

(RE)DEEMING THE MODERN: THE ENIGMA OF HENRY MOORE AND ST. STEPHEN WALBROOK

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First, claims, disclaims and acknowledgments. The case I am about to narrate and study is gleaned from a book titled *Postmodern Jurisprudence* by Coustas Douzinas and Ronnie Warrington (London: Routledge, 1991). As their title might suggest the case is treated in an exegetical manner somewhat differing from orthodoxies of legal research. In particular, it is represented as a metafiction that facilitates critical reflection on the relationship between several disciplines, especially religion and the arts.

The narrative of the development of the matter of Henry Moore and St. Stephen Walbrook, or more particular a ten ton travertine sculpture by Henry Moore, through two level of ecclesiastical court in London in the 1960's, becomes a poststructural form of philosophical reasoning, about issues that would previously or elsewhere be treated in theology, and social and art theory. As such it belongs in a genre of conceptualised fictions, such as Wallace Steven's poetry or Deleuze's fantastic historical interpretations.

The reflexive articulations of judges and expert witnesses in the development of this case provides successive understandings of how art can mediate formations of religious behaviour and meaning. This enables the story to frame and parallel an intellectual history, of longstanding tensions between art and religion, as well as the shift in the boundary between the two involved in the practice of modern (and post-modern) artforms.

The use of this case, in the first instance at least, does not amount to an extended form of legal research. My own initial partitioning and commentary on that story will follow but also significantly differ from the conceptual framing undertaken by Douzinas and Warrington. Their own work for example exploits the polyvalent potential of the actual case history in order to develop themes about contemporary legal reasoning. The present focus on religious themes continues however

abstract dimension of re-narration of those authors. By deploying the case as a frame for conceptual understanding, it is intended that this philosophical fiction might begin to become vehicle for additional strategic and discursive functions, that beyond its historical specificity it could become a pretext, motivation, or behavioural trigger for contemporary social discourse and possibilities for action along that boundary between art and religion. It is hoped conceptual retellings such as this could begin to provide events of imagination and, in the Nietzschean sense, intervening fiction, creating practical 'political' possibilities for transformation and reconstruction of religious life and meaning. In its present form however, the story remain abstract, even allegorical in its meaning. Reading out of actual associations and references, for example from and onto the object of the sculpture, remains to be done.

First, the story.

The church of St. Stephen Walbrook, we are told, was Wren built in London along classical lines 1670's after the great fire. This venue is now doubly historical, because it was already dedicated as a sacred site before the Reformation (a fact relevant to content of ongoing debate) as well as locating one of Wren's greatest works.

The building suffered much damage during the second world war, and extensive repairs were still ongoing in the 1960's. Peter Palumbo was church warden then when he commissioned Moore to design a new central altar. In his own words he asked Moore to design a circular structure, 'something going back to the dawn of history, something primitive'.

The result was a 10 ton travertine marble, which, before it was installed, required permission or a 'faculty' from London Consistory (church) Court. Chancellor Newman at this court declined permission on two grounds which appear to be contradictory.

First, he judged against the work by a semantic exclusion of artistic discourse, as irrelevant for legal consideration. Relying on etymology of church history, he deemed that the planned altar did not comprise 'a convenient and decent table of wood, stone or other suitable material shall be provided for the celebration of Holy Communion' as set down by canon law.

"It is essential to grasp what was meant by 'table'," he said, "because it links up with the theology of the Eucharist." Especially in view of history of this sacred site, he noted the Protestant derivation that "the Holy Communion was not a renewed sacrifice of our Lord,

but a feast to be celebrated at the Lord's table and as the latter view prevailed the result was that 'altars' were removed from churches and 'tables' substituted."

Through its presentation in the adversarial form of a court hearing, the opinion dramatises possible epistemological differences between theological and aesthetic thinking. By excluding aesthetic discourse on a simple etymological and historical clarification of the word 'table', the Chancellor closed off any rejoinder on history or art that might be forthcoming from current art theory.

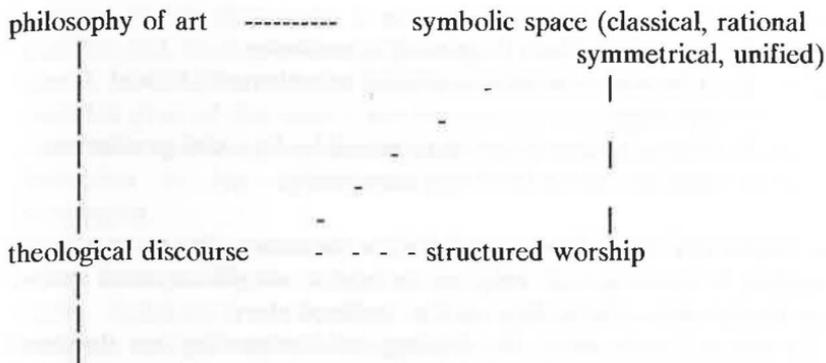
In doing so one can argue he was implicitly expressing a very traditional separation of art and formal religious discourse that can be traced back to Platonic thinking, whereby art is the province of informal individualised expression against the universalising significations of rational judgment.

No sooner is this neat opinion offered, than it is appended and amended by another one which involves a legal aesthetics and seems to vary as well as extend the original. Not content with disregarding aesthetic complexities, the Chancellor proceeds to define their nature in a way that is of benefit for the needs of this particular judgment. Wren, he says, produced a single unified vision a work of 'great geometric precision' and 'congruence' of its parts. Placing the altar were planned would 'render Wren's interaction between the cross-plan and the domed-plan pointless by resolving drama in favour of the circular motif - so that the tension is released and the whole architectural drama rendered otiose'.

This explicit aesthetic reveals a covert religious reasoning, mixing so close the voice and authority of judge, theologian and art critic. This congruence of theological and aesthetic judgment assumes a reflexivity and totalising function in religious belief as it is equated with symmetries of classical design. The admissibility and countenance of one form of art judgement is made more explicit in debate at the ensuing appeal of the judgment. The experts are those whose 'learning and experience improve their ability to detect what in their own liking or disliking, or in that of others, may be attributable to fashion or personal preference than to the application of more enduring criteria of judgment.'

Neuman says the church is 'of the age of Dryden and Purcell; it is not a building of the age of T.S. Eliot and Moore.' By drawing an historical and conceptual boundary between the traditional building and the modernist sculpture, the universalising, signifying process of religious discourse is elaborated, symbolised and embodied through the

visual aesthetics of a physical space.



formal theology

This sense of the global as universal or transcendental meaning can also be held as relevant to forms of spatial thinking significant for the geo-politics and symbolism of formal church buildings and sacred spaces.

The evolution of church buildings as symbolic spaces for mediation of public discourse can be seen to require an theological aesthetic, of the type that can be read in and onto the present judgment. Art design, as the authors note, becomes the servant or tool, of rational certitude, not only in the ability of theology to judge artistic matters. Diverse areas of social action, decision making and public discourse, involved in the behaviour of the church community, are mediated by the mythic and expressive supplement afforded to rational expression by one form of religious aesthetics.

It is possible to include, in the second definition or formal 'deeming' of aesthetics, the current widespread interest in aesthetics and culture in social critical theory and sociology, in seeing art as one form of production of social meaning. As in the classical rationalist model, art events and objects are held as secondary and determined by more fundamental epistemological factors. In the case of religious social behaviour, art is a product of life of the believing community, a position currently popular with many advocates on art expression with churches.

The boundary between art and religion can thus be expressed in at least three divisions:

1. Essentialist belief opposed to aesthetics
2. Classical rationalist aesthetics complements formal theology.
3. Epistemology of art determined by its social production and life of the believing community.

One might add that failure to maintain a necessary tension or possible boundary between art and religion can lead to simplification of various cross disciplinary relationships such as outlined above.

To return to our story. In adopting and legitimating one dominant approach of art, the ecclesiastical judge once again closed off further evidence from contemporary art debates. This time however the precedent of art testimony exists: in proffering an opinion involving art criticism, the judge has exposed his neck to the complex sword of contemporary art theory; in admitting aesthetic evidence the court, representing the church body, has open a door on a Trojan horse that will, in appeal process, subvert the original judgment and transform principles of ecclesiastical law, and by implication, religious behaviour.

The appeal to the Court of Ecclesiastical Causes Reserved (CECR) was on doctrinal, ritual and ceremonial grounds, and resulted in both grounds of the previous judgment being reversed, and consideration of implications of reversal of judgment being made.

Both existing reasons were dismissed, through a revisionist or postmodernist approach to historicism. One witness says it 'seems to me to give the church what it has always needed - a central Altar, something out of the question when it was built, but fully consonant with modern liturgical developments.' The sculpture, he concluded, gave 'what was always needed'.

Historical revisionism was complemented by aesthetics of postmodern appropriation, including explicit ideas of audience and relative meaning.

The possibility or even the inevitability of a particular group of components being readable in more than one way of differing sense. St Stephen's has long since lost the box pews which occupied the beholder's foreground and which Wren had in mind when he designed the high pedestals to his columns. Etymology and taste cannot find their rationale in tradition. 'The distinction between an altar and a table is not as essential as deeply founded as was thought 130 years

ago. The court is free to decide without regard to the doctrinal disputes of past centuries.'

As a result there was a new attention to the sculpture, whose qualities had been previously ignored or excluded. As the subject of appeal, merit is found in its intrinsic and contemporary nature. In any extended gloss of this case, I would want to maintain an intrinsic, quasi essentialist quality to modernist aesthetic domains and experience, in distinction to the more relativised thinking of Douzinas and Warrington.

A number of esteemed art witnesses were called upon to clarify issues admitted by the aesthetic opinions of the lower ecclesiastical courts. Suddenly current ideas about art values were admitted in evidence, and through the complexity of professional art opinion the sculpture assumed renewed significance. A Professor Downes saw that 'many factors contribute to beauty of interior, including its simple lines, the proportion of its parts, the emphasis on right angles in plans and elevations and distribution of lighting, the bilateral symmetry about the west-east axis, the shape of the dome, the detailing of the capitals, mouldings and the unusually rich plaster work of the dome.' Simplicity and lucidity are created through a 'complexity of the means', he concluded in favour of abstractionist defence of asymmetrical geometry, for the appropriateness of the altar in the building.

More theoretically, with an almost post structural flair, we hear 'about the need in this church for a 'sense of the centre' which nevertheless did not require the centre to be empty' or the comment by Downes that 'the original reading is thus now a matter of imagination and any interpretation we make of what we see must be different from the original.'

The warden repeats the mission of his commission, as debate about the sculpture becomes fully reflexive, and indirect acknowledgment of anecdotal verbalism of the artist, about primitivism and morphology, is made. 'I begged Henry Moore to forget any altars and to think of something going back to the dawn of history, something primitive and inseparable from man's search for a meeting place with his God. I implored him to think of the stone altar on which Abraham was prepared to sacrifice Isaac.'

The testimony, debate and judgment of this appeal turns full aesthetic circle, admitting modernist and postmodernist preoccupations that transcend the tradition of art and social discourse evidenced in the first judgment. The possibility of ahistorical as well as prehistorical dimension of art productions are stated. 'The sacred edifice has a

future as well as a past. It belongs not to any one generation'.

In all of these proceedings we can hear, as the authors recommend, overtones as of Derrida's aporia, in appraisals of this abstract form as 'anterior to all the disassociations, oppositions and delimitations of critical discourse, 'older' even than the time of the transcendental aesthetic.'

This altar 'says things' to worshippers and visitors, things 'not expressible in words, but to limit the understanding to the easily expressible is to limit understanding indeed'. The semiotic verbal significance of the sculpture is clearly addressed. While there have been many example of similar visual works being easily appropriated, for example in new architecture for a traditional church group, within the full development, documentation and deeming of this sculpture as evidence in a formalised and legal church debate, fundamental notions of public discourse and rationality are claimed to be involved or transformed by both sides. Suddenly divergent cultural utterances are given new status, even validation, within the church community, and these are held to fundamentally affect issues of religious life and meaning.

Judge Gibson: 'I have difficulty in understanding in what sense the opinion of Mr Ashley Barker could have been shown to be 'wrong' or why the difference of opinion between him and Professor Downes was seen as 'technical''

The plethora of opinions deferring support to the sculpture can be widely differing, but the polyvalence and combined weight of opinion motivated by the sculpture seems to offer a phenomenal grounds, if not cogent reason, for its legitimation.

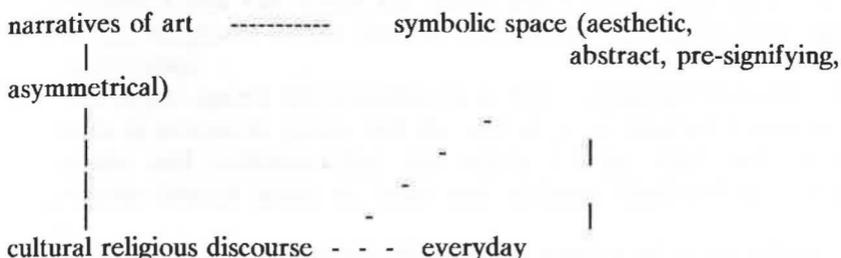
Aesthetic terminology proliferate and replicate, without apparent unifying discourse except that offered by a poststructural attention to artistic expression, in its local modalities and variegations, as the pre-signifying domain of all utterance and meaning.

Loose claims of 'intrinsic beauty', 'beautiful material', 'simply better' and 'masterpiece' abound, while Judge Gibson concurs that this is 'a great work of art' that somehow 'complements the space'.

He concludes that 'the contest between the opinion of Professor Downes and that of Mr Ashley Barker was conducted and explored in terms of aesthetic judgment and not at any point on the basis that either was or could be shown to be right or wrong on any matter of technical analysis or understanding', yet pluralism is no argument against the abstract marble piece. Suddenly the discursive possibilities of the court and its judgement, and the social arrangements of the

church, appear to have been transformed. The traditional discursive arrangements, as between minister and congregation, once maintained by the symmetrical symbolic qualities of the traditional sacred space, have been reappraised directly as a result of the possible presence of the art object and its intervention in the traditional practices of the sacred space. Innovating semiotic and textual possibilities of the abstracted visual structure, for ongoing responses and mediation of social meaning, are intimated.

David Bishop sees the altar positively opening up the church as a location of symbolic interactions and social meaning in the wider community. When the church 'is empty of worshippers,' he says, 'others will continue to come in, and will be fed by the visual and tactile impressions that they receive from this building and its contents. The new altar will say many things to them, not all of them by any means expressible in words.'



Conclusion

Through hearings and judgments in two ecclesiastical jurisdictions, an altar by Henry Moore was twice deemed. The first time its aesthetic nature was excluded, through judgments that redrew the boundary between art and religion. On this boundary that notions of religious belief can be located, and a relationship between art and religion mediated via symbolic space. As the sculpture is named a second and third time, legally, it is progressively (re)deemed and validated.

Its validation involves a third, diffuse shift in the boundary of art and religion, which can be seen to transform theology and religious belief as discourses independent to aesthetic forms. Public discourse is

acculturalised and mediated by the pre-signifying abstract visual form. Rather than sub-serving the global signification of transcendental reason, meta visual domains such as the sculpture subsume and aestheticise realms of universal signification.

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