CULTURE AND THE SACRED

By CYRIL BARRETT

THAT there is a connection between culture and the sacred, however these terms are understood and whatever that connection is, is beyond question. Some writers go so far as to say that all art, which, admittedly is only part of what we mean by culture, is religious. One of the most extreme statements of this position is given by Alessandro della Seta in his book *Religion and Art*. It is worth quoting at length:

> All the art of the human race is essentially religious . . . there is no exception. . . . Art absolutely profane in origin, art born to satisfy the aesthetic taste of the spectator, art that seeks for expressiveness rather than the material utility of its products, even if this be a spiritual utility, is inconceivable in history and has absolutely never existed.[1]

At first sight this assertion is breathtaking and almost inconceivable. To say that all art has its origins in religion is one thing — quite enough, some would say; but to say that there never was art which was profane in origin, or born to satisfy the aesthetic taste of the spectator, or seeking expressiveness, is either patently false or depends on a very special sense of either the term 'religious', the term 'art', or both.

It is true that most art forms as we know them today, drama, music, literature, dance, architecture, painting and sculpture, evolved out of various forms of ritual and the accessories of worship, such as temples, statues of gods and goddesses, votive pictures, and so on. If that is all that being said, then it is defensible. It does not account for the origins of film as an art form, but that is no great matter, since della Seta would probably not take film seriously. But if he wishes to apply his thesis to individual works of art, such as

[1] *Religion and Art* (London, 1914).

the paintings of the Impressionists, Cubists, Surrealists, and Abstract Expressionists, the novels of Stendhal, Zola, Proust, Joyce, Virginia Woolf, the music of Webern, Satie, Boulez and Stockhausen, it will not hold up for one moment. These works may not be profane in origin, but they are 'born to satisfy the aesthetic taste of the spectator', and they seek for expressiveness rather than utility.

Unless della Seta wishes to say that works by the artists I have just cited are not art, he will have either to abandon his thesis or revise his notion of the religious in art. But let us leave him and return to the realms of sanity. Let us, in fact, come to the notion of the sacred.

The sacred is essentially that which is set apart. 'You can ask me anything you like, but whatever concerns my wife is sacred'. This, to my mind, is perfectly good usage. Thus the sacred is not necessarily concerned with God or religion, though there are obvious analogies between the religious sacred and any other sacred; and the sacred is pre-eminently religious, since no one is set apart as God is.

Now one of the features of a great work of art is that it 'stands apart'. I cannot say exactly what I mean, but I remember years ago meeting John Turnbull in the room which had newly been given over by the Tate Gallery to house the Giacometti bequest. We both agreed that it was a superb room, and John then said, quite simply, but, in a way, dismissing everything else in the Gallery, 'This is art'. And I understood immediately what he meant. The Giacometti room was apart from everything else, and so was each individual 'stick-man'. They had that timeless aspect that one finds in the Greek *kore* or *koros*, and in some Mesopotamian and Pre-Columban statues. They were beings apart.

I am not sure that this 'apartness' is to be found, except occasionally, in prose literature. It is certainly found in drama, dance, certain kinds of music, and, perhaps, a few poems, mostly oriental — the Psalms, for instance; and this often comes across in translation, and in certain paintings (such as Piero della Francesca's *Baptism of Christ* in the National Gallery, London) and statues (such as those referred to above).

But this quality of 'apartness' can be found equally in works which we would normally call religious — such as those with religious subject-matter or destined for use in ritual — as well as those which could be called religious only by an extension of that term. Speaking of a still-life by Braque, André Malraux says that, properly speaking, it is not a sacred object, but 'if it is not a Byzantine miniature, it belongs, like the latter, to another world, and participates in an

obscure God (painting or art) as the miniature partakes of the Pantocrator'.[2] In Malraux's view, a museum, like a temple or church, separates a work of art from the profane world. To appreciate any work of art you have to step out of the market place for a time.

This suggests that we should approach the subject of culture and the sacred, not as is traditionally done by considering the inspiration religion has on the production of works of art, but rather by first considering what it is about art that makes it a suitable vehicle for ideas and emotions related to the divine and transcendental. However, the question of inspiration must not be neglected.

If we approach the matter in this way, a number of distinctions which we might like to make become easier and more compelling. For instance, within religious art itself one might like to distinguish those works which give no impression of the sacred. They are religious only because their subject matter is religious, or because they are used in the service of religion. I have in mind, not only painted plaster statues or sentimental holy pictures, sugary hymns and the like, all of which may *serve* devotion rather than inspire it, but also works by acknowledged artists. There is an exhibition of florentine artists of the seventeenth century (Dolci and others) currently on show in the Royal Academy, London; and, though the subject matter of the pictures may be nominally religious, they would hardly be described as sacred religious art. But even greater masters than these have failed. However great an artist Caravaggio may have been, it is hard to see how one could call his *Conversion of St Paul* a sacred object, with the most prominent feature the rump of the saint's horse. Even if the inquisitors of Venice who interrogated Veronese about his *Supper of the Lord* did not ask the right questions, their instinct that it was a secular painting masquerading under a religious title was right.

One could easily find examples in the other arts. Beautiful and impressive as is the music of Verdi's *Requiem* or Berlioz's *Grande Messe des Morts*, they have a very tenuous claim to being called sacred music. It is arguable that Masses by Haydn, Mozart or Beethoven — as opposed to Gregorian chant or Masses by Palestrina and Bach — are not sacred either. If it is a matter for debate, then within so-called religious music there is room for a distinction between sacred and secular (not profane) 'religious' music.

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[2] *La Monnaie d'Absolu* (Paris, 1950).

Now you might say that there was a failure of religious inspiration here. But to say that artistic quality of 'apartness' is missing seems an equally good explanation.

The approach which I am advocating leaves room for certain works which were probably not intended as works of religious art, but which, by reason of this quality of 'apartness', are taken for religious works and could serve as sacred objects. I have in mind such works as George de la Tour's genre paintings, which are not all unequivocally religious pictures, but could quite easily be interpreted as a Madonna and Child, etc., and, as such, be regarded as sacred pictures. In other words, just as it is possible to distinguish within so-called religious art that which can be called genuine sacred art and that which cannot, so it is possible to distinguish within art which has no ostensible religious subject matter and is not put to any religious use, that which has a potential for use *as sacred art* in the service of religion, in one way or another.

But if it is possible to translate works of art from the status of non-religious works with the artistic quality or feature of 'apartness' into works of sacred art properly so called, some transformation will have to take place. What form will this transformation have to take? Once again Malraux has a suggestion which makes a great deal of sense. He says that, whereas non-religious 'sacred' art, such as a still-life by Braque, merely hints obscurely at a deeper meaning, sacred art properly so-called points to it directly. 'Sacred art not only implies an absolute, it implies more, namely, that the society in which it appears should orientate itself towards that absolute'.

It is at this point that we can introduce the notion of religious inspiration, for this transformation will not take place without it. It may be the case that a religious artist cannot produce works which can truly be called sacred unless he is sufficiently inspired as an artist to achieve the quality of 'apartness'; but it is equally true that he cannot transform that quality into a work of sacred art properly so-called unless he is working under the pressure of genuine religious inspiration, both in the ideas he wishes to impart and the feelings he wishes to arouse.

We can see the truth of this by studying the evolution of early christian art. The early Christians in the West took over the contemporary roman iconography, particularly the figure of Hermes carrying a sheep on his shoulders, who became the Good Shepherd, carrying the soul of a departed member of his flock into Paradise. Although this youthful figure was full of joy and optimism and

charm, he could hardly be described as a sacred object. Nor could it be said that the pagan motifs, such as swags and the like, which were incorporated into christian iconography, took on a sacred aspect immediately. But there was one figure, the philosopher or teacher, who appeared frequently on roman sarcophagi, who had what might be called sacred potential. He gradually takes over from the youthful shepherd and, under oriental influence, acquires an impressive beard. This figure evolves into the Christ in Majesty, a truly sacral figure which was to dominate the portals and apses of churches for centuries. While lacking the charm of the youthful, beardless Good Shepherd, as surrounded by its mandala it truly expressed the notion of the Son of the Eternal Father, to whom all power is given in heaven and on earth, and who, as behoves the Son of God, transcends this world.

In this way it could be said that religion has inspired artists. Religion in itself will not inspire artists if they have no talent. Nor will it inspire artists to produce truly sacred objects if they cannot achieve in their art that quality of 'apartness', if they cannot give to a work that life of its own which makes it more than a successful and brilliant composition. Nor will it prevent them from turning great motifs into clichés. But, if they have the capacity, it may give them the stimulus which would otherwise be lacking.

And this brings us back to my initial statement that, however one understands the terms 'culture' and 'sacred', there is an undoubted connection between them. Whether we look at Western or Oriental Art, Islamic Art, Hindu Art, Buddhist Art, Christian Art, African Ritual Art, Pre-Columban Ritual Art, Egyptian and Mesopotamian Ritual Art, and other forms, religious art accounts for about nine-tenths of the finest art that has been produced. If my analysis is correct, this cannot have been accidental. It is not that religious beliefs inspired the *art* as such, but rather that it gave the artists an incentive to find a mode of expression appropriate to the loftiness of those beliefs.

I would not want to say that, without religious belief, an artist cannot produce comparable work. But on the evidence so far available, I am inclined to doubt it. Except in prose literature, where human and ethical values play a dominant role, it is hard for an artist, be he painter, sculptor, musician, dramatist or poet, to avoid being empty, bombastic, grandiose and pompous, if he attempts to emulate the grand manner without expressing some belief in the transcendental: if only what might be called the negative transcen-

dentalism of the existentialist, who believes that *sub specie aeternitatis* man is alone, his world godless and his situation absurd.

From the artistic point of view, it is only by placing the work of art against a background which transcends it that it can sustain grandiose treatment. This partly accounts for the failure and absurdity of the historical paintings in 'the grand manner' advocated by Joshua Reynolds in the eighteenth century, and practised by him and his associates. Wittgenstein says in his *Notebooks 1914-16:*

> The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. . . . The usual way of looking at things sees objects as it were from the midst of them, the view *sub specie aeternitatis* from outside. In such a way they have the whole world as background.[3]

And the same idea is to be found in Heidegger's *Holzvege.*[4] Whether it is a necessary condition for being a work of art that the object should be seen *sub specie aeternitatis* is a matter for discussion, but for any work which aspires to greatness this does seem to be a necessary condition.

There is, however, another side to the question. Leaving aside the discussion as to whether the 'greatness' of a work of art necessarily depends on the fact that it should at least suggest that there is something beyond the here and now of experience, may it not be that, for its proper expression, religion for its part is in need of culture? In other words, is it merely accidental that religious belief and ritual has produced some of the finest art in the world; or is it not rather that art fulfils a *need* on the part of religion? It is one thing — and a perfectly proper thing — to say that only the best is worthy of divine worship, as one might say that only the best is worthy of the Queen or the President. But is this all there is to it? Could it not be that the best and even the only way of conveying a sense of the sacred is through art? Not only is a work of art an analogue of the sacred, since it is 'apart' and timeless, but it embodies in its metaphorical nature the complexities which are destroyed by any other kind of expression. In the nature of things, therefore, religion seeks perfect artistic expression, whether in poetry and prose, such as the Bible and the other sacred books of the Orient contain, or in its sacred places — temples, churches, mosques, synagogues — or in its sacred

[3] *Notebooks 1914-16* (Oxford, 1961).
[4] *Holsvege* (Frankfurt am Main, 1950).

statues and pictures, its ritual and ceremonial, its music and dance, and so forth. Unless this artistic expression is forthcoming, there is a danger that the religious element will be trivialized and the sacred element entirely disappear.

The conclusion of all this may be offensive to pious ears. What I am trying to say is that where the sacred is concerned, pious intentions are not enough. In the nature of things, a writer or composer or painter or sculptor or dramatist who is bent on glorifying God in his work is not guaranteed success by his pious intentions.

The intention to produce a sacred object will not, of itself, produce it. Artistic ability and a profound understanding of art, as well as a reasonable understanding of the religious faith which is to be embodied in the work, are also required.

But there is also an optimistic side to all this. The artist who is not bent on producing a work of sacred art at all costs, but is content with doing a still-life, writing a poem about a hawk or composing a series of pieces of music representing the song of birds, may produce something which, if not religious art, may have its timeless and transcendental quality, and be more acceptable to God than some piece of pretentious and hollow religious sentimentality.

An artist glorifies God first and foremost by being a good and honest artist, and only secondarily by being a religious artist. And he does this by making a work of his genuinely, and not superficially or in appearance only, a work of sacred art.