munch (*Golgotha*, 1900), Georges Desvallières (*Christ at the Column*, 1910), Emile Nolde (*The Crucifixion*, 1912), Lovis Corinth (*The Red Christ*, 1922), Pablo Picasso (*The Crucifixion*, 1930), Georges Rouault (*Ecce Homo*, 1939-1942), Francis Bacon (*Fragment of a Crucifixion*, 1950), Germaine Richier (*Le Christ d'Assy*, 1950), Salvador Dali (*The Christ of Saint John of the Cross* 1951), and of course many others.

By continuing an older attempt of creating workshops for sacred art, this initiative was Maurice Denis's and Georges Desvallières's at the beginning of the century, another attempt of reviving sacred art was that of the Dominicans Marie-Alain Couturier and Raymond Régamey who searched for the rediscovery and the strengthening of the connections which existed between art and religion. By noticing the doubtful quality of many of the creations of art having a religious source of inspiration, they proposed the continuation of the tradition of sacred art and its revival through the means of the most talented artists of the time. This explains the fact that around the 50's of the past century, a new artistic-religious connection would become visible, having as result the collaboration of some of the most representative artists of that moment, such as Henri Matisse, Georges Braque, Marc Chagall, Le Corbusier or Arnulf Rainer with different institutions of the religious field, this fact lead in a prestigious way to the realization of an important number of works of art having sacred topics.

Not only painting, sculpture and architecture had a strong affirmation moment in the direction of the connections between art and religion, but also the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought forward a series of works in the fields of photography, cinema and new media which found innovative ways of expression of the religious message, also speculating on the artists' need to become remarked as being original. In this period, artists having different styles and religious attitudes became well-known. If we look back over the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we notice a diversity of artistic exhibitions, some of them continuing the spirit of the artistic Christian tradition, others, on the contrary,

being revolutionary, continuously thinking about essential aspects of the religious phenomenon. In this respect, we underline only the artistic actions of Michel Journiac (*Messe pour un corps*, 1969), when the present audience were invited to take part in the communion act of eating a sausage made from the artist's blood, or the 'sanguinary' ritualic acts of Hermann Nitsch, and of the group of action people from Vienna who repeatedly caught the attention of mankind by the unconventional character of their artistic representations.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century was also the witness of various examples of artistic manifestations having an offensive character at the value of religious acts, both for Christianity and in general, this fact underlines the more and more secular character of present art compared to the ideal quality of sacred art promoted by other artistic periods. We will not insist on this aspect, we will try to underline another important element which defines the artistic-religious context of the second half of this century, regarding the contemporary recurrence of classic topics of the Christian iconography, such as *The Annunciation*, *The Last Supper*, *Christ's Crucifixion* or *Pieta* which, transposed in the specific language of contemporary art, reflect the new forms of understanding, interpretation, feeling and expressing the religious dimension nowadays. Irrespective of the approached topics, artists such as Marina Abramovic (*Anima Mundi*, 1983), Andres Serrano (*Piss Christ*, 1987), Christian Boltanski (*Humans*, 1994), Chris Ofili (*The Holy Virgin Mary*, 1996), Maurizio Cattelan (*La nona ora*, 1999), Wim Delvoe (*Saint Stephanus I*, 1990), Damien Hirst (*Virgin Mother*, 2005) or Bill Viola (*Emergence*, 2002) represent just some names of the contemporary personalities whose creations have authentic vibes of the connections between art and religion, at least from the point of view of their critics.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Beyond the traditional ways of expression of Church art which we did not insist on in this study, preferring to present some secular artists which are interested in the inspiring side of the religious field, we tried to broadly sketch the image of the artistic-religious context of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, we could notice a specific tendency which is more and more present nowadays, at least in the space of Christian culture which appeals to the theme heritage of religious art, but rephrasing the elements of its traditional language. This explains for example the predilection for the non-figurative which is so frequently found in the artistic creations of the artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including when we refer to the representation of religion-inspired topics. In this respect, according to François Bœspflug, various artists such as Piet Mondrian, Mark Rothko or Barnett Newman, they have succeeded to capture that meditative atmosphere due to the presence of the sacred by using the means of painting which were among the simplest ones [18]. Consequently, the usage of elements belonging to the secular language, most of the time having no trace of the sacred while artistically representing topics of religious inspiration, is a means of expression

which is specific to the studied period whose major symptoms seem to be those of secularization and desacralization.

Even in these conditions, on the one side, the world of art faces a larger aperture towards the religious field, the closeness and working together which exists between these two can practically know no limits. On the other hand, many museums in the entire world show to the public extremely precious works which are invaluable pieces of sacred art, having in general a religious inspiration, offering another facet of the connections established in time between art and religion. This double gateway has much deeper meanings, making one meditate on the status and the way of exposure of the sacred works of art, on the limits between the sacred character (or religious) and the secular one of numberless artistic creations of the last century.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century, by its blending of modern and postmodern features, represents an important moment of the evolution of the relationship between art and the Church. Juan Plazaola shows in one of his works the fact that the history of Christian art pendulates between two tendencies referring to the taste for image and that for the symbolic sign, tendencies which he summarizes by the adjectives "immanent" and "transcendent" [17, p. 224]. We believe that these two tendencies are, in a way, characteristic for the artistic-religious evolution of the century that has just passed. The permanent dispute between tradition and innovation, between immanence and transcendence, between the sacred and the secular, finds connotations and multiple representations, more than ever, in the art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Analyzing this complicated historical, social, artistic and religious context, we can easily conclude that nowadays society is passing through a major crisis of spiritual values, strengthening the belief of some critics that Nietzsche has not entirely made a mistake, the disorienting 20<sup>th</sup> century seems to show that Christ is dead, of course at a figurative level, for the second time [19].

Taking into account the vastitude of the debated topic, we believe it is difficult to extract only one conclusion which encapsulates all the features which define the connections between art and religion over this century which has made itself known as a period of ideological contrasts, devastating global wars, technical-scientific and medical discoveries, pluralism of values and philosophical ideas, unseen development of sects, atheism and religious indifferentism and last, but not least, of the multitude of trends and artistic movements.

Finally, we face new questions which could represent the concern of our present society and that of the future. By noticing the present more frequent usage of notions such as those of religious or artistic syncretism, we ask ourselves about the way in which the two discussed fields will evolve in the case of the present study (art and religion), and also on their way of interacting during the times to come. Moreover, we also wonder on to what extent the capacity of transcendence of art and religion will play, in the future, a role which is at least as significant as the one it had over millennia.

The answer to all these questions will not be found very soon. But, as far as we are concerned, we believe that both religion and art are two essential sides of human existence which, no matter the period, will find the necessary resources to coexist, being complementary and supporting themselves, offering examples which are to be followed by a human which has become increasingly poor regarding one's values and spiritual being.

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