

The papers I selected for this special issue on contemporary art and religion are significant in that they bring some order to a theme that has arisen persistently in Canadian art-making, sometimes against the grain of critical and curatorial interpretation. By discussing work that takes place in a Canadian context, these essays look at a culture that has fostered fascinating developments in this area. Given the importance of freedom of expression in Canada's pluralistic society, it is significant that contemporary visual expressions of religious feeling have flourished largely outside religious institutions. Understanding such expressions becomes particularly relevant when one considers Canada as a nation of immigrants with different religions and recognizes that matters related to identity politics and its visible manifestations are fundamental to the study of the Canadian social fabric. Moreover, Canada's current socio-political climate is strongly affected by a new type of far-reaching conflict that is increasingly interpreted not only according to national parameters but through the post-colonial lens of religious and cultural identity. This discussion of Canadian art and religion thus also provides a forum for reacting against the campaigns of religious organizations that create internal conflict within societies.

My essay on art and religion in Canada from 1926 to 2010 serves as an introduction to this subject. In considering works by artists and writings on art in Canada during this period, I explore motivations and imperatives, desires and prejudices, and themes and approaches. In recognition of the importance of presenting diverse viewpoints, insights, and analyses, the other essays, briefly contextualized below, treat parallel and complementary as well as different and contrasting topics.

Religious symbology can take the form of religious texts, rituals, or works of art.¹ As dogma was being rejected and culture re-examined after the Second World War in light of the weakening of Christian hegemony, Native American beliefs became an important spiritual reference in North America.² Carmen Robertson discusses several of the iconic images of thunderbird transformation produced by Norval Morrisseau in the 1960s and 1970s and examines the ways in which Morrisseau's shamanistic beliefs around healing and transformational revelation, consistent with Anishinaabe ways of knowing, are also influenced by Christian and Eckankar religious images and beliefs.

Today, many artists who, like Morrisseau, subscribe to a particular belief system are determined to express their religious traditions using a compelling, innovative visual language.³ This is clearly seen in the work of Lorraine Malach, who created ceramic relief murals for Catholic religious institutions throughout Western Canada. Susan Surette discusses Malach's last major mural, entitled *The Story of Life* and donated to the Royal Tyrrell Museum

in Drumheller, Alberta. Integral to Surette's analysis is an exploration of how this work contributes to the concept of Ecotheology through its focus on the interrelations of religion, nature, and the environment. Malach's art reveals the ongoing capacity of religious systems to inspire explorations that are highly individualistic and subjective, showing that artists need not reject orthodox assumptions, particular interpretations of truth, or specified ways of being in and seeing the world to be innovative and provocative.

Religious beliefs and practices have been challenged over their approach to gender, in large measure through discussions shaped by feminist and post-colonial discourse. Valerie Behiery, in her study of Arwa Abouon, a Muslim artist, examines how Abouon addresses questions pertaining to identity, selfhood, belonging, and spiritual practice in works that convey a relationship to Islam. A recurring feature of present-day Islam is the tension between interpretations of faith that are intent on controlling religious and secular life and a decentred vision characterized by acceptance of difference and a multiplicity of identities. Profoundly aware of these two perspectives, Behiery situates Abouon within the diverse social, cultural, and religious expressions of Islam.

The reality in today's secular culture is that religion has an effect even on those who do not see themselves as religious. In Canada, as in the United States and Europe, with more and more people shifting their religious outlook and trading one religion for another, there is less continuity from one generation to the next. Among those who call themselves Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu are large numbers of people who are only nominally part of their inherited religion. My own essay looks at the prevailing phenomenon of people who situate themselves at some distance from the religion of their forebears, yet maintain a productive relationship with it. Taking as an entry point Wassily Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911) and his interest in ethnographic practice, I argue that Kandinsky's approach to art resonates with the ethnic and religiously inspired video works of Sylvia Safdie, Marisa Portolese, Marielle Nitoslawska, and Sarindar Dhaliwal and serves as an important way to understand their complex relationship of art and religion.

Religious expressions are dynamic reconfigurations that can change over time and in different places.⁴ In many societies, the presence of competing religions makes the public appearance of religion difficult for religious communities.⁵ One of the significant problems of our age is how to live together in a world where religious differences have become more widespread. Nadia Kurd examines the construction of mosques in Canada and shows that these buildings not only reveal tensions in the cultural makeup of Canadian cities but challenge the historical framework of mosque

architecture. While these buildings do not generally conform to the aesthetic or symbolic conventions of Islamic architecture, they employ visual strategies that articulate the lived realities of Muslims and the practice of Islam in Canada.

Artists who criticize the concepts and practices of organized religion may believe that such religion is not only outdated but damaging to the individual and detrimental to the community due to its political and social implications. This position need not mean that the artists themselves do not hold deeply felt religious beliefs. This dichotomy is perhaps best explained by the philosopher Jacques Derrida, who became preoccupied with religion during the last decades of his life. He recognized that religion is impossible without uncertainty – for Derrida, belief that is not qualified by doubt poses a moral and ethical danger. Louis Kaplan discusses Derrida's concept of hauntology and his idea of deconstruction, in which every structure that organizes experience represses something that returns. With hauntology in mind, Kaplan considers the important questions about traditional Jewish religious practices, laws, and commandments raised by Simon Glass's *The Ten Commandments/Prohibited Weapons* (2005), Melissa Shiff's outdoor sculptural installation *ARK* (2006) at the Jewish Museum in Prague, and Frédéric Brenner's *Diaspora: Homelands in Exile*, a collection of photographs from forty countries (including Canada) taken over a period of twenty-five years.

Each of the essays in this collection examines various religious and secular paradigms. Core methodological issues related to these interactions are addressed de facto, as they pertain, for instance, to phenomenology, postmodern philosophy, and theology. The confrontations between new artistic modes and iconographic traditions as well as the survival of religious symbolic structures also constitute crucial areas of inquiry. In this spirit, six Canadian artists were invited to present contemporary works that address the subject of religion. Curated by Denis Longchamps, this gallery of images contains works by Goota Ashoona, Thérèse Chabot, Robert Houle, Ed Pien, Ted Rettig, and Mitch Robertson.

Within this conceptual framework, the keynote address at the ART+RELIGION symposium in Montreal in 2010, delivered by AA Bronson, is presented as the artist's reflections on his life and work. His address took its structure from the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians, a letter of grave concern written to exhort believers to stand firmly with Jesus in their faith and to adhere to the right use of their Christian freedom. Bronson, situating himself as a survivor of trauma and, as a gay man, as a witness to the violence, sickness, and death that has affected his community, discusses his rebellion against notions of individual and artistic identity, and tells how he came

to find his theological voice in a world where art was uncomfortable with religion and religion was uncomfortable with art.

In their informative and interpretive aspects, the essays and art works in this special issue of *JCAH* are meant to stimulate research into the art historical developments and recent intersections of art and religion. By examining the ways religion has interacted with contemporary art, these explorations set the stage for further inquiries that recognize the multi-faceted nature of religious belief and its many manifestations in Canadian contemporary art.

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NOTES

- 1 Mircea ELIADE provides an extensive multi-faith analysis of the meaning of religious visual symbols in *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961). Robert CUMMINGS, in *The Truth of Broken Symbols* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), offers a cross-cultural study of the ways that symbols function from a theological and philosophical perspective.
- 2 The impact of Native American art and shamanistic beliefs has been well documented in discussions on the British painter Alan Davie and the American abstract expressionists Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, and Barnett Newman, who saw the art of indigenous peoples through the lenses of exoticism and primitivism.
- 3 See, for example, Maurice HALBWACHS, *On Collective Memory* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1950). Halbwachs examines how we use our mental images of the present to reconstruct our past, in the same way pilgrims to the Holy Land over the centuries have evoked very different images of the events of Jesus's life. In *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), Daniele HERVIEU-LÉGER argues that religious belief involves a shared understanding of collective memories gleaned from the past.
- 4 See *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, edited and with an introduction by Hent DE VRIES (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008). This text consists of forty-four articles by scholars from nine countries and diverse disciplines that consider how religion is being reconfigured in the twenty-first century. In the introduction Vries examines the question, "Why Still 'Religion'?" and argues that religion will continue to have a crucial role in human existence, both individually and communally, because of its social, intellectual, and experiential possibilities.
- 5 Some of the more comprehensive publications on religion, pluralism, and transnational religious expressions include: *Religious Pluralism, Globalization, and World Politics*, ed. Thomas BANCHOFF (New York and Oxford: Oxford University

Press, 2008); Scott M. THOMAS, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations: The Struggle for the Soul of the Twenty-First Century* (New York and Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Peter BEYER, *Religion and Globalization* (London: Sage, 1994); José CASANOVA, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994).