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Picture and Existence

DLA-Dissertation

Theses

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The aim of my dissertation is to find an answer to the question of how the urge for visual representation, artistic creation, reflection, and affinity for religious experience stems from human existence. In the first main unit of my paper (“*challenge*”) I approached this question from a general philosophical point of view, while in the remaining section, drawing on the results of the enquiry, I explored more and more definite frameworks of the relationship between human existence and the image.

The point of departure for my paper is an experience, namely, the experience of human existence, that is, the experience of our state of being, as it manifests itself in its utter ambiguity in the dichotomy of total dependency and the cheerfulness which finds existence valuable in spite of this dependency.

„I am coming, but I don't know where from,
I exist, but I don't know who I am,
I die, who knows when,
I am on my way, who knows where to,
It is a miracle that I am so cheerful.”¹

I call this experience the apprehension of the greater². Starting from this idea, and building on Karl Rahner’s line of thought, I discussed that the greater is not a self-sufficient being, as it always has a correlation to something else. The object of this correlation is a kind of objective secret, something that, as the depth of existence, is necessarily a secret for human beings. Still, this Secret, perceived through the greater which is oriented toward it, is a permanent question posed to human existence, and as such, reckoning with it is an existential task of humans.

In the section titled “*transition (religion, philosophy, art)*” I showed, based on the thoughts of Rahner and Karl Jaspers, that the condition of human existence, which, through the greater, is oriented at the Secret, manifests itself in the unified character of religion, philosophy and art. I assert that this unity is one which has aspects rather than separate parts. The removal of any of the aspects also means the debasement of the other aspects. I represented the dominant character of each individual aspect in binary oppositions, based on the concept of deficiency. Following the analysis of the pairs of deficiencies, viewing the dominant character of the individual aspects once again in a unity, I identified the unity of religion, philosophy and art as the maximum of human existence, as finite human totality. This realization led to the *challenge*: how is the individual (the artist) able to achieve the unity of religion, philosophy and art in their own life.

This is the question that the second main unit of the dissertation (*answer to the challenge*) is trying to give more and more answers to, by looking for some kind of *form* for the shaping religion-philosophy-art unity. In order for this form to have more than a superficial connection to the unity of religion, philosophy and art, I established a system of four criteria.

- (1) the question of religion, philosophy art unity can be analysed within this form
- (2) the form provides an interpretation in which this unity is seen as the essence of the form
- (3) the answer provided by the form corresponds to the structure of the question
- (4) the question becomes an intrinsic task of the form

I followed up with an analysis of an arbitrarily chosen form, Christian existence, according to these criteria.

¹ Unknown author from the middle ages, quoted by Karl Jaspers in: *A transzcendencia rejtjelei.*, (2001) p. 154.

² The greater is identical to the transcendental as Rahner uses the term, and it has many resemblances to Jaspers’ concept of transcendental. Cf.: Karl Rahner (1998): *A hit alapjai - Bevezetés a kereszténység fogalmába.* and Karl Jaspers (2001): *A transzcendencia rejtjelei.*

I focused in further on the original question³ based on the ideas of Hans Urs von Balthasar⁴, one of the most famed theologians of the 20th century, using the concepts of *mode of vision* and *mode of thinking*. This approach proved to be fruitful, and, running parallel with the thoughts of Balthasar, lead from the analysis of *the beautiful* to the concept of the *original image*. This concept, instead of leading to the traditional notion of representation, lead to the realization of the tension between the *motivation for representation* and the *impossibility of representation*. Rather than leading to a Sisyphean experience of the impossibility of the task, it opened up the possibility of a knowledge of God which stems from representation.

The method of this is discussed in the chapter *spiritual perception*, in which, through the *development of perception*, I describe the concept of *double perception*, based on the ideas of Origen. This idea opens the way to the discussion of *reality-realization* which will, through Balthasar's concept of *objective evidence with subjective prerequisites*, finally highlight the fact that for human beings reality is a task rather than a circumstance.

In connection with this, in the chapter titled the *relationships of spiritual acts and the picture* I assigned four different types of picture with those human spiritual activities that are motivated by the experience of the greater. For this I relied on the ideas of Pavel Florensky⁵. The four types of picture (*picture of vanity, picture of the glory of the spirit, the picture of expecting guests and the picture of reality*) are, at the same time, the expressions of our relationships to ourselves (*understood / misunderstood signs of our own emptiness*).

After this I turned my inquiry in the direction of the actual realizations of pictures in Christianity. One side of the problem here is the opposition between the picture and the Old Testament ban on visual representation. On the other hand, the very identity of Christianity, the concept of *incarnation* provides some kind of relationship to the image. Art, theology (in a way, philosophy) and religion face a common difficulty here: according to Christian teachings, God became incarnate, thus infinity entered into the finite world, the inexpressible acquired expression, the sphere of creation received into itself something which transcends it, the invisible appeared in the visible. This marked out the task of visual representation: to make this secret, in its full implication, perceptible (though not comprehensible).

To the duality of this problem, the first version of the Christian picture, symbolic image, provided a kind of solution with the help of a *hiding-revealing* duality. According to Lepahin Valerij, the main characteristics of symbolic representation are: 1) symbols are at the interconnection of the visible and the invisible world, 2) the symbol is the expression of a fundamental connection between two things, 3) symbols are discovered rather than invented, 4) understanding a symbol runs parallel with understanding the underlying reality, 5) a symbol is a real presence of what it signifies, 6) a symbol is alive, because it incorporates the principle of its existence.

In the chapter *direct image/direct picture* I presented the paradigm shift of the Christian visual representation which occurred with the development of Christology along the problems of direct image/direct likeness. The two main claims of this chapter are 1) the *direct image* is the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, and 2) *the direct picture* is a result the human urge to partake in the totality of existence manifested in the direct image. These two ideas link back to the idea of *original image – representation*.

In the next chapter (*picture “made by no hand”*) I discussed the process in which the *direct picture*, as the goal of representation, seeks its forms of realization. In this context I analyzed phenomena serving as the basis for *picture “made by no hand”* (Veronica's handkerchief, the story of king Agbar and the shroud of Turin). I asserted that the significance of these phenomena is not their historical aspect, but the fact that they manifest the

³ What can Christianity as existence say about the unity of religion, philosophy and art?

⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar (2004): *A dicsőség felfénylése: teológiai esztétika*.

⁵ Pavel Florenszkij (2005): *Az ikonosztáz*

intellectual process which leads to the recognition that the Old Testament ban of visual representation has lost its meaning, since God became incarnate in a visible form, thus the real image of God is Jesus Christ himself. The concept of *picture* “*made by no hand*” signals a deep human desire for an unmediated view of God. It expresses the human desire to see *everything* in a perfect form.

In the next chapter I represent the realization of the direct picture, that is, the *icon*, as the next step in Christian visual representation following the symbolic image. For this I relied chiefly on the works of L. A. Ouspenski⁶, Lepahin Valerij⁷, and Pavel Florensky. Based on their works, I interpreted the relationship of the icon and reality in the concepts of *ontological identity* and *human likeness of God*. In the light of these two concepts, the icon appeared as the *witness of reality*, and as such, it depends on the presence of certain guarantees. I summed up the underlying guarantees of the icon in the following points: 1) personal guarantee 2) the guarantee of the scripture, 3) the guarantee of tradition (including the guarantee of technique and form), 4) direct guarantee, 5) way of life as guarantee, 6) formal guarantee. I stated that, possessing these guarantees, the icon claims that what it shows is *reality*. The question of reality–realization emerges in connection with the icon as well. In this respect, the aim of the icon is no less than *to be the world in seeing it*,⁸ to perceive reality in realizing it, while it leaves behind the tokens of reality. In this respect, icon is (through the guarantees listed above) both the *method of expression* of the spirit pursuing *reality* and the *assurance* of reality.⁹

The icon as method and assurance in Christian existence has provided an answer to the original question of the unity of religion, philosophy and art. The icon, I am convinced, fulfils the four criteria posed in the opening part of the chapter *answer to the challenge*.

In my opinion, the dissertation reached its goal at this point. At the same time, we cannot dismiss the question whether the icon is possible today. This question was induced by the discrepancy between the chapter about the guarantees of the icon on the one hand, and my everyday experience about art on the other. I outlined the major aspects of the problem in the chapter “*where has the answer gone?*”.

In the chapter called *crossroads* I gave a short description of the historical events which caused a *schism in visual representation* long before the great schism of the church. This effected two distinct changes in the western church. On the one hand, its relationship to pictures changed from a status of “*blood-relation*” to “*guest*”. On the other hand, by the end of the renaissance, in the west a new type of identity was born, namely, the *autonomous artist*.

This twofold change moved the question of the unity of religion, philosophy and art from the community level to the level of the individual. Thus the unity of religion, philosophy and art manifested in the body of the church became oblique. The autonomous artist was, in turn, charged with the *responsibility of remembering* their own origins. In the light of this remembrance, following the advice of Rahner¹⁰, each has to decide on their own if they can recognize in themselves the experience of the *greater* and, as an expression of that, the unity of religion, philosophy and art, or if they are able to take responsibility in their personal existence for the truth of their conviction that they are not the kind of human beings that the unity of religion, philosophy and art shows them to be.

⁶ L.A. Uszpenskij (2003): *Az ikon teológiája*

⁷ Lepahin Valerij (1994): *Az óorosz kultúra ikonarcúsága*

⁸ “*Rather than simply observing the world, we should be the world in seeing it*” Paul Claudel, quoted by Balthasar in: *A dicsőség felfénylése*, p. 380.

⁹ “*Of all the philosophic evidences of the existence of God, the most convincing one is the one never mentioned in any book, and it can be summed up in the following syllogism: Rublev’s trinity exists, therefore, God exists*” Pavel Florenszkij (2005): *Az ikonosztáz* p. 53

¹⁰ Cf. Karl Rahner (1998): *A hit alapjai - Bevezetés a kereszténység fogalmába* p. 35

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