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Reformation and the Secularization of Art

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Abstract: The article examines the Reformation as one of the sources of the secularization of art and simultaneously an impulse for new unintended developments with spiritual potential. It argues that the reformers' attitudes towards art helped facilitate the emergence and development of new secular subjects and renewed attention to ordinary life and its artistic reflection. In this way, it fostered a new kind of aesthetics, which some consider to be distinctly Protestant. At the center of this aesthetic is the reversal of hierarchies, affirming elements of life usually considered low and unworthy of aesthetic attention. Some view this kind of "iconoclasm" as not only Protestant but essentially Christian, as it reflects crucial Christian doctrines, namely the incarnation, where one image of God was destroyed in His becoming human. This newly emerged aesthetic is seen as both a product and a part of the transition from religious images to art in its own right, raising new questions about whether art on its own can be a source of spiritual impulses and thus opening the way towards the sacralization of art.

Keywords: Reformation; art; image; everyday life; the ordinary

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Introduction

This article examines the Reformation as one of the sources of the secularization of art, and simultaneously as an impetus for new unintended developments with spiritual potential. Before exploring this question, it is helpful to revisit the basic differentiation concerning the term "secular." In one sense (*vertical secularity*), art is always secular; whether it is Christian art or any other religious art, it remains worldly in the sense that it is not divine.[1] This basic ontological distinction is important to keep in mind when discussing this issue.

1 This distinction is elaborated in Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Transcendence and the Secular World. Life in Orientation to Ultimate Presence* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018). The puzzling case may be the so-called acheiropoieta – images made without hands, see Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), especially chapter 4. Heavenly Images and Earthly Portraits: St. Luke's Picture and "Unpainted" Originals in Rome and the Eastern Empire (47–77). But even if these would be made by God, they would still be distinct from Him as the rest of the creation.

In another sense (*horizontal secularity*), art can be divided into two categories: art concerned with religious themes and serving religious purposes, and secular art focused on worldly, non-religious matters – such as civic life, nature, and human experiences. Both of these horizontally distinct forms of art existed in European societies prior to the Reformation. However, during and after the Reformation, genres such as still life, landscape, and portraiture gained prominence, along with an increased focus on the theme of everyday life.[2]

The Reformation was not the sole factor in this development. The influence of the Renaissance and humanism, particularly in countries unaffected by the Protestant Reformation, is undeniable. Additionally, other social, cultural, conceptual, economic, and political changes also played a role. The impetus for this shift lies not only in evolving thought but also in material circumstances, which invariably influence cultural development and are, in turn, shaped by it. This interplay between material and conceptual factors is particularly significant in a subject like art, which is fundamentally a synthesis of both.[3]

Nevertheless, this article focuses on the influence of Protestantism, whose specificity seems to lie in a different rationale for this increase. The Protestant rejection of the Church's mediating role in humanity's relationship with God led to the abandonment of distinctions associated with horizontal secularity. Coupled with a strong emphasis on Scripture and its condemnation of images of God, the Reformation adopted a skeptical view of religious art and encouraged the promotion of secular themes.

The study illustrates, with reference to Charles Taylor and William Dyrness, that Protestantism played a role not only in secularization in general and, consequently, in the secularization of art, but also in the emergence of these new genres and the recognition of certain topics as worthy of attention and representation in art.

2 As William Dyrness suggests throughout his Origins of Protestant Aesthetics, the Reformation developed medieval attitudes in this regard and did not radically break up with them. William Dyrness, *The Origins of Protestant Aesthetics in Early Modern Europe. Clavin's Reformation Poetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

3 Ernst H. Gombrich in his classical text points to the role of technical innovation in the shift from "art telling sacred stories" to the one "reflecting a fragment of the real world". At the same time he emphasises that these two ideals do not necessarily clash. Ernst Hans Gomrich, *The Story of Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1951), 159, 177.

Another theme reopened during the Reformation was the image and the understanding of its function and power. The notion of the Reformation as iconoclastic is simplistic. Rather, the Reformation recognized the ambivalent nature of the image, as Joseph Leo Koerner argues.[4] The image negates itself by depicting something beyond itself, yet at the same time, this "beyond" can only be represented through the image. Even if, or perhaps because, the image negates itself, it gains value and importance by showing something beyond through its own representation.

The article proceeds by briefly recollecting important historical facts and ideas of the reformers, then presents Taylor's notion of the affirmation of everyday life and its development by Dyrness, and finally, the notion of the image in the Reformation as elaborated by Koerner and development of these topics by later scholarship. The aim is not to provide a historical description of this process but to explore this era in relation to the question of the religious potential of non-religious art.

Art and Reformation

The attitude of the Reformation towards the arts is difficult to generalize, as there are significant differences not only between Martin Luther and John Calvin but also among others like Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt and Ulrich Zwingli. However, it is fair to say that the Reformation's view on art changed radically from those held by the Western Church before, becoming much more reserved and skeptical about the nature and use of art, especially in places of worship. Christianity before the Reformation can be characterized as intensely sensual and full of imagery, with images being more than just pictorial texts. They were prisms of sacred power, sites of the presence of saints, and not purely passive objects of perception, as Peter Marshall puts it in an introductory text to the Reformation.[5] The position of art in Christianity thus came a long way, from its hesitant acceptance in the early centuries to the highly developed works of van Eyck, Grünewald, or the Renaissance masters in Italy in the century preceding Luther. As Marshall points out, secular commissions were already occurring in this age, but the greatest works were

4 Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004).
5 Peter Marschall, *The Reformation. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 94.

still devotional, with the Church being the biggest patron of art.[6] Sergiusz Michalski similarly claims that art was almost exclusively religious in Luther's time, and especially in Northern Europe, there was no division into secular and religious art yet.[7] In the sixteenth century, this changed, and the attitudes of the Reformers played a role in it. Michalski's work offers a comprehensive account of this process and is used in this part to provide a short overview of the most important attitudes, while the article of Reformers are quoted where needed. As it is not the main focus of this article, the discussion is restricted to the most important figures: Luther and Calvin.

Martin Luther

Martin Luther's views on images were multifaceted and evolved over time, influenced by current situations. His writings on art, like many others, were occasional and not systematic. In the early stages of the Reformation, in the *Lecture on Decalogue* (1516–1517), Luther opposed an iconoclastic interpretation of the first commandment – a point of difference between him and other reformers like John Calvin – and claimed that having images was not forbidden in itself. On the other hand, in the *Sermon on Usury* (1519–1520), he condemned unnecessary expenses for church decoration, raising the question of the social cost of art. In the *Sermon on Good Works* (1520), he criticized the attempt to buy one's way into heaven through the arts. This criticism was directed not against image worship in general but against the desire to gain salvation through endowing and worshiping images and sculptures. In particular, he sketched a difference between the worship of God done in faith and the one done without faith. When one bow, kneel or pray not before an idol, but before the holy cross of God or the pictures of His saint and it's done in a belief that God is gratuitous, then it is alright. On the other hand if it is done with an expectation of pleasing him through these works, "then it is all pure deception, outwardly honoring God, but inwardly setting up self as a false god."[8]

6 Ibid., 94–96.

7 Sergiusz Michalski, *The Reformation and the visual arts: the Protestant image question in western and eastern Europe* (London: Routledge, 1993), 2.

8 Complete quote: "Further, when we are dressed up and bow, kneel, pray the rosary and the Psalter, and all this not before an idol, but before the holy cross of God or the pictures of His saints: this we call honoring and worshiping God, and, according to the First Commandment, 'having no other gods'; although these things usurers,

In his famous treatise, *On the Freedom of a Christian* (1520), Luther was again against the visual and ceremonial elements of the church, indirectly opposing the cult of images as well. For him, changing the rites was proof of real freedom, but this did not mean rejecting them altogether.[9] Michalski sees Luther's attitude towards art as shaped by his notion of justification, which renders images as primarily indifferent in matters of salvation, which is achieved only by grace. Images become problematic when beholders hold salvific expectations from them.

This attitude deepened and clarified as the Reformation took an unintended direction. While Luther stayed at the Wartburg Castle (1521) under the solicitous care of the Elector of Saxony, iconoclastic riots, led by the radical followers Zwickau and Karlstadt, began in Wittenberg. When Luther returned from Wartburg to stop this movement, he began his *Lenten sermons*, which are of decisive importance regarding his attitude towards art.[10]

In the third sermon after Invocavit, Luther asserts his position clearly: "The situation with images is that they are not necessary, but free. We can have them or not, although it would be better if we did not have them at all. I am not fond of them either." Luther then recalls the conflict between Roman Emperor and the Pope concerning images, in which one wanted to get rid of them and the later to make them compulsory. Luther argues they were both wrong "because they wanted to turn freedom into a must and God cannot tolerate that." He proceeds by mentioning the prohibition of images in the Old Testament and their simultaneous presence – the altar, the bronze serpent or two Cherubim on the Ark of Covenant – exactly the place where God wanted to be worshiped, which complicates any final decision regarding images and their worship. Luther does not promote their worship in any case, but on the other hand, is convinced that by force, the idolatry cannot be undone and eradicated. He mentions Apostle Paul in Athens, who preached

adulterers and all manner of sinners can do too, and do them daily. […] Of course, if these things are done with such faith that we believe that they please God, then they are praiseworthy, not because of their virtue, but because of such faith, for which all works are of equal value, as has been said. But if we doubt or do not believe that God is gracious to us and is pleased with us, or if we presumptuously expect to please Him only through and after our works, then it is all pure deception, outwardly honoring God, but inwardly setting up self as a false god." *A Treatise on Good Works / Von den guten werckenn* D. M. L., WA, Vol. 6, 202–276.

9 Michalski, *Reformation and the visual arts*, 8.

10 Ibid., 13.

against idols, but did not remove any of them, and thinks he is doing the same. In conclusion he expresses a belief "that external things cannot harm faith. But the heart must not cling to them, must not trust in them."[11]

Luther therefore built upon the idea of Christian freedom present in his earlier work and argued that Christians do not have to immediately abolish existing ceremonies nor necessarily introduce new ones. Instead, they are free to deal with them with respect for the common good of the congregation, including those weak in faith who need images for sustenance.

Luther considered image to be not in "the domain of eternal religious truths, but in the domain of freedom, where all normative deliberations become an offense against God,"[12] that is a domain called *adiaphora*. By this reasoning, he recognized that shifting this issue from freedom to compulsion was akin to the old justification by works – something done to gain God's favor.

Michalski concludes that by 1525, Luther's attitude on this topic was set. After overcoming initial doubts, Luther became fully convinced that religious art should exist and saw a place for it in the new faith.[13]

On the other hand, even if religious art should have a place in Protestant faith and, in general, was part of the neutral field of *adiaphora*, the particular content of artworks was not irrelevant, as Franz Posset demonstrates in his analyses of the iconography of religious art in late medieval Germany and Luther's later writings. The significance of the content of images is evident in the issue of deësis. This intercession motif, which represents John the Baptist and Mary at the sides of Jesus as intermediaries praying for sinners, was criticized by Luther from his specific theological point of view.[14]

Posset highlights the popularity of this motif from around 1200 to the early sixteenth century, when it was attacked by Luther. This depiction of "intercession" at the Last Judgment was also employed by prominent painters of the Reformation era, such as Hans Holbein the Elder, Albrecht Dürer, and Lucas Cranach. However, it was questioned by artists even before Luther, notably by Hieronymus Bosch and Jan Provost. Through their compositions,

11 WA, vol. 10, III, 26–30.
12 Michalski, *Reformation and the visual arts*, 14.
13 Ibid., 29.
14 Franz Posset, "Martin Luther on 'Deësis'. His Rejection of the Artistic Representation of 'Jesus, John, and Mary'," Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme 20:3 (1996), 57–76, 57.

these artists suggested "that the time for intercession had passed" and, as Posset argues, "anticipated with their paintbrushes what Luther articulated with his pen."[15]

Posset quotes these articulations from Luther's sermons and *Table Talks* from 1531–1533[16] and identifies the primary reason for the Reformers' criticism of the deësis motif as its depiction of Mary as the *advocata* and John the Baptist as her assistant. In this portrayal, these figures intercede between Christ and the believer, which contradicts the central Protestant principle of *solus Christus* – Christ as the sole *advocatus* and mediator between God and humanity.[17] Luther, however, esteemed a different kind of depiction of Mary, namely:

> "if they enhanced his theology of the incarnation, and if they featured nothing but Mary as a humble woman. In contrast, he objected to any spirituality (and concurring depictions) which made Mary a mighty mother and which made her and saints like John the Baptist almost more important than Christ (as Luther perceived it)."[18]

Posset's iconographic analysis and exposition of Luther's judgments reveal a more nuanced differentiation in the Reformer's thinking on the subject of art. This differentiation pertains to the content and meaning of images, whose appropriateness is evaluated on the basis of theological criteria.

John Calvin

While Martin Luther's attitude towards images was influenced by his emphasis on justification by faith, John Calvin's stance was shaped by his emphasis on the authority, majesty, and incomprehensibility of God. Michalski claims that Calvin's lesser interest in Christology meant that for Calvin, Christology was subordinated to theology. It might not be a lesser interest in Christology,

15 Ibid., 62–64.

16 For example: "[…] St. John and Mary (are) asking Christ for us on the Last Day; and [that] the mother shows her breasts to the Son who sucked on them. This is taken from St. Bernard's book, and it is not spoken nor painted not done well by St. Bernard, and one should put away these depictions." Posset's translation from WA 33: 83, 25–42. Ibid., 64.

17 Posset gives the following verses, which served as support for Luther's position: "We have an advocate with the Father, the just Jesus Christ (1 John 2:1)", "God is one. One also is the mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus (1 Tim 2:5)". Ibid., 68.

18 Ibid., 66.

but rather an emphasis on the difference between Christ's two natures, which leads Calvin to not count some properties of Christ, such as visibility, as part of God's nature.[19] Making images of God was a huge misunderstanding of His essence. According to Calvin, "We are similar to God only in our souls, and no image can represent him."[20] To attempt to do so is to belittle His majesty. God is Spirit, and as such, no material, bodily image can represent Him. In Calvin's view, body and spirit contradict each other.

In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* he developed this position in detail in the Chapter 11 titled Impiety of attributing a visible form to God – The Setting up of idols a defection from the true God. Here he claims:

> "Meanwhile, seeing that this brutish stupidity has overspread the globe, men longing after visible forms of God, and so forming deities of wood and stone, silver and gold, or of any other dead and corruptible matter, we must hold it as a first principle, that as often as any form is assigned to God, his glory is corrupted by an impious lie."[21]

Calvin proceeds by emphasizing the difference in the essence of God and the material object, quoting Isaiah to highlight how absurd it is […] "when he who is incorporeal is assimilated to corporeal matter; he who is invisible to a visible image; he who is a spirit to an inanimate object; and he who fills all space to a bit of paltry wood, or stone, or gold."[22] He argues that although God sometimes manifested Himself in signs, these emphasized His ungraspable and unformable essence – the cloud, smoke, and flame – and denies that the Cherubim on the Ark could justify the existence of God's images as they themselves serve to hide Him and express how blasphemous it is to seek a vision of Him. He also refutes Gregory the Great's argument that images

19 Michalski, *Reformation and the visual arts*, 61–62. On the difference between Luther's and reformed Christology, see Petr Gallus, *The Perspective of Resurrection. A Trinitarian Christology* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021). Luther's emphasis is on the unity of the person, that is an alexandrian approach, which leads him to assertion that the sharing of divine and human properties is real, as the person is real, and not only verbal. The conclusions of this assertion are the doctrine of ubiquity of Christ's human body and the notion of the death of God on the cross. The reformed position is on the other hand more antiochian and stresses the difference of Christ's natures, which keep their attributes and the radical difference is maintained. 121–123; 136.

20 *Ioannis Calvini Opera Omnia*, ed. W. Baum, vol. 1–58 (Corpus Reformatorum), Braunschweig – Berlin 1863–1900, vol. 26, 150–1.

21 Jean Calvin and Henry Beveridge, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: Translated by Henry Beveridge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1953), 91.

22 Ibid., 91.

are the book of the unlearned, asserting that anything learned from images about God is futile and false, as it disrespects His character and majesty.[23]

Calvin acknowledges the difference between the supposed image of God and God Himself and believes that even the proponents of sacred images are aware of this distinction. They do not "actually believe them to be gods, but that the power of divinity somehow or other resides in them."[24] For Calvin, this distinction makes no difference because the power or presence of God cannot be connected with a material thing in such a manner.

Regarding the existence of images as such, Calvin is much more approving and does not consider all visible representations unlawful. He views sculpture and painting as gifts from God but insists they should be used purely and lawfully. This means they should not attempt to portray God because He has forbidden it, and any such attempt would compromise His glory. Visible things, on the other hand, can be represented in images and sculptures, which fall into two classes – historical and pictorial. The former can be used for instruction or admonition, while the latter are fitted for amusement. These are approved but should not be present in churches, as ancient churches did not have them either, and Calvin considers this age (the first five centuries) to be more pious. In the church, better symbols are the Baptism and Lord's Supper.[25]

It is interesting that Calvin argues almost solely from the Old Testament, quoting the prohibition of images (Ex, 20, 4–5) and prophets. He nowhere in this examination mentions the Incarnation, as Michalski points out, even though the incarnation played a significant role in the Byzantine strife over images.[26] As it was shown he did not see any benefit in keeping images for the sake of the weak, as Luther did, as it would only lead them into false anthropomorphism.[27] Although he did not completely reject the concept of a visible church and was in favor of some ornaments in church buildings, he regarded sacred images as dangerous due to their inherent idolatry and the superstition they fostered. The cult of images, according to Calvin, led to superstition and a misleading concept of God.[28]

23 Ibid., 92–94.
24 Ibid., 98.
25 Ibid., 100–101.
26 Michalski, *Reformation and the visual arts*, 66. Calvin sees the conclusions of the Council of Nice (787) nevertheless critically.
27 Ibid., 64.
28 Ibid., 68.

Michalski highlights two interesting aspects of Calvin's views on aesthetics: his attention to architecture and city planning, and his allowance for retaining images in private spaces. Calvin provided many concrete instructions on the appearance of churches and stressed the importance of "elegance and splendor" in city construction.[29] Outside of the church, he left space for religious images, especially narrative biblical scenes, and for secular art, as was pointed out above. He believed that by restricting religious images to the secular sphere, believers would not be misguided. Calvin argued, "Certainly, it is permissible to make use of images; however, God wishes his temple to be freed from images. If in a secular place, however, we have a portrait or a representation of animals, this is not harmful to religion […] even idols kept in such places are not worshiped."[30] He considered historical scenes, landscapes, and portraits appropriate subjects and genres of art because they are not venerated but could still be inaccurate and therefore should be restricted to the secular sphere.[31]

This judgment of Calvin fascinated many scholars, who, as Michalski notes, have seen him as a kind of spiritual director of the realistic current in the painting of the Calvinistic Low Countries. However, Michalski warns that this view is disputable, as several other influences were already in play. Nonetheless, he claims that "Dutch art on a general level profited, however, from the secularizing current inherent in Calvinism is, of course, another, quite well-known, matter,"[32] a point that will be explored more deeply in the next section of this article.

The Affirmation of Ordinary Life and Its Impact on the Arts

Before considering art in particular, it is useful to mention a significant related shift in societies influenced by the Reformation, especially by Calvinism. Charles Taylor characterizes this shift as the affirmation of ordinary life, listing it among three major facets of modern identity, alongside inwardness and the notion of nature as an inner moral source.[33] In *Sources of the Self*,

29 Ibid., 70.
30 *Calvini Opera*, vol. 40, 184.
31 Michalski, *Reformation and the visual arts*, 70.
32 Ibid., 72.
33 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 171.

Taylor argues that this affirmation developed in the early modern period, with the Reformation playing a significant role.

Taylor characterizes everyday life, affirmed during this era, as a life of production and reproduction, encompassing labor, marriage, and family. Historically, since Aristotle, these aspects of life were distinguished from those concerning a good life, which involved theoretical contemplation and participation in the polis. Merely maintaining life was not considered fully human.[34] Taylor focuses on the transition that challenges this hierarchy, positioning the locus of the good life not in a special range of higher activities but in everyday life, and criticizing previous "higher" activities.[35] He sees the origin of this transition in "the Judaeo-Christian spirituality, and the particular impetus it receives in the modern era comes first of all from the Reformation."[36]

The common concern of the Reformers was the rejection of the sacramental mediation, in favor of the mediation through the Word. The concern was not anymore which media are to bring up salvation and take the man to God, but how God mediates himself to humans. This paradigmatic shift led consequently to the rejection of the medieval understanding of the sacred.

The Reformation's emphasis that salvation comes from faith alone and is exclusively the work of God renders any differentiation between less and more devoted Christians, typical of the medieval framework, arbitrary. Whether one was a priest, carpenter, monk, or peasant did not bring one closer to God and salvation, which was only attainable through grace.

This recognition had consequences for the media of salvation – sacraments, mass, and the institution of the church in general. Taylor claims that the Reformers rejected the notion "that there are special places or times or actions where the power of God is more intensely present and can be approached by humans,"[37] and this rejection led to an enhanced status for profane life. The spiritual value was affirmed for lay life on behalf of the priesthood of all believers and Taylor strongly claims that "by denying any special form of life as privileged locus of the sacred, they [Protestant churches] were denying the very distinction between the sacred and profane

34 Ibid., 211–212.
35 Ibid., 213.
36 Ibid., 215.
37 Ibid., 216.

and hence affirming their interpenetration."[38] This positive account of the given development is crucial because it means that the fullness of Christian existence was to be found in one's everyday life, calling, marriage, and family. Taylor believes that "the entire modern development of the affirmation of ordinary life was, I believe, foreshadowed and initiated, in all its facets, in the spirituality of the Reformers."[39] This affirmation stems not only from the indifference of life roles but also from the belief that God, as the creator, affirms this life, as expressed in the first chapter of Genesis. Another biblical source for this reversal of hierarchies can easily be found in the anti-hierarchical character of the gospel.

This shift generated an ambiguous or perhaps dialectic relation to the world. Taylor mentions the Puritans' belief that we should love the things of this world, but our love should pass through them to their Creator.[40] Whether this or any other sophisticated relation to the world emerged, Taylor concludes that ordinary life was to be hallowed. He points out that this hallowing was different from the Catholic tradition, which connects it to the sacramental life of the church. In Protestantism, it came about within this life itself.[41]

Taylor elaborates on the development of these impulses in the new notion of calling, different from the idea of vocation, and its impact on civil and economic life and morality. However, for the purposes of this study, the more important consequences are for culture and particularly the arts. This issue is elaborated by William Dyrness, who explored the indirect impact of the Reformation on aesthetics in several works.[42] He challenges the common assumption that the Reformation represents only the reduction of sacramentals and places where believers can encounter God – such as altarpieces, saint plays, devotional images, or pilgrimages. Although this reduction is true,

38 Ibid., 217.
39 Ibid., 218.
40 Ibid., 221.
41 Ibid., 223.
42 William Dyrness, "God, language, and the use of the senses: the emergence of a Protestant aesthetic in the early modern period," in Sarah Covington and Kathryn Reklis (eds.), *Protestant Aesthetics and the Arts* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020); Idem, *The Origins of Protestant Aesthetics in Early Modern Europe. Calvin's Reformation Poetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 19–40.

he argues that the Reformation at the same time expanded the aesthetic possibilities of religious, and not only religious, life.[43]

The influence of the Reformation on aesthetics is predominantly in what Taylor described as the affirmation of ordinary life. Therefore, the major aesthetic shift was in the subject matter of the art and its place of display. The change towards secular genres and the relevance of secular patrons of art is clear even from a brief historical observation. The greatest example of this development is the Netherlands, where artists carried over the existing tradition of portraiture and pioneered the art of landscape and still lifes and "the truthful scenes of everyday life known as genre painting."[44] They could not paint for the churches, but they could paint the churches – producing architectural studies of ecclesiastical interiors. Another genre, where religious themes were accepted, was history painting, especially scenes from the Old Testament which were not tempting to devotion. Marshall claims that "Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69) was the undisputed master of these, giving the lie to any suggestion there is no such thing as Calvinist art."[45] He argues that Protestantism accelerated the separation of art and religion. Although the autonomy of art was not its concern, the conviction that art cannot express the divine or serve as a vehicle for grace helped in its liberation. At the same time, Marshall, similarly as Dyrness, notes that art benefited from this development as the range of possibilities expanded and "new vistas opened for the eye." On the other hand it was "at the price of accepting that there is no ultimate truth in art."[46]

Dyrness highlights other Dutch artist to show that, although the claim for ultimate truth may have been lost, the religious potential of even secular subjects was not. This example is Jacob van Ruisdael. In his painting *Three Great Trees in a Landscape*, we can see "a spiritual drama being played out: there is a broken-down house by the river and three stricken beech trees in the foreground."[47] The picture is interpreted as capturing the tension inherent in our conditions. It speaks about the dramatic presence of sin and fragility through the ruin and the general dark mood of the image on the one hand, and about the hope expressed through light breaking in the

43 Dyrness, *God, language, and the use of the senses*, 19.
44 Marshall, *The Reformation*, 103.
45 Ibid., 103.
46 Ibid., 104.
47 Dyrness, *God, language, and the use of the senses*, 31.

clouds and the men going out to labor on the other. The focus on nature is not on some scientifically neutral nature, but on nature as creation, which, Dyrness argues following Calvin, is both a theater for the glory of God and the dramatic site of sin and brokenness.[48] Additionally, van Ruisdael "offers an image that has extended aesthetic attention to the detailed examination of everyday life. For it is in the everyday life, Calvin claimed, that the drama of God's redemptive work is to be apprehended."[49] Therefore, Ruisdael and other Dutch painters represent one of the concrete manifestations of what Taylor calls the affirmation of ordinary life, foreshadowing later artistic tendencies and movements that transcend the realms of Protestantism's influence.

On the other hand, these works not only foreshadow later tendencies but also continue to explore themes of everyday life, nature, and secular genres that were already present in the painting of northern Europe at the time. This is evident, for example, in the case of Albrecht Altdorfer, a pioneer of landscape painting who worked during the Reformation era. As Christopher Wood points out, even when "Protestantism made inroads into Regensburg," there is "no evidence that Altdorfer strayed from the old faith."[50] Altdorfer's interest in nature was not driven by the new teachings, although he shared many of their sensitivities. While there is a latent iconoclasm in his omission of religious or other subjects in favor of nature, it was "never realized, for

48 In *The Origins of Protestant Aesthetics* Dyrness mentions Calvin's word from the Institution concerning the knowledge of God: "[…] wherever you cast your eyes, there is no spot in the universe wherein you cannot discern at least some sparks of his glory. You cannot in one glance survey this most vast and beautiful system of the universe, in its wide expanse, without being completely overwhelmed by the boundless force of its brightness." Calvin, Institution. Part I., V. 1. The chapter is called The Knowledge of God Shines Forth in the Fashion of the Universe and Continuing Government of It, 52.

49 Dyrness, *God, language, and the use of the senses*, 32.

50 Christopher S. Wood, *Albrecht Altdorfer and the Origins of Landscape* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 347. Wood emphasizes that Altdorfer's landscapes, with their vertical format and composition, resemble devotional panels and, as such, offer an alternative to them: "The empty landscape turned every beholder into a potential wilderness worshipper." However, these landscapes are not always empty; they often include a church or its ruins. Wood concludes that "The forest and the chapel are not antitheses, but extensions of one another." This new complementarity may have resonated with the contemporary cultural climate in Germany, which was marked by dissatisfaction with conventional religiosity and openness to alternatives. This shift included a renewed focus on nature and wilderness, offering a form of spiritual liberation from Rome. Ibid., 208–210.

he did not abandon religious imagery but rather went on making paintings, drawings, and prints of Christian subjects."[51]

These shared sensibilities toward ordinary life and nature also implied a latent opposition to artificiality, raising questions about truth and falsehood in art. This, in turn, led to the fundamental question concerning the nature of the image – the relationship between representation and the represented – which became crucial during the Reformation.

Christian Image as Iconoclastic Image

Joseph Leo Koerner, in his book *The Reformation of the Image*, elaborates on the distinct contribution of the Reformation to art, focusing more on Luther than Calvin. Contrary to the belief that Lutheran art removed church pictures, Koerner argues, as the title suggests, that it renewed them. Lutheran art continued many practices of the Roman Church, appropriated them, and gave them new meaning. This appropriation aimed to conceal differences to facilitate reconciliation, which Koerner terms an act of dissimulation. Nevertheless, the church pictures were not the only feature that Lutheran church has overtaken from Catholic worship: "Wearing traditional liturgical vestments, evangelical pastors administered Communion at altars that were lit by candles, decked in precious cloths, marked by free-standing crucifixes, and backed by altarpieces. They sometimes displayed the host in elaborate monstraces; and when they elevated it in the Mass, sacring bells rang and incense burden."[52]

For the appropriation of images its traction as *adiaphora* was crucial, Koerner notes, but he at the same time proposes an idea of the nature of the Christian image, which he terms "iconoclash", borrowing from Bruno Latour.[53] According to Koerner, the incarnation and crucifixion are crucial because they manifest the core of the Christian image. He contends that the Christian image has been iconoclastic from its inception. This iconoclasm began with the incarnation, where God is manifested in the form of a poor Jewish boy on the periphery of the Roman Empire, and continues through

51 Ibid., 333.
52 Koerner, *Reformation of the Image*, 62.
53 Ibid., 12.

Jesus' life to his humiliating death on the cross – the most ungodly thing imaginable.[54]

Therefore, God was hidden in these events, or rather, revealed under his opposite, as the image displays its object by negating it. The image is never what it shows, and when Luther and other reformers emphasized the absurdity of the belief that an image makes the divine present, they underscored this aspect and liberated the image from false expectations of being a magical object. Koerner argues throughout his work that it is unlikely anyone identified images with God; accusations of idolatry were more common than actual beliefs in such identification.[55] However, reformers felt compelled to oppose the idea of identity and to emphasize the mediating character of the image.

At the same time, Koerner acknowledges that this emphasis diminishes the power of images and represents a reductionist approach to visual representation. He critiques this attitude within his own field of study – art history – as being partly a legacy of the Reformation and also of Hegel's approach, which presupposes that an image has some meaning or points to something beyond itself, independent of the image itself.[56]

By stressing the aspect of showing and the difference between image and model, the image becomes less dangerous and less susceptible to idolatry. But at the same time, it should be emphasized *how* image shows, because it is not only a visible word and its way of showing differs from the verbal, at least in a sense that the meaning is not so clear in the image.[57]

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54 Ibid., 13.

55 Koerner asks: "Has anyone ever believed in images in the ways described by iconoclasts? Certainly, people sometimes worship images, and treat them as agents that can answer their requests. But this is not the same as identifying the image with the God." Ibid., 96.

56 Ibid., 35.

57 Koerner comments on this misconception: "Art, it is hoped, leaves unsaid an unexchangeable something, distinct from the currency of meaning, which insures that, however much is explained, a minimum deposit will remain. The Schweinfurt canvas seems to empty out this reserve. Its surfaces support word while its depths are filled only with what words refer to." Ibid., 26.
On the distinction between saying and showing, Philipp Stoellger asserts following: "Images show, they show something (as something for somebody), they show themselves (are exposed), they are shown and used, so that something can be shown by them, they can as well show how they show and what it means to show (re-entry, self-reflective), and at any rate they hide a lot, because to show means at the same time to hide 'all the rest' (exclude all other possibilities). To show is de facto a highly exclusive selection, of

One possible way of showing is through contradiction, which points to something by presenting its opposite, as previously mentioned. For the theme of this article, the focus of the Reformation on this indirect method of presentation is crucial, as it leads some to consider it a specific characteristic of Protestant aesthetics and its closeness to ordinary aesthetics. This characterization was discussed in the volume *Protestant Aesthetics and the Arts*, particularly by Sarah Covington[58] and Alex Engebretson[59], and it is worth mentioning.

Covington draws from earlier works by Koerner and Dyrness and focuses on the artistic afterlives of Protestant iconoclasm. She explores the precedents and types of thinking that the Protestant Reformation established and how these patterns influenced later European and Western cultural development. These include practices and strategies such as purification, exposition, and the destruction of false idols, which became prominent not only in modernism but also in other movements. She also demonstrates how the remnants of destroyed traditions served their own strategic purposes – reminding spectators of what had been destroyed and functioning as mementos and tools for identity-making. The nostalgia for ruins and the melancholy of Romanticism draw from these impulses and re-enchant the past. "In this sense, the iconoclastic impulse served not as a disenchantment but a reenchantment of fractured objects, this time on other terms."[60]

Covington questions whether this aesthetic behavior is something distinctly Protestant. She claims that "Protestant iconoclasm led to transformation in aesthetic thinking and artistic practice, thereby embedding itself in the latter's DNA,"[61] but this transformation had an impact beyond one confession; although Protestantism introduced a new sensitivity and the possibility of interpreting fractured and ambiguous objects in the sixteenth century, it influenced broader cultural developments. This concern is particularly relevant to the modernist movement and artists such as Picasso or

course." Philipp Stoellger, "Living Images and Images We Live By. What Does It Mean to Become a Living Image?", in András Benedek and Kristóf Nyíri (eds.), *Beyond Words. Pictures, Parables, Paradoxes* (Peter Lang, 2015), 17–35.

58 Sarah Covington, "Unintended aesthetics? the artistic afterlives of Protestant iconoclasm," in Covington and Reklis (eds.), *Protestant Aesthetics and the Arts*, 113–129.

59 Alex Engebretson, "'Gorgeousness inheres in anything': the Protestant origins of John Updike and Marilynne Robinson's aesthetics of the ordinary," in ibid., 221–234.

60 Covington, "Unintended aesthetics?", 122.

61 Ibid., 126.

Duchamp, who utilized "iconoclastic" practices (and Guernica was acclaimed by Paul Tillich as "the most important Protestant painting of our times"[62]) or Le Corbusier, who embraced the whitewashing and purifying impulses of iconoclasm, along with various instances of fragmentation.[63]

The question of the Protestantism of this aesthetic also arises in Alex Engebretson's study titled *"Gorgeousness inheres in anything": the Protestant origins of John Updike and Marilynne Robinsons's aesthetics of the ordinary*. As the title suggests, the author does not present an example of specifically Protestant aesthetics but instead focuses on the origins of a distinct aesthetic approach. However, he argues that these authors "express and embody a particularly Protestant aesthetic modality, an exuberant attention to the mundane, the everyday, the quotidian,"[64] which can be somewhat misleading. He identifies the impulses of this modality, similar to Taylor and Dyrness, in the teachings of the Reformation, particularly in Luther's and Calvin's writings, and explores them in the works of Updike and Robinsons.

Engebretson contends that Updike was inspired by Luther's views on incarnation and Eucharist, which allowed him to see the potential presence of Christ everywhere. For Robinson, who has written extensively about Calvin in her works, it is Calvin's theology of beauty and perception that enables her to recognize God's glory in the most mundane things. This belief is eloquently expressed by one of her characters in *Gilead*, as the author reminds us: "[w]herever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don't have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see."[65] This statement not only recalls Calvin's words from *Institutes*, as quoted above, but also illustrates Robinson's perspective: beauty already exists in this world, requiring no addition, just a readiness to perceive it. However, Engebretson argues that to perceive beauty in this way, and to recognize it as God's beauty, one needs a background in Christian metaphysics, a requirement applicable to Updike as well.

The influence on these authors is undeniably Protestant, but they are not the only ones to have found the sacred in the ordinary, as Engebretson

62 Ibid., 124.

63 "[…] from the formal fragmentations of earlier Cubist painting to collages and found art to Sergei Eisenstein's dialectical philosophy of film editing and Samuel Beckett's obsession with fragmented speech and the fractured self." Ibid., 125.

64 Engebretson, *Gorgeousness inheres in anything*, 221–222.

65 Ibid., 226.

himself notes, mentioning Catholic authors such as Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy,[66] or modernist writers like James Joyce, Gertrude Stein or Virginia Woolf, whose relationships with religion were more complex. Therefore, it seems more appropriate to discuss the contribution of Protestantism to the emergence of this type of aesthetics and to debate the extent of its influence, acknowledging that its impact transcends confessional boundaries.

Conclusion

The contribution of the Reformation to the development of art is manifold. It goes far beyond the simplified impression of being a loss for art, although this is true to some extent – the destruction of some images by radicals and the end of certain ongoing artistic developments were setbacks. On the other hand, the Reformation's critique and restrictions concerning art helped facilitate the transition from religious images to art, as Hans Belting suggests[67], thus leading to the emergence of the category and phenomenon of art in its own right. By stripping images of their supposed supernatural powers, the Reformation liberated art for new purposes and purely aesthetic use. In this context, new subjects could flourish, and among them, everyday life took a significant position, as argued by Taylor, Dyrness, and others.

Influences for this affirmation include Luther's *theologia crucis* and Calvin's notion of the world as the theater of God's glory, along with his focus on everyday life as the locus of the salvation story. These theologies seem to have influenced and foreshadowed new artistic developments that emerged in modernity and remain prominent to this day. In these later developments, some artistic movements followed the iconoclastic impulses of the

66 Engebretson explores these authors in the part called The Catholic Other and is aware of many similarities among their work and that of Updike and Robinson and despite the different theological reasons for the appreciation of the ordinary he considered the abandonment of the distinction Protestant/Catholic in this regard. On the other hand he sees an alternative source of difference in the value which is given to the suffering in Catholic tradition and lack in the Protestant. Ibid., 229–230.

67 The subtitle of Belting's above mentioned book: a history of the image before the era of art, nicely captures this transition. On the other hand Belting emphasizes that: "The Protestant Reformers did not create this change of consciousness vis-à-vis the image; indeed, in this respect they were themselves the children of their time. What they rejected in the name of religion had long since lost the old substance of unmediated pictorial revelation." Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 14.

Reformation and sparked revolutions in the art world, challenging previous conceptions of what art is – Duchamp and Warhol are among the best-known examples.

This development can be considered a secularization of art, or at least part of it. On the other hand, although the Reformation abandoned the devotional use of art, it facilitated a new spirituality connected with a deep respect for everyday life and its dramas. Art seems to be both an expression of this sentiment and a driving force behind this shift. In this regard, Dutch painters and contemporary writers such as John Updike and Marilynne Robinson were mentioned.[68] The discussion has therefore shifted from the question of whether it is possible to portray God, which reformers answered negatively and which seems to be misleading anyway, to whether, through aesthetic perception, one can discern a spark of His glory, which was seen much more positively. This shift has generated many other questions, such as if aesthetics is able to deliver a hint of God, does it make it a religion itself, therefore making art a new religion. As such, the described development would not only be a secularization of art, but at the same time a prolegomena to its sacralisation, though into a different kind of sacred than it was in the Middle Ages.

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68 Many other examples can be found in Richard Deming, *Art of the Ordinary. The Everyday Domain of Art, Film, Philosophy, and Poetry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), or Andrew Epstein, *Attention Equals Life. The Pursuit of the Everyday in Contemporary Poetry and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).