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No Idols: The Missing Theology of Art
Thomas Crow

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No Idols:
The Missing Theology
of Art

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Introduction

The polemic of the present book turns away from contemporary cultural theories where argument is expected and well rehearsed. It begins instead by examining a blind spot obscuring full apprehension of past art in the West. From the fourth century to perhaps 1800, saintly figures, biblical events and Christian Church history overwhelmingly dominate the artistic record. Yet to raise in the present day the issue of religious art as an actual terrain of theology comes with risks. The first of these might be undoing a historically key conceptual break with the predominantly Christianised culture of Europe and North America, such that the art of that tradition might be viewed apart from any devotional reverence. Without such separation, no dispassionate examination of the historical record—which is to say, no art history worth the name—would have been genuinely conceivable.

The secularisation of all the Crucifixions, Madonnas, miracle-workings and Bible stories that make up such an enormous proportion of Western art before the modern era—their effective translation into aesthetic and technical idioms—is easy to take for granted. Indeed it is rarely noticed any longer. But the moment when such translation could simply be assumed is surprisingly recent. Two among the principal founders of the academic field of art history in America—Arthur Kingsley Porter of Harvard and Charles Rufus Morey of Princeton—spent the 1920s championing the study of medieval art and architecture as a bulwark against the levelling effects of modern urban experience in the jazz age, certain that their groomed male pupils would thereby imbibe via the force of art a corrective devotion to hierarchy and conventional piety.

That two such representatives of the American Protestant ascendancy should so comfortably traffic with Roman Catholicism represents only one of the disturbances in normative behaviour induced by taking seriously the religion in religious art; Porter went so far as to take up residence in rural Ireland, where he enjoyed the deference and, to his eyes, simple piety of his tenants. The imagined, pre-modern idyll of Porter and Morey, however, soon fell victim to intellectual counter-thrusts: the young Meyer Schapiro, of immigrant Jewish origin and based at Columbia in New York City, brought to the study of medieval art an unsurpassable, faith-free erudition combined with a Marx-derived attention to a dynamic interplay with secular forces and class interests. Henri Focillon migrated from the Sorbonne to Yale, bearing a more abstract concentration on diagnostic formal systems in medieval artistic styles. Schapiro may have called out Focillon for his bloodless exclusion of so much fractious human experience, but, taken together, the force and appeal of their arguments altered the study of European medieval art to such an extent that revealing clarity of form surpassed doctrinal meaning as the primary source of the field's intellectual magnetism. Ever since, Christian devotion has effectively been displaced from that bastion within the field of art history. Religious behaviour and belief, along with theological meaning, appear as cultural artefacts to be dissected and decoded with clinical detachment, next to nothing presumably at stake for the interpreter beyond demonstration of scholarly acumen.

Religious interpretations of avowedly religious subjects thus all too readily fall into unrevealing tautology, however nuanced and well informed their readings might be. So how then does one gauge the strength or force of the theological ideas conveyed by a given work of art? Christian themes and imagery have as readily provided masks for conformist venality as they have offered reckoning with deep lessons on the order of 'Love thy neighbour as thyself'; indeed the former is far more likely. Certain exceptional art historians such as Schapiro have searchingly assessed the forms in religious art in order to gauge the pressures of secular modernity on the outwardly maintained certainties of dogmatic observance. Just as secularising forces

can best be measured via their indirect effects on religious expression, so the strength of religious outlooks and convictions should be assessed by the pressure they exert on ostensibly secular subjects.

To achieve this, however, it is necessary to find fissures already present in the edifice of conventional piety and belief. In France in the early eighteenth century—at the onset of what is assumed to be the gathering force of Enlightenment values—a strain of religious imagery was consciously conceived to require decoding against an orthodox grain. The severe suppression of one ascetically minded faction within orthodox Roman Catholicism, the so-called Jansenists, necessitated coded or clandestine expression on the part of its adherents.

Vigilant against idolatrous temptations, yet attuned to visual signs of divine grace in the world, the Jansenist effect in Christian subject matter offers a corrective to the implicit endorsement of any and all conventional religious expression, however venal or credulous, fostered by the detached and non-committal attitude of normative scholarship. The concept of idolatry and its critique will loom large in the pages that follow. In taking this path, the work of philosopher Mark Johnston is especially encouraging; his broad definition of the idolatrous entails any form of devotion to God intended to secure personal advantage for the believer. Such postures, whether overt or introspective, negate themselves, in that any entity susceptible to such entreaties is by definition not God, not the 'actual Highest One', to use the term he prefers. Thus to identify religious meaning in avowedly religious art risks not only unrevealing tautology but a categorical mistake as well. As Johnston writes with justifiable severity in his recent study *Saving God* (2009): 'After idolatry is purged, not every "religion" will actually be a religion, and little in the way of "religious doctrine" will be religious. Few will have actually had a religion, as opposed to a simulacrum of one.'¹

Such were already the arguments and implicit assumptions of Jansenist belief. One anonymous partisan wrote in 1728 that the contrived candle-lighting ceremonies and the elaborate ornaments of the Church were not simply vain human inventions, but that 'God is even offended by them, because they direct a cult to creatures that is due to God alone.'² Yet a

Jansenist disposition by no means precluded the making of art, the issue for this sect being what a successful religious art would be like when produced in light of such all-encompassing abhorrence of idolatrous excess. The break within orthodox Catholicism effected by the Jansenists thus provides an escape from the tautological agreement between doctrine and picturing.

Leaping forward two or three centuries, paying attention to cognate, if rare phenomena in recent art provides an opportunity to map the ways in which art might appear in a living form under the aegis of this theological critique. Contemporary art studies have had little to offer concerning the metaphysical systems espoused by avant-garde artists on the order of Kazimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian and Wassily Kandinsky. The current tendency is to adopt a posture of self-satisfied mourning for all bypassed utopianisms, including the Marxist varieties—a form of public piety accompanied by self-congratulatory laments over the devastation of modern-day subjectivity by the hegemony of the Culture Industry (or, alternatively, the Spectacle). Never broached is the idea that the metaphysical basis of so much early modernism could be brought back to life within a Christian religious vocabulary that is both known to millions and connected to a robust tradition of erudite philosophical reflection.

But such was the achievement of the New Zealand painter Colin McCahon (1919–1987). He cherished cubism, suprematism, and *de stijl*, absorbed painstakingly from reproductions, then confirmed by the Juan Gris and Mondrian shows he saw in America in 1958. Extrapolating this inherited geometric vocabulary into letterforms, he rendered certain biblical texts in such a way as to turn conventional piety against itself, from which point he launched, over more than two decades, increasingly stark, aniconic confrontations with doubt, fear and the inadequacy of human endeavour. For McCahon to go back to the Gospels was moreover to tap the primary source of a higher linguistic competence once significantly more widespread in the Anglophone world.

In his early work at the close of the 1940s—from a New Zealand redoubt that was for him at a physically unbridgeable distance from

Europe—McCahon drew upon prototypical Christian subjects of the Italian Renaissance, all derived from art-historical publications, so rehearsing the foundations of the discipline in the study of devotional imagery. The evolution of his practice from the mid-1950s to the early 1980s enacts an appraisal of the idolatrous potential present in the veneration of representational objects by believers and art connoisseurs alike. Art historians Rex Butler and Laurence Simmons sound a note close to Jansenist rigour toward vain idols in observing that McCahon:

works within a distinctively Christian economy of the sign, in which it is not through any mimetic resemblance or significant equivalence that the image works, but through a certain non-resemblance to its subject matter. It is paradoxically through its inability to be expressed, an inability that can be expressed only through the image—that we might best capture the presence of the Divine within a fallen world.³

Thus the heuristic recognition that religious meanings in the art of a given era are best gauged by their effects on ostensibly non-religious works becomes something larger: an imperative that any modern work of genuine theological import abjure conventionally religious signs, symbols and narratives.

Yet even the transformed traces of a Christian legacy have stood in the way of McCahon's example gaining any significant visibility beyond the Antipodes. Artists who employ words as a conspicuous element in their work—Jasper Johns, Robert Indiana, Ed Ruscha and Christopher Wool, to cite prominent figures in the present day—have drawn much critical attention in recent years. The name of McCahon, however, peer of them all, elicits only blank looks when mentioned in the northern hemisphere. And one suspects that, were his paintings to receive adequate exposure in London or New York, the dominance of biblical passages in his word-imagery would turn many viewers away before they might assess his achievement. No such attitude, quite obviously, greets the work of the artist who was among his closest generational and aesthetic counterparts: no less a figure than Mark Rothko (1903–1970), whose far more prominent example will precede McCahon's in the chapters to follow.

Many of the same viewers who would reject McCahon outright as a provincial evangelist would very likely be susceptible to the common ascription of 'spirituality' to Rothko's hovering fields of numinous colour. That Rothko's paintings might provide this sort of satisfaction to viewers hungry for otherworldly comfort, however, provoked the artist to vehement protest. Addressing 'those who are friendly to my pictures on the basis of their serenity,' he stated, 'I would like to say that they have found enduring for human life the extreme violence that pervades every inch of their surface.'⁴ In the mind of the artist, every ill that religion proposes to redeem (but can never validly ameliorate) is inscribed into Rothko's outwardly non-mimetic canvases: to use Johnston's words, 'suffering, corrosive aging ... our profound ignorance of our condition, the isolation of ordinary self-involvement, isolation, the vulnerability of everything we cherish to time and chance, and, finally, untimely death.'⁵

For much of Rothko's career, concentration on such structural defects in human life—acted out by entities derived in the first instance from the Christian Apocalypse—lent his art depth and energy; by the mid-1960s, however, the inner tensions of his art appear to relax. The self-evident fruition of his career, in his own mind and that of posterity, lay in his work from 1964 to 1969 for the Rothko Chapel, adjacent to the Catholic University of St Thomas in Houston, Texas. The artist never saw the installation of his darkly towering canvases in the austere brick octagon that he had specified for their installation. They became exposed to the world under auspices only partly of the artist's making, so require peeling back the layers of their gestation before reckoning with their potential as transformative works of art aching to escape idolatry's gravitational pull—and doing so in a setting that claims as great a religious justification as any of its era.

The Jewish but non-observant Rothko began his mature artistic development, as had McCahon, via explicit quotation from Christian prototypes, but soon sublimated these motifs into coloured fields free of discernable references. Robert Smithson (1938–1973), who was part of a New York cohort a generation after Rothko's, followed a parallel trajectory. Smithson's work over a life shortened by accidental death was pervaded by a self-invented Catholic symbolism. He began his artistic career with

highly wrought figurative paintings on mystical Christian themes. He knew the Augustinian theology of the Jansenist Blaise Pascal and used the seventeenth-century philosopher's definition of nature—'an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere'—as the epigraph to a key magazine piece of 1967. Pascal's assumption of a fallen world, divorced from an infinite and unknowable divinity, resonates with Smithson's frequently expressed hostility to any assumption that the divine might reveal itself in naturalistic clothing.

He located the start of the rot in the religious art of Renaissance Italy: 'The "faithful" have worshipped these playboys of Galilee for the last 4 hundred years'; he opined in a letter of 1961, 'Modern Isms are the result of the failure of the "humanism" of the Renaissance.' Citing Augustine, he wrote with explicitly anti-idolatrous emphasis, 'If icons are seen as *sense-objects*, they are dead to the world. A spirit that is revealed through incarnate grace cannot be *measured* by human beings.'⁶

Around 1965 Smithson made a deliberate decision to adopt the impersonal and industrial idiom of minimalist sculpture, his purpose being to escape artistic marginalisation while he carried forward his religiously steeped visions by abstract (anti-iconic) implication. In this professional aim he found success, but at the same time a blinkered reception that has narrowly circumscribed the understanding of his work. Behind these occlusions has been a general assent to the plausibility of minimalist claims to obviate mimetic representation. Smithson rightly realised that such aspirations, bound to fail within the terms of any empirical phenomenology, could only achieve resolution in a metaphysical register. That recognition reinforced his longstanding preoccupation with the theme of Eucharistic transubstantiation, which received what is surely its most monumental manifestation via his immersing the *Spiral jetty* (1970) in the reddened waters of the Great Salt Lake in Utah (where the unexpected miniaturisation of the jetty within the vast circular horizon generates art's closest, yet tragically inadequate, approximation of a sphere with its centre everywhere and circumference nowhere).

Next in fame to the jetty in the league table of Western land works would be the still-evolving transformation of the Roden Crater in northern

Arizona by James Turrell (born 1943). Turrell has incorporated within this natural formation a syncretic set of references to Native American and Eastern religious rituals and architecture. This book's trajectory, however, will follow the theme of sacrifice and personal witnessing to Turrell's early illumination pieces of the 1960s. Motivated by a strict Quaker formation, he had rejected the implicit vanity of objects fashioned without practical use, seeking a path for art that would be as free of material idolatry as possible. Bound up with this conviction were acts of extreme witnessing, including prison and solitary confinement for abetting resistance to conscription, acts that beggar received notions of 'risk' in art. The conclusion to the present account takes up the case of Mary Corita Kent (1918–1986), Sister Corita as she was widely known and celebrated during the 1960s. It broaches the question as to how this inquiry might fruitfully extend to art generated, in a modern-day parallel to a Fra Angelico, from a cloistered religious vocation. It attempts an answer to the further question as to whether religious art, as opposed to 'a simulacrum of one', is conceivable for our own time.

The impetus for this book took shape in a postgraduate seminar on art in late seventeenth-century France, a moment of heated religious crisis and conflict involving some of the best minds in Europe: the name of Pascal, notorious for his Jansenist partisanship and family ties, need only be adduced. It seemed increasingly untenable to continue assessing the conviction of such actors with no acknowledgement of their fundamental motivation: life redeemed from vain self-interest and idolatrous public hypocrisy. Longing to strengthen one's life in the face of its unavoidable structural defects, but without recourse to expediently supernaturalist remedies, is no period artefact. When devoting ourselves to charting their arguments and meditations, how could we honestly exempt ourselves from any of the same intellectual and moral questions?

At a minimum, a better sense of what it would be like to think in these terms was needed; historical investigation required a shadowing by a parallel theological reflection of our own, a pursuit distinct from parsing parochial issues of period religious observance. Still less suitable, quite obviously,



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