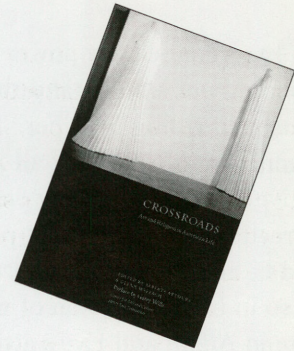
Art, Religion, and Tea



Alberta Arthurs and Glenn Wallach, eds. *Crossroads: Art and Religion in American Life.* New York: New Press, 2001.

Reviewed by John Hoyt

As a practicing visual artist, I am both impressed and a bit amused by the stated objective of this book: "to begin a more rational conversation about the relationships of the arts and religion in contemporary American society" (ix). Rational? Conversation? Artists sitting down with religious leaders (over cups of . . . tea?) to discuss ways in which they can work together toward a set of shared goals? In my world, even the artists (perhaps too absorbed in their personal search for self-expression) rarely talk to one another, and some would argue that the impulses that give rise to artistic and religious expression are often anything but rational.

Yet it seems axiomatic that religion and the arts do occupy some of the same psychic territory, and that artists and religious leaders do, at times, pursue similar goals. Certainly artists as diverse as William Blake, Wassily Kandinsky, and Louise Nevelson are evidence of this, and for hundreds of years Western art and religious art were all but synonymous.

As this book points out, art and religion have "similar or overlapping functions" (37); yet this overlap often seems to cast them in the role of antagonists. Both art and religion are expressions of humans' search for ultimate meaning. Yet although religion is often perceived as the path of conformity, art represents (for better or worse, depending on your viewpoint) the path of openness and imagination.

One woman, a leader in the Latino arts community in San Francisco, states matters this way:

> Religion states that only through following a certain path will you get to a certain place. With art, it's much more open, there's no specific path to follow, there are many different paths. With religion you have to conform to one way of doing things and practicing things in order to obtain eternal grace. (37)

A religious leader in the same city "reaches out" to artists with these words: "If there were the [proposed] dialogue, I will tell them 'Come back to the church. Come back to your roots. Come back to the source of the creativity'" (41).

Stated differently, the arts are often perceived by people who have a conservative religious view of the world as being elitist, self-centered, and solipsistic, whereas the church is more aware of the needs of suffering humanity, that is, in touch with the real beauty and pain of the world.

Although there is arguably a large body of American art that is religious in its underlying themes and inspiration, it would seem that there is very little—at least in the "mainstream" American Protestantism, which is the focus of this book—that is religious in any "official" or conventional sense:

> To find a profoundly religious poet, we must go back to preconstitutional days.... Serious novels that treat religion with reverence (not with satire) do not come from the mainstream Protestant culture. . . . [O]ur theater has been even more uniformly secular.... The only verbal art with a deep religious tradition in America is the sermon, ... In music, the only stream of religious inspiration was that of gospel music and the spirituals—and they have had less impact on American culture than the secular form of black music, jazz. It is not surprising, then, that our visual arts have little to show in religious terms. I cannot think of any great religious sculpture. Our few religious painters have come, like religious novelists, from the margins of society. (xiii)

This bleak view of the relationship between the religious and artistic communities is reinforced

throughout the book. An important indicator of American social attitudes and behaviors, for example, is the biannual General Social Survey. Recent (1998) results from this survey indicate that "non-Christian groups are most, and conservative Protestants least, supportive of the arts; Americans holding orthodox views of the Bible tend to be appreciably less supportive of the arts" (94). Conservative Protestants were more likely than any other group to agree with statements that reflect a lack of understanding of the goals of the artistic community.

For example, respondents were asked whether they thought art should "celebrate what is most beautiful about the world and the human spirit," or whether art "should freely express an artist's deepest thoughts and emotions, good or bad" (77). In other words (as the first of these statements implies), does the artist have a "duty to depict positive images and evoke positive emotions" (77)? Conservative Protestants were more likely than any other group polled to say "yes" to this statement, whereas non-Christians (unaffiliated and Jewish respondents) were more likely to opt for the second statement, which emphasizes artistic freedom and self-expression. Similarly, conservative Protestants were decidedly more likely to agree with statements that showed an incomprehension of "modern" art ("modern art is just slapped on—a child could do it" [78]).

It would, of course, be an over simplification to view Protestants as iconoclasts. In the devotional context, images have played an important, if rather restricted, role. Most readers will think of examples, such as traditional images of Christ in Sabbath School rooms (or possibly even in the sanctuary), didactic images (usually illustrations of Bible stories) used in the education of children, illustrated prophetic charts, and perhaps a few other examples (including celebratory hangings and elaborate stained glass windows in some sanctuaries).

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As well, given the Protestant tendency to view Nature as "God's second book," landscape painting might be studied as a manifestation of the religious impulse in art.

> For American Protestants in the middle third of the nineteenth century, the natural landscape was one principal residence of religious content....With nature construed as a primary medium of divine creativity and communication, landscape painting was quintessentially religious art. (203)

In the mid-twentieth century the picture began to appear slightly more nuanced. Protestant congregations became increasingly urban and educated, and there was a concomitant rise in the diversity of interactions with the artistic community. As Liberal Protestants became painfully aware of (what they perceived as) the "vulgarity and banality" of mainstream Protestant artistic taste, a number of them sought to promote, as an antidote, the "virility and authenticity" of abstract expressionism. Yet, although many twentieth-century Protestants saw the work of artists such as Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman as deeply spiritual, for other Protestants the promotion of this sort of art was in itself a manifestation of a "spiritual void" that lay at the heart of the Liberal impulse (216-21).

To some degree, then, this antagonism between art and religion is a fundamental aspect of Protestant culture. In fact, as one of the artists interviewed in the final chapter points out, this conflict (perhaps somewhat perversely) serves the interests of both parties since it provides a reliable source of energy—to the artists since it gives them the sense that someone is looking at and responding to their work; to the religious conservatives because it provides a focal point for their righteous indignation (252-53).

A first step in the proposed dialogue, then, would be to acknowledge that points of disagreement and misunderstanding do in fact exist. Unfortunately, as the editors point out in their "afterward," these differences currently "exist as largely unexamined ambivalences between the two domains—a continual attraction and repulsion, admiration and rejection" (168). Rather than seeking to resolve these points of contention, perhaps the goal of a dialogue should be to examine these differences and to channel them into endeavors that will be profitable for both.

Visual artist John Hoyt is an instructor at Canadian University College, Lacombe, Alberta, Canada. Examples of his work can be viewed at <www.telusplanet.net/public/hoyt>.