

Experiencing Christian art

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Abstract: In this article, we argue that a secularist cannot experience Christian art in the same way that a Christian can. To defend this claim, we argue that Christian faith is best conceived as an engagement with God, such that coming to have faith is a transformative, second-person experience where a person comes to know what it is like to be loved by God and that Christian art is best conceived as iconic, such that it is an occasion for, and a mode of, experiencing God. Thus, for the Christian, but not for the secularist, experiencing Christian art consists in an experience of God himself.

Can a secularist experience Christian art in the same way that a Christian can? David Pugmire (2006) and Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley (2010) argue that she can by imagining, or make-believing that she is a religious believer (Pugmire) or that what the religious believer believes is true (Neill and Ridley). In this article, we argue against such counterfactual, or fictionalist, accounts of how a secularist could experience Christian art in the same way that a Christian can by maintaining that a secularist cannot project from her secular experiences what it would be like to be a religious believer or what it would be like for what the religious believer believes to be true. In contrast, we take it that experiencing Christian art is an experience of God himself. To defend this claim, we will argue for a conception of Christian faith on which it is an engagement with God and a conception of Christian art on which it is iconic.

To argue for this claim, we draw a comparison between coming to have Christian faith and Mary's coming to know what it is like to see colours, from Frank Jackson's (1982) Knowledge Argument, such that coming to have Christian

faith is an epistemically transformative experience, in L. A. Paul's (2015) terms, consisting of a second-person experience of God where you come know what it is like to be loved by him. This transformative experience then allows the faithful believer to see in a new way, as Mary was able to see in a new way, a way which allows her to see through the artwork to have a second-person experience of God. This 'seeing through the artwork' is the essence of our conception of Christian art as iconic. To use a visual metaphor, Christian artworks are translucent: they allow the believer to experience God directly in and through the artwork. Consequently, just as David Jones (1959, 170) maintains that this, pointing to a painted mountain, 'is not a representation of a mountain, it is "mountain" under the form of paint', Christian artworks present God under the form of paint, words, music, and so on, enabling the believer to commune directly with God. We illustrate this account of Christian art with reference to icons, to the poetry of William Blake and St John of the Cross, and to Rowan Williams's reading of Dostoevsky's fiction.

Counterfactual empathy and fictional engagement with Christian art

According to Pugmire, a secularist can appreciate religious music by having a vicarious appreciation for it through a kind of counterfactual empathy, where she imagines herself to be religious, and reacts to the music as if she were so.¹ He writes:

The secularist will realise that the emotions to which he is sensible in sacred music cannot arise for him in a fully developed form, viz., as feelings arising out of and backed by what he takes the world to be like; for they are not consonant with the world or human life as he must conceive of them. If there is no God, there is no glory of God. So what this sort of music expresses is experienced by him vicariously. One could gesture at this by saying that he feels the feelings but not as his own: his feeling of them is, of course, his own, but what they are, what they are, are not . . . The secularist's (intellectually) 'out of character' vulnerability to sacred music is a case of what might be called counterfactual empathy. The music leads him some way into the experience of a religious person. He reacts as he would if he were religious, which he isn't. (Pugmire (2006), 69)

Similarly, Neill and Ridley propose a fictionalist approach to understanding a secularist's appreciation of religious music:

[W]hatever is the right account of the genesis and character of our engagement with works of narrative fiction – a kind of engagement that is clearly neither precluded nor necessarily compromised by our awareness that what we are engaging with is fiction – might also be deployed to account for the genesis and character of the atheist's engagement with religious music. Just as the reader of Anna Karenina 'suspends his disbelief' that Anna Karenina ever existed, or regards it as 'make-believe' that Anna jumped under a train, and is moved '*as if*' at the report of a real woman's suicide – to employ the locutia of a variety of (doubtless incompatible) accounts – so the atheist listening to a work of religious music suspends his disbelief in God, regards it as make-believely the case, or 'true in the fiction', that God is not merely glorious, but glorious in *this* way, with just *this* fizz of trumpets and sopranos, and as make-

believedly the case that Christ's sacrifice is both momentous and deserving of awe-struck gratitude; his feelings of anticipatory tenderness are as if at the prospect of Christ's being entombed in his heart, his exultation is *as if* at the promise of salvation; and so on. (Neill & Ridley (2010), 1011; emphasis in the original)

On both of these approaches, the secularist can engage with the artwork by imagining, or make-believing: on Pugmire's approach, that she is a religious believer, and on Neill and Ridley's that what the religious believer believes is true. For either approach to work, it would have to be that the secularist can project from her secular experience what it would be like to be a religious believer (on Pugmire's approach) or what it would be like for what the religious believer believes to be true. Either projection, we think, is impossible, or so we argue below, based on a conception of Christian faith as an engagement with God and Christian art as iconic.

Christian faith as an engagement with God

Tracey Emin is an exceptional theologian. Yes, we mean the contemporary artist famous for her works, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995* (1995, destroyed 2004), a tent appliquéd with names, and the Turner-prize-nominated *My Bed* (1998), her own, unmade, dirty bed. Intriguing (or not) as these works may be, they aren't what make her an exceptional theologian. What does, we think, is her work *For You* (2008), a pink, neon sculpture that reads: 'I felt you and I knew you loved me', displayed (the manner of display being very much a part of the work itself) under a large, stained-glass window in Liverpool Cathedral. This sculpture in this setting makes a profound theological statement that gives, we think, insight into the nature of Christian faith, in particular, Christian faith as an engagement with God and coming to have Christian faith as an epistemically transformative, second-person experience of God where you come to know what it is like to be loved by him.

Some things I can come to know only through experience, according to Frank Jackson's Knowledge Argument. In particular, I can come to know what it is like to see red, for example, only by experiencing seeing red. To argue for this claim, Jackson gives the following thought experiment:

Mary is a brilliant scientist who is, for whatever reason, forced to investigate the world from a black and white room *via* a black and white television monitor. She specializes in the neurophysiology of vision and acquires, let us suppose, all the physical information there is to obtain about what goes on when we see ripe tomatoes, or the sky, and use terms like 'red', 'blue', and so on. She discovers, for example, just which wavelength combinations from the sky stimulate the retina, and exactly how this produces *via* the central nervous system the contraction of the vocal cords and expulsion of air from the lungs that results in the uttering of the sentence 'The sky is blue'. . . . What will happen when Mary is released from her black and white room or is given a colour television monitor? Will she *learn* anything or not? It seems just obvious that she will learn something about the world and our visual experience of it. (Jackson (1982), 130)

When Mary leaves her cell, she has a new experience, seeing red, and from this experience she then knows what it is like to see red. Now, it may be that she learns something new or that she learns in a new way something she already knew. The difference doesn't matter for present purposes.² What matters is that her experience taught her something new, namely, what it is like to see red. According to L. A. Paul (2015, 7), Mary's experience is 'epistemically transformative' in that she cannot project from her previous experience, that is, her experience in the black and white room, what it is like to see red: in the black and white room, she cannot know how it will feel phenomenally when she sees red for the first time and what further mental states, e.g. beliefs, desires, emotions, and so on, will be caused by her seeing red for the first time.

Now, epistemically transformative experiences aren't limited to the experience of seeing a colour for the first time, or so Paul maintains. For, she argues, having a child is also an epistemically transformative experience. Indeed, any experience that 'changes the self enough to generate a deep phenomenological transformation' seems to count, for Paul (*ibid.*, 22), as epistemically transformative. We maintain that coming to have faith, Christian faith at least, is epistemically transformative, too, since coming to have a Christian faith changes the self in a relevantly similar way to having a child in that it generates the kind of 'deep phenomenological transformation' that meets Paul's criterion. As another Paul, Paul the Apostle, writes: 'So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!' (2 Cor. 5:17; all biblical quotations come from the NRSV translation), which is something of a credo for the Christian artist, at least for Blake, as we discuss below. Indeed, in his letter to the Romans, he goes on to say that those who have faith, who then are baptized, have died with Christ and now walk in newness of life with him (Rom. 6:1–11). This sort of transformation asserted by Paul the Apostle seems to meet L. A. Paul's criterion of a change to the self, generating a deep phenomenological transformation. And so we might say that, if the experience of having a child is epistemically transformative, as L. A. Paul maintains, so must the experience of coming to have Christian faith, that is, of coming to know oneself as being a child of God, as Paul the Apostle maintains.

In her *Wandering in Darkness*, Eleonore Stump adapts Jackson's thought experiment to argue that knowledge of persons, second-personal knowledge, is relevantly similar to first-personal knowledge of colour. She asks us to imagine that Mary is imprisoned and knows all that science can teach her about other people, but, crucially, she has never met anyone, that is, never had a second-person experience. In particular, she has never met her mother, who loves her very much. And then Mary is rescued from her imprisonment and meets her mother for the first time. She comes to know her mother's love, that is, what it is like to be loved, something she didn't, better, couldn't, know before, in her imprisoned state. '[W]hat will come as the major revelation to Mary', Stump writes, 'is *her mother*. . . . What is new for Mary is a second-person experience' (Stump (2010), 52–53; emphasis in

the original). Following Paul (2015), Mary's meeting her mother and experiencing her mother's love for her is an epistemically transformative experience, for she cannot project what it is like to meet her mother and to feel loved by her from her previous experience. Christian faith is like this, too. It is an engagement with God where coming to have Christian faith consists in the revelation of God, as a person, and coming to know what it is like to be loved by him, something that cannot be imagined before having that experience.

Christian art as iconic and dialogic

The icon may, we think, be taken as a paradigm of Christian art; not least for making explicit the person-to-person, face-to-face, encounter with Christ, which is the ambition of all Christian art. The Christian artwork does not seek to tell us *about* God, but to give us an experience *of* God – 'under the form' particular to an artistic medium. This second-person encounter is essential, we believe, because the Christian artwork is ultimately an object of *love*. 'Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love' (1 John 4:8); so reads one of the central statements of the Christian experience. In this light, the Christian artwork seeks to inspire, and exercise, a love for God by being an object of love itself, granting knowledge of God through a second-person engagement.

We should stress, immediately, that the Christian artwork is iconic, not simply by virtue of its representational content, the subject or theme represented, but through the particular form and beauty of the work. To put it differently, it does matter *how* the artwork gives us God. We do not simply substitute one rendition of Christ for another, a Rublev for a Rubens, or the poems of Hopkins for the novels of Greene; each may give of and give onto the glory of God, and each may bring us into relation with God, in a unique and irreplaceable way. For the Christian artist, as David Jones observes, 'There is only one tale to tell even though the telling is patient of endless development and ingenuity and can take on a million variant forms' (Jones (1959), 130).

Common to all variations, however, is the second-personal nature of the Christian artwork. A believer before the Christian artwork accepts that she herself is addressed by the work, and answerable to it, as to another person. For the non-believer, however, who cannot accept this reciprocity, his experience remains a mere first-person affair, insufficient to the claims and qualities of the work.

To stress the second-personal experience is to say that the Christian artwork is *dialogic* in nature. Rowan Williams has explored the fiction of Fyodor Dostoevsky (one of the most powerful, problematic, and rewarding of Christian artists) in such terms. Crucial to Williams's analysis is the suggestion that works of art, in their appeal to imaginative freedom, are open-ended, that they do not purport to say the final word about the world, about humanity or God, but rather encourage and engender ever more *dialogue*.

Thus, Williams writes, 'A fiction like Dostoevsky's which tries to show what faith might mean in practice is bound to be . . . inconclusive in all sorts of ways' (Williams (2008), 46). Not only the characters, but we readers, too, when grappling with the often irresolute fabric of the novels, discover that the only path to a fuller understanding, to a more fruitful engagement with the themes and truths of the work in question, is the pursuit of dialogue – pursued at the risk of discord, in dependence on the words of others. Indeed, as Williams points out, this possibility of gaining in understanding rests precisely on the fact that any need of ours for certainty and closure will be frustrated. Dostoevsky's fiction issues this challenge, and invites this realization,

by insisting on freedom – the freedom of characters within the novel to go on answering each other, even when this wholly upsets and disappoints any hopes we may have for resolutions and good endings, and therefore also the freedom of the reader to reply, having digested this text in the continuing process of a reflective life. (*ibid.*, 12)

Here, then, we see how the fictional work may open onto, and cut a path into, the life of the reader, informing the life of faith. It is through a lived dialogue that the Christian artwork fully begins to yield its meanings to us; it is here, then, that we should expect to discover the full implications of its iconicity. If *The Brothers Karamazov* is iconic, then this work may provide a true model for the reorientation of the human self and the proper relationship between humans and God.

The invitation to *metanoia* and love

Christian art does not only aspire to reveal divine realities, but invites an engagement in which reading (or viewing, or listening) is inseparable from repentance, *metanoia*, understood as our endeavour to reorient our lives in the likeness of God.

This transformation of our perceptions and persons is the governing theme of the work of William Blake. For Blake, art's role is to reveal the divine image in all things by inviting a perspective of imaginative sympathy and love. His dialogue with childhood in the *Songs of Innocence* may be seen as exemplary of the *metanoia* involved in our engagement with Christian artworks.

On a first view, we are prone to misconceive the poems of innocence because we see them only with the adult's mind, mired in experience. It takes an epistemic transformation – a cognitive leap, if not a leap of faith – to put ourselves in the child's position. The challenge of these songs is not unlike that posed by icons, with their two-dimensional presentation, to one habituated to the naturalistic perspectives of post-Renaissance painting, and, just as the icon requires a shift from 'natural' to 'spiritual' modes of apprehension, so Blake's work asks that we change our ways of seeing.

Indeed, we are required by these poems to undergo a change of heart. When successful, the *Songs* can achieve the miraculous in returning us to the world

with new eyes, able to see God, not as an abstract entity, but as a caring and ever-present Father. Blake's art may help us, therefore, to achieve a deeper *relation* to God.

Mary, in Jackson's experiment, learns to perceive in a new way. Similarly, what is granted to the Christian believer is a new mode of vision, which allows us to see all things in relation to God. This cultivation of right vision is absolutely integral to the redemption and regeneration of Albion, in Blake's masterpiece *Jerusalem the Emanation of the Giant Albion*.

It is noteworthy that Albion's fall, his alienation from God, may also be understood as a lapse from second-person engagements to an abstracting and impersonal third-person perspective. The restoration of right vision, therefore, is also the restoration of a right *relationship*.

In Stump's scenario, Mary comes to know that she is loved, and by that knowledge comes to love in a new way. Christos Yannaras (2007) makes a similar, theological point. 'The knowledge of God', he writes,

does not refer to the realm of our objective enquiries [but] to our inward, personal discovery and certainty that God's erotic ecstasy (the gift of life) is directed exclusively towards us, that we are known and loved by God and consequently all we have to do is to respond positively to this erotic invitation, with the aim of 'knowing' the Person of our Bridegroom and Lover. (*ibid.*, 67–68)

It is this erotic invitation that Christian artworks aim to reissue in ever new ways. Blake's work culminates, thus, with an encounter between Albion and the personal God, in which Jesus directly affirms the reality of mutual, self-forsaking love at the heart of God's dealings with humans:

And if God dieth not for Man & giveth himself
Eternally for Man Man could not exist. For Man is Love:
As God is Love.

(Blake (2000), 393)

This is a communion which we readers are not simply enjoined to observe at a critical distance, but invited to participate in wholeheartedly. Indeed, Blake is adamant that as we exercise our powers of imagination, as in the encounter with an icon, we are not just seeing Christ but indeed seeing *with* and *in* Christ, thus by a labour of perception becoming united to him. For Blake, then, as for all Christians, the aim is *union* with God, a consummate second-person experience in which 'I am in you and you in me, mutual in love divine' (*ibid.*, 301).

We believe that the Christian artwork needs this kind of seeing – and this relation – to come fully into existence as what it is; that a right apprehension of the Christian artwork is dependent, at least, upon our effort at such a relation. We disagree fundamentally, therefore, with the position of Neil and Ridley, that a 'militant atheist' may validly have a full experience of a Christian artwork.

Atheism can be seen to consist precisely in the rejection of a second-person relation with God, and it is this same attitude which disqualifies an atheist from a

proper engagement with Christian art. One who does not acknowledge the work's invitation to a mutually enriching and transformative dialogue, and who is not willing to change his life in conformity to the work's meanings, does not really experience the work at all as what it is, as the work only fully reveals itself in the course of a second-person engagement.

A concluding testimony to this understanding of Christian art is St John of the Cross, for whom the experience of union was emphatically the ambition behind his poetic labours. John conceives this union, on the model of the biblical Song of Songs, as the mutual erotic consummation of two earthly lovers; as here in 'Dark Night':

O night, my guide!
O night more friendly than the dawn!
O tender night that tied
lover and the loved one,
loved one in the lover fused as one!

(John of the Cross (1972), 39)

The impossibility of counterfactual or fictional engagement with Christian art

It should now be evident that, on our accounts of Christian faith and of Christian art, a secularist cannot have the same experience of Christian art as a Christian has because she cannot imaginatively project from her secular experiences either what it would be like to be a religious believer (Pugmire's approach) or what it would be like for what a religious believer believes to be true (Neill and Ridley's approach). What most seriously inhibits a secularist's experience of Christian art is her preconception that a first- or third-person engagement is sufficient for engaging adequately with a Christian artwork; she thus approaches the work as the wrong kind of thing, as something where God is presented rather than present.³ In conclusion, for Christian art, the essential indexical is 'you'.⁴

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Notes

1. Pugmire (2006, 76) proposes a second way for a secularist to experience religious music, namely, where she has 'emotion of the last instance', which transcends any particular personal perspective and is not directed to any particular object but the world as a whole. Neill & Ridley (2010, 1010) rightly object that this proposal excludes any specifically religious content to the emotion and so does not account for the religious character of the emotion, rendering it less than it would otherwise be, and so, in a way, falsifying the work by not engaging with it for its own sake.
2. For discussion, see Lewis (1988).
3. Though the secularist's engagement with Christian art may be *mistaken* or *incomplete*, it may not constitute a complete failure; for the secularist may be perceptive of and sensitive to certain of the aesthetic and artistic qualities of the artwork, while at the same time attending to the work under a misapprehension (and/or denial) of what kind of work it is and what it can offer. Specifically, the secularist does not understand the work as inviting and requiring a second-person engagement.
4. Compare Perry (1979).