

The Scroll-painters of Bengal

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One of the traditional and ancient arts of India which caught my fancy when, some years ago, I lived in India, was that of the scroll-painters, itinerant story-tellers who moved from village to village, telling stories and illustrating them with painted scrolls which they unrolled as the narration of the story progressed. These scrolls, or those at least which remain mainly from the 19th and early 20th centuries, are impressively powerful and colourful pieces of art in their own right, even in the rather tatty and faded examples which one could view in museums.

Alas, the story-tellers had long gone, they no longer toured the villages which now have TV sets with VCRs on which local entrepreneurs show the latest B and C grade offerings from Hollywood and Bombay. And no more would I see the scrolls unrolled before an excited crowd of hearers.

Or so I had thought. And then one day, visiting an exhibition of Indian hand-crafts in Calcutta, I was astonished to see a *patua*, as the scroll-painters are called, sitting surrounded by scrolls and explaining his art to anyone who would listen. As I was fascinated to do. He even told (or, rather, sang) some of the stories for me, and at the end of the session when reluctantly I had to move on, I was able to buy some scrolls which are among my most treasured possessions.

So there are still *patuas* around, practising their art. But they are few, and the art certainly is dying. The artists are now only able to make a meagre existence by

touting their scrolls at fairs and exhibitions, hoping someone will buy them.

The art of the scroll painter is an ancient one. There is a reference from the 2nd century B.C. to men who display paintings which tell the story of the slaying of the demon Kamsa by Krishna, and many later references to such "picture showmen" whom we can count as the ancestors of our *patuas*. Some are specifically referred to as telling the story of Yama, the god of the dead, and his judgement of individuals, and this has been a theme for the *patuas* into contemporary times. The oldest known piece of a Bengali scroll in the current style is from the 15th century A.D.

The existing small communities of scroll painters continue to make scrolls in the traditional manner, painting with colours prepared from local mineral and vegetable products which are ground and mixed with gum. These are used on sheets of light cardboard or heavy paper which are sewn together to make scrolls of up to 8 or 10 frames, which then have sticks attached to each end to facilitate the unrolling of the scroll during the story-telling.

The 'caste' of the scroll painters is one which sits outside the traditional social organisation. The *chitrakaras* as they are called sit uneasily between traditional Hindu and Muslim communities. They are nominally Muslim, but do not observe most of the traditional Muslim customs. And most of the scrolls they produce are for the nearby Santal tribal communities (Death scrolls used in funerary rituals) or



on Hindu themes for the local majority community.

A favourite theme in the small community of scroll painters which I studied was the story of Manasa the snake god-

dess. This story is a popular and well-known story, and a popular subject of the composers of the so-called *mangal* poems from the 13th to 18th centuries in Bengal. These poems usually took as their subject

some aspect of the Goddess, and told the story of her exploits and how she defended her followers, who were usually women or others on the fringes of ordinary society. They seem to reflect the emergence of Goddess worship from fringe cult status into the mainstream of orthodox Hindu life (and incidentally mark an important stage in the development of the Bengali language). The stories (and the poems) are usually quite long and the scroll painters take only shorter incidents from the main narratives as themes for their work.

Artistically speaking the work of the scroll painters is bold and forceful and tremendously appealing. Depiction is simple because small pictures (say 35x25 cms) had to be seen by a wide group of people gathered round the story-teller, and because the narrative could expand on what was depicted in the scroll. Colours are bright and their use bold and the pictures have a strong emotional power which holds the interest of the viewer.

Though the art of the scroll painter is a true folk art, with techniques and themes passed down from father to son, I was struck forcibly on a recent visit to Europe by the similarities the style shares with the pre-renaissance painting of Italy - in my case of the Sienese school. They served a similar function as religious icons for an illiterate people but flatness and absence of perspective, use of space in the frame and the unimportance of the background, the relative 'serialisation' of narratives in triptychs or polyptyches, the absence of chiaroscuro and the formal indication of any shading which they share with the *patua's* art make the parallel an interesting one, and one which I think

throws new light on the Western appreciation of the scroll paintings associated with the Kali temple in Calcutta of single pictures, quickly executed on paper, which pilgrims and other visitors to the temple would take away with them at a cost so small that even the poorest could afford them. The scroll painters were not involved in this trade, but the modern remnant have resorted at times to the production of similar single sheet pictures which they sell at fairs in an effort to make their livelihood. The picture accompanying this article is one such. It illustrates the style of the scroll painter, but perhaps more interestingly to the student of religion, it depicts Manasa, the snake goddess (indicated by the snakes in her hands and surrounding her in the picture) as Kali - blood flowing from her mouth, holding a severed head and sitting on the prostrate body of Siva.

Here the intention of the *mangal* poets in assimilating the story of Manasa to the mainstream Goddess tradition is faithfully reflected and powerfully consummated in an icon of great religious and visual impact (the picture is predominantly of black and white, the triangle below the goddess's mouth is vivid red).

The scroll painters' art is not dead. But it may not have long to live. The painters are poor; it is very difficult to sustain a livelihood from painting. Their only hope of survival as a community of painters (the story-telling side of the art is even nearer death) lies in government sponsorship. And fortunately this is being given. It would be a tragedy if the art was to finally disappear. Fortunately some examples of their art do exist and will, I hope, be preserved.

Sacred Music and the Sacredness of Music

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To begin with a fragment of autobiography: there was a time, many years ago, when I was tempted to try and take up music professionally. I am glad now that I chose not to, music being the risky profession that it is. A precarious living became a satisfying part-time occupation, much of it under the canopy of the Christian Church, in its Methodist, Anglican, and Lutheran varieties. My 'angle' on music has therefore been that of a performer, as well as that of a listener; the 'sacred space' within which that performance has taken place has been Protestant Christianity. Despite having been professionally a comparative religionist and missiologist these thirty years past, I have never ventured seriously into comparative musicology. But, as Adolf Harnack argued at the turn of the century, there is a very real sense in which Christianity (or for that matter any so-called 'great tradition'), if examined with care, can apply a full range of religious *Erscheinungen* (manifestations, phenomena) in any given area. Full, but obviously not exhaustive, since each tradition has forms of expression that are uniquely its own, its own tonality and style.

But the functions of music in relation to the world of religion are not endless, and it is on those I intend to concentrate, illustrating from that area of music I know best.

Another preliminary observation: over the years I have often wondered why, given the obvious connection between the practice of religion and the performance of music, serious reflection on the

relationship between these two professions should have been so infrequent from the 'religious studies' side (the musicologists for their part are well aware of the relationship, though even they seldom qualify as phenomenologists of music). Is it that we have been in the past so obsessed with words and issues that images and sounds have remained outside our field of vision? and hearing? Is it nervousness in face of someone else's specialisation? Or is it just carelessness and neglect?

Whatever the reasons, the fact remains that (in English at least) there would seem to be no book in which the phenomenology of religion is related to the phenomenology of music. Iconography, liturgy, architecture, dance - all these have at least begun to find a place in recent years in that corner of the academy where religion is observed. Not so music - at least not yet.

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These days, the vocabulary of religion in the English-speaking world is a complete shambles. Words may mean something, anything, or nothing, depending on who happens to be using them, and in what context. In the title of this piece I have used the adjective 'sacred', which together with its Germanic more-or-less equivalent 'holy' used to be applied to whatever was on one side of a clear boundary. Everyone knew where to boundary went. On the other side there was that which could be styled 'secular', 'profane', or perhaps 'unholy'. Words, though, are least of all static. They change

colour, execute U-turns, shade into one another, exchange places just for the fun of it. So in this case.

Seventy years ago, a book carrying the title *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* would have been dismissed, probably unread. The Gospel was part of the 'Holy' Bible, 'sacred' Scripture, and therefore could not *a priori* have any 'secular' meaning of any kind. 'Sacred' and 'secular' were regarded by definition as diametrical opposites, touching but never combining. Sacred and secular music belonged each to its own sphere; each had its own medium and therefore its own message.

Matters, though, were not that simple. First, because there were two competing theories of sacredness (or holiness) to be taken into account. The one, stated by Durkheim, maintained that sacredness was a social quality: communities decided for themselves what was to be regarded as *sacre*, and why. The other, of which Rudolf Otto's *Das Heilige* was the classic expression, maintained with equal force that 'holiness' was something to be felt, sensed, perceived by the individual as a manifestation of a *numen* whose nature might remain an enigma, but whose presence could not be questioned.

Sacred music could, and did, fall under either category, being sacred either by reason of its function within a community, or by reason of the emotional impact it had on the individual - though still within a sphere identifiable as 'religious', or at least moral. It is hardly possible to argue for the chronological priority of one over the other, though the full-blown individualism the 'Otto' type presupposes is a late-comer on the religious stage. One cannot in other words judge what, in the world of music is sacred and what secular by aesthetic categories on their own. First

one must answer the question, 'sacred to whom?'. Close behind this comes the question of setting or context, that is to say, ritual or liturgical function within a community of faith and praxis: 'sacred for what?'

It happens that at the time of writing the first draft of this piece, the last major musical performance I heard 'live' (as they say) was a performance of the Bach B minor Mass. The setting, though, was not a church, but the Sydney Opera House. It was magnificently right and desperately wrong at one and the same time. A concert hall is not a sanctuary. There can be no Mass without altar, priest, and elements. Champagne in the interval - of course, but without the words of consecration, something had gone awry. I came away filled with admiration for a superb achievement, an awesome chain of communication from composer, through editors and publishers, by way of highly trained performers (and not forgetting those largely unsung geniuses who actually make the instruments), to an appreciative audience. But was admiration what I ought have been feeling? I am not sure that it was. All the same, there was a moment at the *Sanctus*, when admiration almost became worship, when the concert hall became a sanctuary, and when *sensus numinis* broke through. The moment came and went.

Of course, the mere performance of a piece of music in a sanctuary, in the presence of a community of faith, guarantees nothing. Another personal reminiscence: in 1964 I was part of a choir performing some fairly radical new music in Uppsala Cathedral, as part of the 800th anniversary celebrations of the Uppsala Diocese. On the programme there was an organ piece, which consisted of one note, which sounded with varied registration,

manuals, pedals, stops half out and half in, for what seemed like an eternity, but was probably about ten minutes. The effect, in an over-resonant space, could only be described as excruciating. Appropriately, perhaps, the name of the work was *Eternes*. Doubtless its intention was to translate into the language of music the notion of the timeless and unchanging. Ten minutes of silence would, one suspects, have suited the composer's purpose better.

The essence of music (as opposed to mere sound) is however movement. That movement may be patterned in an almost geometrical fashion, after the style of the baroque, mannered as a minuet. Or it may give free rein to the feelings, celebrate the passionate and the grotesque, feelings and impressions and impulses. As I write these words, the radio is playing Ravel's *La Valse* than which there is nothing more impressionistic, more cloudy.

The neglected essence of religion (as opposed to the theology which is religion's intellectual substitute) is drama. In the beginning was the drama, the idea being a shadowy late-comer on the scene. All drama is human drama; but not all humans are identical humans. Therefore the Hindu drama circles around the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Puranas*, the Jewish drama around the Exodus, and the Christian drama around the events of the night in which the Lord was betrayed. But even earlier there were the heroic legends of Europe - Beowulf and the Tain and the Nibelungenlied - not to be read out in the flat tones of a late-night newsreader, but sung, proclaimed, celebrated.

Clearly, though, drama is not the whole of religion, any more than opera is the whole of music. All I am arguing for the moment is that in the absence of the

sense of dramatic movement, movement and music alike lose something more than impetus. The movement need not be violent, nor is there any absolute need for it to be constantly verbalised: the stillness of the *Pie Jesu* in the Faure *Requiem* marries words and music; the stillness of an evening *Raga*, like that of the slow movement of the Beethoven Choral Symphony, soothes wordlessly. In all 'good' music periods of dramatic action alternate with periods of calm reflection, introspection with enthusiasm, the intricate with the simple, the (almost) static with the rhythmic.

Where music is concerned, the words 'sacred', 'serious' and 'solemn' almost seem to line up for adjectival service. To the unthinking, the sacredness of music is of a piece with monotony: a perpetual adagio played (on an organ, of course) in an ecclesiastical stained-glass twilight. But music that serves a sacred purpose can only be monotonous to the extent that it limits itself to one of religion's many functions, and declines to venture beyond it. I have sometimes been tempted to believe that the chief argument against sectarianism is that it is so boring; and perhaps visa versa, that when what claims to be 'religion' becomes single-issue (and therefore very soon crosses the boredom threshold), it has ceased to be the sort of religion I have spent most of my adult life studying. Religion is not one thing, nor does it fulfil only one function.

In the same way, music in its alliance with religion can and does serve to highlight in turn the personal and the collective, the instinctive and the intellectual, the social and the ethical - all (ideally at least) within the dramatic framework of which I have spoken. For music to lock into one mode of religion, and to remain there, does not necessarily mean that it is

'bad' music. It is a pity, all the same, that the infinite riches of religion and music alike are so easily curtailed, so easily narrowed down to one form of expression.

Not many weeks ago, I happened to look into a Protestant Christian hymnbook used by a rather large denomination 'somewhere in Europe'. Fully nine-tenths of what it contained was in precisely the same style: that of first person singular revivalism. There are several dozen hymnals of this kind in the English-speaking world. They bring together a simple theology and simple forms of music: nothing wrong with that. They have played an incalculable role in helping to create and maintain 'evangelical identity': nothing wrong with that, either. Phenomenologically speaking, they are interesting specimens of a limited application of a limited music to a limited theology: fully to recognise them as 'sacred', one probably needs to have been raised in the tradition that has made them so.

Is that, though, not one of the cardinal principles of the study of religion: to attempt to grasp what, in human life, is sacred (or holy) to whom, and why? To modify slightly a statement I made a few years ago in my *Understanding Religion* (p. 62), we have to recognise that a very unremarkable combination of rhythm, melody, and harmony may be a focus of the sacred, for reasons which pass far beyond what can be immediately observed, and which are transmitted along the deep channels of tradition. I am tempted to add that unless one is oneself capable of being stirred in this particular way by music (of whatever kind), one is hardly going to be able to appreciate music's sacredness in the experience of others. But sacredness, as I said earlier, is not of only one kind: there is a functional

sacredness and an emotional sacredness; and although the two may overlap, there is no guarantee that they will. On the first count, it is somewhat unusual to be inspired by the strains of someone else's national anthem. Those who respect their own, can generally understand how the others are reacting to theirs. On the second count, there are simply no workable rules - which is why the limiting of the 'sacredness' concept to the area of emotional arousal is so unsatisfactory. A fellow student of mine who was once, briefly, a Methodist missionary in the West Indies, wrote to me years ago of his distress on playing some part of Handel's *Messiah* to his youth fellowship, only to find that they laughed at it. These young West Indians were not unmusical, nor were they irreligious. It was merely that they spoke a different musical language, and that as a rule the easiest thing to do with something we cannot understand, is to ridicule it.

Music, then, is 'sacred' either because of its role within a community of faith, or because of the range of emotions it can touch, to the extent that these can also be related to the world of religion. There is a form of music that corresponds to every known human emotion, with every time of day and with every stage of life. Music, like religion, can be both used and misused with almost frightening ease. On the whole, the scale of its legitimate use within the world of religion has far outweighed that of its misuse. Very often it has served as an analogy of religion, and particularly of religious experience. The machinery of religion, it has been argued, can be 'understood' in the way one can 'understand' the mechanism of a piano; but unless one can hear that which is not just the mechanism, namely the music on its way from the composer, by way of per-

former, to listener, one has grasped nothing of significance. No analogy is perfect. This one, though, has a good deal still to recommend it.

In the interplay of music and religion there is a vast field of fascination, interest - and (which is not always the case in the religious studies business) sheer enjoyment. It is odd that the subject has left relatively little trace in the religious

studies literature. It may or may not be the case that whoever (so Shakespeare believed) is not 'moved with concord of sweet sounds, is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils ...'. It may be - it is - hard to translate musical appreciation into academic prose. It is however high time that a few more of us made the attempt.

Creativity and the St James' 'Creation Window'

David Wright, stained glass artist, Melbourne.

In our society creativity is often driven a too narrow definition as being the realm of the artists. To me, creativity is that process by which we individually find meaning (inner reality) from what we perceive to the outside world (outer reality).

This creative process starts when, as children - and given a caring nurturing environment - we can gradually test our 'selves' against the threat of an existence without us: the outside world. At birth we are in a sense complete but undefined, complete in that we are everything we know, but undefined in that we have no context in which to place our 'selves', no external reality to reflect back on who we are.

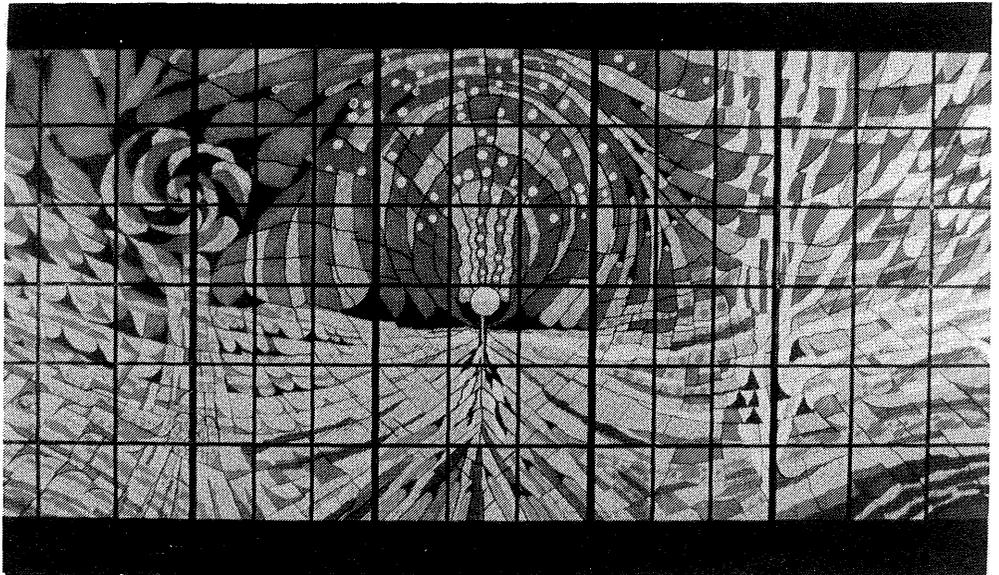
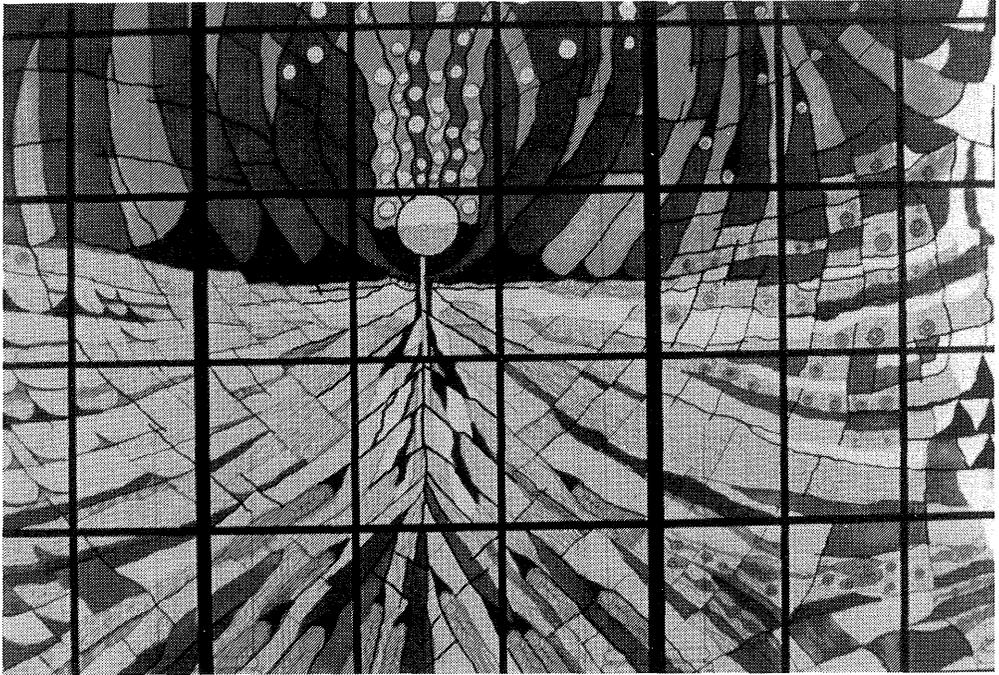
Though play and childhood in general we allow incursions of an external reality, a momentary submission of chaos over control, but done in an atmosphere of the ultimate support and protection.

For instance, children love to be 'scared', but only in an overall atmosphere of security. This is one test of self, a modelling of inner reality: put simply, a

search for meaning: scary situations exist, what does that make me?

This testing is the creative process, more developed in our species perhaps because of our slow maturity to 'self sufficient' adulthood, allowing succour and support which are the prime requirements for creativity. It is no different for us as adults; the process for this creativity may be as diverse as sport, art, relationships, play, religion, and so on, and the products are the symbols, the game, the dance, the painting, the body language, etc..

If in childhood the ability to make a creative association is damaged by withdrawal of support and succour for the child, by neglect or violence, then the individual's sense of self is weakened, his feeling of meaning in life and control over the future is minimal. Artificial quick-fix 'realities' may be sought: drugs, dogmatic religious sects, or anything that imposes a strong external sense of existence, however transitory. or the individual's frustration towards a society



where he can find no meaning may be taken out in a variety of anti-social acts.

In an age where our external reality, our knowledge, our science is expanding at an exponential rate the danger of alienation or the breakdown of creativity is great. something once known cannot be easily unknown, yet everything we know must be aligned with our sense of self and, by creativity, our sense of self altered to find meaning in our new knowledge. It is a process that we do all the time and that we cannot ignore yet on that generally this 'Age of Technology' is unsupportive of.

With the 1988 Bicentennial there has been much talk of 'Australianness' and an Australian Culture. A culture is the shared creativity of a society, constructed over time by individual creative expression, its symbols being the visible signposts of that expression. The culture may be relatively cohesive or fragmented depending on a number of factors: the shared background of its members, the creative vitality of its climate, the rate of expansion of its knowledge base and so on - an extraordinary symbol of the interactions of creativity and knowledge and our power to determine our own destiny, ourselves made in the image of God.

It expresses that, as a species, we cannot just accept our existence, that we need to explore/ question our perceived outer reality and then make a creative response to find inner meaning. Knowledge is neither good nor bad, yet how we use that knowledge to move into the future requires ethical decisions that can only flow from our sense of inner meaning, the power of knowledge for good or evil.

In this age of genetic engineering, IVF etc., no process can be more important to us. Our creative response must be

vigorous in all ways or we will be faced with alienation and despair.

The central figure of Christ speaks also about knowledge, creativity and the future. In a sense, His life and death on earth is our knowledge, His Resurrection our continuing future, and His presence in the Eucharist, linking the future with the knowledge, linking our being at one with God, and, as in childhood, our creativity with His ultimate support and protection.

In the background is the landscape, our sense of community, our Australianness, both the debt we owe the Aboriginal Australians and a continuing symbol of our search for meaning.

The Creation Window in the Chapel of the Holy Spirit in St James' Anglican Church, Sydney

The glasswork for the chapel is a landscape formed elementally by the interaction of earth, air, fire, and water. As a landscape it is also symbolic of the action of the Spirit in the Creation, in Life and in Rebirth in Christ. because we belong in the landscape the landscape gives meaning to our lives and changes us when we enter into deeper levels of meaning.

Reading the work from the left, fire interacts with earth in the creation of the universe, a spiralling explosion, the very creation of matter flinging stars and planets into being. At the bottom, the age of our planet, particularly our continent, is suggested in the worn textures of the earth and the presence of humankind, our prehistory is symbolised in the almost fossilised representation of head, arms, backbone, and ribs.

Winding through the landscape to culminate in a coiling spiral is the serpent, symbol of our loss of innocence, the Crea-

tion of knowledge; our sense of existence can no longer be instinctual but must be creatively sought: failure to do so breeds alienation and despair, success gives enrichment. Through skill we can fashion tools, with tools we can investigate, through investigation we can know but knowledge is not enough. We must make a creative relationship with everything we know. The spirals of creation of matter and creation of knowledge between them cause a tension which forms the Tree of Knowledge whose fruit implies a choice for good or evil. We are indeed made in God's image with creativity to enrich and interpret our existence and with power of choice over our destiny.

Moving to the right hand side of the work, water interacts with earth and air, falling as rain forming spiralling rivulets which turn to streams and finally rivers, cutting and shaping the land. Born on the water are sperm and egg, symbols of new life, and the river becomes the waters of the uterus, proclaiming our natural birth. As the work turns the corner, so the water forms a torrent which with the seven flames of the Spirit symbolises the baptism, Birth into the church and new life and new beginnings through Christ.

As from each side we move towards the centre, so we are drawn into the desert where neither fire nor water can be sustained. This is the wilderness, place of our final introspection, prelude to death and the reclaiming of our bodies to matter. But it is also symbol of our coming to terms with ourselves, our being a part of all around us, a place of peace and triumph of hope over despair.

Central in this arid landscape is the figure of Christ made man. He stands crucified, in despair, the fire and water flowing together from each side joined together to be spilled from his wounds as his blood and water. Yet even so, as the earth thrusts upwards, his arms reach to the sky and his spirit ascends to heaven.

His promise to us in the eucharist is seen in the shape of the chalice and ultimately in the central circle, the body and blood of Christ, wherein the elements of the landscape and everything that exists spiral inward and outwards towards time, shown to us through extraordinary glimpses of light. Our relationship with God is creative and re-creative in and through Christ who redeems all matter. He is the centre towards all things are moving and from which all things come.

This central figure of Christ is also symbolic of the Church as a tree, with its roots in the earth and its branches reaching to heaven. Around the base of this 'tree' is the family of the church, also its foundation in the Pentecost with the flames of the Spirit resting on the heads of the disciples.

That the preceding symbolism grows out of an Australian landscape is important to the work for a number of reasons. The interaction of fire, air, and water in this country is often harsh and violent, bushfire and flood often standing side by side. Reading again from the left of the work, bushfire rages through the landscape, burning the tree and releasing the seeds that fly flaming through the air finally falling to earth.

Rain extinguishes the fire and causes the seeds to sprout, starting the cycle of

nature again. So is the whole landscape an allegory of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, the cataclysmic event, the bushfire, brings death and destruction, but within this are sown the seeds of birth and regeneration, the promise of new life.

Finally, the landscape has always been an often unconscious symbol of who we are as Australians. In our very short two hundred years of white settlement, our view of the country has gone from that of an alien environment to a gradual under-

standing of the beauty of the textured tangled diversity of this unique landscape. This increasing appreciation is underscored by the Australian Aboriginals' age-old oneness with the land, the richness of our traditional symbolic existence expressed in their custodial relationship to the land.

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Religion, the Arts and the "Tutored Imagination"

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Our theme arises from the growing emphasis in recent years on the close relation of religion to the imagination and to the arts in human culture. We bring this out in our courses in Religion Studies, as in other subjects in the Humanities. Within the religious traditions, books are written on theology and the arts and on the theology of the religious imagination. From Australian Aboriginal art to the icons of Eastern Christendom there has been a revival of traditional religious arts within religious communities, as well as modernizing forms of those arts spurred on partly by the popular mass media.

What are the implications for religion of these trends towards art and the imagination? The use of religious images stirred up controversy in past ages and one cannot assume agreement today. While many will applaud the positive value of understanding religion in the company of the arts, others will find negative aspects and grounds for suspicion. Art has become the all-devouring style

for the modern age so that almost any event - political, social, religious - can be turned into art by the various media and thereby rendered innocuous and acceptable to today's lifestyle. The study of religion becomes an aesthetic, entertaining and playful experience. The traditional "serious" religious concerns for salvation, truth claims and social influence are thereby played down. Further, the association of religion with the human imagination places religion in a relativized position among a variety of imaginative arts which can all be called "fictions", "illusions" and "inventions". Can religion live at peace with the arts?

Illusion, Freud and Pruyser

These are serious critical questions. For some structured insights to help in finding a way through them we turn in this article to the work of Paul Pruyser, a Dutch- American who (up to his death in

1987) worked as a Freudian-based clinical psychologist at the Menninger Foundation. It is well-known that Freud expressed his own critical aversion to religion as the "universal obsessional neurosis" of humanity, as "illusions" (1928) expressing "the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind". Yet Pruyser (1973) finds a more constructive meaning of illusion. Freud was emphasizing human wishes, in contrast to reason and experience, as the essential criterion of illusion; yet he conceded that an illusion could turn out to be fulfilled in reality (as in the discovery of America by Columbus). Freud however took a positivist view of reality as opposed to the fantasy-based illusions of religion. It is just this two-valued orientation which Pruyser is not prepared to adopt - this either-or division between illusion and reality based on positivism and rationalism. He points out another side to Freud in his free use of analogies from mythical themes, literature and the humanities.

This is where "illusion" rightly belongs, says Pruyser, and Freud was reaching out for this in his differentiating illusion from delusions which contradict reality. The Latin etymology of "illusion" (from "lusus", play or game) and intensive prefix "-in") denotes "intense or serious play"; for instance in the theatre actors produce illusion by playing their roles. Pruyser therefore takes "illusion" to refer to a third state that is between the delusions of fantasy and the autistic world on the one hand and the realistic world of sense perception on the other. In this in-between third world are the special entities of the arts, human culture and religion which are "the products of civilized man as a being endowed with imagination" Pruyser says that failure to

identify and respect this third world forces us to fit the complex phenomena of human civilization into a straitjacket and reduce their unique qualities. "I am proposing that illusion formation is not a weakness of realistic thought but a unique process that derives from the imagination."

Pruyser's Key Themes

This crucial aspect of his argument and programme is summed up in a diagrammatic comparison of the three worlds - autistic, illusionist and realist - and their "variables". From the preceding position on illusion he works out an illuminating study of religion and culture in his 1983 book *The Play of the Imagination*, sub-titled *Toward a Psychoanalysis of Culture*. From this we now can draw out the major points by means of which he develops this programme.

First, Pruyser makes the imagination his starting-point. "The assertions of religion are imaginative assertions". Pruyser's writings on the psychology of religion (1968) abound in examples drawn from religion and the arts.

Religion, like art, uses the imagination to go beyond the empirically given to a symbolic dimension. His chapter on "Illusion Processing in Religion" (1983) includes in its heading quotations and discussions of philosophers the quote from Feuerbach (1841): "The imagination is the original organ of religion". As a theological atheist Feuerbach saw religious symbols as entirely human, made by humans and out of human being; but Pruyser does not follow him here to the point of dissolving the transcendence of and mystery of religion into the self-projection of the believer. From his

standpoint on the value of the third world of illusion he does not seek to judge its empirical reality but leaves that issue open.

Secondly, Pruyser sees play as a key application of the imagination. "Play means temporarily stepping out of the realistic world of nature and things and out of the autistic world with its unutterable dream thoughts, into a third world of make-believe organized by definite rules and having a seriousness of its own."

There is a time to play, often a space to play, with rules guiding play. Playing is a means of illusion processing which requires attitudes for tutoring the imagination.

Pruyser makes a crucial point of early childhood experience, here following the Freudian developments by Melanie Klein and British object-relations theorists. The key figure is Donald Winnicott whose 1951 paper on "Transitional objects" noted that older infants temporarily exhibit a strong attachment to some "thing" from their environment: a piece of blanket, a soft toy, teddy-bear or rag doll which they keep close to them, cuddle and doze off with. This "thing" is a transitional object in that it marks off the child's inner world from the outer world, yet also brings two together; it is a ritual object handled with reverence and love. The surrounding family usually accept this special symbol and apply a different pattern of interactions from those in ordinary reality testing.

Winnicott saw this as the source of "illusion" in the Freudian sense, yet also as something normal and healthy which took place in the "transitional sphere" and continued into subsequent stages of life in play and culture. Daniel Merkur (1990) comments that transitional objects in his

own adult life include "body armour" - clothing that we wear and automobiles that we drive, both felt to be parts of the self. A person whom we love and even the cosmos may be included in this sense of self. Winnicott wrote:

"This intermediate area of experience, unchallenged in respect of its belonging to inner or external (shared) reality, constitutes the greater part of the infant's experience, and throughout life is retained the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work." (Winnicott, 1971: 14)

The quotation just given could serve as a summary of the agenda which Pruyser was to work on a quarter of a century later. Pruyser explicitly acknowledges his debt to Winnicott's programme as he seeks to develop it. First he relates the transitional sphere to religion as the field of mystery and transcendence; "the transitional object is the transcendent", because it is recognized as something special and sacred by the individual and surrounding community. The much-ridiculed "security blanket" thus becomes the creative source of an intermediate area of play, culture and religion. Art and religion take their place in the "third world" between empirical reality and untutored fantasy; they are recognized as legitimate illusions, *sui generis*.

Thirdly, then, Pruyser proceeds to apply Winnicott's ideas systematically to the various domains of culture (1983). The greater part of his book develops the theme of "illusion processing" in relation to major areas of the arts, - the visual arts, literature and music - but also to religion and the sciences. Pruyser emphasizes that in each area the imagination needs "tutoring"; thus science inducts students

into its world of symbolic thought which turns nature into formulae. Likewise in each area a culture must educate its people. In each field he shows the creative significance of play and illusion in furthering the work of the artist or participant in that field. The transitional object continues to be relevant, as is indicated by one of the examples in Pruyser's fascinating chapter on music (1983: 192):

The student who can do his homework only in the presence of music appears thereby to strengthen what Winnicott called his 'capacity' to be alone' - that is, not radically alone but with a symbolic token, inside him or nearby, of the reliable mother.

Pruyser suggests that music is derived from a mother singing her baby to sleep leading to an internalized singing self. Music then becomes a world of its own which can be described only in metaphors from other fields but which includes a range of experiences from the sensory to the spiritual. Pruyser points to the danger in each field of losing the unique experience of that special illusionistic field by allowing it to slide off sideways (either to realism or to autism).

Fourthly, Pruyser's approach includes religion as one of those imaginative worlds which require "illusion processing" and tutoring. At the same time he sees the need also to appreciate its distinctive features. "Scholars and critics of all kinds have always had an easy time singling out religion as the illusionistic enterprise par excellence." Religion is concerned with peculiar entities which are neither sensory data in the external world nor just private piety and ideas. "Culturally, religion is first and foremost a visible public affair" (which is what keeps us

busy in the whole range of Religion Studies!) The special character of religion lies in its capacity to combine great abstractions with very concrete and specific experiences. Two key terms are "transcendence" and "mystery" because religion addresses the "limit situations" of human life (issues of life and death, good and evil) which challenge the ordinary forms of language and reasoning.

Pruyser points out the ambiguity of such religious conceptions; the Holy can be both awesome and attractive (as Rudolf Otto illustrated). Further he points to the ambiguity that pervades all experience of the arts and religion. This ambiguity derives from the very nature of the illusionistic world with its roots in the transitional sphere. Situated between the public and private worlds, it also shares in the ongoing dialectical tension "between belief and unbelief" (1974). Although in Western culture the pendulum seems to have swung from belief to unbelief as the ascendant norm, this cannot be final. Religion is not finally proved true or false. It remains an area of commitment, rejection, reinterpretation - a precarious world indeed, but just therefore a precious area of human freedom and personal response.

This leads on to Pruyser's concluding emphasis and warning, insofar as the imagination is threatened from either side. The illusionistic world is not one of whimsical fantasy but of "tutored fantasy" which encourages an orderly imagination and cultural creativity. It is the world of culture which people share most of the time, between the polarized worlds of autism and realism. There is a constant danger of allowing illusions in this proper sense to lose their symbolic quality and to be displaced into these other worlds on either side. Thus in children's play Win-

nicott perceived the danger of joyous and imaginative play being displaced into morbid fantasy on the one hand or compulsive stereotyped activities on the other. In the field of religion, Pruyser sees these threats as ever present. The religious imagination can "go haywire" concocting impulsive visions and destructive fantasies. Alternatively it can be channelled into rigid institutions and doctrines which seek to emulate literal realism; they end up in intellectual and behavioral conformity which loses the sense of mystery and symbolism. The ideal is for people to be able to move elegantly back and forth between the three worlds, as required in the appropriate situations. (Often it is primal cultures which are more skilled and relaxed in doing this).

As Pruyser points out, any culture must induct its members into the use of language, symbols, rituals, art and religion, by illusion processing.

Criticism and Appreciation

A wide-ranging view of religion and culture such as Paul Pruyser offers us is clearly open to criticisms on several points. Can his central thesis of "three worlds" do justice to the claims of modern science and psychology? Does his coverage of culture do justice to the range of human experience including modern popular culture and entertainments? Does he do justice to the feminine element? Does his view of religion provide sufficient ground for it as a distinctive realm or does it end up as the product of human imagination without remainder? Can it be satisfactorily integrated with a theory of religion as maintaining social identity along the lines of naturalistic explanation (Beit-Hallahmi,

1986)? Can religious believers ever feel at ease with descriptions of religion in terms of the human imagination and illusion-processing?

Without discussing such criticisms further, the present article can assert that Pruyser's work is worth criticizing seriously because it does consider the relation of religion to culture and the arts in a well-informed manner. Pruyser draws on a wide range of knowledge of human culture, including observable and experienceable phenomena. At the same time he illuminates his thesis with autobiographical material, partly because of his psychoanalytic tradition but also because it helps to give the "inside story" of personal experience.

On four of Pruyser's central emphases I would register my appreciation. He has surely pointed to the human imagination as precious to humanity, an expression of freedom and creativity. I would describe this as an experience of "magical transformation" which provides a common source of magic, religion and the arts (Moore 1985; 1989). A recent anthropological study of contemporary magical groups highlights the importance of imagination in enabling people to hold to magical and religious beliefs in an apparently secular culture; imaginative ambiguity provides an in-between world, similar to that described by Pruyser (Tanya Luhrmann, 1989, p.220). Imagination leads on, secondly, to the importance of play. Whether or not one goes along with Winnicott's theory, the element of play provides a vital area for human exploration in science as well as in the arts and religion. Then the realization of ambiguity in the areas of the "illusionistic world" serves to remind us of the precariousness of our judgments and the need for freedom and tolerance in our

world. Finally, the common roots of these areas of culture in the imagination remind us of the interplay of religion and culture, of the sacred and the secular in a continuing dialectic. It is our task in Religious Studies to understand religion and religions in this wider context. Paul

Pruyser's *Play of the Imagination* helps us in the task by clarifying these key concerns linking religion and the arts. More than that, in a world which rejects or distorts these concerns, Pruyser stands up to be counted and challenges us to do likewise.

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BOOK REVIEW

Images of Religion in Australian Art

Rosemary Crumlin.

Bay Books, Kensington, NSW, 1988.
204pp., 93 col. pl. \$A49.95.

This is a splendid book. The first word which this reviewer heard of it in New Zealand was through some American visitors who had seen the exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria in December 1988 and reported their excitement when they came on to Dunedin. The book itself justifies this excitement. There are 93 fine colour plates nearly all of which are from the period 1940-1988 in which the Blake Prize has stimulated religious art in Australia since 1951. A foreword by Margaret Manion sets the scene, followed by the author's clear and incisive introduction. In the main body of the book Rosemary Crumlin gives each picture full documentation

and a lucid and illuminating commentary. The latter part of the book called "Islands of Reflections" gives special attention to the work of Arthur Boyd, Leonard French and recent Aboriginal artists (for whom Judith Ryan provides the text). A very good bibliography and index conclude the book.

On what basis is this selection made? What, after all, is "religious art" in Australia or anywhere else? One can point to four criteria used in discussions of religious art: traditional religious imagery; liturgical use in sacred places; the religious intention of the artist; and the religious response of the viewer. Some religious art may satisfy all four criteria, but problems arise in identifying the specifically religious element in cases of the latter two criteria - for instance when art is described as "spiritual". Therefore, to avoid opening the floodgates, the curators of the exhibition focussed on

"paintings with explicit religious reference - images that have their origin in religion, even though the artist may in fact be protesting against institutionalized religion" (p.11). This decision proves justified in the resulting book as indicated in its very title. From Rupert Bunny's "Prodigal Son" of 1904, to Albert Tucker's "Judas" (spewing coins) of 1955, to new Aboriginal art of the 1980's, we encounter picture after picture presenting powerful and memorable religious images.

The work of Arthur Boyd occupies a special place, since his two crucifixion paintings of 1979-80 were associated with the author's conception of the idea of the exhibition, as mentioned in the introduction. The nine paintings by Boyd reproduced in the book reinforce his stature. Nothing can replace the experience of seeing them. But as a sample of Crumlin's terse and penetrating comment, here are some of her words (p.18) which help the reader to experience the religious edge of Boyd's art:

"They are 'threshold' paintings, whether or not they use scriptural subject matter. The viewer is enticed to the edge of new awareness and vision. Earthy and sensual, they are paintings that take clear life stances - for openness and against voyeurism in its various forms, against a crass materialism and narcissism, and for a new understanding of the potential of women."

Religious art in Australia comes into its own only in the last half-century, and

the author has previously researched the role of the Blake Prize in its development. The present book displays the richness and scope of Australian visual art, in which this selection participates as a part, based on religious images. From neighbouring New Zealand one cannot resist a certain envy of this production and wish that a similar comprehensive exhibition and book could take shape across the Tasman. (Some perceptive studies of religious themes have already been made of artists such as Colin McCahon and Jeffrey Harris in New Zealand.) The impact of Australian art has already been apparent on the international scene, as evidenced by the admiration of the British art critic Peter Fuller, to name only one.

What lies ahead for Australian religious art? Will some new mix emerge out of the directions explored in this book? For instance will "Western" or international art, further combine with art of the "primal cultures" of Australia and New Zealand as has already begun in recent years? Will "white" European-based artists explore (and perhaps exploit) aboriginal art or will reactions set in to safeguard the ownership of art by the representatives of primal traditions?

In the meantime we have this book. It is a book to buy, to enjoy and come back to, a book to lend to others with enthusiasm. What more could one ask?

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