

CULTURE AND THE SACRED

By D. C. BARRETT

IT HAS BEEN said that more prayers acceptable to God were said before a plaster Madonna or Sacred Heart than were ever said before a work of art. This may well be true, though it might be hard to prove. However, its implications are clear. Works of art, if not positively prejudicial to devotion, are at best irrelevant to it.

This may seem paradoxical when most of the major works of art produced by mankind, from Greece to India, Japan and Mexico, from antiquity to the Renaissance, have been religious in one way or another. But official religion has always been chary of art, for reasons not always connected with art as such. The jews and muslims eschewed works of art which depicted living forms, and, even more, the anthropomorphic representation of God as, for example, a bearded sage. The reasons were twofold: they were not an appropriate way to represent the Almighty; and secondly, animal forms (and even trees and streams) were regarded as divine by pagan peoples.

If we ignore the *practice* of popes, bishops and clergy over the ages and concern ourselves with what they have written, we will find very little said in favour of the arts, whether they be painting, sculpture, architecture, music or literature. This was not entirely a bad thing, since, until the Council of Trent, the Church allowed the artist and his patrons to proceed without interference. However, the general attitude was not favourable. Among the opponents of the arts can be named St Jerome, St Gregory, St Augustine, St Bernard and the Fathers of the Council of Trent. It was not until Vatican II that a morsel of comfort was thrown to religious art.

But in some miraculous way the arts in the Church survived this verbal hostility, for reasons which I hope to show.

One remarkable thing about the arts in the Church, however, was the high standard of taste displayed by such saints as St Philip Neri, St Teresa of Avila, St John of the Cross, and, more surprisingly perhaps, the Curé d'Ars. Indeed, with the notable exception of St Thérèse of Lisieux, very few saints displayed poor taste. Even St Bernard, for all his scorn (on grounds of religious poverty rather

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than of artistic considerations), showed a very keen observation of those things which he considered inappropriate to a monastic church.

It might be said that neither the good taste of the saints nor the excellence of art in the Church proves very much. All that it shows is that the production and choice of works of art (and the same goes for music and literature) of a high quality is compatible with piety and holiness. It does not show that there is any necessary connection between the two. The writers, craftsmen and composers working prior to the Renaissance rarely set out self-consciously to produce *art*. They produced it, in writing a hymn or a prayer, in composing a mass or painting an altarpiece, almost, one might say, by accident. Nor can saints such as the Curé d'Ars be cast in the role of connoisseurs of art.

Indeed, it might be argued that the pursuit of artistic excellence is inimical to devotion. Either one says one's prayers and attends to one's devotions, or else one listens to the music, savours the felicities of the latin liturgy, admires the proportions of the church and its decoration etc., but one cannot do both. Indeed it was precisely because people were coming to church merely for the music (the 'shilling opera') that Pope St Pius X came down so heavily on orchestras and operatic singers in church.

On the other hand, for those who are self-conscious about art and about the aesthetic aspects of things generally, the presence of what they regard as unaesthetic or aesthetically offensive may be equally inimical to piety and devotion. The hearing of mass in a dowdy church; the singing of sentimental or meaningless hymns set to banal music; the recitation of long, ineptly worded public prayers: all this may become for them not an act of devotion but a penitential exercise. Necessary though it may be, one cannot nourish one's soul indefinitely on penance. The chances are that, with increasing artistic awareness among the young, the number of those who are liable to be affected in this way is likely to increase, too.

Moreover, the fact that some people come to church merely for the music, the ceremony and the architectural setting – like those who go straight from hearing the Vienna Boys' Choir in the Burg Capelle to the Spanish Riding School where they discuss the performance – is no reason for concluding that one cannot worship in the context of great art consciously pursued. At the very least one can praise the Creator in the work of his creature.

So far the discussion has been rather negative. Art, whether con-

sciously or unconsciously pursued, is not incompatible with devotion, and the presence of bad art (or the aesthetically unsatisfactory) may be a hindrance to devotion. Providing inoffensive prayers, decoration, church music may be no more an aid to devotion than putting in central heating: it removes a hindrance. The question is: is art just a useful adjunct to the practice of religion or is it something necessary to it? I want to suggest that it is necessary for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways, and that it is no accident that periods of religious fervour were accompanied by great works of religious art, to such an extent that the art can be an index of the religious climate of a period; and, moreover, that the old woman praying before her plaster Madonna is an exceptional person.

Perhaps this can best be demonstrated by considering the effects of bad religious art. Bad religious art or inartistic religious literature, music, architecture, decoration, etc. is not just offensive to the artistically conscious. It is prejudicial to the artistically unself-conscious as well. Whether they are aware of it or not, those who favour this kind of thing are exposed to a distortion of true religion. They utter – whether in hymns or prayers – false religious sentiments and they are given an image of religion as safe and cosy as the nursery which, if it admits the sufferings of life at all, allows only the sorrow one feels on the death of a kitten or puppy.

A work of art is at least of sterner stuff than that. If an artist treats of the Nativity he will not (if he is worth his salt as a religious artist) represent the baby Jesus smiling engagingly at his beautiful mother while Joseph and admiring shepherds with cuddly lambs look on. On the merely human level it will present something of the stark reality of homelessness and destitution; on the religious level it will, hopefully, convey something of the significance of the Incarnation, the redemptive act, the great humiliation. Whatever the theme, an artist will raise it at least to a serious level of human concern: a crucifixion will express the inhumanity of man, the suffering of innocent and suppressed people, the ability of the human spirit to endure excruciating pain for the sake of a principle or an ideal, etc.

There is, of course, the danger that in the presence of great art, whether it be painting, sculpture, music, architecture or oratory, one may be swept up in a pseudo-religious experience. In other words great art, which penetrates the deeper implications of religious ideas – the *St Matthew Passion* by Bach, Michelangelo's *Rondani Pietà*, the poems of St John of the Cross – may become a substitute for genuine and personal religious experience, and when

the emotion fades it leaves no residue. But even if this were true, it would be a vastly preferable situation than that which results in losing oneself in the reveries and false sentiments of pseudo-religious art, music and literature. Thus, if for this reason alone, artistic merit is something of paramount importance to devotion.

But there is more to it than that. It is not merely that if one is to have a substitute religious experience it is better to have one which approximates to the genuine article than one which debases it. Religious art – by which I mean art which is religious in spirit as well as in theme and subject matter and in the use to which it is put – must of its nature create the condition for devotion, not just by being religious, but by being art.

It is a feature of all art worthy of the name that it stands apart in a self-contained or self-sufficient world of its own. When you stand in front of the Duomo or the Baptistry in Florence, the passage of five centuries, the proximity, menace and noise of the traffic around you mean nothing. You are in the presence of something that is disengaged from the life around it while forming part of it. The same is true of a well-organized spectacle such as a dance or play in the open. It draws attention towards itself and away from its surroundings. This may be because it is organized while most of what goes on around us appears disorganized and haphazard. But the fact remains that any work of art, whether it be a building, a statue, a play, a piece of music or a poem, is something both set apart and enduring in its own right.

Kant spoke of art as a symbol of morality. With its qualities of being set apart, self-contained, a perfect world of its own, while still part of or inserted in the everyday world we live in, it is also a symbol of the religious, the transcendental dimension. Some will say that this is all there is to the religious experience: it is artistic experience at its highest, an experience of transcending time, space and the human condition itself, of attaining to some transcendental, but fictitious, reality. That is another issue, but at least there is no disagreement about the affinity of the aesthetic and the religious experience. The Abbé Brémond believed that the experience of reading poetry differed only in degree from a mystical experience. Art has been described as 'sacral' (as opposed to sacred) because it shares with sacred things this feature of being set apart and being quasi-transcendent.

From the foregoing discussion it may become clearer how art can create the condition for worship, piety and devotion. If this account

is acceptable, then it should come as no surprise that the circumstances of worship and devotion should be in a high degree artistic, and that well-designed churches, well-worded liturgies, well-written music are not only favourable conditions for devotion but prerequisites. Nor should it be a surprise that the quality of religious art is an index of religious fervour; for there is a two-way traffic between art and devotion. If art favours religion, religion also favours art, since – if what I have said is correct – true religious feeling will reject pseudo-art and encourage the real thing. But to say, as de Selincourt (*The Consecration of Genius*) and others have said, that only religious art can be great, is going too far.

If this is correct, what of the old woman in front of her plaster Madonna? What of christian piety of the last century and a half and more? This is a difficult question. It is complicated by the development of cheap means of reproduction both of pictures and statues, and also of churches since the last century. But as a matter of personal judgement, I would say that the deterioration in religious art corresponds to a deterioration of religion which was a late flowering (or decaying) of the Reformation and the Council of Trent. The heart has gone out of christianity with the narrow conformism of puritanism (towards which most protestant sects and some catholic communities gravitated in one way or another) on the one hand, and curial decrees on the other. Whether the new revival in the catholic church, which was preceded by a liturgical and artistic revival, and the new spirit of ecumenism will bear fruit, remains to be seen.

Meanwhile the old woman has been left saying her prayers in front of her plaster madonna. In my opinion she is a rare and exceptional person: but, for one thing, I doubt if she would object if a black madonna or even Henry Moore's *Madonna and Child* (Northampton) were placed before her – if she demurred slightly in the presence of the latter, I should be pleased, as that work, though sacral, is for instance not sacred like the madonna of Ste-Foy, Conques. Unlike so many others, she has known only her plaster madonna and so she has no choice. But, I maintain, given a choice, she, unlike so many others, would prefer a madonna with real sacral qualities. To her the plaster statue is transparent; it is a mere occasion for prayer; her thoughts are elsewhere. When the authorities ordered a crucifix by Germaine Richtier to be removed from the mortuary chapel of a sanatorium, the patients protested that they found it a statue before which they could pray.

This brings me to the last point I want to make. Although I can envisage difficulties from some of the grand ladies who patronize the Oratory, Westminster Cathedral, Farm Street and the churches of Fulham, Wimbledon and Ealing, insofar as they might not like what I would consider genuine religious art and might even, bless them, prefer a plaster madonna, I cannot envisage anything like the same opposition from the old woman. In other words, for the genuinely pious soul there is no problem about culture in the sense of the arts. What, finally, about culture in the broader sense of education and knowledge?

Undoubtedly ignorance has many advantages where faith is concerned. If you have no education, then you have no problem in accepting what the parish priest or the sisters in the convent school have to tell you. It may even happen that they are right (a possibility hardly ever entertained by progressive thinkers); but it may not. On the other hand, why disturb untroubled faith? Why, indeed, if all you have to offer is half-boiled cabbage? Yet, however attractive unquestioning faith may be, and however superior to earthly wisdom the folly of the gospel may be, we have, as St Paul himself says, to offer a reasonable service; we all have to grow and mature in face of the realities, not only of life, but (if they are not the same thing) of the limitations of human knowledge. If we do not do this we cannot develop as human beings and still less as religious persons. If we are afraid to expose ourselves to anything which human science and philosophy has to offer in criticism of the religious dimension of human life, then our religion must be hollow and superficial, just as the quality of atheism in certain societies is shallow because of any serious theological ideas with which to contrast it. Certain people (the young and, if they still exist, the semi-educated) must be protected from sophisticated or apparently sophisticated arguments; but the idea that there are some areas of knowledge, thought and speculation which no religious person can investigate must be destructive of the whole notion of religion.

If religion is what it claims to be, then, in the long run – which is the only run it is interested in, since it operates *sub specie aeternitatis* – it must be open to whatever human culture has to offer; otherwise it has no reason for remaining in business, since human experience is one and real, and what cannot accommodate itself to it will be rejected.