

Modern Art and the Life of a Culture and The Forge of Vision —An Extended Review

By Stephen Westich

Jonathan A. Anderson and William A. Dyrness. *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture: The Religious Impulses of Modernism.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016. 376 pp. \$24.00, ISBN 9780830851355.

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David Morgan. *The Forge of Vision: A Visual History of Modern Christianity.* Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015. xiv + 407 pp. \$39.95, ISBN 9780520286955.

Many writers have found reason to unleash withering rejections of certain artworks of their time. Writers such as Leo Tolstoy, Max Nurdau, and Hans Rookmaaker did this for social, psychological, and religious reasons respectively. For them, certain trajectories in the various modern art worlds they observed were evidence of decline. Of note is the fact that though social and psychological accounts of modern art and artists abound, religious accounts are harder to find. Even when the subject matter is overtly religious, such as Paul Gauguin's *Yellow Christ*, scholarly discussions tend to be formal, social, or psychological instead of theological. The books *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture* by William Dyrness and Jonathan Anderson and *The Forge of Vision* by David Morgan offer just such a theological perspective.

Modern Art and the Life of a Culture: The Religious Impulses of Modernism by theologian William Dyrness and art critic and artist Jonathan Anderson appears in the new InterVarsity Press series *Studies in Theology and the Arts*, edited by David McNutt. Though the two authors are in one accord, the book has two sides. On one hand, it is a response to and critique of Hans Rookmaaker's 1970 work *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*. This side of the book has a few goals rolled into one. The motivation for this critique is the divide that the authors see as having arisen between the Christian church and the art world particularly in the past few decades. In order to overcome this divide, Dyrness and Anderson want to undo what they see as damage done by Rookmaaker's influential claims that the trajectories of modern art are incompatible with Christianity and that Chris-

tians should combat this, not by engaging the art world, but by making separate, Christian artwork. This makes the first, and I believe primary, demographic for this book Christians and especially those Christians who have found the world of modern art to be antagonistic to their faith. Focusing specifically on the painting of the North Atlantic world between 1850 and 1970, Anderson and Dyrness explain that many of the artists and artworks that Rookmaaker and many after him assumed to be proponents of nihilism and absurdity were in fact often strong allies to the Christian faith. This leads us to the second function of the book.

The other demographic that Anderson and Dyrness have in mind with this book is the world of art historical discourse which they find to be unforgivably secular in the offered narratives. The authors show that not only should Christians feel free to engage with the modern art world, but that the art world itself has been deeply influenced by Christianity in its development. To think of the development of the modern art world, whether in Europe or North America, as an atheistic reaction to the nihilism following World War II is a narrative simplistic to the point of invalidity. On the contrary, many modern artists were deeply shaped by their religious belief and experience and consequently, argue the authors, so was their art. Sometimes this was a direct influence, such as in the case of Caspar David Friedrich who was interpreted by Rookmaaker as having lost faith in Christianity and turning to existential despair in his paintings such as *Monk by the Sea*. Anderson and Dyrness show that on the contrary, Friedrich was striving specifically for a theological reading heavily shaped by his Pietist upbringing. Other examples are more indirect, such as in the work of Gustave Courbet. Courbet was not a Christian and did not have Christian values in mind while painting. However, the social views that did shape his work were directly influenced by the piety of his close friend Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. In this way, Christianity was an important factor in Courbet's development, which is a part of the narrative often left untold.

For most of *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture*, the authors are able to accomplish both goals at once. If they can demonstrate that Courbet or Friedrich were heavily influenced by Christian theology, then no more need be said to convince reluctant Christians to appreciate and approve of their work. However, on a couple occasions, the discussion is limited to a demonstration not of an influence of Christianity on the work, but simply that a work can still be appreciated by Christians. Such an example is the discussion of Paul Cézanne. The authors do make mention of his very late conversion, but admit that there is no reason to think that there is a Christian influence on his painting. Instead, they point out that his work is not necessarily oppositional to Christians. In a similar vein, in the discussion of Pablo Picasso, the authors mention his Catholic upbringing and point out that the typical narrative of his Communism is flawed; but there is again only the suggestion that his work need not be understood as oppositional to Christian ideals. The discussion of these two artists certainly seems to fall into the role of speaking more specifically to Christians than to the art historical world.

This leads me to assume that this is the primary aim of the book.

The authors bring up a number of examples that show how deeply Christianity shaped the “grain” of modern art. This includes fruitful and illuminating discussion on artists such as Piet Mondrian and Andy Warhol. Often the authors show that the works of these artists, sometimes thought of as iconoclastic, are fruitful for theological meditation. The book successfully rebuts claims that Rookmaaker makes and presents a more charitable view of modern art to today’s Christians while sternly interrogating the art world’s lack of engagement with the faith of these artists.

Perhaps a welcome addition to the book would be a few more examples as foils. There is brief mention of the Luminists, Fitz Henry Lane and John Frederick Kensett, and the tensions between their Emersonian metaphysics and the Protestant spiritualism of Frederic Edwin Church. But are there artists who truly were nihilistic and absurd? If so, can there be dangerous pictures? What about artists, such as Marsden Hartley, who claimed that his work, while sometimes including religious imagery, was simply an exercise in solving formal, painterly problems? This book goes a long way in rebutting Rookmaaker and the art world. However, if a primary demographic for this book is Christians who are reluctant to engage modern and contemporary art, questions remain: How should a Christian evaluate modern art? Is it important to understand an artist’s biography before engaging with their work? Is it a matter only of finding reference points for faith in the piece? Of course the answers are not simple. I think that Dyrness and Anderson would be pleased to discover believers previously suspicious of modern art thinking carefully about these questions in a more optimistic way.

As for its other purpose, *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture* does not claim to be a revisionist history, but instead is a book that asks some hard questions of the art historical world about the unfortunate omission of religion as a shaping influence on the development of modern art. These are questions that receive deep treatment from theologian David Morgan.

In his book, *The Forge of Vision: A Visual History of Modern Christianity*, Morgan—professor of Religious Studies and specialist in the study of visual culture in American history—sets out not only to demonstrate that Roman Catholic and Protestant theologies have been deeply involved in shaping the development of visual culture in America, but also to illuminate how this happened. He states that the purposes of his book are to present a “cultural history of the visuality of Christian thought and practice since the sixteenth century” and to argue that “this history of visuality contributed importantly to the shape of modernity.” The eponymous forge is a reference to both John Calvin’s “forge of idolatry” and to William Blake’s “Forge of Los,” which is featured on the front cover. Both of these examples frame the act of imagining in terms of the smithy, though with Calvin it is also a kind of forgery. Morgan finds these examples representative of two conceptions of imagination: that in which imagination is trustworthy and that in which it is untrustworthy. What Morgan is particularly interested in are

the ways these forges of imagination shaped ways of seeing. He believes that in modernity, there is a clear break from past forges of vision. The invention of the printing press, modern ideas of nationhood, and modern art are some of the concepts to which he turns his scholarly eye in this volume.

In the first part of the book, Morgan traces a fault line between the use of images in Roman Catholic and Protestant piety and to a lesser extent domesticity. What is important to Morgan is both the similarities of Roman Catholic and Protestant imaginations and the differences; in particular, the differences that arise from conflict between the two.

Under the title "The Shape of the Holy" Morgan sketches a brief history of Roman Catholic visuality. He comes to the conclusion that, for Catholics, that which is unseen is just on the outside of sensory experience. Sensory experience is at the beginning of a hierarchy of experience at the top of which is God himself. Therefore, continuity is implied. Morgan turns to the veneration of saints and the relics therefrom as representative of this kind of thinking. To venerate the relics of a saint is to believe in the fluidity of the seen and unseen realities. By contrast, in some Protestant traditions, imagery was banished from the churches, not to disappear, but to proliferate in domestic and educational spaces. In an argument that echoes William Dyrness's earlier *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), Morgan shows that images played an essential role in Protestant development from the very beginning.

Morgan has a very specific methodology in approaching these questions and does the favor of clearly laying it out to the reader. His microscope is the concept of "economies of the sacred." Morgan believes that there are a great number of advantages to analyzing the materiality of religion through this lens. There are a number of these sacred economies, but the ones that Morgan discusses in his book are: the power of words, the imagination of nationhood, visualizations of the likeness of Jesus, and the complex relationship between Christianity and modern art. Using these "economies," Morgan attempts to show both the relationships of the institution to God, the institution to the laity, the laity to each other, the laity to God, and significantly, institution to institution. These institutions are, in this context, the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches.

Morgan believes that the history of religion can be explained in terms of these economies. He emphasizes the economic nature of Catholicism and Protestantism in particular by pointing out the role of indulgences in the former and the concept of penal substitution and, later, a prosperity gospel in the latter. These examples show that the nature of religion, according to Morgan, is a system of exchange between humans and God. Images are a distinct form of currency within this exchange system.

A question that Morgan probes is how Jesus can be recognizable by those who have never seen him. The manner in which traditions of representation arose is one ripe for Morgan's methodology. Morgan identifies three modes of authority

in representing Jesus. The first is that of repetition. These are images that claim authority based on the fact they participate with the prototype in a literal way. Examples are the Veil of Veronica and the Shroud of Turin, but also depictions of the Veil of Veronica such as that by James Tissot. The theory of images espoused by John of Damascus explains why this repetition is not, like Plato attests, a loss of reality but a transposition of it. The second mode of authority is that of emulation. What Morgan has in mind here is exemplified in images of the stigmata of St. Francis, for instance. The authority comes via the saints. Jesus is recognizable as the one whom the saints are emulating. The third mode of authority is that of affinity. This mode Morgan sees as especially important for Protestants, but not at the exclusion of Catholics. In this mode, while Christians strive to be like Christ, they also have the tendency to image Christ like themselves. This balance of sameness and difference is what gives rise to the images of Christ that are at once ethnically diverse and recognizable.

In the last chapter, Morgan addresses modern art. He believes that many of the ideas fundamental to the development of modern art can be directly traced back to the forge of vision that was important to Roman Catholics and Protestants in the modern era. He states, "Without imagination as modernity has conceived it—as a faculty free from but not antagonistic to reason—modern art could not exist" (199). Morgan believes this subjectivity is a direct descendent of the practices of imagination of Catholics and Protestants before and into the modern era. He recognizes that Christianity had rival theories in the modern era from the ideas of German Romanticism. However, he shows that the Romantic Movement generated widespread interest in the return of religion to art. Groups such as The Brotherhood of Luke or the Nazarenes are examples. There was a widespread idea of artists such as Gauguin or Vincent van Gogh as priests or seers, at least as they are portrayed by contemporary art critic Albert Aurier. These symbolist painters were driven by a sense of alienation in the modern, industrial world and sought an escape through the spiritual. After the symbolists, modern artists such as Barnett Newman and Wilhelm de Kooning also sought transcendence in their art. It is here that Morgan addresses the important question of the relationship between the spiritual and the religious. He admits that many spiritual works of art are not religious and that works that use religious imagery are not necessarily doing so in an uncritical way.

The fact that religious art often has beauty as its aim, and that much modern art seems to have little use for beauty, is a major distinction. The problem is simply that the criteria for good art of faith and the criteria of good art for art's sake have often been considered to be quite discrete. However, Morgan does not accept the supposed disinterestedness of the art world. He believes that modern and contemporary art is judged by whatever social and political values are held by the titans of the art world. Because of this, they are likely to overlook or repress what they do not wish to see. For Morgan, it is not very important to measure the religion of an artist, but instead to look at the way Christianity has influenced

modern art, both in the continued use of religious motifs and the spiritual goals of these artists. Morgan believes that an attempt to understand the art world with no consideration of religion is not tenable.

Both of these books in their respective ways take aim at the art world for its reluctance to engage with religion as a continuously influential force on the development of art. For Dyrness and Anderson, this also involves a critique of Protestant views of art since the work of Rookmaaker. Anderson and Dyrness approach the question primarily from that point of view of artists' biographies, showing the influence of religion on these artists and their work. Morgan takes a much broader view in which he shows that the very conception of modern art is contingent upon ideas of imagination and self that were developed by Roman Catholic and Protestant sacred economies. After these books, it seems difficult to imagine a holistic teaching of modern art without a thorough involvement of the ways Christianity contributed to the development of modern ideas of art and its viewers.