

# CHAPTER 1

## THE CONCEPT OF RELIGIOUS ART

### Aesthetics and the service of the Divine

#### ART, BEAUTY AND THE DIVINE

In the philosophical system or ordering of the sciences by G.W.F. Hegel, the science of “aesthetics” – the study of the creative fine arts – is termed a science of the “Absolute”, the grasped whole and essence of reality. The sense in which the fine arts are said to pertain to the Absolute is that they have to do with a comprehensive *Weltanschauung*, a “view of the world”, or a statement of the ultimate principle or concept, which gives meaning to all the individual phenomena of reality. The individual sciences deal with *segments* of reality such as the structure of psyche, the order of nature, the order of law and society. Because they are limited, they cannot grasp their place in the whole of knowledge, nor their own essence, without reference to a more comprehensive truth.

Philosophy, art and religion, on the other hand, are, for Hegel, sciences of the Absolute because they treat in various ways the foundation of all and any aspects of reality. Specifically, Hegel stated that the fine arts were concerned with the “*sensuous* representation of the Absolute”.<sup>1</sup>

For the important recent philosopher, Theodor W. Adorno, who was both in the Hegelian tradition as well as a critic of aspects of Hegel’s thought, art was similarly a form of knowledge of ultimate reality. He would never employ the term “Absolute” for all its (for him, unacceptable) Hegelian connotations of a seamless, systematic whole. Yet, for him, too, art was beyond the partial domains of knowledge with their specific concerns. Its function was to disclose the truth of things, albeit not as in Hegel where art is another expression of the total socio-cultural order or collective “spirit” (*Geist*) of the epoch, but rather through *critique*. It disclosed the dissonances of the socio-cultural order; its task was to reveal truth in and through its distortion and repression through social and cultural constructions – the truth beneath, and hidden by, the surface.

Just as in secular philosophy, art, in a sensual

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1 *Hegel’s Introduction to Aesthetics*, translated by T. M. Knox, Oxford: OUP, 1979, p. 70. Emphasis added. The word “sensuous” intimates that art represents more immediately – through the senses and feeling – than does philosophy, which communicates abstractly to the intellect and understanding.

modality, expresses the universal – and the essential – in the particular, so too in monotheistic religious teaching the function of art is to reveal the universal and essential in, and underlying, all the details of reality. That universal and underlying (“absolute”) principle which operates in and through every detail of reality is the Divine. The function of art will therefore be “sensuously” to disclose the Divine operating in reality. This is how Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson expressed it in a letter:

You know, I am sure, that the genius of the artist in sketching, drawing and painting is his ability to detach himself from the externality of the object he is portraying. The artist must be able to look deeply into the inner content of the object, beyond its external form, and to see the inner aspect and essence of the object. He must then be able to express that “inner essence” in his portrayal so that whoever views the painting sees revealed for him the inner aspect of the object, an essence which he had never noticed in the object itself for it had been obscured by non-essential, external aspects. An artist reveals in his art, the *essence* and *being* of his subject; the viewer examining the result can now see the object in a completely different light and realizes that

his previous impressions of the object were erroneous.<sup>2</sup>

Art focuses on essence, the grasped truth of being. But what, in religious terms, is this essence? Rabbi Schneerson goes on to put it as follows:

All creation is derived from the “word of G-d” which brings matter into being and sustains it every instant continuously. However, the parallel G-dly force of contraction and concealment obscures the Divine creative force; as a result, all one can see is the external form of the physical. Service of G-d, aided by the simple belief that “there is nothing aside from Him (G-d)” mandates an honest effort by each of us to “bring to the surface” the G-dliness inherent in everything in our lives, and to remove as much as possible the mask of physical externality obscuring the inner G-dliness.<sup>3</sup>

The ultimate reality to which the religious artwork relates, in and through its material and subject matter, is the Divine. The Divine is not only present in the creation. It is also manifested and drawn into the

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2 *Letters from the Rebbe*, NY: Otsar Sifrei Lubavitch, 1997, Vol. 2, pp. 2-3. I am grateful to Mr Kalman Rubin for drawing this letter to my attention.

3 *Ibid.*

creation through the human service of the Divine in deed, prayer and study.

#### THE SERVICE OF THE DIVINE

For Hegel and Adorno, art is an aspect of praxis: the interaction of subject and object. In Hegel, this is the formation by the subject, “thought”, of its object, the substance of being. In Adorno, the subject is the human being, who engages and forms the object, the materials of nature and culture. Thus, aesthetic *praxis* is not *simply* a removed contemplation, an abstract construction by the subject<sup>4</sup> of the object, but the *actuality* of that construction of reality, forged by the subject in reality. Beauty resides not so much in nature, as in its being being brought into expression through the *artwork*. This is how Hegel formulates it:

We rejoice in a manifestation, which must appear as though nature has produced it, whereas in fact it ... is a production of the historical socio-cultural mind [*Geist*]. The [art] objects delight us not because they are so natural, but rather because they have been *made* so natural.<sup>5</sup>

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4 Compare the critique of Kant by Hegel in *Hegel's Introduction to Aesthetics* and in Adorno's *Aesthetische Theorie*.

5 *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, Vol. 1, p. 226 (12th volume of G.W.F. Hegel, *Sämtliche Werke*, Stuttgart: Fr. Frommanns Verlag, 1953). All translations from this work in this chapter

Adorno took over the Marxian “inversion” of Hegelian idealism: from the *actus purus* (pure act) of thought to the plane of material *praxis*. But for Hegel and Adorno alike, the artwork is a *praxis*, an actual “working over” of reality to produce beauty from it.

In religious terms, the *praxis* of humanity is the conduct of life and activity in and with the world under the general aegis of the study of the Divine and the practice of Divine ethical precepts.<sup>6</sup> Through teachings about the Divine (which have been made known to us through revelation, and the study of which is itself a Divine precept) and the practice of Divine ethical precepts, humanity perceives and attaches itself to G-dliness. Practically, the precepts are channels through which the Divine is drawn into the world, transforming it in such a way as to manifest the Divine within it. Just as G-dliness – the qualities or attributes or powers of the Divine – is in general disclosed through the practice of Divine precept and the study of Divine teaching, so the beauty of G-dliness is disclosed through a dimension or adjunct of that Divine service. Religious art is in fact a specific form of enhancement of Divine service.

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are the present writer’s.

6 See S.D. Cowen, *Jewish Thought in Context*, Melbourne: Institute for Judaism and Civilization, 2000, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Ch. 1.



Image of *Tanya*, Chapter 12