

# Vincent van Gogh's Christian Faith and How it influenced his Life and Art



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# Declaration

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## **Vincent van Gogh's Christian Faith and How it influenced his Life and Art**

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### **Abstract**

The genesis of this thesis was the experience of the transcendent quality of Vincent van Gogh's oeuvre. The hypothesis is that Van Gogh pursued his vocation to be a minister of Christ through art having failed in his desire to pursue a vocation in the institutional church. The perspective is through the lens of Christian Spirituality and the concept of transformation leading to transcendence. Van Gogh's life is viewed as a compulsive mission, a pilgrimage with both a physical and spiritual dimension. His physical journey is well documented. His spiritual journey seems almost as clear when his obsession with depicting the Sower is analysed in the light of that parable and Christ's Gospel as expressed as much in his artworks as in his correspondence. Account is taken of the abundant critical literature including Christocentric analyses. These latter tend to focus on the trilogy of paintings which unmistakably represent religious biblical images: *The Pietà (after Delacroix)*, *The Good Samaritan (after Delacroix)*, and *The Raising of Lazarus (after Rembrandt)*. However, this ignores the rich Christian symbolism that can be found in so much of his other work through his understanding of chromatics and the choice of his subject matter.

Van Gogh's early life as an art dealer exposed him to a wide variety of artistic genres and styles. He also became an advocate for and an adept in Japonisme. Van Gogh was multilingual and widely read in his native Dutch and in English and French. He was immersed in the Bible and Christ's teaching. All of this combined in his developing mastery of a personalised art form which found expression in depictions beginning with *The Potato Eaters*, continuing through numerous works of sowers, harvest and reaping, culminating in the death and resurrection symbolism in his final works, *Wheatfields with Crows* and *Roots*. Christian spirituality evidenced in that mission.

## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Introduction**

This thesis examines whether the basis of the path pursued by Vincent van Gogh to be a minister of the Gospel can be found in his art and letters. This first chapter considers the motivation for the study. Details of Van Gogh's life, including chronological tables, are presented and the scale and complexity of his published letters and artworks are introduced.

### **1.2 Motivation for the study**

Undertaking theological studies in South Korea I was fascinated by the covers on some of Henri Nouwen's books. Nouwen, a Dutch-born Catholic priest, was an internationally renowned author in the field of spirituality. Included among the artistic masterpieces that illustrated his book covers were works of Vincent van Gogh; *The Sower at Sunset* (1888), for example, was on the cover of *The Dance of Life* published in 2005. Nouwen taught several seminars on "the ministry of Vincent van Gogh" in Yale Divinity School. His fascination with Van Gogh is clear from this luminous sentence:

Few writers or painters have influenced me as much as Vincent. This deeply wounded and immensely gifted Dutchman brought me in touch with my own brokenness and talents in ways nobody else could ... He painted what I had not before dared to look at; he questioned what I had not before dared to speak about; and he entered into spaces of the heart that I had not before dared to come close to. By doing so he brought me in touch with many of my fears and gave me the courage to go further and deeper in my search for a God who loves. (Nouwen, Foreword in Edwards 1989, p.x)

I already had a deep interest in Van Gogh's life and art, poring over his letters, the many copies of his own artworks, and biographies. However, whilst I lived in South Korea I lacked the opportunity to see Van Gogh's many masterpieces at first hand. Further inspired by Nouwen's sentiments, when I came to live in Europe as an ordained Methodist minister, I sought the opportunity to engage in serious research on the spirituality of Van Gogh. Of course, it would have been impracticable to have carried out this research without looking at the actual paintings.

The first time I stood in front of a Van Gogh painting was experiencing *The Sunflowers* (1888) in the National Gallery, London. I was overpowered by the harsh colour of chrome yellow. It was rather like the light of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* hypnotised me or overwhelmed my consciousness. I could only echo the young Van Gogh standing in front of one of Millet's drawings feeling something akin to the biblical Moses told to "put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground" (The Bible, Exodus 3:5). From this starting point, I have re-traced Vincent van Gogh's steps from Zundert, his birth-place, to Auvers-sur-Oise, where he died, and from the Van Gogh Museum to the Kröller-Müller Museum. It was not only an artistic pilgrimage to follow in his footsteps but, just as with Henri Nouwen, it also required a spiritual journey to enter the inner place of the heart searching for the God who loves. In my own journey, I have met many people who loved seeing art in museums and were impressed by Van Gogh's paintings. Sometimes, I have felt that their creator has still much to communicate to us about salvation, transformation, and the sacraments through his letters and paintings. The art of this "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (The Bible, 2 Corinthians 6:10) religious painter is of deep theological and spiritual significance.

Van Gogh's pilgrim attitude is expressed in this letter:

Wait, perhaps someday you will see that I too am an artist. I do not know what I can do, but I hope I shall be able to make some drawings with something human in them. But first I must draw the Barges (exercises) and do other more or less difficult things. The path is narrow, the door is narrow, and there are few who find it. (LT 1882, p.206)

Van Gogh quoted this Bible verse many times thereafter as if these words were his personal motto (cf. LT 28, 39, 73, 79, 82, 85, 87, 89, 112, 114, 116, 121 1875-1877). For Van Gogh, to be a stranger or pilgrim is to love God and neighbour. In this sense, the Gospel as the Bible remained in Van Gogh's artistic life. There is definite evidence that he understood the Gospel in his life and faith:

And the Bible consists of layers and there's progression in it. For example, the difference between Moses and Noah on the one hand and Jesus and Paul on the other, and in my opinion Stowe and Michelet are a *continuation* of the gospel, not a *repetition* ...  
to believe in God, by that I mean feeling that there is a God, not a dead or stuffed God, but a living one who pushes us with irresistible force in the direction of 'Love

on'. That's what I think. Proof of His presence– the reality of love. Proof of the reality of the feeling of that great power of love deep within us – the existence of God. Because there is a God there is love; because there is love there is a God. Although this may seem like an argument that goes round in a circle, nevertheless it's true, because 'that circle' actually contains all things, and one can't help, even if one wanted to, being in that circle oneself. (LT189, 1881, p.219)

He repeatedly quotes passages from the Old Testament which referred to the idea of pilgrim. He quoted Luke, John, Acts, and Paul's letters. He quoted the texts containing the words of Jesus Christ and instructions on becoming a real disciple:

As soon as I have a chance, I shall send you a French Bible, and The Imitation of Christ... Father wrote to me once: "You know that the same mouth which said: "Be as harmless as the doves," and straight away added: "and wise as a serpent." [Matt. 10:16] Keep that in mind and believe me always ...

When I was here last winter, one of the things he said to me was, "Supernatural things I may not know, but I know everything about natural things." I do not know if those were his exact words, but that was the meaning. (LT47, 1875, p.95)

Vincent van Gogh's life, although short-lived, was full of energy and vitality. This is outlined in the next section.

### **1.3 Vincent van Gogh: a brief outline of his life**

Vincent van Gogh was a self-taught artist classified nowadays as Post-Impressionist. Van Gogh was a pastor's son, well-versed in Scripture, which he cited prolifically. He was also an avid reader of the classical Christian literatures. He was born on March 30, 1853, in the old parsonage of the Dutch Reformed Church in the small village of Zundert in Holland. Vincent's early career was guided by the interest of his father, Theodorus, and of two of his uncles, Cornelis van Gogh referred to as Uncle Cor, an art dealer and bookseller in Amsterdam, and Vincent van Gogh referred to as Uncle Cent, also an art dealer. In 1869, when he was sixteen years old, the young Van Gogh was given his first job with the uncles' art dealership, Goupil & Cie in Holland. During his time with Goupil he worked in his homeland, Holland, and in England and in France. In 1873, he was sent to work in Goupil's London branch and in 1875 he was transferred to the Paris branch. In 1876 he was dismissed by Goupil whereupon he returned to England and took up a post as an unpaid teacher and, later, as paid secretary to a Methodist minister, Reverend Thomas Slade-Jones. Van Gogh returned to Holland at the end

of the year and in January 1877 began a new job working for a bookseller in Dordrecht, near Rotterdam. During that year, living with his uncle in Amsterdam, he began preparation for the ministry but failed to get accepted for theological studies because, despite intensive tutoring, he failed Latin and Greek in the entrance exam.

Wanting to pursue a career as a minister, in 1879, Vincent moved to Belgium, to the Borinage coal-mining district. Here he was employed as a missionary to the mining community. He was dismissed from this post too. Nevertheless, he continued his vocation now unpaid, ministering to the Borinage miners. Van Gogh remained in the Borinage, devoting himself to self-reflection and to learning artistic skills. He subsequently moved between various locations in Holland (1881-1886) and in France (1886-1890) pursuing his calling as an artist. Vincent's many art works, more than 800, were sent to his brother, Theo, accompanied with a vast correspondence. Theo was a constant support throughout his life. Theo became a successful art dealer and it was to him that most of Vincent's published letters are written. Theo, the younger brother, was a constant support to Vincent throughout his life.

Table. 1: From birth to age 27 (1853-1880)

Period	Contents
<p><b>1853-1872</b> <b>Zundert,</b> <b>Hague</b></p>	<p>1853 March 30: Vincent Willem 2, the painter, born.            1857 May 1: Vincent's brother Theo born.            1861 January: Vincent goes to the village school.            1864 October: Vincent goes to Jan Provily's boarding school.            1869 July: Vincent leaves Zundert forever; he is taken on by Goupil &amp; Cie at The Hague.            1872 August: Vincent begins to correspond with Theo, who is at school at Oisterwijk.</p>
<p><b>1873-1874</b> <b>Brussels,</b> <b>London,</b> <b>Paris</b></p>	<p>1873 January: Vincent starts work at the Brussels branch of Goupil.            1873 June: Vincent is sent to the London branch of Goupil.            1874 October: Vincent is sent to the Goupil head office in Paris.            1874 December: Vincent returns to the London branch of Goupil.</p>
<p><b>1875-1876</b> <b>Paris,</b> <b>Isleworth,</b> <b>Etten</b></p>	<p>1875, May: Vincent is sent back to Goupil head office in Paris. He ceases to be interested in art-dealing and is absorbed in studying the Bible.            1876, April: Vincent dismissed from Goupil. He arrives at Ramsgate, where he teaches and assists at a Methodist school.            1876 July: Vincent becomes a secretary to Rev. Slade-Jones, a Methodist minister, at Isleworth.            1876 November: Vincent preached his first sermon.            1876 December: Vincent is on a return visit to his parents at Etten.</p>
<p><b>1877-1878</b> <b>Dordrecht,</b> <b>Amsterdam</b></p>	<p>1877 January: Vincent takes a job with Brussel and Van Braam's bookshop at Dordrecht.            1877 May: Vincent arrives in Amsterdam where he prepares for the entrance examinations to the faculty of theology at the university.            1878 July: Vincent abandons his studies of Latin and Greek, which do not interest him.            1878 July: Vincent goes to Brussels with his father and the Rev. Slade-Jones who happens to be visiting Etten.</p>
<p><b>1879</b> <b>Borinage</b></p>	<p>1879 January: Vincent is appointed mission preacher at Wasmes in the Borinage. After a serious explosion in the local mine and a miner's strike, Vincent tends the injured and the sick. He lives in a poor worker's house where he lacks everything.            1879 July: At the end of the month Vincent is dismissed by his superiors because he is sacrificing himself too much to his fellows and not troubling to look respectable.            1879 August: Vincent moves to Cuesmes, where he remains until July 1880.</p>
<p><b>1880</b> <b>Borinage</b> <b>Brussels</b></p>	<p>1880 July: Vincent continues his mission work on his own account.            1880 August: Vincent finds his real vocation: he begins to draw.            1880 October: He takes a room in Brussels to continue his art practice.</p>

Table. 2: The life of Artist (1881-1890)

Period	Contents
<p><b>1881-1883</b> <b>Etten, The Hague, and Drenthe</b></p>	<p><b>First steps as an artist</b> Returns to his parents manse to draw and paint. His brother, Theo, had been appointed manager of Goupil &amp; Cie in Paris. Theo supported him financially enabling Vincent to focus entirely on his art. Vincent studies with the artist, Anton Mauve. Vincent leaves The Hague and wanders in the desolate Drenthe region, in debt and depressed.</p>
<p><b>1883-1885</b> <b>Nuenen, Antwerp</b></p>	<p><b>Peasant painter</b> Vincent returns to parent's home in Nuenen, an ideal setting for a peasant painter, and worked in a small rented studio behind parsonage. Vincent cares for injured mother. Vincent's father dies, March 1885. Painted <i>The Potato Eaters</i>, April. Painted his father's Bible in a still life. Vincent moved to Antwerp and first bought Japanese prints.</p>
<p><b>1886-1888</b> <b>Paris</b></p>	<p><b>From Dark to Light</b> Vincent moved into Theo's apartment in Paris. Attended Cormon's studio classes and met many of the Impressionists. Vincent bought Japanese prints at Bing's shop. Vincent's work grew steadily brighter in Paris. Painted sunflowers, self-portraits, and copied Japanese woodcuts.</p>
<p><b>1888-1889</b> <b>Arles</b></p>	<p><b>South of France</b> Vincent moved to Arles, Southern France to paint in an area as beautiful as Japan. Vincent set to work enthusiastically, painting orchards in blossom and harvest. Vincent moved into Yellow House, painted sunflowers and Gauguin arrived October 1888. Vincent claimed he mutilated his own ear and was hospitalised. Gauguin left.</p>
<p><b>1889-1890</b> <b>Saint-Remy-de Provence</b></p>	<p><b>Hospitalisation</b> Vincent voluntarily entered the Asylum of Saint-Paul-de-Mausole. Vincent was given an extra room as a studio. Copied prints after paintings by artists such as Rembrandt, Millet, and Delacroix. Mercure de France published Aurier's article praising Vincent's paintings. The Red Vineyard, his single sale, was sold during an exhibition in Brussels.</p>
<p><b>1890</b> <b>Auvers-sur-Oise</b></p>	<p><b>Vincent's final months</b> Vincent left the Asylum and headed north to Auvers-sur-Oise, in May. Vincent took a room at the Ravoux Cafe and met Dr. Gachet. Vincent visited Paris when Theo's son was ill. Vincent van Gogh shot himself 27th July and died 29th of July.</p>

## 1.4 Van Gogh's Letters and artworks

Over a period of years all Vincent van Gogh's published letters have been studied and analysed for this thesis. These are dated from September 1872 to July 1890. Numbering in excess of 800, most were written to his brother Theo, with one or two to other members of his family. Van Gogh also corresponded with the Dutch artist, Anthon van Rappard; these letters date from October 1881 to August 1885. Emile Barnard, the French artist and writer, was also a friend of Van Gogh and their correspondence spanned two years, December 1887 to November 1889. The third artist with whom Van Gogh corresponded was another friend, the French artist, Paul Gauguin, March 1888 to June 1890. The letters include many quotations from the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. He repeatedly quotes passages from the Old Testament referring to the idea of pilgrim or the concept of pilgrim. For example, Van Gogh mentioned the panting hart of Psalm 42 with Fisherman's boat and small fishing vessels. See LT 51, 1876, p.46.

The letters were explored for passages from Psalms, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. He quoted Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Paul's letters included Corinthians. He quoted the texts containing the words of Jesus Christ and instructions on becoming a real disciple. The letters contain very detailed descriptions of Van Gogh's activities. They contain many references to works of art, to artists and to literature. Many of the letters describe Van Gogh's artistic choices of subject-matter, materials, colours and method in meticulous detail. The edition from which the letters are quoted is a 1958 publication in 3 volumes: *The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh* Greenwich: New York Graphic Society. In the thesis the letters are referenced by year.

Van Gogh's more than 800 letters contain a variety of literary values and artistically serious aesthetic exploration, rich creativity and self-reflection. Among these many letters, those containing Van Gogh's religious expressions and theological concerns were treated as an important part of this study. Of course, these religious concerns and reflections not only had a temporary impact on his life, but are also an aesthetic quest for artistic completion and complex expressions.

Approximately 30 paintings and drawings were selected that tend to show Vincent van Gogh's spiritual transformation and pilgrimage as a minister and as an artist of the Gospel. These have also been studied as have reproductions of the painters he most admired, Jean Francois Millet,



Eugene Delacroix, and Rembrandt van Rijn. Van Gogh not only copied their works for learning but to experiment with his novel ideas for instance with colours or composition. The artworks also reflect his identity as a painter and pilgrim. These have been studied as reproductions and when possible these have been further studied through visits to the National Gallery, London, to the Van Gogh Museum, and to the Kröller-Müller Museum, both in Holland.

The choices are referenced from Marc Tralbaut's catalogue of Van Gogh's work printed 1969, Renilde Hammacher's list of illustrations, 1990, and Meyer Schapiro's index, 1969. In addition, Van Gogh's complete works were published in six volumes in 2009: *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters: The Complete Illustrated and Annotated Edition (Vol. 1-6)*. These are available on the website: [www.vangoghletters.org](http://www.vangoghletters.org). I also reconfirmed my selection from the main website of the Van Gogh Museum, [www.vangoghmuseum.nl](http://www.vangoghmuseum.nl).

The Van Gogh Museum Library and Website (<http://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en>) provided invaluable resources and support for this thesis. Two separate 3-day visits were paid to the Library in Amsterdam.

## **1.5 Summary**

In this chapter my fascination with Van Gogh and the luminous aspect of his work is introduced. His life and interest in Scripture, religion, and Christianity have been outlined. The vast, and profound, nature of his personal writings and his artworks is presented. My initial selection of his written and artistic oeuvre which is the foundation of this study is presented.

Chapter Two reviews the relevant literature including art criticism, Van Gogh's position in art history between Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, Symbolism, and the background of Methodism and social circumstances when he was in England.

## **Chapter 2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The research question to be addressed in this thesis analyses whether the basis of the path pursued by Vincent van Gogh to be a minister of the Gospel can be found in his art and letters. Van Gogh is celebrated as a Post-Impressionist artist even though he died in 1890 and the Post-Impressionist movement was recognised as commencing after his death. He pursued a calling in art late in life and those years coincided with the period known as Impressionism. In this chapter the literature review looks at these periods in art and follows by assessing Van Gogh's place in art history. It also considers the creative influences on Van Gogh such as *Japonisme*. Then, bearing in mind the research focus, literature on Christianity is reviewed with an emphasis on the situation in relation to Methodism, and England, where Van Gogh spent formative years.

### **2.2 Impressionism and Post-Impressionism**

Impressionism was born in a certain social and cultural context which was responsible for shaping its forms and ideology. Most of its artists had grown up under the not so distant shadow of the French Revolution and of Napoleon. They themselves lived through the Coup d'État, the Second Empire, the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune, dying under political turmoil, with which they were necessarily involved (Denvir, 1999, p.11). The movement of Impressionism broke away from a purely academic discipline of art and also from the official Salon as the only place where paintings could be viewed and bought. It was a time when individual liberty was being acknowledged. "Do what you please, as you please" was a new principle for the painter who, no longer bound by the order and rules of the Academicians, renounced official art and set off on a discovery of himself (Cogniat, 1967, p.75). Members of The Anonymous Society of Artists, as this group were first called, included artists who have become world renowned such as Cézanne, Degas, Gauguin, Manet, Monet, Morisot, Pissarro, Renoir, Seurat and Sisley.

Impressionism grew out of traditions of landscape painting and Realism in France. The predecessors of the Impressionists were Courbet and the Barbizon painters. Impressionists

painted landscapes or scenes of modern life. The paintings are typically small. The colours are pure and intense. Conventions of perspective and hierarchies of forms are not observed; instead, a field is created by using a series of short brush-strokes. The term *Impression* was first used to characterise the group in response to the first exhibition of independent artists in 1874. Louis and other hostile critics seized on the title of a painting by Monet, *Impression, Sunrise* (1873), as exemplifying the radically unfinished character of the works. On the other hand, Castagnary, champion of the secular style of art, does not use the term impression in a negative or critical way. For him, it described a style in which the painter provides the viewer with a sensation produced by the subject rather than a faithful reproduction of it. Impressionism may be described as either Transparent Impressionism or Mediated Impressionism. According to Richard R. Brettell (1999, p.17), the first of these, Transparent Impressionism, includes painters of mostly landscape or urban views. Monet is the canonical figure of this genre, painting what appear to be impressions of visual reality. The second type of Impressionism, Mediated Impressionism, is confined mainly to figure painters who, following the lead of either Degas or Renoir, constructed visual realms that stress the contingent and elliptical aspects of realist subject matter in stylistic terms that are mannered and self-consciously elaborate. Unlike the Impressionist, the Post-Impressionist is concerned with abstract qualities and symbolic content rather than with depicting light and colour in a naturalistic way. The style of Post-Impressionism is strong. There is a belief in colour as an emotional or aesthetic carrier of meaning (Brettell, 1999, p.23). Hanson notes that there are three artists that can be said, with obvious reservations, to represent a complete aspect of art - Cezanne, the intellect; Van Gogh, the heart; and Gauguin a balance between the two - but all are at one in expressing the spiritual by means of the visual (1963, pp.284-285).

The life of Van Gogh with his brother, Theo, in Paris is pivotal to his career as an artist. He has explored the new approach to art that had been propelled by the Impressionists. Generally speaking, Van Gogh is one of the painters who is Post-Impressionist because, during his time in Paris, March 1886 to February 1888, he has adapted some style and techniques from the great artists of Impressionism. Although he would argue with his contemporary artists late into the night in the cafés, he nevertheless has adapted some of their features in a manner that would further define his own unique style. That is to say, Post-Impressionism is defined as a rejection of the Impressionists' concern for the naturalistic depiction of light and colour in favour of an emphasis on abstract qualities or symbolic content. The style of Post-Impressionism is strong. There is a belief in colour as an emotional or aesthetic carrier of

meaning. The term was coined in 1910 by the English critic and painter Roger Fry for an exhibition of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century French painting, drawing and sculpture that he organised at the Grafton Galleries in London.

Interestingly, the elements of “the heart”, which are intensely revealed in Van Gogh's works by Hanson, are characteristics that distinguish him from an Impressionist painter. Van Gogh's position in art history is considered next.

### **2.3 The study of Van Gogh in art history**

There have been numerous and varied dissertations about Vincent van Gogh in the fields of art and art history. The very first critique, published in Van Gogh's lifetime, was by the art critic, Gilbert-Albert Aurier (1890) in an article entitled *Les Isoles* (The Isolated Ones). In this article Aurier depicted a neglected, lonely, genius. A year later, journalist, Octave Mirbeau, (1891) in *L'Echo de Paris*, wrote “poor Vincent van Gogh, whose demise means the extinction of a beautiful flame of genius, has gone to his death as obscure and neglected as he lived in 1891.” Van Gogh's brother, Theo, was certainly well aware of Van Gogh's ability. He sized up Vincent as being at the frontier of contemporary artistic style. Theo wrote from Paris in 1888:

A person like Vincent is hard to replace. The amount he knows and the clarity of his views on the world are unbelievable. Therefore, I am sure that he will make a name for himself while he still has a certain number of years to live. Through him, I came in contact with many painters, among whom he was well thought of. He is one of the champions of new ideas; as there is nothing new under the sun, it is more correct to say, of the upheaval of old ideas which have degenerated or have lost their value through the humdrum of our time. (LG, 1888, p.ix)

In Van Gogh's time, Western art was in a transitional period between classic art and modern art. As stated, Van Gogh is a Post-Impressionist painter. His style and use of contrasting colour was rooted not in optical theory but in older European ideas of the symbolic and associative meanings of colour. While Van Gogh had learned from the medieval European art and Renaissance artists, he created his own distinctive style as one of the champions of new ideas. Schapiro (1969, p.19) describes Van Gogh's pure colours as a revolution in an art that had made much of purity and strength of colour while chastening it by various means. No painter before him had dared apply a straight chrome yellow to a large area of the canvas, as he did during his time in Arles.

According to Schapiro (1969, p.12), the division of Van Gogh's artistic output into two periods, Dutch and French, has created a kind of competition in the critical interpretation of these periods. Very often the so-called Dutch period was looked upon as Van Gogh's immature style, both artistically and with regard to his choice of subject matter. Picasso described Van Gogh as follows:

Beginning with Van Gogh, however great we may be, we are all, in a measure, self-taught – you might almost say primitive painters. ... And the individual adventure always goes back to the one which is the archetype of our times: that is, Van Gogh's – an essentially solitary and tragic adventure. (in Gilot & Lake, 1986, p.379)

Yet, for much of the twentieth century, Van Gogh was better known for his bouts of insanity rather than his oeuvre. Perhaps this is no wonder given the story of cutting off his own ear and his subsequent suicide. At the first exhibition of Van Gogh's paintings in the United States in 1935 the description "Self-Portrait of Mad Dutch Painter" appeared below the photo of his self-portrait (Schneider 1935, p.2). Albert Lubin (1972, p.36), a psychoanalyst in the United States wrote that Van Gogh's pivotal points derived from the failure of his first love leading to "his withdrawal, and his obsession with religion" as well as to his sense of being a "replacement child": an older son, also Vincent, had been stillborn on the precise date of Vincent's birth, March 30, a year earlier in 1852. For example, Jan Hulsker (1980, p.9) noted that "one of the causes for Vincent's diminishing interest in the art business was undoubtedly his religious zeal, which had gradually assumed the character of fanaticism." Marc Tralbaut (1969, p.46) mentioned that "Vincent immersed himself in the Bible and soon was in a state of religious exultation". Pierre Cabanne wrote of his "mystic fervor" (Cabanne, 1963, p.14). Henri Nouwen (1995, pp.10-11) felt uncomfortable with the many psychological and psychoanalytical interpretations of Van Gogh's work. Nouwen believed that there was something to be said and understood that went far beyond the level of psychodynamics.

Biographers including Cabanne, Tralbaut, and Hulsker have failed to acknowledge Van Gogh's deep-rooted evangelical faith. On the other hand, authors including Cliff Edwards (2004, 1989), Kathleen Erickson (1998), Kristopher Kowal (1990), Meyer Schapiro (1980), Judy Sund (2002, 1992) and Frits Wagener (1996) have written more positively of Van Gogh's religious leanings. Edwards, Kowal and Wagener disagree with previous biographers who had accused Van Gogh of "religious fanaticism" or "fanatical religious mysticism." Instead these later writers suggested that Van Gogh adopted an appropriate approach in his religious love

rather than fanaticism or excessive zeal. Edwards (1996, p.253) writes that "Vincent's own creed as artist," practising the high spirited past which is free to risk mistakes, reveals the manner of God's own artistry. Kowal (1990, p.268) defines as a given the enduring spiritual legacy of the artist: "Did he really 'fail as an evangelist,' as one recent film boldly declares? Given the enduring spiritual legacy of the artist, clearly there remains 'something of the Gospel' in Vincent van Gogh to this day, inextricably bound together with the mystery of the man's genius." Wagener (1996, p.201) notes a misunderstood lone wolf who still clung to the "founder" of the "Gospel movement, Jesus."

Walter Pach (1936, p.51) analysed the features developed so powerfully in Van Gogh's final two years:

He tells us through the letters to Theo of the ideas that were associated in his mind with the scenes he painted and the figures in them. The great Christian symbols of the sower and the reaper are to the fore in his mind as he paints the peasants around St. Remy engaged in actual sowing and reaping.

Pach evaluated these great Christian symbols in Van Gogh's works in which "the colours burn as his thought burns as the thought of the early centuries of Christianity burned with its newfound fire" (1936, p.56). Erickson and Sund have also suggested multiple and symbolic meanings paralleled with Christian faith in Van Gogh's early life and in his notes and letters. Both have described his spiritual concerns but neither have commented on the relationships between Bible passages and the subject matter in his paintings such as the *Sower* and *Reaper*. According to Sund (1988, p.60) "Vincent van Gogh was both a deeply religious man and an artist who distrusted most religious pictures."

We have seen from the literature how Vincent van Gogh is placed in art history. The following sections consider some of the influences on Van Gogh's study and expression of art. *Japonisme* is described first.

## **2.4 Japanese Art in Europe**

Running parallel with Van Gogh's connection to Impressionism was his interest with what became called *Japonisme*, or, sometimes *Japonaiserie*. As a consequence of the Meiji

Restoration, Japanese merchants could sell Japanese paintings to Europe and, in turn, Japanese painters transformed their style into western art. Thus, in the later years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a rapid influx into Europe and the United States of Japanese printings, paintings and other artefacts as a result of the opening up of Japan to foreign trade. After the Meiji Restoration, young Japanese art students studied in the West and foreigners established universities and colleges in Japan (Stanley-Baker, 1984, p.188). More important than the effect of imported Western methods on the Japanese was the influence that pictures made in Japanese had on Western artists when, after Japan resumed contacts with the rest of the world in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, they were exported abroad.

*Japonaiserie* is a word commonly used in art contexts to refer to a representation of Japan through a cluster of conventionalised signs (Lewis 2000, p.52). Sund (2002, p.152) notes that “japonaiserie” refers to Western appreciation of Japanese exotica. Ayako Ono (2003, p.2), a Japanese scholar, describes the term “Japonaiserie” as the incorporation of principles of Japanese pictorial art and design in western art. This phenomenon had wide influence on western art from the 1860s to the 1920s. A packet of Japanese prints arrived in Paris around 1860 (Hokenson, 2004, p.13). Japanese pottery and glass were also much in evidence as shown in the catalogues listing the collections of art critic, Victor Champier, critic and writer, Edmond de Goncourt, and, of course, Siegfried Bing whose art emporium was renowned for Chinese and Japanese art and the largest collection of Japanese woodcuts, *ukiyo-e* (Silverman 1989, p.127). Wichmann (1999, p.242) pointed out the historical and commercial detail given here establishes a rich sense of context often lacking in accounts that discuss *Japonisme* strictly in terms of stylistic problems. Wichmann explains the role of visionary dealers such as Samuel Bing, whose gallery was frequented by the Van Gogh brothers, in shaping artistic taste.

Of all the aspects of Japanese art, *ukiyo-e*, woodblock prints, have had the greatest appeal for the Western world (Munsterberg 1982, p.3). They were introduced to the general public following the Paris World Exposition of 1867. There is overwhelming evidence that artists of both Impressionism and Post-Impressionism were influenced by *Japonisme*. These included Degas, Gauguin, Manet, Monet, Tissot, Toulouse-Lautrec, and, as mentioned, Vincent van Gogh (Gunderson, 2009, p.26). There may be many historical and cultural reasons why the bright compositions and fresh colours so impressed the late Impressionists hidebound by

classical realism; but, there can be no doubt that one important factor was the stimulus supplied by the woodblock prints of such artists as Hokusai and Hiroshige (Ienaga, 1979, p.158). Hokusai was a painter during the Anyei period, 1772-1781, and the later Hiroshige, 1797-1858, was considered the last great master of *ukiyo-e*.

Vincent and Theo were both enthusiastic collectors of Japanese art. Whilst still living in Holland, Van Gogh had come under the spell of *Japonisme*.

My studio is not bad, especially as I have pinned a lot of little Japanese prints on the wall, which amuse me very much. You know those little women's figures in gardens, or on the beach, horsemen, flowers, knotty thorn branches. I am glad I went, and hope not to sit still this winter. Well, I feel safe now that I have a little den where I can sit and work when the weather is bad (LT 437, 1885, p.453).

The brothers both frequented Bing's emporium:

If it was possible — all the Japanese prints we have at home being beautiful — it would be better to take the whole stock back. We're getting them so cheaply and we can give pleasure to so many artists with them, we should after all keep what favour we have with père Bing. I went to his place myself 3 times at New Year to pay, when I found the shop closed, probably for stocktaking. Then a month later, before I left, I no longer had the money and I'd also given a good many Japanese prints to Bernard, when I made the exchanges with him. But take the Hokusai as well then, 300 views of the sacred mountain and scenes of manners and customs. There's an attic at Bing's, and in it there's a heap of 10 thousand Japanese prints, landscapes, figures, old Japanese prints too. (LT 410, 1888, p.611)

In another letter Van Gogh noted: "now there is still something to learn at Bing's and that is why I strongly advise you to hang on to our stock and our right to inspect the attic and cellars" (LT 511, 1888, p.614). In 1887 Van Gogh painted *Bridge in the rain (after Hiroshige)*. The Japanese characters in the border were chosen at random by Van Gogh. According to Sund (2002, p.153), by the winter of 1886-7, Van Gogh's passion for Japan had surged anew. This reawakening probably owed something to his friendships with Toulouse-Lautrec who had become infatuated with Japan in 1882 and John Peter Russell (1858-1931), an Australian painter, who had travelled in China and Japan. Russell, who sometimes worked at Cormon's and painted Van Gogh towards the end of 1886, collected Asian art, which he doubtless discussed with Van Gogh.

To sum up, *Japonisme* that brought fresh cultural influences to Europe in the 19th century



positively influences change and diversity in the materialistic and technical aspects of Impressionist artists. Van Gogh, too, had a great interest in *Japonisme*, and he sometimes experimented with simulations in terms of more vibrant colour than the sombre tones associated with Dutch art. *Japonisme* provided a creative and productive influence for Van Gogh in developing his unique styles, distinct from the existing community of artists. Another particular interest of Van Gogh which he developed in his own unique way arose from his love of nature. This is considered as a part of the next section on Symbolism.

## 2.5 Symbolism

It is evident that Van Gogh's love of nature, especially blossom and flowers, and his enthusiastic approach to transform the failure of his ministerial vocation into his artistic goal, resonate with complex intention and emotion in his symbolic flowers. Van Gogh explained the idea of *Reminiscence of the garden at Etten* to Theo on November 1888, after he painted *La Berceuse January 1889*, as a link with "a memory of our garden at Etten, with cabbages, cypresses, dahlias, and figures" (LT, 1889). Werness (1996, p.51) suggests that Van Gogh specified the flowers as dahlias, flowers whose many seeds make them appropriate symbols of fecundity which is suggested by the green egg-shaped ovals, dotted with red spots, spreading across the background. Schapiro explained Van Gogh thought himself of "this image of a mother" as "a consolation to the lonely". Fecundity is doubled with the dahlias in the background.

Panofsky (1964, p.142) pointed out that the method of disguised symbolism in early Flemish painting was applied to each and every object, man-made and natural. Whether Van Gogh used symbols in a manner reminiscent of Netherlandish disguised symbolism or not, Panofsky said that Van Gogh tried to reconcile a new naturalism with a thousand years of Christian tradition. There was a greater holistic harmony between naturalism and Christianity in the early church and Byzantine periods than today. On the other hand, unlike Panofsky, Tsukasa Koder, a Japanese art critic, sees a confrontation between Christianity and Nature in Van Gogh's oeuvre. Koder (1990, p.87) has concluded that Van Gogh gave up his faith as a Christian and converted to a faith in nature, abandoning Christianity in his later life as a painter. He wrote that "what Van Gogh talked about with Gauguin and Bernard is the problem of working from the imagination and painting religious subjects, which Gauguin and Bernard did paint, but Van Gogh could not." Koder (1990, p.35) did acknowledge that Van Gogh's new god, the sun of

the Midi, is not free of traditional Christian symbolism. Nevertheless, he showed that iconological studies have revealed that sunflowers were often used in painting as symbols of the profane.

According to Bob Haak (1984, p.115), however, sunflowers traditionally symbolise the love of God, as in Dutch emblem books. Elisa Laurillard notes that: “Indeed, if we believe that we may say, ‘The Lord God is a sun,’ we must wish our hearts to be as sunflowers, ever turning to the Great Light, in order to receive the full measure of the rays it sends forth” (1876, p.170). Kodera (1990, p.97) declares that the extremely rapid transition from Christianity to nature-religion must have caused enormous stress in Van Gogh’s mind. Moreover, he concludes that Van Gogh’s concept for the Yellow House and his *Japonisme* were both attempts to supply a substitute for Christianity and to create a new congregation of believers in naturalised religion.

With regard to Kodera’s conclusion that Van Gogh was caught between Christianity and nature, this view highlights something of a paradox between the mutual understanding or lack of understanding between East and the West. Many Asian countries have been dominated at various times by Western colonial governments and by Japanese colonial rule. As a consequence, somewhat unfair myths have been created about the East, and people in Asia have been led to believe that the West is ahead of the East. Thus, whilst they have learned science and modern technology from the West, Asians have not been exposed to Western culture in the broadest sense. For example, arising from the Asian experience of the evangelical church, Asians have tended to see a loathsome dogma in the ecclesiastical features of the Western church.

Not having lived within the Western context their exposure to the richness of Western civilisation is viewed through the filter of colonialism and those few Westerners who did reach their shores. Consequently, there is tendency among some Eastern people to neglect the warp and weft of the Christianised frame which supports the culture of Europe. Kodera’s focus appears to belong to this genre of limited analysis of the position of Christianity or individual Christians in Europe.

The next section considers the Christian environment in which Van Gogh’s religious beliefs were nurtured.

## 2.6 Christianity In Holland and England

The distinctive theological background of Holland in this period seems to present two remarkable features: one is the humanistic stream from Erasmus and Arminius, the other is pietism, the origin of which is derived from Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*. Calvinism was the state religion in Holland and only members of that sect were eligible for public office (Bihlmeyer & Tüchle 1966, p.220). Several writers have wrongly concluded that Van Gogh was Calvinist because of his belonging to the Dutch Reformed church. Edwards (2004, p.198) insists that Van Gogh's father, Theodorus, was influenced by a strict Calvinism to the extent that Van Gogh often could not side with his father's theological faith. However, the Van Goghs were not strict Calvinists in belief, but rather, adherents of the Groningen party, a liberal branch of the Dutch Reformed Church (Metzger 1996, p.7). Tillich (1965, p.12) explains the difference: "the one was a critical opinion and the other was the dissolution of Calvinist orthodoxy which has grounded traditional protestant theology in 19<sup>th</sup> century Holland. There, however, was no theological solution in Holland." Erickson (1998, p.2) has pointed out that Van Gogh's family actually subscribed to this distinctive theology that diverged sharply from Calvinism. She suggested that both Vincent's father and his uncle Stricker, a famous theologian, followed the Groningen teaching.

The young Van Gogh, who had been in the domestic church in Holland before he came to London, had seen the new and various Protestant Dissenters in the nineteenth century involved in discontinuities of a fundamental kind. Similarly, a huge change had occurred in England concerning religion before Van Gogh moved there. As was the case of the Church of England, so too with Methodism, the second quarter of the nineteenth century saw a major change of growth: a period of sustained rapid expansion from the birth of the movement to about 1840; a period of considerable, although much slower and decelerating expansion until 1906 and the outbreak of the war in 1914. Gilbert explains this stabilisation of Methodist strength as being helped by a marked population growth in the period before 1840 (1976, p.30).

Methodism has distinguished itself as a religious movement strongly tied to social issues. John Wesley (1703-1791), the founder of Methodism, believed that holiness for a Christian was not only personal, but also social, and needed to be expressed in terms of compassion and service to the needy members of the community. Wesley and his preachers would address any crowd, wherever it might be gathered. Many of these labouring people responded with enthusiasm to

the message that God was concerned about them, and that there was a place for them in his mercy. Methodism is essentially a working class movement. In addition, Maddox (1994, p.146) notes that Wesley understood prevenient grace as a gracious gift of God through which people could be awakened to begin a journey to life and deliverance. Holifield (1986, p.32) relates that Wesley encouraged women to become visitors, who were charged with the duty of seeing every sick person in their district three times a week. Such acts of charity exhibited the fruits of faith in an 18<sup>th</sup> century context. Cameron (1961, p.120) notes that Wesley's social philosophy was characterised by "an instructive reluctance to criticize existing institutions which was overborne by indignation at certain abuses which cried out for rectification." Out of concern for social issues and justice, Methodists established orphanages, schools, and colleges all over the world. Most of all, for Wesley, to be made perfect in love meant that a Christian could live with a primary guiding regard for others and their welfare. He based this on Christ's quote that the second great command is "to love your neighbour as you love yourself" (The Bible, Matthew 22:39).

There had been a period of sustained rapid expansion in English Methodism from the birth of the movement to about 1840. At the time Van Gogh arrived, there was a revival of Methodism and English Puritanism (Gilbert 1976, p.30). If, as is most likely, Van Gogh was exposed to Methodist and Wesleyan history when in England, he would have known that the young John Wesley was influenced not only by a rich tradition of classical literature and philosophy but also by spiritual classics like Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*, Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living and Dying*, and William Law's *Serious Call* (Maddock 2011, p. 222).

Serious reading of these books enhances self-reflection most especially in the context of personal pilgrimage. In the artistic world self-portraiture can fulfil this purpose in addition to being a recognised form of artistic development. The master of self-portraits is recognised to be Rembrandt van Rijn who Van Gogh also studied for his tonal values and chiaroscuro effect. The self-portraits are discussed next.

## **2.7 Self-portraits**

Van Gogh transformed his fascination with Rembrandt's works into an artistic identity especially in relation to self-portraiture. According to Braider (1998, p.286), in the form in

which it has come down to us from the Renaissance, the genre of the self-portrait is a kind of representation of the naturalism it exploits. Bonafoux (1985, p.7) says that “the portrait is a refusal: it refuses to own up to any assurance, any assertion that it is more than an anecdote.” Self-portraits have been analysed under three predominant categories of analysis. First, self-image impels the artistic creative process as Narcissus invented the art of painting. Secondly, there is an economic motivation in that a self-portrait advertises the painter. Thirdly, with a self-portrait the artist does not need to find and pay a model.

Rembrandt’s series of self-portraits have been analysed by many art critics and historians. Chapman (1989, p.158) observes that Rembrandt lived during an age of self-scrutiny: his propensity for self-study was symptomatic of a broader cultural milieu that privileged the process of introspection. As van Mander (1973, p.655) wrote, Rembrandt’s self-portraits are the “soul of art” and the “passion of the soul.” Risser (1996, p.152) declares that the self-portraits seemingly present us with an image of the artist’s own self-image in which we can read his inner conflicts. The image from the self-portrait presents the specular image of the self. Bacon (1987, p.28) notes that “if you take the great late self-portraits of Rembrandt, you will find that the whole contour of the face changes time after time; it’s a totally different face, although it has what is called a look of Rembrandt, and by this difference it involves you in different areas of feeling.”

Chapman’s words are relevant:

Early seventeenth-century artists, and Rembrandt in particular, with their intensified concern to make visible the deepest recesses of the human psyche, concentrated increasingly on representing the more intangible aspects of emotion and thought. In their attempts to capture great extremes of feeling and to penetrate the depths of the inner man they relied even more on the face as a primary vehicle for expression. (Chapman 1989, p.161)

In addition, Rothenberg (2008, p.109) notes that the expressiveness of the portrayals is considered an outstanding feature of Rembrandt’s achievement. He proposes that Rembrandt, in these drawings, etchings, and paintings of himself, introduced characteristic features of composition, meaning, and expression to produce a distinct artistic genre based on the pictorial and visual metaphor of the self.

Chilvers (2003, p.185) notes that whereas Rembrandt's self-portraits are spread throughout his career, all of Van Gogh's belong to the final five years of his life. Having changed his touch and tonality in Paris, the self-portrait of Van Gogh may indicate a kind of experimental work and transformative novelty between the Dutch tradition and the modern French art. Before 1887 his self-portraits are based on the identity as a painter, copying Rembrandt. With regard to his Christianity, the self-portraits show Van Gogh on a developing journey not just as an artist but with self-reflection. It helps understanding of his path as a Christian. This leads to analysis of the path of a pilgrim which Van Gogh first considered seriously when delivering his sermon as a young man aspiring to the ministry when in England. The following section analyses his sermon in the context of a stranger and pilgrim.

## **2.8 The Concept of a Stranger and Pilgrim**

The sermon based on Psalm 119:19 delivered by young Van Gogh is centred on his next journey as a painter. For the soul searching artistic pilgrim, he needs to be a stranger whenever he settled down the new places he moved. Research of the structure of Psalm 119 may be found within Book V of the Psalter. Many verses in Psalm 119 are difficult or impossible to interpret correctly. Zenger (1998, p.88) describes the structure of Book V as a concentric arrangement, in which Psalm 119 is framed by three layers. According to Zenger (1998, p.91), Psalms 111 and 112 are the response to the oracles of Psalm 110. The composition directs the reader to see in Psalm 112 the king whom YHWH has called to his side in Psalm 110. In the centre of Book V, he notes "Psalm 119 is a prayer for a life according to the Torah which is the precondition for the advent of the universal reign of the God of the Exodus and of Zion celebrated in the fifth book of Psalms" (Zenger, 1998, p.91).

Zenger comments repeatedly that:

[Psalm 119] is a prayer for the grace to keep and love the Torah as the fundamental law of the announced and praised kingdom of God, so that the kingdom may come. In terms of the literary form it is an individual who is speaking here. But in terms of the compositional context, those praying are from Israel and the nations. (1998, p.99)

From Zenger's point of view, Psalm 119 is part of a spiritual pilgrimage, which comprises the sequence: Psalms 113-118 the Exodus, 119 Sinai, and 120-135 Zion. According to Reynolds

(2010, p.164), in addition to the rhetorical reasons for avoiding any reference to specific texts, the poetic features of Psalm 119 make it difficult to demonstrate any textual relationships. He notes nevertheless that there are a few examples that indicate that the author of Psalm 119 was using passages from elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible; these deserve consideration.

Reynolds notes that Psalm 119 uses traditional religious language to construct an acrostic poem with a striking message. It gives the reader a portrayal of the process of spiritual formation. By doing so the reader experiences the Psalm from the subjective perspective of the speaker. Psalm 119 contributes to the belief that the Torah is God's life-giving word and that the wise servant of God is devoted to its study and observance. Bearing this analysis in mind, it may be noted that the Bible occupied a large place in Vincent van Gogh's education, and he could not so easily throw off its message. Writing to Theo from England in 1876, and referring to crowds of people in London flocking to hear the American evangelists, Ira D. Sankey, and D.L. Moody, Vincent says: the old, old story of Jesus and His love, lodged in the heart, stays there (Lawrence 1979, p.58).

Moreover, it is common to describe human life as a journey and religious life as a pilgrimage. In T. S. Eliot's words, "what we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from (Eliot 2001, p.32)." Pilgrimage or journey is one of the constant narrative features of the Bible. From Abraham's journey to those of his descendants such as Isaac, Jacob, and Moses, readers of the Old Testament need to find a key for understanding the biblical message. There is a process: the calling of God, the transformation of a man into a pilgrim, and submission to God's guidance. Pilgrimage is the coherent and repeated way that originates in other times and places in all parts of the Old Testament. Human beings are recommended to be holy, "for I the LORD your God am holy" (The Bible, Leviticus 19:2).

Van Gogh, the pilgrim, lived through several transformations. He can be described as always on the road whatever his careers, be it as an art dealer, minister in training, or painter.

## **2.9 Summary**

In this chapter the literature review explores the focus of the thesis by establishing Van Gogh's place as an artist in Impressionism and Post-Impressionism and his personal growth in

Christianity. It describes Van Gogh's artistic position through analysis of art criticism and of the various artistic influences on his development such as *Japonisme*, Symbolism, and Self-Portraiture. The Christian environment in which he lived was also considered leading to the conclusion that how he lived his life was a pilgrim of the Gospel. The research question is whether there is evidence in Van Gogh's Letters and selected artworks to show that the path he pursued throughout his life was to be a minister of Christ's Gospel. In chapter three, the methodology to examine that question is described.



## **Chapter 3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This study explores the influence of Van Gogh's deep Christian faith on his life and work. The research question posed is whether there is evidence in Van Gogh's letters and selected art works to show that the path he pursued throughout his life was to express himself as a minister of Christ's Gospel. In this chapter on methodology the general theme of spirituality and the related concepts of lived experience, particularly Christian spirituality are considered first. This provides a foundation for the use of hermeneutic method. A discussion of how hermeneutics is utilised to examine the Van Gogh letters is followed by a description of the thematic selection of his letters and artworks for analysis. The reason why Van Gogh's suicide does not form part of the analysis in Chapter 4 is explained.

### **3.2 Christian Spirituality**

The word *spirituality* is commonly used yet difficult to define. There are various perspectives expressed by individuals and by collectives, and much academic research on the definition of spirituality and its relationship with theology. The object of theology is faith as the thematic response to a revelation that has been transmitted in the Church and as it is currently being lived out in the particular context in which one finds oneself, for example in the institutional Church or some other field of Christian activity. Spirituality as an academic discipline has a different, though related, object. Spirituality's primary object in the academic field is not the formulated tradition as it illuminates and is illumined by the lived experience of the faith, but the lived experience of the faith itself (Lescher 2006). Sheldrake (2006) suggests that spirituality may be described as transitional between theology and other disciplines.

A number of books which attempt to define spirituality have been written in response to an increasing interest in the subject. Examples are *Toward Defining Spirituality* (Principe, 1983); *Reclaiming Spirituality* (ÓMurchú, 1997); *Exploring Christian Spirituality* (Collins, 2000); and *Studying Christian Spirituality* (Perrin, 2007). In tandem with these developments there has been an increasing diversity regarding agreement on the meaning of the word *spirituality*.

The concept of spirituality is, of course, not limited to Christianity and, perhaps surprisingly, is

familiar in non-religious contexts. This study, however, is primarily concerned with spirituality in Christian terms, and how an individual or a collective expresses their interrelationship with God both in worship and in their life through their works, in the lived experience. Spirituality is about how people construct knowledge through unconscious and symbolic processes. These are often made more concrete in art forms. Spirituality has been described as “the experience of consciously striving to integrate one’s life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value they perceive” (Schneiders 1989, p.684). Christian spirituality contends that the source of ultimate value is God disclosed in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, active and present in the community of discipleship called the Church.

In a seminal article in *Science Religieuses/Studies in Religion*, the renowned Canadian journal, Walter Principe (1983, p.130) analysed the Latin term *spiritualitas* as an abstract word derived from the noun *spiritus* and adjective *spiritalis* or *spiritualis*. Following Principe’s publication, there has been an increase in published literature in spirituality. Nonetheless, the relationship between theology and spirituality remains ill-defined. McGinn (1993, p.9), one of the most prolific contributors to the discussion regarding the identity and shape of spirituality, has defined spirituality as being close to theology, its parent discipline. He wrote that it is quite possible to teach spirituality effectively in and through traditional disciplines such as theology, both historical and constructive, ethics, and also the history of Christianity.

The need to bridge the gap between religious experience and the field of academic spirituality is generally recognised, but there is little consensus on how to develop it. On this point, Howard (2008, p.16) focuses on the three phases in Christian spirituality: at the level of practice, at the level of dynamic, and at the level of academic discipline. The study of spirituality encompasses wider fields such as psychology, anthropology, and sociology. However, Schneiders (1986, p.263) suggests that she is most convinced with a position which regards spirituality as an autonomous discipline functioning in partnership and mutuality with theology. According to Sheldrake (1995, p.7), studying contemporary spirituality would be a very lengthy task if any justice were to be done to such a complex subject. McGrath (1999, p.3) explains that the term “Christian spirituality” refers to the way in which the Christian life is understood and the explicitly devotional practices which have been developed foster and sustain that relationship with Christ. Acquiring this understanding of the relationship between Christian spirituality and other academic disciplines was an essential step in developing an

appropriate research framework for my study of Van Gogh and his lived experience.

### **3.3 Lived experience**

The term spirituality has long been associated with experience, whether mystical or not, characterised by Klass as having the following three features: a sense of encounter with that which is beyond the self, an adoption of a worldview, and a sense of bonding with others within a community (Klass, 1999, p.29). King (2009, p.5) identifies spiritual experience as being linked to our bodies, to nature, to our relationships within our community, a transformative dynamic capable of serving as an instrument of self-transcendence. Taves (2003, p.192) defined a process of spiritual formation as the lived experience of individual or groups.

Liebert (2005, p.94) bridges pastoral theology and Christian spirituality through “practice” which “allows for many variations and context, but always takes experience seriously, including the experience of lived spirituality that I have been calling ‘practice’.” Practice is a key in the integration of Christian theology and spirituality. Thus, spirituality can also be defined in relation to lived experience. The practice of Christian spirituality through visual art is to be considered in contextual terms as it takes in experience, reflective discourse, and action. For the purpose of this research the context is linked to the actual journey Vincent van Gogh takes as a person along his artistic pilgrimage as expressed in the form of spiritual experience. Thus, the lived experience might be described as “lived Christian faith” (Schneiders 1989, p.685) or “the lived experience of life in the Spirit” (Principe,1983, p.131) or “the lived experience of Christian belief” (McGinn 1993, p.12). Van Gogh described a journey to God:

To try to understand the real significance of what the great artists, the serious masters, tell us in their masterpieces, that leads to God; one man wrote or told it in a book; another, in a picture. (LT133, 1880, p.198)

For further specific discussion of Christian Spirituality with Van Gogh’s lived experience of Christian belief, the concept of hermeneutic method is discussed next.

### 3.4 Hermeneutic Research

Since this study is a study of the religious influence inherent in the work of an artist, I applied a hermeneutical methodology to look at the historical situation in which the artist lived. All approaches to theology and spirituality, whether it is a biblical interpretation or an interpretation of a creed, tradition, or experience, are interpretive as long as it contains interpretation. Significant discrimination between hermeneutical and transcendental approaches arises from different interpretations of the relationship between experience and language. Transcendental theology appeals to religious experience which views language as expressive, as meaningful. The expression of the lived religious experience is inherent in the language used in whatever form that language may take. In Van Gogh's case this expression has been captured in words in his many letters and in visual form in his artistic output. In other words, doctrinal formalisation is proposition statements expressing basic religious experience. By the turn of the twentieth century, modern theologians such as Hans von Balthasar viewed religious experience as much more fundamental than religious doctrine, which viewed the doctrine as simply a verbal expression of religious experience. Balthasar (1982) and Walter Kasper (1984), therefore, thought that doctrinal formalisation could be replaced by another, but equivalent, formalisation.

Hermeneutics criticises this viewpoint in the following context. Seeing language and doctrine from an expressive point of view can neglect the fact that language is not only expressive but it can also form an experience. Therefore, religious language is not only expressive but also forms a religious experience. Thus, George Lindbeck (1985) argues that religion should be understood not only as a phenomenon that is simply expressed, but also as a cultural and linguistic phenomenon. On the other hand, Charles Taylor (1985) claims that the cultural linguistic view of language is essentially a wider construct that includes, but surpasses, a priori philosophy. The hermeneutical view of the link between language and experience is a theological reflection. This theory had a significant impact. At this point, philosophers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur were particularly influential. For instance, Gadamer defines hermeneutics as follows:

Hermeneutics has to do with a theoretical attitude towards the practice of interpretation, the interpretation of texts, but also in relation to the experiences interpreted in them and in our communicatively unfolded orientations in the world (Gadamer, 1981, p.20).

According to Waaijman, hermeneutic research fosters “the transformative impact of a text someone develops ways of understanding and appropriating it” (Waaijman, 2002, p. 690). Ricoeur (1981, p.43) defines hermeneutics as the theory of the operation of understanding in relation to the interpretation of texts. Notwithstanding the significance of biblical hermeneutics, Wood (1984, p.11) proposes theological hermeneutics, asking more specifically how the text may be understood through Christianity and what the aims of a deliberate Christian use of it might be focusing on “methods for interpreting the text of the Bible” (Keegan 1985, p.3).

Following these perspectives of hermeneutics and biblical hermeneutics, Waaijman highlights that

whatever substitute terms we may fashion, the perspective of the fashioner will always be dominant in it. The notion of ‘God’, on the other hand, has gone through so many divergent experiences that it has acquired the desired inclusiveness. (2002, p.430)

In this respect, hermeneutic methodology as employed in this thesis is a framework to explore, in so far as is possible at this temporal distance, Van Gogh’s lived experiences as a Christian.

### **3.5 Van Gogh’s letters and hermeneutics**

Vincent van Gogh’s collection of letters is unparalleled in art history. The more than 800 letters are monumental records of him and a source of amazing depth for anyone trying to study his work. Many of them describe Van Gogh’s artistic choices of subject-matter, materials, colours and method in meticulous detail. They contain many references to works of art, to artists and to literature. They are an important treasure-house for comparative study of pre-Van Gogh painters and later painters. Above all, these are a collective report on the life of the painter, an internal and aesthetic autobiography of an artist. The collection of letters confers status as a literary artist on Van Gogh in addition to his even more well-deserved reputation as a leading Post-Impressionist painter. I had been reading the complete works of Van Gogh’s published letters for seven years before I decided to undertake this academic research. His letters fascinated me. In reading them I discovered that he was a deep thinker. What struck me most of all were his expressive passages about the Gospel and humility. I experienced such profound feelings in reading them that they have become a consolation for

me, and Vincent van Gogh is my preferred reading over and above any other Christians writers.

The riches contained in Van Gogh's letters were constantly being revealed in fresh light through the application of hermeneutics. This methodology inspired me to re-read the letters and with each iteration another possibility presented itself as to how best to interpret Van Gogh's writing. On occasion he repeated himself. For instance, he begins a paragraph in one letter to Theo with the comment: "I don't know whether I have already written to you about it or not." Vincent continues in this paragraph to describe his wonder when first seeing a work of Millet: "I felt like saying, 'Take off your shoes, for the place where you are standing is Holy Ground.'" (LT 29, 1875, p.28) He concludes this one paragraph with references to other works of Millet including the one entitled "The Church at Gréville." Consequently, this single paragraph of one letter can be interpreted in many ways and, perhaps, most significantly in the context of this thesis, as a revelation of the transcendental impact Millet's art had on Van Gogh. This paragraph is divided and quoted in two different sections of Chapter 4.

A further aspect of the discovery of Van Gogh through continually re-reading his letters relates to the different translations from the originals depending on which publication is chosen. One clear example is the description of Delacroix's *Christ asleep during tempest* (Plate. 21). In one translation (1958) Van Gogh's description in his letter to Barnard (LB 8, 1888, p. 497) reads "with his pale lemon halo — sleeping, luminous — within the dramatic violet, dark blue, blood-red patch" and the other translation (2009) reads "with his pale citron-colored aureole— luminously asleep against that patch of dramatic violet, somber blue, blood red." The first translation seems more of a literal description. By contrast, the second translation seems to be much richer and carries a deeply felt transcendence. Because of this difference in interpretation each is separately quoted in the analysis of this painting by Delacroix in Chapter 4.

With over 800 letters to choose from, it became obvious to me that I needed selection criteria to arrive at a more manageable number of letters for this research. The following three criteria which appeared most significant emerged from applying hermeneutics. Firstly, there are the biblical quotes which Van Gogh used to describe his personal definition of Christian faith. Secondly, there are the quotes which mixed his ideas and concepts referring to both theological and aesthetic expressions. Finally, the parts of his letters were chosen in which his thoughts and ongoing purpose are repeatedly expressed. Once these selection criteria for the letters had

been established a number of themes emerged which provided a framework for structured analysis. These are considered in the next section.

### **3.6 Thematic exploration of Van Gogh's letter and art**

The research question is whether there is evidence in Van Gogh's letters and selected art works to show that the path he pursued throughout his life was to be a minister of Christ's Gospel. In this context, the analysis of Van Gogh's letters is not based on their chronological order, but, rather, it focuses on the following themes broadly characterised under three headings: *Van Gogh, the Bible, and the Preacher*; *Pilgrim Spirit* and *From minister of the Word to minister through art*.

#### **3.6.1 Van Gogh, the Bible, and the Preacher**

The first division of approximately 50 letters is for the time period 1872-1879, when Van Gogh lived away from home and began to correspond with his younger brother, Theo, who was at school at Oisterwijk. In selecting the letters from this period the focus is on the religious interest as depicted by the young Van Gogh, prior to his decision to become a full-time painter in 1880. These letters detail his activities in the church both as secretary in the Methodist church in London and when Van Gogh subsequently lived and worked as a missionary in Belgium. They provide a factual record of his daily life as well as representing his inner life and desires. The analysis in Chapter 4 looks closely at evidence of the developing theological concerns that Van Gogh experienced when interacting with British Methodism.

#### **3.6.2 Pilgrim Spirit**

The second selection of approximately 20 letters is based on the physical journeys taken by Van Gogh. As a teenager and young adult Van Gogh was employed in Goupil et Cie art dealership. He was dispatched to the gallery as an employee, moving to London and, also, living in Paris. Subsequently, he took a temporary job in Brussels and briefly stayed in Amsterdam, Etten, Wasmes. His travels continued in his later life, moving to Paris from the Netherlands, and, in France, from Arles to Auvers-sur-Oise. Through these diverse itineraries, I explore letters that imply the fierce thought of this compositional artist and his pursuit of worthwhile artistic values.

### 3.6.3 From minister of the Word to minister through art

In the third and final selection, in excess of 100 letters, Van Gogh's highly personalised interpretation of the Gospels beginning with his earlier letters until 1879 is explored. The result of this examination is compared with the letters written in his most prolific period as a painter (1885-1890). This aspect of the study attempts to investigate how Van Gogh tried to build on his experience of failure. The edition from which the letters are quoted is a 1958 publication in 3 volumes, *The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh* Greenwich: New York Graphic Society. In the thesis the letters are referenced by year.

LT: Letter to Theo 1-652 (vol. 1-vol.3) 1872-1890

LR: Letter to Anthon van Rappard 1-58a (vol.3) 1881-1885

LB: Letter to Emile Bernard 1-22 (vol.3) 1887-1889

LW: Letter to Wilhelmen van Gogh 1-23 (vol.3) 1887-1890

LV: Letter from Theo to Vincent 1-16 (vol.3) 1887-1890

The hermeneutic interpretation of the selected letters is complemented with a thematic analysis of selected artworks from Van Gogh's oeuvre.

### 3.7 Van Gogh's art selection criteria

With reference to the research question those artworks have been selected which best illustrate the path of Vincent van Gogh as he sought to illuminate Christ's Gospel. These artworks have been separated into four themes with undeniable Christian origins. These are the *Sower*; *Images of a Boat*; *Familiar Christian themes and images*, and finally, a *Desire for Eternity*. The Sower is a familiar parable, images of boats represent the Christian journey, the familiar themes illustrate parables, communion, suffering and resurrection and, finally, the desire for eternity is the fulfilment of a pilgrim's progress.

These subject areas were explored, first, to reveal the connection between Sower, a most important theme in his early works, and the Biblical text Van Gogh regarded as most important. Further, they show the connection between the image of the pilgrim who appeared in his sermon and his persistence in pursuing his own new style. Second, Van Gogh sought to explore the characteristics of the Christian subjects and interests in a variety of ways, such as painting, still life, and landscape painting. For example, his works show how well he was able to direct himself to the longing for eternity which he found in painting ordinary figures rather



than being restricted to the conventional depiction of holiness. Third, how the intense aesthetic cohesion revealed in elements of nature that Van Gogh pursued to the end was probed. Through the later works that show the boundaries between reality and beyond, his desire for eternity is analysed. The lists given below include the name of the piece and the year and place of creation.

### 3.7.1 Sower

Not only does a sower have meaning that the painter repeatedly regards as very important, but it also has great significance for Van Gogh's identity as an artist himself. The periodic creation of works on the sower as the same theme at various times and places proves to be an important motive for his identity as a painter. This theme of Sower is also a manifestation of his humanity because by using ordinary people, such as farmers and miners, Van Gogh intended to embody the sublime in his work. Above all, Van Gogh made several works with this coherent intention and motif before painting, and he also considered the way in which natural aesthetic concepts that arise in the process of painting were involved in his works. Van Gogh left over 20 works, both drawings and paintings, based on the theme of the sower. Some of these included the surrounding landscape. His landscape paintings are famous for their diversity, so it was not easy to set standards for selection. However, among the relatively late paintings of his works, I chose mainly works for which he had more affection, and preferentially selected the objects and intentions consistent with other works. I restricted my choice to those mentioned in the selected letters.

Table.3: Sower

No.	Title	Year	Place	Location
1	Sower	1881	Etten	Van Gogh Museum
2	Sower	1882	Etten	P & N. de Boer Foundation
3	Sower	1883	Hague	Location unkonwn
4	Sower (Study)	1883	Hague	Location unkonwn
5	Sower (Sower with setting sun)	1888	Arles	Kröller-Müller Museum
6	Sower	1888	Arles	Villa Flora
7	The Sower (after Millet)	1888	Arles	Tate Gallery

### 3.7.2 Images of Boat

The boat can be seen as an image of Christianity. This is with reference to Christ's ministry in the Sea of Galilee. Van Gogh depicted his physical journey from the Netherlands with a number of paintings of boats which he saw on his travels. The accompanying letters describe his pleasure with all these scenes. When he arrived in Paris he liked to walk along the Seine with his friend, Bernard. He corresponded with Gauguin who had a particular affinity with stories of fisherman. In depicting fishing-boats, canal-boats and barges he illustrated some of the industry of the time. The final choice links to the well-known series of *Starry Night*: in this case *Starry Night on the River Rhône* includes boats.

Table.4: Images of Boat

No.	Title	Year	Place	Location
1	View of the Sea at Scheveningen	1882	Scheveningen	Location unknown
2	Fishing in Spring, the Pont de Clichy	1887	Paris	Art Institute of Chicago
3	With Seascape at Sainte-Maries	1888	Arles	Pushkin Museum
4	Fishing boats on the Beach at Sainte-Maries	1888	Arles	Van Gogh Museum
5	Langlois Bridge at Arles alongside the Canal	1888	Arles	Van Gogh Museum
6	Quay with sand barges	1888	Arles	Museum Folkwang
7	Starry Night on the River Rhône	1888	Arles	Musée d'Orsay

### 3.7.3 Familiar Christian themes and images

Of the paintings selected under this theme, the early still life of *Still life with Open Bible* is a relatively unknown work to the public. This is a depiction of Van Gogh's late father's Bible and his own favourite novel, Zola's *La Joie de Vivre*. For me this has a special significance as there is such a depth of expression both in the accompanying letters and in the painting. Although he often had frequent conflicts and misunderstandings with his father, it is a very meaningful work painted after his father's funeral. In addition, this work is important because he created it in 1885 in the middle of his artistic life. This was a major achievement for Van Gogh who had only been painting for five years. It also marks a mid-point in his creativity and the transition from the Dutch school. Further, because of the subject matter it can be viewed as an expression

of his life on the margins. At this stage he was leaving his homeland and the comfort, even if in conflict, of his family.

Table.5: Familiar Christian themes and images

No.	Title	Year	Place	Location
1	Still Life with Open Bible	1885	Nuenen	Van Gogh Museum
2	The Potato Eaters	1885	Nuenen	Van Gogh Museum
3	The Good Samaritan (After Delacroix)	1889	Saint-Rémy	Ottelo
4	Pietà (After Delacroix)	1889	Saint-Rémy	Van Gogh Museum
5	The Raising of Lazarus (After Rembrandt)	1890	Saint-Rémy	Van Gogh Museum

### 3.7.4 Desire for eternity

Of this selection, *Tree Roots* is considered Van Gogh's final painting. The last of his life, the tree root still life is very meaningful. By this stage of his journey he had left his hometown in the South. Back in the north of France at Auvers-sur-Oise, closer to his homeland, he would have had time to think about the origins of his art and life. Meeting a new doctor encouraged Vincent with the expectation that he might be cured of his current illness. Thus, this work was included because it could be interpreted as an expression of his lifetime. It is an example of his chromatic concerns with favoured colour choices of yellow and blue. It represents another masterpiece from an artist who, at this stage, had only ten years' experience.

Table. 6: Desire for eternity

No.	Title	Year	Place	Location
1	Old Man with his Head in his Hands	1882	Hague	Tehran Museum
2	Old Man in Sorrow	1890	Saint-Rémy	Kröller-Müller Museum
3	Starry Night over the Rhône	1888	Arles	Musée d'Orsay
4	Wheat Field with Crows	1890	Auvers-sur-Oise	Van Gogh Museum
5	Wheatfield under Thunderclouds	1890	Auvers-sur-Oise	Van Gogh Museum
6	Landscape at Auvers in the Rain	1890	Auvers-sur-Oise	Cardiff
7	Tree Roots	1890	Auvers-sur-Oise	Van Gogh Museum

### **3.8 Van Gogh and suicide**

A common problem faces anyone who wishes to write about Vincent van Gogh. That problem is how to deal with his self-harm and suicide. As noted in Chapter 2, for much of the twentieth century Van Gogh was better known for his bouts of insanity rather than his oeuvre. Without repeating what has already been said I, like Nouwen (1995, pp.10-11), feel uncomfortable with the many psychological and psychoanalytical interpretations of Van Gogh's work. Some of the most moving passages in Van Gogh's letters are those in which he expresses serious self-doubt. Indeed, in some cases a reader could easily infer that the writer was in a depressive state. It then becomes all too easy to dismiss him as a suicide and the question could then be asked: "How can someone who commits suicide be regarded as a true Christian?" This, for me, is not the right question. In answering my own research question, I was seeking the evidence in Van Gogh's letters and selected art works to show that the path he pursued throughout his life was to be a minister of Christ's Gospel. As will be shown in the remainder of this thesis I found ample evidence to support this view. Therefore, within the context of this thesis, it became unnecessary to comment any further on the self-harm and suicide.

### **3.9 Summary**

Hermeneutical methodology is inevitably required to extract important themes consistently appearing in Van Gogh's life through objective data such as his letters and works. Through these hermeneutical methodologies, the keywords representing Christian values that consistently persisted in his letters and pictures are as follows; a sower, a pilgrim who pursues learning and newness, a wonder of life with nature, a sublime manifested in ordinary figures, a desire for eternity. Applying hermeneutic research relied on spiritual writings to support and expand on the spiritual and transformative reading of Van Gogh's letters and artworks. The overall aim was to examine Van Gogh's transformation of faith within an artistic dimension and to show whether this transformation represented an artistic pilgrimage. In addition, it seemed from the methodology that Van Gogh, the artist, had a Christian faith not only of worshipping the Saviour in the institutional church but in a Supreme Being called God and eternity, put back in place above this world. This hermeneutic methodology has enabled the analysis in Chapter 4 which answers the research question as to whether there is evidence to

show that the path Van Gogh pursued throughout his life was to be a minister of Christ's Gospel.

## **Chapter 4. Religious Context and Influence in his first vocation and artistic Life**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, the research question is addressed using the methodology described in Chapter 3. Selected letters and artworks of Vincent van Gogh are interpreted employing the hermeneutic approach to explore whether they show that the path he pursued throughout his life was to be a minister of Christ's Gospel. The chapter considers Van Gogh and Methodism as it related to Protestantism in his time. This includes his time in London and in the Borinage. From there Van Gogh began his artistic journey and this is analysed in terms of personal pilgrimage looking at his knowledge of the Bible, and his limited but significant preaching, especially his one recorded sermon, based on Psalm 119. His relationship with his father is also considered. In the later part of this chapter Van Gogh's artistic pilgrimage is charted by considering those selected works of Van Gogh that mark his spiritual journey from sower to death and resurrection. It reveals a pilgrimage of suffering, and of sacrifice, during which Van Gogh began to recognise that for him the goal of the Celestial City might be achieved through his art. The analysis reveals that with his later works Van Gogh aligned art with the Gospel.

### **4.2 Van Gogh and Methodism**

In England, the young Van Gogh encountered the Methodist movement. A careful reading of Van Gogh's letters reveals how he developed as an adult, both in his Christianity and as an artist. The first thing to note is his remarkable familiarity with literary concerns: poetry, art, magazines, novels. In addition, he recorded regular attendance at Sunday service and Bible study. It becomes clear that his highly-paid position in the Goupil branch enabled him support his new life in London.

Van Gogh closely observed his surroundings. He wrote of his impression of London that

in front of every house there is a small garden with flowers or a few trees, and many houses are built very tastefully in a sort of Gothic style. One of the finest sights I have seen is Rotten Row in Hyde Park, where hundreds of ladies and gentlemen ride on horseback. (LT 9, 1873, p.8)

During this time, walking, reading, copying poetry and observational insights are shown as the

habitual features of his experience. Furthermore, wherever he was, Van Gogh took the opportunity to visit art galleries and museums. These habits remained with him throughout his life.

Secondly, Van Gogh's interest in a religious vocation as a missionary or pastor is plain. As noted in Chapter 2 and, again, below, in London the young Van Gogh would have heard the story of Wesley and about the foundation of Methodism with its strong social characteristics. We know from his letters that he associated strongly with Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Both men had experienced crises in their mid-lives. He may have recognised parallels with himself. The next section explores these Christian aspects of Van Gogh's life as well as the family experience in the Dutch Church and what he personally encountered in the Methodist Church. The influences of these two experiences is explored.

#### **4.3 Van Gogh, Methodism, and Protestantism**

The distinctive theological background of Holland in this period seems to present two remarkable features: one is the humanistic stream from Erasmus and Arminius; the other is pietism, the origin of which is derived from Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*. Calvinism was the state religion in Holland and only members of that sect were eligible for public office (Bihlmeyer & Tüchle 1966). Several writers such as Cabanne, Tralbout, and Hulsker have wrongly concluded that Van Gogh had no interest in Calvinism and his father's ministry and had been temporarily caught in religious zeal. Edwards (1996, p.255) insists that Van Gogh's father, Theodorus, was influenced by a strict Calvinism to the extent that Van Gogh often could not side with his father's theological faith.

However, the family were not strict Calvinists in belief, but rather, adherents of the Groningen party, a liberal branch of the Dutch Reformed Church (Metzger 1996, p.7). Tillich explains the difference:

The one was a critical opinion and the other was the dissolution of Calvinist orthodoxy which has grounded traditional protestant theology in 19<sup>th</sup> century Holland. There, however, was no theological solution in Holland. (Tillich, 1966, p.12)

Erickson (1998, p.2) has pointed out that Van Gogh's family actually subscribed to this

distinctive theology that diverged sharply from Calvinism. She suggested that both Vincent's father and his uncle Stricker, a famous theologian, followed the Groningen teaching. Thus, the young Van Gogh, who had been in the domestic church in Holland before he came to London, was aware of the new and various Protestant Dissenters in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who had been involved in discontinuities of a fundamental kind.

With regard to Methodism, the second quarter of the nineteenth century saw a major change in growth similar to that in the Church of England. There was a period of sustained rapid expansion from the birth of the Methodist movement to about 1840, a period of considerable, although much slower and decelerating expansion until 1906 and the outbreak of the war in 1914. Gilbert explains this stabilisation of Methodist strength as being due to a marked population growth in the period before 1840 (1976, p.30).

Methodism has distinguished itself as a religious movement strongly tied to social issues. It is essentially a working class movement. John Wesley (1703-1791), the founder of Methodism, believed that holiness for a Christian was not only personal, but also social, and needed to be expressed in terms of compassion and service to the needy members of the community. Wesley and his preachers would address any crowd, wherever it might be gathered. Many of these labouring people responded with enthusiasm to the message that God was concerned about them, and that there was a place for them in His mercy. In addition, Maddox (1994, p.146) notes that Wesley understood prevenient grace as a gracious gift of God through which people could be awakened to begin a journey to life and deliverance. Holifield (1986, p.32) relates that Wesley encouraged women to become visitors charged with the duty of seeing every sick person in their district three times a week. Such acts of charity exhibited the fruits of faith in an eighteenth century context. Cameron (1961, p.120) notes that Wesley's social philosophy was characterised by "an instructive reluctance to criticize existing institutions which was overcome by indignation at certain abuses which cried out for rectification." Out of concern for social issues and justice, Methodists established orphanages, schools, and colleges all over the world. Most of all, for Wesley, to be made perfect in love meant that a Christian could live with a primary guiding regard for others and their welfare. He based this on Christ's quote that the second great command is "to love your neighbour as you love yourself" (The Bible, Matthew 22:39).

The revival of Methodism and English Puritanism coincided with Van Gogh's arrival in



England (Gilbert 1976, p.30). Through his known involvement with English Methodism and Methodist ministers Van Gogh would have been exposed to Methodism and Wesleyan history when in England. He would have known that the young John Wesley was influenced not only by a rich tradition of classical literature and philosophy but also by spiritual classics such as Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*, Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living and Dying*, and William Law's *Serious Call* (Maddock 2011, p. 222).

The historical and religious circumstances of that period in London reflected those on the European continent. Indeed, the most remarkable feature of European history in the nineteenth century was a sharp transformation in major aspects of life as a result of the forces of a new industrial age. This sharp transformation involved not only an age of uncertainty but also a conflict between old and new. Similarly, artists in that time tried to create art which made a striking contrast to the prevailing tradition (Knapton & Derry 1965). As the representative of Goupil et Cie, Van Gogh would have witnessed these artistic developments.

Having set the context, through carefully reading Van Gogh's letters, one can see how he adapted to this environment. An example of his profound thinking is the following, from a letter to Theo, demonstrating both understanding of the Bible and of contemporary literature. Stowe refers to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Jules Michelet was a nineteenth century French historian with whose books Van Gogh seemed very familiar.

And the Bible consists of layers and there's progression in it. For example, the difference between Moses and Noah on the one hand and Jesus and Paul on the other, and in my opinion Stowe and Michelet are a continuation of the gospel, not a repetition ... To believe in God, by that I mean feeling that there is a God, not a dead or stuffed God, but a living one who pushes us with irresistible force in the direction of 'Love on'. That's what I think. Proof of His presence— the reality of love. Proof of the reality of the feeling of that great power of love deep within us – the existence of God. Because there is a God there is love; because there is love there is a God. Although this may seem like an argument that goes round in a circle, nevertheless it's true, because 'that circle' actually contains all things, and one can't help, even if one wanted to, being in that circle oneself. (LT 189, 1882, p.274)

Many Bible passages are included in his letters to Theo and to his family members reflecting his personal Bible reading. As the following example shows, it is clear that he was well versed in Biblical passages:

It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man. It is better to fall into the hands of the Lord than into the hands of men. Let Christ be the center of your

longing, Comforter of the disquieted mind. (LT 82, 1876, p.81)

During this early period of his adult life, Van Gogh became interested in a religious vocation as a missionary or pastor. According to Sweetman (1990, p.82), Van Gogh's religious feelings gathered so dangerous a momentum he could only rein them in for brief intervals before a headlong rush carried him forward again. Lawrence, in his thesis titled "The Methodism of Vincent van Gogh", primarily focused on the relationship of the young Van Gogh and Rev. Thomas Slade Jones, a Methodist minister who became Van Gogh's mentor. According to Lawrence (1979, p.8), Rev. Jones employed Van Gogh as a school teacher and church worker. The reverend continued to encourage Vincent's calling to the ministry when he visited Van Gogh at Etten in 1878, and applauded his evangelistic work in Belgium in 1879. Lawrence described Van Gogh's Methodism as follows:

We shall concentrate on what we have chosen to call Vincent's Methodism, holding in mind Wesley's definition of the terms as love, fellowship, dedication, and evangelism. Vincent fell from grace, but there remains so much to inspire about his character and work, and we shall be wise not to let tales of a severed ear eclipse the essential goodness and greatness of the man. (Lawrence, 1979, p.113)

In searching for the young artist's experience, Lawrence notes that Rev. Jones allowed Van Gogh teach at a boy's middle class school and required Van Gogh to do more church work (1979, p.16).

Van Gogh wrote about this on different occasions to Theo: "Rev. Jones let me take his turn" (LT 81, 1876, p. 45). Van Gogh's letters support Lawrence's conclusion that there are three strands to the Methodism of Vincent van Gogh. First, according to Lawrence, Van Gogh not only worked with Rev. Jones in his church but also was known to the Rev. James Pratt, the superintendent minister of the Richmond Circuit, and also possibly to his colleague, the Rev. George Carnson, who resided at Teddington (1979, p.21). It was through these associations that Van Gogh preached from the pulpit at Richmond Methodist Church and spoke of the great privilege it was for him to be allowed to conduct worship. There were quotations of Methodist hymns and lyrics in Van Gogh's letters such as 7:4, 118:2, 160:4, 160:5, 180:5. 277.

Second, Lawrence suggested that Vincent was helped by the Methodist emphasis on personal religion which expresses itself in practical ways, and also by the ethos of Methodism as he found it in actual fellowship with them. In this context, following his introduction to

Methodism in London, when he subsequently went to Belgium, Van Gogh's "lived experience" demonstrates deep concern for fellowship with the Borinage miners. Later on, in Arles in 1888, he demonstrated similar concern for contemporary painters as is clear from his plans for an artistic community in the Yellow House although this did not come to fruition.

Third, the idea of the pilgrimage had been shaped by Van Gogh's experience in the Methodist church in London. During his life in London, loving *Pilgrim's Progress*, the pilgrimage became a key to understand Van Gogh's life and art. This is evidenced from the copies of poetry by Vincent in letters to Theo. One of these is titled the pilgrimage;

Homesickness flowed through  
The heart of a pilgrim,  
Seeking the heavenly Jerusalem.  
City of pleasures,  
Of joy everlasting,  
Which once God's angel had promised to him.

Crystal-clear rivers,  
May your placid waters  
Show the reflection of this lovely sight.  
Glittering mountains, from far you behold it,  
The place that my soul doth ease and invite.

I hear there the chiming of bells as thought ringing.  
The sunset suffuses the woods with its glow.  
If I only had wings like a dove I should glide,  
And fly fast through the sky, to you, city, I'd go.

Wide, oh too wide  
Is the distance between us.  
Long is the journey, I am overwhelmed.  
Dreams of enchantment  
Unveil the delightfulness,  
Give me the joys of the heavenly realm. (LT 277, 1888:453)

#### **4.4 From London to the Borinage**

In 1873, as a twenty-year-old Dutch art dealer, Van Gogh arrived in London. In anticipation of the new experience of staying in a foreign country long term, Van Gogh wrote that he was "looking forward very much to seeing London" (LT 5, 1873, p.3). He wrote in his first letter to his brother: "In London Goupil has no gallery, but sells only directly to art dealers" and "the

business here is only a stockroom, and our work is quite different from what it is in the Hague” (LT 9a, 1875, p.8). When Theo also became an art dealer three years later, they made sure to write to each other regularly sharing their common experiences. Van Gogh wrote joyfully to Theo: “I am so glad that we shall both be in the same profession and in the same firm” (LT 2, 1872, p.1). Whilst Theo became a successful art dealer, Van Gogh was insufficiently interested, preferring to spend his time in the pursuit of a religious vocation. He and Goupil parted company when he was at the branch in Paris in 1875.

Following his departure from Goupil, the young Van Gogh returned to England in 1876 to work for Rev. Jones in Isleworth as a temporary secretary. He was in this role as secretary of Isleworth Methodist Church for almost one year. He met many Christian friends and often taught the boys Bible history. He sent a letter to the clergyman expressing his desire for a position “between clergyman and missionary among the working people in the suburbs of London” (LT 69, 1876, p.59). Concerning his vocational work, as Van Gogh wrote to Theo, he was devout: “You know that I go to the Methodist Chapel there every Monday night” (LT 75, 1876, p.67). The clergyman, Rev. Jones, who was greatly respected by his young secretary, recognised the latter’s talents and entrusted him with various responsibilities.

Mr. Jones has promised me that I shall not have to teach so much in the future, but may work more in his parish, visiting the people, talking with them, etc. May God give it His blessing ... I cannot tell you how glad I am that Mr. Jones has promised to give me work in his parish, so that I shall find by and by what I want. (LT 76, 1876, p.69)

He also gave “a German lesson to Rev. Jones’ daughters” (LT 77, 1876, p.71). Furthermore, Van Gogh had an opportunity to preach,

Thursday week I hope to preach on John and Theogenes in Mr. Jones’s church. Your brother was indeed deeply moved when he stood at the foot of the pulpit and bowed his head and prayed: Abba, Father, in thy name be our beginning. (LT 79, 1876, pp.73-74)

Although Van Gogh decided that he would not go back to England after visiting home the following Christmas, he did re-examine his wish to study theology and to become a minister. He decided to follow his deepest enthusiasm and joy. He finally moved to Amsterdam to begin studies toward a degree of theology, having worked for nearly four months in a bookstore in Dordrecht as a clerk. He studied very hard with Uncle Stricker, who was a pastor and professor in the University, and Uncle Jan, who opened his house for Van Gogh as a cousin.

Unfortunately, he did not demonstrate improvement in the study of classical Greek and Latin. He confessed to Theo:

I have a lot of work to do this morning. I see that it is not easy, and it will get more and more difficult, but still I firmly hope to succeed ... I have begun to study the Bible already, but only at night when the day's work is done or early in the morning-after all, it is the principal thing- though my duty is to devote myself to the other study, which I do. (LT 96, 1877, p.117)

He also admitted feeling that studying a classical language is like a sense of "duty." During the summer in Amsterdam, he tried to prepare for the examinations. There was no positive progress in his study so he did not see "how I shall ever get that difficult and extensive study into it" (LT 98, 1877, p.119). In the last day of October, he noted:

Boy, studying Latin and Greek is very difficult, but still it makes me feel happy, and I am doing what I longed to do. (LT 112, 1877, p.146)

Oh! Boy, if I might pass that examination, what a blessing it would be! If I pass the first examination with all those subjects which seem simple but are difficult enough, I shall have good courage for what must follow. (LT 114, 1877, p.152)

Van Gogh tried hard and struggled with his Latin and Greek exercises for the whole year, 1877. Unhappily, he failed to pass the examinations. His tutor, Mendes da Costa wrote about Van Gogh in his article entitled *Personal Memories of Vincent van Gogh during his Stay at Amsterdam*.

So far everything went well, including mathematics, which he had begun studying with another master in the meantime; but after a short time the Greek verbs became too much for him. However I might set about it, whatever trick I might invent to enliven the lessons, it was no use. 'Mendes,' he would say, 'do you seriously believe that such horrors are indispensable to a man who wants to do what I want to do: give peace to poor creatures and reconcile them to their existence here on earth?' (da Costa 1910 in *The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh*. Vol.1, p.169)

As da Costa mentioned, it was not easy for Van Gogh to pass Greek and Latin examinations in a short time. His father visited his son, da Costa, Uncle Stricker, and Uncle Cor to ask after his son's study and life in Amsterdam. In February of 1878, Van Gogh wrote:

After I had seen Father off at the station and had watched the train go out of sight, even the smoke of it, I came home to my room and saw Father's chair standing near the little table on which the books and copybooks of the day before were still lying; and though I know that we shall see each other again pretty soon, I cried like a child. (LT 118, 1878, p.160)

Following this latest failure to find his path in life, Van Gogh's father, Theodorus, supported Vincent in obtaining the position of a lay preacher in the Belgium church. Reverend Jones travelled from England to Belgium as Van Gogh's guarantor. Van Gogh writes, "I suppose father has written you that we went to Brussels last week, along with the Reverend Jones of Isleworth, who stayed here over Sunday" (LT 123, 1878, p.172). Van Gogh's father also travelled to meet the Committee for Evangelisation of the Union of Evangelical Protestant Churches of Belgium and wrote to Theo about meeting Reverend Jones:

It was nice that we were accompanied by the Rev. Jones, for whom Vincent had worked in England. He came to visit us the previous Saturday and stayed until Tuesday, at which time he went with us to Brussels. He's a kind man who made a good impression on all of us. In Brussels he also spoke well on Vincent's behalf and his very presence meant that these matters were usually discussed in English, which gave Vincent the opportunity to show that he spoke it readily and correctly, for which he received a pat on the back. (FR b985, 1878, cf Hulsker, 1974, pp. 31-32)

In February 1879 Van Gogh was appointed to the Borinage coal-mining district. Louis Piérard, a child of the Borinage, in describing a mining disaster, wrote of the esteem in which Van Gogh was held.

There were hundreds of victims. Most of them were miners, killed on the spot of the coal dust ... Vincent tried to relieve the atrocious sufferings of these unfortunate wretches, applying compresses drenched in olive oil to their burns. These frequent mining disasters at last prompted an outbreak of anger and mutiny among the mining population. They believed that the inspection of the mines was not conducted in such a way as to protect the miner and guarantee his safety. So there were strikes which were in fact strikes of despair. Because of this, the strikers were tempted to commit acts of violence and destruction. The gendarmes and even the army were mobilised to maintain order. It is highly probable that, in order to prevent bloodshed, Vincent intervened and used his great moral authority to restore the miner's self-control. (Piérard, 1925, p.229)

Respected and revered among the miners, Van Gogh became known as the "Christ of the Mines" (Van Gogh Museum). Van Gogh's enthusiastic pastoral works to miners in Borinage may be evaluated from the point of view of a life-giver.

I just visited an old mother in a charcoal-burner's family. She's seriously ill, but pious and patient. I read a chapter to her and prayed with all of them. The people here have something special and appealing because of their simplicity and kind-heartedness, just like the Brabanters in Zundert and Etten. (LT 127, 1879, p.185)

However, the manner in which he conducted his mission was not approved of by the Mission

Board and after six months his contract was not renewed. Even though he had been dismissed by the Belgian church Van Gogh remained in the Borinage. Without resources he, nevertheless, tried to continue his mission (Pierard in the *The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh*. Vol.1, p. 222). It is clear that Van Gogh kept up a correspondence with Rev. Jones in relation to his ministry in the Borinage. Van Gogh notes:

A few days ago I received a letter from the Reverend Mr. Jones of Isleworth in which he writes about building little wooden churches here in the Borinage. Is that practicable, is it desirable? He is ready to work to that end, that is, for the erection of the first of such little buildings. He even speaks of coming here in the autumn to talk it over; I certainly hope it happens. (LT 130, 1879, p.189)

When Van Gogh finally gave up this ministry in March 1880, for a while he had been to stay with his parents now in Etten, as emerges from a letter his father wrote:

Vincent is still here. But alas! It is nothing but worry. Now he is talking about going to London and speaking with The Reverend Jones. If he sticks to that plan, I'll enable him to go, but it is hopeless."(From Reverend Van Gogh to Theo, 1880, p.230)

Van Gogh's father informed Reverend Jones, whom he trusted following their earlier meeting, that he might consider sending his Vincent to London as a last chance to become a church worker.

#### **4.5 From preacher to painter**

There is a most important letter, from July 1879, showing his vocational transformation from preacher to painter, after his missionary contract had been rejected. He had not corresponded with Theo for almost 11 months, the longest break and discontinuity in his correspondence with his brother. He writes:

So you would be wrong in persisting in the belief that, for instance, I should now be less enthusiastic for Rembrandt, or Millet, or Delacroix, or whoever it may be; the contrary is true. But, you see, there are many things which one must believe and love. There is something of Rembrandt in Shakespeare ... and then there is something of Rembrandt in the Gospel, or something of the Gospel in Rembrandt – whichever, it comes to the same if only one understand it properly, without misinterpreting it and considering the equivalence of the comparisons, which do not pretend to lessen the merits of the original personalities. And in Bunyan there is

something of Maris or of Millet ... If now you can forgive a man for making a thorough study of pictures, admit also that the love of books is as sacred as the love of Rembrandt ... To give you an example: someone loves Rembrandt, but seriously – that man will know there is God, he will surely believe it ... To try to understand the real significance of what the great artists, the serious masters, tell us in their masterpieces, that leads to God; one man wrote or told it in a book; another, in a picture. (LT 133, 1880, pp.196-198)

His concern and love for the miners is transformed into the thematic issues in his art. At this time, the theme of his paintings is people and nature, such as “a laborer”, “peasant women”, “orphan man”, and “old man.” He likened himself to “being a laborer” and stayed “at home in the laboring class” by taking root there. He notes that “I cannot do otherwise, I do not want to do otherwise, I cannot understand any other way (LT 194, 1882, p. 359).

#### **4.6 Van Gogh: A Personal Pilgrimage**

The concept of pilgrimage informs his next journey which is his development as a painter. For the soul-searching artistic pilgrim, Van Gogh continues to travel on his personal journey moving as a stranger until he can settle down in the new places. For Van Gogh, to be a stranger or pilgrim is to love God and neighbour. It is not to escape from real life and people. However, it took a period of absence for him to realise this, an absence which he described as a “moulting time”:

I’m inclined to believe, it is beneficial and the best and most reasonable position to take, for me to go away and to remain at a proper distance, as if I didn’t exist. What moulting is to birds, the time when they change their feathers, that’s adversity or misfortune, hard times, for us human beings. One may remain in this period of moulting, one may also come out of it renewed, but it’s not to be done in public, however; it’s scarcely entertaining, it’s not cheerful, so it’s a matter of making oneself scarce. (LT 133, 1880, p.194)

Describing his long walk away from the Borinage, which followed the moulting, Van Gogh journeyed like Bunyan’s pilgrim, avoiding the material world around him. Through suffering, and sacrifice, Van Gogh began to recognise that for him the goal of the Celestial City might be achieved through his art. He was aligning art with the Gospel.

Though this trip was almost too much for me and I came back overcome by fatigue, with sore feet, and quite melancholy, I do not regret it, for I have seen interesting things, and one learns to take a different but correct view of the hardships of real misery. Occasionally I earned some crusts of bread along the road in exchange for



some drawings which I had in my valise. But when the 10 fr. were all gone, I had to spend the last nights in the open air, once in an resting place; once in a pile of fagots; and one time that was a little better, in a haystack, where I succeeded in making a rather more comfortable berth- but then a drizzling rain did not exactly further my well-being ... well, even in that deep misery I felt my energy revive, and I said to myself, in spite of everything I shall rise again: I will take up my pencil, which I have forsaken in my great discouragement, and I will go on with my drawing. From that moment everything has seemed transformed for me; and now I have started and my pencil has become somewhat docile, becoming more so every day. (LT 136, 1880, p.206)

#### **4.7 Van Gogh, the Bible, and the Preacher**

Unfortunately, no scripts of Van Gogh's preaching from the period of the Borinage have survived. However, a single sermon delivered by him in the Richmond Wesleyan Methodist Church in 1876 survives in his letters (Lubin 1972, p.1). The text of the sermon is Psalm 119 and the sermon is based on Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and on Boughton's painting *Godspeed! Pilgrims setting out for Canterbury* (Plate.1), painted in 1874. Van Gogh saw this painting when visiting the Royal Academy annual exhibition held in London. A pilgrim meets a woman and there is a man wearing black between them in the centre of painting. In this sermon, he not only showed his admiration for Boughton but also copied his religious motifs. Van Gogh stresses not only pilgrimage but also the responsibility of social and practical concerns on earth. This is exposed in the last passage of his sermon; "And when things are not what they seem, that God by the things of daily life teaches us higher things" (LT 84, 1877, p.92).

In 1883, Van Gogh reminisced about the day he saw this piece of work, writing that "in one of Boughton's pictures I know a little figure of one of those Puritans, for which I should think you had posed if I didn't know better" (LT 338, 1883, p.195). Today this painting is in the Van Gogh museum. It is important to interpret "stranger" in his sermon with reference to Psalm 119:19, because stranger does not function without the word "pilgrim" in the Bible. Usually the metaphors of the pilgrim and the stranger are applied to indicate the similar experience of Christians (De Kruijf 2011, p.278). Roland Dorn concludes that Boughton's painting is critical in Van Gogh's sermon: "association was certainly Van Gogh's most important instrument of thought, something that could be used creatively: his thoughts (or pictures) are thus intimately linked to one another" (Dorn, 1990, p.16).



Plate.1 Broughton, *Godspeed! Pilgrims setting out for Canterbury* 1874

The stranger is not a social misfit but a pilgrim like Abraham, Moses, and Jacob. His sermon begins:

Psalm 119:19. I am a stranger on the earth, hide not Thy commandments from me. It is an old belief and it is a good belief, that our life is a pilgrim's progress - that we are strangers on the earth, but that though this be so, yet we are not alone for our Father is with us. We are pilgrims, our life is a long walk or journey from earth to Heaven. The sermon continues:

That Angel of God has been placed there to encourage the pilgrims and to answer their questions and the pilgrim asks her: "Does the road go uphill then all the way?" And the answer is, "Yes, to the very end." And he asks again, "And will the journey take all day?" And the answer is, "From morn to night, my friend." And the pilgrim goes on, sorrowful yet always rejoicing – sorrowful because it is so far off and the road so long; hopeful as he look up to the eternal city far away, resplendent in the evening glow. And he thinks of the two old sayings that he heard long ago – the one is: Much strife must be striven, much suffering must be suffered, much prayer must be prayed, and then the end will be peace. (Van Gogh 1876, p.90)

In part of the conclusion of a sermon, the preacher Van Gogh compares his personal journey to a beautiful picture.

I once saw a very beautiful picture: it was a landscape at evening. In the distance on the right-hand side a row of hills appeared blue in the evening mist. Above those hills the splendour of the sunset, the grey clouds with their linings of silver and gold and purple. The landscape is a plain or heath covered with grass and its yellow leaves, for it was in autumn. Through the landscape a road leads to a high mountain far, far away, on the top of that mountain is a city whereon the setting sun casts a glory. On the road walks a pilgrim, staff in hand. He has been walking for a good long while already and he is very tired. And now he meets a woman, or figure in black, that makes one think of St. Paul's word: As being sorrowful yet always rejoicing. (Van Gogh, 1876, pp. 87-91, Vol.1)

The paragraph conveys the way he will undertake his artistic journey as a pilgrim. Analysing this sermon through the lens of hermeneutic and aesthetic perspectives reveals the fact that pilgrim and artist were two parallel streams in the life of Van Gogh. For Van Gogh, as a preacher with an understanding of theology, the main theme of Psalm 119 is peregrination, *peregrinatio*. Kraus concludes that the psalmist knows he is a sojourner, stranger, on earth, verse 19 (Krauss 1983, p.420). According to this view, the stranger declares that he has no claim to possess land but can only be a fellow lodger (cf. The Bible, Genesis 12:10; 19:9; 21:23, 34; 26:3). Following verse 20, the longing of the stranger is directed, not toward the living space of the land but toward the instructions of Yahweh.

#### **4.8 The Concept of a Stranger and Pilgrim**

The sermon based on Psalm 119:19 delivered by young Van Gogh is centred on his next journey as a painter. If we view Van Gogh as the soul-searching pilgrim, we see him as an artist constantly on the move. Just as with any traveler, just as with any pilgrim, he is a stranger whenever he arrives in a new place. Research of the structure of Psalm 119 may be found within Book V of the Psalter. Many verses in Psalm 119 are difficult or impossible to interpret correctly. Zenger (1998, p.88) describes the structure of Book V as a concentric arrangement, in which Psalm 119 is framed by three layers.

According to Zenger (1998, p.91), Psalms 111 and 112 are the response to the oracles of Psalm 110. The composition directs the reader to see in Psalm 112 the king whom YHWH has called to his side in Psalm 110. In the centre of Book V, he notes “Psalm 119 is a prayer for a life according to the Torah which is the precondition for the advent of the universal reign of the God of the Exodus and of Zion celebrated in the fifth book of Psalms” (Zenger 1998, p.91). Zenger comments repeatedly that:

[Psalm 119] is a prayer for the grace to keep and love the Torah as the fundamental law of the announced and praised kingdom of God, so that the kingdom may come. In terms of the literary form it is an individual who is speaking here. But in terms of the compositional context, those praying are from Israel and the nations. (1998, p.99)

From Zenger’s point of view, Psalm 119 is part of a spiritual pilgrimage, which comprises the sequence: Psalms 113-118 the Exodus, 119 Sinai, and 120-135 Zion. According to Reynolds

(2010, p.164), in addition to the rhetorical reasons for avoiding any reference to specific texts, the poetic features of Psalm 119 make it difficult to demonstrate any textual relationships. He notes nevertheless that there are a few examples that indicate that the author of Psalm 119 was using passages from elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible; these deserve consideration.

Reynolds notes that Psalm 119 uses traditional religious language to construct an acrostic poem with a striking message. It gives the reader a portrayal of the process of spiritual formation. By doing so the reader experiences the Psalm from the subjective perspective of the speaker. Psalm 119 contributes to the belief that the Torah is God's life-giving word and that the wise servant of God is devoted to its study and observance. Bearing this analysis in mind it may be noted that the Bible occupied a large place in Vincent van Gogh's education, and he could not so easily throw off its message. Writing to Theo from England in 1876, and referring to crowds of people in London flocking to hear the American evangelists Ira D. Sankey and D.L. Moody, Vincent says: the old, old story of Jesus and His love, lodged in the heart, stays there (Lawrence 1979, p.58).

#### **4.9 Van Gogh's relationship with his father**

The ultimate concern of Van Gogh within the Bible is the term "the kingdom of my Father" which is the core of the Gospel from the teaching of Jesus Christ. Erickson's (1998, p.34) deeply thoughtful research theorised about Van Gogh's life and religious background concluding that for the young Van Gogh, "the kingdom of God" is "the kingdom of my Father." This may have informed his difficult relationship with his father.

Theodorus, Van Gogh's father, was for many years influential in his son's life. It would have been from his, and the extended family's, teaching and example that Van Gogh formed a basis of understanding of the Gospel and Christian faith. Moreover, whilst he often collided with his father about troubles, great and small, he was familiar with his father's ministry: "Father, who so often goes long distances, even in the night with a lantern, to visit a sick or dying man, to speak with him about One whose word is a light even in the night of suffering and agony" (LT, 1877, p.140). To the young Vincent, his father was a good comforter and life-giver. He accepted his father's ministry and faith so that he described his understanding of the relationship between the Gospel and his faith:

But I always think that the best way to know God is to love many things. Love a friend, a wife, something — you like — you will be on the way to knowing more about him; that is why I say to myself. But one must love with a lofty and serious intimate sympathy, with strength, with intelligence; and one must always try to know deeper, better and more. That leads to God, that leads to unwavering faith. (LT 133, 1880, p.198)



Plate. 2 *Still life with Open Bible* 1885

On March 27, 1885, his father died at the age of sixty-three. Van Gogh memorialised his father's death by painting his father's open Bible on a table with a blown out candle and a paperback novel. It was entitled *Still life with Open Bible* and Zola novel (Plate.2). These few objects carried a heavy freight of meaning for Van Gogh and it is possible that Vincent tried to be reconciled with his father through his painting.

Van Gogh had failed to become a pastor despite his father's support, and whilst he tried to become a painter, his father did not understand his choice and could not sympathise with him. Further, whilst living and painting at his father's home, he was often in conflict with his father because of their opposing standpoints. Vincent had written to Theo, his brother:

Father cannot understand or sympathise with me, and I cannot be reconciled to Father's system - it oppresses me, it would choke me. I too read the Bible occasionally just as I read Michelet or Balzac or Eliot; but I see quite different things in the Bible than Father does, and I cannot find at all what Father draws from it in his academic way." (LT 154, 1881, p.283)

Even though he sometimes quarrelled with his father about their conflicting opinions, he still tried to understand him. He wrote:

So I do not consider Father an enemy, but a friend who would be even more my friend if he were less afraid that I might infect him with French errors. I think if Father understood my real intentions, I could often be of some use to him, even with his sermons, because I sometimes see a text in quite a different light. (LT 161, 1881, p.272)

Van Gogh tried to find a bond with his father and wished to gain his father's approval through becoming a renowned painter

I think that if Father knew something about art, it would undoubtedly be easier for me to talk with him and to agree with him. Suppose you become like Father, plus your knowledge of art. I think we shall continue to understand each other. I have quarrelled with Father very often, but the bond between us has never quite been broken. (LT 312, 1883, p.110)

#### **4.9.1 Analysis of Bible painting**

In this painting, his Father's Bible is in the centre, so we can conclude that his father's Bible dominates the painting. There is the blown out candle which may represent his father's death. Two bronze objects are metal latches hinged to the Bible's cover. He did not close the Bible. Van Gogh painted the Bible open to one of the "suffering Servant Songs" in the book of Isaiah, chapter 53. (Edwards 2004, p.40) Although the Bible dominates by size, the small yellow paperback novel nudging the lower edge of the Bible dominates by colour. This yellow book, Zola's *La Joie de Vivre* looks brighter than the Bible. In the absence of an explanation in Van Gogh's letters one might speculate that this could be a formal representation of the continuing conflict between his father and himself or, more hopefully, that it is an attempt at reconciliation and integration, the Bible and his favourite novel. Van Gogh did write to Theo about the colour and technique:

I'm sending you a still life of an open, hence an off-white Bible, bound in leather, against a black background with a yellow-brown foreground, with an additional note of lemon yellow. I painted this in one go, in a single day. This to show you that when I say that perhaps I haven't spotted entirely for nothing I mean it, because these days it really comes quite readily to me to paint a given object, whatever the shape or colour may be, without hesitation. (LT 429, 1885, p.429)

Speculation aside, it is clear that although Van Gogh gave up his work as a pastor, he still kept

the Bible and the Gospel in his life, providing him with creativity and inspiration for his painting. He wrote to his sister, Wilhelmiën;

Is the Bible enough for us? Nowadays I believe Jesus himself would again say to those who just sit melancholy, it is not here, it is risen. Why seek ye the living among the dead? If the spoken or written word is to remain the light of the world, it's our right and our duty to acknowledge that we live in an age in which it's written in such a way, spoken in such a way that in order to find something as great and as good and as original ... [he has read] the Bible more thoroughly than many people nowadays, because it eases his mind somewhat to know that there were once such lofty ideas. But because of the very fact that I think the old things so beautiful, I must think the new things beautiful. (LW 1, 1887, p.426)

In the letter quoted above, he defines clearly that a painter who metaphorically expressed “the living” needs to transform the whole old society into “new things all the more beautiful.” From his aspiration to be a minister or missionary in his early life, Van Gogh had never stopped Bible reading and quoted many passages of the Bible in his letters. From his new life in Hague, London, and Paris as an art dealer of Goupil, he would adhere to reading the Bible and he even showed signs of perceiving something of a spiritual connectedness between scripture, his family and Zundert, his hometown:

How often we walked with father to Rijsbergen in those last days of February and heard the lark over the black fields with young green corn, the radiant blue sky with the white clouds- and then the stony path with the beech trees... Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem! Or, rather, Oh, Zundert, Oh, Zundert! (LT 85, 1877, p.91)

#### **4.10 Van Gogh's transformative experience**

In the research of Van Gogh's early life in the Borinage, Sund (2002, p.37) deduced that “his attitude toward both evangelicalism and traditional religious institution had soured, but Van Gogh retained his faith in God and love of Christ.” Erickson and Edwards (1996, p.252) suggest that Van Gogh did not reject his Christian faith. Erickson (1998, p.69) suggests that for Van Gogh's religion it is not “a categorical rejection of religion, or even of Christianity, however, it was a rejection of the hypocrisy he had experienced at the hands of the clergy, both in Borinage and within his own family.” Van Gogh had been conflicted with his first employer and gave up his job as an art dealer. He had experienced his failure to pass the theology entrance exam as a barrier to becoming a minister, an expectation that was no longer feasible. As a lay preacher in the Borinage, once again he came into conflict with his employers. Again

he lost his appointment but Van Gogh did not lose all his faith in Christ's church. He withdrew into self-isolation as birds do when moulting. Following this period of reflection, Van Gogh distinguished "my God" and "their God" in his letters written between 1880 and 1882. He noted: "Their God is like the God of Shakespeare's drunken Falstaff, the inside of a church" (LT 133, 1880, p.201). Leaving the institutional church, he followed the Christian ethos in the rock of the word of God and applied "Love thy neighbor as thyself" in his life as a painter. In Isaiah chapter 53, he looked back upon the memory of his father, simultaneously with reverence and resentment. By painting with the father's old Bible, he portrayed the beginnings of his artistic way that was "despised", "rejected", and "wounded." On this point, Nouwen (1989, p.10) said of Van Gogh, "this deeply wounded and immensely gifted Dutchman."

#### 4.11 The Sower

Young Van Gogh had known that Millet's drawings were being shown at the Hotel Drouot in Paris between his first stay as an art dealer and his second as teacher and preliminary preacher in England. He then had something of a mystical experience:

I don't know whether I have already written to you about it or not, but there has been a sale here of drawings by Millet. When I entered the hall of the Hotel Drouot, where they were exhibited, I felt like saying, 'Take off your shoes, for the place where you are standing is Holy Ground. (LT 29, 1875, p.28)

He notes: "I must tell you that I am busy trying to sketch large drawings after Millet" (LT 134, 1880, p.200). He also wrote in the next letter to his brother:

I can tell you that I have sketched the ten sheets of 'Les Travaux des Champs' by Millet ... I wish I could show them to you and get your opinion of all this, as well as of some other drawings — for instance, a large sepia drawing after Th. Rousseau, 'Four das les Landes' I had already done it twice in water color before I succeeded in finishing it. (LT 135, 1880, p.201)

During his early life as an artist in the Hague, Van Gogh wrote, "That's the highest thing in art, and *there* art sometimes rises above nature – in Millet's *Sower*, for instance, there is more *soul* than in an ordinary sower in the field" (LT 257, 1883). The conception of Van Gogh's *Sower* (Plate.3) depends on Millet's *The Sower*. It is rendered in Millet's composition by pencil. Although he tried to duplicate Millet's *The Sower*, Van Gogh's version (Plate.4) in 1883 is a little different in composition, but it is closely allied to Millet who showed the twin qualities of



naiveness and simplicity. In his correspondence with Van Rappard they discussed this theme. Van Rappard replied that the sower in Van Gogh's repeated copies of 1881, was "not a man sowing but a man posing as a sower (LR 2, 1881, p.306).

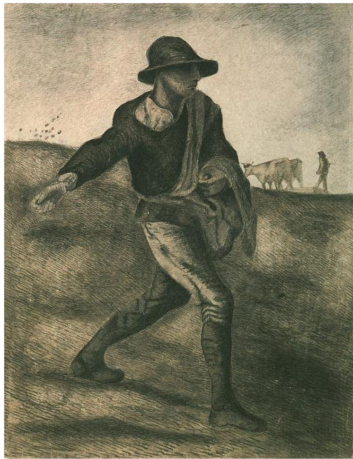


Plate.3 Sower 1882



Plate.4 Sower 1883

It has been shown that the parable of the sower was a most important metaphor for Van Gogh. Whilst the term *Kingdom of God* is nowhere to be found in the parable, it can be interpreted as the sower who is also the reaper in the harvest which is a common figure for the arrival of the kingdom and its fullness. The parable of the sower in the New Testament contains imagery and themes that express Christian concerns such as sowing the seed as sowing the word, and persecution as occurring on account of the word. According to Van Gogh:

Art is jealous and demands all our time, all our strength, and then, when one devotes all one's power to it, to be looked upon as a kind of unpractical fellow and all kinds of other things – yes, that leaves a bitter taste in one's mouth. (LB 9, 1882, p.324)

Certainly it's presumptuous to feel sure of one's success, and yet one may believe: my inner struggle will not in vain, and I want to fight it; despite all my own weakness and fault I want to fight it as best I can ... What artist hasn't struggled and toiled, and what other way is there than struggling and toiling to find firm ground beneath one's feet? (LT 160, 1881, p.270)

As Sund (2002 p.40) commented, Millet's *The Sower* shown at the Paris Salon of 1875, struck many as anarchic, with its grimy, scowling protagonist casting metaphorical seeds of dissent. She concluded that "Van Gogh took Millet as a tutor, and, as he struggled to master the rudiments of artistic practice, he perhaps took comfort in the acknowledged technical imperfection of *The Sower*" (Sund 1988, p.664). There are considerable similarities between the picture he verbally painted in his one sermon in England and *The Sower in Arles*, on June

of 1888. He notes comparatively detailed motifs and the colour sense which, as has been described earlier, was of rare genius:

Large plowed field with clods of earth, for the most part frankly violet. A field of ripe wheat, yellow ochre in tone with a little carmine. The sky, chrome yellow, almost as bright as the sun itself, which chrome yellow No. 1. With a little white, whereas the rest of the sky is chrome yellow Nos. 1 and 2 mixed. So very yellow. The sower's shirt is blue and his trousers white. Size 25 canvas, square. There are many hints of yellow in the soil, neutral tones resulting from mixing violet with yellow; but I have played hell somewhat with the truthfulness of the colours. I would much rather make naïve pictures out of old almanacs, those old "farmer's almanacs" in which hail, snow, rain, fair weather are depicted in a wholly primitive manner, like the one Anquetin has hit upon so well in his "Harvest." I won't hide from you that I don't dislike the country, as I have been brought up there- I am still charmed by the magic hosts of memories of the past, of a longing for the infinite, of which the sower, the sheaf are the symbols- just as much as before. (LB 7, 1888, p.492)

There is also his comment about the daily life of a Christian in his sermon:

I am a stranger on the earth, hide not Thy commandments from me. It is an old belief and it is a good belief, that our life is a pilgrim's progress – that we are strangers on the earth, but that though this be so, yet we are not alone for our Father is with us. We are pilgrims, our life is a long walk or journey from earth to heaven. The beginning of this life is this: there is only one who remembereth no more her sorrow and her anguish for joy that a man is born into the world. She is our Mother. The end of our pilgrimage is the entering in Our Father's house. (1876, p. 87)  
These two commandments: we must keep, and if we follow after these, if we are devoted to this, we are not alone, for our Father in Heaven is with us, helps us and guides us, gives us strength day by day, hour by hour, and so we do all things through Christ who gives us might. (1876, p.88)

Like Bunyan and Wesley, Van Gogh experienced being *born-again* during the time after his mission work for desperate miners failed. Finally, he decided to be a life-giver as an artist. Van Gogh reveals his thoughts about life:

When I was ill, I boldly disregarded some of the doctor's advice, not because I thought his advice wrong, or because I thought I knew better, but because I reasoned like this, 'Life means painting to me and not so much preserving my constitution.' Sometimes the mysterious words 'Whosoever shall lose his life shall find it' are as clear as daylight. (LR 34, 1883, p.380)

Van Gogh clearly articulated his artistic aim to his brother in 1882, acknowledging his shortcomings as an amateur and self-taught painter. He clearly said what he really wanted to

do with his works:

It seems to me it's a painter's duty to try to put an idea into his work. In this print I have tried to express but I cannot do it well or so strikingly as it is in reality; this is merely a weak reflection in a dark mirror what seems to me one of the strongest proofs of the existence of "something on high" in which Millet believed, namely the existence of God and eternity – certainly in the infinitely touching expression of such a little old man, which he himself is perhaps unconscious of, when he is sitting quietly in his corner by the fire (LT 248, 1882, p.495).

In letters to his sister, Wilhelmin, Van Gogh integrated two stories, the parable of the sower and the story of a grain of wheat. Van Gogh's dedication on the print he gave to da Costa was quoted:

The Kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow he knows not how. The earth produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle because the harvest has come. (See Mark 4:26-29)

He represented a grain of wheat as a metaphor for human life. In his letters he describes himself standing in that field which marginalised the real landscape and the Biblical context.

You see yourself that in nature many flowers are crushed underfoot, get frozen or scorched by the sun; the further that not every grain of wheat, after ripening, returns to the earth, there to germinate and become a new plant - but the great majority of grains of wheat do not attain their natural development, but go to the mill, isn't this true? ... Now as for comparing mankind to grains of corn. In every man who is healthy and natural there is a germinating force as in a grain of wheat. And so natural life is germination. What the germinating force is in the grain of wheat, love is in us. (LW 1, 1887, p.425)

He developed this theme in a later letter from Arles:

What else can one do, when we think of all the things we do not know the reason for, than go look at a field of wheat? The history of those plants is like our own; for aren't we, who live on bread, to a considerable extent like wheat, at least aren't we forced to submit to growing like a plant without the power to move, by which I mean in whatever way our imagination impels us, and to being reaped when we are ripe, like the same wheat? (LW 13, 1889, p.456)

In these letters to his sister, Van Gogh sought to attribute to God eternal Love. For him, love "never remains the same in a literal sense", but "the changes are like the ebb and flow of the tide which leaves the sea unchanged (LT 265, 1883, p.534).



Plate.5 *The Potato Eaters* 1885

In 1885, Van Gogh painted *The Potato Eaters* (Plate.5) a great achievement of his long self-taught period in his home country. Artistically it commences the pilgrimage from the darker tones of the Low Countries. It shows sympathy with the Eucharistic ceremony and the eating of bread in communion with others. Schapiro (1969, p.40) also characterised it “a sacrament for each one who has labored.” Van Gogh depicted *The Potato Eaters* with “Millet-like quality.” Van Gogh’s transcendent experience when he saw the first Millet painting laid a foundation for his paintings of people in the reality of their lives. Van Gogh invited the sowers, the real peasants realised by Millet, to the table structured by his inner canvas. The sower is also a digger, integrating both farmer’s and miner’s work in Van Gogh’s mind. In this way he followed Millet, whom he admired, by drawing many copies of the sower, yet he went further along this way of painting peasants, farmers, miners and their families. These were people who, traditionally, had not been painted by others.

Nothing seems simpler than painting peasants, but no subjects in painting are so difficult as these commonplace figures! ... To draw a peasant’s figure in action, I repeat, that’s what an essentially modern figure is, the very core of modern art, which neither the Greeks nor the Renaissance nor the old Dutch school have done. (LT 418, 1885, p.402)

Kodera (1990, p.74) strenuously insists that “Van Gogh did not ascribe biblical meaning only to digging peasants, but to digging figures in general.” Lubin (1996, p.55) noted that “having announced from the Borinage in July 1880 that he had decided once and for all to become an artist, he moved into the house of a miner named Decrucq”. Van Gogh could now give expression to his artistic vocation which had been unfulfilled while he was in his ministry to

suffering miners. By continuing to live within this community and take his models from it he could devote both his heart and his soul to his art. Theo had sent Vincent copies of Millet's works including: *Diggers*, *The Sower*, *Winter: The Plain of Chailly* (LT 611, 1889, p.224) and he used these as templates or patterns for his own compositions. Van Gogh wrote to his brother about the two character's eyes in *The Potato Eaters*: "I prefer painting people's eyes to cathedrals, for there is something in the eyes that is not in the cathedral" (LT 441, 1885, p.462). This was not the first occasion on which Van Gogh believed God's light was reflected in the eyes. He had written in an earlier letter to Theo:

I think I see something deeper, more infinite, more eternal than the ocean in the expression of the eyes of a little baby when it wakes in the morning, and coos and or laughs because it sees the sun shining on its cradle. If there is a 'ray from on high,' perhaps one can find it there. (LT 242, 1882, p.482)

When in the Borinage Van Gogh had written movingly of a young girl's eyes:

There was a little girl there in the stable that night-in the Borinage-a little brown peasant girl ... she had tears of compassion in her eyes for the poor cow when the poor thing was in throes and was having great trouble. It was pure, holy, wonderful, beautiful. (LT 181, 1882, p.325)

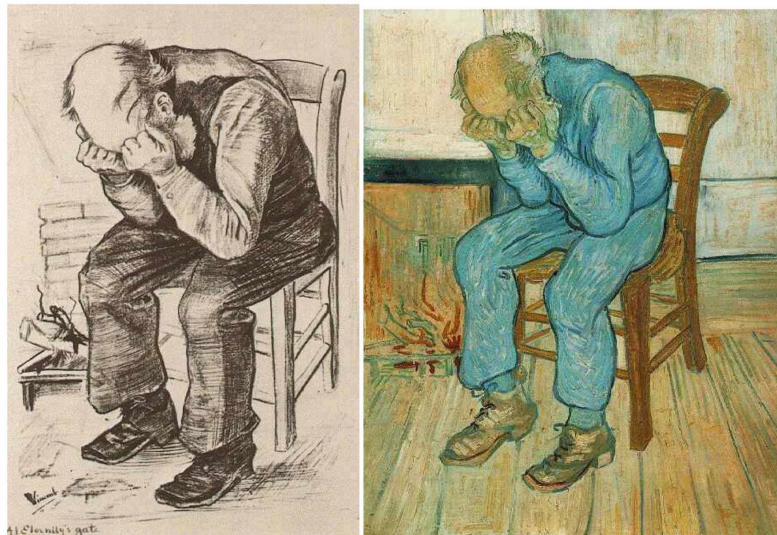


Plate.6 *Old man with his Head in his Hands* 1882 Plate.7 *Old man in Sorrow* 1890

For *Old man with his Head in his Hands (at Eternity's Gate)* (Plate.6), Van Gogh wrote "the fact that the poorest little woodcutter or peasant on the hearth or miner can have moments of emotion and inspiration that give him a feeling of an eternal home, and of being close to it (LT 248, 1883, p.493). He recreated *Old man in Sorrow (On the Threshold of Eternity)* (Plate.7),

towards the end of his life. While the latter is located in the vanishing point beside a roaring fire, the former is a bit more focused on the posture of the old man.



Plate.8 *Sower* 1882. Plate.9 *Sower (Study)* 1883. Plate.10 *Sower* 1888. Plate.11 *The Sower* 1889

Van Gogh's development of his craft and his expertise in representing people is in evidence in the series of the *Sower* most especially *Sower* (Plate.8) This work is differentiated from Van Gogh's early *Sowers* in the Low Countries (Plate.9) by the vibrant sky and richly impacted ground. It is classified as a landscape but is also a thematic as a chronicle of the *Sower* in his oeuvre. *The Sower* (Plate.11) has a high viewpoint which locates the horizon line substantially above the mid-point of the picture. The sower, standing on the vanishing line is juxtaposed with a flying crow and the end of a road which joins another vanishing line. All the elements such as the sower, road, and the crows are on vanishing lines that are perpendicular to the painting plate, converging at a single point, into the Sun, on the horizon. The sun, therefore, painted chrome yellow is located at the apex of the triangle.

In another painting, *Sower* (Plate.10), is the new figure with colour in 1888. The *Sower* in Arles has a high viewpoint which locates the horizon line substantially above the mid-point of the picture. The sower, standing on the vanishing line is juxtaposed with a flying crow and the end of a road which joins another vanishing line. All the elements such as the sower, road, and

the crows are on vanishing lines that are perpendicular to the painting plate, converging at a single point, into the Sun, on the horizon. The sun, therefore, painted chrome yellow is located at the apex of the triangle. From this point of view, the pilgrim in his sermon becomes the sower in Arles.

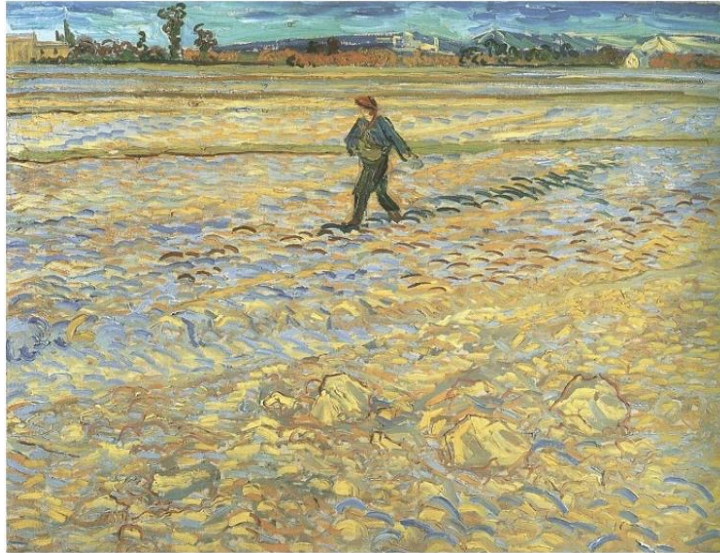


Plate.12 *Sower* 1888

Here, peasant is transformed to pilgrim. This is an expression of the holistic pilgrim spirit and the artistic passion of Van Gogh. Living with his parents in Nuenen he had devoted himself to learning and developing his art and had painted about fifty peasants' heads at that time (Meier-Graefe 1922, p.36). The sower is not only a stranger in the spring but also will be reaper as in the glory of pilgrimage (Plate.12). Although there is a change in the actual landscape from Holland to Arles, Van Gogh's sower remains the expression of his inner faith and a belief in a plentiful harvest. He can visualise from his memory: "I have been brought up there". The sower, who is "longing for the infinite," becomes the reaper in the field of harvest (LB 7, 1888, p.492). In Arles, Van Gogh is still in search of God's light: "God is a lighthouse whose beam flashes on and off, an occulting lighthouse, and if this should be the case we are passing through the eclipse now (LT 543, 1888, p.56).

#### **4.12 The symbol of the boat**

The boat is a significant element in Christ's ministry and Van Gogh was spiritually moved by Delacroix's, *Christ asleep during tempest* by Delacroix. While Jesus is sleeping his disciples try to lower the sails in the storm. One of them tried to wake his master. Jesus in the boat is

likely to be an expression of being completely in the presence of divine power which is a sign of the partial implementation of the Kingdom of God. The experience of the disciples in the boat is an extension of that divine presence of the One who is the instrument of its arrival in the world. In addition, Jesus made a long journey, to Sidon and to the Decapolis which are Gentile areas; the boat is an important instrument in the ministry for proclaiming the kingdom of God. The boat which was taken by Jesus and his disciples is the means of crossing a sea in the New Testament. According to Charlesworth (2006, p.36), it is conceivable that Christian form the West, made the sign of a boat, an early Christian symbol, and saluted their arrival at the place. For Van Gogh, a boat is a vessel that symbolises his journey. He emphasises complementary colour contrast as a tonal concern. As a painter, Van Gogh preached about a floating boat:

Our life, we might compare it with a journey, we go from the place where we were born to a far-off haven. Our earlier life might be compared to sailing, on a river, but very soon the waves become higher, the wind more violent, we are at sea almost before we are aware of it – and the prayer from the heart ariseth to God: Protect me O God, for my bark is so small and Thy sea is so great ... They that go down to the sea in ships that do business in great waters, these see the works of the Lord and His wonders in the deep. (Van Gogh, 1876, p.88)



Plate.13 *View of the Sea at Scheveningen* 1882. Plate.14 *Fishing in the Spring, the Pont de Clichy* 1887.  
 Plate.15 *With Seascape at Sainte-Maries* 1888. Plate.16 *Fishing boats on the Beach at Sainte-Maries* 1888.



Van Gogh depicts boats as main subjects in six paintings. His artistic sailing started from Holland. “The passions are the little ship’s sails ... he who hoists the Ambition & Co. sail and no other on his mast, sail through life on a straight course without accidents, without wavering (LT 157, 1881, p.264). His journey begins with *View of the Sea at Scheveningen* (Plate.13). His metaphorical boat is loaded with what he took from his homeland: his self-taught artistry and his Christian ministry. His stopover in Paris is represented by *Fishing in the Spring, the Pont de Clichy (Asnières)* (Plate.14). *With Seascape at Sainte-Maries* (Plate.15), it is as if his boat keeps company with other, each searching for its own route to harbour. Reaching shore in *Fishing boats on the Beach at Sainte-Maries* (Plate.16), Van Gogh appealed to nature when he wrote of his actual journey:

I spent a week at Saints-Maries, and to get there I drove in a diligence across the Camargue with its vineyards, moors and flat fields like Holland. There, at Saints-Maries, were girls who reminded one of Cimabue and Giotto – thin, straight, somewhat sad and mystic. On the perfectly flat, sandy beach little green, red, blue boats, so pretty in shape and color that they made one think of flowers. (LB 6, 1888, p.490)

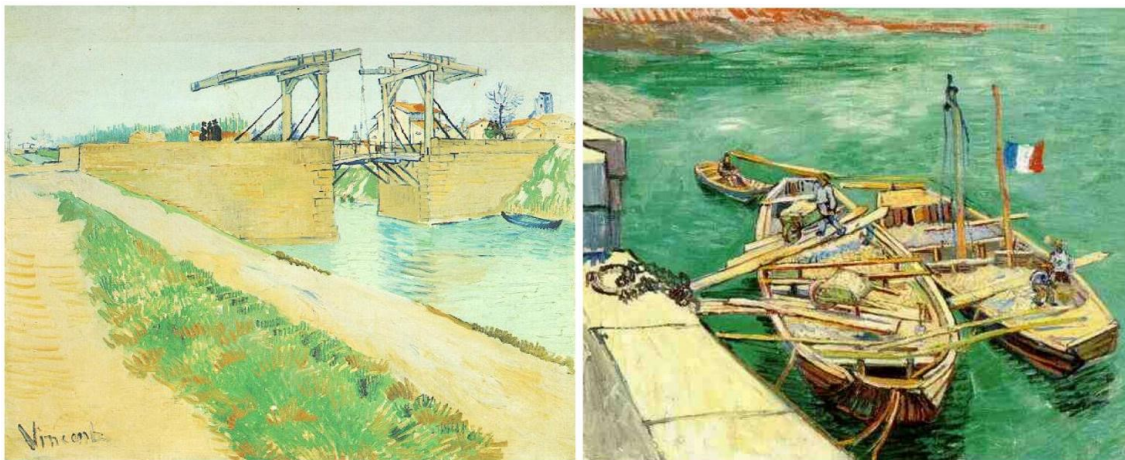


Plate.17, *Langlois Bridge at Arles alongside the Canal* 1888. Plate.18 *Quay with sand barges* 1888.

He travelled up the water passing *Langlois Bridge at Arles alongside the Canal* (Plate.17) and finally, he anchored in Arles on the Rhône painting *Quay with sand barges* (Plate.18), writing that “two boats are pink tinged with violet, the water is bright green, no sky, a tricolor on the mast (LT 524, 1888, p.14). The reaper can be symbolised by fishermen on boats whether reminding one of Icelandic fishermen or of Jesus’s disciples. The similar hue and colour of the water in the river Rhône is reproduced in his works which have been fertilised by Delacroix’s colour choice.

I have just said to Gauguin about this picture that when he and I were talking about the fishermen of Iceland and of their mournful isolation, exposed to all dangers, alone on the sad sea- I have just said to Gauguin that following those intimate talks of ours the idea came to me to paint a picture in such a way that sailors, who are at once children and martyrs, seeing it in the cabin of their Icelandic fishing boat, would feel the old sense of being rocked come over them and remember their own lullabies (LT 574, 1889, 129).

I believe that if one placed this canvas just as it is in a boat, even one of Icelandic fishermen, there would be some who would feel the lullaby in it (Bakker, 2010, p.148).

Just as with his paintings of people, Van Gogh's boats are the ordinary craft that are seen daily on the waterways and that are worked hard. They differ from the style and detailed features which were painted by Impressionists in his time. Van Gogh abandoned “what he learned in Paris” and transformed “the ideas I had in the country, before I knew the Impressionists (LB 4, 1888, p.480). Through a transformation of his colour and hue in Arles, Van Gogh has harvested abundant results of quality and creativity as an artistic reaper. With these paintings “boat” becomes a “sower” with the boat as a conveyance for a journey to heaven that is finally completed in eternity.



Plate.19 *Starry Night on the River Rhône* 1888

Coincidentally, there are two floating boats in the river in *Starry Night on the River Rhône* (Plate.19) Van Gogh's long journey across the sea in search of celestial colour, is completed when he reached the harbour at the starry night. His artistic progress has gone well from “the loving breast of our Mother” to the arms of our Father in heaven. He is still “being sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” because of “for those who believe in Jesus Christ (LT 87, 1877, p.97). In

the stage of his last journey to heaven, he reached a town beyond the hill. There is a relative marginality because of using low eye level to emphasise “the larger scope of existence.” Within the lightless church and dusky coloured town as limited and finite are contrasted magnificently dancing stars with coiling spiral nebula as a dominantly infinite space.

Schapiro (1969, p.101) describes *Starry Night* as “one of the rare visionary pictures inspired by a religious mood.” This dispels the notion that the spiral-shape was an optical illusion due to Van Gogh's epilepsy. Sund (1988, p.672) suggested it represented “the limits of earthly life and its relative marginality in the larger scope of existence.” For Van Gogh, in Southern France, the starry night becomes a “celestial orb” and resembles “the combination of celestial blues and yellows in paintings by Vermeer of Delft (LT 539, 1888, p.42). The sky or starry firmament is expressed with the imagery of the kingdom of God or heaven which is the final goal as a pilgrim and symbolised God and eternity.

Van Gogh had the colour of a starry night in his mind when he wrote: “a starry night, the figure of Christ in blue, all the strongest blues, and the angel broken lemon yellow” (LT 540, 1888, p.47). It means that the contrast of "light" and "dark" does not symbolise good and evil in his canvas. In other words, Van Gogh did not merely symbolise the victory of brightness over darkness. It symbolises the dark night of the soul as described by John of the Cross, a spiritual crisis in the journey of the soul from its bodily home to its union with God.

#### **4.13 Pilgrim Spirit**

It has been a commonplace to describe human life as a journey and religious life as a pilgrimage. In T. S. Eliot's words, “what we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from” (2001, p.32). Pilgrimage or journey is one of the constant narrative features of the Bible. From Abraham's journey to those of his descendants such as Isaac, Jacob, and Moses, readers of the Old Testament need to find a key for understanding the biblical message. There is a process: the calling of God, the transformation of a man into a pilgrim, and submission to God's guidance. Pilgrimage is the coherent and repeated way that originates in other times and places in all parts of the Old Testament. Human beings are recommended to be holy, “for I the LORD your God am holy” (The Bible, Leviticus 19:2).

It is necessary to distinguish pilgrimage in the conventional sense and contemporary understanding. The former is the way of a devotional and ritualised pilgrim who follows the path set by the church., for example a pilgrim on the way, without detour, to Santiago de Compostela. The latter is an intentionally chosen journey on a sacred path that leads to goals that vary depending on the pilgrims themselves. This may include travelling to recognised shrines at times of life change because a shrine represents an oasis of greater stability and order (Morinis 1992, p.11). However, it can also involve acts of piety or acts of charity or, as in Van Gogh's case, dedication to an entire way of life.

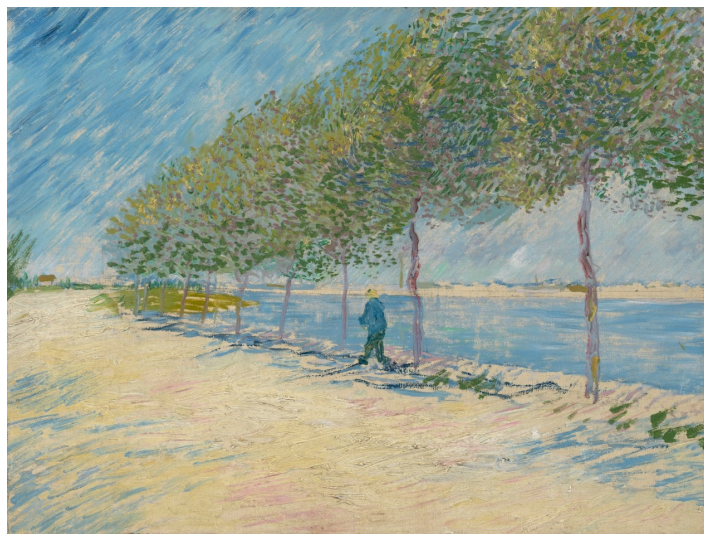


Plate.20 *Road along the Seine near Asnières* 1888

Pilgrimage is transformational. Schmidt (2009, p.70) distilled the three modes of transformational pilgrim who has elements in common with the journeying undertaken by the shaman and hero: (a) separation, (b) initiation or awakening, and (c) return. Neither shaman nor hero, this pilgrim is someone who thinks life is an intentional spiritual journey. This is how Van Gogh may be perceived. In 1887, he painted *Road along the Seine near Asnières* (Plate.20). Van Gogh was always on the road whatever his careers, be it as an art dealer, minister in training, or painter.

#### **4.13.1 Conflicted origins**

Unlike his contemporary painters, Van Gogh had a tendency to obsess about his artistic roots. A distinction can be made between the art of the Low Countries, based on reality, and Italian art, based on the ideal. Van Gogh would have understood the genre of Italian Renaissance

paintings from his time as an art dealer as well as knowledge familiar to his contemporaries from academy training. While painting in the style of the Low Countries, Van Gogh introduced into his painting some of the ideal. Conversely, he portrayed the ideal by painting the real. Van Gogh noted: “My attention is so fixed on what is possible and really exists that I hardly have the desire or the courage to strive for the ideal as it might result from my abstract studies (LB 19, 1888, p.518).

There is a marginal mixture of interior ideal and exterior nature. To be more concrete, Van Gogh wants to be a minister through being a sower of the Word of God, like the *Marginal Jew* (Meier,1991), Jesus Christ, transformed his vocation into that of the artistic pilgrim seeking to find God in art as well as in nature. Although Van Gogh failed in his ministry in the Borinage, he drew a miner so that “those unknown or little-known types would be brought before the eyes of the people (LT 136, 1880, p.206).

Van Gogh's frame of mind as a pilgrim is repeated in what he painted, what he paints, and what he will paint. In his reflections, Van Gogh often considered where his art originated from, what he, himself, was, and where he would be brought to on his pilgrimage. This introspection can be seen in his letters, from Arles and Saint-Rémy. He was troubled by a perceived conflict with the different aesthetic concerns arising from the Dutch artistic tradition with its dark tones and the new more colourful Impressionism in France (LT 552, 1888, p. 79 / LW 4, 1888, p.431). Van Gogh wrote to his Dutch friend Van Rappard that

we must not have any illusions about ourselves, but be prepared to be misunderstood, despised and slandered, and yet we shall have to keep up our courage and enthusiasm... I shall go my own way. (LR 17, 1882, p.342)

The pilgrim spirit underlies the synthesis of his art and his faith on the way. Even though his reality was one of poverty and hard work, he never stopped self-studying, drawing and painting; “not a day without a line.” (LT 140, 1881, p.213)

#### **4.13.2 At the margins**

Van Gogh often depicted the character such as sower, reaper, and peasants either on the road or in a marginal area in his landscapes. The marginality of these characters symbolised the narrow road less travelled until reaching the infinite and eternal. Van Gogh is also standing on the narrow marginal road less travelled. Marginality is not only the context of marginal theology

but also the method of marginal theology. (Lee 1995, p.3) Academic research suggests that the modification of consciousness in adulthood arises through the experience of marginality. Marginality is understood as a stage or phase in a social process in which those who experienced transformation emerge from a period of social uncertainty and ambiguity (Musgrove 1977, p.34). Lee elaborated on the six features of marginal people: rejection; humiliation; alienation; loneliness; nothingness; and allness. He wrote:

Rejection comes through various forms of exclusivism which set apart those who are different. The second emotion felt by marginal people is humiliation which is certainly a dehumanising process. The third feeling explicit to the marginal experience is alienation. Another emotion is loneliness which results from total alienation. The more we want to avoid loneliness, the more we need to be a part of that which rejects us. The fifth feeling is nothingness, which is an extreme form of the marginal experience. The sixth sensibility is allness, which is the opposite of nothingness and is possible because of it. Thus, allness is the fullest expression of nothingness and is the affirmation of marginality. (1995, pp.162-168)

Lee (1995, p.155) proposes that “the commitment of marginal people to the *communitas* of Love (*koinonia*) is the power to overcome marginalisation.” The life of Jesus Christ was a life of marginality. The infant Jesus was marginalised when Herod decreed that all male babies were to be killed and Jesus’ parents took the infant Jesus to Egypt, where they lived in exile until Herod died. Jesus ministered in the marginalised area between mountain and town, on the east side Jews and on the west side pagans. There is a marginal tension when Jesus stayed alone and preached to people. “The people Jesus called to be his disciples were marginal people. None came from the religious political establishment ... Most were fishermen, except for a tax collector and a clerk, Judas, who betrayed Jesus (Lee 1995, p.85). Jesus, too, often walked along the marginal edge: between Jews and Samaritans, between the opponent and the follower, and between the present and the kingdom of God. There are always the sick, poor, foreigners, and widows. The Beatitudes were given to marginal people such as the poor, the meek, and the mourner as described in Matthew chapter 5.

Meier’s *A Marginal Jew* (1991) describes the historical Jesus in the context of his life and how he might have been viewed by his contemporaries. Meier, renowned Professor of Theology at Notre Dame University, considers Jesus the Jew in his relationships with other Jews and seeks to situate Jesus within first-century Palestinian Judaism. Noting that his teaching and ministry were highly valued he nevertheless describes Jesus as the marginal Jew.

In Mark 4:10, the story of Jesus's ministry is divided into two circles, the inner and the outer group. The actors are from a markedly narrower circle that is made up of the twelve disciples, and an extended group of followers that in principle are to be identified with Jesus' real family (Hartman 2010, p.172). There is clearly a distinction between the disciples and "those outside" (The Bible, Mark 4:11). It does not distinguish between the disciples and the crowd who have just heard Jesus teaching on the lakeshore, but between those who have become disciples through repentance and forgiveness, and those who through failure in this regard have placed themselves in a situation of permanent exclusion from the kingdom of God.



Plate.21 Delacroix, *Christ asleep during tempest* 1853

One of Van Gogh's favourite paintings by Delacroix, *Christ asleep during tempest* (Plate.21) highlights the imagery of the boat in the New Testament.

Ah! That lovely picture by Delacroix. Christ in the boat on the sea of Gennesaret. He – with his pale citron-colored aureole- luminously asleep against that patch of dramatic violet, somber blue, blood red, the group of mortally frightened disciples – on that terrible emerald sea, rising up, rising up to the very height of the frame. I should make some sketches of it for you. (LB 8, 1888, p.497)

There are reasons why Jesus used a boat in the New Testament. The first time he gets into it to escape the pressure of the multitude and is pushed out a little way from the land. The second is as a means for crossing the water or sea, which symbolised chaos or leviathan, called the "wriggling serpent" (Hunter 1999, p.72). There is clearly a marginality of Jesus' ministry between the multitude and solitariness. Some elements of marginality are identifiable in Van

Gogh's religious and artistic transformation; the marginal temperament of his real life as an art dealer and the ideal vocation as a more creative something, the marginal vocation of the preacher and artist, the marginality of naturalism and impressionism, the marginality of private art and the artist's community, the marginal pilgrim between religion and art. While Meier concentrates on the human Jesus in his society, one may see Jesus as marginal in the sense that he is both human and divine. These two elements can be applied to the work of Van Gogh where ordinary subjects may have a transcendent quality. His style and colour in Southern France shows the sharp change as a paradigm shift. Not long after arriving in Arles, he made a lot of rural friends such as Roulin's family, the Zouave soldier, an old peasant, Ginoux, and priest. For this reason, Van Gogh would be transformed into a "wounded healer," which is Henri Nouwen's description.

#### **4.14 From minister of the Word to minister through art**

With regard to his involvement with the English Church, Van Gogh was enthusiastic in his duties as assistant teacher and, then, as secretary to the Methodist minister at Isleworth church in 1876. He was particularly pleased at the opportunity to preach. Moreover, he was exposed to the social concerns of Methodism which served him when he went to work with the Borinage coal miners. Van Gogh hoped to learn from Rev. Jones when he worked for him as a secretary. He trusted Rev. Jones as a ministerial worker and may have seen their relationship as comparable that of Elijah and Elisha. He wrote to Theo: "Have you ever read the story of Elijah and Elisha properly? I've been reading it again these last few days, and am enclosing what I've copied out (LT 72, 1876, p.63).

Returning to the Netherlands, Van Gogh spent time on furthering his Biblical studies for the theological school entrance exam and despite failing he still seemed intent on a life as a missionary. During this period he had time to personalise his own faith through learning with a tutor and others. However, he repeatedly complained that "I wish ... I had already done a lot of the difficult work of a Christian labourer and minister of the gospel and a sower of the word (LT 89, 1877, p.99)," and "for a sower of the word, as I hope to become just like for a sower of corn in the field (LT 93, 1877, p.104).

Van Gogh confronted a new question in Arles. The extensive correspondence with Theo and Bernard shows how he began to respond to the problem of what it meant for him to be a



painter. It ironically became his dilemma as he tried to make an idealistic balance between landscape and portrait. The threat of his depression is another problem, although he “stopped drinking, stopped smoking too much (LT 481, 1888, p.557). Van Gogh began to make more explicit progress in his struggle with contemplation on his future. For his personal and spiritual needs, Van Gogh reinterprets the meaning of solitude as a painter. He does not want to remain as a stranger, as he was in Paris. He notes:

I only wish that they would succeed in proving to us something that would tranquillise and comfort us so that we might stop feeling guilty and wretched, and could go on just as we are without losing ourselves in solitude and nothingness, and not have to stop at every step in a panic, or calculate nervously the harm we may unintentionally be doing to other people. That queer fellow Giotto, whose biographer says that he was always in pain and always full of ardor and ideas, there, that's what I should like to achieve, such a self-confidence that more easily in the country or in a small town than in the furnace of Paris. (LT 543, 1888, p.56)

Of course, Van Gogh aimed to find his new experiences of colour and light for both landscapes and portraits in the South of France. Although Aurier described Van Gogh's expectation as that of “an exalted believer, a devourer of beautiful Utopias” his expectation was not for individual spontaneous creation but a hope for communion with other artists. An example is both he and Gauguin painting sunflowers and portraits together. It is interesting that the time in the Yellow House was the only short period in Van Gogh's whole life as a painter in which he had an opportunity to have both a studio and a bedroom. In that moment, he was not satisfied to have his own studio but, following in the steps of Christ, he thought about others who suffered and struggled to survive. Theo, recognised this spiritual generosity of Vincent, and, after Van Gogh left for southern France, in a letter sent to their sister wrote: “Furthermore, he has such a great heart that he is always trying to do something for others. So much the worse for those who do not know him or want to understand him (LT, 530, 1888, p.22). Finally, Van Gogh has reintegrated the new perspective, renewed dedication to his artistic mission. There is the moment of aesthetic dimension as well as spiritual contemplation. Here is confessional self-judgment:

I am having two oak frames made for my new peasant's head and for my Poet study. Oh, my dear brother, sometimes I know so well what I want. I can very well do without God both in my life and in my painting, but I cannot, ill as I am, do without something which is greater than I, which is my life –the power to create. And if, frustrated in the physical power, a man tries to create thoughts instead of children, he is still part of humanity. (LT 531, 1888, p.25)

#### 4.15 Van Gogh's triptych

Van Gogh copied recognised masters' works with his own distinctive compositional style and chromatic effects, a practice that he followed with all his copied works. He painted copies or paraphrases from the works of other artists. He focused on the contrast between Mannerism and Dutch painters. From the religious point of view, Van Gogh notes that

The Italian primitives — Botticelli, the Flemish primitives — Van Eyck, and Germans Cranach — they are nothing but heathens who interest me only in the same respect as the Greeks, as Velazquez and so many other naturalists. (LB 4, 1888, p.480)

His letters, when describing his artistic techniques, repeat the refrain of sorrowful yet rejoicing.

Some time ago I read an article on Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Giotto and Botticelli. Good Lord! It did make an impression on me reading the letters of those men. I have tried to put something of that into one of the pictures painted in a very thick impasto, citron yellow and lime green. Giotto moved me most — always in pain, and always full of kindness and enthusiasm, as though he were already living in a different world from ours. (LT 539, 1888, p.43)

Recopying helped Van Gogh fulfil his need for both his artistic self-education and his artistic innovation. In addition, during difficult times, copying the works of the masters was his consolation. “Many people do not copy, many others do – I started on it accidentally, and I find that it teaches me things, and above all it sometimes gives me consolation” (LT 607, 1889, p.216). Some thirty-six works Van Gogh copied whilst a patient at Saint-Rémy still exist.

Although Van Gogh makes repeated references to Christian faith, Christ, and the Bible, he only painted a few scenes from the Bible. He created no original composition of Christ. There is a small card with a picture of Christ crowned with thorns in the Van Gogh Museum. On this card Van Gogh wrote a slightly altered passage from Romans 8:38-39: “Nothing shall separate us from the love of Christ nor things present nor things to come.” Van Gogh defines clearly that a painter who metaphorically expressed “the living” needs to transform the whole old society into “new things all the more beautiful (LW 1 1887, p.426). Van Gogh's interest in reinterpreting the images of Christ's life by Rembrandt and Delacroix reflects his spiritual engagement, an interest in chromatics, and a pious desire to represent Christ. He wrote to Bernard:

Ah — E. Delacroix's beautiful painting — Christ's boat on the sea of Gennesaret, he — with his pale lemon halo — sleeping, luminous — within the dramatic violet,

dark blue, blood-red patch of the group of stunned disciples. On the terrifying emerald sea, rising, rising all the way up to the top of the frame. Ah — the brilliant sketch. (LB 8, 1888, p. 497)

In another letter to Bernard he wrote that “the figure of Christ, as I feel it, has been painted only by Delacroix and Rembrandt.”

Those Dutchmen had hardly any imagination or fantasy, but their great taste and their scientific knowledge of composition were enormous. They have not painted Jesus Christ, the Good God and so on— although Rembrandt did in fact – but he is the only one. He is only one, the exception, who has done Christ, etc.... And in his case it is hardly like anything whatever done by the other religious painters; it is a metaphysical magic... (LB 8, 1888, p.495)



Plate.22, Delacroix. *Pietà* 1850.

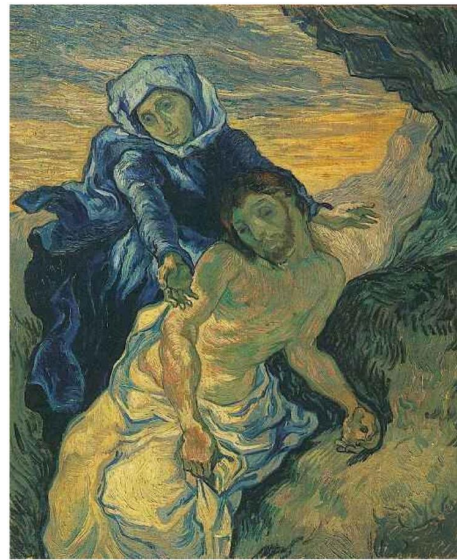


Plate.23 *Pietà* (after Delacroix) 1889

Delacroix paints a Christ by means of the unexpected effect of a bright citron-yellow note, a colourful luminous note which possesses the same unspeakable strangeness and charm in the picture as a star does in a corner of the firmament. Rembrandt works with tonal values in the same way Delacroix works with colors. Now there is a great distance between Delacroix’s and Rembrandt’s method and that of all the rest of religious painting (LB 12, 1888, p.504). Van Gogh’s only painting of Christ is his 1889 interpretation of Delacroix’s *Pietà* (Plate.22). At this time, he notes:

The Delacroix is a *Pietà*, i.e. a dead Christ with the Mater Dolorosa. The exhausted corpse lies bent forward on its left side at the entrance to a cave, its hands outstretched, and the woman stands behind. It’s an evening after the storm, and this desolate, blue-clad figure stands out – its flowing clothes blown about by the wind – against a sky in which violet clouds fringed with gold are floating ... With its

flowing clothes this figure is almost as wide in extent as it's tall. And as the dead man's face is in shadow, the woman's pale head stands out brightly against a cloud – an opposition which makes these two heads appear to be a dark flower with a pale flower, arranged expressly to bring them out better. (LW 14, 1889, p.457)

It can be seen that his concerns relate to artistic issues of composition and tone. Van Gogh describes the contrast between citron-yellow and violet, while Delacroix expresses Christ and Mater Dolorosa with four colours (Plate.23). Schapiro (1969, p.9) evaluates that Van Gogh's pure colours are a revolution in an art which had made much of purity and strength of colour while chastening it by various means. For this reason, it is remarkable that Van Gogh's colours are similar to primitive art or the early medieval era. In his letters, Van Gogh's only reference to *The Good Samaritan* (Plate.24) refers to his intention to paint it, an indication, surely, that its significance for him was as an artistic exercise. Once again it is a mirror image with colour experiment, for example replaced Delacroix's red cloak with yellow. The background is more textured with blue and violet tones.



Plate.24 *The Good Samaritan* 1889. Plate.25 Vivant-Denon *The Holy Family in the evening* 1787.

Van Gogh hung the etching after Rembrandt, *The Holy Family in the evening* (Plate.25) in the Hague. There are two women beside the cradle in the centre of the picture, one reading from the Bible by the light of a candle. Van Gogh notes that “great shadows cast a deep chiaroscuro all over the room (LT 213, 1882, p.400). In Saint-Rémy, Van Gogh painted *The Raising of Lazarus* (Plate.26) with the colours violet, yellow, white of the cave and the corpse, the woman with green dress and orange hair, the other with black hair and a garment painted green and pink. His description is that “the combination of colors would thus itself speak of the same

expressed by the chiaroscuro of the etching (LT 590, 1890, p.164). He was seeking both tonal values and the colourful impression of chiaroscuro.



Plate.26 *The Raising of Lazarus* 1890

The colours to which he was very attached in his oeuvre are blue, yellow, and purple. The blue is used to express eternity or longing, with black or grey in *Starry Night on the River Rhône*. The yellow is contained in the sun, which also substituted for Christ in *The Raising of Lazarus*. The vital tones of yellow with orange are painted in landscapes on his canvases. The aesthetic feature of Van Gogh's paintings with daring backgrounds of intense yellow and contrasting blue was very individual. According to Schapiro (1969, p.7), it reflects "the great mosaics of the early Christian and Byzantine period." According to Hammacher (1982, p.23), Van Gogh was never in Italy, but he knew their reproductions; he had read about Giotto, Fra Angelico, and other such early Italian artists. Schapiro's analysis is that Van Gogh knew only one red, one yellow, one blue, so that the particular tint or intensity represents that colour in general, universally. Through his Christian faith and reading of the classical Christian books, one can be sure that Van Gogh invested deep theological and spiritual significance in his favourite colours such as yellow, blue, and red.

#### **4.16 Life's harvest: death and resurrection**

Little critical attention has been paid to *Landscape at Auvers in the rain* (Plate.27), painted in the rain, June, 1890. There is a tiny figure of a reaper on the left at the front on his canvas. Van

Gogh has finally transformed a sower into a reaper; going far away beyond realism and Impressionism in the last stage of his life.



Plate.27 *Landscape at Auvers in the rain* 1890

That is to say, there is a portrait of a reaper in a landscape, and a landscape drawn makes an impression in the reality, still working to cast a rustic eye on earth and on life, as the train passes by.

Yesterday in the rain I painted a large landscape viewed from a height in which there are fields as far as the eye can see, different types of greenery, a dark green field of potatoes, between the regular plants the lush, violet earth, a field of peas in flower whitening to the side, a field of pink-flowered lucerne with a small figure of a reaper, a field of long, ripe grass, fawn in hue, then wheatfields, poplars, a last line of blue hills on the horizon, at the bottom of which a train is passing, leaving behind it an immense trail of white smoke in the greenery. A white road crosses the canvas. On the road a little carriage and white houses with stark red roofs beside this road. Fine rain streaks the whole with blue or grey lines. (LW 12, 1890, p.230)

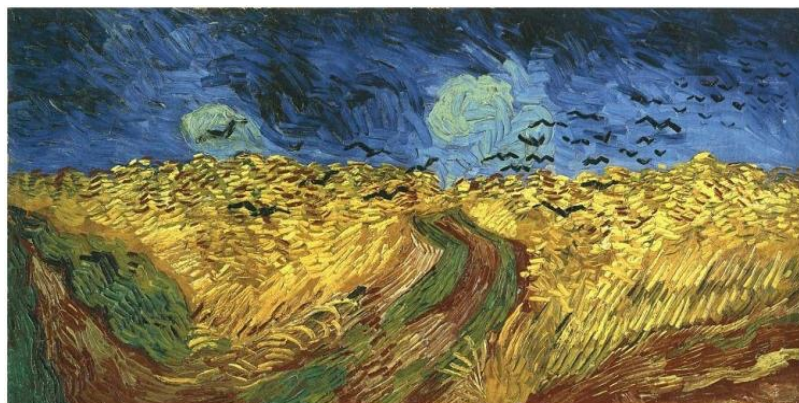


Plate.28 *Wheatfield with Crows* 1890

In stark contrast to this gentle depiction, *Wheatfield with Crows* (Plate.28), long-considered to be Van Gogh's final painting, portrays a different harvest. Many art critics and experts have

considered it to have dark association. For example, Graetz (1963, p. 278) notes “overripe” wheat as a “huge wildfire.” Unlike Graetz, Sund (2000, p.296), despite referring to the crows’ sad and lonely tenor, focuses on the visual expression of the vista of wheat under heavy skies. However, it seems hardly necessary to disintegrate into the heart of a maelstrom, as the symbolism of *wheatfield* can be gleaned from the written sources. Van Gogh described the reaper, a vague figure fighting like a devil in the midst of the heat to finish his task, which was to overcome “the image of death (LT 604, 1889, p.202). This image is not dreadful or ill-omened but reminds us of the famous Biblical message, about a grain of wheat in John 12:24. In Greek, a grain of wheat is *κόκκος τού σίτου*. Ignatius used this imagery: I am God’s wheat and will be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts (Beasley-Murray, 1999, p.211). Van Gogh understood that wheat and painter become in death the seed for the next sowing. He described himself as a reaper who was “a figure fighting like a devil in the midst of the heat (LT 604, 1889, p.202). He considered that not only is the sower an appropriate response to the metaphorical language of the Bible, but a grain is the symbolic language of the Bible as much as it is an artist’s destiny.

What the germinating force is in the grain of wheat, love is in us. Now I think we are apt to stand staring with a long face, and at all loss for words, as soon as we are frustrated in our natural development and see this germination made impossible, and find ourselves placed in a situation as hopeless as that of the wheat between the millstones must be. (LW 1, 1887, p.425)

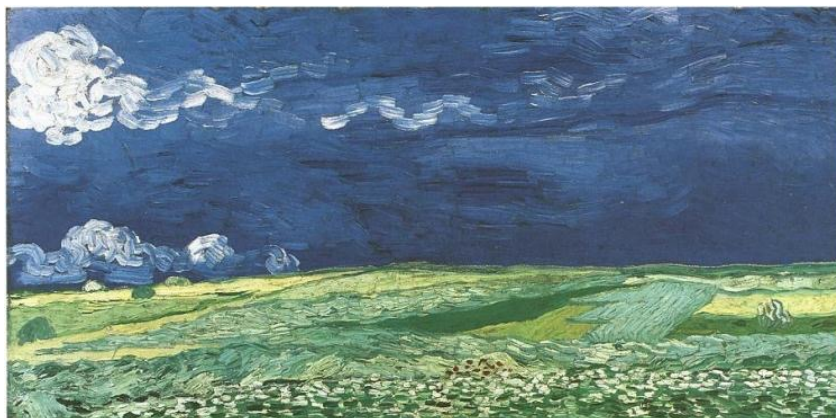


Plate.29 *Wheatfield under Thunderclouds* 1890

In this perspective, the viewer is only focused on looking at the wheatfield, either deleting the threatening sky from the canvas *Wheatfield with Crows* or juxtaposing it with *Wheatfield under Thunderclouds* (Plate.29). Then, one would reach the wheatfield itself and the land that he walked and painted with fortifying forces. For Van Gogh, agony and obstacle in his life is no

different to the suffering for the new creation. Through a confirmation of his feeling for nature, he suggests a metaphor of the artistry of Christ by presenting the same great themes of nature. Both the imagery of a grain and a reaper in his canvases were different ways of presenting himself and of Christ's message. It would be possible to extend the grain of wheat which dies and bears much fruit, to the reaper, as the image of death extends to symbolise Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. Van Gogh had previously written about the link between nature and resurrection, describing his feelings about the spring season:

It was Sunday today, almost a spring day. This morning I took a long walk alone all through the city, in the park, along the boulevards. The weather was such that I think in the country they will have heard the lark sing for the first time. In short, there was something of resurrection in the atmosphere. (LT 453, 1886, p.496)

The symbol of resurrection is portrayed in what is now considered to be Van Gogh's final work, *Tree Roots* 1890 (Plate.30). Some years earlier, at the beginning of the artistic life, Van Gogh had written about roots in a letter to Theo:

The Roots shows some tree roots on sandy ground. Now I tried to put the same sentiment into the landscape as I put into the figure ... in the black, gnarled and knotty roots. Or rather, because I tried to be faithful to nature as I saw it, without philosophizing about it. (LT 195, 1882, p.360)

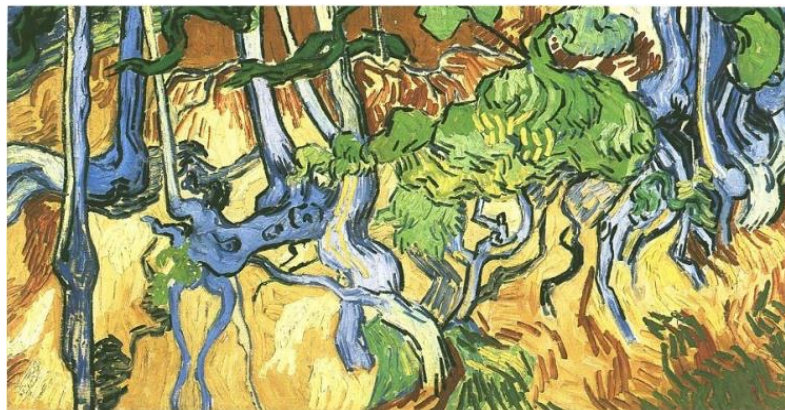


Plate.30 *Tree Roots* 1890

In the official website of the Van Gogh Museum, there is short introduction below the painting, *Tree Roots*:

Many people believe that the more dramatic *Wheatfield with Crows* is Van Gogh's final work. This colourful painting is a much likelier candidate, however, as he was unable to complete it, which helps explain its irregular, unfinished character. Theo's brother-in-law, Andries Bonger, described it as follows in a letter: 'The morning



before his death, he had painted an underwood [sous-bois], full of sun and life.’ (Van Gogh Museum 2015)

#### 4.17 Summary

This chapter examined religious context and influence in Van Gogh’s first vocation and artistic life. The selection of his letters and paintings discussed in this chapter represent a spiritual journey or pilgrimage for the artist which continued without vacillation until the tragic end of his life. For the young Van Gogh, his self-concept was to be a minister, and, after the transformation of his vocation after his period of reflection in the Borinage, to be an artist. He explored this new path with his sense of Christian faith and his personal vision of the Kingdom of God, the central teaching of Jesus Christ. Van Gogh transformed his experience of failure as a missionary into a new expectation to be a painter in the Borinage. As Paul was dedicated to living by the Law of Moses, yet nevertheless converted his zeal into becoming a follower of Christ, so Van Gogh still focused on the miners who were sorrowful but yet rejoicing, after he was transformed into a painter.

He became an artistic pilgrim and entered himself into passion, sorrow, and even illness. The plentiful, symbolic, expressions of faith in his art works can be traced through his letters to his religious view of life. After a long journey from Holland, Van Gogh finally arrived in Arles. Through a transformation of his colour and hue in Arles, Van Gogh harvested abundant results of quality and creativity as an artistic reaper. He described himself as “a traveller who is going somewhere and to a destination” and the boat in *Seascape at Sainte-Maries* were painted with green and red. The “painter” on the “boat”, in the “sea” is a “symphony in blue and yellow (LT 526, 1888, p.19).

Van Gogh's own reflective discourse brought him on a pilgrimage based on the parables of the sower and the grain of wheat through sowing, reaping and, ultimately, to death and resurrection. With the new transformative experiments in Arles, Van Gogh overcame the marginal features of rejection and alienation into the “allness” which created transformation of the self with love for nature and for the neighbour. This and the foregoing analysis and the theme of constant pilgrimage are the subjects of the next, and final, chapter of the thesis.

## **Chapter 5. Conclusion**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The aim of this thesis was to explore an approach to the spirituality of Vincent van Gogh, as both a minister of art and as an artist of the Gospel. The research question posed was whether there is evidence in his letters and selected art works to show that the path Van Gogh pursued throughout his life was to fulfil such a desire. The analysis revealed testimonies of Christian faith in his letters and paintings even though his works are not included in the genre of religious art. It demonstrated that his oeuvre portrays and leaves a deep impression of a spiritual transition. It showed that Van Gogh's religious faith cannot be separated from his artistic life. The paintings of Van Gogh were his life. It revealed a pilgrimage of suffering during which Van Gogh began to recognise that, for him, the goal of the transmission of the Gospel could be achieved through his art.

Van Gogh's Christian faith was established from the quotations in his letters and from his paintings. For Van Gogh the literary and visual arts were inseparable simply because they gave form to primary human experience. The object of research into Christian faith and spirituality is to examine the lived experience of the faith itself. It is through that lens that this thesis approached the life and work of Vincent van Gogh. It approached the different phases of his short life, both "sorrowful and rejoicing", as a series of life-changing transformations. The analysis revealed that through all his experiences there was a ceaseless journey; he was always on the road whatever his careers, be it as an art dealer, minister in training, or painter.

### **5.2 Lived experience**

It might be considered that because Van Gogh suffered from the extent of depression and isolation described in the research on his life that he would have difficulty in creating any meaningful relationships. Yet, he developed a web of relationships: his lovers, family, co-workers in church, the Borinage miners and the ordinary people he met. These relationships provide the contents, the objects, the environment, and the context of his experience. They provide the material from which his memories, thoughts, images, and decisions were formed. In this thesis the details of Van Gogh's life were explored to help understand his passion for transmitting the Gospel.

There was marked development of his religious faith and self-identity when he left his family to live and work in different places in the Netherlands, in London, and Paris. Working for the Goupil & Cie art dealership presented a unique opportunity to develop a serious interest in art and Van Gogh began a personal collection of prints and illustrations. It was then that his illuminating correspondence with Theo commenced. From this correspondence we are given details of his many visits to museums and exhibitions and we learn of the beginnings and development of his fascination with Rembrandt, Millet, Delacroix and other artists.

Following the termination of his employment by Goupil, Van Gogh returned to England to work with the Reverend Thomas Slade-Jones in London. He immersed himself in Christian activities and wrote to Theo about going “to the Methodist Chapel there every Monday night (LT 75, 1876, p.67).” It was then that Van Gogh had the opportunity to express publicly his commitment to the idea of pilgrimage in the sermon based on Psalm 119:19 that he preached in Isleworth church. It is clear from this sermon, and, of course, from the familiar usage of the many Biblical passages in his letters that we can conclude that the Bible occupied a large place in Van Gogh’s education. Similarly, a close affinity with uplifting Christian literature is evidenced by his strong reference to Thomas à Kempis’s *The Imitation of Christ* and Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.

Returning home from England, following this immersion in English Methodism, Van Gogh tried to live up to his father’s and uncles’ wish to follow in their footsteps into the ministry. “I see that it is not easy, and it will get more and more difficult, but still I firmly hope to succeed (LT 96, 1877, p.117).” Unfortunately, he was unsuccessful in passing the entrance examination to study theology. Nevertheless, his deep appreciation of the religious and spiritual core of Christianity and matters of faith set Van Gogh on the phase of his journey to minister as a missionary to the miners in the Borinage.

There is a strong connection between praxis in Van Gogh’s faith and the social concern of Methodism which would have strongly influenced Van Gogh in England. As a missionary, Van Gogh showed the miserable miners his faith concerned not only personal but also social needs. To his flock he was ‘The Christ of the Coal Mine.’ He shirked no ministering duty no matter how distressing:

There were hundreds of victims. Most of them were miners, killed on the spot of the

coal dust ... Vincent tried to relieve the atrocious sufferings of these unfortunate wretches, applying compresses drenched in olive oil to their burns. (Piérard 1925, p.229)

Yet, the institutional church rejected him. Nevertheless, Van Gogh continued with his personal vocation during this very ascetic period of his life until he emerged from his “moulting time” with a transformed vocation from minister of the church to minister of the Gospel of Christ through art. It is a paradox that the more Van Gogh did his missionary work for solidarity in the coal-mining town, the more he separated from his family and the institutional church. This raises the question as to how Van Gogh managed to overcome this spiritual and social crisis having withdrawn from these places of belonging: family, the institutional church, acceptable society? There is Van Gogh’s own answer in this letter. He continued:

There are two kinds of idleness, which are a great contrast to each other. There is the man who is idle from laziness and from lack of character, from the baseness of his nature. If you like, you may take me for such a one.

On the other hand, there is the idle man who is idle in spite of himself, who is inwardly consumed by a great longing for action but does nothing, because it is impossible for him to do anything, because he seems to be imprisoned in some cage ... Such a man does not always know what he could do, but he instinctively feels, I am good for something, my life has a purpose after all, I know that I could be quite a different man! How can I be useful, of what service can I be? There is something inside of me, what can it be? (LT 133, 1880, p.198)

Through exploring a variety of alternatives, Van Gogh has struggled with his feelings of melancholia in his vocational crisis. Although he experiences his failure in the Borinage, there remains his inner conviction; “my life has a purpose after all” and “there is something inside of me.” Van Gogh needed a balance between his profound discouragement and a new vocation. He had transformed his perspective so that he came to reinterpret the meaning of his life’s purpose. Finally, he concluded:

A caged bird in spring knows quite well that he might serve some end; he is well aware that there is something for him to do ... But then the season of migration comes, and attack of melancholia ... Do you know what frees one from this captivity? It is every deep, serious affection. Being friends, being brothers, love, that is what opens the prison by some supreme power, by some magic force. Without this, one remains in prison. Where sympathy is renewed, life is restored. And the prison is also called prejudice, misunderstanding, fatal ignorance of one thing or another, distrust, false shame. (LT 133, 1880, p.199)

Van Gogh's experience both of rejection by the Mission Committee and of solidarity with the miners had been transformed into his artistic vocation and reintegrated into the new perspective of loving both nature and humankind.

### **5.3 Conflicted relationships**

Van Gogh was brought up under the guidance of his father who was a Christian minister. This Christian guidance brought him to a personal relationship with God and a desire to become a Minister. This did not work out as he experienced a conflict of belief and work between himself and the church training leadership. This crisis brought him to a crossroads. Should he forsake the ministry to concentrate on art? What was the archetypal image for Van Gogh? Would he be a minister like his father, or would he be an artist creating something tangible and physical so that he could visually convey the Gospel to give to others. These vocations are similar. There is a common image of "giving something to others" in the Bible. It is the archetypal image of a sower.

However, having encountered the plight of the miners and peasant folk he suddenly saw his Christian vocation as working with the poor. He left the ministerial training and embraced evangelising the miners and what he saw caused him to begin sketching, drawing and painting. This all became part of his ministry to the poor. The more he saw and did in the poverty-stricken areas, the more he began to express what he saw in terms of his new art. Rather than forsaking his personal faith in God he forsook the mainstream church edifice, embraced taking the Gospel in a meaningful way to those who were poor and working on ways to express true Christianity, not in words, but through his art. This was a new beginning for him; transformation of marginality between the periods before and after in his life in the Borinage.

### **5.4 Artistic pilgrimage**

As a pilgrim on the artistic earth Van Gogh's first seed is *The Sower* in 1880-1885. The parable of the sower, in the New Testament, begins with seed either falling on good soil or not. The seed of art is to become a fruitful tree, when it is planted on honest and fertile land. Although Van Gogh knew himself that at 27-years of age he was already considered too old to become an accomplished painter, he did not hesitate to accept and cultivate the seed growing in him. Just like the young man who desired to follow a ministerial vocation, the enthusiastic

and religious praxis of the young Van Gogh is in his life as an artist, too. Van Gogh's artistic mission may be described in three phases. First, there was the transformative phase of the journey from the Netherlands to Paris as an artistic pilgrim to meet his contemporary artists. He brought with him the skill and talents acquired from the Dutch style and in Paris he adapted *Japonisme* and the bright colours of the Impressionists. Secondly, in Paris, Van Gogh painted the series of self-portraits, with the resonant style influenced by Rembrandt, especially Rembrandt's tonalities. Thirdly, Van Gogh reconstructed his own style of colour and tone after he moved to Arles. In this last artistic journey, he was transforming the meaning and structure of his life and reinforcing his Christian faith and artistic purpose for his recovery from mental illness.

### **5.5 The Sower**

In 1880, early in his painting career, Van Gogh made many copies of the *Sower* in the style of Millet. During his time in Paris, Van Gogh devoted himself to developing a new style of painting, influenced by the Impressionists. In Arles, he resumed his own journey, applying what he had learned in Paris to his painting of rural scenes. The colours to which he was very attached in his oeuvre are blue, yellow, and purple. The blue is used to express eternity or longing in *Starry Night over the Rhône*. The yellow is contained in the sun, which also substituted for Christ in *The Raising of Lazarus*. Purple is a dominant colour in *Starry Night over the Rhône*.

The young Van Gogh had an insightful understanding of the Gospel and the core truths of Christianity. Through his literal and religious reading as well as by relating to others' experiences, he tested his new understanding with others, explored options for his new vocation, and built competence into his new artistic role. Van Gogh wrote to his friend Van Rappard that "we must not have any illusions about ourselves, but be prepared to be misunderstood, despised and slandered, and yet we shall have to keep up our courage and enthusiasm... I shall go my own way without paying much attention to the present school (LR, 1882, p.342)." The pilgrim spirit underlies the synthesis of his art and his faith on the way.

### **5.6 Conclusion**

Although Van Gogh fled from his vocation as a missionary in the institutional church, he

stepped on to the narrow road of art whilst never giving up on his Christian faith. Through his experience of change, Van Gogh progressed along the long journey of uniting intimate appropriation of God's pure love in nature, contemplation, and participation in the inner life of God. The young preacher, soon to become a painter, has been walking on the road as an artistic pilgrim. He walks on the margin but does not walk along desolate.

The inner expansive self-transcending power of his spirit was expressed in his words and paintings whenever he suffered. Van Gogh's long journey across the sea in search of celestial colour is completed when he reached the harbour at the starry night. His artistic progress has gone well from "the loving breast of our Mother" to the arms of our Father in heaven. Whether overcoming every obstacle in its path or not, it is obvious that he attained a wider or higher horizon.

Van Gogh has undergone a startling transformation from his original vocation of preacher and he has experienced a total aesthetic transformation between the traditional art which he had learned and contemporary art. For unfolding understanding of Van Gogh's artworks we need to consider the whole of his lifetime experiences including his frustrations and his "moulting time". As one of those special people who experienced and lived a life on the margins, he is comparable to Jesus who saw an entire universe encompassed in a mustard seed. Painters, too, can create a whole universe with their brush strokes. Van Gogh distilled his own essence in his art. For Van Gogh, the remarkable elements of overcoming marginality between possibility and impossibility are not important. His journey never stops as long as he breathes and lives. Whenever he was wrenched from a hopeless situation, and he arrived at a standstill, he believed "It's always possible to overcome fate through willpower and principles (LT 26, 1882, p.8)."

I have tried to determine the resonance between young Van Gogh's Christian faith and background as a preacher and his painting and letters. Van Gogh's letters still remind us of a language that Van Gogh has spoken and has depicted. This point is clearly represented in his many letters with varied religious expressions, many quotations from the Bible, and ceaseless self-reflection for unifying Faith and Life in his own life. Van Gogh appeals to his purpose for a new artistic vocation in which he thinks that everything which is really good and beautiful – of inner moral, spiritual and sublime beauty in men and their works – comes from God. Van Gogh's life as expressed through his letters and art can be viewed as such a shift of

consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world.

Early in his career as an artist, Van Gogh had developed the connection between religious vocation and aesthetics. He painted many images of a sower, and was to be a sower in his works, an innovator. Van Gogh invited the sowers, the real peasants first depicted by Millet, to the table structured by his inner canvas as in *The Potato Eaters*. In addition he reached the position where he interpreted biblical themes in his own way with *The Good Samaritan*, *The Raising of Lazarus*, and *The Pietà*.

Most particularly, the parable of the *Sower* and of the the grain of seed is told in the paintings of the *Sower* begun in the Netherlands, through *Fishing boats on the Beach at Sainte-Maries* and *Starry Night* from Arles, to the finality of death and resurrection in *Wheatfield with Crows* and *Tree Roots*.

## **5.7 Summary**

This thesis examined Van Gogh's Christian faith within an artistic dimension and also showed how this transformation represented a spiritual journey or pilgrimage for the artist which continued without vacillation until the tragic end of his life. It can be concluded that Van Gogh's journey as a pilgrim in search of the Divine, and his mission to preach the Gospel of Christ radiates through his art. It can never be known if Van Gogh believed he had reached the Celestial City in the Kingdom of God, but for those of us who see the transcendent glory and beauty in his magnificent oeuvre, there is no doubt that Vincent van Gogh was both luminous and numinous.



## **Appendices: Paintings referred to in thesis**

All paintings are by Vincent Van Gogh and downloaded from the Van Gogh Museum website [vangoghmuseum.nl](http://vangoghmuseum.nl) or [vangoghletters.org](http://vangoghletters.org) unless otherwise stated.

1. Godspeed! Pilgrims setting out for Canterbury
2. Still Life with Open Bible
3. Sower (after Millet)
4. Sower
5. The Potato Eaters
6. Old Man with his Head in his Hands (At Eternity's Gate)
7. Old Man in Sorrow (On the Threshold of Eternity)
8. Sower
9. Sower (study)
10. Sower
11. Sower (after Millet)
12. Sower
13. View of the Sea at Scheveningen
14. Fishing in Spring, the Pont de Clichy (Asnières)
15. Seascape at Saintes-Maries
16. Fishing Boats on the Beach at Saintes-Maries
17. Langlois Bridge at Arles with Road Alongside the Canal
18. Quay with Sand Barges
19. Starry Night Over the Rhone
20. Road along the Seine near Asnières
21. Christ asleep during the Tempest
22. Pietà
23. Pietà (after Delacroix)
24. The Good Samaritan (After Delacroix)
25. The Holy Family in the evening (After Rembrandt)
26. Raising of Lazarus (after Rembrandt)
27. Landscape at Auvers in the rain
28. Wheat Field with Crows
29. Wheatfield under Thunderclouds
30. Tree Roots

Plate.1

Godspeed! Pilgrims setting out for Canterbury



George Henry Boughton  
1874  
Van Gogh Museum

Plate.2

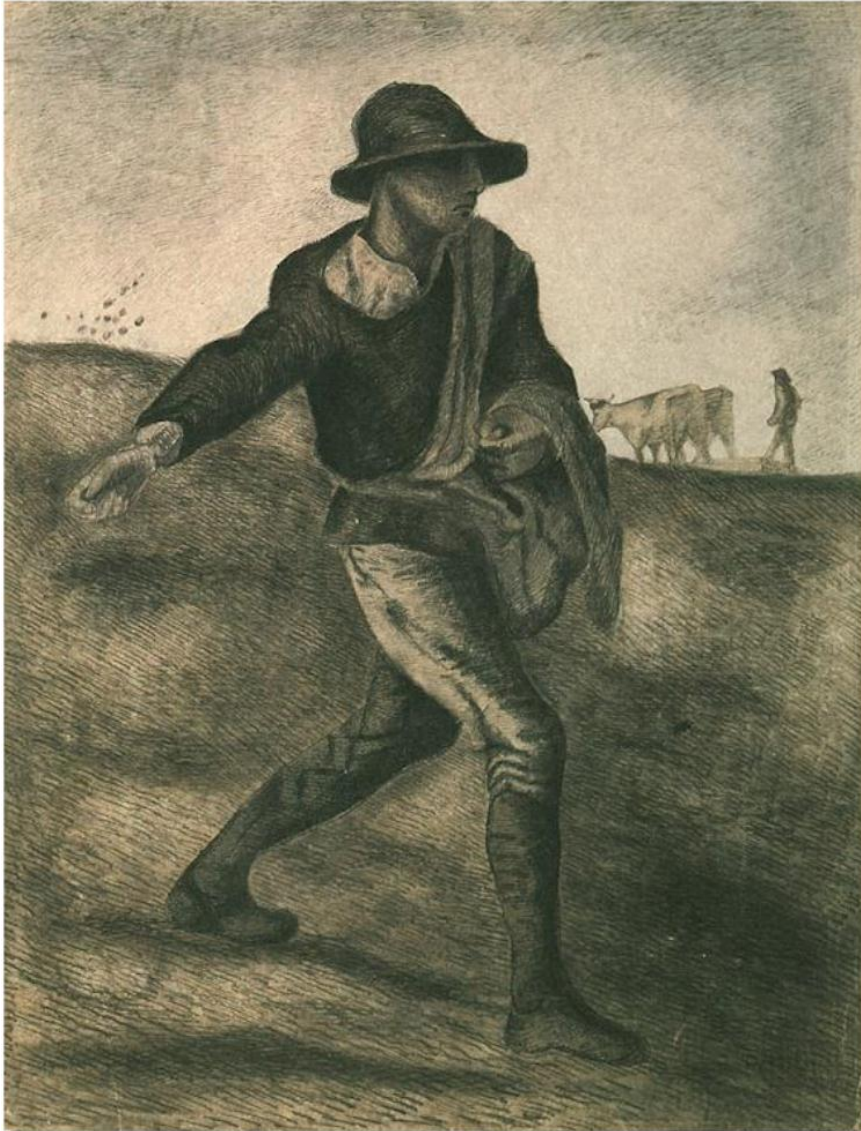
## Still Life with Open Bible



Vincent van Gogh  
Nuenen, 1885  
Van Gogh Museum

Plate. 3

Sower (after Millet)



Vincent van Gogh  
Etten, 1881  
Van Gogh Museum

Plate. 4

## Sower



Vincent van Gogh  
The Hague, 1883  
Location unknown

Plate. 5

## The Potato Eaters



Vincent van Gogh  
Nuenen, 1885  
Van Gogh Museum

Plate. 6

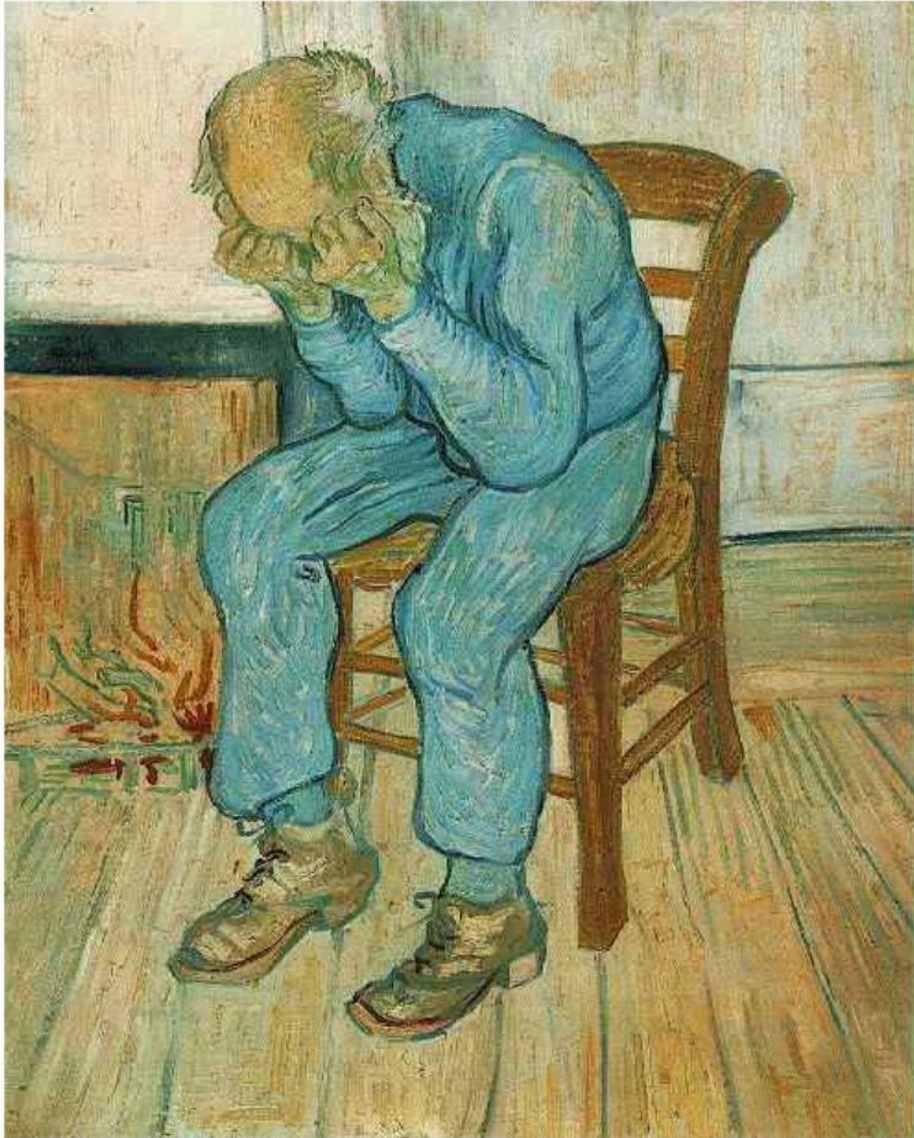
Old Man with his Head in his Hands (At Eternity's Gate)



Vincent van Gogh  
The Hague, 1882  
Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art

Plate. 7

Old Man in Sorrow (On the Threshold of Eternity)



Vincent van Gogh  
Saint-Rémy, 1890  
Kröller-Müller Museum



Plate. 8

## Sower



Vincent van Gogh  
Nuenen, 1882  
P. and N. de Boer Foundation

Plate. 9

Sower (study)



Vincent van Gogh  
The Hague, 1883  
Location unknown

Plate. 10

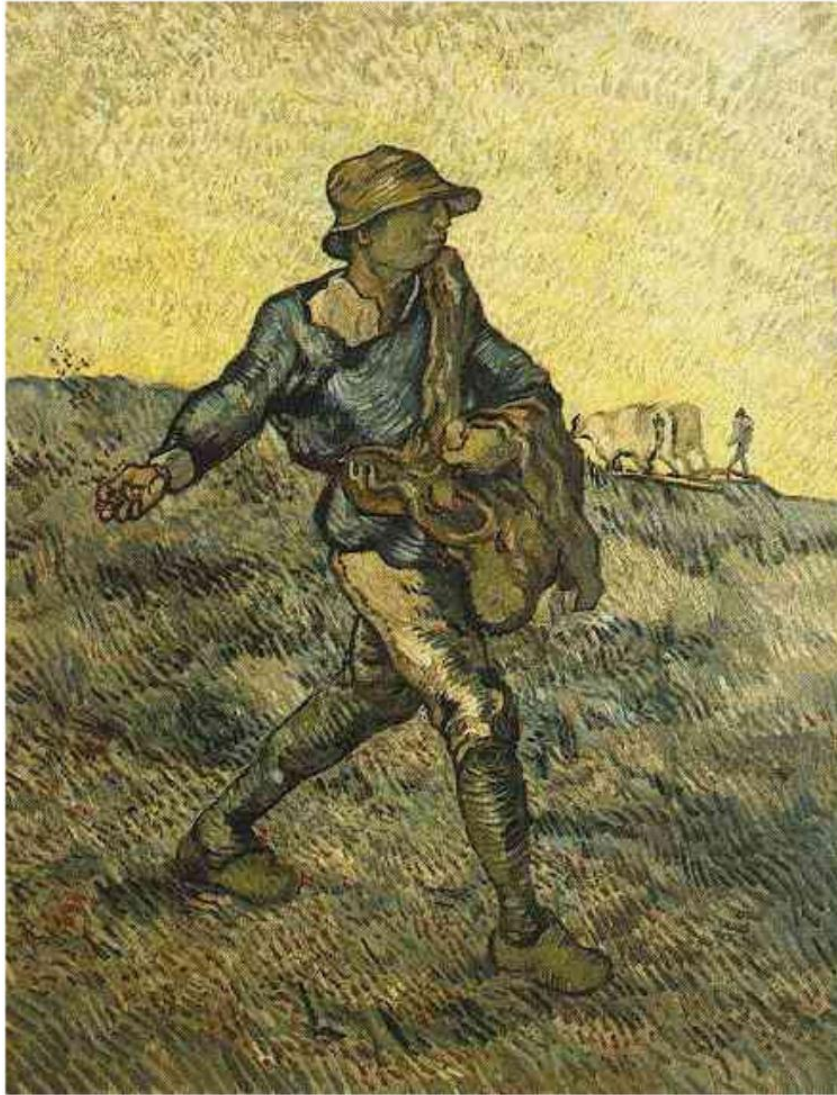
## Sower



Vincent van Gogh  
Arles: June, 1888  
Kröller-Müller Museum

Plate. 11

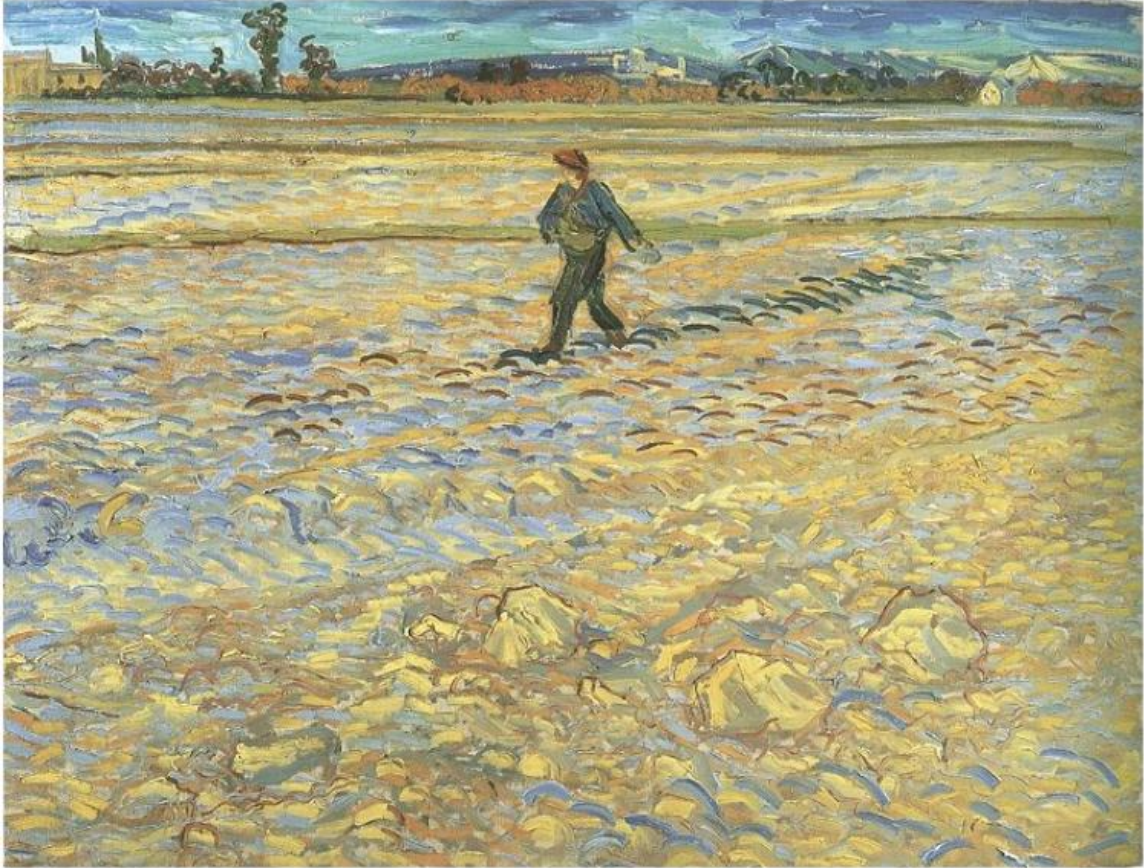
Sower (after Millet)



Vincent van Gogh  
Saint-Rém, 1889  
Tate Gallery

Plate. 12

## Sower



Vincent van Gogh  
Arles: October, 1888  
Villa Flora

Plate. 13

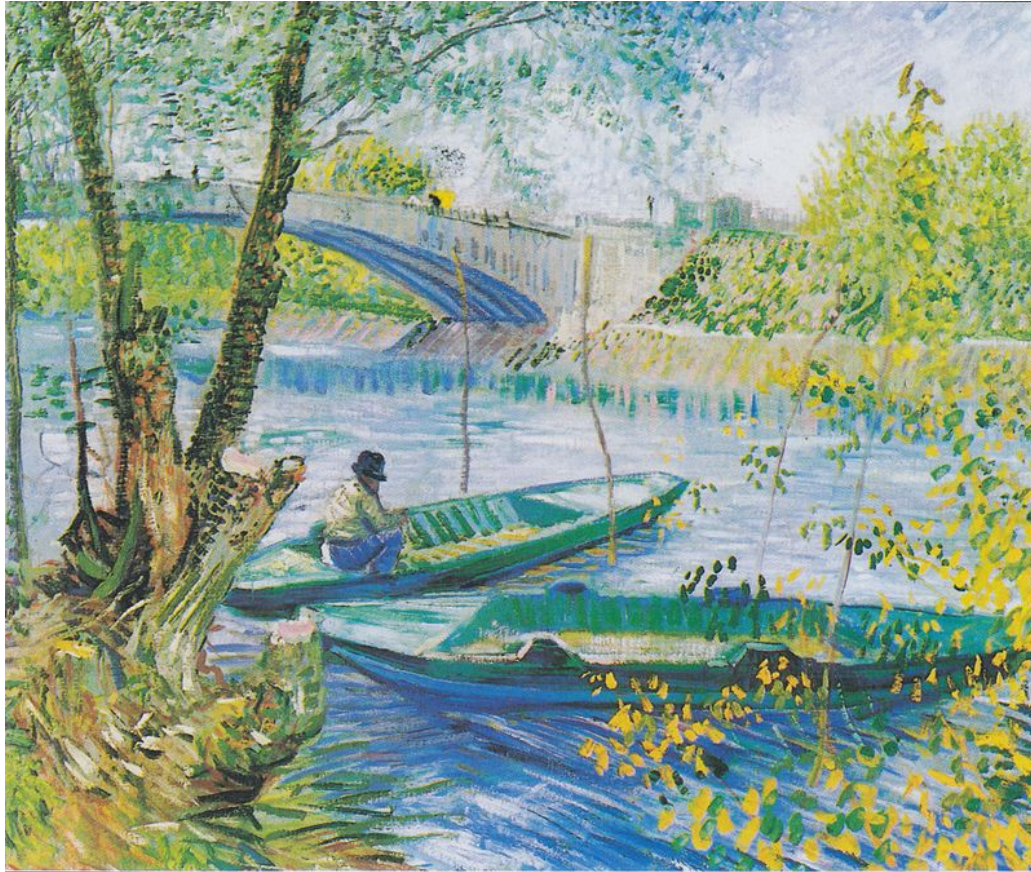
### View of the Sea at Scheveningen



Vincent van Gogh  
Scheveningen, 1882  
Location unknown

Plate.14

Fishing in Spring, the Pont de Clichy (Asnières)



Vincent van Gogh  
Paris, 1887  
Art Institute of Chicago

Plate. 15

## Seascape at Saintes-Maries



Vincent van Gogh  
Arles, 1888  
Pushkin Museum



Plate. 16

## Fishing Boats on the Beach at Saintes-Maries



Vincent van Gogh  
Arles, France: June, 1888  
Van Gogh Museum

Plate. 17

Langlois Bridge at Arles with Road Alongside the Canal



Vincent van Gogh  
Arles, 1888  
Van Gogh Museum

Plate. 18

## Quay with Sand Barges



Vincent van Gogh  
Arles: August, 1888  
Museum Folkwang

Plate. 19

## Starry Night Over the Rhone



Vincent van Gogh  
Arles, 1888  
Musée d'Orsay

Plate. 20

Road along the Seine near Asnières



Vincent van Gogh  
Paris, 1887  
Van Gogh Museum

Plate. 21

Christ asleep during the Tempest



Eugène Delacroix  
1853  
H.O. Havemeyer Collection

Pietà



Eugene Delacroix  
1850  
Nasjonalgalleriet

Pietà (after Delacroix)

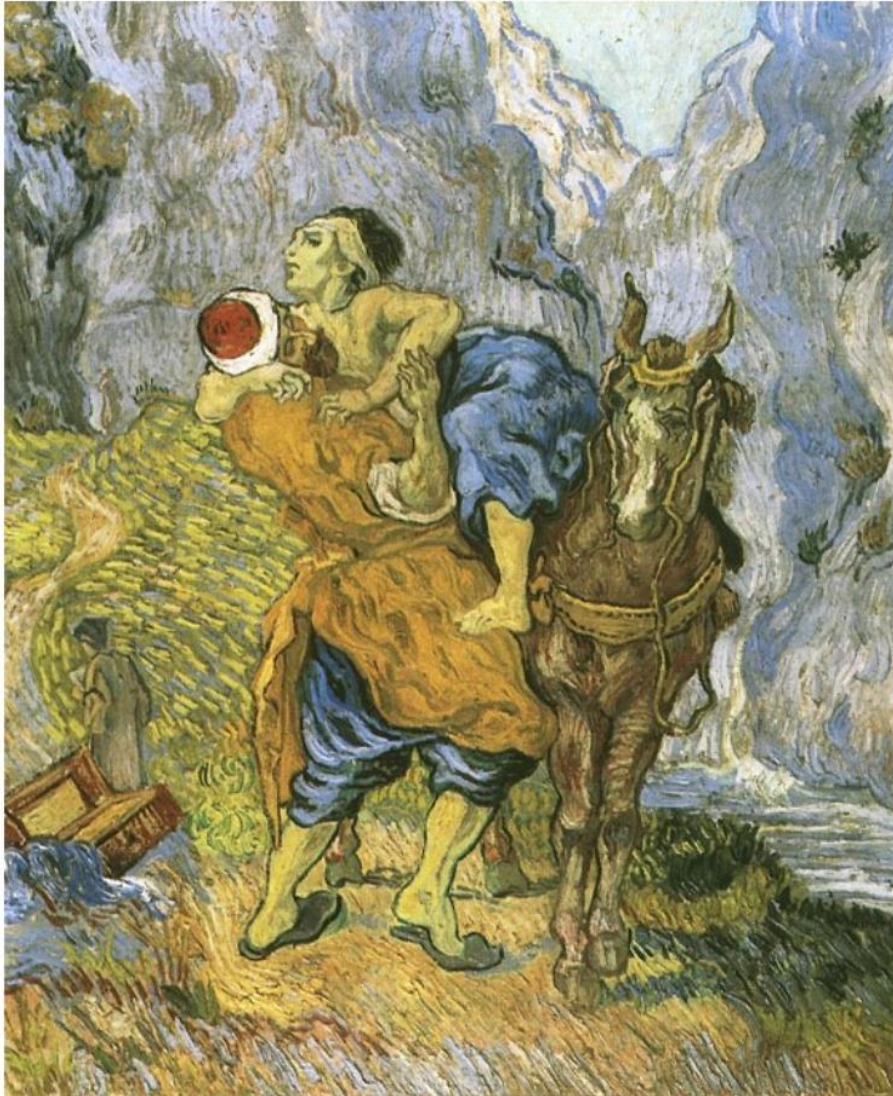


Vincent van Gogh  
Saint-Rémy, 1889  
Van Gogh Museum



Plate. 24

The Good Samaritan (After Delacroix)



Vincent van Gogh  
Saint-Remy, 1889  
Otterlo

The Holy Family in the evening (After Rembrandt)



Dominique Vivant-Denon

1787

Paris

Raising of Lazarus (after Rembrandt)



Vincent van Gogh  
Saint-Rémy, 1890  
Van Gogh Museum

Plate. 27

Landscape at Auvers in the rain



Vincent van Gogh  
Auvers-sur-Oise, 1890  
Van Gogh Museum

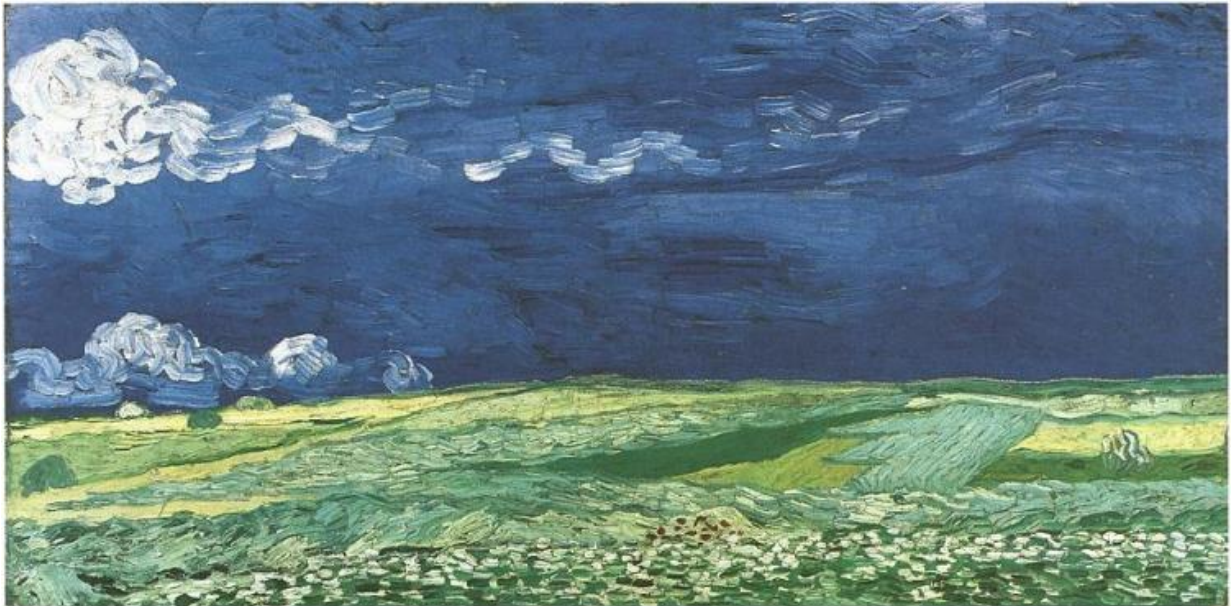
## Wheat Field with Crows



Vincent van Gogh  
Auvers-sur-Oise, 1890  
Van Gogh Museum

Plate. 29

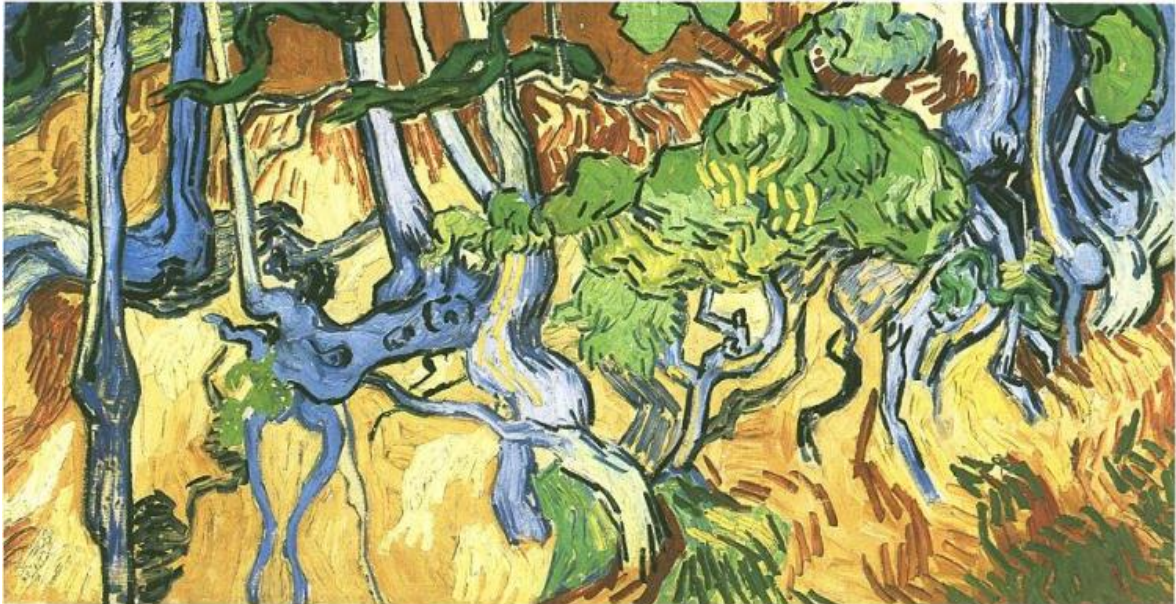
## Wheatfield under Thunderclouds



Vincent van Gogh  
Auvers-sur-Oise, 1890  
Van Gogh Museum

Plate. 30

## Tree Roots



Vincent van Gogh  
Auver-sur-Oise, 1890  
Van Gogh Museum

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