

# Roundtable

## *ART, RELIGION, AND THE MARKET PLACE*

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*The subject of this Roundtable is the impact of commercial interests and practices — “the marketplace” — on art and religion. The original essay, asserting common goals for art and religion and a common enemy in marketplace values, was written by Marden J. Clark, Professor of English at Brigham Young University, who has published poems and articles in Brigham Young University Studies. Professor Clark is responded to by two men with quite different evaluations of the interrelationship of art, religion, and the marketplace: Robert Christmas, a young poet now teaching English at the University of Southern California, and Gary Driggs, former lecturer in the Indiana University Graduate School of Business and presently an economist and business executive in Phoenix, Arizona.*

### ART, RELIGION, AND THE MARKET PLACE

*Marden Clark*

Art and religion share a common end and a common enemy. The common end is the enrichment of the life of the spirit; the common enemy is the market place. That the end, or at least the highest end, of religion is the enrichment of the life of the spirit I take as axiomatic, though, unhappily, religion has not always sought this end. Too often it has sought intimidation of the spirit, in the process belittling both the spirit and the body that houses it. Too often it has sought only its own self-aggrandizement, in the process belittling both itself and its source. Too often it has sought only efficiency of organization and power through organization, in the process denying the dignity and value of what it was trying to organize. But I aim here at another false end of religion.

That the highest end of art is the enrichment of the life of the spirit may not be quite so axiomatic, though I think it should be.

But in a world of art still in the process of emerging from the depths of naturalistic pessimism, and emerging, it sometimes seems, only into the more disturbing depths of certain kinds of existentialism — in such a world art, too, must often seem to have lost its concern for the life of the spirit.

Art has generally proclaimed as its province the whole of experience. Hence we should be little surprised that not all art seems concerned with the spirit, nor that much of it does. But if we broaden, as I think we must, the concept of the spirit to include truth and beauty, which the voice of Keats's urn assures us are already one, then surely most of what we have accepted as art must have its relevance to the life of the spirit. We have no trouble seeing the relevance in *The Divine Comedy* or *Paradise Lost*, in the Sistine Chapel or "The Last Supper," or in Bach's *Magnificat* or Handel's *Messiah*. We should have little trouble seeing it in the intense probings and ironies of a *King Lear* or a *Moby Dick*.

But what about such awesome studies in human degeneration as *Medea* and *Macbeth*? What about that wry satirical questioning of all values, *Vanity Fair*, or all those profoundly questioning novels of Thomas Hardy and Joseph Conrad? Or what about the devastating pictures of a sterile modern society in *The Waste Land* or *The Sound and the Fury*? What about such works, to say nothing of significant works such as *Topic of Cancer* that on the surface, at least, seem even antipathetic to the life of the spirit. I would have, of course, an impossible task to defend in any detail even the few I have listed. The defense would probably start with what I've called "awesome studies in human degeneration," *Medea* and *Macbeth*. For with both I suspect I would have nearly everyone on my side. The point here: what we see degenerating in both is precisely that human spirit which it is the end of art and religion to enrich. But degeneration is the wrong word. Only if we think of its root can we approach the sense I want. For both are studies, really, in *generation*, but in generation seeking after the wrong things, in generation gone horribly awry. In some such direction would the defense move for most of the rest.

That the enemy of religion is the market place we have on high authority: in that whip falling on the money changers; in those soft but ringing words that echo from a hundred of the passages of the gospels — "Take no thought of what ye should wear . . .," "For what is a man profited . . .," "Ye cannot serve both God and Mammon . . ."; in the wrath that hurled the first tablets of stone to destruction at the sight of the golden calf. Surely we must sense more than the usual significance that the calf was gold; gold as the

essence of the market place but also gold as the demonic incarnation of all things of the spirit made flesh and then worshipped; gold, in modern terms, as the positivistic proof that God is — and can be — only our own creation. I here consciously, and a little bit unfairly, both limit and extend the meaning of “market place.” I limit it to exclude the legitimate function of supplying and distributing human needs. With this function I have no quarrel — only with the exploitation of those needs, or of religion and art. I extend the meaning to include materialism in all of its various manifestations — the money changers in the temple, the trust in things and gadgets, the belief in a totally materialistic universe in philosophy or economics or history (i.e., Marxist economics and history) or religion. Against all these religion stands opposed.

And so, I think, does art. But here I must tread gingerly. For many great works of art have come out of philosophical beliefs in materialism, mechanism, naturalistic determinism. I do not want to give up *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* or *A Shropshire Lad*. But these, like much great art, have sprung not from the belief itself but from intense wrestling with the problems posed by the belief: the insult to human dignity — to the human spirit — posed by the evidence that finally pictured man as caught in a mechanistic universe both outside and inside himself, in both his physical and social and economic environment, in both his physiology and his psychology. Even the workings of the human mind posited as a matter of the balance between positive and negative charges of electricity. We can hardly wonder that the artist should wrestle.

#### ART VERSUS THE MARKET PLACE IN THE PAST

That the most persistent enemy of art is the market place I can document simply by reference to the running battle art has fought. I do not want to over-simplify here. Most of my examples involve more than that battle. But they do involve the battle. Medea horrifies us with her terrible jealousy and revenge. But in some ways Jason horrifies us even worse with his dull market-place justification: By marrying the king's daughter, he can secure his position in the kingdom! Dante reserves one of the choice spots in his *Inferno* for his usurers, who make sterile money breed. And he himself gets his vision of the Light that is God only after purging himself of everything that could be associated with the market place — and of much besides. Chaucer's Miller who well knew how to “tollen thryce” and his Friar who could tell the state of a man's soul by the size of his gift, these and many more dramatize the battle. Macbeth's ambition is for power, position. But both involve the market. And all the

way from the casket scene and Shylock to the grasping brother of Prospero, Shakespeare explores the problem. Note especially the kingdom divided which sets off the action in *Lear*. Milton's Christ must resist both bread and the kingdom. And so it goes, to reach a kind of climax with the romantics. The errant son of Wordsworth's Michael never returns from the market place. The mystic experience above Tintern Abbey can come only with the denial of all market-place concerns. Whitman may try to reconcile *every* thing in his "I," but his mystic experience is a union of body and soul, not body and market place. Walden is one long denial of the market place and one long hymn to the life of the spirit. Mark Twain's sharp satire aimed about as often at the market place as any other one thing — though he himself was obviously attracted to the market and almost ruined in it. Huck Finn finds that Miss Watson's market-place version of prayer won't really give a body anything he wants — won't even supply a fishing outfit complete. Note the cupidity that, along with self-righteousness and mere negative innocence, corrupted — and saved — Hadleyburg. Or note the delightfully devastating "Letter from the Recording Angel" in which Twain satirizes the cupidity of Livy's uncle. Even James, so often considered above such considerations, looks sharply at the market place over and over again: in that almost literal market place run by Mrs. Medwin, in which social position and talent are bartered for money; in the using of his *Lady* by Madame Merle and Osmond; in the "values" of Woolett, Massachusetts, juxtaposed against those of the Paris that Lambert Strether is supposed to rescue Chad from; and so forth.

The attack continues, perhaps even with increasing sharpness, into the twentieth century, from Ezra Pound's polemics against usury to Eliot's *Prufrock* caught in his sophisticated but meaningless social market place; from Sinclair Lewis's satiric denunciations of Main Street and Babbitt to Faulkner's Popeye and Flem Snopes, who between them embody practically everything Faulkner sees as evil about the market place: its cold self-seeking, its mechanistic, inhuman sterility, its vicious depthless quality like stamped tin; from the attacks against the modern abstract impersonality of finance banking in Steinbeck or Robert Penn Warren to, even, the revolt of the beatniks against convention and materialism. For the literary artist so persistently thus to define the enemy may not mean that the market place consciously opposes art. But it must mean that artists see the distorted market-place emphasis as the enemy to the life of the spirit.

But if art and religion share a common end and a common enemy,

they also share a mutual distrust — of each other. True, each may use the materials and techniques of the other, but each looks with a suspicious eye at the other. Not in Dante, not in Milton, not even in Swift or Doctor Johnson. But beginning perhaps in the romantic identification of nature or the inner self with God, our poets have been increasingly suspicious of organized religion — though still insisting on the validity, even the supremacy, of inner religion. And organized religion has generally responded as we would expect: by counter-attack. The artist is apt to consider the man of religion narrow, authoritarian, self-righteous, prudish, positive, or just mystic. The man of religion is apt to consider the artist dangerous, irresponsible, impractical, hypersensitive, immoral, or just mystic. For documentation here I trust to common experience. I need hardly point further than the kind of undeclared hostility we all sometimes sense between various departments in our universities. Yes, the dichotomy between art and religion exists. It exists in America. It exists in our churches. It exists on our campuses.

I am uncomfortable with the dichotomy. I am more uncomfortable, though, with what I sense as an almost wholesale sell-out in both camps to the enemy. Neither art nor religion but the market place is winning, and this in spite of the highly publicized revival of interest and activity in both art and religion. Both are making their peace with Mammon.

In the nation at large I need only point to the vast popularity of the Norman Vincent Peale brand of religion to indicate what I mean by the sell-out of religion, Peale abetted by such as *Life*, *Time*, and *The Reader's Digest*. I can find a great deal of meaning in the "partnership with God" concept until the Bible becomes a how-to-do-it manual and prayer a part of the pitch to sell vacuum cleaners or bonds. Then Madison Avenue and Wall Street have taken over Trinity Church; the sell-out is complete. And the result makes Sinclair Lewis's world of business-become-religion and religion-turned-business seem pure and undefiled.

By documenting broadly the fundamental enmities and by picking out the Reverend Peale to epitomize market-place religion, I have hardly intended to leave Mormons complacent. Surely we have our own popularizers who see religion nearly always in market-place terms, our mission presidents who can speak of baptism — so significant a spiritual event — as "moving a paper," our stake presidents and bishops who judge spiritual welfare by the monthly statistical report. The Reverend Peale's books make only a trickle in the flow — almost now a deluge — of popularized books on religion, and Mormons contribute more than their share. Many of these

books must deserve their popular success. Some certainly do. But I fear that too many of them trade on the embarrassing trait dramatized for Mormons so forcefully — and exploited so frighteningly — by *These Amazing Mormons*: our desire to read good things about ourselves. And it is among Mormons that we hear so often the tale of the tithing that returns many fold in the hour of need, the talk of tithing as our best buy in insurance, or the distasteful joke about it as personal fire insurance; that we hear the strange market-place emphasis given the repeated philosophy of history, “Inasmuch as ye keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land”; that we hear so much talk of individual awards and see so much display of statistics. Perhaps their connection with the market place is what makes me suspicious of these devices for efficiency.

And what about art? In spite of our lip service to it and in spite of many very fine creative achievements, I fear that much of art, too, has sold out. In one of the fine ironies of history, *treasures* of art have become also treasures of the market place. Not that the market place has gone esthetic, but that it has discovered art treasures as one of the highest paying and safest of all investments. Hence the strange incongruity of a speculative market in painting and sculptures almost as wild as that in uranium. I comment on this not to deplore, though I have some misgivings about the prospect of a \$200,000 bonus-baby artist. I comment to take the fact as symbol for the market-place control, via Hollywood or Madison Avenue or television, of so much of the country’s artistic talent.

Perhaps “sell-out” is too strong a word. But surely serious art is on the defensive. Not, though, against genuine religion, not against the Master’s dictum that we love our neighbor and our God. Not against the Mormon dictum that we seek knowledge out of the best books. But against a market-place psychology that encourages widespread apathy or distrust or promotion of mediocrity, that too often swallows up the aspiring artist or drives him out of church activity because he finds neither understanding nor audience.

Yes, the market place has been able to purchase far too much of both art and religion. And where it has been able to purchase both at once — that is, where both exactly meet in the market place — then Michelangelo’s David becomes a gimmick to sell larger burial plots with a better view of the city, and the Ten Commandments become the basis for super-colossals that make us think we have been participating in religious art when we have only been witnessing orgies. Surely there is a higher destiny for both.

Partly, I fancy, the market place has succeeded so well in its exploitation of art and religion just because of the mistrust with

which art and religion have come to view each other. And here I do deplore. I deplore the results, far-reaching and deep as they seem to me. The world is reaping the fruits of market-place religion and market-place art and of the divorce between religion and art. This may be loading things too heavily. Perhaps no amount of mutual trust and support, perhaps not even the strictest denial of the market place by both religion and art, could have prevented the present division of the world. But surely at least part of the cause for it lies in market-place approaches to world politics, at least part in the positivistic philosophy that Moscow shouts as a "barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world" and that we publicly deny and may not even consciously understand as our own.

Regardless, while I am aware of at least some valid reasons for the mutual distrust, I feel certain of the much greater validity in the reasons for a mutual trust and support between art and religion, and for their mutual distrust of the common enemy. That enemy is brash, brassy, subtle and seductive — and convinced of its own righteousness. It can seduce, if it were possible, even the very elect. It can shout to the world, "Think big," or whisper to each of us, "Come, eat, and know." It can tell our young business majors, "The secret of all selling is to learn to love people, really love people; then you can sell bonds unlimited." It will require the combined effort of art and religion to defeat.

They should make that effort. For art is essentially religious. And religion is itself an art in the highest sense, or perhaps a combination of all arts. And each can know more of itself, its own deepest nature, through the other. Religion an art? Not exactly. Not the kind that concentrates on statistics and awards. Not, I believe, the kind that seeks to make God a business partner. But to love God with all one's being and one's neighbor as oneself, to live the life implied in *The Good Samaritan*, to understand the miracle of the Word made Flesh, to make the word we have flesh in our own lives, to know and make viable in our lives the paradox of the denial of self that only can save — no one can convince me that these do not involve, even require art. Nearly all of us, I suspect, can testify to the sense of artistic and religious identity involved in our deepest religious experiences and more so to our sense of failure in both art and religion because we experience neither more deeply than we do. If my original assertion will stand, that the common end is the enrichment of the life of the spirit, then that common end proclaims a relationship — if not of identity, then at least of fraternity. The support that religion has always found in symbol, in ritual, in music and painting and sculpture and liturgy defines that fraternity, as

does the inspiration that artists have always found in religious event and meditation.

Art is religious? No, again, not often the market-place variety, though it often has religious subject matter, often thinks itself religious. Again I am thinking of the life of the spirit: no enrichment, no art. And again I may be playing a bit loosely with meanings. But in a very real sense, even the simplest kind of imagist poem or of harmony or of design in color has its relevance to the spirit:

So much depends  
upon  
a red wheel  
barrow  
glazed with rain  
water  
beside the white  
chickens

—William Carlos Williams

If nothing more, just the touch of magic is relevant, the touch that sends the mind in quest of what depends.

#### *PLUMBING THE GREATER DEPTHS*

I need not rely too heavily on what is perhaps a tenuous relationship, not with so much of our great art explicitly religious. It is hardly mere accident that so many of our greatest works have grown from conscious celebration of religious event or concept or truth. Hardly mere accident that so many others have grown from the profoundest kind of struggling with problems posed by religion. Hardly mere accident that the western world's two great ages of drama grew, independently, out of religious ritual. And whether we consider tragedy as the highest expression of religious yearnings or as "religious paradox," we can hardly deny that great tragedy speaks to our deepest religious senses.

Or, to look at it differently, if art can help religion defeat the common enemy it can also help to deepen and strengthen our religious experience. Here the relationship becomes very complex. The depth of any experience, artistic or religious, depends largely on the depth of our awareness. Quantity alone can bring depth to neither water nor experience. Both need focus, control, a container. Yes, prayer, my friends from the College of Religion will say. But not only prayer, fundamental though that is. At our best, and using every resource available to us, our experience is able to encompass only a fraction of total experience, to plumb deep enough only to



suggest the greater depths. Any resource that can help deepen and broaden that experience we should be grateful for. We should contemplate the "Sistine Madonna" or "The Last Supper." We should listen to Handel and Bach. We should read *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost*. With their explicitly religious subject matter they can deepen our own religious experience. We read *The Brothers Karamazov*, especially "The Grand Inquisitor" section, and "free agency" means something different — and more — than it had meant. We read it along with *Paradise Regained* and our understanding, our response, to the temptations of Christ broadens and deepens. No longer just "the world, the flesh, and the devil," they must become the most subtle and profound appeals to all that was best and deepest in His nature, to the very God in Him. We trace Raskolnikov's crime — and the punishment that begins even before the crime — through the windings of his consciousness, we see both crime and punishment become the agents of an eventual salvation, and the concept of "opposition in all things" grows richer and more profound. We live with Wordsworth or Whitman through the emotion of a mystic experience, and we recognize qualities that not even a Prophet's description of the experience has caught.

I should hate to give up many of the experiences in art that deepen my experiences with religion: the fourteen-line cry of Milton to God that He avenge His "slaughtered saints" in Piedmont, or the softer response to the blindness that had lodged with him useless the "one Talent which is death to hide"; the meditations of Donne that tell me "no man is an island"; Hopkins's wonderful comparison of Christ to a windhover or his earlier cry that assures the Lord that He is indeed just, but asks, "Wert thou my enemy, O thou my friend, / How wouldst thou worse, I wonder, than thou dost / Defeat, thwart me?" and ends, "Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain"; Eliot's *Four Quartets* with their remarkably complex combination of meditation, lyricism, and symbolic development that culminate in a symbolic vision of beatitude. Even the two lines with which Eliot defines beatitude — "A condition of complete simplicity / (Costing not less than everything)" — repay the cost of knowing these poems.

Such explicitly religious poems try to give answers. But the artist may not give us answers at all. He is more likely to give us difficult questions. Or he may send a Captain Ahab around all the oceans seeking to destroy a certain white whale which, at least for Ahab, embodies all evil or brute force or inscrutable malice that lies at the leas of things. He may finally give us a morally ordered universe—as I think Shakespeare does. But in the twentieth century he may