

## ART, THEOLOGY, AND RELIGIOUS SYSTEMS: A CASE FOR THE INQUISITION?

by J. W. Bowker

IN the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge there hangs a large picture by Paolo Cagliari, better known from his place of origin as Veronese. It is not a picture which is likely to produce on its own any great admiration for the artist. It gives an impression not of imaginative daring and excitement but of prosaic competence and conformity. The painting is large and almost entirely conventional. It is a picture of a somewhat obscure classical subject, the story of Hermes and the two sisters Herse and Aglauros. Hermes, messenger of the gods, has fallen in love with Herse. This is made known to Aglauros, who is consumed with envy and tries to prevent Hermes from coming to see her sister Herse. As a result Hermes touches her with his wand, and she is turned into a statue, and that is the moment represented in the picture.

The story was included by Ovid as one of his *Metamorphoses*, and although he touched on it quite briefly the subject did evoke from him at least some quite dramatic writing, as, for example, when he described the bitter envy of Aglauros for her sister. It was, he says, "like the burning of weeds which do not burst into flame, but are none the less consumed by smouldering fire."<sup>1</sup> But from Veronese the subject seems to have evoked very little. The two heroines appear quite undisturbed by the appearance in their midst of a man with winged feet wearing little else but a helmet. Plump and elegantly disposed, they play their appointed parts in the drama with what Robert Louis Stevenson once described as "a heavy placable nonchalance like a performing cow." It is typical, conventional, and dull. If it is a repre-

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sentative example of Veronese's work, one might well be justified in accepting the verdict that he was a deserving but undisturbing artist, following without question the conventions of his time. Yet this was the man who, in July 1573, appeared in Venice before the Inquisition; and he appeared before the Inquisition precisely because his paintings were disturbing and because they did go against the conventions of his time; or perhaps one should say not "paintings" in the plural but in the singular because it was one painting in particular which was called in question by the Inquisition. It was a picture of the Last Supper commissioned by the Prior of San Giovanni to go into the refectory of his monastery.

The immediate cause of complaint was very simple. In the foreground of the picture there appears, very prominently, a large dog. The Inquisition thought the picture would be more dignified if Mary Magdalene were substituted for the dog. But this was really only an excuse to bring Veronese before the Court because in fact there were far more serious issues at stake. Veronese seems to have been aware that this was so because when he was asked by the Inquisition what the picture was intended to represent he replied, either with extreme stupidity or with extreme astuteness, "It is a picture of the Last Supper, taken by Jesus Christ with his Apostles in the house of Simon."<sup>2</sup>

The reply is either very able or very ignorant, for there was, according to the Gospels, no such thing. We know, obviously, of the Last Supper, and we know also of a feast at the home of Simon the leper, where the woman anointed him with precious ointment. But there is no possible way at all in which the two occasions might be connected. If this was not a plain mistake, it suggests that Veronese may well have been aware that the storm was about to break and that he was already, literally, beginning to shift his ground. For what was at issue? It was not simply the substitution of Mary Magdalene in the place of a well-bred beagle; it was the whole character of the picture. Some of its details are entirely conventional: The Supper has been transferred to a classical Renaissance setting with formal Italian palaces and churches in the background; but that was usual. The figure of Christ is in the center with a halo encircling his head; and that also was usual. What gave offense was the rest of the picture.

It is a sort of M.G.M. wide-screen production, painted on a very wide canvas with the Supper taking place across its whole width. There was some necessity for it to be a wide picture because it had to fit the space in the refectory. This meant that if the picture was to fill the whole canvas many more than the usual thirteen people (Jesus and his twelve disciples) would have to be included. It was the added figures which caused offense because the picture is indeed "filled up"

with a great many highly unlikely characters. There are present at this Last Supper, for example, two German soldiers in armor, a clown with a parrot on his arm, two dwarfs, a man with a nosebleed, and even Veronese himself in an eloquent self-portrait. At a rough count there are forty-nine individuals present at this Last Supper, or fifty counting the dog. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Inquisition asked Veronese, "Who do you believe was really at that Supper?"

He replied: "I believe that Christ was there, with his Apostles; but if any space remains in the picture, I adorn it with other figures, of my own invention. . . . I saw that it was a large one and could hold many figures."

But then, they went on, "does it appear fitting to you, that at the Last Supper of Our Lord there should be introduced jesters, drunkards, Germans, dwarfs, and such-like scurrility?"

He replied, "No, sirs."

There was no suggestion on the part of the Inquisition that the imaginative activity was wrong in itself or that there was no value in relating the events of Christ's life to the contemporary scene. What was at issue was the actual way in which Veronese had done it. In a particularly significant exchange the Inquisition asked him, ". . . what is meant by the armed man, clothed after the German fashion, and with a halberd in his hand?"

"Of that," said Veronese, "I should need to speak at more length!"  
"Speak."

"We painters," he said, "allow ourselves the same liberties as do poets and madmen, and thus I made these two halberdiers, one of them drinking, the other eating, at the foot of the stairway, yet both ready to do their service. For it seemed to me to be fitting that the master of the house . . . should have such servitors."

"And the fellow dressed like a jester, with a parrot perched on his fist—to what end did you portray him?"

"As an ornament," said Veronese, "according to custom."<sup>3</sup>

So we find, between the artist and the Inquisition, an almost total lack of contact. The artist was defending the artistic need of a craftsman to build on the example of great artists before him; he therefore appealed to the tradition of art "as an ornament, according to custom." The Inquisition was defending the spiritual need of those who look at an artist's pictures; they therefore appealed to the tradition of the Church. It means that both are essentially conservative, but they are conserving different resources of human creativity, and they are therefore competitive in the methods they regard as appropriate. That is the conflict.

The conflict comes out very clearly at the end of the inquiry. Ve-

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ronese cries out, “. . . I must repeat what I said, that I am compelled to follow what has been done by those greater than I.”

“What has been done by those greater than you? . . .”

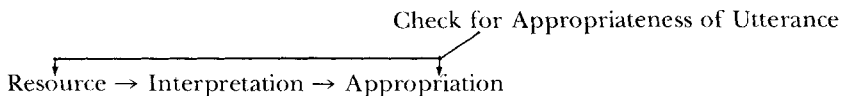
“In the Pope’s chapel in Rome, Michelangelo depicted Our Lord Jesus Christ, his mother, St. John, St. Peter and the heavenly Court, all naked, . . . and amid actions that display little reverence.”

To this the Inquisition replied—pompously, no doubt, but clearly indicating what was for them the vital issue: “Do you not know that in painting the Last Judgment, at which it is not to be supposed that clothing will be worn, there is no occasion to paint garments? But in those figures there is naught but what comes of the spirit. . . .”<sup>4</sup>

### TENSION BETWEEN AUTHORITY AND IDIOSYNCRASY

That familiar anecdote has been quoted at some length because it summarizes the tensions which exist in religious traditions between the authority which is necessary for the continuity of a life-enabling and life-enhancing tradition and the idiosyncrasy which is necessary for the creativity of an individual. It is in this tension, in this nexus, that the transformation of religious symbols occurs; but the peculiar power and effectiveness of religious symbols require both sides, both aspects: the authority of the system and the idiosyncrasy of the individual appropriations.

This tension can be put in a slightly different way, as I have tried to argue in *The Sense of God*.<sup>5</sup> A religious system, if it is to continue itself in time, must behave systematically, and this means that it must both designate the resources which are constitutive and authoritative in the system in question and establish a control and transmission system which will ensure the process of information flow from those designated resources into the lives of individuals who appropriate them. The resources which are designated as fundamental in that sense are often old and frequently scriptural, though the authoritative resource of course may be the wisdom of an elder, or some other designated, figure. But the point is that there is a clear and recurrent model of religious systems:



Individuals certainly will have other resources on which they draw for the construction of their lives. But the religious system creates the context in which a particular information flow will occur and from which individuals can be religiously informed. The adverb “reli-

giously" is not vague; It is differentiated, both in terms of what does count as appropriate resources and what goals are held out as attainable in human life and in the universe, and that is precisely what creates different religions. But the general point that religions are systems of information process and flow of a particular kind remains clear.

It follows that religions are inevitably conservative. If the designated resources have been life giving up to a moment in time,  $t$ , then at  $t + 1$  it is irresponsible to disintegrate the system which has mediated that resourcefulness into life up to that moment in time. And yet at the very same moment we have to bear in mind that the point of the whole exercise is the individual. It is the individual whose life is to be informed so that it may be translated from its prosaic and mundane occurrence into some outcome far beyond what otherwise would be possible. And that is precisely why religious systems of information process are so powerful and pervasive: The inputs transacted in and through brain behavior in the case of religious utterance, whether in ritual, or formal symbol, or word, or action, or on occasion silence, are leading (or are claimed within the systems to be leading) to goals which far transcend the particularity of the subject of the brain behavior in question. They are leading the individual to a transcendence of his ordinary mortal life—a transcendence in ethical terms or in spiritual terms, and certainly a transcendence of the strictly materialist analysis of brain behavior, of such a kind that there may be even some continuity through death (or so religious systems generally have claimed). In other words, religious symbols and their expression are not basically designed for aesthetic appeal ("Isn't that a beautiful picture!"), though they may be, and often are, reinforced in that way. They are designed to initiate and transmit the particular information flow which in that system leads to the religious good of the individual or the group. Obviously that is a vastly oversimplified account, but the distinction is nevertheless clear, and it indicates why it is that the preservation of a tradition of religious utterance is far more vital, for those concerned, than the preservation of an ancient monument or the restoration of an old picture.

Consequently conservation is essential for the continuity of any religious tradition because the resources of appropriate utterance have been designated in the past. But that creates real difficulties for us, first, because so much of the necessary conservation in religion has turned out, historically, to be an almost automatic and inhuman conservatism of the most lethal and destructive kind (and in that sense there is obviously no defense of the Inquisition in practice because it has capitalized on the inherent necessity for conservation and lost

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sight of the overriding purpose, which relates to the individual) and, second, because we value, in art as much as in scholarship, originality and individual vision. We have become insistent on the freedom of the artist, on the worth of his individual vision, on the value inherent in its uniqueness.

Thus in the engagement between Veronese and the Inquisition it is almost certain that our sympathies are with the artist and certainly not with the censorious authorities who are attempting to restrict the artist's freedom of expression. This has become a commonplace, a cliché almost, of our time—and not surprisingly when one considers the tragic absurdities which have resulted from the subordination of art to propaganda in this century. The German theory that art is the continuation of politics by other means led to the destruction of the Weimar expressionist renaissance on the one side and on the other to the ludicrous realism in the art of Fritz Erler, Adolf Ziegler, and the rest. When the Nazis made their first clutch on power, in the provincial elections in Thuringia in 1930, one of their first acts was to destroy the murals and relief which Oskar Schlemmer had created in one of the Bauhaus buildings in Weimar. Schlemmer believed that he was a good German, and in a bewildered way he wrote in his diary: "The dreadful thing about the work of these cultural reactionaries is that it is not a case of persecuting works which have political tendencies, but of attacking works of pure art which are equated with Bolshevism merely because they are original and individual in spirit." Here is the Veronese issue again. And Schlemmer went on to emphasize the point: "This assault on the pictures of the Weimar museum hits precisely those artists about whose genuinely German attitudes there is no question."<sup>6</sup>

With memories such as those, can there be any doubt where our sympathies must lie? Certainly with the freedom of the original and individual spirit. Nor is it simply a matter of memory: The protest of "unofficial art" in the Soviet Union is another, more contemporary, example of the same issue. In 1959 the Royal Academy of Arts mounted an exhibition of Russian art, and the deputy director of the State Gallery in Moscow wrote an introduction to the catalogue. At the end of it he drew attention to the well-known fact "that Soviet art is following the path of social realism." He pointed out that social realism can be expressed in different styles, but the controlling criterion of judgment remains social realism. He then commented:

The absence from the exhibition of works analogous to the widespread tendencies in the West, such as tachism, surrealism, abstract painting, etc., re-

flects the non-existence of such tendencies in Soviet art. We do not consider this a deficiency in our painting, as we are deeply convinced of the fruitlessness of any directions in art which lead away from the great realistic traditions of artistic culture throughout the world. We believe that these formalistic tendencies merely reflect the painful contradictions of present-day culture, and cannot renew art. According to our view, the only genuinely modern forms are those which somehow or other reveal the profound meaning of new life and the joy and suffering of the people.<sup>7</sup>

That the forms of modern art in the West are not "somehow or other" revelatory of the profound meaning of joy and suffering of the people seems a bizarre judgment. But leaving that on one side, the criterion of revelatory populism, of art subordinated to the proletariat, is so emphatically stated that no further comment is necessary. But the issue is not even as remote as 1959: Edward N. Luttwak wrote an article on China which was based on a visit to China at the time when Chairman Mao died and which was therefore less circumscribed than most because the controls on visitors were not so tight. All the same, the burden of his article is that a great deal of what he saw could have been seen by other visitors and yet their comments have been, almost invariably, deferential:

Why . . . have previous visitors not been revolted by the schoolrooms where small children are taught from booklets replete with the brutal images of harsh class-war propaganda? Why have our "Concerned Asia Scholars" failed to denounce the militarism of a system where the cheapest suit of clothing for little boys is a mini-uniform complete with toy rifle?

And, above all, how could they have missed the central phenomenon of Chinese life: its unique, almost pure totalitarianism? After all, it is scarcely concealed. The managers of a paint and canvas shop did not hesitate in the least to explain through an interpreter that they would not sell to anyone who would paint "reactionary pictures." Would trees and birds be thought reactionary? "Oh yes", they answered, "reactionary and personalistic." . . . Sound painting, it was explained to me, was painting that served the people by furthering the campaign against "the right-deviationist attempt of Teng Hsiao-p'ing to reverse the correct verdicts"—or, in other words, sound painting would serve the *current* campaign of the party. But how could you know what people would paint with the oils they bought here? Simple. The responsible member for the street, alley, or blocks would make sure that the people's paint and canvas would be used for the cause of the people. And if not? Then we would be told not to sell them any more paint, and they would in any case be forbidden to buy.<sup>8</sup>

Everywhere the Inquisitions are at work—with the emphasis on "everywhere." Not all the villains live on the other side of the hill. To give only one example, Tom Wolfe's cry of protest, *The Painted Word*, was raised against the controls which operate in Western art through

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galleries and commercialism and above all through art critics who control (or try to control) what is worthwhile in art:

People don't read the morning newspaper, Marshall McLuhan once said, they slip into it like a warm bath. Too true, Marshall! Imagine being in New York City on the morning of Sunday, April 28, 1974, like I was, slipping into that great public bath, that vat, that spa, that regional physiotherapy tank, that White Sulphur Springs, that Marienbad, that Ganges, that River Jordan for a million souls which is the Sunday *New York Times*. Soon I was submerged, weightless, suspended in the tepid depths of the thing, in Arts & Leisure, Section 2, page 19, in a state of perfect sensory deprivation, when all at once an extraordinary thing happened:

*I noticed something!*

Yet another clam-broth-colored current had begun to roll over me, as warm and predictable as the Gulf Stream . . . a review, it was, by the *Times's* dean of the arts, Hilton Kramer, of an exhibition at Yale University of "Seven Realists," seven realistic painters . . . when I was  *jerked alert* by the following:

"Realism does not lack its partisans, but it does rather conspicuously lack a persuasive theory. And given the nature of our intellectual commerce with works of art, to lack a persuasive theory is to lack something crucial—the means by which our experience of individual works is joined to our understanding of the values they signify."

Now, you may say, My God, man! You woke up over *that*? You forsook your blissful coma over a mere swell in the sea of words?

But I knew what I was looking at. I realized that without making the slightest effort I had come upon one of those utterances in search of which psychoanalysts and State Department monitors of the Moscow or Belgrade press are willing to endure a lifetime of tedium: namely, the seemingly innocuous *obiter dicta*, the words in passing, that give the game away.

What I saw before me was the critic-in-chief of *The New York Times* saying: In looking at a painting today, "to lack a persuasive theory is to lack something crucial." I read it again. It didn't say "something helpful" or "enriching" or even "extremely valuable." No, the word was *crucial*.

In short: frankly, these days, without a theory to go with it, I can't *see* a painting.

Then and there I experienced a flash known as the *Aha!* phenomenon. . . . All these years, along with countless kindred souls, I am certain, I had made my way into the galleries of Upper Madison and Lower Soho and the Art Gildo Midway of Fifty-seventh Street, and into the museums, into the Modern, the Whitney, and the Guggenheim, the Bastard Bauhaus, the New Brutalist, and the Fountainhead Baroque, into the lowliest storefront churches and grandest Robber Baronial temples of Modernism. All these years, I, like so many others, had stood in front of a thousand, two thousand, God-knows-how-many thousand Pollocks, de Koonings, Newmans, Nolands, Rothkos, Rauschenbergs, Judds, Johnses, Olitskis, Louises, Stills, Franz Klines, Frankenthalers, Kellys, and Frank Stellas, now squinting, now popping the eye sockets open, now drawing back, now moving closer—waiting, waiting, forever waiting for . . . *it* . . . for *it* to come into focus, namely, the visual reward (for so much effort) which must be there, . . . All these years, in short, I had assumed that in art, if nowhere else, seeing is believing. Well—



how very shortsighted! Now, at last, on April 28, 1974, I could *see*. I had gotten it backward all along. Not "seeing is believing," you ninny, but "believing is seeing," for *Modern Art has become completely literary: the paintings and other works exist only to illustrate the text.*<sup>9</sup>

With all these examples in mind, it is probable that our sympathies will be with the artist against the Inquisition. To reverse the sympathies is to sign away our own freedom to be, more or less, as we will.

#### PUBLIC INTELLIGIBILITY IN INDIVIDUAL CREATIVITY

And yet . . . and yet: There is something equally, if not more, destructive in Veronese's position. Consider the way in which the issue between Veronese and the Inquisition was solved: Veronese simply agreed to retitle the picture. He literally shifted his ground. He called it, and it keeps this name down to the present day, not "The Last Supper" but "The Feast in the House of Levi"; and, as one can see in the account in Mark 2:14-17, it was indeed an occasion when there were present "publicans and sinners" and others who were undoubtedly regarded at the time as "such-like scurrility." If it is so simple to retitle a picture, what does this suggest of the artist's engagement in the original subject? Veronese claimed that the artist must have the liberty of the poet or the madman—and that makes the point very graphically. The liberty of a madman is indeed prodigious in its versatility. It can take us into strange and unknown worlds with as much ease as it can take us into the presence—or the claimed presence—of Napoleon or Jesus Christ. And who is to say which is sanity and which is madness—a relativistic question which has had much publicity in recent years?

But the single and obvious point is that the liberty of the madman takes us into the private and the disconnected; it takes us to the utterance which is not necessarily intended to be publicly intelligible. The emphasis is on the private and personal vision, the articulation of subjectivity in which the main issue is not whether it can be shared or understood at large. That such an emphasis can produce works of extraordinary brilliance there is no need to deny; the more simple point is that it is something different and that the human ability to create worlds with shareable properties is a far more important communism or communalism than anything that has been achieved politically so far. That we can hold a conversation with Sophocles and sit down to dinner with Shakespeare is a fact which we should not take lightly for granted. Again it must be emphasized that no attempt is being made to set up an absolute value judgment between the private experience and the public intelligibility. But what also needs to be

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understood clearly is that public intelligibility has a necessary place in some contexts of human creativity, a necessity derived from the nature of the contexts in question and their purposes. Universities and schools are an obvious example which it is not necessary to elaborate.

But so also are the contexts of creativity and exploration which we refer to as religions. Why? Because religions do not, like Topsy, just grow. Religions continue and develop through time because they develop the means of that continuity and because their subject matter remains plausible and might be of ultimate importance.

The point, then, that has to be made is this: In religious art, or in the creation or extension of religious symbols, the artist has to come within the boundary of the system; he has to come within the boundary of discipline—unpopular word though that is. Consequently the artist who wishes to extend the life of the system must understand at least (though not necessarily believe) the terms, conditions, and resources of the system's continuity. Systems behave systematically, and religious systems are no exception to that rule.

But what does it mean to say that systems behave systematically? Take the simplest—and oversimplified—model of what is at issue in a religious system: The *bene Jacob* (the sons of Jacob), a seminomadic kinship group of no more intrinsic importance than, say, the sons of Hamor, are constrained into the outcome Israel. How? Fundamentally because they (or some of them) believed that a reality external to themselves which they characterized theistically created effects in their case which transformed their lifeway and made it what it would not otherwise have been. Translated from that jargon, the reference (though it may not sound like it) is to such things as the Exodus—events which established (in their view) unequivocally the differentiating consequences of inputs into the construction of human lives derived from theistic reality apart from, and external to, themselves. The importance of referring to “theistic reality” is that we cannot say *simpliciter* “God” because that term carries with it so many associations and so many identifications, and claimed theistic reality has received many different characterizations.

There were plenty of odd gods lying around in the ancient Near East—or rather sitting around just up there, above the dish cover dome of the sky. But the *bene Jacob* created a new characterization of theistic reality as—what? Yhwh, which we vocalize conventionally as Yahweh. There are indeed traces of Yahweh before the Exodus, not least in the recent excavations at Tel Mardikh in Syria. But that is beside the point. The characterization of theistic reality as Yahweh, which eventually subsumed or eliminated alternatives within that re-

ality (celestial courts and hierarchies of gods in Yahweh's court) or alternatives to that reality (polytheism), led to the sense that the bene Jacob were linked to God in a special condition of relatedness which they called, in their language, covenant. Therefore they constructed their life to be a whole offering to God—the whole people to be offered in holiness to God. Therefore the commands of Torah became a language of love, a way of saying “Yes” to God; and the Jews undertake their obedience on behalf of the world.<sup>10</sup>

Here then is a means of human relatedness to theistic reality—on the terms and within the boundary of the covenant. Here a faithful person knows and can determine how to live if he wishes to bring his life to an ultimately successful outcome. What does this mean in practice? It means that for those who participate in the system (i.e., for believing Jews) there is established a fundamental insight into the nature of God, the nature of man, and the means of relatedness—of connection and of information flow—between them. The resource of that insight is designated eventually as Torah and then as Scripture—and it must be remembered that the boundary of Scripture was designated only after much argument and therefore much care.

But the system that develops is this: First, there is the designation of Torah as fundamental resource and constraint. Of course, while Torah itself may have been accumulated over a long period of time, conceptually it is identified as a single initiative from God, associated with Moses on Sinai. So Torah is designated as the basic resource of authoritative and legitimizing information. But how is that linked to life—or to lives lived in circumstances not envisaged on Mount Sinai? Mechanisms of transmission, interpretation, and control have to be developed or rather will emerge because this is not necessarily a consciously thought-out program. But in practice it will be necessary for a ritual connection to be developed or to emerge between Torah in the past and life in the present; and controls or control figures to monitor actual behavior also will be necessary. So historically it is possible to observe how nomadic and then Canaanite rituals were transacted into a novel outcome to serve the first necessity; and ecstatic and cultic prophets were transacted into a novel outcome to serve the second—and the way in which this happened is summarized in my *Religious Imagination*.<sup>11</sup> Beyond the prophets and coming down to the second century B.C.E., the priests and above all the high priest emerge as the interpreters of the resource and the monitors of behavior. Consequently the link, both of transmission and to some extent of control, is established from the resource to the individual, who is of course

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already set, in childhood, within his or her own family—and there too interpretation and control will be occurring. The resulting process is:

Torah + Prophets → Priests → Individual/Family

It is not surprising that the priests, in the period of the second Temple before the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 C.E., were unmistakably conservative. Indeed the Sadducees were what now might be called biblical fundamentalists. That is to say, they insisted that, so far as possible, the exact detail of Torah should be implemented in life; and if that was literally impossible, then their interpretation—and theirs only—was to prevail. But the fact remained that for many Jews, particularly those who lived in the Roman empire, the exact implementation of Torah was not possible; and in any case new situations which had not been foreseen in Torah were arising.

As a result a new group emerged among the Jews, the Hakamim or predecessors of the rabbis (more popularly known as the Pharisees), who believed that Torah could and should inform all Jewish lives.<sup>12</sup> They therefore developed rules of exegesis, through which Torah could be interpreted, and they developed schools and synagogues; and these are obviously the two necessary conditions for the continuity and survival of a religious system: mechanisms of transmission and control. Exegesis mediated Torah into life, and schools and synagogues created the means of ensuring the transmission. Eventually the interpretations of the Hakamim became formalized as equally authoritative and legitimizing, and indeed they became known as Torah shebealPeh. These eventually were collected in Mishnah, and again the commentary on Mishnah (together with Mishnah itself) in turn was unified eventually in the Talmuds. But the Babylonian Talmud itself was not easy of interpretation or use, and eventually the resource was pulled together again into a new formulation by Maimonides.

Thus, even in miniature, one can see in the building up of the Jewish tradition the exemplification of what is necessary for the continuity of an information system: clearly designated resources to act as a constraint over the outcomes in life and clear and effective means of ensuring the process of continuity from generation to generation.

The same kind of analysis can be made of other religious systems. Sometimes the fundamental resources of worthwhile or authoritative information are designated with a high degree of formality, as when something is designated as scripture; but in other instances the designated resources may be traditional and may be transmitted through designated people in the tribe, or they may be located in an individual in a chain of transmission, such as a guru. At an advanced level the

transmission may take place even without words—transmission outside the scriptures, as it is designated in Zen Buddhism. But all these exemplify, from one extreme to the other, that systems behave systematically—if they did not, they would not continue through time; and in fact, at the more obvious levels, Buddhism and Zen Buddhism are among the most formal systems of information transmission and control which the ingenuity of man has yet devised.

But what is the point of all this? What is the purpose? Obviously not to design bigger and better systems, though it is familiar that in every religious system some people *do* always emerge for whom the system is an end in itself. They become obsessive over ritual, or they become cardinals, or they become commissars, or they become inquisitors, or indeed some of them become professors. But that is not the purpose; that is the product of the systematic nature of systems. What is the purpose? The purpose is you, or me, the human subject. The point of the religious system is that you or any other human subject can be informed, can receive into the construction of a lifeway those cues of information which, if they are appropriated and realized in life, can lead that lifeway to what the system in question has designated as an ultimately successful outcome. So the locus of the transformation of religious symbols lies in the human subject. But the subjectivity cannot be allowed to destroy the system totally since otherwise the simplest form of continuity is threatened. And that is the tension between the artist and the Inquisition.

It is obviously true that religions are competitive about the nature of the human subject and about what counts as a successful outcome, and many of the propositions they advance on these topics are logically incompatible; consequently what they offer as cues of worthwhile information are very different indeed. But that does not affect the theoretical point being made, that the purpose of religious systems is not to evaluate themselves as systems but to function in such a way that you and I become Christianly, or Buddhistically, or Hinduistically informed—remembering always that “information” in this technical sense is not in any way confined to verbal or propositional information. It is always a desperate and dangerous moment when religious systems overcommit themselves to the value of verbalization.

The purpose of the religious system is you—which is why there is a recurrent configuration, in the history of religious systems, of periods of increasing efficiency in the development of mechanisms of transmission and control until they become apparently so much of an end in themselves and so inadequate for the individual's life that they are challenged by those who insist on the priority of the individual appropriation of what is offered in and through the system. It is hardly

necessary to murmur the name Luther to make the point, but Gautama and Mahavira are equally good examples in the Indian tradition.

An equally obvious example is Jesus. If we return to the model of Judaism as a system of information process, we easily and immediately can see the problem which Jesus posed within that system. In contrast to the Sadducees, who relied on formal adherence to the designated resource in Torah, the Hakamim accepted that there must be a mechanism of interpretation interposed within the transmission of Torah to life, and this created a clear map of appropriate conduct: The more efficiently Torah is interpreted, the more it can be expected that people actually will express Torah-informed lives. The Hakamim thus created a well-mapped boundary within which authentically Jewish, or God-related, life must fall—and those are the exact “founding principles” of Rabbinic Judaism in Pirque Aboth: “Be careful in the judgements you make; raise up many pupils; and make a fence around Torah.”

But Jesus claimed a direct relatedness to theistic reality external to himself (which he characterized as Abba, Father) and claimed also that we can be related to that reality not necessarily by being brought within the boundary of Torah but simply by the faith that it can be so—faith becomes the new boundary condition. But nothing could be more destructive of Israel than that claim. Is Torah then no longer necessary? Is Torah made of no effect? God forbid, said Paul; but it becomes subordinate, as illustrating a way of redemption which had failed to change men *en tais kardiais*, at the very root of behavior.

And when Jesus insisted in Jerusalem (the center of legitimate and legitimizing authority) that his understanding of God and of God-relatedness was right, was simple, and would make a powerful transformation of life, the Jews could not evade the challenge which his journey to Jerusalem posed; and eventually Jesus was excluded from the system, and Christianity became a new and separated system, with its own designated resources and means of transmission.<sup>13</sup>

Now why does it matter? Why bother when an individual invents a new or different understanding of religious reality? That is to ask, in another way, what is the purpose of a religious system? And that is to ask, in another way, why religion? And the answer to that is very simple and very clear: It is because, in an evolutionary context, where all living beings are threatened with death and perhaps with extinction, and in the case of human beings, who are conscious of this fact and can share this consciousness with one another and can reflect on it, religions offer to their adherents the means to construct a lifeway which will come to an ultimately successful outcome through all the

limitations which circumscribe it, including, ultimately, through death itself. It has to be remembered that, contrary to the prevalent dogma derived principally from Marx and Freud (that the origin and power of religions are to be found in their invention of a compensatory heaven supervised—in Freud's case—by a father figure), the elaboration of a belief in a conscious continuity of life with God after death seems to be a relatively late development, except where accidental discoveries (such as the discovery of mummification in Egypt) precipitated speculative beliefs on that new-found basis. The fact that the whole of the Old Testament was written without a belief in a conscious continuity of life with God after death is a familiar illustration of the point.

So when we say that within religious systems resources are offered to help bring a life which incorporates them to a successful outcome, we may be talking in fact about a this-worldly, present-life experience which is important not for what it will yield but for what it actually is here and now.

It is all the more remarkable that, looked at that way round, religious systems do not confine what they designate as potentially resourceful to this world, least of all to a particular informational resource—say scripture—if they have one. All religious systems, including Buddhism, claim that there are resources of effect which do not present themselves immediately (unmediatedly) as objects among other objects in this world. They describe those resources of differentiating effect in very different and often very bizarre ways, as gods, devils, angels, spirits, jinn, devas, and the like. Many of those descriptions become implausible. They collapse and go to extinction, and this is why the death of God occurs in almost every generation. But the more important fact is that the pictures are parasitic on experience, not the other way round.

It is the experience of relatedness to another (to literally A.N. Other) which demands a poetry to speak of it. The poetry then indeed may feed and inspire in reverse the imagination of others and become something in its own right, and in this way traditions of religious art and music are established, from which individuals in later generations derive inspiration for their lives. Nevertheless, the poetry and the image may go. They may disappear or collapse because they are no longer eloquent, but the experience of relatedness to externality characterized theistically continues.

#### ARTIST'S PROBLEM IN A RELIGIOUS SYSTEM

If images collapse in implausibility, then the nature of that externality will have to be recharacterized, provided of course that the experi-

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ence continues in any human subject; a new poetry has to be found to make the experience shareable with others and indeed intelligible and continually attractive to introspection. So a major purpose of religious symbols is to relate the human subject and the universe to an externality (which has been characterized very diversely and no doubt often wrongly—an externality which survives the death of particular symbols but to which we have no access initially except through a personal transaction of the available symbols. Our access to a sense of God is almost invariably through a prevailing theistic system, however much we may transform that sensibility as the symbols are transacted through our own experience. Even so, the transaction is not so personal as it sounds because the pictures are fundamentally parasitic on general and extensive experience within the system, not the other way round. We do depend on the transmission of the cues of theistic possibility in the theistic systems, and this remains the case even if one has not yet engaged in the possible experience oneself.

It is here that we can see the necessary problem of the artist in a religious system. Religions offer fundamental clues—fundamental resources—for the construction of a lifeway which will lead (in their own estimate) both to immediate goals in life and to an ultimately successful outcome. The nature of the goals and of what counts as a successful outcome is very differently conceived and described in different religious systems, and there are issues of truth between them. They may all be wrong, but they certainly cannot all be right. They remain identical from the structural and analytic point of view: Religions are systems in which mechanisms of transmission and control have been developed to ensure that the construction of human lives within the boundary of the system can be appropriately informed. Again one must stress that the word “informed” does not refer to verbal items of information alone; it refers to the whole range of mediation and communication, much of which, in a religious system, will be nonverbal.

But if there are basic and designated resources, then an effective and continuing system necessarily must develop a strong transmission link between the resource and the subject. Furthermore, the more precisely the fundamental resources can be designated and circumscribed—as, for example, in a canon of scripture or in an unvarying ritual pathway throughout the year—then the more closely subsequent behavior can be monitored and can be defined as appropriate or inappropriate. To that extent the Inquisition is on the side of the angels: Art in relation to ritual or resource is not primarily innovative but repetitive, as one can see in the artistic representation of



symbols in an anthropological museum. It secures the familiar ground. Indeed the more clearly the resource can be designated, the more effective and strong the system will become; and the stronger the system becomes, the more innovation tends to become an offense: *bida* in Islam, the heretic in Christianity, the *zagen mamre* in Judaism.

The Inquisition is thus intelligible, even though a systems analysis of religious traditions makes it absolutely clear why it overreaches itself and becomes indefensible: The failure of the obvious logic which produces the Inquisition and which has articulated itself so repeatedly in the history of religions lies in the fact that the point of the exercise is not the system but the person. It is the realization in the person of *moksha*, of *bhakti*, of *samadhi*, of union, of salvation. And therefore the recovery of religious art from the plastic reproduction of endless smiling Buddhas and from what Rose Macaulay summarized as "pictures of the Sacred Heart in convent parlours" depends not on the liberty of a madman but on a more profound sanity—on a deep and reflective understanding of what a religious tradition has been defending—what, in other words, it holds out as the goal and as the outcome and what it designates as resourceful for the attainment of those ends.<sup>14</sup>

So the transaction of religious symbols in a work of art, in a way which endures and continues to speak to other generations, requires an acceptance—or at the very least an appreciation—of the grammar articulated within any system designed to control the transformation of symbols which occurs in and through the person. Then of course even the transformation of symbols becomes possible because the connection with the resource is accepted and deliberate while the poetry is personal. For this reason religious art which can be so facile and superficial is also the most difficult of all human exercises—difficult because it requires a tremendous discipline of sympathy. It is not that the artist himself must be an adherent, a believer in the propositions advanced within the system. In fact the point is made very powerfully by Henry Moore, in a pamphlet he wrote about his statue of a madonna and child in a church in Northampton:

When I was first asked to carve a Madonna and Child for St. Matthew's, although I was very interested I wasn't sure whether I could do it, or whether I even wanted to do it. One knows that religion has been the inspiration of most of Europe's greatest painting and sculpture, and that the Church in the past has encouraged and employed the greatest artists; but the great tradition of religious art seems to have got lost completely in the present day, and the general level of church art has fallen very low. . . . Therefore I felt it was not a commission straight-away and light-heartedly to agree to undertake,

and I could only promise to make notebook drawings from which I would do small clay models, and only then should I be able to say whether I could produce something which would be satisfactory as sculpture and also satisfy my idea of the "Madonna and Child" theme as well.

... I began thinking of the "Madonna and Child" for St. Matthew's considering in what ways a Madonna and Child differs from a carving of a Mother and Child—that is, by considering how in my opinion religious art differs from secular art.

It's not easy to describe in words what this difference is, except by saying in general terms that the "Madonna and Child" should have an austerity and a nobility, and some touch of grandeur (even hieratic aloofness) which is missing in the everyday "Mother and Child" idea. Of the sketches and models I have done, the one chosen has I think a quiet dignity and gentleness. I have tried to give a sense of complete easiness and repose, as though the Madonna could stay in that position for ever (as being in stone she will have to do).<sup>15</sup>

But this simply means that the work of the artist in transacting religious symbols is indistinguishable from the work of prayer, although the expression is overtly different. The continuity of a religious tradition depends on the appropriation of what up to that point has been fundamentally resourceful and on the translation of those resources into the construction of life. And that essentially is the work of prayer (differentiating, for the moment, prayer from worship): Prayer is to realize and lock into the information net which already exists, long before we do anything about it; and it is to allow those informational cues (which no doubt we have inherited in a particular cultural situation and which Freud may be entirely right in saying that we approach for all sorts of base and abject motives) so to rest and move and live within the disposition and intention of our brain behavior that we—the very subject of that behavior—are moved beyond the inherited point of our departure into a new and volunteered dependence until indeed we realize in ourselves the meaning of Augustine's otherwise quite unverifiable assertion, "God is the only reality, and we are only real in so far as we are in his order, and he in us." The material of ourselves thereby is shaped and formed into that condition of relatedness as though we could stay in that position forever—which being dead we will have to do. Here then we come full circle and return to the question as I posed it in *Sense of God*: "What are the capabilities of this particular organization and assembly of matter which makes us what we are? We know that we are capable of walking, eating, talking, drinking; we know that we are capable of experiencing feelings which we label (culturally) as beauty, truth, love. Is it also possible that we are capable of God—capable of experiencing feelings and effects which we label theistically (i.e. label appropriately as God-derived or God-related)?"<sup>16</sup> But here no one can go further on

another person's behalf. Each of us at this point has to take up his pen and write his own answer but write it in the language of his life. If one goes back to the picture by Veronese and looks closely at the painting of a step in the bottom right-hand corner, one will see depicted on the step as though it is an inscription, "Paulus Caliari Veroneseus fecit"; Paul Caliari of Verona made it: I, Paul, and no other, this is what *I* have done. In the same way we eventually have to add our own signature to whatever work of translation of information into thought and into activity we have made in our own life: I, and no other, did this. This is mine, this is what I did with all that God offered me informatively of himself to be translated into life. As Chrysostom put it long ago: "Let us then draw him to ourselves, and invite him to aid us in the attempt, and let us contribute our share—good will, I mean, and energy. For he will not require any thing further, but if he can meet with this only, he will confer all that is his part."

Dear God, if we must build you by argument  
The resulting idol  
Will be of curious proportion.  
But if you build me  
Synapse and flow, fleeting like firefly  
Through the hidden night of the skull,  
Then—perhaps then—the world will flare once more,  
The field of wheat be golden and the earth revered  
As other eyes and other minds have known:  
The heathen in his wisdom  
Bows down to wood and stone,  
But we who outgrow images,  
Must stand with you alone.

#### NOTES

1. Ovid *Metamorphoses* 2:809–11.
2. Richard Friedenthal, ed., *Letters of the Great Artists*, 2 vols. (London: Thames & Hudson, 1963), 1:113.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 116–17.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
5. J. W. Bowker, *The Sense of God: Sociological, Anthropological and Psychological Approaches to the Origin of the Sense of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).
6. As quoted by Frederic V. Grunfeld, *The Hitler File: A Social History of Germany and the Nazis, 1918–45* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1974), p. 251.
7. G. Nedoshivin, "Introduction," in *An Exhibition of Works by Russian and Soviet Artists, Royal Academy of Arts* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1959), pp. 16–17.
8. Edward N. Luttwak, "Seeing China Plain," *Commentary* 62 (December 1976): 31.
9. Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975), pp. 3–7.
10. For a fuller account of this see my *The Religious Imagination and the Sense of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 37–42.
11. *Ibid.*

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12. For these terms see my *Jesus and the Pharisees* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 1-5.
13. This analysis of Jesus in relation to Judaism is given in much greater detail in my *Religious Imagination*, pt. 2.
14. Rose Macaulay, *The Towers of Trebizond* (London: Collins, 1956), p. 187.
15. As quoted by Herbert Read, *Henry Moore: A Study of His Life and Work* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1965), pp. 154-56.
16. Bowker, *Sense of God*, p. 40.