A Short Talk.

St Luke’s Presbyterian Church

Remuera, Auckland, New Zealand.

Art and Religion

**Image - Iris Mid-5th century BC Agrigento, Sicilia**

When this talk was suggested to me, I thought it was relatively straightforward, but each time I think I may have some sort of hold on it, I stumble across yet another aspect of the subject.

Tonight, I’m going to concentrate on religious art, both in the historical and the contemporary sense, and try to cast some light on what has changed and what has remained the same.

So, this is a personal journey through the history of art, looking at some of the underlying connections, which unite old and contemporary works.

And there is a connecting thread. The way in which artworks have changed and evolved reflects the huge philosophical, religious, social and scientific changes that have evolved during the period from the 1st image, from the 5th century BC, until now.

It struck me when I was first looking at the wonderful Italian paintings of the 13th and 14th centuries that we can really have no real understanding of the world they come out of, yet we can still find them absolutely beautiful, engrossing and full of meaning.

We are looking back at the past, then, through the wrong end of the binoculars, interpreting what we see through our own particular contemporary perspective.

At this point, it would be useful to try to define, or at least to enlarge upon what we mean by religion and the other word which religion implies in contemporary art – spirituality.

I looked it up in a thesaurus.

Some of the synonyms for spiritual are - divine, metaphysical, sacred, devotional, holy.

The synonyms for religious are – clerical, devout, doctrinal, holy, moral, pious, sacred, sectarian, spiritual, theological.

So you can see that the synonyms for religion often have more to do with the institution of religion, it’s observance and codification, it’s moral implications (and art may not be moral or even good for you).
Spirituality implies a more transcendent aspect. Actually, I find the term “spiritual” an overused and slightly tarnished term too. Perhaps metaphysical is a better term, with a less lurid aura. Meaning ‘not physical’ or ‘without physical presence’ some synonyms - abstract, mystical, philosophical, spiritual, fundamental, numinous, transcendental.

*You can't believe anything until you have direct perception of it.*

- George Harrison

This applies to both art and religion. They both have this in common- that they must be experienced on a individual and personal basis. Of course it doesn’t mean that large numbers of people can’t share this experience, but that it’s a matter of individual communication, in the case of art, back and forth from the object to the observer.

Both art and religion too, provide the metaphorical language, which gives our experience of the natural world and our perception of it meaning and provides a bridge between “the other” and ourselves.

Likewise, there is a thread of continuity going through art, from the earliest artworks that exist to the present, which links the most intense spiritual experience in the “religious” sense, with the highest forms of beauty in the aesthetic sense, meaning that we can still relate to art from the distant past.

In fact it could be argued that in contemporary art, aesthetics and the mystical, the metaphysical, have merged.

Now though, spirituality, the mystical, has become implicit rather than explicit. Religion as such is not on view. One might say that it dare not speak its name.

I’ve done a little research online about the place of religion in contemporary art and found this one from a German critic Silvia Henke,

1. Religious art is taboo! Religious art exists in churches, in historical museums, at most in museums for non-European art, or in the vicinity of mentally confused artists, but not in the white cubes of major art temples. When it gets to close to pure art, the latter feels “threatened.

2. While individual artists are eager to lay claim to a certain subjective “religiosity” (which however, they are loath to explain), contemporary art exhibitions full of religious symbols, themes and staging see themselves as events of culture rather than religion, culture which has usurped the molten core of religion, namely questions of belief and denomination.

3. Replacing belief in God with belief in art is only a trick, a way to evade the social and moral questions of religion. According to the art historian Wolfgang Ulrich to believe in art means that the obligatory questions of religion have been done away with under the guise of art. The notion of “high art” always implies the intellectual, the inarticulate, the hidden; it is about aura, spiritual moods, and the transcendence of art in absolute terms.

4. It would be more useful for contemporary art to accept the long-standing diagnosis of Western society put forth by philosophers and sociologists of religion, namely: That it finds itself in a “post-secular” phase, a term which allows for critical self-reflection through religious thought, while considering the ubiquity of the religious
in its various manifestations within the secularization process, through secular thought (Jürgen Habermas).

5. One could and should have certain expectations regarding the concurrence of art and religion today. Artistic works which precisely deal with religious form and meaning have the ability to mediate between blind faith and rational knowledge; they belong neither to a dogmatic religiosity that confuses belief with conviction, nor to a totally individualized “who cares how or what” religiousness, in which faith is an utterly private thing. When artistic works successfully translate sacred symbols into the language of secular art it happens not as blasphemy or a deconstruction of the religious but rather, as “redeeming deconstruction.”

6. In terms of inter-cultural understanding, it might be opportune if Western artists came to realize that secularization is a uniquely European project. Understanding other cultures means understanding their religions, in which instance it is also helpful to consider the religious foundations of our own culture, for which Christianity developed an iconographic program, which retains its magnificence to this day.

Art, like the bible, is a language of metaphor. Everything depicted, every object, has a host of associations, meanings, premonitions. These associations can be profoundly affecting, ironic or trite.

In medieval and the art of the renaissance, which was almost exclusively religious in the obvious sense at least, the symbolic language and metaphorical was vast.

There have always been underlying strands of the spiritual, the mystical, the metaphysical, running through art. So that we’re not here for the next 5 years, the short period in the history of art that I am going to deal with is from the archaic Greek, through the late Roman empire to the present day. From this, I am going to pick a few examples as illustrations.

The image that’s up on the wall now is that of Iris, from the 5th century BC. It’s interesting that before angels (at least in the Christian sense) came in to being, they already existed in the human imagination.

From the early days of the Christian church, to the time up to the early Renaissance, art and religion were synonymous; life was seen and portrayed through its prism. This art emerged, almost seamlessly from Roman and Greek culture. The vital difference being that Christianity is a monotheistic and transcendent religion, in contrast to that of Greece and Rome, where the many Gods were man writ large.

**Image – Madonna and Child Catacombs of Priscilla c.250CE**

This leads me to the next image I would like to show you, of the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child, from the catacombs of Priscilla, beneath Rome. Although it is from the Christian era, the imagery and the religious symbols are contiguous with pagan religious images.

The image of mother and child is a common one, central in both the pagan and Christian religions. Indeed, if you tour the churches of Italy today, the count of paintings of the Virgin Mary supersedes all others, including those of Christ.

**Image – Mother and Child Sarcophagus Marcus Cornelius Statius**
The underlying symbolic language, the subjective and psychological imagery isn’t so much reliant on the theological and doctrinal language of Christianity but comes from a deeper, local source that has been around as long as human society.

As Mary Kisler said last week, this is something that can still be seen in many countries in Southern Europe, where the local religious festivals connect in a direct line to the previous pagan ones.

You can see here the figure of the Virgin Mary, who is carried through the streets of Oviedo today, in a direct line with goddesses from the pre-Christian era.

**Image - Virgin Mary Oviedo**

The metaphysical language of the Middle Ages and early Renaissance is far more abstract and less naturalistic than that of the renaissance proper and the mannerist and baroque period that followed. In fact from the high renaissance, right up to the time of the impressionists, naturalism was the prevailing mode, in one form or another.

An anti-naturalistic style (pre the renaissance), which included the use of gold as a metaphor for a transcendent reality, was much more suited to the more abstract depiction of religious subjects.

This was a more conceptual and metaphysical language, strangely parallel to the modernist movement of the early 20th century, when concepts; intellectual, emotional and subjective, took over from the outward observation and depiction of the world.

**Image – Lamentation Giotto c1305**

**Image – The Mystic Marriage of St Francis Sassetta c1450**

To look at the transition from the metaphysical to the naturalistic, look at these two artworks and then the transition from absolute belief, an almost abstract and conceptual view to a naturalistic and more earthly style.

**Image – St Francis in Ecstasy Caravaggio 1595**

The power of belief gives the angels wings in the Sassetta, whereas in the Caravaggio the angel has to, perhaps more plausibly and naturalistically, but certainly with less conviction, has a distinctly earthbound and theatrical presence.

**Image – The Ecstasy of St Teresa Bernini 1652**

This theatricality is amplified in Bernini’s The Ecstasy of St Teresa. It’s very difficult to look at this beautiful work in a way in which it was presumably viewed originally and not see it through a Freudian lens!

The transition from an almost abstract and conceptualized way of conceiving of God to an almost completely humanized and naturalistic one is complete.
Until the renaissance, religion/the bible largely provided the narrative and lens through which every aspect of life was experienced. With the renaissance, the rediscovery of the ancient world and somewhat later, the protestant revolution and the enlightenment, the age of scientific discovery, it was no longer possible to see the world through this single portal.

Since the nineteenth century and really far before that, the seventeenth century, art has not been in the service of organised religion. Religion, spirituality, metaphysics, in art went underground.

**Image – Still life with Quince, Cabbage, and Melon Cotan 1602**

I would like to show you now an image of a work by Sanchez Cotan.

To me, Cotan’s paintings seem like a precursor to the way in which religious, metaphysical concerns are depicted in contemporary art.

Cotan himself was a Carthusian, and a profound religious sensibility is at work here in this painting, giving the simplest and the most unadorned fruits or vegetables, by their arrangement, by their relative positioning, by the way they are being set apart and offered up to us, one by one, and each one seemingly suffused with a preternatural light from some undisclosed source, a kind of spiritual aura. The quince and the cabbage could be planets turning. Each element of this painting feels like a very singular gift, set apart from all the rest. They have been wrench, miraculously, from their humbleness.

The forms stand out with an almost geometric clarity against a dark background. This orchestration of still life in direct sunlight against impenetrable darkness is the hallmark of early Spanish still life painting. Each form is scrutinized with such intensity that the pictures take on a mystical quality, and the reality of things is intensified to a degree that no other seventeenth-century painter would surpass.

They express a monastic denial of worldly pleasure and richness, although his fruits and vegetables are arranged in beautiful ballet like compositions.

There’s an almost surrealist aspect to these paintings, made at a time when Spanish baroque painting and sculpture was at a tortured extreme. It’s very curious that Cotan would have chosen to depict vegetables as sort of displaced religious images, in this strangely modern way.

Later I’ll show you a couple of works by Rothko, from the mid-twentieth century, which likewise strip away all extraneous detail and leave us an object of contemplation.

Perhaps the paintings of Cotan was a reaction to the rather overblown and histrionic images of bleeding Christs’ and martyred saints popular in the Baroque, especially the Spanish baroque period

**Image - Bleeding Christ**

At almost the same time in Spain, El Greco, who had trained 1st as an icon painter in Crete, was producing a series of contorted, mystical, almost expressionist (in the contemporary sense) works.

I’m going to show you 2 paintings, one by El Greco, from the early 17th century and the other by Pablo Picasso, from the early 20th.
There has been a lot of comment on the similarities of the 2 paintings - I saw them brought together in an exhibition at the Museo Picasso in Barcelona.

**Image - Opening of the 5th Seal El Greco 1608**

The Opening of the Fifth Seal is a large fragment of one of three altarpieces El Greco contracted to paint in 1608 for the church of the Hospital of St John the Baptist, just outside the walls of Toledo.

The painting has been cut at the top, where there was possibly a representation of the Throne of God.

In the foreground is an incredibly elongated, ecstatic figure of St John, his head turned imploringly heavenward, his arms raised. Behind him are two groups of figures. The three on the right, seen against a green drapery, are male and reach upwards for white garments distributed by a flying cherub. The four on the left are shown in front of a mustard-colored cloth. Two are male, two female, and they seem to be covering (or uncovering) themselves with the yellow drapery. The Spirit as 'a living flame, striving upwards', and this strange compatibility of infinite darkness and 'all-consuming light' is met with in the writings of the mystics of his time, Saint Teresa of Jesus and Saint John of the Cross. El Greco realises the apocalyptical vision in color, light and movement.

In addition, the clothed figure in the left part of the painting and the naked figures to the right showed the contradiction between profane and divine love

**Image - Demoiselles d'Avignon Picasso 1907**

Opening of the Fifth Seal served as an inspiration for the early Cubist works of Pablo Picasso, especially Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, which mirrors the expressionistic angularity of the painting.

When he was working on Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, Picasso visited his friend Zuloaga in his studio in Paris and studied El Greco's Opening of the Fifth Seal.

Picasso, ostensibly the least religious of people, was very impressed by its visionary power.

The Apocalypse in El Greco’s Opening of the Fifth Seal was the catalyst, which showed Picasso how to harness the spiritual energy of a great religious artist to his own demonic ends. Picasso followed this apocalyptic vision for the rest of his life.

The other strand in Picasso’s religious (in the broader sense) thinking was his visit in 1907 Trocadero Museum of Ethnology (now the Musée de l'Homme) with another artist friend, André Derain. That visit, Picasso later claimed, was pivotal to his art.

"A smell of mould and neglect caught me by the throat. I was so depressed that I would have chosen to leave immediately," Picasso said of the museum. "But I forced myself to stay, to examine these masks, all these objects that people had created with a sacred, magical purpose, to serve as intermediaries between them and the unknown, hostile forces surrounding them, attempting in that way to overcome their fears by giving them colour and form. And then I understood what painting really meant. It's not an aesthetic process; it's a form of magic that interposes itself between us and the hostile universe, a means of seizing
power by imposing a form on our terrors as well as on our desires. The day I understood that, I had found my path."

**Image - Crows Over a Wheatfield Vincent van Gogh 1890**

As a young man, van Gogh was exceptionally interested in the bible, and trained to become a pastor. He later described this period as “a few years, which I find hard to understand myself, when I was confused by religious ideas – by a sort of mysticism.”

Later in life he rejected the church. He quoted the French author Michelet “Religions pass, but God remains”. In tandem with this, his early religious imagery changed to a pantheistic view of nature.

The painting here, *Crows Over a Wheatfield*, was painted in July 1890, in the last weeks of van Gogh’s short life.

You can see that it’s a double-square canvas, a classic landscape format, and depicts a dramatic, cloudy sky filled with crows over a wheat-field. There’s a mood of isolation, heightened by a central path leading nowhere and by the scattered direction of flight of the crows.

The crows themselves are used by van Gogh as a symbol of death and rebirth, or of resurrection. The metaphor of the painting seems to indicate that the road, in contrasting colors of red and green, is a metaphor for the travails of life. Sorrowful in that it is so long and difficult. However, there is something strangely exhilarating about the painting too, through the splendid use of colour.

I’ve put *Crows Over a Wheatfield*, in a little group alongside this Uccello *Cruxification*, and the following 2 works by Colin McCahon.

All 3 use landscape to express ideas of a metaphysical and metaphorical presence and (with the exception of the Uccello), without the actual appearance of any obvious religious iconography

**Image - Cruxification Uccello c1450**

If you take away the figures from this painting by Uccello, you can see the important part that landscape plays in setting the psychological mood of the picture, as it does exclusively in McCahon and van Gogh works.

The colour of this painting too, is very unnaturalistic and provides the painting with its own particular mood and atmosphere. Artists of the medieval period and early renaissance often constructed light boxes, lit by candles, containing rocks to form an ersatz landscape. This enabled the artists to study the effect of light upon the contents, but more importantly, helped them to strip away extraneous detail and invent a conceptualized landscape, fitting to the subject of the painting.

**Image - Takaka Night and Day McCahon 1948**

This work was painted in the studio from memory.
There is a Biblical allusion to the passing of night into day, darkness into light. It illustrates two issues that remained central to McCahon’s work throughout his career: his personal exploration of spirituality and religious faith, and the way he placed this into a local and therefore personal setting.

**Image - Six Days in Nelson McCahon 1950**

**Mc Cahon – Existentialism**

Colin McCahon can be seen as an exclusively religious artist.

However, to put him into an historical context, he can be seen in the same category as Grahame Greene, Camus and other artists (including Rothko) writers of the existentialist generation, who were profoundly affected by the two world wars and the loss of faith in the establishment and the church this involved.

For instance, Camus rejected religion is because it is used to provide pseudo-solutions to the absurd nature of reality — the fact that human reasoning fits so poorly with reality as we find it. Indeed, Camus rejected all attempts to overcome the absurd — even existentialist solutions, like the “leap of faith” advocated by Kierkegaard.

In common with these writers, his religious beliefs are at odds with his awareness of the great tragedy of the recent past and the intrinsic ambiguity of faith this engendered.

A lot of his work involves this- in pictorial terms- the contrast and struggle of light against darkness.

I’d like to talk a bit now about the paintings of Mark Rothko.

**Image - Rothko installation shot, Tate 1958**

To my mind, there’s a relationship between Rothko’s work and Cotan’s still life, both refuse any sign of religious imagery, at least in the obvious sense, while at the same time being deeply mysterious and metaphysical.

**Image - Rothko installation shot, Tate 1958**

Rothko believed his art could free unconscious energies previously liberated by mythological images, symbols, and rituals. He considered himself a "mythmaker" and proclaimed that "the exhilarated tragic experience is for me the only source of art”

Many of Rothko’s paintings are extremely large.

Rothko said about this:
I realize that historically the function of painting large pictures is painting something very grandiose and pompous. The reason I paint them, however . . . is precisely because I want to be very intimate and human. To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience, to look upon an experience as a stereopticon view or with a reducing glass. However you paint the larger picture, you are in it. It isn’t something you command!

He recommended that viewers position themselves as little as eighteen inches away from the canvas in order to experience a sense of intimacy, as well as awe, a transcendence of the individual, and a sense of the unknown.

The paintings here, from 1958, were originally painted for the Four Seasons Restaurant in the Seagram Building in New York.

Over a period of three months, Rothko completed forty paintings, three full series in dark red and brown.

Obviously he was extremely ambivalent about the restaurant as a venue for his paintings as said that his true intention for the Seagram murals was to paint "something that will ruin the appetite of every son-of-a-bitch who ever eats in that room”

Following a trip to Europe, Rothko visited the near-completed Four Seasons restaurant. Upset with the restaurant’s dining atmosphere, which he considered pretentious and inappropriate for the display of his works, Rothko refused to continue the project and returned his cash advance to the Seagram and Sons Company.

He then kept the commissioned paintings in storage until 1968. Given that he’d known in advance about the luxury decor of the restaurant and the social class of its future patrons, the motives for his abrupt repudiation remain mysterious. A temperamental personality, Rothko never fully explained his conflicted emotions over the incident. He was an Isaac who at the last moment refused to yield to Abraham.” The final series of Seagram Murals was dispersed and now hangs in three locations: one part at London’s Tate Modern.

You can see them, or at least some of them here. I guess many of you will have seen them there. To me, it’s an ambivalent experience because the Tate often is very busy public space, which interferes with the privacy the paintings need.

However, if you get them at the right moment, they radiate a beautiful somber and intense almost Cathedral-like atmosphere.

Lastly, I’d like to talk a little about Anselm Kiefer, probably the major post-war German painter.

To tie it in with the pictures of angels at the start of this talk, here is an image of a work of Kiefer from 1992 Book with Wings (image).

This is one of numerous sculptures of freestanding winged books involving the myth of Icarus.
I really like the way that these magnificent yet oddly incongruous and awkward wings are fixed to the book, which, perhaps represents history or the quest for knowledge – so that there’s both transcendence in the wings and tragedy as represented by the book.

Kiefer is arguably the most prominent artist of the last several decades to presume arts capacity (and responsibility) to respond to religious and spiritual questions, questions he believes to still be at the center of human experience and asks “universal, to some people, unfashionable questions about whether faith and spiritual belief can be represented in the contemporary age?” Kiefer is no longer a practicing Catholic, but acknowledges that “even people who seem not to be spiritual still long for something; I’m sure this is the reason we have art and poetry. I think without spirituality we cannot live, and in this respect the best religion is Hinduism, which teaches that each religion can contain some little truth. Art is an attempt to get to the very centre of truth. It never can, but it can get quite close. It is the dogmatism of the church, the idea that words can express a single truth over hundreds of years, that is complete nonsense”.

The world changes. Languages change; cultures evolve, change or disappear. A thread connects then and now.

Tony Lane, 2014.