
Religion and the Arts in America

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AT THIS MOMENT in America, religion and politics are at a flash point. Conservative Christians deplore the left-wing bias of the mainstream media and the saturation of popular culture by sex and violence and are promoting strategies such as faith-based home-schooling to protect children from the chaotic moral relativism of a secular society. Liberals in turn condemn the meddling by Christian fundamentalists in politics, notably in regard to abortion and gay civil rights or the Mideast, where biblical assumptions, it is claimed, have shaped US policy. There is vicious mutual recrimination, with believers caricatured as paranoid, apocalyptic crusaders who view America's global mission as divinely inspired, while liberals are portrayed as narcissistic hedonists and godless elitists, relics of the unpatriotic, permissive 1960s.

A primary arena for the conservative-liberal wars has been the arts. While leading conservative voices defend the traditional Anglo-American literary canon, which has been under challenge and in flux for forty years, American conservatives on the whole, outside of the *New Criterion* magazine, have shown little interest in the arts, except to promulgate a didactic theory of art as moral improvement that was discarded with the Victorian era at the birth of modernism. Liberals, on the other hand, have been too content with the high visibility of the arts in metropolitan centers, which comprise only a fraction of America. Furthermore, liberals have been complacent about the viability of secular humanism as a sustaining

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creed for the young. And liberals have done little to reverse the scandalous decline in urban public education or to protest the crazed system of our grotesquely overpriced, cafeteria-style higher education, which for thirty years was infested by sterile and now fading poststructuralism and postmodernism. The state of the humanities in the US can be measured by present achievement: would anyone seriously argue that the fine arts or even popular culture is enjoying a period of high originality and creativity? American genius currently resides in technology and design. The younger generation, with its mastery of video games and its facility for ever-evolving gadgetry like video cell phones and iPods, has massively shifted to the Web for information and entertainment.

I would argue that the route to a renaissance of the American fine arts lies through religion. Let me make my premises clear: I am a professed atheist and a pro-choice libertarian Democrat. But based on my college experiences in the 1960s, when interest in Hinduism and Buddhism was intense, I have been calling for nearly two decades for massive educational reform that would put the study of comparative religion at the center of the university curriculum. Though I shared the exasperation of my generation with the moralism and prudery of organized religion, I view each world religion, including Judeo-Christianity and Islam, as a complex symbol system, a metaphysical lens through which we can see the vastness and sublimity of the universe. Knowledge of the Bible, one of the West's foundational texts, is dangerously waning among aspiring young artists and writers. When a society becomes all-consumed in the provincial minutiae of partisan politics (as has happened in the US over the past twenty years), all perspective is lost. Great art can be made out of love for religion as well as rebellion against it. But a totally secularized society with contempt for religion sinks into materialism and self-absorption and gradually goes slack, without leaving an artistic legacy.

The position of the fine arts in America has rarely been secure. This is a practical, commercial nation where the arts

have often been seen as wasteful, frivolous, or unmanly. In Europe, the arts are heavily subsidized by the government because art literally embodies the history of the people and the nation, whose roots are pre-modern and in some cases ancient. Even in the old Soviet Union, the Communist regime supported classical ballet. America is relatively young, and it has never had an aristocracy—the elite class that typically commissions the fine arts and dictates taste. In Europe, the Catholic Church was also a major patron of the arts from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance and Counter-Reformation. Partly because of the omnipresent Greco-Roman heritage, furthermore, continental European attitudes toward nudity in art are far more relaxed. In Europe, voluptuous nudes in painting and sculpture and on public buildings, fountains, and bridges are a mundane fact of life.

Conservatives often speak of the US as a Judeo-Christian nation, a formulation that many people, including myself, find troublesome because of the absorption by our population, over the past century and a half, of so many immigrants of other faiths. The earliest colonization of America by Europeans was certainly Christian, and in New England specifically Protestant. The Spanish Catholic settlements in Florida and California, as well as the French missions in the Great Lakes and central New York, were eventually abandoned. Maryland, established in 1634 as a refuge for English Catholics, was the exception, and out of it would come the dominance of the bishops of Baltimore on American Catholic doctrine.

The Puritans who arrived in New England in the early seventeenth century brought with them the Calvinist hostility or indifference to the visual arts. A motivating principle of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation was its correction of Roman Catholicism's heavy use of images in medieval churches—in statues, paintings, and stained-glass windows. The Protestant reformers reasserted the Ten Commandments' ban on graven images, idolatrous objects that seduce the soul away from the immaterial divine. The Puritans, a separatist sect that seceded from the too-Catholic Church of England,

followed the Reformation imperative of putting the Bible at the center of their faith. Through direct study of the Bible, made possible by Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, believers opened a personal dialogue with God. This focus on text and close reading helped inspire the American literary tradition. Both poetry and prose, in the form of diaries, were stimulated by the Puritan practice of introspection: a Puritan had to constantly scrutinize his or her conscience and look for God's hand in the common and uncommon events of life. Oratory, embodied in Sunday sermons, was very strong. Literary historian Perry Miller identified the jeremiad or hellfire sermon as an innately American form, the most famous example of which is Jonathan Edwards' sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," which was delivered in Connecticut in 1741 during the religious revival called the Great Awakening. This enthusiastic style of denunciation and call to repentance can still be heard on evangelical television programs, and it is echoed in the fulminations of politically conservative talk radio (which I have been listening to with alternating admiration and consternation for over fifteen years).

The visual arts, on the other hand, were neglected and suppressed under the Puritans. The Puritan suspicion of ornamentation is symbolized in the sober black dress of the Pilgrim Fathers depicted every year in the Thanksgiving decorations of American schools and shops. The Puritans' attitude toward art was conditioned by utilitarian principles of frugality and propriety: art had no inherent purpose except as entertainment, a distraction from duty and ethical action. The Puritans did appreciate beauty in nature, which was "read" like a book for signs of God's providence. The social environment in England from which the Puritans had emigrated to America (either directly or indirectly via the Netherlands) was overtly iconoclastic. Destruction of church art was massive during the Reformation in Switzerland and Germany as well as England, where destruction of churches, priories, and abbeys followed Henry VIII's severance of the

English church from control by the Roman Catholic hierarchy in the 1530s. Crowds smashed medieval stained-glass windows and intricately carved wooden altar screens and decapitated the statues of saints carved on church facades. Walls were whitewashed to cover sacred murals. Politically incited damage to churches was even more severe during the English Civil Wars (1642–51), when Puritan soldiers dispatched by Parliament attacked even the cathedral at Canterbury, which Richard Culmer, Cromwell's general and the leader of the ravagers, called "a stable for idols." Puritan iconoclasm was a pointed contrast to the image mania of the contemporary Counter-Reformation, the Vatican's campaign to defeat Protestantism that would fill Southern Europe with grandiose Baroque art.

The first serious body of painting in America was eighteenth-century portraiture, documentary works commissioned to mark social status. Professional theater also began in the eighteenth century in the Southern colonies and New York City, although a vestige of the battles waged by the English Puritans against the theater world in Shakespeare's time survived in the laws prohibiting stage plays that were passed during the two decades before the American Revolution in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Pennsylvania. Though American drama and the visual arts may have languished in the wake of Puritanism, music was tremendously energized. The first book published in the American colonies was the *Bay Psalm Book*, which was released in 1640 in Massachusetts and went through twenty-seven editions. As a collection of psalms for singing in church, it belonged to a century-long line of British and Scottish psalters. Before the Reformation, hymns for the Catholic Mass were in Latin and were sung only by the clergy, not the laity. But Martin Luther, a priest and poet who admired German folk song, felt that hymns should be couched in the vernacular and should be sung by the entire congregation of worshippers. This emphasis on congregational singing is one of Protestantism's defining features—imitated in recent decades, with varying success, by

American Catholic parishes. Through its defiance of medieval religious authority, Protestantism helped produce modern individualism. Yet Protestant church services also promoted community and social cohesion. The intertwining of capitalism and Protestantism since the Renaissance has been extensively studied. But perhaps the congregational esprit of church-going may also have been a factor in the Protestant success in shaping modern business practices and corporate culture.

The Protestant reformers were bitterly split, however, over the issue of music in church. Luther encouraged the composition of new hymns and was the author of a famous one—"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" ("Ein' Feste Burg Ist Unser Gott"). In contrast, John Calvin, the father of American Puritanism, maintained that only the word of God should be heard in church; hence songs had to strictly follow the biblical psalms. Like his fellow reformer, Ulrich Zwingli, Calvin opposed the use of organs or any instruments in church: organs were systematically destroyed by Protestant radicals. Furthermore, Calvin condemned the complex polyphonic music endorsed by the more artistic Luther. Calvin rejected harmony or part-singing, so that the Holy Scripture could be heard with perfect clarity. Thus the American style of Protestant church song, based on Calvin's principles, was simple, slow, serious, and cast in unaccompanied unison. That intense, focused group sound has descended through the centuries and can be heard in the majestic hymns that have been adopted as stirring anthems by American civil rights groups, such as "Amazing Grace" and "We Shall Overcome."

The Quakers, who were pivotal to the abolitionist movement against slavery, were even more restrictive about such matters: they frowned on music altogether, even at home, because they believed it encouraged thoughtlessness and frivolity. But the German and Dutch who emigrated to America from the late seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries held the more expansive Lutheran view of church music. The German influence was especially strong in Philadelphia,

to which German Pietists imported a church organ in 1694. By the start of the nineteenth century, hymn writing exploded in America. Over the next hundred years, hymns of tremendous quality poured out from both men and women writers. In many cases, they were simply lyrics—pure poetry that was attached to old melodies. A famous example from the Civil War is Julia Ward Howe’s “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” which Howe wrote overnight in a fever of inspiration after visiting a Union Army camp near Washington, where she heard the soldiers singing “John Brown’s Body,” a tribute to the executed abolitionist rebel. Several other songs would become political hymns to the nation, such as “My Country ’Tis of Thee,” written in 1832 by a Baptist minister, Samuel Francis Smith, and “America the Beautiful,” a lyric written by Katharine Lee Bates, a native of Massachusetts whose father was a Congregationalist pastor. Bates saw the Rockies for the first time when she taught here at Colorado College in 1893. She wrote “America the Beautiful” after a wagon trip to the top of Pike’s Peak. When it was published in 1899, it became instantly famous and has often been described as America’s true national anthem. The huge nineteenth-century corpus of Protestant songs became part of common American culture for people of all faiths—thus the tragic power of that final scene on the sinking Titanic in 1912, when the ship’s band struck up the hymn, “Nearer My God to Thee.”

Hymnody should be viewed as a genre of the fine arts and be added to the basic college curriculum. One of the most brilliant products of American creative imagination, hymnody has had a massive global impact through popular music. Wherever rock ’n’ roll is played, a shadow of its gospel roots remains. Rock, which emerged in the 1950s from urban black rhythm and blues of the late 1940s, had several sources, including percussive West African polyrhythms and British and Scots-Irish folk ballads. But a principal influence was the ecstatic, prophesying, body-shaking style of congregational singing in the camp meetings of religious revivalists

from the late eighteenth century on. All gospel music, including Negro spirituals, descends from those extravaganzas, which drew thousands of people to open-air worship services in woods and groves.

The most influential camp meeting occurred at Cane Ridge in Bourbon County, Kentucky, in 1804. For three days and well past midnight, a crowd estimated to be between twenty and thirty thousand sang and shouted with a great noise that was heard for miles around. Worshippers transported by extreme emotion jerked, writhed, fell to the ground in convulsions or went catatonic. This Kentucky Revival, called the Second Great Awakening, spread through the inland regions of the South and eventually reached western Pennsylvania. But the movement never flourished in the North because of its harsher weather.

Collections of gospel music for use in revivals were published to huge success throughout the nineteenth century—from *Gospel Melodies* (1821) and *Spiritual Songs for Social Worship* (1832) to Ira D. Sankey's volumes of *Gospel Hymns and Sacred Songs* (1875–91). A defining characteristic of such songs is their subjectivity—that is, their use of the first-person pronoun to assert an intimate relationship with Jesus—as in “Abide with Me,” “I Need Thee Every Hour,” “Jesus Loves Me,” “He Leadeth Me,” “I Love to Tell the Story,” or the rousing “Give Me That Old-Time Religion.” Out of this gospel tradition also came Negro spirituals, which would powerfully counter the degraded stereotypes of African Americans circulated by minstrel shows. Spirituals began on the antebellum plantations, where Bible stories were ingeniously adapted to carry coded political messages, as in “Go Down, Moses,” a dream of liberation where Pharaoh represents the white slave-owner in collusion with American law. A major addition to the gospel repertory was *Slave Songs of the United States*, published in 1867. In the 1870s, an African American choir, the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University in Tennessee, traveled the country performing Negro spirituals in a concert setting to help endow black edu-

cational institutions. The songs made a sensation, not only for their melodious beauty and religious fervor but for their residual African elements, such as bluesy flat notes and off-beats, the syncopation that would later surface in jazz.

The brilliant folk hymns of nineteenth-century camp meetings were inherited by modern revivals, such as the Billy Graham Crusade. In popular music, the spasmodic undulations and ecstatic cries of camp-meeting worshippers were borrowed by performers like Little Richard, Elvis Presley, and the late, great James Brown, whose career began in gospel and who became the “godfather of soul” as well as of funk, reggae, and rap. Gospel music, passionate and histrionic, with its electrifying dynamics, is America’s grand opera. The omnipresence of gospel here partly explains the weakness of rock music composed in other nations—except where there has been direct influence by American rhythm and blues, as in Great Britain and Australia. The continuing impact of gospel music on young African Americans in church may also account for the current greater vitality of hip hop as opposed to hard rock, which has been in creative crisis for well over a decade.

There was a second great confluence of religion with the arts in nineteenth-century America. The Bible, in its poetic and indeed Shakespearean King James translation rather than in today’s flat, pedestrian versions, had a huge formative influence on the language, imagery, symbolism, and allegory of such major writers as James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, and Herman Melville. The American literary renaissance was produced by the intersection of the nation’s residual Calvinism with British Romanticism, which was hostile to organized religion but which had transferred its concept of spirituality to nature. Pantheism helped inspire transcendentalism, which was suffused with aspects of Hinduism by Ralph Waldo Emerson (a refugee from strict Unitarianism). This view of nature, which saw God as immanent in creation, was spectacularly embodied in the nineteenth-

century Hudson River School of landscape painting. In such works as Thomas Cole's "River in the Catskills" or Frederic Church's "Niagara," these artists showed America's mountains and monumental cataracts glowing with the numinous.

Catholic immigration in the nineteenth century brought a radically different aesthetic to church architecture and decor. The typical American church had been in the Protestant plain style, white and rectangular with a steeple that formed the picturesque apex of countless villages—a design bequeathed by the British architects Sir Christopher Wren and James Gibbs. Originally, American churches were often simply a meeting house (a word still retained in Quaker practice). Also used for local government, the meeting house was a boxy space with exposed timbers and benches but no ornamentation—a template that was borrowed by town halls across the nation. Catholic taste was far more lavish. The influx of Irish immigrants in the 1830s and '40s—which caused anti-Catholic violence (including the burning of churches in Philadelphia)—was soon registered in New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral, designed by James Renwick and constructed from 1850 to 1877. With its soaring spires, delicate stonework, and stained-glass windows, it exemplified the current Gothic Revival—a grand style that was also adopted by Episcopalian churches in America.

Polish and Italian Catholics arrived en masse in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Eastern European parish churches followed the ornate Byzantine model. Italian American churches, as was customary in the old country, installed a profusion of polychrome statuary. That flamboyant style continued until after World War II, when the German branch of the Liturgical Movement for Catholic reform introduced a stripped-down modernist design, with concrete construction, open spaces, and little imagery except for abstract crucifixes. This development (blandly formulaic at its worst) resulted in a genteel Protestantizing of American Catholicism, which erased all traces of working-class ethnicity. When aging Catholic churches were renovated in the

1950s and '60s, the saints' statues were displaced or banished altogether. I mourn this loss, which has impoverished the cultural environment for young people: my interest in the arts was first kindled in childhood by the gorgeous stained-glass windows and theatrical statuary of my baptismal church, St. Antony of Padua in Endicott, New York. Perhaps America's rising Hispanic population will restore the great imagistic style of Latin Catholicism.

Though there was a long tradition of censorship in Roman Catholicism, typified by its voluminous *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* ("Index of Prohibited Books"), American Catholics made few attempts to influence public policy during the nineteenth century. That role was taken up with gusto by the Protestant-led temperance movement, which called for a ban on the public sale of alcohol—a long campaign that finally succeeded with the ratification in 1920 of the eighteenth amendment to the US Constitution, which began thirteen years of Prohibition. Major groups in the temperance movement, which included leading feminists like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, were the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Anti-Saloon League, which was heavily financially subsidized by Methodists and Baptists. Episcopalians, in contrast, kept their distance from the temperance crusade.

Catholic surveillance of American public life would come with the rise of Hollywood. At the start of the studio era, movies were still viewed as vulgar. In the Roaring Twenties, the Jazz Age, there was a new rule-breaking energy and sexual adventurism in urban areas. Responding to audience demand, movies began pushing the limits with bare flesh and sexual innuendo. Small communities across the US felt they were being invaded by an alien cultural force. Resistance came from a collaboration between the Catholic Church and local Protestant women's groups, speaking from the perspective of concerned mothers. There were tinges of anti-Semitism in this protest, because so many of Hollywood's early producers and financiers were Jewish. A series of guidelines was in-

stituted in moviemaking throughout the 1920s, but compliance remained uneven. The Motion Picture Production Code, written by a Jesuit priest, was adopted by Hollywood in 1930 but laxly enforced by the Hays Office. Finally, in 1933, a conference of US bishops created the Catholic League of Decency (later renamed the National League of Decency) and threatened a nationwide boycott. Hollywood responded by appointing a tough Irish Catholic, Joseph Ignatius Breen, to administer the Code, which he did through the Breen Office for the next twenty years. The Code, which wasn't officially abandoned until 1967, required scripts to follow a moral formula: crime had to be punished and marriage respected, with homosexuality and miscegenation forbidden.

Though long disbanded, the Legion of Decency lingers on today in our lettered rating system for movies—G, PG, PG-13, R, NC-17. The Legion attached descending grades of A, B, or C to each film released in the US. When I was a child, the group was still a formidable force. After Mass one Sunday, I was transfixed by the official list, posted in the church foyer, that showed the Legion of Decency had slapped a C on the 1956 film, *Baby Doll*, meaning it was “Condemned” and that no Catholic could see it without pain of sin. The title, *Baby Doll*, seemed inscribed in smoking, red-hot letters from hell! The film, based on an over-the-top Tennessee Williams tale about Southern decadence, was being provocatively advertised by kiddy-porn images of blonde Carroll Baker lounging in a nightie and sucking her thumb. It was forty years before I finally had a chance to see *Baby Doll* on cable TV in the 1990s. It still retains its mythic, subversive significance for me. Indeed, *Baby Doll* is emblematic of the quarrel between religion and the arts in America.

As avant-garde modernism triumphed in the first half of the twentieth century, it was only the movies that addressed or expressed the religious convictions of the mass audience. With few exceptions, most modern artists and intellectuals were agnostics or atheists, above all in Europe, where anti-clericalism has raged since the Enlightenment. In its search

for ticket sales, Hollywood returned again and again to the spectacular bible epic, one of my favorite genres. Cecil B. DeMille, for example, made *The Ten Commandments* twice, in 1923 as a silent film and then as a wide-screen Technicolor extravaganza released in 1956. The latter is regularly broadcast on religious holidays and remains a masterpiece of heroic narrative and archaeological recreation of upper-class Egyptian life. The best-selling American religious novel of the nineteenth century was General Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, published in 1880 and widely imitated. *Ben-Hur* was also made into two films, the first a 1925 silent and the second yet another wide-screen masterpiece, released in 1959. The dynamic star of both *The Ten Commandments* and *Ben-Hur* was Charlton Heston, who afterward became a conservative activist and president of the National Rifle Association.

Because of the divergence between religion and the prestige fine arts in the twentieth century, overtly religious art became weaker and weaker. One of the most disseminated images of the twentieth century was William Sallman's *Head of Christ*, a 1940 American oil painting inspired by Victorian precedents that showed a long-haired Jesus bathed in light and gazing raptly toward heaven. In his intriguing 1996 book, *Icons of American Protestantism*, David Morgan notes that *Head of Christ* was reproduced five hundred million times over the next four decades. The image was beloved among evangelicals but not mainline Protestants. Many critics, even believers, rejected the painting as sentimental kitsch and denounced its portrayal of Christ as "effeminate" as well as overly Nordic Caucasian. (Sallman was in fact the son of Scandinavian immigrants.) *Head of Christ* shows Jesus as the gentle, benevolent Good Shepherd—the forgiving friend with whom born-again Christians, such as President Jimmy Carter, claim to walk and talk.

If there were few open conflicts in America between religion and the fine arts through most of the twentieth century, it was simply because the two realms rarely overlapped. But

that uneasy truce ended with the culture wars of the 1980s and '90s. Under the conservative presidencies of Ronald Reagan, whose goal was to reduce big government, there was close scrutiny of cultural agencies. Considerable impetus came from William Bennett, the new director of the National Endowment for the Humanities, whose budget he cut; when Bennett was appointed Secretary of Education, he was succeeded as Director of the NEH by Lynne Cheney, wife of the future Vice President, Richard B. Cheney. She targeted deconstruction on campus and liberal bias in government-funded public broadcasting programs. A focus of controversy soon became the National Endowment for the Arts, whose authorization was approved in 1964 by President Lyndon Johnson but which had to struggle for congressional funding from the start, with vehement opposition even to its creation coming from Strom Thurmond, the conservative senator from South Carolina.

A variety of groups mobilized outside government in the 1980s to counter what was perceived as a moral degeneration in the media environment. These included Dr. James Dobson's Focus on the Family, the Rev. Louis Sheldon's Coalition for Traditional Values, and Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition. In 1985, the Parents Music Resource Center, led by Tipper Gore (wife of then-Senator Al Gore of Tennessee), lobbied in Senate hearings for content labeling of popular music because of concerns about sex and violence. In 1985, evangelical Protestant organizations, led by the Rev. Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority, and the Rev. Donald Wildmon, founder of the National Federation for Decency (renamed the American Family Association), allied with anti-pornography feminists (whom I strongly opposed) to pressure 7-11 and other national chains of convenience stores, to ban the sale of *Playboy* and *Penthouse* magazines. That effort succeeded but may have been a pyrrhic victory insofar as it immediately stimulated the market for pornographic videos, introduced into homes by the then-new technology of the VCR. In 1988, Wildmon's lobbying led to

the introduction in the US House of Representatives of a resolution (sponsored by conservative Southern California Congressman William E. Dannemeyer) calling for Universal Studios to cancel the release of Martin Scorsese's "morally objectionable" film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The resolution was referred to committee and never reached the floor for a vote.

Wildmon's activities expanded to the fine arts when, in 1989, his group publicized an apparent example of blasphemy in an exhibition that had been partly funded (in the amount of seventy thousand dollars) by the National Endowment for the Arts. The show had opened at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in conservative Senator Jesse Helms' home state, and after a short tour closed in Richmond, Virginia. The point of contention was New York artist Andres Serrano's "Piss Christ"—a five-foot-high blow-up of a misty photograph of a back-lit plastic crucifix immersed in a Plexiglas vat of the artist's urine. Without that slangy and perhaps gratuitously confrontational title, of course, no one would have known how the photo's golden glow had been produced. The outcry over "Piss Christ" began with local letters to the editor and spread to Congress, where New York Senator Alfonse D'Amato called Serrano's photo "filth" and "garbage" and punctuated his remarks by tearing up the exhibit catalog and flinging the pieces to the Senate floor.

Another bitter controversy broke out that year over an exhibit of Robert Mapplethorpe's openly gay and sadomasochistic photographs: this show was assembled by the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia and was partly funded (in the amount of thirty thousand dollars) by the National Endowment for the Arts. There were no problems in Philadelphia, but negative publicity exploded just before the Mapplethorpe show was to open in Washington's venerable Corcoran Gallery of Art, located only a block from the White House. The director preemptively cancelled the exhibit, an arbitrary move that caused outrage in the art world

(she resigned under fire by the end of the year). The Mapplethorpe show was quickly taken by a local progressive venue, the Washington Project for the Arts, where it drew huge crowds. When it moved to the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center, however, there were serious repercussions: police entered the gallery, and the director was charged with obscenity. He was put on trial but later acquitted by a jury.

Political activism on the left was unusually intense in the 1980s because of the AIDS epidemic, which the Reagan administration was accused of having initially ignored. Mapplethorpe, who had died of AIDS at age forty-two in 1989, was viewed as an apostle of sexual liberation. As an admirer of Mapplethorpe, I argued at the time that this was a sentimental misreading of his work, whose dark, punitive hierarchies were partly a residue of his childhood Catholicism. Another seething ex-Catholic, Madonna, was also challenging taboos at the time: in 1989, her music video for "Like a Prayer," which showed her receiving the stigmata, making love to the animated statue of a black saint, and dancing in her slip in front of a field of burning crosses, caused Pepsi-Cola to cancel her five million dollar endorsement contract.

Though work offensive to organized religion constituted only a fraction of the projects annually supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, conservative demands for the total abolition of that agency escalated. The NEA's administrators and peer-review panels were denounced for left-wing bias and anti-Americanism. As a career teacher at arts colleges, I was very concerned about the stereotyping of artists as parasitic nihilists that was beginning to take hold in the popular mind in America. While most people in the arts community viewed the Serrano and Mapplethorpe controversies as assaults on free speech, I saw them as primarily an argument about public funding. I feel that no genuinely avant-garde artist should be taking money from the government—a view also expressed at the time by the legendary Beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti (another Italian American). Mapplethorpe, certainly, was no struggling artist—he was rich

and famous by the time of his death. And I would question whether Mapplethorpe's cool, elegant torture and mutilation scenarios were an ideal advertisement for gay male life.

After acrimonious Congressional debate, the National Endowment for the Arts managed to survive, but it was now regulated by an obscenity clause; grants to individual artists also decreased. Though controversy has subsided, the NEA disturbingly remains at the top of every list of government agencies that many citizens across the nation want abolished. What I found agonizing about the Serrano-Mapplethorpe episodes was that they ruined any prospect for vastly *increased* federal support for the arts in this country and furthermore that they would inevitably undermine arts funding at the state and local levels, where budgets are limited. Dance companies are particularly vulnerable, because they require high-quality rehearsal space and depend on a sustained continuity of teacher and student.

Almost a decade passed in America without a major conflict between government and the arts. In 1999, however, the Brooklyn Museum of Art mounted an exhibit called "Sensation: Emerging British Artists from the Saatchi Collection." When this show had appeared two years earlier at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, controversy had mainly focused on a large image of an infamous child murderer, which was vandalized with ink and eggs. The work that caused trouble in the US, however, was the British-Nigerian artist Chris Ofili's mixed-media painting, "The Holy Virgin Mary": it depicted a black-skinned Madonna with a protruding breast sculpted of lacquered elephant dung from the London zoo; two other lumps of dung supported the painting's base. In England, no one objected to the Ofili work. But in New York City, with its huge constituency of ethnic Catholics, there was an immediate reaction, fomented by the New York-based Catholic League for Religious and Civil Liberties, whose vocal president is William A. Donohue. Yet another Italian American Catholic politician, Mayor Rudy Giuliani, expressed outrage—before the show had even

opened. At a fiery press conference, Giuliani, who had not yet seen the Ofili painting, called it “sick” and “disgusting.” The mayor unilaterally impounded the Brooklyn Museum’s city funding and threatened to evict it from its century-old lease. This extreme political intrusion diverted the discussion from one of art to that of censorship.

While the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Philippe de Montebello, wrote a *New York Times* op-ed criticizing the handling of the show by Arnold Lehman, the director of the Brooklyn Museum, most people in the arts community instantly rallied to the latter’s side. But unease remained, especially after Lehman openly lied to the press about the pivotal financial role played in the show by Charles Saatchi, a British advertising executive notorious for his speculation in the art market. A direct intervention was made at the Brooklyn Museum by a seventy-two-year-old devout Catholic, who evaded security guards to squeeze washable white paint all over Ofili’s painting—an act that some viewed as racist but that oddly paralleled the whitewashing of Catholic images by early Protestant iconoclasts. The man, who told police he had attacked the painting because it was “blasphemous,” was charged with violating the city’s ordinance against graffiti.

When the controversy first erupted, I publicly questioned the double standard operative in the art world in regard to artists’ manipulation of religious iconography: desecration of Catholic symbols was tolerated in American museums in ways that would never be permitted if the themes were Jewish or Muslim. Second, I denounced the total failure of curatorial support of “Sensation” at the Brooklyn Museum, which simply passively mounted the London show. Much of the misunderstanding of the Ofili painting might have been avoided if the museum had framed it with historical context about, first, African Christian and particularly Ethiopian art; second, tribal African fertility cults; third, the Catholic doctrine of the Virgin Birth; and fourth, the long Southern European tradition of black Madonnas. Commentary by the

tabloid press and furious conservatives who had never seen the painting referred to dung being “thrown” or “flung” at the Madonna, which was completely false. But with all candor, no defense of this painting could have totally exonerated it from scandal, since Ofili had provocatively pasted around Mary a cloud of small cutouts of female genitalia culled from pornography magazines. From a distance, they looked like butterflies or hovering angels, emissaries of nature rather than the Christian God. That there was indeed unprofessional indifference to curatorship in this case would be confirmed just last year [in 2006] when Arnold Lehman shockingly demoted his principal curators in a reorganization of the Brooklyn Museum that demonstrated the unscholarly diversion of the institution from public education toward commercial buzz.

The automatic defense of the Brooklyn Museum during the “Sensation” imbroglio sometimes betrayed a dismaying snobbery by liberal middle-class professionals who were openly disdainful of the religious values of the working class whom liberals always claim to protect. Supporters of the arts who gleefully cheer when a religious symbol is maltreated act as if that response authenticates their avant-garde credentials. But here’s the bad news: the avant-garde is *dead*. It was killed over forty years ago by Pop Art and by one of my heroes, Andy Warhol, a decadent Catholic. The era of vigorous oppositional art inaugurated two hundred years ago by Romanticism is long gone. The controversies over Andres Serrano, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Chris Ofili were just fading sparks of an old cause. It is presumptuous and even delusional to imagine that goading a squawk out of the Catholic League permits anyone to borrow the glory of the great avant-garde rebels of the past, whose transgressions were personally costly. It’s time to move on.

For the fine arts to revive, they must recover their spiritual center. Profaning the iconography of other people’s faiths is boring and adolescent. The New Age movement, to which I belong, was a distillation of the 1960s’ multicultural attrac-

tion to world religions, but it has failed thus far to produce important work in the visual arts.¹ The search for spiritual meaning has been registering in popular culture instead through science fiction, as in George Lucas' six-film *Star Wars* saga, with its evocative master myth of the "Force." But technology for its own sake is never enough. It will always require supplementation through cultivation in the arts.

To fully appreciate world art, one must learn how to respond to religious expression in all its forms. Art began as religion in prehistory. It does not require belief to be moved by a sacred shrine, icon, or scripture. Hence art lovers, even when as citizens they stoutly defend democratic institutions against religious intrusion, should always speak with respect of religion. Conservatives, on the other hand, need to expand their parched and narrow view of culture. Every vibrant civilization welcomes and nurtures the arts.

Progressives must start recognizing the spiritual poverty of contemporary secular humanism and reexamine the way that liberalism too often now automatically defines human aspiration and human happiness in reductively economic terms. If conservatives are serious about educational standards, they must support the teaching of art history in primary school—which means conservatives have to get over their phobia about the nude, which has been a symbol of Western art and Western individualism and freedom since the Greeks invented democracy. Without compromise, we are heading for a soulless future. But when set against the vast historical panorama, religion and art—whether in marriage or divorce—can reinvigorate American culture.

NOTE

1. See Camille Paglia, "Cults and Cosmic Consciousness: Religious Vision in the American 1960s," *Arion* 10.3 (Winter 2003), 57–111.