Finding the Face of Jesus

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Throughout the history of Christian art, portrayals of the face of Jesus have been as varied and revealing as the various theologies interpreting his person produced throughout the history of Christian thought.[1] It is curious that none of the evangelists, and certainly none of the great theologians of the church, ever met and conversed with Jesus, yet all have had strong, though differing, views of who he was. Christian artists have produced revealing, incisive portraits of a face no artist has ever seen (visions and raptures aside).

Although there has been no agreed-upon description of Jesus, virtually all portrayals of his face are recognizable as his "likenesses." This is true largely because any competent artist always invests the portrayal with an unmistakable authority. Yet even here, the sense of Jesus' authority has differed drastically from age to age and from artist to artist.

Great portrayals of Jesus exhibit a myriad of styles and visions. At one extreme is the Romanesque (11th and 12th centuries) depiction of Jesus' face, characteristically envisioning him with a masklike visage and a radically expressionistic, transfixing gaze, reflecting a profound sense of the transcendent source of holiness. The human countenance is stricken by a holiness that consumes the merely human. In sharp contrast are Rembrandt's pictures of Jesus. Although he was equally expressive, Rembrandt nevertheless painted far more naturalistically, showing Christ's divine authority as emerging from the depths of his human sympathy and suffering love.

"Christian" style is not merely a function of artistic genius and theology. It is also related to the accidents of history. For example, the art called "early Christian," some of which dates from as late as 400 C.E., was stylistically dependent on the art of late antiquity. Jesus was portrayed in the naturalistic manner of Hellenistic, pagan classicism. Christianity, as a sect within late Hellenism, contributed nothing to the development of this style. It simply drew its artistic sustenance from its cultural environment.

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All of this changed as the Constantinian era took root and the church's power became secure. No longer a persecuted minority religion dependent on the culture of an "alien" world, Christianity now itself became a wellspring of culture. Byzantine art was the first mature style born of the new situation. The Byzantine portrayals of Christ were abstract, severe, and dematerialized. Such a vision incorporated a theology that looked to our salvation as a work of deification, just as Jesus' humanity was deified. The stern, commanding face also reflected the awesome sense of regal power vested in the emperor, a power supposedly modeled on Christ's power.

This change leads to a disturbing question. Does this great variety in Christian styles provide an overwhelming illustration of the way in which we simply foist our own perspectives, ideologies, needs, and vanities onto Jesus? Is Christianity the projection of ourselves onto this conveniently obscure figure from the past? Does art graphically illustrate that self-deification which is a bit more difficult to ferret out of the self-glorifying sophistries we call theology (Feuerbach)?

That we do try to make Jesus over in our own images - in art, in historical research, in theology - is our sin, our idolatry. But in another sense we have no choice but to project ourselves onto the past in our attempts to interpret Jesus. The study of history entails a measure of self-projection. How can we "see" unless we project ourselves by creative intuition into greater proximity to the factual events we seek to understand? History would be folly if it were done in the vain hope of reconstructing the past as it actually was. Not even those living in that past saw it "as it was." We do history in order to understand ourselves in relationship to the past.

However, the "past" we view is always the past we re-create by projection and intuition. The "facts" anchor speculation, but they do not speak for themselves.

We cannot see Jesus with the "pure" eyes of the first century; but even then Jesus was "seen" as many things by those who actually saw him. Was he the son of God or one in league with the devil? The Messiah or a blasphemer? Even his own disciples drew him after their own nationalistic and vainglorious conceptions of the Messiah. As his contemporaries, they knew what he looked like, but that did not do them much good.

The Gospel of John boldly acknowledges that in order to attain a truer picture of Jesus, in order to achieve a finally more penetrating vision of the historical significance of the historical Jesus, distance, not proximity, is required. "It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away the Counselor will not come" (16:7).

The unbridgeable historic gap faced by the Christian artist in portraying Jesus is similar to the perilous chasm faced by theologians or biblical critics in their respective enterprises. All are pointing subjectively toward an objective reality. But critical reconstructions of the historical Jesus and theological interpretations of his being stand

no more chance of being objectively "true" than do the countless portraits of Jesus of constituting accurate renderings of his actual visage. The very multiplicity of theologies - all claiming to be true and all in detail or even in totality contradicting one another - and the equal multiplicity of higher critical judgments about the "historical" Jesus - all done in the name of objective historical probabilities and all at odds with one another - are an indication of how radically interpretive, speculative and indeed projective is all our Jesus talk or picturing.

My comments are not meant to suggest that there is no truth that can be spoken about Jesus, or that any view is as valid as any other. They are, rather, meant to illustrate that any truthful portrayal of Jesus, be it theological, historical, or graphic, entails a creative act. Such an act is inspired by the muses of human creativity; however, if it is valid, it is also inspired by the most ancient of all the muses - the Holy Spirit (Genesis 1:2).

To ask what status in truth a portrayal of Jesus by an artist who never saw him can conceivably have is inevitably to open the door to the wider question: Does anything we claim to know about him, theologically or historically (save perhaps that he once lived), have any great objective validity? The modern world in an epistemological limbo. We "know" that we know something, but no one can give an account of *how* we know it that satisfies more than a handful of the likeminded. Nevertheless, there is the Holy Spirit.

As early as the middle of the 19th century Soren Kierkegaard could see the skeptical morass into which higher biblical criticism was leading. In an attempt to reconstruct Jesus' life historically, various scholars so contradicted one another that its reality seemed to slip away. Kierkegaard met this situation by saying that the only historical facts Christianity needs are that in such and such a year God became man, and that he died. A century later Rudolf Bultmann was to detheologize such a historical reductionism by saying that the only thing of which one can be historically certain is that Jesus died on the cross under Pontius Pilate.

Of course even Bultmann, to say nothing of Kierkegaard, wrote in the conviction that he knew more about Jesus than the mere fact of his death. Bultmann even engaged in theological reflection - an extremely risky business, it would seem. From a purely naturalistic perspective, what is theology but abstract reflection on the alleged meaning of historical uncertainties? Nevertheless, there is the Holy Spirit, who comforts us in our epistemological uncertainty and who prods us to think, paint and preach, in our hope to find the truth.

The poet Robert Frost once wrote, "Heaven gives its glimpses only to those not in a position to look too close." I have always regarded this as a profound insight into the situation of Christian revelation. We have, in faith, glimpsed Jesus Christ. However,

when the content of that glimpse is portrayed - verbally, visually, or musically - the vision and the viewer inevitably become one. Though the glimpse is real, we are not "in a position" to sort out where *it* ends and *we* begin. Nevertheless, there is the Holy Spirit.

The apostle Paul was bold enough to claim that if we are in the spirit of God, "we have the mind of Christ" (I Corinthians 2:16). If this is true, then any supposed necessity of separating ourselves in our subjectivity from the objective reality of Jesus Christ is fundamentally dislocated. So-called "objectivity" - i.e., detachment from the object of concern - becomes irrelevant to the highest ideal of Christian theology, scholarship, or art. Quite apart from the reality of our philosophic situation, wherein modern skepticism has called into question the very possibility of objective "truth," there is the overriding theological consideration: objective detachment from the object of faith, which is Jesus Christ, is not one of the gifts of the spirit. It is only out of our subjectivity that we can discover who the real Jesus is, for his mind is actually present in the world. But it is present only in his seekers and followers, as a gift of the Spirit.

To illustrate how an artist, in his or her subjectivity and historical situation, can, through the ministrations of the Spirit, plumb the objective realities of Jesus Christ, I would like to discuss three portrayals: Michelangelo's *Pietà Rondanini,* Henri Matisse's *Fourteen Stations of the Cross,* and Georges Rouault's 1905 *Head of Christ.*

Days before his death the aged Michelangelo worked at his unfinished, indeed unfinishable, masterpiece, the *Pietà Rondanini*. It is the product of many years of brooding artistic reductionism. The present sculpture was carved out of an earlier, very different ensemble. While Michelangelo chipped away much of the earlier work (probably an entombment of Christ), its mutilated traces remain. Most prominent is the powerful, disconnected arm to the right of the figure of Christ.

That this contorted, expressionistic work was achieved out of the wreckage of an earlier, more naturalistic undertaking - done in a style much closer to that of the high Renaissance, with which Michelangelo is generally associated - is particularly revealing. During the last 30 years of his long (89 years) life, Michelangelo had grown increasingly convinced that his earlier work, such as the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, had been not an authentic witness to the Christian faith but, rather, an exercise in Promethean pride.

The older Michelangelo, though always a Catholic, had not been untouched by the spirit of the Reformation. He had come to a profound sense that salvation is by "faith alone." More and more, as he brooded over the realities of sin and death, he

sensed the hopelessness of his state apart from grace. The great paintings of his maturity, *The Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel, the twin frescos *The Conversion of Paul* and *The Crucifixion of Peter,* also in the Vatican, all reflect his deepening sense of absolute dependence on God's grace.

However, until the very end, he could not totally transcend the humanism of the High Renaissance, which he had helped to create, but then had come to reject. Even though the works of his last 30 years reflected his moving away from this perspective and from naturalism, still, when he drew or sculpted the human figure, he continued to portray it in a glorified, idealized manner. The vast, perfect muscularity of his earlier "Promethean" period continued to appear in his works, even though, as in *The Last Judgment,* these perfect human specimens were often shown grappling with despair, or, if redeemed, grasping a salvation that came from above.

As long as he idealized the human body, his art expressed a vision that his later theology refuted - i.e., that idealized humanity can serve as an adequate symbol for communicating the Christian faith. Only in the *Pietà Rondanini* does he finally achieve a complete stylistic break with the past, a break expressing his Catholic "Protestantism." To cite the great Michelangelo scholar Charles De Tolnay:

> In this work the master superseded at last the Renaissance principles of causality and the representation of the rationally possible. What he achieved is an image contradicting the law of gravity and yet speaking with utmost immediacy to the heart of the beholder. . . . A fully articulated body would here only detract from the essential *[Michelangelo: The Final Period* (Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 92].

As we've observed, Michelangelo destroyed an earlier work in order to bring forth his final *Pietà.* It is still "Catholic" in the sense that it still holds out the possibility that representational art can properly testify to the incarnate love of God. However, it is "Protestant" in its profound declaration that Christianity can be proclaimed only in symbols of human brokenness, and in its awareness of the radical tension between nature and grace.

Ironically, the more Michelangelo grew in his spiritual knowledge of Jesus Christ, the less able he seemed to find the face of Jesus - as his final misty crucifixion drawings and, above all, the *Pietà Rondanini* witness. In the *Pietà,* the unfinished face has the look of a tortured search. Michelangelo destroyed his earlier face of Christ in order to find a truer countenance. One wonders if the somber genius would ultimately have whittled the head away to nothing.

Michelangelo confronted a paradox which Luther, in his own way, also encountered. We know God through his revealed word, through Jesus Christ; and having "the mind of Christ," we must witness boldly to that knowledge. However, in the depths of our knowing, born of the experience of faith, there is also the sense of an abysmal mystery, which Luther spoke of as the *Deus Absconditus* – the hidden God. Here is where our faith is most sorely tested. When confronted with a depth of mystery which leaves us gaping in awe, do we not despair of what we know? The terrible awareness of the immediacy of God's mystery can drive us to despair of God's promise, to despair of God's love. Both Luther and Michelangelo struggled with an awareness of this dark side of faith. Ironically, the deeper one's personal faith, the deeper the sense of devastation in the presence of God. "Woe is me! For I am lost. . . . For my eyes have seen the King, Lord of hosts!"

Henri Matisse (1869-1954) came to do Christian art very late in his life, and even then it was decidedly an atypical subject for the great master of sensation, color, and line. I have long admired Matisse and his almost hedonistic celebration of beauty, but I had thought that his foray into Christian art could only fail, since Matisse clearly was not a Christian. I had seen pictures of his great Vence Chapel (in the hills above the French Riviera) but because I was so convinced, a priori, that this could have been only a *tour de force,* I did not really see what I was looking at. Then I went to Vence, expecting to have my prejudices confirmed. However, even the most rock-bound dogmatist could not help but be overwhelmed by the sheer spiritual delight of the chapel. Utterly severe, all white but for the black murals and the black accent tiles on the floor, the interior was tinted in blues and yellows by the gorgeous late Matisse stained-glass windows. Matisse had created a tiny temple in grateful celebration (he seemed incapable of any other mood) of the beauty of life and creation.

Matisse refused to be converted by the theological enthusiasm of his Christian admirers. He said, "The only religion I have is my love of the work I have to do, my love of creation, and my love of absolute sincerity. I made the chapel to express myself completely and for no other reason." To this disclaimer, however, one must at least reply that it is revealing that; toward the end of his life, in order to express himself "completely" he chose to do a chapel free of cost and with the proviso that his

design be submitted to church authorities for approval. He wished to make a religious statement about his love of beauty, and it was a characteristically French statement. I am reminded of the French carol that is translated, "Praise we the Lord who made all beauty for all our senses to enjoy."

In the Vence Chapel there is an astonishing wall of tiles on which Matisse sketched the *Fourteen Stations of the Cross.* One critic has observed that the drawing "looks like the urgent notes of an eyewitness to Christ's passion." The "witness" is certain that the event is of great significance. Therefore he hastily records the tragic details, lest the memory be lost. However, the witness "witnesses" from a detached perspective, without emotion or interpretation. We know only that he recognizes the importance of the event by the bare fact that he records it. He is like a reporter with instincts for the newsworthy.

Matisse, then, is pure reporter. Do not ask for commentary, for he has none to give. Although he cannot ignore Jesus, he cannot penetrate the question of who he was. Thus there is no face in his drawing, save for the image on Veronica's veil. This image, without expression and once removed, he can record; but Jesus Christ himself Matisse can view only from afar in detached fascination.

Michelangelo found it increasingly difficult to picture Jesus' face, precisely because he had faith - showing us that even in revelation, God remains mystery. Matisse's stations of the cross stand as a magnificent confession of the faith of modern secular humanity. Many modems can neither embrace nor ignore Jesus: who he was eludes them; *that* he was haunts them.

If Matisse witnessed to a Jesus Christ he could not find, his lifelong friend, Georges Rouault, a believing Christian, painted the face of Jesus time and time again. It was the great subject of his art: "My only ambition is to be able some day to paint a Christ so moving that those who see him will be converted."

Rouault's mature paintings of Jesus have an iconlike quality. They are works inspired by love, and done to inspire love. These later portraits have an increasingly serene quality. Even in the midst of his suffering, Christ is portrayed as patiently offering himself and his suffering to the beholder. The subject is enhanced by Rouault's technique of laying thick patches of paint on his canvases, so that undercolors glow through to the surface. He achieves the suggestion of stained glass, eternally lighted from within. It is the stylistic characteristics of this later Rouault with which we are most familiar.

However, Rouault's mature vision of Jesus evolved out of the intense struggle, indeed anguish, of his earlier work. It is the Christ of the earlier period I want to focus on: the *Head of Christ*, 1905. There is no serenity here; it is a violently painted face that almost looks as if it had been dripped onto the canvas, *à la* Jackson Pollock. In this radically expressionistic work, Christ's huge eyes stare in sorrow and distress, and his ambiguously painted mouth is a shattered grimace.

The *Head of Christ* was done during the same period in which Rouault painted a great number of carnal, yet pathetic, nudes, often prostitutes; a fiercely drunken woman; sad or debauched clowns; cruel judges, and so on. Most of his works of this time are searing representations of human lust, cruelty, pride and brokenness. They reflect a drastically Augustinian sense of humanity as a "mass of perdition." Seen in this larger context, the *Head of Christ* is a powerful statement of Christ's passion as an atoning event. It declares the substitutionary character of Christ's death and his desperate loneliness. Interestingly, Karl Barth's early work sounds almost like a commentary on this painting:

> "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" People have attempted to absolve Jesus from blame for this utterance by the argument, difficult to substantiate, that it was not an expression of real despair - and the fact has been quite overlooked that it was not less but *more* than doubt and despair: as our old dogmatists knew, it was *derelictio,* a being lost and abandoned *[The Word of God and the Word of Man* (Harper Torchbook. 1957), pp. 118-119].

Although our century has produced little significant Christian art, its first half witnessed a flowering of creative theology. Twentieth century theology came into being in a time characterized by a drastic and/or existentialist mood. The two most influential theological portrayals of Jesus in our age have been Albert Schweitzer's and Barth's.

Schweitzer radically redrew the liberal conception of the historical Jesus in his 1906 *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (done almost contemporaneously with Rouault's *Head of Christ).* Schweitzer portrayed Jesus as an imperious first century apocalyptic fanatic, beckoning to us from his own age, as an alien in our own. Although Schweitzer's case for Jesus' obsessive apocalypticism was overdrawn, we are nevertheless left with an awareness that Jesus must remain historically alien to us. Estrangement and faith mingle in the brokenness of modern Christian awareness.

Barth's early indifference to the "historical" Jesus was grounded in his realization that the Jesus of history can, indeed, only be an alien to us; he is "the crater made at the percussion point of an exploding shell, the void..." Such a shattering metaphor typifies the existentialist, expressionist mood in which the early Barth - and with him the preponderance of post-World War I theology - came to see Jesus. The compatible, gentle Jesus reconstructed by earlier liberals was lost in the "void." The only thing that could clearly be known of Jesus was his suffering, his brokenness and his rejection by the world.

Schweitzer and Barth were far from being theological allies, and Rouault was a French Catholic who probably had no knowledge of Protestant theology. Nonetheless, together they helped to create the modem sense of the person of Christ. The modern experience of faith in the context of radical historical and cultural paradox requires that we cannot see Christ in the more serene light of the late Rouault or the late Barth (if we are ever granted such confidence at all) unless we go through the anguish of Christ's being crucified anew in our age.

Violent expressionism and existentialism inevitably consume themselves. It is not possible to live permanently at the extremes. Faith must either find some resolution or shatter in the icy air blowing from the void. Yet modem Christianity was born in a sense of the void. Rouault's *Head of Christ* is a profound symbol of the wellsprings of modern faith. Perhaps the present poverty of Christian art and thought can be traced to our avoidance of the cross and our consequent deprivation of the joy of resurrection, hindering new creation. We tremble to pray for a renewal of creativity within the church, for we sense that it can come only by way of crucifixion. Would that there could be new life without it!