

Changing perceptions¹: Methodism's engagement with the modern art world

“Artists tend to be the prophets of the day. They see something different...”²

The proposal that follows in this paper is that dialogue with artists, of professed faith and none, and with those who run galleries and spaces for art, is an opportunity for the Church to learn and offer much. I would like to open up some specific routes for consideration, and to give some examples of why Methodism's engagement with the modern art world is so important in its mission to serve the present age.

Historical context

Its part in the Nonconformist tradition means that Methodism suffers from assumptions that it possesses little aesthetic appreciation. “It is a well-known fact that Nonconformists are culturally challenged” (Binfield, 1999:142) is a rather over-confident generalisation but not without foundation. British artist Stanley Spencer (1891-1959) had an intense boyhood experience of visits to the Methodist chapel in Cookham, Berkshire, now the Spencer Gallery, currently being refurbished with Heritage Lottery funding:

I am filled with the atmosphere I remember as a child... My eyes were well down and I was trying to imagine what *shape* they [the worshippers] were in, on that sacred piece of ground... that patch of hard linoleum floor – it seemed to be the ‘take off’ place for their Methodist heaven ... flopping & crumpling up in a wonderful ecstasy expressive of all that Wesleyan conception of goodness, etc. (Glew, 2001:29-30)

¹ This first part of the title is taken from an article I wrote five years ago in the *Epworth Review* (see References) but serves now to illustrate the development of a theme which takes us beyond the Church.

² Staub, D. Q&A, *The United Methodist Recorder*, Dallas, Texas, June 1, 2007, p3b

A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland maintains that Methodism “has in reality enjoyed a steady undercurrent of interaction with the world of the fine arts” (ed. Vickers, 2000:11). Let’s not forget that Vincent Van Gogh, as a Methodist (Auxiliary) preacher, led worship in Richmond, Surrey and in South London churches around 1876. He writes of perceiving Jesus Christ as ‘artist’.

Whether it is regarded as an exception to our tradition or not, the **British Methodist Church’s touring Collection of Modern Christian Art** provides a bridge to the contemporary art world. Its founders, Dr John M. Gibbs and Rev Douglas Wollen, collecting largely in the 1950’s and 60’s, wanted to encourage a more imaginative approach in Methodism to the commissioning and buying of paintings, sculpture, and church furnishings, as is well documented by Roger Wollen in his 2003 account of the Collection’s history. Their acumen resulted in works by Graham Sutherland, Ceri Richards, Elisabeth Frink³ (twentieth century artists now enjoying a revival of interest in British galleries) eventually becoming the property – and much valued asset – of the Methodist Church. The current Trustees of the Collection have a developing acquisitions policy which has led to several new works being added over the last four years. Expansion criteria for the Collection – which now includes over 40 works - state that the subject of any work acquired should reflect the Christian narrative and experience, though such terms might themselves be the subject of a discussion paper. The Trustees’ core purpose is

To care for, develop and promote the Collection in order to encourage people to enter into conversations about God in Christ in the contemporary world, and to offer material that can bring new dimensions to study, worship and spiritual life.

(Acquisitions Policy, May 2007)

³ Amongst a range of other artists of different nationalities including French and Indian.

Current research

As part of this purpose, I was commissioned by the Trustees to undertake a research project in order to make some collective record of the number of exhibitions, list of venues and views from borrowers/critics/visitors over the period 2000-2006. The resulting report, *Cloud of Witnesses*, concludes how rewarding it was to witness the variety of individual initiatives and the high level of satisfaction recorded by borrowers and visitors, whilst offering some specific recommendations to the Trustees about strategies for the future. Over 40 loans of the Collection, in part or in its entirety, were made during this period. Most of these were to ecumenical church groups, town galleries or schools, and the tours have continued this year, most recently with the exhibition in this city of Oxford under the title *The Colour of Love*.

Developing my research into the value of this Collection, and other so-called modern Christian art, specifically in terms of cultural capital⁴, I have interviewed some of the artists with paintings in the Collection. I have also questioned curators of mainstream galleries, and potential funders of exhibitions including senior staff of Arts Council England.

The findings of the combined research have been rather unexpected in what many describe as a 'post-modern' current. Indeed it could be argued that 'post-atheist' is an equally valid description, at least of contemporary British society. (The research was British-based but a view was also sought from the curator of the Museum of Biblical

⁴ A sociological concept developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) which might be summarised as 'culturally valued taste and consumption patterns'. See References.

Art in New York, following the gallery's Spring 2007 exhibition, *Biblical Art in a Secular Century: Selections, 1986-1993*).

My focus is necessarily the Methodist Art Collection. At its current stage of development in seeking new acquisitions and new audiences, it provides something of a microcosm for exploring the currency of Christian iconography and narrative in a multi-faith, multi-cultural society. It was with this exploration in mind that I approached six artists with work in the Collection.

Artists' perspectives

"I was delighted to have had my work selected," said John Brokenshire. "It catalysed me to rethink what I could aim for in my painting." Further exchanges with this artist revealed that he had not previously produced work with any Christian intention in terms of iconography and theme.



Fig. 1 *Untitled – Pentecost*. Artist: John Brokenshire (1958-).
Oil on canvas, 2003, 76 cm x 77 cm.
Reproduced with permission of artist and TMCP.

His untitled picture (see Fig. 1 above), semi-abstract, suggesting a bird in motion, had been interpreted by two of the Trustees seeing the painting in a private London gallery as suggestive of the Holy Spirit, the dove brooding over creation, the same Spirit who came as the wind of Pentecost. As a result the painting, acquired for the Collection in 2004, was listed in the catalogue as *Untitled – Pentecost*. Inspired by this response to tackle other biblical themes, the artist subsequently painted two narrative sequences: the raising of Lazarus and the healing of Jairus' daughter. He went on to have a show in Sheffield Cathedral.

Another of the 2004 acquisitions is the *Dalit Madonna*. Artist Jyoti Sahi was brought up as a Christian in India. He has studied the relation of the Church in India to Indian cultures and spirituality, and in the early 1980's started an art ashram in a village outside Bangalore. Of the *Dalit Madonna* (the word 'Dalit' meaning 'broken'), Sahi writes:

The image has arisen out of an Indian folk symbol – the grinding stone, which is often set in the courtyard of traditional Indian homes. It consists of the Mother Stone and the Baby Stone [illustrating] the bond between mother and child. This is linked to the preparation of daily bread and other food which is ground or blended together.

Dalits (formerly known as 'Untouchables') are known as the despised and rejected members of South Asian society. Traditionally expected to play the Dalit drum at upper caste weddings and funerals, they are now generating art forms of their own, often depicting stories of struggle against caste discrimination. Brokenness producing life for the community; that which was despised becoming an instrument of liberation – these themes have caught the interest of many who have seen this painting which stands almost five feet high. "It is vital when we seek to interpret art to understand the cultural and political context from which it comes", wrote Methodist minister, David

Haslam, soon after the painting began touring with the Collection in 2005. “The idea of a Dalit Madonna would be anathema to many in India, even perhaps some Indian Christians.”⁵

Mark Cazalet, who has two works in the Collection, delights in focusing on what he describes as “gaps in the canon”. One of his later paintings is of Mary comforting the mother of Judas Iscariot. In the catalogue to an exhibition called *Faith*⁶, Cazalet writes:

I'm greatly moved by the bond that can exist between mothers who have shared in suffering.... Neither will fathom the reasons that led to their sons' deaths, but they can fathom their emotions, and find support in the sharing of their grief with each other.

Cazalet suggests that painting the “gaps” (eg. imagining the rest of the story) can be intriguing to viewers, whether museum and gallery curators or ordinary visitors, in the way that straightforward biblical illustration may not be. “Acceptance depends on the openness of the artwork”, he told me. “If it has mythic qualities or some sense of puzzle or parable about it, then reaction tends to be more positive. If people sense they are being told what to believe, their reaction is usually very poor.”

All three of the artists mentioned above have stimulated dialogue across perceived cultural divides (between church and art world, across continents). In exhibition reviews, *Untitled – Pentecost* and the *Dalit Madonna* are two of the paintings attracting most comment. Brokenshire's bird has lent itself to a range of interpretation

⁵ Letter to the Methodist Recorder, 17 February 2005

⁶ Curated by Rev Richard Davey at Nottingham Castle, from 18 December 2004 to 13 February 2005

(appropriate, one might say, to the Pentecost story). Sahi is challenging at least two cultures (the caste system and, dare one say, colonial complacency) in choosing a young Dalit woman to bear the Christ child. What is he saying theologically through the subject he has chosen and his treatment of it? Though made in a more general context, Catherine Pepinster's remark may go some way towards an answer: "Faith thrives when it takes on the culture of the group rather than destroying it."⁷ The same might be said of theology.

Curators' perspectives

I analysed responses from five curators/gallery staff in the context of my research, some working freelance, some within city museums/galleries. "Personally, I would have no problems in displaying religious narrative in museum space but of course the captioning would be important", was the response of one of the museum staff when I asked whether she might consider using the Methodist Collection in her education role with young visitors, "80% of the school children coming to this museum would not attend a school nativity or assembly."

Captioning holds dilemmas all of its own, as has been evidenced by Graham Howes in his newly published book, *The Art of the Sacred*. He records an objection (not one that resonated with me) to the captions at *Seeing Salvation*⁸ on the basis that by using phrases such as 'Our Lord' and 'Jesus our Saviour' the National Gallery was surely proselytising for a particular religion while claiming that it was not (2007:50).

⁷ Catherine Pepinster, Editor of *The Tablet*, on *Thought for the Day*, BBC Radio 4, 25 May 2007.

⁸ An exhibition at the National Gallery in London of the changing image of Christ by artists from around the world over 2000 years (record gallery attendance of 350,000 over a three-month period).

One way to avoid such criticisms is to take a different curatorial angle on the paintings of Christ in the Methodist Collection. The number of its artists who lived through the First and/or Second World War suggests there would be value, according to one curator, in investigating the effect of war time experience on their work. This might offer a less threatening ‘way in’ to the Christological focus of the paintings. Having said that, each tour venue of the Methodist Collection has been free to choose its own exhibition title. This has yielded a rich variety, including *A Brush with Faith*, *Painting the Passion*, *Modern Miracles*, *Framing the Word*, *The Divine Muse*.

Freelance curator, Meryl Doney, who had shown the Methodist Collection some years ago, recently launched a new exhibition space in the City of London. ‘Wallspace – a spiritual home for visual art’ is part of an eighteenth century church building that hosts regular acts of worship, often quite experimental in style. The gallery opened in March 2007 with *New Religion* by Damien Hirst. Around 3,000 visitors in four weeks attended the exhibition (see Fig. 2 below), which received extensive media coverage. Amongst a variety of exhibits was a cedar cross, studded with gem-like pills. This was positioned on an altar with a carved marble pill standing in for the Eucharist. It was the first time that *New Religion* had been seen in a church building. So struck was Damien Hirst with the church’s interior that he also designed three large new paintings of butterflies to hang in the apse.



Fig. 2 Private view of Damien Hirst's *New Religion*, April 2007.
Photo: Gordon Curtis. Courtesy: Wallpaper.

Caroline Lewis, interviewing Hirst, speaks of “reinvented iconography”.⁹ She might be referring to his cross with its pills (offering a chemical rather than a spiritual panacea?) Or to *The Wounds of Christ*, showing photographic representations of bloodied hands, feet and side, created as silkscreen prints on somerset satin. Is Hirst being provocative? Playful? Deeply serious? All these possibilities need to be admitted in any consideration of Christian iconography in today’s British culture where irony is such a prevalent mood. And what of the butterflies, associated with transformation? Conventional religious icons are juxtaposed with ‘new religious’ symbols.

⁹ http://www.24hourmuseum.org.uk/nwh_gfx_en/ART43610.html (accessed 23 July 2007)

“Traditional Christian iconography is by no means worn out,” wrote Don Cupitt in 1991, “In Christianity the Divine is constantly in the process of passing into the human.”¹⁰ One wonders what he would have made of *New Religion*. In 2007, consistent with post-modernism, everything seems up for grabs. Yet this is not for lack of interest in Christianity. Those who are obsessed with mortality, as Damien Hirst appears to be, want to examine its claims, albeit with a critical eye. Wallpace is rising to this challenge through its aim to be a place of dialogue, a place to explore the relationship between art and spirituality, attracting those from the art world as well as the Church.

MOBIA (Museum of Biblical Art, Manhattan) approaches a similar aim from the opposite direction. Opened in 2005, it is ostensibly an ordinary gallery space dedicated to religious art. Its location on the edge of New York’s Central Park is designed to attract tourists of all faiths and none. My first of two visits there was to see the George Rouault *Miserere* series of aquatints (begun by Rouault in 1913 but not published until 1948). It was a moving experience to come straight from the crowded, noisy Columbus Circus into the still and quiet room where these exquisite depictions of pain and love were hung. Two of the same aquatints depicting Christ’s crucifixion¹¹ are also in the Methodist Collection. Their power and quality means they can hold their own both within and outside traditional sacred space.

Less overtly evangelistic than MOBIA is the curatorial approach known as ‘**ethical space**’. “How we seek to understand the ‘other’ will have a tremendous bearing on

¹⁰ Don Cupitt (1991), *Seen and Unseen*, *Art in Worship* Catalogue essay.

¹¹ *Aimez-vous les uns les autres* (*Love one another*) and *Obeissant jusqu’à la mort et à la mort de la croix* (*Obedient unto death, even to death on a cross*).

our ability to construct democratic conversations” writes Nick Stevenson (2003:25) who believes that the cultural realm offers real opportunities for mediating human rights disputes. We see an example in the British Museum’s recent travelling exhibition, *Throne of Weapons*. This was made by the artist Kester in 2001, in response to Mozambique’s civil war. He constructed a ‘throne’ from decommissioned firearms, as part of ‘Transforming Arms into Tools’, a project that has been instrumental in the voluntary surrender of more than 600,000 weapons, in exchange for tools of production.

Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, describes how ‘the Throne’ was purchased by the British Museum in 2002 and displayed in its African galleries “alongside more traditional stools and chairs that are symbols in many African societies both of authority and the willingness to sit and listen, an essential prerequisite for mutual understanding”.¹² When the Museum was planning its contribution to ‘Africa 05’, a year-long programme celebrating African culture, the *Throne of Weapons* toured British schools and galleries, supported by UNESCO and Christian Aid.

Eight months earlier, the British Methodist Church had initiated its own ‘ethical space’ through the theology and arts project known as **Colloquy**. At the 2004 British Methodist Conference, an exhibition area was set aside, for Conference members and also for the public, to be a place for ‘quest, reflection, performance and conversation’ (the word ‘colloquy’ being derived from the Latin word for conversation.) Four new acquisitions to the Methodist Collection, including the *Dalit Madonna*, were exhibited

¹² Director’s Foreword to the 2006 catalogue for *Throne of Weapons: A British Museum Tour*, published by the Trustees of the British Museum. P5.

along with work by other contemporary British artists of Christian faith. *Stations of the Holocaust* carved in wood by Jean Lamb was a particularly striking modern interpretation within a traditional devotional art form.

Intrinsic to the Colloquy vision is the idea that conversation is the heart of human experience.¹³ Building on the success of its initial exhibition, Colloquy toured galleries and churches in England and Scotland in 2006, this time showing art works to stimulate conversations around the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, commemorating the centenary year of his birth. Different media on show ranged from embroidery to painting to woodcuts, many of which were for sale. Poetry, music and discussion flowed around the theme of *Resisting Tyranny*. The anguish of South African apartheid was portrayed through the works of John Muafangejo (1943-1987), another Christian speaking out against events of the political life surrounding him. Following the Colloquy tour of 2006, some of Muafangejo's linocuts were bought for the Methodist Art Collection, including *Judas Iscariot betrayed our Lord Jesus for R.3.00* (dated 1972).

The impact of this small project has been profound. Artists and musicians have found solidarity in tackling ethical themes, often interpreting biblical narrative, from a contemporary perspective. Commissioning and acquisition have been encouraged, thereby developing relationships between churches, working artists and the Methodist Art Collection. At the same time, Colloquy's openness to the public and to timeless issues has raised questions over the term 'Christian Art'. Is it a valid definition? Is it helpful in the work of mission?

¹³ David Moore, Methodist minister and curator of Colloquy, a theology and arts project. See <http://www.david-moore.net/colloquy.html>

Larry Kreitzer (2002) speaks of ‘reverse hermeneutical flow’ where so-called Jesus films are used as a lens to see the artistic qualities and subsequent insights of scripture more clearly. Colloquy would seem to be serving a similar function, even if it has more primary links with church. Its strength has been to broaden the conversation and draw in new contributors. I would argue that this is evidence of the Holy Spirit at work through the perception and activity of artists. It is ‘talk about God’ and the things of God, leading to creativity, to deeper understanding, to wrestling with issues of social justice.

One other curatorial perspective is worth a mention before leaving the subject of ‘ethical space’. It concerns thresholds and boundaries, a recurrent feature of the work of leading contemporary British artist, Mark Wallinger. In Tate Britain this year an exhibition by Wallinger called *State Britain* has been on display. It consists of a precise reconstruction of a real demonstration (placards, banners, etc.) erected in London’s Parliament Square by peace campaigner Brian Haw who has been protesting for five years against the economic sanctions imposed upon Iraq. The curator of Wallinger’s exhibition is Clarrie Wallis who explains the significance of this work:

In 2005 Parliament passed the ‘Serious Organised Crime and Police Act’. Section 132 of this legislation makes it an offence to organise or take part in a public protest within a 1 km radius of Parliament Square unless authorisation has been obtained from the Metropolitan Police Commissioner. Taken literally, the edge of this zone bisects Tate Britain... On the night of 23 May 2006 78 police officers were detailed to remove most of Haw’s placards and personal items.¹⁴

¹⁴ Wallis’ comments in *State Britain* catalogue, published by Tate Trustees for the exhibition 15 January-27 August 2007.

Some of Haw's slogans (recreated by Wallinger on a landing of Tate Britain) include Christian liturgy. 'HALLELUJAH! CHRIST IS RISEN INDEED!' stands alongside 'Peace Salaam Shalom' and the representation of a cross.

"Wallinger is careful to make a distinction between Haw's protest and his own act as an artist in using the space of the museum to draw attention to the issues of freedom of expression", continues Wallis, going on to place Wallinger in the tradition of Eugene Delacroix and Edouard Manet who used the genre of grand-narrative painting to subversive effect. With its roots in social holiness and its reputation for campaigning against political injustice, Methodism has a culture well placed to produce yet another in this tradition. Are there those within it who have the artistic vision and ability to change perceptions in this way?

Perspectives from the arts managers

I include under this heading those who have taken the bold step of deciding to host an exhibition of the Methodist Art Collection, an act which can require at least two years' planning, especially in cases where churches choose to work collaboratively with a gallery (often then involving liaison with schools, sponsors and others). More of the venues were able to state their aims in borrowing the Collection than to show systematic evaluation of their exhibitions, perhaps because many of the aims were difficult to measure. Aims included:

- *To help people look at life in different ways*
- *To promote the Christian faith through the work of outstanding artists*
- *To promote the Methodist Church*

- *To develop spirituality*
- *To celebrate the completion of a new church building scheme.*

Virtually all the churches and cathedrals who hosted the Collection had put in place a programme for schoolchildren to visit and reflect on the exhibition. Some recorded this as their most effective outreach element, especially when comments in visitors books ran like this,

Totally marvellous, very inspirational. One wonders if this poetic art work could convince even the most unbelieving person. [*Kerry, aged 16*]

Others recorded disappointment about schools' poor take-up of invitations. One cathedral who hosted the Collection in autumn 2005 recorded in its report that

a total of 853 primary, secondary and special school pupils visited the exhibition and the level of children's appreciation and response was very warming.... Unlike some of the adults, none of the young people appeared to have any problem with the modern idiom of the works, and they were able to interpret and reflect with ease, perhaps illustrating the work they'd experienced on aspects of visual literacy at school.

This perception about visual literacy is another that deserves consideration in forming mission and evangelism policy. As is the concept of audience development, which might be described as arts management-speak for a task very similar to the Church's.

In a recent national survey of attendance at English art galleries, classified in terms of the religious adherence of visitors, the category of adults who reported their religion as Buddhist or Other Religion had significantly higher rates of attendance than all of

the remaining groups, which included No Religion, Christian, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh.¹⁵

Two of the arts managers reporting on borrowing the Methodist Collection recorded positive experiences in strengthening **dialogue with those of other faiths**. In Birmingham it was the Methodist minister who coordinated a city-wide Arts Festival entitled *Life in the Face of Death* in April/May 2006. The Methodist Collection was shown at the city's main art gallery under the title *Matters of Life* – interestingly the gallery did not want the word 'death' to be mentioned (compare Damien Hirst's *New Religion*). At a neighbouring Anglican church, as part of the same festival, an artist with Gujarati Hindu heritage displayed her work. Birmingham Children's Hospital took part, as did The Custard Factory, a private gallery where a form of the Colloquy initiative (see page 11) took place.

In Saltaire, Bradford, the minister of the host church organised complementary creative activities in partnership with the local Faith-to-Faith worker. This included a creative writing session led by Bradford Interfaith Writers for Peace which was attended by Muslims, Hindus and Christians, "providing an opportunity for them to talk together in a non-confrontational setting"¹⁶. In the concert that concluded the exhibition last October, Kala Sangam, a Bradford-based South Asian arts organisation, performed a series of dances and interpreted some of the poetry written by visitors in response to the paintings. "This has led to the dancers seeking other

¹⁵ See Chapter 4 (Museums and Galleries, fig. 4.2.5) of government survey *Taking Part* (2005-6) <http://www.culture.gov.uk> (accessed 23 July 2007). Survey results released 10 May 2007.

¹⁶ Part of a report submitted 1 January 2007 by Sarah Jemison, Methodist minister at Saltaire.

ways of interpreting Christian themes and they are to be part of the celebrations to mark the tercentenary of the birth of Charles Wesley in 2007.”¹⁷

In terms of encouraging people **‘to enter into conversations about God in Christ in the contemporary world’** (part of the aim of the Trustees) two comments stand out.

The first is taken from a statement by Rev Tom Hurcombe, priest-in-charge of an Anglican church hosting the Collection in 2002:

We see this event as a celebration of our culture, and the way our faith, in word and icon, is a part of that. These works ask us to think again about the faith we affirm, and it means that God became en-fleshed. This is both a theological reflection and an evangelistic invitation to look at the Christian story in this way – here in a Late-Modern context – and to meditate on the breadth of its meanings for us.

The second is a comment by a steward following *The Imagined Word* exhibition of the Collection at Methodist Central Hall Westminster in 2003:

I have been a volunteer steward on a rota basis for the last three weeks and have found this to be the most rewarding voluntary work I have undertaken since I retired. All sorts were taken round from sceptical ‘seniors’ without any art background to people clearly very knowledgeable, to small children and teenagers... Memorable was the young man with red hair whose Mum had just died who was ‘gobsmacked’ by the Edward Burra painting [*The pool of Bethesda*]. He told me he had twice been sectioned and that was just what it was like. Burra’s Jesus was his Jesus.

In terms of bringing **‘new dimensions to study, worship and spiritual life’** (the second part of the Trustees’ aim), it is interesting to note the imaginative programme of study events laid on by the organisers of the Oxford exhibition, *The Colour of Love*. Lecture titles ranged from *In Images the Illiterate Read – the role of art in the*

¹⁷ Ibid.

*conversion of Britain to Christianity*¹⁸ to *Images of God – one step to heresy*¹⁹ about the tension between art and religious prohibitions of portraying God.

Under this same heading, the final example is of a Methodist minister who offered a service of Holy Communion to visitors to the town gallery in which the Methodist Collection was displayed. He described the inspiration behind this:

In the secular space of public council property, visitors enjoyed the sacred space created by these works of modern Christian art. It was in this space that we felt it important to celebrate the sacrament. I looked for liturgies that in some way celebrated the artistic creativity of God but found nothing appropriate. I felt the need to write something relevant to the setting and context of our celebration.

The first area of the gallery presented – through the paintings – the narrative of Christ's passion and beyond. The second area was devoted to the paintings that link Eucharistic practice and experience, including the miracle of the loaves and fishes. Paintings on the other walls depicted the parables and miracles associated with Jesus. All this provided a narrative space in which people could let the story of Jesus in some way touch their own.

During the sacrament the bread and wine were distributed from two points: one in front of depictions of *The Supper at Emmaus*; the other in front of Iselin's *The Elements of the Holy Communion*.²⁰

This example is interesting on a number of counts. I wish to take up the point about secular and sacred space. It seems to me that this is a distinction increasingly difficult to draw with confidence. Much of what has been recorded in this paper, particularly over the last couple of years, is pointing to the value of inclusivity, or what the artist might describe as 'seeing God in everything'. This raises other theological issues

¹⁸ Lecture by Professor Michelle Brown, University College, London, 22 April 2007

¹⁹ Lecture by Francis King, OBE, former theologian and diplomat, 26 April 2007

²⁰ Extract by Rev Kerry Tankard who also submitted the liturgy he created for the exhibition at Ashton-under-Lyne in 2004.

which are not the subject of this paper. However, it seems appropriate at this point to describe the response of Arts Council England (ACE).

I had approached the Heads of Visual Arts in five of England's Arts Council regions, asking if they would be prepared to answer the following three questions:

1. Has your Region funded any faith-based exhibitions through Grants for the Arts²¹ since 2004?
2. If yes, how many of these exhibitions have given expression to a single faith, eg. Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism?
3. If yes, how many have given expression to more than one religious faith?

My request prompted a letter from the Freedom of Information Coordinator at Arts Council England, explaining that "faith is not one of the classifiers used to manage and monitor grants in ACE's grants management system".

How we evaluate

Reflecting on this policy has been something of a theological exercise. It is not that the government of this country is excluding faith-based projects from its considerations. Indeed, one of the regions originally contacted did supply anecdotal evidence of supporting projects (some with a Christian focus, some with a Muslim focus). And the ACE website's 'Celebrating Diversity' statement is upfront: "Race, ethnicity and faith will remain major preoccupations in this country, and the arts are fundamental to such debates".²²

²¹ A grant-making programme of Arts Council England (government-funded) to help artists and arts organisations from England to carry out their work for public benefit.

²² <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/about-us/diversity.php> (accessed 24 July 2007)

The problem is partly to do with definitions and the fact that terms are often used loosely. It is not always easy to see when the phrase ‘faith-based’ is more appropriate than the word ‘spiritual’, when the word ‘biblical’ is more appropriate than the word ‘Christian’ in describing works of art – or in fact whether these adjectives are helpful at all. This is as much a challenge to the Trustees whose Collection’s full title is ‘The Methodist Church Collection of Modern Christian Art’. Who is able to categorise ‘Christian Art’ (let alone ‘Modern’)?

Mark Cazalet would not differentiate between ‘biblical’ and ‘non-biblical’ subjects when answering questions about his work. He spoke of “getting between the text” which should be “disputive, like the Jewish tradition”²³. Those who apply to Arts Council England for funding may well have a religious background and motivation to their work but they are unlikely to label their work as such. Are we then expecting the funders to do that (even though they are interested in the religious adherence of the applicant, according to their grant application form)? I see with the benefit of hindsight the pitfalls of my questions to them.

More could be said here about cultural capital, and the different expectations brought to a work of art by those who create it, curate, collect, and ordinarily view it. It has come through strongly in the research that good art welcomes different interpretations and leaves one feeling that a perception has changed. Verbal definitions can in any case be only an approximation. No doubt the artists would say the same of their attempts to represent the Divine.

²³ From my interview with Mark Cazalet, 1 March 2007

So we need as a Church to be careful in assigning the words ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ in terms of space that artists use. Careful because context is crucial – works of art speak differently according to where they are placed. Careful because our use of language in building relationships with other cultures is very important. There is an openness and enthusiasm in the art world for debating the big questions of life and death – this is the stuff which tends to excite the artistic personality. The Church has great freedom and opportunity to be part of this, but suspicion of proselytising is alive and healthy.

This argument is not saying the Church should accept wholesale the values of modern art simply because it is ‘culture’, even if Methodism has some catching up to do in its aesthetic appreciation. I turn to one of Oxford’s former illustrious students, C. S. Lewis, who makes this point most eloquently in his address, *Lilies that Fester*. He warns against a blanket applause of culture per se as a way of improving the Church’s image:

To be constantly engaged with the idea of *culture*, and (above all) of *culture* as something enviable, or meritorious, or something that confers prestige, seems to me to endanger those very “enjoyments” for whose sake we chiefly value it (1962:107)

He draws a parallel with faith in ‘religion’, another collective noun which can lead to a diversion from that which it seeks to represent. He urges that we ‘get inside’ what we call ‘culture’, examining for ourselves the quality of the works, the individuals who produce it, the fruit that is borne.

... So far as I can see, the question [of faith in culture] has nothing to do with the difference between Christians and those who...have been called “humanists”. I hope that red herring will not be brought in. I would gladly believe that many atheists and agnostics care for the things I care for. It is for them I have written. (1962:118)

Agreeing criteria for rating a work of contemporary art, and deciding whether to call it 'religious', could be a useful addition to the curriculum of any theological college if not already part of the visual arts in theological education.²⁴

Conclusion

The call for Methodism to be engaged with the modern art world is a call on several fronts, as I hope this paper has begun to show. Early on I suggested that 'post-atheist' might be a legitimate description of contemporary British society. This is only a personal sense, but the experiences encountered in the course of this research have revealed an acceptance and interest where I was surprised to find it. This is no doubt linked to the quality of the work I've been able to promote through the Methodist Art Collection. Church buildings are a natural place to display it but its artistic reputation means it is equally well qualified for museums and galleries, was the sentiment of one curator whose gallery has just been awarded the prestigious Gulbenkian Prize.²⁵

The stimulus given by this Collection to commissioning and displaying contemporary art, thereby affirming the vocation of the artist, is something of which the Methodist Church can be proud. Its association with those in the professional art world is important both for the contacts it opens up and for the credibility it needs to maintain in order to serve the present age. May this working Collection, and the other initiatives sketched in this paper, be examples of what can be achieved through our different gifts, and a stimulus to further collections, conversations and changed perceptions in seeking God.

²⁴ A survey on the visual arts in theological education has been undertaken and reported on by Sophie Hacker and Graham Howes in the journal of *Art and Christianity Enquiry*, July 2007 (See References)

²⁵ Simon Martin of Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, which won the £100,000 prize for demonstrating a track record of imagination, innovation and excellence in museums and galleries.

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