

## **Art from the Christian point of view – by Beat Rink**

Translation: Bill Buchanan  
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Statement by the Swiss  
Evangelical Alliance, Arts+  
and "HOPE FOR EUROPE"

Approved by the Central  
Committee of the Swiss  
Evangelical Alliance (SEA-DS) in  
March, 2009

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## PREFACE

Many Christian churches have discovered the importance of various forms of art in recent years –going beyond the previous use of organ and worship music. This is true at least of protestant churches, while the Catholic and Orthodox churches have always attached a different, in some cases higher, value to art.

This rediscovery has been welcomed in established and independent protestant churches and, for obvious reasons, not least by artists themselves. At the same time, church leaders and members have often expressed the wish to be helped towards a deeper understanding of the phenomenon "art".

Amongst Christian artists, new initiatives have grown up in various countries since the 1980s, mostly in the form of interconfessional movements. This was also the case in Switzerland, which is also where Arts+ was founded in 2005 as an alliance of Christian cultural initiatives. Discussions conducted in such artists' movements and networks centre around such topics as the "self-conception (and the daily experience) of Christian culture makers", "aesthetics and theology", "ethics and art as a business"– or generally: "The Kingdom of God and culture", thus also returning frequently to the relationship between "art and the church". The process reveals a need for

thinking on a more relevant and deeper level, primarily theologically, on the subject.

The present statement is conceived as a sketch-like and provisional attempt to illuminate various facets of the extensive topic "art" (using this term always as applying to all branches of the arts), constantly bringing in the Christian perspective. The multiplicity of individual topics has been subdivided into three areas: "Art and society" – "Art and the individual"– "Art and the church". It is inevitable that many questions will not be addressed at all, while other recur repeatedly and lead to a certain amount of overlapping amongst the chapters. "Defining it is a work of art in itself", the Polish aphorist Stanislaw Jerzy Lec writes. This quip has something comforting about it, reminding us in advance the impossibility of understanding creativity in any way other than as a gift originating in God and defying all our attempts to pin it down intellectually.



Photo: Crescendo

## A. ART AND SOCIETY

### 1. The present-day art boom

The starting point for our considerations is an observation: art is an increasingly significant factor in our society, as is shown by the growing importance of popular music<sup>1</sup>, design, fashion and film. Our feeling for life is largely determined by aesthetics – or, putting it another way: as never before, artistic creativity permeates all sectors of our life and appeals there (not least in order to make products sellable) to our sense of beauty. This is confirmed by the fact that the art market is booming – even in economically less than rosy times. Large scale cultural events attract mass audiences, whether in pop concerts, film festivals or museum nights. The media devote attention lavishly to the topic “art and culture”. And, finally, culture has become politically more important: no party programme seeking serious attention can afford to side-step culture politics. The reasons for this art boom are multiple:

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<sup>1</sup> One distinguishes “serious” music [German: E-Musik] and “entertainment” music [German: U-Musik]. This distinction and, above all, the strict separation of the two areas is not unproblematic. One need only reflect how much of today’s “serious” music served as entertainment at the time of its composition.



#### Reasons for the Boom

- 1. Economic reasons:** The more prosperous a society is, the more intensive the aesthetic feeling for life and the more many-sided the culture on offer. Art is, moreover, a capital investment, and culture offers opportunities for sponsoring and marketing.
- 2. Sociological reasons:** The artist enjoys a status previously accorded to other professional groups – including the clergy. The booming art scene also offers a platform for social contacts.
- 3. Ideological reasons:** Postmodern man is sceptical towards all conventional “ideological concepts” and intellectual contents, and therefore receptive for impulses from a direction which is not ideologically suspicious to him. It is in fact one of the trademarks of art (or of the preconceptions about it) that it is considered intrinsically critical of ideologies. But: even where it plays no role in interpreting or superimposing meaning, it offers its aficionados a place of

“beauty, truth and goodness”<sup>2</sup> and thus an “aesthetic home”. The secular art scene can in such cases assume almost religious traits: in this, it continues a long tradition with roots above all in the Romantic period.

4. **Psychological reasons:** man is searching for holistic experiences – often as a compensation for his place of work, where his personality is reduced to functionality. He often finds such holistic experiences in his free time – and this also means in art.

## The art boom from the Christian point of view

The mounting interest in the arts should basically be welcomed. Art is for Christians a gift of God with “image” characteristics, a human ability reflecting the divine Creator. With its aesthetic form (*aisthesis* = (originally) perception), art speaks to the senses. It is its “beauty”, for which we have the deepest of longings and sensitivity, that touches us. The resulting holistic experience provides an important counterbalance to all materialistically or intellectually truncated pictures of man.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This is an old triad of terms often used in relation to art.

<sup>3</sup> It is a fundamental element in the self-conception of the Christian faith that it is anchored in concretely experienced events and not in an inner religious world or in a “believed dogma”; for “the Word became flesh” and was “heard”, “seen with eyes, beheld, and touched with

The way that art, in the process of secularisation, has lost its connection with the church and has often taken on religious characteristics itself should be seen critically, but also self-critically, on the Christian side. It

is true that the church has been an important source of work and a spiritual home for many artists over the centuries. But, at the same time, the freedom of artists has been cut back in the name of narrow dogmatism; artists left the church, without the church showing concern for them and inviting them to share in a dialogue. The result was a growth in secular circles (and sometimes in liberal churches) of “art religion”, countered only by amateurish art on the church side, which only aggravated the alienation between art and church fellowships (see section C).

Counter to its many positive effects, the art boom has brought problematic consequences where artistic work (and the artists themselves) is subjected to the forces of the “art market”. These forces can, e.g. even during training, lead to mental stress and a competitive atmosphere damaging to creativity. Recent studies show, for example, that more and more orchestral musicians and opera singers can only stand up to professional pressure with the help of doping.

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hands”, see 1. Joh. 1, 1ff. There are thus no good theological grounds for a polarity between “senses” and “faith”.

## 2. The function of art in society

In the western world (which is our main concern here), art has carried out important functions in society for a long time now. The art boom mentioned above must be seen in the context of these factors. Here some of them are summarised:

### 1. Art as a factor in the history of ideas:

Art – principally literature, music, sculpture, architecture and painting – has been an important factor in the history of Western ideas since classical times. Artists are often pioneers of new directions in ideas and life patterns, giving impetus to the search for truth. We can hardly imagine any period without the important contribution made by the arts. However one may define the interaction between art and philosophy or between art and other forces in society (economy, politics, the sciences etc.), the arts are a catalyst, and sometimes even a motor, in the field of ideas and, indirectly, in developments in society generally. This is also true where art is mainly intended for small but influential groups. The theory of the “downwards dissemination of cultural goods” refers to the significance in the long term of path-breaking works of this kind for wider circles as well.

### 2. Art as cult:

Every religion is familiar with artistic expression. In heathen cults, dance, music, theatre and painting were also (and are) practiced. Art aims to make some kind of experience possible to that which is unseen (or believed). Its capacity to represent something in concentrated form has been of value to cultic and magical thinking since the days of cave painting.



### 3. Art as a factor in creating community:

Taking pleasure in art brings people together, whether in concerts, theatres, museums or cinemas. It forms an important part of communal activity in free time. The arts can contribute to a sense of identity: one need think only of national epic poetry, national anthems, folk song and other works that belong to the cultural resources of a social group (including religious communities).

#### **4. Art as a place for recognition and reflection:**

It is one of the fundamental characteristics of art that it trains perception and beckons us to new ways of seeing, hearing and thinking. Provocation directed towards old habits of seeing or hearing has been (and still is) often interpreted as an insult against tradition and as rebellion against convention.

#### **5. Art as a place for personal development:**

The preservation, exhibiting and re-interpretation of old works trains us in perceiving the past. From works of art, it is possible to read where a society is coming from, what gave it its identity over long periods or what has left a discernible impression on it (at least below the surface). Art challenges us to examine this identity critically. Not least, it is of central importance that art should be brought closer to people in certain contexts, particularly in schools. Good art also contributes to "personal development" or to "civilised behaviour" in the broadest sense.

#### **6. The contribution of art to public areas:**

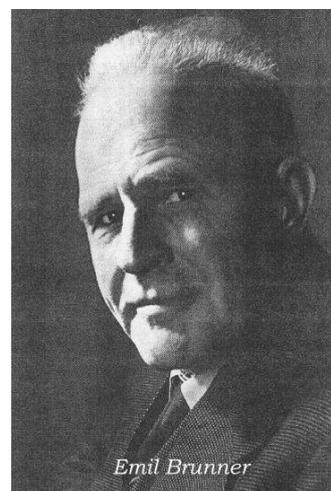
Art brings beauty into public areas. In the same way that no attractive living areas are imaginable without good architecture, it is impossible to conceive of a society without

effective art work in different areas of life.

#### **The importance of art in society - from a Christian perspective:**

In Christian circles, the deep alienation between the church and art and the art world is not sufficiently noticed. Furthermore, anti-secular reflexes make it difficult to reflect on the role and relevance of arts in society (*see point 1*).

**But in fact the Christian faith itself is an ideal nutritional soil for the arts to grow in.** How can we reconcile these statements? Although one cannot claim that there is a general link between artistic achievement and personal faith, we can agree with Emil Brunner when he says that "a world, a society in which religious belief dies out will in time also suffer artistic decay." For "no art will be able to continue flourishing in a soil in which humanity has dried up. Where people are no



longer capable of great feelings, where their intellectual horizon has

lost that broad sense of the infinite, and where their understanding of life is devoid of any metaphysical or religious depth", art will become superficial and degenerates to virtuosity.<sup>4</sup>

**In a society bearing a Christian imprint, the conditions for the unrestricted development of art are particularly good.**

For it is only in the Christian western world, after all, that a separation between the secular and religious areas is known – despite all the mutual influence and occasional interpenetration of the "two kingdoms".<sup>5</sup> Just as natural science is only possible in the context of a faith which does not recognise any gods of nature, art can only develop freely where it is released from any kind of cult function. Although invited to work within the church, it must never be allowed to become a "cult" itself or take over any kind of "cultish-magical" role (**point 2**). Then artists are no longer surrounded with an air of "religious" consecration, whether in the church or in the secular domain, and are not subjected to pressure to become "modern prophets or priests".<sup>6</sup> A healthy,

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<sup>4</sup> Emil Brunner. *Christentum und Kultur*, Zürich, 1979, p. 268.

<sup>5</sup> The idea of the "two kingdoms" was used by Luther. Jesus in his day had already drawn a clear boundary between his Kingdom and that which "belongs to Caesar". This does not contradict the commission to proclaim God's Kingdom and to mix it like yeast with the world – including the culture world.

<sup>6</sup> It is indeed incontestable that art can take on prophetic qualities. But what is meant here is a widespread image of the

non-religious relationship with art is thus only possible in an environment where the wrong kinds of interweaving of "the Kingdom of God" and "secular domain" have been removed.<sup>7</sup>

**If the Christian can gain insight into such relationships, his art could help to prevent, precisely in the name of faith, the misleading of people with religious or ideological ideas.**

Tendencies to mislead in this way occur especially where art is intended to create a sense of identity (**point 3**). In the worst case, art is threatened ethically by a binding with the wrong powers and aesthetically by a lapse into kitsch (as a concession to communal taste) or into plain propaganda.<sup>8</sup>

New ways (**see point 4**): Art must be granted the right to go new ways. **Christian faith is of course familiar with the idea of historical development and therefore also knows about the cultural task of art.**<sup>9</sup> This cultural

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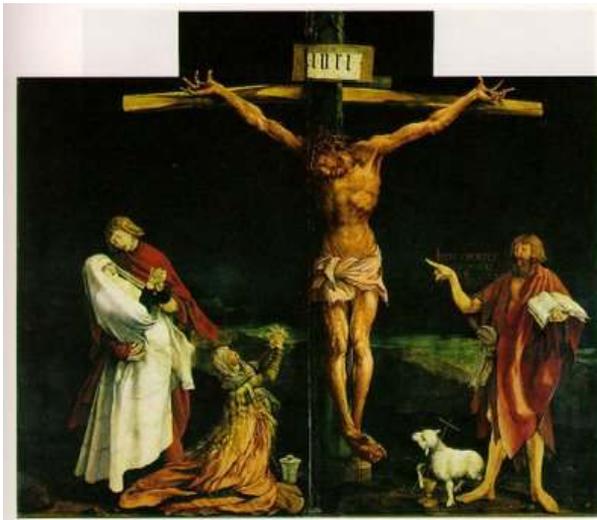
*artist. It appears e.g. where artists are consulted like "prophets" by representatives of the media and are expected to give answers of universal validity.*

<sup>7</sup> Secular does not mean directed against God. The secular sphere can be thoroughly permeated with knowledge of God's ordinances.

<sup>8</sup> This is visible where dictators have sought to force compliance on creative artistry. For the cultural policies in the Third Reich or in Stalinism, even non-representative art or modern music was considered subversive.

<sup>9</sup> The Christian – as indeed the Jewish – faith understands history in terms of the perspective of salvation not as static or, as in eastern thinking, as cyclical, but as movement and transformation – although

task includes using art to break up embedded patterns of thinking and perception. This also applies to the contents of the Bible, to which each epoch and every generation must find its own access. **To this extent, sacred (i.e. art dealing with "Christian" subjects) must also be provocative when it is concerned with clearing the way to matters of faith.**



There is then a danger, of course, that art may slip into a role of permanent provocation for the reason that there is success and market potential in this. In this context, we must call into question the present-day understanding of artistic "originality", which is derived equally from the idealistic cult of genius and from the concept of artistic "autonomy" and freedom. The addiction to "ingenious" originality occasionally assumes bizarre dimensions in the art

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*not in the sense of a humanistic faith in progress. Cultural changes are part of history. It is the task of man to shape history and culture. One can therefore speak of a cultural commission, acting on Christian tenets, for creative artists.*

scene. **In the name of "artistic autonomy", some branches of art take pleasure in a constant breaking of taboos in a way that, in normal public life, would see them punished by the law a long ago.**

Here we need a theologically differentiated view of things. On the one hand, art should not be censored, unless it is deliberately calling on people to behave as racists or if it hurts religious feelings in a massive way. Every call for artistic censorship must be answered by pointing out that art fundamentally takes place in a "fictitious domain", in a game with different "roles" and "voices" which are in no way identical with reality or with the opinions of the artist. A careful interpretation is therefore called for! The modern understanding of autonomy sometimes joins the poet Charles Baudelaire in claiming that genius can (no, must!) place itself above all social and moral norms – whatever serves the cause of art is allowed.



Charles Baudelaire

Discussion is also needed regarding the statements by the Catholic theologian Hans Küng when he demands an "autonomous literature, bound to no authority or rule (other than aesthetics)". **This stands in dichotomy with his**

**idea that ultimately no area can be excluded from the relationship with God and his lordship. Christian artists, at least, will not raise such claims of absolute autonomy.**

The role of education (*see 5 and 6*): Art is without doubt an important source for knowledge of history and for an understanding of our culture. To what extent, though, does it contribute to "civilised behaviour"? This question has occupied thinkers and poets for centuries. While Plato wished to banish the "mad" poet from his ideal state, Friedrich Schiller was of the opinion, more than two thousand years later, that art transported man into an "aesthetic" state in which alone a free decision for the good is possible.



Friedrich Schiller

For "only here do we feel torn away from time; and our humanity expresses itself in all its purity and integrity, as if it had never suffered any loss through the effects of external forces" ("Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man"). In the time between the great minds Plato and Schiller, thinkers widely separated in both time and content, – and naturally continuing beyond the latter – this topic has been intensively debated. In the process, Schiller's idealism still produces offspring

today! A Christian view of art cannot concur with him. For it must take into account the profound fallenness of man, for which not even the greatest of artistic pleasures can compensate.



Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Christian should instead take a lead from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote as follows on the "feeling of quality" in his book "Widerstand und Ergebung": "All the way along the line, it is a matter of rediscovering covered-over experiences of quality, so that things can be placed according to their quality. Quality is the greatest enemy of the stereotype. In relation to society, this means abstaining from the chase after higher positions, breaking with any kind of star cult, keeping vision free upwards and downwards, especially as far the choice of one's closer circle of friends is concerned, rejoicing in the hidden life as well as having the courage for public life. Culturally, the experience of quality means returning from newspaper and radio to the book, from haste to leisure and quiet, from sensation to reflection, from the ideal of virtuosity to art, from snobbery to modesty, from self-indulgence to moderation. Quantities compete with each other for space, qualities complement each other."

These words were not uttered on art, but they are relevant to our

theme. Art, we can conclude from this, offers an experience of quality and thus also a way out of an unhealthy attitude to life. It is not the aesthetic experience itself, however, but the co-operation of one's own will that brings the desired fruit. This is an important point: **the effect of art – including its own ethical effect – is decisively influenced by the recipient.**<sup>10</sup> **This applies also to art dealing with spiritual subjects, especially to art in the church, where the expectations of the believing recipient play a role.**

The recipient in this case does not primarily want to enjoy the work of art as such, but brings to the piece of church music, to the altar painting or to the stained glass a readiness for contemplation and for a meeting with God.

What effect does art have on an individual? The preceding sections have touched on this question here and there and suggested answers. But one could equally easily start at another point, with the question "Why does art exist at all? What needs does it address, that mankind should have produced art in all ages?" The most diverse branches of science, such as philosophy, psychology, theology and, of course, scholars of the fine arts and culture studies have pondered the matter thoroughly – as have, not least, musicians, poets, painters and film makers

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<sup>10</sup> In communication theory, the recipient is one who receives a message. Applied to art, the term refers to a listener, beholder or reader.

themselves. Every answer shows signs of the view of man held by the thinker involved. Here we are not concerned with a comprehensive listing of all the various answers, but only those which particularly underline the Christian view or – not less interesting! – those that challenge it.



Photo: Crescendo

## B. ART AND THE INDIVIDUAL: HOW DOES ART AFFECT PERSONS?

- 1. Art satisfies the thirst for beauty.** Beauty also has something to do with "aesthetic order". This can have healing influence (e.g. in music therapy).
- 2. Art is of service in "delectare",<sup>11</sup> i.e. in joy and relaxation.** A phrase often heard today is: "The question now is not which book we want to take with us on a desert island; a good book is an island already."



Photo: Crescendo

Merely to enter another "sphere" of music, film, poetry or painting releases the mind and senses from (perhaps oppressive) everyday experience and is thus related to play. Greater joy and relaxation is achieved by adding various forms of humour or the "light Muse".

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<sup>11</sup> "Aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae", Horace declaims in his Poetics. "The poets want either to create something useful or to give pleasure."

(satire, burlesque, operetta, musical, parodie – going as far as Dadaist silliness) or by the ebb and flow of tension in an exciting story.

- 3. The enjoyment of art as a process of purification and liberation:** in his famous poetics, Aristotle speaks of the purifying effect (= catharsis) of tragedy. This takes place where fear and sympathy are induced: in practical terms, where the audience gets goose-pimples and wet handkerchiefs. According to Sigmund Freud, art results from a process of sublimation, drawing its energy from the transformation of basic impulses and reaching out to fascinate the beholder. Modern psychologists<sup>12</sup> think that we value the ambivalent (= capable of various interpretations) character of the arts because we recognise in this the ambivalence of our own life and thus experience something liberating.
- 4. Art as a means of solving problems and as a place to seek truth:** other psychologists<sup>13</sup> see art primarily as a means of solving problems, helping a person to develop his own attempts at solution. Many statements about art agree with this: in every great work one can sense suffering in the confrontation with reality and a

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<sup>12</sup> Thus Udo Rauchfleisch in his book "Musik schöpfen – Musik hören. Ein psychologischer Zugang." Göttingen, 1996"

<sup>13</sup> Heinz Hillmann, *Alltagsphantasie und dichterische Phantasie. Versuch einer Produktionsästhetik.* Kronberg, 1977.

searching for truth – usually for the ultimate truth.

### **Some remarks following up this theme:**

**1. The artistic struggle for “truth” cannot be separated from the struggle for the right form.** It is not unusual for this to become (apparently) the primary concern. One then perceives the artist as a person obsessively pursuing one particular and seemingly subsidiary goal, resisting all calls to turn his attention to “more essential things”. Here we must bear in mind that the artist has taken upon himself the task not only of “naming” the truth he has recognised, but also of putting it into a new work such as no-one has seen before – and that also means: in a new language, new music, a new colour, figure or movement.

**2. This realisation, if it is not to be a copy, is a fundamentally original expression of an individual artistic personality and is perceived and interpreted by the world in a quite particular way.** This “new work” then challenges the listener or beholder to set off on his own journey of discovery in a small “universe”.

**3. Because “authentic” and “truthful” art of this kind can be experienced and does not appeal only to the intellect, it affects the recipient holistically, reaching the deepest levels of his person;** it captivates and moves, brings joy

and turmoil, celebration and comfort.

### **The Christian perspective:**

**Beauty (see 1): the striving for “beauty” is a fundamental constant in the human constitution. “Beauty” is one of the central features of art.** This term is considered out-of-date in current discussions of art, however, because it is too vague and of too little importance in determining artistic quality. For, on the one hand, the perception of beauty is subject to change in the course of time. On the other hand, there are also the “aesthetics of the ugly”, for example in artistic representations of evil.

Consequently, in a great work of art the ugly can dominate, while in a less successful work the “beautiful” may be prevalent. The knowledgeable Christian art lover in particular is familiar with this distinction: the representation of the Cross can never be “beautiful”, but can nevertheless have great artistic value.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless: “beauty” is an important theological and aesthetic category. God’s person and action are unthinkable without “beauty” (or “glory”<sup>15</sup>). At the same time, “beauty” in the Bible – from the Creation through to the New Jerusalem – is never “l’art pour l’

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<sup>14</sup> See the prophetic text in Isaiah 53, 2b: “he had no form that might have attracted us”.

<sup>15</sup> The work in several volumes dedicated to aesthetics by the great Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar correspondingly bears the title “Herrlichkeit” [“Glory”].

art" ["Art for art's sake"], but an expression of love.<sup>16</sup> A view of "beauty as love given a form"<sup>17</sup> would be valuable precisely in our time, with its tendencies towards self-complacent aestheticism.



Photo: Crescendo

**Joy and relaxation (see 2): "Joy" is also a central Christian category. But, unfortunately, precisely the Christian church considered the "light Muse" suspect for a long time.<sup>18</sup> They hardly had a place for "delectare", quite**

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<sup>16</sup> There are precise theological studies on this, e.g. by Old Testament scholar Claus Westermann.

<sup>17</sup> This phrase was coined by dressage trainer Fredy Knie.

<sup>18</sup> In the adiaphoristic controversy, Lutherans and Calvinists debated over worldly pleasures such as dance, fashion and music. The Lutherans considered these things to be harmless adiaphora (ethically neutral, "middle things"), while the Calvinists held them to be sins, an idea which left its mark on English-American Puritanism. This was the view taken by Pietists in Hamburg in response to the building of a theatre, namely that going to the theatre or dancing, use of tobacco and similar worldly pleasures in themselves are sinful, and are not made sinful only when misused. This attitude is still encountered in present-day Pietism.

contrary to the message of the Euangelion (eu = joyful, euangelion = gospel)! This is one more reason for agreeing with the view voiced by the theologian Helmut Thielicke in his "Ethik" ["Ethics"] regarding art: "Because we are looked after, because we are protected, because the cares of tomorrow are taken from our shoulders, we are free "today" to play, free "for a moment" to belong to the "moment" without constantly forcing ourselves to fix our gaze on the transcendent purpose lying beyond this moment." In this playful freedom, there is also an opportunity for a "new approach": whether on the part of the artist, capable of visionary thinking, or on the part of the recipient, his fantasy stimulated, who no longer experiences his reality as life with a rigid structure, but as something that can be changed. It is one of art's properties, anyway, that (like playing) it permits "open processes", in which those who are interested in art can take part.<sup>19</sup>

**From a Christian point of view, this freedom, and with it the privilege of the artist to create without defined purpose or being under "economic" constraints (and to be supported in doing this), is to be valued and defended, including on the cultural political front** (this is also relevant to **point 4**). At the same time, a view of art based on Christian tenets, and which is also expressly open to the concept of "delectare", has every right to attack the lack of standards and

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<sup>19</sup> See Umberto Eco's important term, the "open work of art".

moral decadence such as those (e.g. in the comedy shows) that swash into our living rooms daily.

**Liberation and truth-seeking (see 3 and 4):** This is not the place to go into the theories of the creation and effects of art already referred to. In today's discussion, however, it is clear that the Christian perspective is generally missing; for example, the possibility of an "inspiration" is completely ruled out. Why should this Christian perspective be important? It is self-evident that any theory has consequences for the artist's view of himself. To name an example: the centuries-old idea that artistic genius must be either close to madness or at least produce work stemming from a profound tragedy in his biography has had fatal consequences for many artists regarding their concept of life-style.<sup>20</sup> It is therefore all the more important for other artists to provide counter-examples and to show that not every work that speaks about suffering and injustice and which battles for the truth – and consequently also for the appropriate artistic form – requires the personal desperation

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<sup>20</sup> *"It is demonstrably clear, statistically clear, that the larger part of the art of the last half-millennium are over-reaching productions by psychopaths, alcoholics, abnormals, degenerates, with protruding ears and coughs: that was their life, and in Westminster Abbey and in the Pantheon their busts stand, and over both stand their works: unstained, eternal, blossoms and brilliance of the world." (the writer Gottfried Benn). The Swiss German scholar Walter Muschg wrote his much-acclaimed "tragic history of literature" under this guiding thought.*

of the artist as a pre-condition. It can also be that a Christian attitude lies behind it. A Christian is called anyway to solidarity with those that suffer. His radical approach to creativity can therefore be a direct expression of his love for his neighbour – or equally well of his love for God, to whom honour should be paid with art of only the best quality (and this means, of course, with quality often achieved at a great price). A proviso: when a Christian portrays the reality of suffering, it should not be forgotten that in the final analysis his existence is characterised by hope, and this must automatically leave its mark on his work.

**Another tendency in today's art results from the concept of individuality prevalent in our times.** In (4) we spoke of an individual component which belongs to every good work of art. This can however be tied to an exaggerated concept of self or desire for originality – or with a radical despair over a handed-down "language" which can no longer do justice to the inner experiences of the artist. Then incomprehensibility threatens: the artist speaks such an individual language that communication with the beholder, reader or listener is subject to massive disturbance.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *In the wake of the will to artistic autonomy (also under the influence of the modern theory of knowledge, initiated by Kant, and later of psychoanalysis), one can observe in the arts strong individualistic tendencies, a refusal to accept the general view of things, as e.g. in the lyrical poetry towards the end of the 19th century or Surrealist paintings. Art is without doubt entitled to create at will artificial "worlds"*

Along with the modern (and also post-modern) inclination to a culture of the self, this tendency has to be called into question from the Christian perspective.

## C. ART AND THE CHURCH

### 1. Points of contact between "art and religion"



**Not only in Christianity are there many points of contact between art and religion.** Without art, no cult, no divine service and no Christian church history is conceivable. On the other hand, the conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt can say that "I believe there is no artist who is not a believer. Not necessarily in a denominational sense. I can think of absolutely no really important artist who really believes that his outstanding abilities are due to himself."<sup>22</sup>

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*decoupled from external reality. It must nevertheless be prepared to be asked what the price of this is.*

<sup>22</sup> In an interview in the SPIEGEL of 9th February 2009

To name some of these points of contact: art and religion promote community. Art and religion are concerned with the "inner reality" and the "hidden truth". Wherever, on the contrary, they become primarily concerned with surface effects, they deny their own essence. Art and religion are holistic and therefore convey more than a truth to be grasped purely intellectually. No-one goes into a church, concert-hall or museum in order to "understand" in a purely intellectual sense. This is also reflected in the fact that art and religion reckon with sources of inspiration that lie outside one's comprehension and are not at one's own disposal. They are open for the spiritual, and directly or indirectly for God's Spirit.

### 2. Points of contact between "art and Christian faith"

There are also points of contact between (good) art and the Christian faith, regardless of whether this art was created by a Christian or not: creative artists know about the inner connection between love and beauty anyway.<sup>23</sup> In both areas, the "general" is relegated to the background behind the "individual": divine love creates

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<sup>23</sup> The Hebrew word for "good" ("and God saw that it was good" in the story of the Creation) also means "beautiful". God creates for his creatures, in love, a good and beautiful space for living.

individually<sup>24</sup> and is directed primarily towards the individual. Every work of art is unique and sharpens our perception for the individual and particular.<sup>25</sup> Love and beauty know of the mystery of the "incarnate": that the spirit takes on tangible form. Both point towards the New Creation and to new creating.

### 3. "Art and church"

#### a. Art in the service of the church



A glance at the history of art and of the church reveals a truth: art produces beauty, and can thus praise God in a special way and lead us into praising God. Think only of the music of Bach! Art can, without

manipulating, present the biblical message in an interesting way and spur us on to meditate and believe. Think of masterly paintings from Rembrandt to Chagall! Think of C.S. Lewis! Art can help to calm our thoughts and open us to God. Think of the architecture of meditative church interiors! Art can touch our deepest self and make us receptive there for the working of the Holy Spirit. Think of David's harp playing! Art can give the church a language for dialogue with the world. Art can, finally, shake the church into life and speak with a message of orientation for our times.

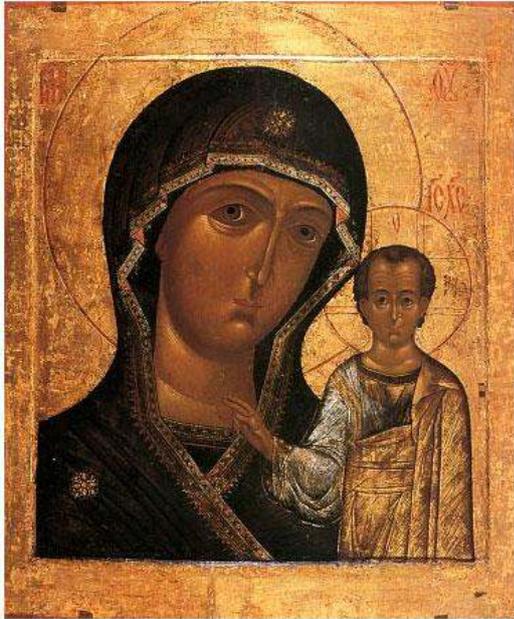
The church could look after this valuable heritage and do more once again to show appreciation for the artists (and agents of art) amongst its own people. The heritage of Christian art has been forgotten all too often by the church, and in many places it has "survived" thanks only to the secular art scene: in "secular" museums, concerts or publications.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> "Each according to its kind" is God's creative principle.

<sup>25</sup> Whereas works such as Andy Warhol's, which result from an entirely series production process and usually make the individual subordinate to the general, are hardly great art.

<sup>26</sup> There are more than enough examples of this. We are seeing today, e.g. in the secular art scene, a veritable "Bach boom". Bach's works are, however, mostly treated as "purely music". One generally takes no notice of the meaning of the text, which is an extremely questionable procedure on the artistic level alone – a fruit of the disunion between church and culture.

## b. The church's skepsis towards art



In the iconoclastic controversy, the Orthodox Church battled for its icons. The Reformation opposed images – and, under its banner of concentration on the Word, to an extent music as well. The church of the 17th century condemned Baroque novels. Earlier Pietism prohibited going to the theatre, and practised a certain kind of deliberately unartistic aesthetic in its church services.<sup>27</sup> The church of the 19th and 20th centuries generally came to terms with the emigration of the arts into the secular domain. There were in fact attempts at bridge-building, such as the Catholic “renouveau catholique”, which probably owed its existence more to individual artists than

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<sup>27</sup> These battles were accompanied by interesting theological debates whose repercussions are still being felt today.

to the church. (See the so-called “cultural protestantism”, which was theologically not without its problems.<sup>28</sup>)

Sharp conflicts grew up where art obviously (or seemingly) damaged the cause of the church.

Accusations made by the church against art were: luring into idolatry, distracting from the essential, concentrating attention on the work of man’s hands instead of spirit-led inspiration, unorthodox and heretical representations of spiritual subject matter ... On top of that, there grew up a skepsis towards artists and their way of life. To name some of these prejudices: in artistic circles an all-too free life style is usual.<sup>29</sup> The artist places his

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<sup>28</sup> Regarding Friedrich Schleiermacher’s “cultural protestantism”, the theologian Hans-Eckehard Bahr observes (in: *Poiesis. Theologische Untersuchung der Kunst*) that it is “a true initial observation ... that not only faith, but also aesthetic emotion, represent a mode of holistic affective experience. If one assumes this to be a purely subjective experience, one is misled by this formal analysis into equating, with devastating consequences, quite disparate matters. It is clear that, if the basis of our analysis is the perceiving subject alone, faith is reduced to religious psychology and the complex of questions surrounding art to aesthetic experience.”

<sup>29</sup> In fact, it cannot be denied that it is normal in artistic circles to break at an early stage with middle-class (and Christian) moral concepts, and that a libertine life-style is widely seen as part of the accepted way of doing things. The accusations levelled in this and the next section are therefore to an extent justified. Problems arise when they are generalised and lead to a demonisation

work at the centre of attention instead of God. Lacking modesty, he seeks his own honour instead of God's glory. He depicts the negative above all. His art is not sufficiently "beautiful". Individualism and elitism lead to rebellion against the authority of the church and to abandoning fellowship. The spiritual independence of the artist displays heretical tendencies.

His professional surliness stands in the way of the creative development of members of the congregation. His demands for financial reward contradict the principle of voluntary work.

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### **"Christian art" (excursion)**

*These common factors provide good preconditions for "Christian art" Only: what is Christian art? The term is fuzzy. Fundamentally, art can be looked at and enquired into under three aspects: its origin, its form and its effect or purpose. So how do we define the "Christian" aspect of a work of art? We soon realise that limiting our definition to these three aspects is hardly satisfactory. Can one define "Christian art" on the basis of its origin only? Then we have to ask who defines whether an artist is Christian? Is testimony of something such as "inspiration" in creating a work of art enough to draw conclusions?<sup>30</sup> And to what*

*extent can one agree with Dorothy Sayers when she writes that Christian art should be the expression of a very personal experience? "Otherwise it does not genuinely convey strength to us, but simply exercises power over us." This warning directed towards Christian artists is of course very important, but there are without doubt magnificent and unmanipulative works on Christian themes not created by Christian artists. Building on Dorothy Sayer's statement, a definition of Christian art based solely on the form or the subject matter would be very questionable. Numerous works in which there is no explicit reference to faith are nevertheless clearly permeated by it. Can we perhaps pin "Christian art" down by looking at its effect? Hardly! Otherwise any work through which God "speaks" to us would have to be termed "Christian".<sup>31</sup> The use of other definitions such as "spiritual art" (referring purely to the subject matter) or "church" or "sacred" art (considering only the function) is more practical. A further caveat is that "church" art does not necessarily have to have "Christian" subject matter.<sup>32</sup>*

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investigated the phenomenon "inspiration" in a quite immanent sense and concluded that even unreligious artists can have powerful sensations of being inspired.

<sup>31</sup> There are many accounts of persons who have experienced God speaking to them in a non-Christian work of art.

<sup>32</sup> The term "Christian art" is nevertheless helpful to a limited extent, and cannot always be avoided.

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of artists.

<sup>30</sup> Psychology, for example, has



### **c. The artist's skepsis towards the church**

On the other side, some accusations made by artists against the church have been repeated over the centuries. The main points are: dictating to and controlling the artist, limiting his creativity by church decree. Lack of appreciation, inadequate pay. And the opposite pole: the tendency to a "star cult" in certain churches: artists are not treated as normal members of the congregation, but are fawned over because they are famous. Such "fawned-over" artists are often over-exposed and soon "burned-up" in Christian circles. Lack of understanding for the artist's frequent lack of conformity with middle-class life-style. Lack of understanding for art and aesthetics generally. Practice of "church art" of inferior value, and unwillingness to accept the advice of "specialists".

### **d. Projected solutions**

Today we are called on to clear up the conflictual aspect of the relationship between art and the church without one-sided attributions of blame. There are however still too many prejudices and hurt feelings on both sides. How can this clearing-up take place?

#### **PROJECTED SOLUTION 1:**

##### **Appreciating the strengths and weaknesses of the other side**

**A first step would take place wherever art and the church discover the character of the other side. To name some aspects at least briefly:**

##### **Appreciation on the artists's**

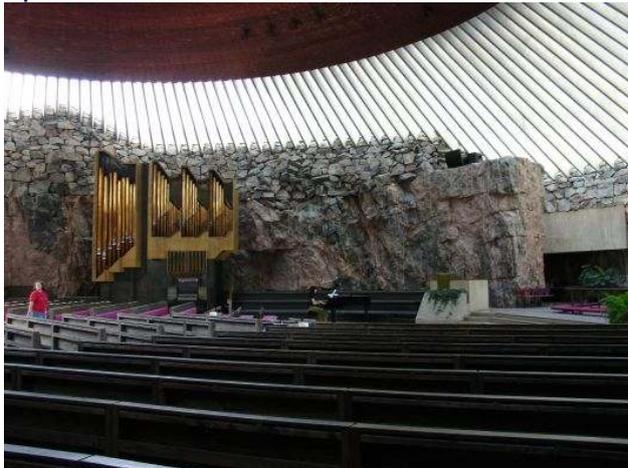
**side:** the church has supported art for centuries. There is no fundamental skepsis towards art on the part of the church. In today's church, however, there is a lack of understanding of art. It requires love and patience to arouse interest in this "forgotten field" and to develop in the fellowship of believers a sense of aesthetics. There are many other fields within a congregation which need

attention. Stamina is therefore all the more necessary – as is perhaps the readiness of artists to take on tasks in one of these other areas.

##### **Appreciation on the church**

**side:** artists suffer under the low quality of art called for by churches. They are specialists and should be included in consultations

on aesthetic questions. Professional artistic work often requires financial sacrifice on the part of the artist; the question of payment is therefore an important matter. At the same time, artistic work is more than a profession. It is an intensively lived – and sometimes suffered – form of existence. An artist requires free space for



creativity and, from time to time, periods of withdrawal, which can be misunderstood as the erecting of individualistic barriers. The artist needs the concession of free space for innovation, where the “unorthodox” is also allowed. The portrayal of apparently worldly subjects is in no sense a negation of faith. In his battling, the artist is dependent on understanding and encouragement. The need for praise does not mean a retreat from the “Soli Deo Gloria” attitude.<sup>33</sup> The artist finding his position in relation to the secular art scene does not mean a denial of the fellowship of believers; rather, he finds there his standards for quality and understanding that is often

<sup>33</sup> With these words, “to God alone be the glory”, Johann Sebastian Bach signed both his spiritual and secular works!

missing in the church. Artists generally have a creative brain: why not invite them to contribute ideas about other areas in the congregation?

## **PROJECTED SOLUTION 2:**

### **Appreciating the necessity of working together**

**It would be a second step if art and church realised that they can enter into an alliance bringing much blessing.**

For, on the one side, artists need the accompanying and praying fellowship of Christians – both within the church and in Christian artists’ networks.<sup>34</sup> The challenges of the art market (pressure of competition, financial survival) and various internal, mental potential sources of stress such as perfectionism and sensitivity can weigh one down. On top of that, it can happen that the Christian creative artist sees himself as isolated because of his faith, because the perspective of faith in his work is met with incomprehension, or because he refuses to go along with worldly tendencies in the artistic community. On the other side, the church needs the critical and creative ferment of artists.

<sup>34</sup> *These networks and inter-confessional artists’ movements fulfil important tasks in accompanying the artists spiritually and professionally, in spiritual counselling and mission amongst artists, in developing joint art projects with a “proclaiming” character etc. In a number of countries and on an international level there are already many interesting initiatives. Networking with these is one of the tasks of Arts+ (www.artsplus.ch).*



In addition, the church knows that it is less “attractive” to those outside without appreciation and support of the arts. It recognises that the works of sacred music, literature, painting or architecture are amongst the essential spiritual treasures of our culture and – more than almost any other form of proclamation – still shine out brightly into the world. And, finally, it welcomes the presence of Christian artists in the secular art scene, where they help to build a part of “God’s Kingdom”.

Perhaps special platforms could be arranged – e.g. in combination with theological symposiums – where artists and representatives of the church try to come closer.

### **PROJECTED SOLUTION 3: Concrete collaboration**

**The third step would lead to concrete collaboration:** to involving artists in the church,<sup>35</sup> in church services, in the preparation of church interiors, in work directed towards those

<sup>35</sup> This can probably only happen through structural measures, such as setting up a working group “art” in the church, led by professional artists or those knowledgeable in the arts.

outside,<sup>36</sup> in ideas for free-time activities.<sup>37</sup> Contact and collaboration with the artists’ networks and initiatives mentioned must not be neglected, because these are the places where there has already been discussion of such questions for a long time and practical models tried out. If art and church find a way to reach each other again, it will hopefully finally be possible to disprove Gottfried Benn’s claim that “faith is a bad principle to base style on”.



<sup>36</sup> There have been interesting experiences with e.g. taking church music into hospitals and prisons.

<sup>37</sup> The “Stuttgart open evening”, for example, hired an opera house for an evening for the whole congregation.