

Art, Faiths and Culture Convergence and Conflict

A report on papers given at the 2007 ACE International Conference
by Graham Howes

The Art and Christianity Enquiry's seventh biennial international conference was held at Trinity Hall, Cambridge from 2 – 6 July, 2007. Its theme 'Art, Faiths and Culture – Convergence and Conflict' had been chosen with a view to identifying those other traditions worldwide whose aestheticologies and practices have much to offer the Western Christian tradition and whose very presence might enjoin us to venture beyond ACE's customary confessional boundaries. Predictably, the 35 core participants – drawn from Australia, the USA, Germany, Finland, and the UK – and a steady stream of occasional visitors supplied, within a tightly packed framework of plenary sessions, group discussions, individual communications and study visits, an exceptionally broad, yet relatively focussed pattern of responses to the conference theme itself.

The first of these sought to identify the contours and causes of convergences and conflicts between Art, Faiths and Culture. Here the most radical challenge to our thinking came from **Arthur Pontynen** (University of Wisconsin) who argued forcefully that 'the choice between a peaceful convergence or violent conflict made no sense since both convergence and conflict are currently mandated in culture, faith and even science'. Hence 'neither a tolerant multiculturalism nor an identity-based authenticity offer a solution. Indeed rather than offering us a solution, they are the problem' – a problem grounded, in his view, in the contemporary Modernist-Postmodernist tradition that 'substitutes fact for truth, power for wisdom and aesthetics for beauty'. One consequence for Pontynen (if not for many of his audience) had been the 'denial of all of the fine art dedicated to the pursuit of transcendent wisdom and beauty. Not only Christian art, but also the art of Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Classicism, etc... with the result that fine art

is reduced to entertainment, therapy and propaganda.' The only alternative to convergence and conflict, was, he argued, 'a culture united by the free and rational pursuit of truth and wisdom.'

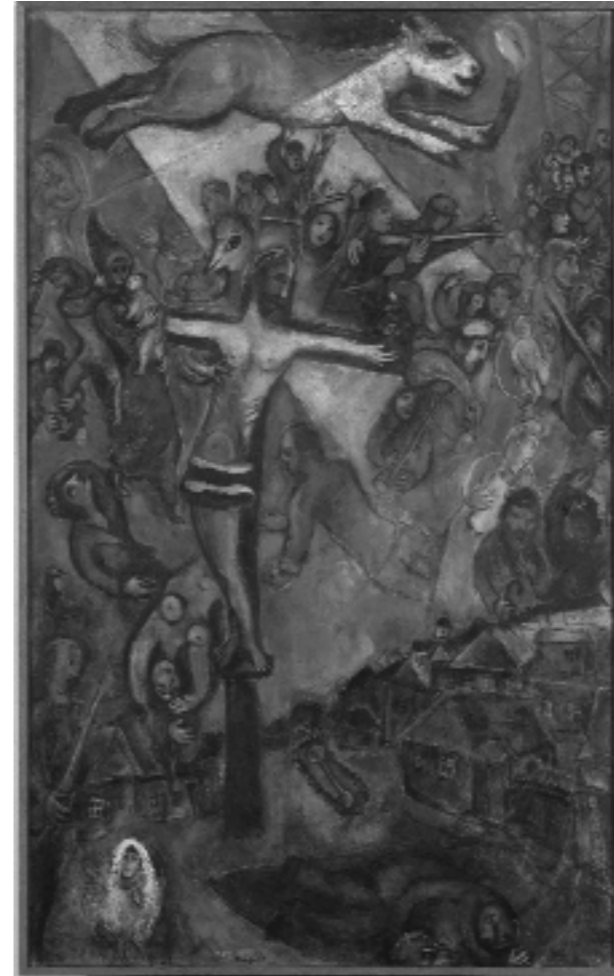
Others identified parallel causes for anxiety. **John Nurser** (a former Dean of Trinity Hall) was less concerned with Modernism and Post-Modernism than with the increasing role of globalization in fostering the co-presence of cultures in territories. 'This', he argued 'plus the normal intra-cultural mutual denials of validity with arts and religious traditions is likely to lead to a more and more dangerous (and culturally unmanageable) situation' not least 'at a time when experience of the visual arts and of "spirituality"... seems so generally incoherent and fractured – and yet so omnipresent'. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that **Wilson Yates**, too, should temper his characteristically up-beat keynote address with a concern that such cultural pressures as these had not yet pressed Christian institutions and especially Christian theologians 'into the larger conversation with other world religions and spiritual movements except by reference to our need to engage in conversation with other religious cultures'.

Several other participants, however, offered some relatively pragmatic rejoinders to such expressions of cultural pessimism.

One, **Linnea Wren** (Gustavus Adolphus College) described how she sought to balance the existing visual culture of that institution ('consisting entirely of Protestant artworks created by an avowedly Lutheran artist') with contemporary artworks created by artists of diverse backgrounds and faiths. Central to this was a process whereby 'students became artists and performers as they created masks and wrote narratives around the traditions of their own religiously diverse back-

grounds' and, after further collaboration with the college chaplains, community leaders and regional artists, found themselves 'commissioning original works of art for the college chapel from artist of diverse faiths'. In Wren's view the site-specific art works that have been created have thus accomplished, in practice, the theoretical goals of her college, 'that is, to embody the values of diversity, internationalism, ecumenical cooperation and interfaith dialogue'. Another, **Manfred Richter** (Kunstdienst, Berlin) drew upon the mixed responses to Gabriela Nasfeter's ambitious exercise in 'spiritual ecumenism', the installation of her white textile constructions *Light Pyramid* (see review in *A&C*45, p. 13) in no less than 12 high-profile Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox places of worship, including Ulm and Wroclaw Cathedrals, St Sulpice in Paris, St James Piccadilly, and Hagia Irene in Istanbul, to demonstrate how, if they are to succeed, ecumenical initiatives 'must be allowed to cross carefully protected borders aesthetically as well as spiritually'. 'Could' Richter asked 'a new aesthetic experience in a church space possibly transform itself into an opening of religious mentalities, into a new spiritual experience?' On this evidence, the potential was there.

Such a 20th-century process, as no less than three other contributors made clear, has some clear historical antecedents. While **Samir Mahmoud** (Jesus College, Cambridge) in the course of a very sophisticated exposition of the theological rationales behind Islamic art, could comment that like medieval Christian art (especially the Gothic) it, too, 'had its gaze fixed on the otherworldly', **Allan Doig** (Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford) provided a very convincing case study of the incontrovertible religious and cultural interdependence of Muslims, Jews and Christians in early medieval Andalu-



Marc Chagall
Résistance, 1937/1948
Courtesy: Centre Pompidou

or religious canon as an *art historical* canon; one in which Christian stories and symbols signified less about the Christian faith than they did about Chagall's own position as a Jewish artist'. Hence the crucifixion motif – explored by the artist for decades after the Holocaust – was essentially about a Jewish Jesus who is never transformed into a Christian divinity, and the iconography of Christian redemption itself became, in Chagall's imagination, the language of a Jewish cultural rebirth.

Finally, three more participants offered some widely differing, but hypothetically concrete strategies for resolving the acknowledged tensions that others had already identified as central to the contemporary relationship between Art, Faiths and Culture. One, **Rod Miller** (Hendrix College, USA), drawing deeply upon John Damascene, Augustine of Hippo, and, above all, Plato, urged us to search for and rediscover, 'a different, and historically grounded, notion of Beauty ... in the hope of encouraging confidence among artists and Christians who aspire to make Beautiful art and Beautiful lives'. Its template should not be mere aesthetics, nor 'ill-defined spiritualism', but rather 'a substantial manifestation of the True and the Good'.

Another, **John Nurser**, while acknowledging that 'we in a conference such as this ... have to presume ... to commit ourselves to informed judgements in matters of faith and art' also saw 'a clear need in art, in faith and in human rights for processes and structures that include the ordinary and the local and have some hope of containing normal angry dismissals of "the other" in some degree of mutual affirmation'. To this end it would be 'highly desirable from time to time to assemble a relatively small group of persons with a range of appropriate expertise (and preferably drawn from more than one culture) to take respon-

sia. He showed how the architecture of Muslim Spain was itself enriched by the architectural traditions of Byzantine Syria, while its learning drew on ancient Greek sources. In these and other cultural areas, not least the scientific, Muslims produced a fresh new synthesis. In literature, Jews borrowed Arabic language and forms to enrich their own culture and translated philosophical and scientific texts for the enrichment of Christian culture. Further afield he reminded us that the West front of Charlemagne's original St Denis 'was in a form that relates closely to Syrian prototypes' while in the late 11th and early 12th centuries, much of the new building along the pilgrim routes to Compostella was 'in a mature Romanesque style enlivened by Islamic forms'. In Andalusia itself, it was clear that while the Christian and Islamic artistic communities may have been separated and serving different masters, much of their artistic currency was held in common. In those 'remarkably tolerant times' and, as Doig wryly implied, in marked contrast to our own day, 'the other religion and culture was no longer perceived as a threat, its artistic and architectural forms could

be used freely in a highly creative synthesis'. Above all, 'the diversity of the ethnic heritage was unified in the convergent embrace of the cultural heritage.'

The third, historically specific example of an interfaith dimension to the triangulation between art, faiths and culture, was provided by **Aaron Rosen** (Pembroke College, Cambridge) who focussed on Chagall's management of his Jewish identity in relation to his exposure to the Western tradition of Christian art, especially after leaving Russia for Paris in 1910. Here, the crucial question was, as Rosen put it, 'how can a Jewish artist as a Jew, fully engage with the history of art when that history is, by and large, a non-Jewish one?' The answer was, Rosen suggested, a relatively uncomplicated one. For in coming from outside that tradition, Chagall was able to write his own art-historical narrative, in which Jesus was no longer a messianic figure (as Chagall had perceived him earlier, in the Russian icon tradition) but rather 'a great poet'. The New Testament itself – and all the attendant themes and references of Western art – became, for the artist, 'not so much part of a scriptural

sibility for both framing questions and posing answers.'

It was a London clergyman, however, **Jonathan Evens**, who, rather than demonizing – *à la* Pontynen – Modernism and Postmodernism, or advocating – *à la* Nurser – the contemporary equivalent of Plato's guardians, saw the former, especially within the visual arts 'as progressing largely via deconstruction' where 'each successive movement identified a new individual element of what had originally been a whole work of art and explored that fragment to its limits.' But he did not view this process as culturally or credally dysfunctional, but believed, with David Jones, that 'objects, images and words accrue meanings over the years that are more than the object as object or image as image. Therefore all things are signs re-presenting something else in another form'. Such a process, Evens argued, rather than weakening the links between art, faiths and culture, only served to strengthen these by lending them greater emotional and spiritual unity. His predicted outcome was indeed close to the 'unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity' which Samir Mahmoud had described to us as 'the essential characteristic of Islamic spirituality and the creative well-spring of its art'. Evens' more general and essentially creative conclusion was that in much 'Modern' art, as in much 'Postmodern' discussion of Biblical form and content, we now saw 'the holding together of fragments in ways that enable conversations to occur between these fragmentary ideas and images'. This, in his judgement, rendered the need for what he called 'a revival of religious and artistic languages that are "elusive, allusive, not didactic" even more imperative.

Inevitably the 2007 ACE gathering, like all its predecessors, also discussed several topics of recurring interest beyond the confines of the formal conference theme. The first concerned the relationship of aesthetics to spirituality. Here one initial input came from the series of eight still-life paintings by the Cambridge-based artist **Donald Stubbs** which were exhibited in the conference room. Provisionally entitled 'Via Symbolica', they were, in the artists words, 'objects designed to provoke a specifically spiritual response. I have', he added 'put the word "spiritual" in italics as I am only too aware that it is a word almost impossible to define meaningfully and that anyway the



DFS Stubbs
to work with what one has, 2007

intention of these works is that through them the whole of the ordinary everyday world might be "pointed up" as being unique, surprising and just as "spiritual" as anything that the imagination might be able to concoct or vaguely imagine as somehow representing "otherness".'

Charles Pickstone (an ACE Trustee) in his turn, offered a powerful critique of Kandinsky's well-known claim, in 'The Spiritual in Art' that by using abstract art he was attempting (as a typical artist, driven by a mystical 'inner need') to express the 'spiritual' nature of his subjects (unlike figurative art, which is concerned with their material nature) by employing the natural properties of colour and line. Drawing upon neuro-scientific research, Pickstone suggested that Kandinsky 'clearly had a not uncommon synaesthesia which linked colour

and sound' and that while this in no way devalued his art, 'a hundred years of research on synaesthesia and neural processing have largely eliminated the need for any very spiritual explanation into the significance of colours and lines.' More specifically he argued that 'so many of the colour effects that Kandinsky uses are not, in fact, the result of delving into theosophical arcane ... as he claimed, nor a revelation of some mystical reality that transcends the base necessity of rude matter, but simply consequences of the hard wiring of the brain'. This, for Pickstone, carried implications well beyond our understanding of Kandinsky *per se*. It demonstrated that powerful and complex images, once demythologized through analysis of their somatic origin, can reveal not so much a structure of 'an underlying, spirit-filled reality' but rather 'a sense

of the powerful inter-relatedness and complexity of this world, a complexity that completely knocks on the head any easy subdivision into immanent and transcendent'.

Pickstone's perspective was clearly in contrast to the Islamic perception of the relationship between art and spirituality. For **Samir Mahmoud** 'all art and architecture is the outward expression and concretization of the inner spirit of its religious and cultural system, and in Islam it is the doctrine of the Unity of god that has been the most fundamental principle'. That 'Unity' he reminded us, was 'not the result of combination and synthesis but a transcendental a priori'. In this sense Islamic artists, in a true Platonic sense, 'have their gaze fixed on the spiritual world of being with little interest in the ephemeral world of becoming', while the aniconic nature of their work invested what most Christians would perceive as merely ornament with 'an unprecedented status and power to evoke the spiritual, the infinite, the divine'.

A second, not unconnected theme, raised initially by Wilson Yates, concerned the complex relationships between art and liturgy, and to which conference participants brought a variety of perspectives. **Renée Moineau** (of the French Comité Nationale d'Art Sacré) and **Canon Tom Miller** (from the Cathedral of St John the Divine in New York), although acknowledging their very different cultural and ecclesial contexts, both shared a strong sense of the tensions between local and national liturgical practice, 'traditional' and 'innovative' commissioning policies, the need to respect, without necessarily acceding to, the autonomy of the artist, and above all the difficulty of devising and applying what Miller called 'a creative visual theology' which would not, literally and metaphorically, be 'set in stone'. **Inge Linder-Gaillard** (Grenoble), too, identified a parallel, and not dissimilar, set of tensions accompanying Renzo Piano's dual project (an entrance building and a small convent for a community of Poor Clares) on the site surrounding the Ronchamp Chapel. As a Board member of the latter she provided a clear-minded and fascinating 'insider' perspective on both the dynamics of the interaction between the architect, those who own and run the chapel, the nuns, and the local Tourist Board, and also the twin problems of maintaining, amid physical



Gabriele Nasfeter
Lichtpyramide, 2005
Berlin Cathedral

transformation, the 'visual continuity' of the site as well as enhancing the 'pilgrim experience' of many visitors.

Visual *dis-continuity* and 'the pilgrim experience' were also major themes of the Cambridge-based theologian and art historian **Lynne Broughton's** talk – given *in situ* – on Ely cathedral's Lady Chapel 'as Gesamtkunstwerk'. Although today's Chapel remained a powerful 'sacred space' it was also, in the mid-16th century, the victim of deliberate Protestant iconoclasm, with its carvings destroyed or severely damaged, its paint whitewashed over, and its windows mostly filled with clear glass. Hence we needed 'a great effort of imagination ... to recover its original effect.' This she helped us to achieve, reminding us that the building, with its 'waving wall-canopies, edged in carved leaves' suggesting a medieval 'hortus inclusus', seemed 'to have been conceived as a stage for meditating on the sculpted scenes while praying the Mary prayer. It is devotional architecture at its most focussed: a rose garden because Mary herself was both the garden and the rose'. Pilgrims entering the chapel were enjoined to pray the Rosary in front of the stone carvings portraying its mysteries – 'a total sensory experience, involving sight and touch together with mental effort'. Above them would have been canopy-

vaults 'painted azure blue and studded with silver stars' representing the firmament 'which marks the boundary between the earth, which can be perceived by the senses, and the invisible spiritual realm'. For those ACE conference members present, Dr Broughton's was more than just a scholarly re-creation of pre-Reformation worship. It also reminded them of two integral parts of their own mental furniture – the liturgical functions of art, and what Broughton herself described as 'the connection between the physical object and the spiritual state which it symbolizes'. This, with appropriate cultural and credal variants, was at the heart of the 2007 Cambridge conference.