
The Role Of Art In Religious Practice: Art And Christianity

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Abstract

Art is a means of expression that is often employed in religious practices. The roles of art, particularly in spiritual purposes, are legion and as indispensable as they are multiple in man's life. This paper looked at the contributions art makes to religion. It traced historically the introduction and the use of artistic images in Christian religion, as well as the misunderstanding of the roles of these images which created rifts among the folk. It also contended that true sacred art that comes from creative men of faith tends to strengthen the faith particularly if it is rightly employed in the worship of God. Finally, the paper recommended that art in religion should be viewed with an objective mind in order to create room for a balanced aesthetic experience and perception of religious art, and as well appreciate the invaluable contributions it makes towards the spiritual upliftment of man.

Introduction

Religion is known to have a long dependence on art especially in expressing and understanding spiritual values. This outstanding relationship dates back to the prehistoric era. During this period, aesthetics as it is in art today was not paramount. Rather, the early man's preoccupation was chiefly how to unravel the mysteries that enshrouded the universe. He was all out to propitiate that unseen force that wrought the inexplicable wonders before him. In an attempt to appease what he believed was the supernatural being, he got himself entangled in art, which became for him a vehicle that could affect a meeting between him and the invisible being.

As civilization continued, there was a gradual evolution in art belief system – each unfolding into a more distinct entity. It is at a later stage of social evolution that what we now regard as a natural phenomenon, which was the central point of the prehistoric man's belief, observes Lucien Levy-Bruhl in *Read* (MCMLXVII), appears superstitious.

According to him, the superstitious man, faced with bewildering natural phenomena, eventually developed a belief system in which he believed in a twofold order of reality, the one visible and the other invisible, intangible, "spiritual". Between these polarities is man; he believed he could guard himself against the tangible because it is visible and substantial, but the invisible he feared. Sequel to this, therefore, art became the intermediary between man and the unseen. Man now represented the invisible forces with subservient art forms, which embody his imagination.

Though those art objects were lifeless, they were believed to have souls. And thus far, animism was introduced into man's belief system. He no longer viewed the images as mere representations of the numinous, the invisible forces, but as the spirits themselves possessing a life force. Even trees, stones, hills, rivers, among others, were believed to have souls – the vital force. And virtually everything became an object of worship. Imaginary

things were given material forms, either two or three dimensionally, and worshipped too. They became gods, which had some magical powers, and whose potency controlled the universe. This is the practices the Holy Bible forbids man from indulging and believing in (Exodus 20:3-5).

However, this paper looks at the contributions art makes to religion. It traces the introduction and the use of artistic images in Christian religion, as well as the misunderstanding of the roles of these images which created rifts among the folk. Although there are numerous types of institutionalized or personal systems of beliefs and practices relating to the divine, with different traditions, the paper focuses on the central role of art in Christianity.

Christianity and Iconography

Christianity from the beginning preached against idolatry. Even though “there were two traditions of doctrine about the use of art – the Syrian and the Roman,” observes Read (MCMLXVII), none accepted that its doctrine was tilted towards idolatry. He goes on to note that the early Roman Christianity with its Semitic tradition strongly discouraged any representation of holy persons. No wonder Clement of Alexandria in the 2nd century warned the Christians against practicing “deceptive” art. He reminded them that it contradicts the biblical injunction: “Do not make for yourselves images of anything in heaven or on earth or in the water under the earth” (Exodus, 20: 4).

But on the other hand, Clement was silent on that portion of the Bible in which we are told that God himself instructed Moses to make a fiery serpent in the wilderness. Moses sculpted a serpent in bronze and set it on a pole according to God’s directions. Through it, it is reported, miracle came into the Israelite camp (Numbers 21:8). Clement also avoided commenting on that part of the Scripture that narrated how King Solomon adorned the house of the Lord with brazen images of twelve oxen (Chronicles 4:14, 15), and it never displeased God.

Perhaps it was these artistic experiences in the Bible, among others, that gradually paved way for art in the Roman Church, so much so that with time, symbolic art was allowed. Such things like the dove, the anchor, the lyre, the fish, the shepherd, etc were depicted. These were then seen as symbols. Of course such images were usually paintings. A figure in the round was still regarded as too close to the pagan idol and not appropriate to the spiritual quest (Butler, 1979). As time went on, pictures of other things were gradually included to the extent that “by the fifth century the depiction of Christ, and a fortiori of the apostles and saints was permitted” (Read MCMLXVII, 58). But some sects like the Nestorians were not convinced and they remained opposed to the use of representational art (images) in churches.

However, the controversy was not extended to the early Syrian Christian (Eastern) Church. This was because it was certain that Eastern bloc started the traditional modes of depicting Christ and the apostles. Even when the Roman Church completely shunned any representational art, the Syrian Christians were deeply into it. In other words, the controversy was within Roman Church only. It was so turbulent and quite threatening that at a point there was a general need to get the issue reconciled. In 787 AD, the council of Nicaea deliberated on it and finally resolved, according to Edward James Martin in Read (MCMLXVII), that:

We therefore following the royal pathway and the divinely inspired traditions of the Catholic Church ... define with all certitude and accuracy that, just as the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross, so also the venerable and holy images, as well in painting and mosaic as of other fit materials, should be set forth in holy Churches of God and so on the sacred vessels and on the vestments and on hangings and in pictures both in houses and by the wayside, to with, the figure of our Lord and savior, Jesus Christ, of our spotless Lady, the Theotokos, of the honorable angels of all Saints, and of all pious people. For by so much more frequently as they are seen in artistic representation, by so much more readily are men filled up to the memory of their prototypes and to a longing after them; and to these should be given due salutation honorable reverence, not indeed the true worship of faith which pertains only to the divine nature, but to these as to the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross and to the book of the Gospels, and to the holy objects, incense and lights may be offered according to ancient pious custom. For the honor which is paid to the images passes to that which the image represents, and he who reveres the image reveres in it the subject represented. For thus the teaching of our holy fathers, that is the tradition of the Catholic Church ... is strengthened ... (60-61).

With the above declaration, art was quickly welcome into Christianity. It was liberalized to the extent that with time, nude figures were allowed in churches and other holy places. Popes and bishops even turned out to be the major patrons of art. They always ensured that all church projects had art, and in one way or the other embraced in them. For instance, Michelangelo enjoyed rich patronage from the Pope. At one time, he was commissioned by Julius II to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel which had the dimension of some 5800 square feet. This project was however to be implemented while waiting for fund for the construction of Pope's tomb, a colossal structure, which was earlier commissioned to the sculptor.

It eventually took Michelangelo four years (1508-12) to complete the work. Choosing for his theme the creation, fall, and redemption of man, the artist managed to weave into the vast surface more than 300 figures (De la Croix and Tansey, 1980). The majority of these figures turned out to be nude. There was also some sculpture in the round which he carved in marble for the Pope. It was not only Michelangelo who enjoyed papal patronage, several other artists did.

Visual Images in the Catholic Church

Really, the Roman Catholic Church has been under severe criticism and verbal attack by the other religious sects and Christian denominations on this issue of images. What was thought to have been resolved once and for all by the Nicaea Council gradually sprang up again with the emergence of Protestants and Non-conformists. They resurrected the controversy and pursued it vigorously, condemning along the use of all images of holy people as they condemned praying to saints.

However, one should not dismiss their argument with a wave of the hand. The Protestants were not convinced that using a representational art in worship does not tilt towards idolatry. They could not see the difference in the use of images by the Catholic Church and those people the Christians in general refer to as idolaters. A protestant of the modern era may even ask whether those images really represent the holy people they are meant to represent as many of them do not in any way resemble God or those people they are claimed to be representing. For instance, it is believed that no mortal has ever seen God face to face to ascertain his true nature – whether he is tall or short, black or white, young or old, handsome or ugly, and so on. And besides, since it is not easy to draw a line as to when a worshipper goes beyond worshipping the one God to worshipping the image itself, the Protestants feel that the use of images in churches, in order to be on the safe side, should be discouraged.

In truth, there are two sides to every argument just as there is always a reason, at any point, for or against any action. The image maker (the artist) and his supporters often point at the book of Genesis 1:26 as reference. Therein it is said that God created man in his own image and after his own likeness. This, however, has made their argument weighty – it could not be wrong if God is made to appear like a human being.

And so it is that the Roman Catholic Church holds fast to the belief that gave birth to the 787 AD resolution by the Nicaea Council. As noted by Martin in Read (MCMLXVII), the protagonists of the use of images in the Church “conceived of idolatry as an attitude of mind which led a worshipper to substitute the created thing for its creator” (60). It therefore points back to belief. What the worshipper believes in delineates his ritual activity – whether he engages in idolatrous practice or true worship of God. A man, for instance, becomes an adulterer when he lusts after a beautiful woman perhaps passing along the street. As a matter of logic, he becomes an idolater when instead of forming a mental picture of God with the aid of the image before him directs his petitions and worship to the image itself.

Although, the controversy of the use of images in the Catholic Church was settled in the West long before its contact with Africa in the 19th century, the early Christian missionaries, particularly the Catholics, still made the burden of rejection and destruction to bear heavily on African traditional sculpture. They believed there was no other way Christianity could disseminate its doctrines and really influence the people than to obliterate all those traditional practices that formed traditional African religion, and being the marrow of African religion, traditional sculpture was targeted for attack by the missionaries (Oloidi, 1988).

It was evident that African art objects were not only rejected by the early Christians in Africa generally, and in Nigeria particularly, they were also subjected to massive destruction calculated at wiping them out. Even many Catholic missionaries who came from regions where images were playing significant role in the Church, and who arrived the continent with crucifixes and images illustrating the scripture, seemed to have wreaked more havoc on African sculpture. They incited their new converts to destroy all African sculpture within their reach in evidence that they have accepted God. In 1935 for instance, one Reverend Father G. Laugel, it was reported, advised his Catholic congregation in Oshogbo to jettison all their carved figures as they would only take them into an unquenchable hell-fire (Oloidi, 1987). Following these attacks on African art, therefore, one wonders if their intention does not transcend mere conversion of the African to psychological enslavement.

Later on, however, Father Kevin Carroll and the SMA Fathers in Nigeria intervened by creating an atmosphere where African traditional art could be viewed from a positive perspective. In fact, they “established a centre of craftsmen who would employ the traditional forms of sculpture ... to help in the worship of the Christian God” (Willett, 1975, 247). And so, the artists at Oye Ekiti project started producing expressive carvings which portrayed scenes from both their traditional life and from the Bible. They carved drums, door panels and other functional objects that were all put to the service of God.

Today, the Catholic Church and some other Christian denominations in Africa have come to recognize the relevance of art forms in evangelization and worship of God. Reverend Father Okey Igboaka of Otukpo Diocese has even noted that the “recognition of some of these practices (masquerading, sacrifice and rituals in Alekwo ancestral cult) in cultural religion ... will no



Osagie Osifo – Osifo, *Crucifixion* 1961



Bandeles — *Baptismal Font*, 1965

doubt facilitate some meaningful dialogue by the Catholic Church ... towards inculturation of the gospel message” (Igboaka, 2007, cover p.). In other words, there is an understanding among many African Christians that God or Christ or an Angel could be depicted to look like a black man also. What is important is that God is made to appear in the likeness of a man, since He created man in His own image.

The Abstract Embodied

People think in images or concrete forms. They also try to express or communicate ideas in concrete forms. This is what the artist does when he is creating his work. He tries to present his work in a manner that will make it impress deeply on the minds of his audience. He transfers his feelings on to the work so as to trigger off ripples of similar feelings in the viewer too, in an “attempt to create or re-create a critical and/or contemplative base for a deeper reading or study of the artist’s” work (Onuzulike, 2003). For instance, Kainebi Osahenye’s 2003 art exhibition, *The Cross Took Me for a Walk*, depicts his interpretation and understanding of the scripture in concrete terms. Reacting to one of the paintings in the show, Onuzulike notes that:

The canvas support (of the Blood Phenomenon (2002)) is coloured in red oil paint, leaving only the strips of ribbon-like crosses with textual materials sourced directly from the Bible. The cut-outs have been drawn from the passage of the New Testament narrating the trial and murder of Jesus Christ.



Kainebi Osahenye – *The Lamb of God*



Hubert and Eyck – *God the Father*

The doctrine of Christianity is chiefly a mental activity, which is abstract to a great extent more especially when we talk of God and His Angels. They are invisible beings. But the artist gives flesh to these spirit beings (in form of visual images) thereby aiding the faithful in their imagination. Sufficient verbal description of the unseen is hardly available to help in this direction. And even when a descriptive attempt is made, some people still find it extremely difficult to picture to themselves the nature of the spirit beings.

When the Church sought to solve the problem it perceived was posed by the invisibility of the spirit, it decided to employ visual images to concretize the unseen. The visual images act as teaching aids which help the faithful to conceptualize, for instance, the nature of angels or saints who lived and died long ago. Gombrich (1972) observes that “these images lived on in the minds of people even more powerfully than did the words of the preacher’s sermon.” To demonstrate this, he quotes Francis Villon, a French poet, as saying:

I am a woman, poor and old,
Quite ignorant, I cannot read,
They showed me by my village church
A painted Paradise with harps
And Hell where the damned souls are boiled,
One gives me joy; the other frightens me ...

Hence, the Church saw the need to furnish its evangelization with illustrations – illustrations that aid a learner to grasp the theme and content of the subject being learned. So, it picked visual images for its illustrative strategy. The poor woman above who could not read letters was able to read images. The idea of heaven and hell was so clear to her that it pulled at her feeling. She no longer needed any verbal description of heaven or hell. And so, the idea of heaven and hell to her became an indelible reality.

Since the worship of God is more of a mental activity than a physical one, what one beholds physically while praying, or where one prays means very little. It is rather the intrinsic perception of God that erases the essence of idolatry. Hence, it is the presence of visual images (call them guides), which the individual constantly encounters that culminate in that intrinsic perception, and this perception is incidental to knowledge – knowledge embodied in visual forms. Schuler refers to those embodiments of visual forms which express the truth of Christ’s revelation as sacred art. He further notes that Liturgy requires sacred art for the purpose of manifesting and illustrating Christ’s life, and that the expression of the faith is weakened when sacred art is weak or bad.

Vacuum hardly exists, and ipso facto, the conscious mind of every worshipper is always occupied even as he prays or meditates. What is loaded in his mind is largely the knowledge he acquired through experience. An individual, for instance, may have once or many times encountered the picture of Christ or Angels. One or series of such experiences are pushed and rubbed right into his subconscious mind, ready to be recalled at will. It is the experience thus gathered that flashes into the individual’s mind whenever he prays or meditates. Think of the nature of the devil, for instance. Your mind will likely wander through the store of your experience and eventually become blank if you had not seen previously any image called “Devil”. But if you had seen and been struck by Michael Pacher’s *St Wolfgang Forces the Devil to Hold His Prayerbook* before, the image of the devil as portrayed by the artist will be stored in your memory. The more you appreciate the work,

the more it impresses on your mind. Thus, it happens to an extent that once the name “Devil” or “Satan” is mentioned to your hearing, or the idea of devil or Satan occurs to you, a clear-cut mental picture of Pacher’s image of the devil will leap into your mind.

It is granted, however, that a faithful may have previously viewed several and probably different types of statues or paintings, which may or may not share any resemblance but which are believed to be representing the same Almighty God respectively. At meditation the most striking visual image among others, which the faithful had encountered usually comes up first in the mind. Even when his thought may have to wander from one icon previously beheld to another, the one that overwhelmed him most tends to be more readily available and sharply focused in his mind.



Hieronymus Bosch – *The Carrying of the Cross*, c. 1510



Michael Pacher – *St Wolfgang Forces the Devil to Hold His Prayerbook* c. 1481

So, visual images help an individual to pull his thoughts together while praying or meditating. They act as a kind of lens in the individual's conscious mind which sharply focuses on intangible divinely things making them appear real and clear, through a channel packed with past experiences. But because the object of worship is a spirit being, it becomes impossible for a mortal to have a real formal experience of it. When he has no guide for conceptualizing the nature of God, anything from his past experience leaps into his mind and he focuses on it. The past experience could be his favorite dish or his life of concupiscence, among other things. In this way the worshipper unconsciously strays from intended supplication to something else.

Perhaps, it may be relevant at this point to add also that some images are symbolic too. A crucifix, whether painted as a picture or sculpted, symbolizes Christianity everywhere just as a crescent symbolizes Islam. As a badge is not worn for its own sake, but for the sake of the information it passes around, so is the crucifix and the medals. The crucifix, though symbolic, reminds every Christian that Christ died on the Cross for mankind. The terrific crown of thorn, the agonizing face and the withered body on the Cross passionately induce in the faithful a sense of piety.

Conclusion

Art is obviously loaded with an overwhelming responsibility in the face of religion. It contributed immensely to the growth of most religions. Christianity, however, seems to be favored the more – from its early stage through the Renaissance period to date. Apart from being lavished profusely on vestments, sacred vessels and in holy places for decoration sake, art forms the backbone of evangelization. It is often employed for the strengthening of faith in the faithful, especially in the Catholic Church, where it is believed that the mind may stray if it is not properly guided with words and visual aids as well. Thus, representational art is promoted in the Church.

It is true that many Protestant Churches rejected the reform that allowed the use of images in Christian worship. Their contention is that the images, particularly figurative art, do not represent who they are meant to stand for because they are not even the true likeness of God, the devil or the saints. According to them, the Holy Scripture warns that the people of God should not practice idolatry (Exodus 20: 3 – 5). But these are dependent on individual or denominational interpretations of the Bible. People's opinion, particularly their standpoint on the use of images in the Church, varies significantly. Everybody acts according to his faith which takes root from his understanding of the Scripture. Today, some Protestants are gradually changing their position. They allow the use of crucifix in their liturgy and also illustrate their devotional books with figurative forms.

However, art in religion has to be looked at with an objective mind so as to allow for a balanced aesthetic experience and perception of religious art, and as well appreciate the invaluable contribution it makes towards the spiritual upliftment of man. Unless we critically analyze and comprehend the nature of art and its functions in situ, we may likely misconstrue some individuals' belief or actions and become biased in our judgment. In this way, the attainment of that lofty spiritual state we strive for becomes elusive. True sacred art that comes from creative men of faith stands to strengthen the faith particularly if it is employed in the worship of God. It becomes a renewed visual account of what the Church teaches.

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