



Rejection and Renewal: Art and Religion in Canada (1926–2010)

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In 1979, as part of a series of performances by members of the artist-run centre Véhicule Art in Montreal, Tim Clark (1943–) performed *A Reading of “On Obedience and Discipline” from The Imitation of Christ, by Thomas à Kempis* (Fig. 1).¹ The chosen text, by the German monk Thomas à Kempis (ca. 1371–1479), contrasts the fleeting nature of earthly joy with the eternity of happiness to be found in God, the mystery of Redemption, and the love of Jesus Christ. Clark stepped before the camera, removed his shirt, slipped a black leather gauntlet onto his right hand, knelt before the book, and, raising his right hand to cover his face, began to yell the words. When the reading was over, he removed the glove and walked away.

The gloved hand in Clark’s performance was a reference to Dr. Strangelove, a character played by Peter Sellers in Stanley Kubrick’s satirical film *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), based on former Nazi rocket scientist Dr. Werner von Braun who, like many former Nazis, worked in the American nuclear defence industry in the Cold War era. At the conclusion of the film, as Dr. Strangelove outlines the suicidal logic of the “Doomsday” device and his thoughts on survival underground after the end of the world, his mechanical right arm rises in an unintentional Nazi salute. Clark appropriated the gesture, using it to signal pain, violence, and the persistence of fascism.

Clark’s performance dramatizes the problem of evil and the concept of theodicy. He attempts to show that, as Thomas à Kempis argues in *The Imitation of Christ*, it is possible to affirm both the omnipotence and love of God and the presence of evil in the world without being contradictory. His argument is based on the premise that if there is a world, and moreover a good one, evil is probably one of its features, but its existence does not impugn either the power or goodness of God. The question of apophatic theodicy has been a constant in Clark’s work since the late 1970s, but after his 1979 reading of Thomas à Kempis and his performance of a companion piece,

Detail, Joanne Tod, *Flag for a State of Perpetual Motion*, 1988, oil on canvas, 213.4 × 269.3 cm, private collection. (Photo: Peter MacCallum)



1 | Tim Clark, *A Reading of "On Obedience and Discipline" from The Imitation of Christ, by Thomas à Kempis*, commissioned by Véhicule Art as part of Art Montreal for Cable TV, 1979, black leather gauntlet, text. (Photo: Tim Clark)

A Reading from the Lord's Prayer, later that year at Mercer Union in Toronto, he ceased directly addressing religion in his art.²

Tim Clark stopped quoting religious texts when he realized that artists who focused on religiosity or identified with traditional religious practices faced the possibility that teachers, fellow students, and art critics would either refuse to address their interests or be openly hostile to them. This was his experience, and for years it was also the experience of his students at Concordia who created religiously inspired art.³ Visual artists desiring avant-garde status saw fit to cast aside religion and experiment with different ideas of art with the goal of establishing a new distinctiveness.

Art that had anything to do with religion was considered inappropriate for Canadian museums or galleries, despite the fact that some of the artists whose works were owned or exhibited had been involved in the interior design and decoration of the many churches and synagogues built between the 1950s and 1980s. For example, in 1964, Charles Daudelin (1920–2001) completed a baptismal font, tabernacle, and sanctuary lamp, all in bronze, for the Église Saint-Jean-l'Évangéliste in Montreal. In 1980, Eric Wesselow (1911–1998) created the Scroll of Ruth windows, a series of seven large-scale stained windows, for Temple Sinai in Toronto. In general, however, artists refrained from accepting public commissions of a religious nature.

The most dramatic and influential Canadian example of this turning away from religious art is that of Paul-Émile Borduas (1905–1960),⁴ who led the Groupe Automatiste in Quebec and was the principal author of the manifesto *Refus global*. In 1922, Borduas began an apprenticeship with Ozias Leduc (1864–1955) during which he worked on church decoration, notably for the Pauline Chapel of Saint-Michel Cathedral in the diocese of Sherbrooke,

the Chapel of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart in Halifax, and the baptistry of the Notre-Dame Basilica of Montreal. His interest in non-religious art began with the cool reception to his religious art projects as a result of the economic crisis of the Great Depression. It accelerated with his discovery of modern art in Paris and in 1938 after he read André Breton's text on surrealism, "Le château étoilé." In an abrupt departure from religious paintings, the form and content of his compositions became landscape-like, closer to dreams and unconscious visions than to external reality.

Like many intellectuals of that period, Borduas detested the hold that the Catholic Church had on the people of Quebec, convinced that Quebec's petty nationalism and close-mindedness had cut its people off from positive developments in the world. With fifteen members of the Groupe Automatiste, he wrote *Refus global*, a manifesto released on 9 August 1948, which denounces Quebec's Catholic-centric collective identity.⁵ His involvement with *Refus global* cost Borduas his job at the École du Meuble, where he had worked since 1937.⁶

Borduas's rejection of organized religion mirrored the philosophy of many Canadian painters between the 1920s and 1950s, some of whom were also art educators. This was a particular problem in Quebec: Alfred Pellan's (1906–1988) experience provides an example. In 1943, he was hired to teach art at the École des Beaux-Arts de Montréal, but its director, Charles Maillard (1876–1973), seeing Pellan's art and ideas as a threat to his own belief that religious and historical artworks were the cornerstones of art practice, rejected his work as too progressive. Their clash resulted in Maillard's resignation in 1945 and the development of a somewhat more liberal teaching atmosphere at the school.⁷

In 1946, to counteract the perceived distancing of art from religion at the École des Beaux-Arts and other teaching institutions in the province, Father Wilfrid Corbeil (1893–1979) and Abbot André Lecoutey (1890–1974), art teachers at the Séminaire de Joliette, founded the group Le Retable with artists Cécile Chabot (1907–1990), Sylvia Daoust (1902–2004), Marius Plamondon (1919–1976), Gilles Beaugrand (1906–2005), and Bertrand Vanasse (fl. 1940s).⁸ Dedicated to the renewal of religious art in Quebec and Canada, the organization sponsored exhibitions and founded the journal *Arts et Pensée* to disseminate writings more consistent with a conservative understanding of modern art.

Father Julien Déziel (1907–1990) and the artist Maurice Raymond (1912–2006), both professors at the École des Beaux-Arts, where the tensions that Pellan had experienced continued to simmer, were sympathetic to the ideas of Le Retable. In 1948, Pellan and likeminded artists at the school responded. Pellan formed the group Prisme d'Yeux with Léon Bellefleur (1910–2007),

Jacques de Tonnancour (1917–2005), Albert Dumouchel (1916–1971), Jeanne Rhéaume (1915–2000), and Goodridge Roberts (1904–1974). Their main accomplishment was the publication of a manifesto written by Jacques de Tonnancour that called for an art free of restrictive ideology. It appeared a few months before the much more radical *Refus global*.

Art educators in the anglophone community experienced no such conflicts. Arthur Lismer (1885–1969), principal of the Victoria School of Art and Design in Halifax (1916–19), vice-president of the Ontario College of Art and Design (1920–27), and head of the Montreal Children’s Art Centre at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (1941–67), believed that the individual was a self united in body and spirit. He contended that the modern world’s obstruction of the individual’s aesthetic and spiritual development could be overcome through art instruction that stressed creativity and the student’s response to beauty.⁹

J.W. Beatty (1896–1941), a teacher at the Ontario College of Art, also favoured attention to personal feelings, and his teachings emphasized meaningful expression, especially in the depiction of Canadian landscapes.¹⁰ Exceptions to this approach were J.E.H. MacDonald (1873–1932)¹¹ and Lawren Harris (1885–1970). MacDonald was a transcendentalist who espoused the teachings of Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau, turning to nature as a way to reach a higher spiritual plane. Harris was a theosophist who believed in mysticism, the divine forces of nature, and the ability of all religions to help humankind reach greater perfection. He often explained that these ideas offered him access to a world of pure abstract form that gave his landscapes a timeless, spiritual feeling.¹²

For the most part, however, educators believed that religion had no place in the instruction of Canada’s artists. One of the most vocal in this regard was John Lyman (1886–1967), who established the Contemporary Arts Society in Montreal in 1939. In 1949 he became an art professor at McGill University, and, three years later, director of the Fine Arts Department. Concerned that students were being given formulas and preconceived concepts rather than learning how to experience art, Lyman aligned himself with various European art schools and freethinkers’ associations and in his numerous writings for Canadian newspapers and magazines insisted that students be exposed to international modernism and the formal properties of painting. He was opposed to art whose content was driven by spirituality and the fixation on representing the nation’s spirit through landscape paintings.¹³

Some of the most innovative Canadian painters between 1920 and 1940, such as Kathleen Munn (1887–1974), Bertram Brooker (1888–1955), Emily Carr (1871–1945), Jock Macdonald (1887–1960), Fred Varley (1881–1969), and David Milne (1882–1953),¹⁴ were motivated by spiritual ideas. In the 1930s



2 | Miller Brittain,
Sermon on the Mount,
1947, pastel and gouache
and pencil on paper, 63.5
× 47.9 cm, Beaverbrook
Art Gallery, bequest of
Dr. Paul Toomik. (Photo:
Beaverbrook Art Gallery)

and 1940s, however, religious, metaphysical, mystical, and occult beliefs became increasingly suspect, largely because of their political association with the Nazi theory of Aryan supremacy. In the aftermath of the Second World War there was a pressing need to try to comprehend why things had gone so very wrong. The philosopher Theodor Adorno, in “Theses against Occultism” (1949), equated occultism with fascism and made a case that it was antagonistic to the healthy progress of Western culture.¹⁵ In his reflections on ethics and metaphysics, he emphasized that, “after Auschwitz,” philosophers had to find ways to explain meaning, truth, and suffering that neither denied nor confirmed the existence of God or a transcendent world.¹⁶

By creating paintings that image a more humane world, the artist Miller Brittain (1914–1968) exemplifies one approach to Adorno’s challenge, though no direct connection to his philosophical ideas can be assumed. Brittain was a bomb aimer in the Royal Canadian Air Force before becoming an Official War Artist¹⁷ and for him, the struggle for moral meaning was played out in his attempts to reconcile the horrors he had seen during his bombing missions over Germany with Christian thinking. A letter to his parents describes the apocalyptic-like destruction he witnessed as “an enormous lighted Christmas tree twenty miles away but straight beneath ... I have seen of the mouth of hell.”¹⁸ He reveals his struggle in only one painting, *Night Target Germany*, otherwise concentrating on the humanity of his fellow airmen in realistic conté drawings of their day-to-day activities in the barracks and close-up portraits that evoke the traumatic after-effects of battle.

For several years following his return to Saint John, New Brunswick, after the war, Brittain produced dramatic paintings of biblical imagery taken from the New Testament. The depiction of Christ’s faith and that of his followers and the juxtaposition of the sacred and profane in these figurative works resonate with the art and poetry of William Blake. Paintings such as *At the Foot of the Cross* (1947) and *Sermon on the Mount* (Fig. 2) demonstrate the artist’s intense feeling for Blake’s religious cosmology.

The artist Gershon Iskowitz (1921–1988), a Holocaust survivor who immigrated to Toronto in 1949, took a different approach to Adorno’s challenge by endeavouring to arrange his thoughts and actions so that “Auschwitz would not repeat itself, nothing similar would happen.” Although best known for his bold and luminously coloured abstract paintings, which represented Canada at the Venice Biennale in 1972, the appellation “Holocaust artist” pursued him throughout his life.¹⁹ After the war, Iskowitz made many attempts to communicate his version of the Shoah, experimenting with styles, techniques, and pictorial devices in his search to find the right way to express his experience. The most poignant of these works have a religious subject.

In *Yzkor* (Fig. 3) sorrowful figures in a burial mound hold on to one another in death. Here, the artist visualizes a line from the Yzkor prayer for the dead – “bound up in the bundle of life, with the souls of all the righteous men and women” – and in this way mourns the loss of his entire family and the people of Kielce, Poland, murdered in the Shoah. Iskowitz was influenced by Cabbalist beliefs as a child and thus the abstract landscape paintings that followed *Yzkor* can also be interpreted religiously, as a visualization of the colours and light crystals that manifest the Godhead and an expression of the union of the artist’s spirit with those who were killed.

For many Canadian artists during the 1950s and 1960s, modern art meant abstract painting and a dedication to purely aesthetic issues. This gave rise



3 | Gershon Iskowitz, *Yzkor*, 1952, watercolour, coloured ink, pen and black ink on illustration board, 30.9 × 40.9 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, no. 39915. Gift of Joey, Toby, and Alan Tanenbaum, Toronto, 1998. (Photo: © National Gallery of Canada)

to very different regional movements: Montreal's Plasticiens were principally oriented towards France and Europe in their singular interpretation of geometric abstraction, the Painters Eleven in Toronto looked south to the Abstract Expressionists artists of New York City, Vancouver painters favoured landscape-based lyrical abstraction strongly influenced by the British artist Graham Sutherland, the Prairies' Regina Five created bold, nonfigurative paintings,²⁰ and the Maritimes became a centre for Magic Realism with Alex Colville (1920–), Christopher Pratt (1935–), Mary Pratt (1935–), and Tom Forrestall (1936–).²¹

In the course of these developments many artists purposefully turned away from religion. Oscar Cahén (1916–1956), for example, who became a member of Painters Eleven, abandoned his somber figurative works of

religious subjects, such as *Praying Man* (1947) and *Praying Family* (1948), for vibrantly coloured abstractions.²² Other members of Painters Eleven made similar changes. Jack Bush (1909–1977) produced expressionistic paintings with emotional and religious themes in the 1940s before developing a cubist-like approach to abstraction.²³ Harold Town (1924–1990) shifted between figurative and abstract works before producing his erotic *Enigma* drawings in 1964. These were published in a limited edition with a short accompanying text in which he took issue with Protestantism for asserting that sexual pleasure was evil and with Catholicism for its stranglehold on Quebec society.²⁴

Interestingly, even as overt expressions of Judeo-Christian beliefs were being rejected, Roy Kiyooka (1926–1994),²⁵ an artist from Saskatchewan whose parents came from Japan, as well as three of the artists of the Regina Five – Kenneth Lochhead (1926–2006), Arthur McKay (1926–2000), and Ronald Bloore (1925–2009) – sought spiritual sustenance in the Japanese *wabi-sabi* appreciation of the transitory in nature.²⁶ These ideas, derived from Buddhist beliefs surrounding beauty, impermanence, and the integrity of natural processes, can be seen in pictures by these artists that are reminiscent of Zen Buddhist scroll paintings.

The categorical rejection of religion in modern art has been connected to the American art critic Clement Greenberg, one of the most influential art critics of the twentieth century.²⁷ For Greenberg, the reasons for a work's creation, its historical background, or the life experience of the artist were of little significance. His views, in conjunction with the tendencies of modernism, which encouraged the rejection of tradition, conservative values, and religious beliefs, were significant throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. His influence was felt by Canadian artists most directly on three occasions: in 1956, when he praised the Painters Eleven at the Riverside Gallery in New York City, where the artists were exhibiting with the American Abstract Artists; on his visit to Toronto in 1957, when he particularly admired the direct simplicity of Jack Bush's (1904–1977) watercolours; and in the summer of 1962, when he was invited to lead the Emma Lake Workshop in northern Saskatchewan.²⁸

Yet on closer inspection one discovers that spiritual concerns did not completely disappear from abstract art during this era. Jack Shadbolt (1909–1998), in 1955 the first instructor at the Emma Lake Workshop, continued to express the influences of his formative years in British Columbia: the symbolic mythology and material culture of the Northwest Coast Indians, Emily Carr's (1871–1945) paintings of abandoned Indian villages, and, most importantly for his abstract inventiveness, the concept of the artist as a shaman whose freedom to form imagery was akin to a creator of magic.²⁹

Ronald Bloore (1925–2009), a member of the Regina Five, was instrumental in inviting Barnett Newman, an Abstract Expressionist painter from New York, to lead the Emma Lake Workshop in 1959,³⁰ the year after Newman embarked on the first of his *Stations of the Cross*, a series of black and white paintings (1958–66) subtitled “Lema Sabachthani” – “why have you forsaken me” – the words spoken by Christ on the cross.³¹ Bloore, who appreciated the colours and forms of Byzantine paintings, identified with Newman’s interest in the sacredness of art and his belief in the use of symbolic elements such as light, shadow, textured surfaces, and a limited palette to communicate ethical and religious values.

Although abstract painting dominated the Canadian art scene in the 1950s and 1960s, representational art continued to have a prominent presence. Ernest Lindner (1897–1988), a Saskatoon artist and participant in the Emma Lake Workshop, was a realist painter who specialized in landscape painting. Nonetheless, he respected the works of the abstract artists who led the workshops and wrote in his assessment that “There is no question that the artists’ seminars at Emma Lake have caused the most important upsurge of creative work in those who participated. The intimate contact with contemporary New York artists of first rank and especially with the eminent art critic Clement Greenberg has been simply invaluable to all of us who took part in these seminars. I for one am deeply grateful for this ‘window’ to the larger contemporary art world.”³² Lindner’s paintings, often associated with the colour field works of the American artist Jules Olitski, who led the Emma Lake Workshop in 1964, are strongly connected with the transcendentalist artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is particularly evident in his emphasis on the mystical qualities of nature and his visual meditations on the life cycle of decay and renewal.

In his book *High Realism in Canada* (1974), Paul Duval considers Ernest Lindner to be a realist painter, significantly leaving out any reference to the spiritual characteristics of Lindner’s paintings. For Duval, “High Realism,” a term he coined to describe the works of such artists, had as its principal features “objectivity of vision, sharpness of definition, precision of technique, accuracy of detail, and excellence of craftsmanship.” While he grants that the artists bring to nature “a highly personal vision, style and technique,” religious, mystical, or spiritual intent is considered antagonistic to the realistic approach.³³

Duval brings the same limited viewpoint to the art of Jack Chambers (1931–1978), a realist painter and filmmaker who returned to London, Ontario, in 1961 after studying at the San Fernando Academia de Bella Artes in Madrid from 1954 to 1959 and travelling in Europe. Through the 1960s Chambers produced paintings that contained surrealist images and fused personal



4 | Jack Chambers, *Olga and Mary Visiting*, 1964–1965, oil paint and mixed media on Douglas fir plywood, 125.1 × 193.7 cm, Collection of Museum London, Purchase, Art Fund, 1965. (Photo: Courtesy the Chambers Estate and Loch Gallery)

experience and memory. In *Olga and Mary Visiting* (Fig. 4), for example, the pale tones, discontinuity between subject and background, and the handling of light and colour as spatial elements give the painting an otherworldly sense of interiority.³⁴ In 1969, the year he was diagnosed with leukemia, a dramatic change took place in his paintings – the visionary qualities of his earlier works were supplanted by intensely precise representations of family, home, the city of London, and the surrounding rural landscape. Although there is nothing specifically religious in Chambers’s works, the fact that he converted to Catholicism following his return from Spain, was very interested in Catholic iconography,³⁵ and drew on significant religious thinkers such as Johann Baptist Metz, Carl Rahner, Charles Webster Leadbeater, and Martin Buber in “Red & Green,” a manuscript on art and perceptual realism he worked on between 1971 and 1978,³⁶ denotes a profound religious sensibility. The manuscript, which includes a scrapbook of photocopied excerpts from philosophers of religion, as well as writings by mystics, saints, poets, novelists, prophets, and artists, is persuasive evidence of the spiritual credo and mystical aesthetic that energized Chambers’s art practice.

In fairness to Duval, it is possible that he failed to mention religious aspects because the artists were not ready to divulge such personal information. Only recently has Tom Forrestall, another artist in Duval's book, been forthcoming about his lifelong Christian sensibility. As Tom Smart writes in *Tom Forrestall: Paintings, Drawings, Writings*, which accompanied the retrospective exhibition organized by the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia in 2008, "More and more, as Forrestall probed the nature of his creative process, he came to understand that his art 'served God.'"³⁷

An overview of writing on Canadian art from the 1960s and 1970s reveals an attitude towards art and religion that was typical of the secular climate of the period. In 1963, in the magazine *Canadian Art*, George Wallace, in his review of two exhibitions – one at Regis College in Toronto, the other at the Jesuit Graduate Faculty of Theology at the University of Toronto – writes that he does not see a religious art of any great significance developing in Canada, though the fact these exhibitions were held indicates that the subject had not been forgotten.³⁸ In fact, most exhibitions on religious art during this period were held in religious institutions or sponsored by religious associations.

In 1966, Regis College hosted *Canadian Religious Art Today: An Exhibition of Contemporary Art/L'art religieux canadien d'aujourd'hui: une exposition d'art contemporain*, which consisted mainly of works produced expressly for the exhibition. Among the artists represented were Ronald Bloore (*Untitled*), Bruno Bobak (1923–) (*Lazarus*), Alex Colville (*Woman and Terrier*), Tom Forrestall (*The Twelfth Station* and *The Lost Souls*), Jack Humphrey (1901–1967) (*In the Beginning*), Ernest Lindner (*Forest Cathedral*), Kazuo Nakamura (1926–2002) (*Inner Structure*), Claude Roussel (1930–) (*Descent of the Spirit and Crucifix*), Harold Town (*Mechanical Nativity*), and Jack Shadbolt (*Ritual Blue*). In short texts accompanying the exhibition, which included laudatory comments by William Bothwell from the Christ Church Deanery in Montreal and Rabbi Gunther Plaut from Toronto's Holy Blossom Temple, Guy Viau, director of the Musée du Québec, lamented the state of contemporary religious art: "Our imagery suffers either from affectation, languor, wooliness, or from crudeness of expression and an aggressive bad taste." In the exhibition's new works he saw "the signs of a renewal of sacred art, a renewal which ought to concern all of us, artists and faithful."³⁹

Despite this call to action, the exhibition had little consequence. By this time art criticism had relegated religious sentiment to the realm of "folk" or "primitive" art. In 1974, in a text written for the National Gallery of Canada's exhibition *People's Art: Naïve Art in Canada/L'art populaire : l'art naïf au Canada*, J. Russell Harper links the religious paintings and carvings of "artisans" from Quebec's past to the works of Simone Mary Bouchard (1912–1945), an artist active in the 1930s and 1940s who had no formal



5 | William Kurelek, *Lest We Repent ...*, 1964, oil on pressed board, 68.60 × 53.30 cm, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, no. 09-006, George Taylor Richardson Memorial Fund, 1966. (Photo: Agnes Etherington Art Centre)

training.⁴⁰ Bouchard was considered to have an unsophisticated approach to representation in her genre scenes, which were imbued with religious feeling and featured the people and scenery in and around the Charlevoix region.

William Kurelek (1927–1977) was also seen from this perspective, despite having studied at the Ontario College of Art and the Instituto Allende in San Miguel, Mexico. In many of the articles published in the 1960s and 1970s about Kurelek, whose paintings recorded life on the Prairies, the religious messages they contain were attributed to his lack of concern for technique, his love of Ukrainian folklore, and his stay at a British mental institution, which precipitated his becoming a devout Catholic. Robert Ayre came to his defence in his 1974 review of Kurelek's books *A Prairie Boy's Winter*, *O Toronto*, and *Someone with Me*. He argues that the artist is actually an innovator because of "his rather antiquated notion that art should say something."⁴¹ A year later, in the article "Kurelek: Artist or Propagandist," Donald DeMarco agrees with Ayre in dismissing the oft-repeated criticism that Kurelek compromised his artistic purity by favouring religious symbolism, proposing instead that the artist, although a "religious painter," retained his integrity because he believed in the primacy of aesthetic values.⁴² Indeed, Kurelek conveyed some very difficult religious messages, as exemplified by *Lest We Repent ...* (Fig. 5). Kurelek believed that the artist was a messenger for God's word, revealing sin and corruption and encouraging people to follow a life of salvation. In this painting Kurelek chastises the grieving mother, set apart from the community of mourners in the cemetery, for refusing to accept a life dedicated to God. Her state of disbelief prevents her from recognizing that her dead child will have everlasting spiritual *life* after bodily *death*.

Similar to the attitude toward Kurelek as a "folk" artist, an anthropological approach prevailed when considering the "primitivism" of First Nations artists. In 1969, *Masterpieces of Indian and Eskimo Art from Canada*, the first major exhibition of Aboriginal Canadian art, was initiated by the Musée de l'homme in Paris.⁴³ None of the works were contemporary. In his review of the exhibition, Ronald Bloore pointed out that twentieth-century artists were interested in primitive art forms and suggested that contemporary Native art should be collected not by ethnographic institutions but by art galleries.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the mythic view of primitivism, in the sense of a search for original supernatural sources, persisted even as contemporary Native artists began to be recognized. This is exemplified in writing about Northwest Coast artist Bill Reid (1920–1998), who was born to an American father and a Native mother. Encouraged by the anthropologists Edmund Carpenter, Wilson Duff, and Claude Lévi-Strauss, Reid relearned the Haida traditions of jewellery-making and sculpture. In the sculpture *The*



6 | Bill Reid, *The Raven Discovering Mankind in a Clamshell*, 1970, boxwood, overall: 7.6 cm × 7 cm × 6.2 cm, Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, NBI.488. (Photo: Ulli Steltzer)

Raven Discovering Mankind in a Clamshell (Fig. 6), Reid depicts the Haida story of human creation.⁴⁵

In Reid's retrospective exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1974, the accompanying texts by Carpenter and Lévi-Strauss emphasized anthropology's achievements in relation to Reid's work, particularly its promotion of the historical study of cultural forms and the meanings of religious symbols and concepts.⁴⁶ Lévi-Strauss saw in Reid's accomplishments the spiritual reawakening of a dying people: "our debt to Bill Reid, an

incomparable artist, is that he has tended and revived a flame that was so close to dying.”⁴⁷

On 3 May 1971, a tape of a symposium on the relevance of religious subject matter in art and the meaning of sacredness for contemporary artists was aired on CBC Television; a transcript of the broadcast was edited by John Noel Chandler for publication in *artscanada*.⁴⁸ The participants were Father Benedict Ashley, a Catholic theologian and philosopher from the United States; Ronald Bloore, an abstract artist and university art teacher; Edmund Carpenter, an anthropologist well known for his Inuit and First Nations fieldwork and interest in visual media; Gregor Goethals, an American artist and art historian interested in the religious implications of secular images and rituals in popular culture and high art; Gary Lee-Nova (1943–), a Vancouver artist and experimental filmmaker; and Gene Youngblood, a theorist of media arts and politics and a founding member of the Faculty of Film and Video at the California Institute of the Arts.

Ashley insisted that for religious art to be sacred it had to raise questions. Characterizing modern artists as creators, he explained that inventiveness – the possibility of creating something new in the world – was what constituted the sacred questioning aspect of art. Bloore emphasized that the “function of art has been to really communicate ethical, religious values and it can be done with a landscape or it can be done with a portrait. It doesn’t have to be the face of a saint or Christ or Buddha or what have you.” Carpenter argued that it is the “thought association” that makes works sacred and explained that he avoids words such as art and sacred, as do Native people, who have no word for art or religion, though they treat the environment as largely supernatural. Emphasizing the importance of creating images that evoke a sense of ethical action, Goethals said that “this would be a very wide kind of imagery and could be created by artists who have no particular association with a special religious community but would give a sort of common sense of humanity.” Lee-Nova contended that sacred artefacts such as a Tibetan prayer wheel contributed to the “maintenance of order in the universe” and that art, to be re-associated with sacredness, had to be removed from the context of the museum and gallery and be reintegrated into the world to create a “sacred environment.” Youngblood focused on the “incredibly destructive” concept of a “man-made world” and, in agreement with the other participants, pointed out that sacredness requires communication and the fundamental knowledge that as human beings we need to bring integrity to our relationships with nature and one another.

Significantly, not one of the participants referred to Judeo-Christian belief systems. The rediscovery of the divine came instead from the subtle influences of Aboriginal, African, Asian, and other non-European religions,



7 | Pat Martin Bates, *Stars Beyond Stars for Rumi in the First Silent Place*, 1971, 118.1 × 67.9 cm, perforated, embossed, print on paper, University of Lethbridge Art Gallery. (Photo: University of Lethbridge Art Gallery)

the artist's experimentation with art-making, and art-making that was responsive to the community and environment. Learning from images associated with the "primitive" world, in which life, art, and religion cohere into a sense of oneness, was a recurring theme in the discussion.

These opinions were consistent with notions circulating at the time about art theory and criticism. In the same issue of *artscanada* were related articles by P.K. Page and Dorothy Cameron. Page's "Darkinbad the Brightdayler: Transmutation Symbolism in the Work of Pat Martin Bates" focused on the artist's perforated paper works.⁴⁹ Analyzing *Stars Beyond Stars for Rumi in the First Silent Place* (Fig. 7), Page makes it clear that the non-Christian religious influence in these works by Bates (1927–) is permissible because the artist's orientation is mystical and unique. She writes: "It is by relating Bates' work to the art, architecture and literature of the Middle East that it reveals its deepest meanings ... the pierced domes of Muslim mosques and the writing of Jalaludin Rumi, twelfth-century Persian poet to whom many of her works are dedicated." That Bates felt a connection to Rumi, a theologian and Sufi master who believed passionately that music, poetry, and dance were ways of reaching God, was acceptable. On the other hand, Christian sources were not. In Cameron's interview with Tony Urquhart (1934–), the artist explains that some of his favourite works of art are the "dark age" churches of Ireland, the Baroque and Rococo churches of Bavaria, and the graves of French and Spanish cemeteries. Cameron quickly qualifies his statement by interjecting that "the theme of Urquhart's art is of course, not religion, but the paradox and process of metamorphosis" even though *Rocamadour I* (Fig. 8), referencing a church-like building with wings, was clearly inspired by a visit the artist made to this pilgrimage town in France.⁵⁰

In 1973, Terrence Heath published an article in *artscanada* about Otto Rogers (1935–), who had adopted the Baha'i faith.⁵¹ "The Cosmic Landscapes of Otto Rogers" opens with an expression of Heath's discomfort with religion, even when the artist indicates its influence in straightforward terms:

The difficulty of talking to Otto Rogers about art is that he does not think that painting should be discussed in terms of form but rather in terms of content. He speaks of paintings as messages, and that pulls the carpet out from under any art critic's feet, and of a good number of artists as well. If you let him have his way you end up talking about God and the spiritual life; if you fight to keep the paintings central, you begin to think of yourself as an idolater or crass materialist.

After "several bouts" Heath was finally able to discover "a pivotal point" at which it was possible "to stand with some certainty and face both Rogers's



8 | Tony Urquhart, *Rocamadour I*, 1970, wood, oil, plexiglass, found objects, 162.6 × 50.8 × 40.6 cm (wings closed); 162.6 × 74.9 × 40.6 cm (wings open), National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, no. 16892. (Photo: © National Gallery of Canada)

paintings and his words without distortion – or at least with a minimum of distortion.” Only by removing the artist from the works of art and focusing on the fact that paintings revolved “around an observer” could Heath dismiss the artist’s spiritual beliefs and detach the works’ meaning from their religious context to provide an objective formal analysis.

Since the 1980s, contemporary artists working with religious subject matter have found this domain to be a place of experimentation and challenge compatible with transgressions of traditional aesthetics and also of political, cultural, and social norms. Possibly the best examples of this development in Canadian art can be found in Father Daniel Donovan’s eclectic collection of more than 150 works by over sixty Canadian artists.⁵² Donovan, a professor of theology at St. Michael’s College of the University of Toronto, kept his collection in his living quarters until 1999, when it was installed in the college’s newly renovated Odette Hall. The works differ in style, technique, and medium, with some deploying traditional religious symbols and others evoking a more personal visual language.

The titles of the works in the collection attest to the wide spectrum of religious references used by Canadian artists since the 1980s. We find allusions to Christian theology in *Twelfth Station* (1996–97) by Michael Amar (1948–) and *Schriftbilder: Gothic (Wulfila: The Gospel of Saint Mark)* (1999) by Angela Grauerholz (1952–), and to Judaism in *Moses* (1998) by John Scott (1950–) and *Yahweh* (1994) by Simon Glass (1956–). The title of *Noche oscura (à St-Jean de la Croix) #1* (1992) by Roland Poulin (1940–) translates as “the dark night of the soul,” the metaphor used to describe a period of loneliness and desolation in a person’s spiritual life. *Akedah (The Sacrifice of Isaac)* (1994) is an abstract work by Leopold Plotek (1948–) that expresses a primal, almost incomprehensible drama (Fig. 9). Here, daytime has been transformed into nocturnal darkness and terror. Hints of physical forms reveal the hand of Abraham lit by a powerful current of red light and the head of Isaac lying immobile beneath a stack of boards. The fluttering of a blue bird-like shape hovering above Isaac’s head specifies the intervention from above that prevented Abraham from plunging the sacrificial knife into his son. Sorel Cohen’s (1936–) *Gothic Lament* (1988) combines two iconic images, a photo of the Brooklyn Bridge from the 1930s and a colour reproduction of the sixteenth-century crucified Christ at the centre of the Isenheim Altarpiece by Matthias Grünewald,⁵³ bringing to mind the suffering inflicted by modern industrial society as well as Christ’s hidden presence in this secular world. It also contains Cohen’s response to the revelation of the fourteenth-century visionary Saint Catherine of Siena that Christ is the soul’s bridge to God.

The existence of such works does not necessarily mean that the artists want to be understood as embracing specific beliefs or the practices of a



9 | Leopold Plotek, *Akedah (The Sacrifice of Isaac)*, 1994, oil on canvas, 227.3 × 172.7 cm, The Donovan Collection at St. Michael's College, University of Toronto. (Photo: Leopold Plotek)

particular religion. Many artists continue to resist being categorized as religious adherents and dislike having their work analyzed from a religious point of view. The works in Father Donovan's collection, which range from figurative and landscape to abstract images and contain subjects that reference biblical, theological, and religious philosophy, do, however, signify a new



10 | Joanne Tod, *Flag for a State of Perpetual Motion*, 1988, oil on canvas, 213.4 × 269.3 cm, private collection. (Photo: Peter MacCallum)

perspective. This standpoint is most readily defined as postmodernism, a concept generally believed to have become important in the early 1970s.⁵⁴ It has been interpreted as an intentional departure from modernist approaches that developed as a revolt against the “traditional” forms of art, religious faith, and conventional society. Characterized by an interest in revisiting beliefs, periods, and styles from the past and an emphasis on being attentive to the countless individual and community stories of different people and their cultures, postmodernist thought holds that realities are social constructs that are changeable over time and in different places.

In *Remembering Postmodernism: Trends in Recent Canadian Art* (1991) Mark Cheetham and Linda Hutcheon examine the manifestations of postmodernism as “reactions to art’s history, the construction of the subject, and the social uses of memory.”⁵⁵ Through a detailed analysis of works by a diverse selection of Canadian artists the authors also reveal some of the



11 | Jennifer Macklem, still images, *L'Histoire de l'albatross*, 7:40 min, stop animation/video, 2008. (Photo: Jennifer Macklem)

ways that Canadian artists have responded to religious themes. For instance, Evergon (1946–), a photographer whose identity as a gay male is central to his work, mocks the art historical tradition of the male nude in religious art.⁵⁶ *Boy with Ingrown Tattoo* (1971), a photograph of a well-built young man in an outdoor setting, transforms the classical and Baroque renditions of Saint Sebastian by using ironic connotations that both inscribe and disrupt the memory of its Christian message. By bringing the homoerotic sexuality implicit in this religious image to the fore, the artist transforms parts of the time-honoured representations of Saint Sebastian.

Much of the visual discourse in contemporary art is associated with satire, irony, paradox, provocation, and playfulness. Artists who work with religious subjects have discovered that these same elements can be part of their own explorations, even if the resulting artworks cannot be designated as straightforward religious art. Others have dared to rediscover making a place for investigating the hidden dimensions of reality and self in ways that are consonant with the traditional purposes of religion. Joanne Tod (1953–), Jennifer Macklem (1960–), and Adrian Gorea (1979–) are Canadian artists who take new and different approaches to religion.

Joanne Tod's realist paintings confront key social issues such as power, racism, and cultural imperialism.⁵⁷ She focuses on the “re-presentation” of images appropriated from popular media, using devices such as improbable composites of subjects and peculiar texts and titles that contain alternative meanings to prompt her viewers to question the picture's artifice and its underlying significance.⁵⁸ When religious imagery infiltrates these paintings,



the context is unsettling and problematic. In *Flag for a State of Perpetual Motion* (Fig. 10), the collective religious vitality of a crowd of praying Muslim men appears to summon up an oriental vase in the form of a huge boulder that hovers in mid-air. Two strangely striped Stars of David sit on either side of the boulder, almost like rivets that are preventing it from exploding on the men. The overhead perspective is reminiscent of images seen on television in Asia and the Middle East. Tod suggests that electronic media systematically categorize the “other” with emblematic fragments that connote fanaticism and conflict.

In our daily lives, through media of all kinds, we are confronted with questions about faith. A wide array of concerns, from the personal and social to those dealing with science, nature, and the environment, are often characterized as religious or spiritual. This is the issue Jennifer Macklem addresses in her video short, *L'Histoire de l'albatross* (Fig. 11).⁵⁹ Reflecting on the environment from a spiritual stance, she challenges the notion that religion is an unacceptable subject of discourse for the artist. The narrative is loosely based on Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), which contains the phrase “Instead of the cross, the Albatross/About my neck was hung.” The mariner kills an albatross, a bird that is often interpreted as a symbol of the Christian soul, and is forced to wear it around his neck as a sign not only of his suffering as a result of killing the bird but also his regret. The video shows layers of Macklem's hand-drawn stop-motion animation superimposed onto the artist's photographs of the coast of Newfoundland, which she later altered. The artist re-envisions Coleridge's



12 | Adrian Gorea, *My dear baby, do you know my name?*, 2010, gold leaf, acrylic, on wood panel, 21 × 28 cm, private collection. (Photo: Adrian Gorea)

poetic references to transcendence, redemption, guilt, and penance to evoke anxiety about the environment and fears of a technology-driven eschatological collapse.

Adrian Gorea's decision to appropriate Byzantine icons for new purposes arose from his experience as a Byzantine iconographer in Romania, where he painted religious murals and icons for a number of churches.⁶⁰ Following the Byzantine techniques of symbolic realism, in particular the use of light, inverse perspective, gesture, and colour, his icons reframe the methods of the Orthodox icon painters in order to establish an aesthetic inquiry that is an alternative to consumer aesthetics. Through the strategic use of popular culture images, such as Walt Disney's Looney Tune characters, selected because of the cultural influence of the Disney corporation, he creates unusual icons intended to precipitate self-exploration and analysis, in much the same way traditional icons are expected to affect the viewer. For example, in *My dear baby, do you know my name?* (Fig. 12), the head of baby Jesus has been replaced with the face of Hector the Bulldog and the bottom part of the Virgin Mary's face is wrapped tightly with rope, covering her mouth like a veil, a reference to Byzantine iconography in which the mouth symbolizes speaking holy wisdom. The Virgin Mary's hands are monster-like, provoking fear, which is also invoked by the hellish expressions on the two grim angel-faces of Bugs Bunny and Marvin Martian situated in the top corners of the icon. Gorea does not consider that his work either affirms or disavows religion. Rather, his artistic direction is driven by the complex meaning of the icon as a sacred narrative and its power for change and renewal.

Despite the opposition to religion in art and the resistance to writing about art from this perspective, religion in its different expressions, approaches, and interpretations appears to have once again become a recognized part of contemporary art practice. Artists in Canada are interested in producing works of art that explore, criticize, and counteract what they see and experience as the diverse manifestations of religion in a changing society.

NOTES

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Crucifix, and to suggest Friedrich Nietzsche's belief that "man needs what is most evil in him for what is best in him."

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Rejet et renouveau : l'art et la religion au Canada (1921–2010)

LOREN LERNER

En 1979, Tim Clark (n. 1943) a interprété *A Reading of "On Obedience and Discipline" from The Imitation of Christ, by Thomas à Kempis* (« Sur l'obéissance et la discipline, de *L'Imitation de Jésus Christ* par Thomas à Kempis »). La main gantée, dans la performance de Clark, était une référence au Docteur Folamour, personnage interprété par Peter Sellers dans le film satirique de Stanley Kubrick, *Docteur Folamour ou comment j'ai appris à ne pas m'en faire et à aimer la bombe* (1964). Clark a cessé de citer des textes religieux quand il s'est rendu compte que les artistes qui focalisaient sur la religion risquaient de voir les enseignants, les autres étudiants et les critiques d'art refuser de s'y intéresser, quand ils n'étaient pas ouvertement hostiles. Le premier exemple canadien d'un rejet de l'art religieux, et le plus influent, est Paul-Émile Borduas (1905–1960), chef de file du mouvement automatiste au Québec et auteur principal du *Refus global* (1948), qui dénonçait l'identité collective catholicocentriste du Québec. Le rejet de la religion organisée, chez Borduas, reflétait la philosophie de nombreux peintres canadiens entre les années vingt et cinquante, parmi lesquels des enseignants en art. Au cours des années trente et quarante, les croyances religieuses, métaphysiques, mystiques et occultes sont devenues de plus en plus suspectes, généralement à cause de leur association avec la théorie nazie de la suprématie aryenne. Le philosophe Theodor Adorno, associe l'occultisme au fascisme et soutient qu'il est contraire à un sain progrès de la culture occidentale. Miller Brittain (1914–1968), bombardier dans la Royal Canadian Air Force avant de devenir officiellement artiste de guerre, en créant des tableaux qui représentent un monde plus humain offre l'exemple d'une approche au défi d'Adorno. Gershon Iskowitz (1921–1988), survivant de l'Holocauste émigré à Toronto en 1949, a pris un chemin différent en cherchant à communiquer dans de nombreux dessins sa version de la Shoah. Pour plusieurs artistes canadiens au cours des années cinquante et soixante, l'art moderne signifiait se consacrer exclusivement à des questions d'esthétique. Pourtant, en y regardant de plus près, on découvre que les questions spirituelles n'ont pas entièrement disparu de l'art canadien durant cette époque. Roy Kiyooka (1926–1994), artiste de la Saskatchewan dont les parents étaient originaires du Japon, cherchait un

soutien spirituel dans l'esthétique japonaise du *wabi sabi* et sa compréhension du transitoire dans la nature. Jack Shadbolt (1909–1998) continuait d'exprimer les influences de ses années d'apprentissage en Colombie-Britannique, la mythologie symbolique et la culture matérielle des Amérindiens de la côte nord-ouest. Ronald Bloore (1925–2009) appréciait les couleurs et les formes des peintures byzantines et croyait à l'utilisation d'éléments symboliques tels la lumière, l'ombre, les surfaces texturées et une palette restreinte pour communiquer des valeurs éthiques et religieuses. Ernest Lindner (1897–1988) mettait l'accent sur les qualités mystiques de la nature, Jack Chambers (1931–1978), sur son intérêt pour l'iconographie catholique, et Tom Forrestall (n. 1936), sur son fort attachement à une sensibilité chrétienne. Un survol de ce qui s'est écrit sur l'art canadien depuis les années soixante et soixante-dix, révèle que la critique d'art a relégué le sentiment religieux au domaine de l'art « populaire » ou « primitif ». Les messages religieux dans les peintures de William Kurelek (1927–1977) sur la vie dans les Prairies étaient généralement attribués à son amour pour le folklore ukrainien et à son séjour dans une institution pour malades mentaux, en Angleterre, qui aurait précipité son choix de devenir un fervent catholique. De la même manière que l'on considérait Kurelek comme un artiste « populaire », un point de vue anthropologique prévalait concernant le « primitivisme » des artistes des Premières Nations, comme on peut le voir dans les écrits à propos de l'artiste de la côte nord-ouest, Bill Reid (1920–1998). Le verbatim d'un symposium de la CBC dans le numéro de 1971 d'*artscanada* sur la pertinence des sujets religieux en art et le sens du sacré pour les artistes contemporains, révèle qu'aucun des participants n'a fait référence au système de croyances judéo-chrétien. La redécouverte du divin est plutôt venue des subtiles influences des religions aborigènes, africaines, asiatiques et autre religions non européennes. Dans le même numéro d'*artscanada*, P.K. Page dit clairement que l'influence religieuse non chrétienne dans l'œuvre de Pat Martin Bates (n. 1927) est permise parce que l'orientation de l'artiste est mystique et uniquement reliée à l'art, à l'architecture et à la littérature islamiques du Moyen-Orient. De même, dans l'interview de Dorothy Cameron avec Tony Urquhart (n. 1934), lorsque l'artiste explique que certaines de ses œuvres d'art préférées sont les églises irlandaises du haut moyen-âge, les églises baroques et rococo de Bavière et les tombes des cimetières de France et d'Espagne, Cameron se hâte d'apporter des réserves à sa déclaration en déclarant que « le thème de l'art d'Urquhart est, naturellement, non pas la religion mais le paradoxe et le processus de la métamorphose ». Dans un article de 1973 d'*artscanada* à propos d'Otto Rogers (n. 1935), qui s'était converti au bahaïsme, Terrence Heath a dit ressentir un profond malaise lorsque l'artiste discutait de religion. Depuis les années quatre-vingt, cependant, les artistes contemporains qui s'inspirent de sujets

religieux ont trouvé que ce domaine est un lieu d'expérimentation compatible avec les transgressions de l'esthétique traditionnelle ainsi que des normes politiques, culturelles et sociales. Les meilleurs exemples de ce développement peuvent sans doute se trouver dans la collection éclectique du père Daniel Donovan de plus de 150 œuvres par plus de soixante artistes canadiens, qui vont du figuratif et du paysage aux images abstraites, et qui contiennent des sujets se rapportant à la philosophie biblique, théologique et religieuse. Le point de vue de ces artistes a été interprété comme postmoderne par son éloignement délibéré des approches modernistes et son intérêt pour les croyances, les périodes et les styles du passé. Ainsi, dans *Remembering Postmodernism: Trends in Recent Canadian Art* (1991), Mark Cheetham et Linda Hutcheon analysent *Boy with Ingrown Tattoo* (1971) par Evergon (n. 1946), photographe dont l'identité homosexuelle est au centre de son œuvre, en montrant comment sa photographie d'un jeune homme musclé transforme les représentations classiques et baroques de saint Sébastien en utilisant des connotations ironiques qui inscrivent et dérangent à la fois le souvenir de son message chrétien. Joanne Tod (n. 1953), Jennifer Macklem (n. 1960) et Adrian Gorea (n. 1979) illustrent des perspectives nouvelles et différentes sur la religion. *Flag for a State of Perpetual Motion* (1988) de Tod s'attaque à des questions sociales clés comme le pouvoir, le racisme et l'impérialisme culturel. La brève vidéo de Macklem, *L'Histoire de l'albatros* (2008), est une réflexion sur l'environnement d'un point de vue spirituel, et *My dear baby, do you know my name?* (2010), de Gorea, s'approprie des icônes byzantines et des images de la culture populaire pour révéler le sens complexe de l'icône comme récit sacré et son pouvoir de changement et de renouveau.

Traduction : Élise Bonnette