

# The Power of Passion Imagery: theology, beauty and truth in depictions of Christ's suffering and death

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article analyses four classic works by Bosch, Spencer, Grunewald and Dali that represent the crucifixion of Christ, and explores their theological

and social implications in relation to beauty and truth.

**Key words:** Art, beauty, theology, truth

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## **El poder del imaginario de la pasión: teología, belleza y verdad en representaciones del sufrimiento y la muerte de Cristo**

### **RESUMEN**

Este artículo analiza cuatro obras clásicas de Bosch, Spencer, Grunewald y Dalí que representan la crucifixión de Cristo, y explora sus implicaciones teológicas y

sociales en relación con las nociones de belleza y verdad.

**Palabras clave:** Arte, belleza, teología, verdad

Art in the West has been dominated by Christian subject matter and this has wielded an enormous influence over people's sensibilities, consciously and unconsciously, helping create what have been called "structures of affect" whereby art, allied to theology and religious ritual, has helped direct people's sentiments and sensibilities, teaching them what they must feel and why (see Ford, 1996, p. 8).

If art is capable of influencing people's hearts and minds then the question of the truth of certain artworks arises, especially when it comes to representations of the Truth proclaimed by Christianity. Conversely this art should make us question the truth of traditional Christianity's doctrinal and dogmatic assertions.

Within Christian art the most commonly represented theme has been the Passion, the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. The death of Christ has of course been understood by the Church as salvific and is therefore the central dogmatic tenet of Christian faith. However, it is a striking fact that "Christianity in its mainstream forms has never officially defined one doctrine of salvation" (Ford, 1999, p. 112). Nevertheless, this mysterious truth has been powerfully represented in art- powerfully in the sense of its internal effect on the viewer and its 'external' effect on culture and society as well as its visual, aesthetic force. The *suffering* of Christ has also been understood as having an important part to play in our salvation. In Passion mysticism of the Middle Ages people identified their own suffering with that of Christ's, which led them to believe that this brought assurance of salvation and fellowship with God. This suffering of Christ has also been powerfully depicted in art and reflected and contributed to a deeper understanding of Christ's suffering, especially in the Medieval period.

In this essay I am going to look at contrasting depictions of the Crucifixion and Christ carrying the Cross. I shall be comparing Matthias Grunewald's and Salvador Dalí's paintings of the Crucifixion and Hieronymus Bosch's and Stanley Spencer's versions of Christ Carrying the Cross. I want to get at what lies behind the imagery and to assess the theological truth and significance of it. The contrast in the representations of each theme is both aesthetic and theological. On one level the difference is immediately of beauty and ugliness, attractiveness and repulsiveness. Of course things get a little complicated when using such language to describe art; in one sense the Grunewald Crucifixion could be called 'beautiful', for example, and the Dalí one perhaps 'repulsive', depending on what exactly we mean by these words. As R. Harries says, "beautiful works of art often include that which is disturbing and ugly, dark and disruptive...[but] beauty to be beauty must always be seen in integral relation to truth" (Harries, 2000, p. 22). The fact is that beauty exercises, by definition, a powerful attraction and therefore its application in Christian art and its association with the Christian faith is significant. Harries believes that, "unless the experience of beauty in

nature and the arts is encompassed and affirmed the Christian faith will seem to have nothing of interest or importance to say” (Harries, 2000, p. 6). Yet there is the danger that Christianity’s discomfiting and “distasteful” elements be falsely prettified for an era characterized by a lack of depth and a desire for instant, superficial gratification. However, Harries qualifies his statement saying, “This is not... just a tactic to win the allegiance of the lost. The fact is that God is beautiful and the Church is hiding this” (Harries, 2000, p. 6). This is part of a wider failure to “recognize real people and the actual feel of life...too often the Church...has failed to grasp the actual texture of human existence. The result is that people’s moral instincts react against the kind of picture of God which is being conveyed to them.” (Harries, 2000, pp. 11-12). The problem is deeper than one of aesthetically sombre sermons and displeasing church interiors. It is a problem of doctrine and dogma especially in the area of salvation. The most beautiful truth has not been explained in a satisfactory way and has not been shown to be beautiful in real, everyday life, which is more than making church an attractive place to go and rather about revealing the beauty of this truth in actions. A picture might speak a thousand words but actions speak louder than both. As Harries remarks, “beauty is the persuasive power of God’s truth and goodness” (Harries, 2000, p. 11). For Christians this truth is revealed in the Passion yet we still do not understand it and its persuasive power, indeed we have more often misunderstood it. Paintings of the Passion can help us to understand but also to misunderstand.

Although the *Crucifix* did not appear in Christian art until about the fifth century, the *Cross* was depicted albeit in often allusive form due to the persecution of the early Church, and was primarily understood as the means of God’s victory over sin and evil. After the conversion of Constantine in 312 the Christian faith became the official religion of the Roman State, which paved the way for more open Christian art. N. Spivey comments that “by the mid-fourth century...the cognitive attachment of Christ with ‘the Cross’ was losing its tag of embarrassment” (Spivey, 2001, p. 48). However, depictions of the Passion were noticeably ‘victorious’, ‘stoic’ even –the most common image of Christ by the fifth century was the enthroned figure of Christ Pantocrator.

Around the eleventh century a change in aesthetic and religious sensibility occurred (see Spivey, 2000). Imagery based on the Passion of Christ became increasingly common, especially in the thirteenth century, partly as a result of the influential writings of the Cistercian monk Bernard of Clairvaux and the religious renewal inspired by St. Francis of Assisi. They both placed emphasis on the humanity of Christ and encouraged an ‘affective’ spirituality focused on the Passion. My first two examples come after this change in sensibility.



Hieronymus Bosch, *Christ Carrying the Cross* (circa 1515)

Reprinted in W. S Gibson, 1973

Hieronymus Bosch painted his *Christ Carrying the Cross* around 1515, shortly before his death. He is an enigmatic artist; little is known about his life and even less about his artistic background. We know that the first great masters of the Flemish School, Jan van Eyck and Robert Campin, had been dead for some thirty years by the time Bosch's name appeared in his city's records. Geertgen tot Sint Jans also had a school of painting in Haarlem at the time and many writers see the origins of Bosch's art in these artists' traditions.

Bosch lived and worked in s' Hertogenbosch, a quiet Dutch city which was part of the territories of the dukes of Burgundy. Religious life flourished there- a number of convents and monasteries were based in the city and one particular order, the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life, was attempting to return to a simpler and more personal form of devotion, which was part of the wider movement known as the *Devotio Moderna*. This took its inspiration from Thomas á Kempis's work, the *Imitation of Christ*, which must have been well known to Bosch. Generally the period was a time of religious upheaval; many people were growing disaffected with the Church, which is evident in the proliferation of religious orders which sought a deeper and more personal spirituality, and the seeds of discontent which had been sown quite some time before would soon yield a forceful outcry that was to culminate in the Reformation. The world was a chaotic place in many ways- poverty, disease, corruption, inequality, witchcraft, religious authoritarianism; all this formed the social world of Bosch and

his contemporaries. Bosch himself was an orthodox Christian and attempted to teach the viewer certain moral and spiritual truths.

In this painting Bosch strikingly depicts the vulgarity and malice of Christ's tormentors. It has been suggested that he was inspired by Leonardo's drawings of grotesque heads, although it is equally likely that he was influenced by the German artists "who for generations had endowed the tormentors of Christ with monstrously deformed features" (Gibson, 1973, p. 128). The *Life of Christ* written by the Carthusian monk Ludolph of Saxony was disseminated throughout Europe from around 1474. In it Ludolph emphasises the nastiness and callousness of Christ's tormentors on the way to Calvary, and this text surely influenced Bosch. The figures are exaggeratedly ugly, their faces distorted and eyes bulging.<sup>1</sup> They are pressed up close to him, surrounding him on all sides, jostling, jeering and hissing. Bosch has filled the picture almost entirely, giving us no real indication of space, which creates a claustrophobic feeling. The two thieves are shown to the right of the picture, either side of Jesus, being mocked and abused, the thief in the lower foreground curses back at his abusers. The second thief is bullied by a snarling friar, the most obvious allusion to the Church and no doubt meant as a biting criticism. The heathen and therefore sinful character of men is symbolised by the strange headwear worn by some of them. The dark-faced character immediately next to Christ seems possessed, his eyes screwed shut (perhaps indicating blindness to the Saviour, the Light of the World) as he hollers at no one in particular, epitomizing the senselessness of these people's acts. The jarring juxtaposition of this man's face with that of Jesus seems deliberate and is perhaps meant to represent the contrast between this world and the heavenly realm, between chaos and order, good and evil. Amidst all this Christ is an epicentre of calm, bearing the weighty cross as the crown of thorns punctures his delicate skin, drawing blood. His eyes are closed and he looks peaceful, untroubled by the chaos around him. Two of his followers are represented: Veronica turns away from the crowd, with the miraculous imprint of Christ's face on her cloth which looks out of the picture at us, encouraging and beseeching us. She is not going the way of the crowd, she knows who this man is and like him she appears to be 'above' the goings on, content as she meditates. The figure behind Jesus (Simon of Cyrene) clasps hold of the Cross, attempting to carry some of the burden and he too is calm and untroubled, his head turned up towards Heaven, perhaps experiencing a mystical, private vision or moment of ecstasy. Bosch may have been alluding to the idea of taking up one's own cross, suggesting that on doing so one gets closer to Jesus and the Heavenly realm above. As W S Gibson writes, "to all

<sup>1</sup> Note the contrast with Van Eyck, for example, who spared no effort in depicting reality as faithfully as possible. Bosch could have represented realistically looking ugly people but instead caricatures in order to emphasise these people's spiritual and moral ugliness.

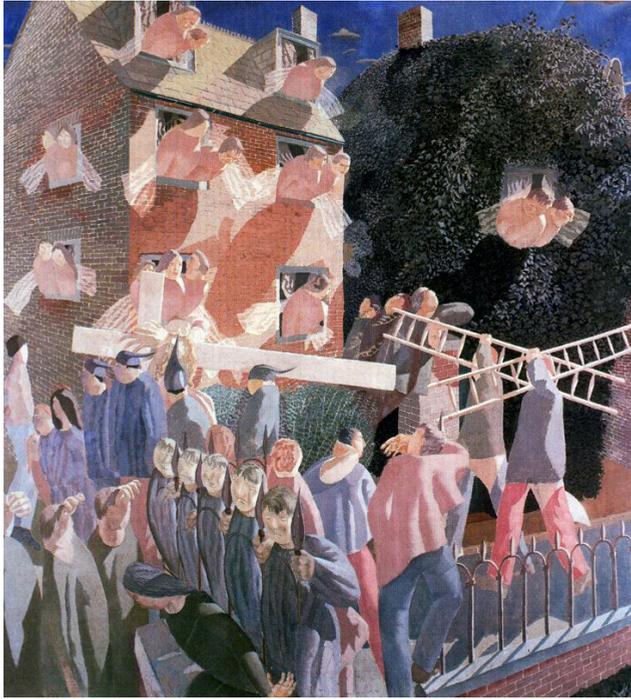
who take up his cross and follow him, Christ promises the same victory over the World and the Flesh: this was the message which Bosch's...Passion scenes presented..." (Gibson, 1973, p. 128).

What of the truth and beauty of this work? Bosch seems to be saying that Christ is alone beautiful and the world most emphatically is not. Christ's face is gentle and attractive, enhanced by the sheer vileness of those around him. Arguably, Bosch is saying that the sacred is above the secular and no doubt in his time this must have seemed an obvious truth.<sup>2</sup> However, is it true from a theological perspective that the world is as entirely negative and lacking in beauty as Bosch depicts it? We must remember that Anselm's theory of redemption in his seminal work *Cur Deus Homo?* still exerted a strong influence on the theology of the time, feeding into Luther. Anselm's theory laid stress upon humanity's failings and the injury that these caused God. Because He is infinite the pain and gravity of sin is infinitely magnified and so even the merest peccadillo causes supreme offence for which satisfaction must be made. But humanity could in no way make sufficient reparation, which necessitated the divine-human Saviour –the created order is ultimately good-for-nothing– which Bosch expresses.<sup>3</sup> However, if God created the world "and saw that it was good" (Gen.1) Bosch's pessimistic outlook cannot, arguably, be theologically nor aesthetically correct. However, there is theological truth in Bosch's piece. Although, possibly, he wrongly suggests there is nothing redeeming or sacred in humanity or the world, he correctly, from a theological viewpoint, identifies humanity as collectively failing, including the Church, which could be the most significant theological point he makes.

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<sup>2</sup> The Scholastic doctrine of the double order of things, that of the earthly and temporal and the heavenly and eternal, could perhaps have still resonated with Bosch. His other works such as *The Ship of Fools*, for example, also paint humanity in a negative light.

<sup>3</sup> Moreover, "the language of satisfaction refers us back to the beauty of the divine nature itself", which Bosch emphasises. Gorringe, 1996, p. 96).



Stanley Spencer, *Christ Carrying the Cross* (1920)  
Reprinted in Finaldi, 1996

Stanley Spencer was born in Cookham, England, in 1891 and in total he spent 49 years of his life there. Cookham is an attractive village on the Thames in Berkshire and to Spencer “it was the loveliest in the world, the gateway to heaven, almost heaven itself” (Collis, 1962, p. 17). Spencer’s *Christ Carrying the Cross* could not be more contrasting to Bosch’s. Christ is shown on his way to Calvary and the event is placed, as in Bosch’s version, in contemporary surroundings giving added force to the message aimed at the viewer. However, Spencer “does not make it the deeply mournful event imagined by most artists since the Middle Ages” (Avery-Quash, cited in Finaldi, 1996, p. 196). Quite the contrary in fact; the painting radiates a cheerfulness evoked by the bright sun which bathes the street and houses. A glorious blue sky above evokes a feeling of freshness and “a sense of burgeoning life is suggested” (Avery-Quash, cited in Finaldi, 1996, p. 196) by the house on the right which is engulfed by lush green ivy –surely here is a ‘proleptic’ allusion to the renewal of life in the Resurrection. People in the houses lean out of the windows, enthusiastically watching the event. Christ is almost inconspicuous amidst the throng of activity, his cross blending in with the workmen’s ladders, which is deliberate and signals Spencer’s perception of God being “hidden” all around us in the everyday world. He stands upright,

unburdened by the cross and shows no signs of suffering or injury- an obvious and striking contrast to many depictions of the event.

As Susana Avery-Quash writes, "Spencer thought that Christ's decision to enter our humanity gave human life great dignity; by undertaking a mission of teaching and healing Christ had made all human tasks worthy, even holy" (cited in Finaldi, 2000, p. 196). Spencer had, in theological terms, a sacramental understanding of the world. For him, everyday commonplace objects in the village seemed to have a meaning which transcended their appearance. They took on what he called a religious significance, and a transcendent atmosphere arises from this painting where he has inserted everyday landmarks such as the house in which he was born and the ivy-covered cottage where his grandmother lived. The characters are based on Cookham villagers, including the workmen from the local building firm, Fairchild's. By depicting them following Christ with their ladders on their shoulders Spencer is indicating the connection between people's daily activity and that of Christ. The ladders are the workmen's crosses, their profession is invested with divine dignity and significance thanks to Christ's affirmation of the earthly realm and its duties. In contrast to Bosch, then, we can say that Spencer sees the sacred *in* the secular not 'above' it. He could perceive a hidden depth and meaning, an "ultimate concern" in humble, local surroundings. Spencer's vision can be expressed theologically in the words of the existentialist theologian Paul Tillich:

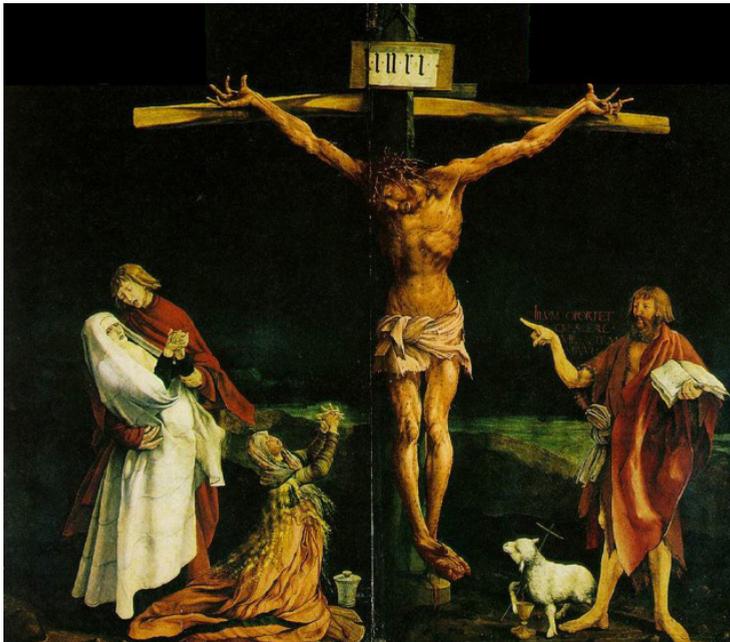
If religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, this state cannot be restricted to a special realm. The unconditional character of this concern implies that it refers to every moment of our life, to every space and every realm. The universe is God's sanctuary. Every workday is a day of the Lord, every supper a Lord's supper, every work the fulfilment of a divine task, every joy a joy in God...Essentially the religious and the secular are not separated realms. Rather they are within each other. (Tillich and Kimball, 1956, p. 41)

What is also significant about this painting is that it comes soon after the First World War, which was the most terrible war in known history at the time in which human mortality and suffering reached unprecedented levels. Spencer certainly experienced much of the misery in earthly existence- he was a soldier in the war, was twice divorced and suffered from debilitating illness at various periods, which makes his positive and optimistic affirmation of humanity and material existence all the more significant. Theologically this represents the important Christian virtue of Hope.

The danger in what I have perceived to be Spencer's theology is that, as Harries writes, "For human beings there is always a narrow path to walk between undervaluing earthly beauty in the light of the perfect and eternal beauty of God on the one hand, and so rejoicing in earthly beauty that God is forgotten or rejected" (Harries, 2000, p. 38). Spencer's vision is truthful in as much as it

implies a truly sacramental, 'incarnational' view of reality and doesn't draw an unbridgeable chasm between God and the world, which can only be overcome through the Church, but sees the divine in the world. "The special insight of Christianity... is that the divine beauty is to be seen in and through the particular, of which the Incarnation is the supreme expression" (Harries, 2000, p. 38). This is an important insight for an age characterized by a reckless and exploitative relationship to the natural world. But while an unbridgeable chasm is rightly dismissed, an equation of humanity and nature with God is just as, if not more dangerous- a distance and qualitative difference need to be recognised if we are to avoid idolatry and a self-absolutization that leads to Totalitarianism.

This is where the event and symbol of the Cross (i.e. the Crucifix) can help us. A correct understanding and interpretation of the Cross is the key that can liberate the world from self-delusion, and Christian faith from the straitjackets of dogma and ideology, and in doing so enable it to reveal the beauty of God to the world and thus to preach God's message of salvation in an authentic way (see Moltmann, 1974, p. 1).



**Matthias Grunewald, Isenheim Altarpiece (circa 1515)**

Reprinted in Finaldi, 1996

Matthias Grunewald was born between 1480-90 in Seligstandt in Germany. His social, historical and theological context is broadly that of Bosch's as outlined above. He too was disaffected with the Church and identified with the 'normal'

folk of his day. Found amongst his possessions after his death in 1528 was a document referring to the peasant uprising of 1525 and twenty-seven sermons of Luther, the possession of which was a punishable offence.

His greatest work, the Isenheim altarpiece, was painted around 1515 and commissioned for the hospital in the Isenheim monastery of St. Anthony where patients were treated for epilepsy and blood and skin diseases. This partly explains the imagery of the piece along with some of the factors which influenced Bosch.<sup>4</sup> The central image is a shockingly gruesome Crucifixion in complete contrast to the usual elegant and beautiful depictions of it in the Renaissance. Christ's body is spattered with blood, covered with bruises, and contorted. His feet are deformed and appear to be rotting; a huge nail pierces both feet and blood pours from the wound. The arms appear unnaturally long as if they have been agonizingly stretched and almost pulled from their sockets, his hands "twist convulsively and claw the air" (Huysmans, 1958, p. 10). Christ's head is bowed yet he is still alive, his face grimacing with pain. John the Baptist's pointing finger bids us behold the bloodied Lamb of God who has taken away the sin of the world. The Baptist himself looks stunned by what he is witnessing and the darkness of the background emphasises the macabre horror of the event. The figures in the painting are not truly proportional. Grunewald disregarded the rules of modern Renaissance art here and returned to the principles of medieval artists who varied the sizes of characters according to their importance.<sup>5</sup> Also by exaggerating the stature of Christ, Grunewald aids the impression of profound suffering and ensures the other intriguingly rendered characters do not divert our attention.

We can see how this Christ would have served as encouragement to those suffering in the monastery's hospital, the most destitute and wretched of society whose only help lay in the charity of the monks. The divine Saviour here takes the form of the abandoned, the despised and the most vulnerable. However, it is arguably meant to implicate certain sectors of society as much as to affirm and encourage others. We know that Grunewald shared Reformist sympathies, which always had a tendency to criticise the hierarchical and extravagant Church since the days of Wycliffe and Huss. Arguably Grunewald's Christ represents a daring expression of this resentment by taking the dominant sacred image of the Church and strikingly recasting it. This is not the beautiful and regal Lord of the Church whose sacrifice was repeated, or more accurately, re-presented in sanitized form in the Church by regally dressed clergy. This is the tortured Messiah, a humble, pathetic human figure who has absorbed the sins of the world.

<sup>4</sup> Moreover, "the language of satisfaction refers us back to the beauty of the divine nature itself", which Bosch emphasises. Gorringer, 1996, p. 96).

<sup>5</sup> The doctrine of Transubstantiation was also a significant factor behind the tendency of artists to depict Christ in excessively bloodied state. See Spivey, 2001: 85. Also, see Gorringer, 1996, p. 108).

As Huysman says, "This...Christ [is] not the Christ of the Rich, the Adonis of Galilee, the healthy young fop...whom the faithful have worshipped for the past four hundred years...This was the Christ of the poor, a Christ who had become flesh in the likeness of the most wretched of those he had come to redeem" (Huysman, 1958, p. 8). The sick men and women in the Isenheim monastery were brought before this Crucifixion so that they might be miraculously healed- such was the faith of the devout in the saving grace of this Christ. Images like Grunewald's resonated powerfully with the poor and therefore constituted a threat to the Church, to the extent that it attempted to render neutral the political and theological implications of such art and the devotion it inspired.<sup>6</sup>

As Moltmann points out, "This mysticism of the passion has discovered a truth about Christ which ought not to be suppressed by being understood in a superficial way. It can be summed up by saying that suffering is overcome by suffering, and wounds are healed by wounds" (Moltmann, 1974, p. 46). Grunewald affirms that Christ is the Lord of the most lowly and wretched who therefore challenges every human notion of worth and beauty. In Moltmann's words, "the suffering of abandonment is overcome by the suffering of love, which is not afraid of what is sick and ugly, but accepts it and takes it to itself in order to heal it. Through his own abandonment by God, the crucified Christ brings God to those who are abandoned by God" (Moltmann, 1974: 46). These are theological truths that our present society, which narrowly defines beauty, attempts to hide mortality, disdains dependence and weakness and seeks instant quick-fix solutions to profound human problems (e.g. by reverting to military might instead of dialogue and self-examination), would do well to learn and reflect upon. The non-beautiful Christ of Grunewald's revelation can paradoxically teach us something about true beauty. It releases us from the arrogant desire to make and impose our own standards, usually the standards of the strong, of those who can dominate and control aesthetic and ethical discourse to the detriment and even destruction of others.<sup>7</sup>

As we have seen, art (particularly Passion imagery) can contribute to shifts in theological sensibility, emphasis and awareness, and as such it carries a responsibility. If Christian faith takes its identity, meaning and purpose from the Cross of Christ, then it is of the utmost importance that it correctly understand and truthfully depict its primary symbol.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Pevsner and Meier (1958, p. 14) note that "The Middle Ages were ready to neglect true relations of size in favour of relations dictated by significance."

<sup>7</sup> As J. H. Marrow (1979: 18) contends, "There was a measure of control implicit in the theology of meditative devotion, an attempt to harness the expression of subjective emotional religiosity and to direct it along paths compatible with traditional Christian doctrine." See also Moltmann, 1974: 49). However, the painting could also be said to reflect what was already implicit in the theology of the time, namely that redemption is guaranteed by paying in pain and blood; see Gorringer, 1996, pp. 102-3.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. those imperialists who declared native people were subhuman savages and who dismissed native art



**Salvador Dalí**, *Christ of St. John of the Cross* (1951)  
Reprinted in Finaldi, 1996.

Salvador Dalí's *Christ of St John of the Cross* is one of the most celebrated religious paintings of the twentieth century and has provoked strong reactions from critics and public alike. It is inspired by a drawing made by the Spanish Carmelite friar and mystic, St John of the Cross, which Dalí has developed in a dramatically different way. For St John, the crucified Christ was the Man of Sorrows of Isaiah, the humble Saviour who took on the frailest human form to save us. For Dalí, in contrast, Christ is the image of perfection and transcendence. As he himself says, "My aesthetic ambition...was completely the opposite of all the Christs painted by most of the modern painters who have all interpreted him in the expressionistic and contortionistic sense, thus obtaining emotion through ugliness. My principal preoccupation was that my Christ would be beautiful as the God that he is" (cited in Finaldi, 1996, p. 198).<sup>9</sup>

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and culture as inferior- see Edward Said's *Orientalism and Culture and Imperialism*. Also, of course, National Socialism's discourse.

<sup>9</sup> My contention is that Christian artists have a responsibility to depict carefully and truthfully the primary symbol of their faith- as believers we are all theologians and must therefore seek to agree on the fundamentals of our faith. Art contributes to this ongoing dialogue. Of course those who do not share the faith do not have the same task and responsibility and as such have free reign to portray Christian symbols how they so wish.

Christ is shown on the cross in dazzling perspective. The cross is suspended over the earth, surrounded by the blackness of space, with the foot of the cross just breaking into the top of the clouds below, and Christ is lit from an unseen source on the right. This all creates a sense of transcendence and awesomeness. We look down on Christ from our viewpoint, which makes for a spectacular effect. Significantly, Christ is not nailed to the cross, shows no signs of the wounds, and is not suffering in any way.<sup>10</sup> He is rendered with the physique of a fit and strong man; his muscles are defined and he is reminiscent of Renaissance sculptures. Dalí wanted to reclaim the transcendent ideals of perfection established during the Renaissance.

He painted this picture in 1951, only six years after the end of the Second World War, which had seen some fifty million killed and the use of the atom bomb. The systematic abuse and extermination of the Jews represents the darkest moment in humanity's history. The arts had to face the question of their purpose and legitimacy after the war. "All culture after Auschwitz is trash," wrote Theodor Adorno, and in similar vein he declared that it was barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz. However, he regretted that statement and conceded that suffering had every right to expression.

Is Dalí reacting against the terrible suffering of the war and the inference drawn by Camus that the suffering Christ makes suffering the route to heaven by encouraging acceptance of it? (See Bauckham, 1995, p. 81). R. Harries (2000, p. 75) points out that "the early 1950's were a time of renewed religious faith... People were still strongly conscious of the Second World War and the need for faith and grace in the face of terrible evil..." Dalí's painting could be said to reflect the need for assurance of salvation –a painting of the suffering Christ would possibly have been seen at the time as impotent, incapable of helping. The Christ of Dalí is strong, still depicted on the symbol of suffering –the cross– but in control of it (perhaps it is a comforting image; Christ is symbolically represented as suffering but is not defeated by it and can therefore help overcome it). However, Dalí's Christ on the Cross is not a Crucifixion and he can be accused of beautifying the Cross. His Christ can more readily be seen as above suffering and above the world.

Belief in God was thoroughly shaken by the horrendous suffering of the war and many saw faith as impossible in the light of it- how could God allow such atrocities to occur? However, some theologians were led to explore the notion of a God who suffers with humanity, most notably Jurgen Moltmann. The problematic of the Cross in view of human suffering is that "if it is divested of deity

<sup>10</sup> The insistence upon God's physical beauty and the rendering of a beautiful Christ has especial implications for the way the human body is perceived. It raises issues about disability, self-worth etc. Christ's suffering may be alluded to in Dalí's arguable 'quotation' of Grunewald's Christ's hands.

Jesus is just one more victim, protesting his innocence against divine injustice. If the cross is invested with deity it becomes the most effective, but also the most objectionable theodicy, justifying suffering and silencing protest" (Bauckham, 1995, p. 81). Moltmann's response was to interpret the suffering and death of Jesus as God's *protest* against suffering and death- against the systems and powers of death and domination that govern our world. Dalí's Christ does not seem to say anything about this human and social condition, and as Kosuke Koyama puts it, "Theology, to be genuine, must contain the moment of sharp self-criticism" (Koyama, 1985, p. 259).

The problem is that in hundreds of years of theology the Cross hasn't been understood in a political way, as a protest against the political realities of a world based on domination and systematic inequality. Grunewald's and Bosch's Passion scenes arguably imply a kind of this understanding and at least critique the social-political conventions of their day. Dalí does not appear to do this. It could arguably be implicit in his painting if we take it that in depicting Christ as perfect the world is implicitly revealed to be imperfect. Understanding the work as the reflection of humanity's search for salvation in that which is Other than this dark and hopelessly flawed world, in Christ's perfection, strength and beauty, we could arguably get hints of an indirect criticism. But if this reading is correct then Dalí fails to recognise that his Christ is actually a construction and projection of the Other and that it was the most developed, cultured and strong nation on earth that brought the Holocaust and the subsequent longing for "faith and grace" in its aftermath- his Christ is not Other but of the same strong and beautiful humanity that led to the slave trade and the concentration camps. Ultimately, his Christ is the continuation of the myth of salvation by the strong and the noble. Humanity needs not myths or projections of its own desires but to face the truth of its condition, which will actually set it free. The crucified God liberates us from our own projections and delusions, "this scandal...brings liberation into a world which is not free...this faith...is capable of setting men free from their cultural illusions...and confronting them with the truth of their existence and their society" (Moltmann, 1974, p. 39). Again Moltmann makes the profound and penetrating point that, "If faith in the crucified Christ is in contradiction to all conceptions of the righteousness, beauty and morality of man, faith in the 'crucified God' is also a contradiction of everything men have ever conceived, desired and sought to be assured of by the term 'God'" (Moltmann, 1974, p. 37).

Dalí makes the Crucifixion beautiful, which for Moltmann suppresses and destroys the unique, the particular and the scandalous in it. As Harries puts it, "one of the disturbing features of art is the way it can beautify what is terrible, can render aesthetically pleasing what should shock us. This is seen most frequently in the case of the Crucifixion of Christ" (Harries, 2000, p. 139). Although Harries

sees the horror in the suffering of crucifixion and agrees that such suffering should never be glossed over, he concedes that "art cannot help but beautify... for it is an inescapable element in art as art" (Harries, 2000, p. 139). However, I do not agree that just by putting paint on paper this automatically beautifies what it depicts. Harries believes the beautifying of the Crucifixion is justified on the basis of the Resurrection and that the beautifying power of art is a pointer to the redemptive work of God in Christ. The beautifying power of art in general might point to this, but not in depictions of the defining symbol and criterion of Christian faith, in my view. It is one thing to enhance and beautify a landscape or a human person, and quite another to do the same to an image of the event which, as Moltmann claims, reveals the truth about God and humanity. And as P. Sherrard (1990, p. 12) remarks, "If the truth is always beautiful, the beautiful is not always true." Harries (2000, p. 139) contends that "We can bear to look at a painting of the Crucifixion as a work of art and not just the depiction of horror because in the Crucifixion love is poured out for our salvation and revealed as victorious." But this is an unqualified truism (platitude) which reveals the way talk about the Cross and salvation has become mere habit. Harries allows the beautifying of the Cross because it is salvific, which reveals, to my mind, a misunderstanding of the way the Cross can be said to save.

The Cross, I believe, should not be beautified and I don't think it is licensed on the basis of the Resurrection. The Cross can only be made sense of in light of the Resurrection but the Resurrection in no way makes the Cross beautiful. There is a dialectical relationship between the two events which has to be maintained if the Cross is to speak to us in an authentic way. God's self-giving can be seen as beautiful in the sense that it is the ultimate expression of love, but if we begin to see the Cross as beautiful because of this we run the risk of slipping into an easy determinism, of making the Cross a necessity and an inevitability, and thus of effectively sanctioning and making an eternal law of human and divine violence that required the blood of a man. The Crucifixion is and must always remain hideous because it is the exposé of the failings and corruptness of this world; humanity killed its own maker, which can hardly be seen as a beautiful event.

These four paintings reflect and suggest theology and ideology. They are the product of a particular theological, artistic and political context and contain fantastic power to conjure emotion, thought and reaction, and to contribute to structures of affect which influence, for good and for bad, private faith and public theology. Passion imagery is ultimately attempting to express a divine truth about which consensus needs to be formed if the Christian faith is to perform its mission. Art has a huge part to play in this but it must be informed by good, critical theology as it should also inform and critique faith and theology.

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