THE IMAGE OF CHRIST IN THE SECOND MILLENNIUM BETWEEN CONVENTION AND NARCISSISM

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The passing of one of the most renowned contemporary artists in Croatia, Đuro Seder, in May 2022, resurrected for a brief time the debate about the "strange place of religion in contemporary art" – to paraphrase James Elkins.[1] Seder dedicated a large part of his opus to religious (Christian) themes showing how contemporary religious art remains thought-provoking and relevant despite its major retreat from the institutional context (museums, exhibitions) and scholarly discourse. Seder is one of the few Croatian contemporary artists who openly and seriously promoted and contemplated religion in art, while not being simply spiritual or ironically distant. In his works, he tried to demonstrate that religion and fine arts have not necessarily gone their separate ways.

From the end of the 18th century on, the relationship between the church and art became very complex, and modern art was considered incompatible with traditional church iconography. Many theologians seek to define modern/contemporary art as an experience of contact with God, and artists as those who convey the divine presence to the perceptive recipient, in such a way that through art God could appear and become available. Theology approached Christian art from different perspectives, of which the theology of beauty has become dominant, as it seeks an answer to God's visibility and presence in Christian representations referring to beauty as one of the attributes of God who is invoked in Augustine as "the beauty of all things beautiful."[2] Aesthetic experience is an experience of intense meaning since art provides essential insights into religious concepts and truth.[3] Throughout history, the church has often associated the concept of beauty with certain stylistic periods and was able to understand, accept and control or adapt it to its teachings. However, the change brought on by modernity was not only stylistic, it was a profound change of paradigm and meaning – art has become personal,

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[1]   James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004).

[2]   Augustine, *Confessions* III, 6.10; Bruno Forte, *The Portal of Beauty: Towards a Theology of Aesthetics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

[3]   Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays,* trans. Nicholas Walker, introd. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 13–20.

experiential, emancipated from religious and church life, turning to spirituality or the experience of transcendence but not necessarily following a certain dogmatic content or liturgical purpose. The artists promoted the creative act as an encounter with an idea – it was irrelevant whether it was a complete and true religious experience, a serious criticism, or just a way to express an idea or to communicate a message. The "image", therefore, was focused on the affective and experiential dimension of the individual (the artist, but also the viewer).

Despite this "break", religious art has remained very much alive on both sides: in the traditional church setting as well as in the secular artistic practice. There is almost no great artist who hasn't tackled religious themes, and it remains difficult and perhaps irrelevant to bring up their motives or to cite the facts concerning their religious feelings in order to understand or evaluate their works. What purpose would it serve in the post-postmodernist *aporia* of competing intentions, definitions and social and intellectual tendencies which have opened up new discursive spaces outside the confines of established practices? In the many examples, we can see recognizable themes or titles, but with details that confuse and point to the fact that the artist used religious topics to communicate some other messages, mostly related to global themes such as war, revolutions, individual fears, etc. These art-creations usually deviate from the fundamental canons of the painting for sacred space, and artists use these themes in a very subjective (sometimes even deeply religious) way, and in the dramatic actualization of their time. This practice confirmed the insurmountable gap between the traditional church expectation of art and modern artist preoccupation. The separation was particularly deepened with abstract (non-figurative) art, although according to some contemporary theorists, the abstract form has been recognized as the purest form of visualization of the sacred/invisible.[4] A number of painters used abstraction to evoke transcendental reality, such as Mondrian, Kandinsky, Rothko or Reinhardt whose "iconoclasm" has no religious motivation,[5] yet his series on the cross and crucifixion were perceived by some as images that express a religious message in the truest sense and invite contemplation. This was strongly advocated by his great admirer, Thomas Merton, one of the important theologians of the 20th century, who argued that freedom from all "images" (traditional and

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[4]   Donald Kuspit, "Concerning the Spiritual in Contemporary Art," in Maurice Tuchman et al., eds., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985* (New York: Abbeville, 1986); Gerhard Boehm, "Ikonoklastik und Transzendenz: der historische Hintergrund," in Jürgen Schilling and Wieland Schmied, eds., *Gegenwart Ewigkeit: Spuren des Transzendenten in der Kunst unserer Zeit* (Stuttgart: Ed. Cantz, 1990), 27–34.

[5]   Barbara Rose, ed., *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1975), 186.

conventional) enabled focus on the concentration and contemplation of God. Merton was a monk in an abbey in Kentucky and he received as a gift from Reinhardt a small black and blue painting with a cross. He wrote to Reinhardt saying that he saw it as a truly religious painting and was using it to empty his mind of images while contemplating and praying.[6] Merton calls it a holy painting, an image without features that helps one put aside trivial images and empty the soul of concepts and words they generate in order to achieve clarity in prayer. Therefore, he did not see any obstacles for such images to be part of the sacred space, thereby opening the door to the so-called "soft iconoclasm" that has constantly simmered in the reflections on images.

For many, it was with modern movements that the 19th-century banalities of so much Christian art were radically questioned and altered, such as a "robed and radiant, calm and stately" figure of Christ. As Rowan Williams remarked "this banal style renders visible the obviousness of religious sentiment of a certain kind, and so makes practically unthinkable any perception other than that already familiar."[7] Since a genuine artist helps to change the way we see things, the task to respond to the form of Christ appropriate to their own time represents a serious challenge. According to Paul Tillich, expressionism was the ideal art form for Christian faith since it involved several fundamental principles: representative aspects, strong emotion, dedication to the truth and artistic integrity.[8] To this we need to add his role as chaplain during World War I, so that the tragic experience made him argue that there was a close relationship between expressionism and Christian art. The interest to express a greater sense of suffering and anger through Christian iconography was shared among many artists of that time. Max Beckmann deeply experienced the events of the war and tried to "move from illusions of life towards the essential realities that lie hidden beyond"[9], turning towards representations of Christ and his suffering that began to be widely used as a symbol of human suffering as a whole. The same impact of war (the first and the second world wars) and reference to Christian iconography are evident in the work of Otto Dix. His *Ecce Homo II* (1943) represents the paradigm of anti-sentimental, harsh and real physical and mental suffering. Christ's face and body in these images often represent real people, such as in Jakob Epstein's *Risen Christ* (1917–1919) whose face was based on his friend's, Bernard van Dieren's portrait of

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[6]   Wessel Stoker, *Imaging God Anew* (Leuven / Paris / Bristol: Peeters, 2021), 98.

[7]   Rowan Williams, *Presence: Images of Christ in the Third Millenium* (High Wycombe: BibleLands, 2004), 5–8.

[8]   Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God,* vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 210–14.

[9]   Richard Harries, *The Image of Christ in Modern Art* (London / New York: Routledge, 2016), 12.

"noble and intellectual suffering"[10], introducing a modern "living" Christ. His monolithic stone sculpture of Christ, *Behold the Man* (1934–1935), displayed on the wall of the old Coventry Cathedral, represents the new phase in personal and intimate rendering of Christ's figure liberated from the traditional iconographic model. These many modern artists managed to revitalize Christian art by producing personal visions that resonated with the wider public, however outside the church, witnessing the growing rift between Church and art.

The distinctive individual perspective on religious art, associated with modern artistic skills, resulted in new, unconventional representations of traditional Christian images that were mostly not recognized or accepted by the Church. The separation was fundamental even though many modern artists openly expressed their religious enthusiasm. The attempts to examine this split in order to mitigate it were undertaken by several projects starting with the founding of *La Société de Saint-Jean pour le développement de l'art chrétien* by Henri Lacordaire in 1839. It was followed by the journal *Kirche und Kunst* in 1909, *Les Ateliers d'art sacré* by George Desvallières and Maurice Denis in 1912, *La Pontificia Commissione centrale per l'arte sacra in Italia* in 1924, *Liturgical Arts Society* in 1928, and the revue *L'art Sacré* in 1935.[11] These platforms undertook serious analyses and considerations of the contemporary situation between art and Church, indicating numerous vacillations in judging modern works of art in the church space.[12] The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) clarified the Church's position on the subject of sacred arts in the *Dogmatic Constitution De sacra liturgia, Sacrosanctum Concilium,* published on 4 December 1963 (Chapter VII – *De arte sacra deque sacra suppellectile*), a document that has become a key reference for many other texts.[13] The Council pronounced the Church "a friend of the arts" and indicated a basic understanding of art in modernism. Although it highlighted the quest for dignity founded in beauty and truth – not providing, however, precise definitions of both – it specified that "beauty" is not the sole interest of art. Institutional support was more strongly felt in the personal efforts of Pope Paul VI (1963–1978). With the homily *Messa degli artisti* of 1964, he restarted the dialogue between the Church and the artists, acknowledging freedom of the mind, spirit, and inspiration of

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[10]   Jacob Epstein, *Let There Be Sculpture* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1942), 79.

[11]   James Thomas Hadley, "Ars Gratia Artis: The Freedom of the Arts in the Twentieth-Century Liturgical Reform and Today," *Studia Liturgica* 45, no. 2 (2015): 176–98.

[12]   Elio Guerriero, ed., *Chiesa e arte* (Milan: Jaca Book, 1995); Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997).

[13]   Mauro Mantovani, "Church and Art, from the Second Vatican Council to Today," *Conservation Science in Cultural Heritage* (December 2014): 127–43.

artists as well as a specific personality that must be visible in their works. He spoke about artists who helped make the spiritual world comprehensible as well as sensitive. Even more significant, however, was his address to the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Art in Italy on 17 December 1969 when he expressly reiterated the artistic agenda of modernism, stating that the freedom of art in the liturgy is based on the internal character of art, referring to the principle already confirmed by the Constitution on Liturgy and anchored in the *Mediator Dei,* the encyclical of Pope Pius XII (November 1947).[14]

In spite of the efforts to bridge the gap between art and the Church, advances were slow-moving, while the changes on the art-scene from the mid-20th century were fascinating. With the emergence of conceptual, video, and digital arts as well as the language of pop culture, anything could become a vehicle of expressing Christian messages.[15] It was the art/visual culture of the moment, and for the moment and it initiated a new phase of deep misunderstanding between the Church and art(ists). In many examples the art was transgressive, shocking, even blasphemous yet at the same time accepted by the social norms and largely distributed via new media channels and platforms.[16] It seemed that in the second half of the 20th century, Christian iconography/imagery became ubiquitous either in the pop culture (where Jesus, for example appeared in so many various forms such as Elvis, gay, Afro American, etc. communicating different messages) or in the traditional church art of stereotypical narratives, often sweet and sentimental (such as the backlit beautiful Jesus with flowing blond hair and big blue eyes). However, many churches opened their gates for the modernist experiments and fresh interpretations. Antony Gormley, for example, created sculptures to explore the human body and its congruence in the sacred space.[17] His *Transport* (2011), made up of nails, hovers suspended from the ceiling of Canterbury Cathedral, demonstrating that the physical body can become the "laboratory of spirit" and our bodily posture an expression of unarticulated prayer. Rose Finn Kelcey composed glittering murals of colored, metallic

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[14]   Hadley, *Ars Gratia Artis,* 187.

[15]   David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998); David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkley / Los Angeles / London: University of California Press, 2005).

[16]   Anthony Julius, *Transgressions: The Offences of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); David Nash, *Blasphemy in the Christian World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[17]   John Hutchinson et al., eds., *Antony Gormley* (New York: Phaidon, 2000), 32–95; Wessel Stoker, "Presence in Contemporary Religious Art: Graham Sutherland and Antony Gormley," *Perichoresis* 18, no. 3 (2020): 77–89.

shimmer-discs.[18] The one hanging over the west façade of St. Paul's Church in East London (2004) represents an angel, created using emoticons, letters and punctuation marks from mobile phone texting: a colon, dash, bracket, and zero formed a smiling face with a halo. This modern mosaic looks like a large advertising billboard communicating a Christian message to the passers-by. Many of these contemporary art works depict the themes of Christ's crucifixion or death, the most frequently used Christian topics. Bill Viola created some excellent examples in his performances and videos to reenact the stations of the cross with living people communicating the message of Christ's suffering and death as an image of universal human suffering, an iconic means of depicting Christ's identification with suffering humanity. In the *Passion Series* – videos, performances and installations – Viola explores the power and complexity of emotions, using the method of citing and re-staging older works of art in the contemporary and diverse settings.[19] It is the potential of the media that appeals to the senses of the viewers and elicits strong emotions. Viola's videos engulf the viewers and transport them to the alternative space of contemplation.[20]

However, we often forget that this mode of reconciling religion and art through motivating empathy and mutual experience is not immanent to modern and contemporary art. In history we find many examples in which artists through Christian depictions discuss some personal or universal problems referring to the real world: Holbein's *Dead Christ* (1521–1522), the dirty feet of Caravaggio's dead Christ as in the miserable and poor from the slums he often visited (*The Entombment of Christ,* 1603–1604), or Matthias Grünewald's impetus for the creation of an exalted and dramatic figure of Christ on the cross that was unusual at that time (*Cucifixion* on the Isenheim altar, 1512–1515). Grünewald modeled his Christ after the patients in the hospital within the Antonite monastery in Isenheim, afflicted by the so-called St Anthony's fire, with depictions of wounds, a distorted physiognomy and body, in a way to identify Jesus' suffering with the sufferers in their disfigured agony.[21] His Crucifixion was considered so unsightly in the 19th century that the clergy had it removed in 1875 and replaced it with a simple wooden cross. In

[18]   Jonathan Koestlé-Cate, *Art and the Church: The Fractious Embrace. Ecclesiastical Encounters with Contemporary Art* (London / New York: Routledge, 2016), 203–4.

[19]   David Morgan, "Spirit and Medium," in Chris Townsend, ed., *The Art of Bill Viola* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 88–109.

[20]   Rina Arya, "The Neglected Place of Religion in Contemporary Western Art, Fieldwork," *Religion* 6, no. 1 (2011): 38–41.

[21]   Ann Stieglitz, "The Reproduction of Agony: Toward a Reception-History of Grünewald's Isenheim Altar after the First World War," *Oxford Art Journal* 12, no. 2 (1989): 87–103.

between the two wars it became revered as emblematic of a German Gothic style and was exhibited at the Munich Alte Pinakothek where it made a great impact on many modern German artists.[22] In 1919 it was moved back to its Alsatian home, ere it influenced artists from all over. A similar way of treating the same motif would be repeated centuries later by numerous artists, such as Graham Sutherland who multiplied this theme over twenty years in an effort to present it in his own historical context.[23]

Sutherland worked as a war illustrator during the Second World War, and on this assignment he encountered a lot of suffering. However, at the end of 1945, he was sent a copy of a newly published document compiled by the American army, the so-called "Black book" that dealt with concentration camps, with photos of Auschwitz, Belzen and Buchenwald. Upon seeing the photographs, the idea of the crucifixion occurred to him, which fascinated him because of the duality it possessed: suffering/death and hope/salvation. His crucifixions, especially the one for the St. Matthew church in Northampton (1946), rely on the stylistic language of the late Middle Ages, which serves to root the viewer within the biblical frame of reference, however, suggesting that the painter is a kind of absorbent paper; he is a part of the world and cannot avoid the implications of the external chaos of civilization. In other words, artists bring life back to the image and transform it from a traditionally historical to a genuine one, to *imago*.[24]

Sutherland, like many contemporary artists (as well as those before them) examines a relevant problem: the relationship between the particular and the universal. The tension between the two always comes into focus in difficult historical moments and in times of great human suffering, promoting the idea of art as a mirror of the times. Without that perspective church art becomes "outdated", imitative, mediocre and lacking dept as argued by Marie-Alain Couturier, one of the leading French theologians of the 20th century. He urged the Church to turn to the greatest artists of the time, believing that it is better to hire a genius without faith than a believer without talent.[25] He argues that the beauty of art has also shown that in contemporary culture the viewer is looking for an encounter with God that cannot be provided by conventional, undemanding, often sugary works of art that are on the verge of kitsch; modern man is looking for something that will move him, inspire him, cause strong emotions. Rina Arya also discusses various imperatives, besides the media, that should be taken into account in the

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[22]   Gregory C. Bryda, "The Exuding Wood of the Cross at Isenheim," *The Art Bulletin* 100, no. 2 (2018): 6–36.

[23]   Roger Berthoud, *Graham Sutherland: A Biography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1982), 114–27.

[24]   Harries, *Image of Christ*, 76–80.

[25]   Marie-Alain Couturier, *Art sacré* (Houston: Menil Foundation / Herscher, 1983), 34; Sabine de Lavergne, *Art sacré et modernité: Les grandes années de la revue* L'Art Sacré (Paris: Cessius, 1999), 29.

mapping of the paradigm of spirituality in contemporary art, so among other things she emphasizes the importance of context (the position and environment of the work of art, lighting, interspatial relations) and receptions or the role of the viewer (the degree of openness, education, susceptibility to be emotionally moved by the work, a willingness to sacrifice time, etc.).[26] New media have brought a completely new language to art, which leads to the creation of strong emotions and profound spiritual reflection, through a more individual and active approach to the art process. The use of light, color, sound, and scent in creating a complete sensory experience – a *Gesamtkunstwerk* –, in which the viewer is transported beyond the firmly defined boundaries of the earthly space, has become a relevant feature for many contemporary artists such as Mark Rothko[27], James Turrell[28] or Hermann Nitsch[29].

Among many challenges in expressing Christian themes or religious sentiment – especially the encounter with God in modern art –, one of the most prominent is depicting Christ's face. It is one of the central *topoi* of Christian art, and one of the most intriguing chapters that enters within several problem frames: it tackles the relationship between art and faith, the question of beauty and goodness, the veracity of the image, its communicative or manipulative power, and its changeability. The concept of the *acheiropoieton* – not made by human hand – has constructed the most powerful iconic representation of all time, both attractive and controversial: the true image of Christ. It contains a direct expression of the divine will towards the artist, as a grace given to the artist to translate his talent into the creation of beauty in the theological sense.[30] This original and true image was established as a dogmatic principle already in early Christian art; however, it has aroused critical responses in many theoreticians. Augustine argues that we do not possess a real image of Christ, but we do create a "mental image" by read-

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26   Rina Arya, "Contemplations of the Spiritual in Visual Art," *Journal for the Study of Spirituality* 1, no. 1 (2011): 76–93.

27   Susan J. Barnes, *The Rothko Chapel: An Act of Faith* (Houston: The Rothko Chapel, 1996).

28   Arden Reed, *Slow Art – The Experience of Looking: Sacred Images to James Turrell* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 226–34.

29   Maria Soroniati, Ritual Transgressions: *A Study on the Religious Ritual, its Politicization and its Function in the Works of Hermann Nitsch and Ron Athey,* PhD-diss. (University of Glasgow, 2020).

30   Adele Castagno Monaci, ed., *Sacre impronte ed oggetti „non fatti da mano d'uomo" nelle religioni,* Atti del Convegno Internazionale, Torino, 18–20 maggio 2010 (Alessandria: Edizione dell'Orso, 2011), 95–323; Roland Krischel, Giovanni Morello, and Tobias Nagel, eds., *Ansichten Christi: Christusbilder von der Antike bis zum 20. Jahrundert* (Köln: DuMont, 2005).

ing what is written about him in the holy scriptures.[31] References in the biblical texts are scarce: Matthew presents him as the son of David and Abraham, Luke as the son of Adam, John as a suffering redeemer and the source of ultimate love. His physical likeness is not revealed but texts outline his spiritual image, through the symbolic genealogy and his mission, producing elements for a pictorial archetype that rests on his inner qualities. Different ages emphasized different qualities that would gradually add gentleness, modesty, humility, compassion and suffering to his image in order to construct a recognizable visual constant, which would multiply throughout the centuries in western art.[32] The "true image" of Christ is something so deeply implanted in our visual culture that when the BBC presented in 2001 the computer-generated image of Jesus' face based on scientific and archeological evidence and research on the skulls from the Galilee in approximately Jesus' time, the public was appalled.[33] The forensic anthropologist Richard Neave created an image that portrays Jesus with a more rounder and robust head, dark complexion, dark short hair and beard and large nose, while other scholars gave additional historical interpretative support. However, this attempt produced so many criticisms and negative feedback and it had no effect on the visual arts whatsoever.[34]

Modern times follow different paths in interpreting Christ's face: from illustrative representations to creative, unrestrained expressions. The changes in its depiction introduced at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century were inconceivable: James Ensor's *The Man of Pain* (1891), Emil Nolde's *The Life of Christ* (1911–1912), Alexei von Jawlensky's *Saviour's Faces* (1919), Georges Rouault's serious of Christ's faces (1930s) and many others manifested the perception of Christ's face far beyond the bounds of traditional representations. The artists, in many cases, paraphrased Christ's image within new contexts and often accompanied their work with extensive comments emphasizing their intention to depict the various emotions and states of mind with the everlasting image of Christ in the world to which he was invited as a symbol of sympathy, identification and salvation. Historical Christ was, thus, (re)connected with contemporary man being taken out of the Christological narrative and beyond ideological framework. The

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[31]   Augustin, *On the Trinity,* book 8, 4, accessed August 29, 2022, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/130108.htm.

[32]   Michele Bacci, *The Many Faces of Christ: Portraying the Holy in the East and West, 300 to 1300* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014).

[33]   The image was displayed in the popular BBC documentary series *Son of God.* Helen K. Bond and Edward Adams, eds., *The Bible on Television* (London / New York / Oxford: Bloomsbury Publishing / T&T Clark, 2020), 53–7.

[34]   Ibid., 58.

same issues continued throughout the 20th century and in the beginning of the 21st: Mimmo Paladino's series on *Veronica* (from 1989) experiments with the idea of the face imprint on the canvas with the addition of the fragments of gauze, colored in red that reveal the memory of the wounds still open. Marlene Dumas in her water-color canvases inserts the face of Christ among many faces from her everyday life in the desire to bring Christ back to reality, depicting the faces of the dead (like his) and focusing on spiritual sensuality (*Jesus Serene*, 1994; Fig. 1). The Columbian artist Rosenberg Sandoval brings Christ in the context of extreme violence on the streets of Bogota, by performing the washing of the feet, hands and faces of the children (*Baby Street*, 1998) or the beggars and drug dealers (*Dirt*, 1999) increasing awareness of the abused and marginalized.

Fig. 1. Marlene Dumas, *Jesus Serene*, ink, watercolor and graphite on paper, each drawing approx. 30 × 19 cm, 1994, at the exposition "Marlene Dumas – Image as Burden", Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 2014, © 2008 Marlene Dumas, Collection of Victoria and Henk de Hues, The Netherlands

Artists from the modern time used Christ's image as their alter-ego often to communicate the proper condition of being misunderstood and persecuted. By using a specific form of physiognomy with a theological background in the Christian image of Christ, they constructed a new visual strategy in conveying powerful messages. The reversal that

occurs when the artists paint their portraits (themselves) as the face of Christ is particularly interesting.[35] Albrecht Dürer painted the *Self-Portrait* (1500) as the reference to the figure of Christ producing an impeccable copy of the "true icon":[36] the inequality of the pupils, the eyebrows' form, the raised lip on one side, unevenly combed hair, the hand that touches the fur but with the gesture of blessing recognized.[37] The face is cold and without any emotions, depicted frontally with a fixed, motionless and direct gaze towards the observer that conveys strength and highlights the elements of the ideal and universal in the portrait, which some experts associate with narcissism.[38] Dürer approached the theme of the self-portrait from the theological point of view, building upon the idea that, if God created man in His own image, everyone carries within themselves the image of God.[39] In the 19th century this form would be rediscovered by artists such as Giovanni Segantini, Paul Gaugin, Émile Bernard and James Ensor but with a different idea – to propagate the myth of the artist as a shepherd of a new era, isolated and suffering, who sacrifices for his art and ideals.[40] The Christ-like self-portraits continued to be produced in the 20th century, especially in photography and performative arts where it has become a powerful means of connecting the deeds of Christ with those of the artist.[41] In 1898, American photographer Fred Holland Day made a series of 250 photographs portraying the Passion of Christ, in which he posed as Jesus which aroused a lot of controversy (Fig.

[35] Omar Calabrese, *L'art de l'autoportrait: Histoire et théorie d'un génie pictural* (Paris: Citadelles& Mazenod, 2006); Jérôme Cottin, "La 'vraie image' et les autoportraits d'artistes en Christ au XXe siècle: Similitudes et différences," in Paul-Louis Rinuy and Isabelle Saint Martin, eds., *Sainte Face, visage de Dieu, visage de l'homme dans l'art contemporain (XIXe–XXIe siècle)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Paris Ouvest, 2015), 129–52.

[36] There has been an ogoing dispute regarding religious references to the portrait. See Margaret A. Sullivan, "Alter Apelles: Dürer's 1500 Self-Portrait," *Renaissace Quarterly* 68, no. 4 (2015): 1161–93.

[37] Georges Didi-Huberman, "L'autre miroir: Autoportrait et mélancolie christique selon Albrecht Dürer," in A Gentili et al., eds., *Il ritratto e la memoria: Materiali II* (Rome, 1993), 207–40; Martin Germ, "Christology of Nicholas of Cusa and Christological Iconography in Self-Portraits of Albrecht Dürer," *IKON* 1 (2008): 179–96.

[38] Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art* (Chicago / London: Chicago University Press, 1993), 67, 186; Jeffrey Wallen, "Reflexion and Self-Reflexion: Narcissistic or Aesthetic Criticism," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 34, no. 3 (1992): 301–22.

[39] Demetrio Paparoni, *Cristo e l'impronta dell'arte: Il divino e la sua rappresentazione nell'arte di ieri e di oggi* (Milano: Skira, 2015), 149–50.

[40] Michael Wilson, "Rebels and Martyrs," in Alexander Sturgis, *Rebels and Martyrs: The Image of the Artist in the Nineteenth Century* (London: National Gallery Company Limited, 2006).

[41] Nissan N. Perez, *Corpus Christi: Christusdarstellungen in der Fotografie* (Heidelberg: Wachter Verlag, 2003).

2).[42] His art was accompanied by his words which explained his intentions to endorse more than a metaphorical relationship between religion and art by underscoring the shared philosophical presuppositions of religious devotion and aesthetic experience.[43] Like many other artists, he engaged in searching for forms of religious belief based on the individual encounter with God, but also with the problem of the material manifestations of the unseen. He relied on *tableaux vivant* since they enabled a form of spectatorship that could assimilate the corporeal body with the ideal figure.[44] In this project he was the actor and the artist at the same time, anticipating the new cinematic medium that would bring more drama and realism which would deeply affect audience. However, the scholarly approach and criticism of his work at the time suggests that this kind of religious "promotion" – in essence based on the very traditional iconography and almost medieval idea of passion plays – incited a more serious debate on the role of such images in the broader modern artistic context. The figure of Christ was perceived as a typological model of individuality against institutional authority and social conventions, as a vehicle to represent the suffering of artists even the discriminations of homosexuals. There was, of course, a serious criticism from the religious institutions questioning the sacredness of the images and expressing doubt that the model could overcome artists' own individuality.

Fig. 2. Fred Holland Day, *The Seven Last Words,* seven platinum prints in original frame, overall with frame 21.6 × 90.2 cm, 1898, © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

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[42]   Patricia J. Fanning, *Through an Uncommon Lens: The Life and Photography of F. Holland Day* (Amherst: University of Massachussets Press, 2008).

[43]   Kristin Schwain, "F. Holland Day's *Seven Last Words* and the Religious Roots of American Modernism," *American Art* 19, no. 1 (2005): 33.

[44]   Ibid., 39.

Modern artists raised important issues regarding the role of an art object and the meaning it conveyed: is the meaning in artistic intention, "historicity" of the object, the location where it is displayed or beholder's response? It referred to the place of Christian fate in modern and contemporary society. This resulted in a fundamental dilemma of depicting Christ – being both human and divine, an historic agent and contemporary presence.[45] The dilemma that would continue until the present day: what characterizes the imaging of Christ in the era of the break with tradition, a time of secularization, new technologies and artistic representations that are idiosyncratic, personal, intimate and experimental? Modern artists and theoreticians have also resumed the debate on the role of a beholder and the interpretative power, imagination vs. sight, evocation vs. illustration. They tackled the question of the clash of institutionally proclaimed canons of representing Christ as a pictorial archetype in the Great narrative and the modern quest by the artists *in search* of the human, rather than depicting it.[46] Instead of simply illustrating Christ, modern artists search for the key anthropological tropes in representing Christ as neighbor, friend, consort, sufferer, oppressed – the aspects of his humanity that are oriented towards other human beings. It was in placing art in the higher realm of human emotion that modern artists seek to answer the question of what it is that in the embodied, humanized image of Christ separates him in his divine role, what is hidden, what is sublime and what makes a difference. It is not in the banalities demonstrated in numerous works of art that bathed the image of Christ in radiant, pathetic forms, using cheap templates to achieve religious sentiment. Contemporary artists do not feel limited to recycling of iconic forms or producing a devotional image of the conventional type, they create instead new visual references. They cannot change Christ, but they indicate and show a changed image of the world in which they constantly invite Christ's presence. His human figure is multidimensional and answers numerous questions, and therefore precisely his humanity is a frequent theme of contemporary art. To show his divine, transcendent nature is, on the contrary, very difficult as was problematized at the exhibition *The Problem of God,* organized in the K21 Ständehaus in Düsseldorf in 2015. Czech artist Pavel Büchler in *The Problem of God* depicted a partly opened book with a magnifying glass that mirrored a word from the book – INVISIBLE. He proposed to reveal the manifold character of this problem through re-examining and re-evaluating the fascination with Christian iconography that set standards in depicting universal themes of pain,

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45   Charlotte Allen, *The Human Christ: The Search for the Historical Jesus* (New York: Free Press, 1998).

46   Alistair McFadyen, "Imaging God: A Theological Answer to the Anthropological Question?" *Zygon* 47, no. 4 (2011): 931.

suffering, fear, love and hope.[47] This iconography, rooted profoundly in the Christian tradition and belief, has developed in the universal cultural inheritance and is developing further and stronger in a secular context.[48] This, however, does not necessarily detach it from the religious sentiment or transcendence since art continues to be a place of encounter with the invisible and the contemplation of the pious, regardless of the many theoretical definitions and limitations.

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[47]   Isabelle Malz, ed., *The Problem of God* (Düsseldorf: Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen-Kerber, 2015), 311–12.

[48]   Alena Alexandrova, *Dis-Continuities: The Role of Religious Motifs in Contemporary Art,* PhD-diss (University of Amsterdam, 2013), 260–67.