A Conversation About the Sacred in Art,
From Kandinsky to the Present

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The relationship between art and spiritual are explored by reviewing the published conversation, beginning with Kandinsky’s *On the Spiritual in Art*, then viewing highlights from the classic text *Art, Creativity and the Sacred* and ending with excerpts from the journal *Image*. The ways in which art is similar to religion are discussed. Pertinent concepts are explored, with awareness of shifting definitions and application of these concepts. This conversation seems to present a consensus that there are aspects of art that overlap with the spiritual or religious. There is not, however, consensus on what these aspects are or their significance to society, as perspectives and understanding continue to change with growing complexities and multiple viewpoints within this interdisciplinary field. It does seem to bring into question the distinction between the spiritual and the secular.

*Keywords*: art, religion, sacred, secular

**Introduction**

For hundreds of years, throughout the Western world, the production of art was sponsored and controlled by the Holy Catholic Church for the use of Biblical storytelling for the illiterate masses and as visual documentation of church leadership. For these many years essentially all fine art focused on religious subject matter. The production of “secular art” began gradually during and after the Renaissance. After the Reformation, with a rise in the utilitarianism of Protestantism, over time, art was largely handed over to the secular world, save the traditional pieces still belonging to the Catholic Church. The idea however that art was ever truly secular has been challenged by many artists, historians, and theologians. While there may have been less of a focus on overtly religious content and subject matter in the past couple hundred years, early in the 20th century, artist and theologians began to document the discussion about the sacred and spiritual in the very nature of art. This conversation has been complicated by distinction of the religious from the spiritual or sacred.

The concepts of art, religion, spiritual and sacred are interwoven throughout this ongoing conversation with unclear and evolving language as the scholars and participants have worked out the meanings and relationships of the nature and function of these two vital aspects of every culture. This paper will begin the review by looking at the apparent first articulation of the modern conversation in the work of Wassily Kandinsky (1911). Then the paper will review some of the key thoughts on this interdisciplinary area as contained in a classic text, *Art*
Creativity and the Sacred (Apostolos-Capodona, 1984). Then the paper will examine the ongoing conversation as seen in a recent issue of journal addressing this topic, Image (2012).

The Beginning of the Conversation: 1911

The conversation about the sacred or spiritual in art, it may be said, was first set in writing by Wassily Kandinsky in 1911, in his original Russian text translated as On the Spiritual in Art. Kandinsky was a painter, philosopher and writer (Bowlt, 1980, p. 2). He is considered the founder of abstract expressionism, the first movement to use completely non-representational art. His art, at its best, did not attempt to represent, portray or imitate any natural, earthly or physical reality. Quite the contrary, he worked diligently to try to reach beyond the earthly and create an experience of spiritual truth. Carol Washton-Long (1980) points out that Kandinsky’s work had a “messianic tone” and he held a “belief that an abstract style of painting had great potential for the forceful expression of cosmic ideas [and] helped to take the concept of abstraction out of the realm of decorative design [and] offered a way to express more powerfully the transcendental values of a spiritual vision” (pp. 43-44). Kandinsky very clearly connected abstract painting to the spiritual realm (Gorringe, 2011, p. 17).

Kandinsky was Russian by birth but spent most of his adult life in Germany where he published a German version of this article in 1912, which was longer than the original Russian (Bowlt, 1980, p. vii). Though this longer version was translated into English in 1914 under the title The Art of Spiritual Harmony, and again in 1946 and 1947 under the title Concerning the Spiritual in Art, the shorter more concise Russian version was not translated into English until 1980. Apparently, the shorter version managed his eccentric writing style more handily, as soon after this publication there is a flourish of English conversation about the sacred in art.

Early Responses: 1984, Exploring, Defining, Broadening Perspectives

Diane Apostolos-Capodona documented part of this conversation as editor of the text Art, Creativity and the Sacred in 1984. It is a telling fact that this anthology begins with Kandinsky’s own writing. It is interesting fact that it is an excerpt from a 1947 printing of Concerning the Spiritual in Art as opposed to the more concise version of this writing On the Spiritual in Art. Yet, it is an excerpt. The anthology acknowledges the interdisciplinary nature of this conversation by dividing the twenty-five articles by differing perspective: those written from the artist perspective; those from the art historian’s perspective; those from the perspective of the historians of religion; and those from philosophers and theologians and then those who attempt an interdisciplinary vision. Some of the articles are reprints from earlier publication. This is acknowledged when it is the case as cited by the editor, otherwise it is assumed that this anthology is the first printing.

While the collection of articles represent a wide range of approaches to the issue of sacred in art, this paper will focus on some pieces that discuss the role of art as sacred functions in society. It will not attempt at this point to define sacred, but will attempt to let the authors explore that along the way. But the author will say, by way of clarification, that when she discuss sacred or spiritual, it is not the same as religious, though some of the author don’t make this distinction. The author consider religious those physical or earthly elements, symbols, events or activities used to aid in reaching the spiritual or sacred. The use of language is one interesting evolution to be observed in this ongoing conversation. Cecilia Davis-Cunningham (1984), one of the artist-writers, presents a concise summary of the mood of the conversation in her statement, “in that rather large
task of world salvation the artist plays a modest but real role: to create epiphanies of beauty in the mundane
surrounding of everyday life” (p. 11).

To begin, Joshua Taylor, art historian, in his reprinted 1976 article, “The Religious Impulse in American
Art” gives an overview of the history of the connection between religion and art in America through the 18th and
19th centuries, noting changes that lead to the changes of attitude about art by the early 20th century. This
parallels nicely the timing of the Kandinsky’s ideas, confirming that what Taylor says about American art and
society is also true about European. He even includes England as part of his discussion.

Taylor notes that the changes in the last half of the 18th century set artist in a unique place. Related to the
revival of rational thought in academia, which eschewed sensuous distractions of the mundane, there grew a
belief in the order of beauty as the physical equivalent of a morally ordered life. Taylor (1984) states:

Both artist and theologians talked about elevating the spirit… there was even a kind of moral purpose in simply being
an artist; one was called to art much as one was called to the ministry. It became a kind of sacred obligation. (pp. 96-97)

So there is a theological connection to art even as early as the late 18th century, though it may be limited to
moral intents.

The artist of the 18th century were guided by these believes: First, there was a belief that form has
consequences, a given form produced a predictable state of mind. An artist’s job is to make such forms; Next,
they believed that the mind can be taught through site and action; and Lastly, that the mind had within itself full
knowledge of moral direction and needs only to be brought out. If art was to reach the proper level of moral truth
it must be formally perfect and speak only the highest beauty. This highly formal style is often misunderstood as
copying the classical forms of Greece, when actually it was a focus on moral content. The emphasis was on
justice and morality, not on spiritual transport.

As the 19th century began nature entered the artistic picture. While some artist and philosophers believed
that nature painting was mindless and soulless, many thought that the informality of nature and its beauty was
truer because it was non-style, that is, it is not designed and planned, not manipulated by man’s mind as was
artistic style. Therefore, nature spoke the voice of God. More recently, these people are called naturalist. Taylor
(1984) says, “The function of the artist then was not to transcend nature, but to reveal within nature itself a high
spiritual order… What emerged is this idea that artistic creativity itself has spiritual value” (p. 101). Taylor notes
that in 19th century religion was the center of society, Artists in the 19th century were not specific affiliated in a
church or specific religion but religions impulse were in the art. He states that American art rarely served as
illustration of religious thought, but rather it creates an environment of mind that make religion possible.

Taylor (1984) says that art has moved through many stages to become a symbol and proof of a persistent
human spirituality. First, art moved through a stage when it was believed that form was morality, which he called
“moralogica” (p. 103). Then it moved through the focus on nature as non-form or non-style to express. It appears
that this passing through moral intent and through the romanticism of nature, art was being transformed into a
vehicle of spiritual transport, becoming more mystical, which is the space into which Kandinsky was born, as if
for two centuries of culture had evolved for someone such as him to transcend into the next realm of artistic
divination.
The conversation on the sacred in art is not exclusive a Western conversation. It appears that the transformation of Western art to a place of spiritual transport has been met with Eastern traditions that share this belief. Lois Ibsen Al Faruqi (1984), a historian of religion, summarizes his understanding of the function of art in his “An Islamic Perspective on Symbolism in the Arts: New Thoughts on Figural Representation” (p. 164). He describes the function of art based on four theories. Firstly, art is a symbolic statement of ideas, using sensory stimulus; Secondly, humanistic theory says art is about humanity or some aspect of human life; Thirdly, naturalist theory says art is describing meaning and truth about the natural world and; Fourthly, “transcendent” theories say art is a means of conveying intuition about divinity. It is this last function that he focuses on as the only viable use of art in Islam: “For Muslim, the aesthetic realm, the beautiful, is that which directs attention to Allah. It is the permeating factor, they of Islamic being… that has put the stamp of Islamicity or the Islamic arts and molded them into a recognizable unity” (p. 168). The writer goes on to describe the doctrine which bans figurative naturalistic, human and symbolic art, and the methods used to direct thoughts to the divine.

Within the conversation of sacred in art the Islamic perspective, perhaps, seems to be the purist example of art containing the sacred; for this group the sacred use is the only acceptable use of art. Because this is coming from a non-Western perspective, it clearly has followed a different path than that which Taylor described earlier. It seems that the opening of the door of the Western art world to the sacred, as Taylor described, is what allowed the Islamic divine art to enter the conversation in the 1980s.

Noted Romanian religious writer, Mircea Eliade (1995) is the first to clearly discuss the distinction between religious and sacred. In his “The Sacred and the Modern Artist”, reprinted from a 1964 article, he says that traditional religious image are not often in modern art, but this does not mean the scared is not. He states that the sacred is often unrecognizable, not obvious or immediate. While not voluntary camouflage, and not motivated by shame, the sacred is present in the work even for people who are not religious. He says, “Modern man has forgotten religion, but the sacred survives” (p. 181). He states that the sacred is found in dreams, fantasies, impulses, ability to penetrate deep into meaning, in fear or veneration.

Eliade (1995) claims that two modern developments are susceptible to religious interpretation: the destruction of traditional forms and the fascination with formless. This sounds very similar to Taylor’s discussion of the decreasing obsession on formalism in art and society in the 19th century. Eliade says that this destruction of traditional forms and fascination with formlessness leads to the discovery of the sacred manifest in the substance itself. He calls it a “cosmic religiosity” that was present in primitive experience. Ancient Neolithic man understood a rock to have power and intention of its own. The process of desacredization of nature opened the door for scientific investigation. A rock was no longer a sacred thing, the stars and planets were no longer demons and angels. Eliade states that a person’s art is religion when he develops cosmic religion, focusing on sacredness in the material. This requires a deconstruct tradition and results in the creation of a new world of hope. This seems to touch on one of the traditional functions of religion; giving hope. He seems to state that giving hope is a sacred thing, even if it does not come from religious subject matter.

American Protestant theologian Langdon B. Gilkey, in his 1981 address, “Can Art fill the Vacuum” connects the rise of technology with the need for art. He does not separate out the sacred from the religious as do many of the other authors. He states that art and religion futures rise and fall together. Because our culture is
technical, that is, we know how to do things and are experts at doing, we focus on knowledge. We tend to turn everything into skills. He states that all powers in our society seem bent on the production and glorification of instruments to increase effectiveness of doing things (p. 188).

Gilkey (1995) sees art as significant in such a society because it, like religion can stop that utilitarian monotony. He says, “One significant role, or gift, of art is to enhance direct, immediate experience” to create an event of intrinsic worth (p. 188). He states, “when an event… stops the heedless flow of time in an enhanced moment, a moment of new awareness or understanding, a moment of intense seeing… the transcendent appears through art, and art and religion approach one another” (p. 189). He sees art as offering this moment of transcendence, like religion.

In Gilkey’s (1995) view there is overlap between the religious and the artistic in that another significant role of art is making us see in new and different ways, below the surface, beyond the obvious; “when art thus condemns present reality in the name of humanity and justice and seeks for its transformation, it becomes itself a vehicle of transcendent and approaches the religious” (p. 190). He points out that art, like religion, offers an experience that can heal and recreate as well as cut and cauterize, and this is essential to every culture and “especially to a technical culture” (p. 191). Gilkey contributes to the conversation in his observation that art is sacred in its functioning similar to religion.

The defense of the sacred in art among Protestant theologians may be surprising noting the mentioned utilitarianism of Protestantism, but may not be as startling from Catholic theologians like Thomas Franklin O’Meara (1995) who draws parallels between the aesthetic experience of art and theology in “The Aesthetic Dimension of Theology”. He states that in aesthetic experience the art is not the object of perception but the medium. Similarly in theology the text, the law, the liturgy and church are not the object but the medium. Both aesthetics and theology have an immediacy which leads to contemplation of deeper abstract concepts. Both art and theology deal with the whole of human existence, dark and light, life and death, beautiful and ugly. O’Meara seems to point to the task of religion as a medium for the sacred, similar to the task of art as a medium of sacred. This may be the best distinction of religious and sacred we have heard in the conversation thus far. He also makes a distinction between aesthetics and the larger category of art, a distinction no other author has used.

Well known and influential German-American theologian Paul Tillich looks at the religious experiences revealed in stylistic element of art in his “Art and Ultimate Reality”, reprinted from 1961 article. He uses the phrase “ultimate reality” to include and surpass the word “religious” and include larger truths or experiences. He states that there are two ways man can express ultimate reality experience; indirectly in philosophy and art, and directly in theology and religion. While discussing art he states that “If the idea of God includes ultimate reality, everything that expresses ultimate reality expresses God whether it intends to do so or not” (p. 220).

Tillich (1984) named five types of religious experience revealed in stylistic elements of art, which include sacramental, mystical, prophetic-protesting, prophetic-critical, and ecstatic-spiritual. Sacramental elements of art are objects, people and events which are a bearer of the holy. They contain divine or demonic present in objects. Mystical element of art is that which reach ultimate reality without mediation of particular things. In this stylist element God is equated with nature, no items stands out, they are dissolving, like air, water, cosmic unity, it includes nonobjective painting, impressionist, dissolution into light and color. Thirdly, prophetic-protesting elements of art are the protest in art. They are the criticism of distorted sacramental systems for righteousness or
social justice sake. In this style nature loses its demonic and divine power. It includes realism. The prophetic-critical style basis its power on the element of hope. It tends to be very idealistic in anticipation of the future perfection. Lastly, ecstatic-spiritual style of art focuses on the dynamic character of art. It accepts realism but also looks beyond it. It criticizes reality and anticipates change. It is the foundation of the expressionistic movement.

Tillich’s description of ecstatic-spiritual style of art seems to accurately describe Kandinsky’s ideas of capturing the spiritual in abstract form, though Tillich notes the cyclical nature of this style that accompanies many movements throughout religion’s history. He emphasizes that art as mediator of ultimate reality does not depend on the use of traditionally called religious works. He separated the sacred from the religious by noting how art communicates “ultimate reality” outside of the traditional religious parameters.

Lastly, in our look at the conversation in the anthology, we have theologian T. R. Martland’s (1984) “Question: When is Religion Art? Answer: When it is ajar”. He draws a direct connection between religion and art, again equating religion and sacred. He states that religion is art when it jars us, like art does, to see new reality, to get us out of our comfort zone. Both religion and art open us to something new, gets us someplace new, maybe a revelation about the depravity or glory of the human experience or maybe a new thought about the nature of time. We don’t know where we may be until we go there.

Since 1984: Evolving Discussion, New Applications

The conversation did not stop at in the 1980s. The Apostolos-Capodona anthology was republished in 1994, and again in 2001, but even before this we see more movement. In fact, soon after the original publication of this conversation the true mark of the ongoing conversation occurred, that is, the establishment of a periodical for exactly this topic. In 1989 the Center for Religious Humanism began a quarterly publication called Image based on the exploration of Art, Faith and Mystery as described in a recent issues, one hundred years after the initiation of the conversation (Fall, 2012): “Since 1989 Image has hosted a conversation at the nexus of art and faith among writers and artists in all forms. As the conversation has evolved, certain words have cropped up again and again” (p. 35). As a study of the lexicon of the conversation, the issue included essays for words that they have seen in their own pages over the years, including: beauty, mystery, art, story, presence, community, human, discipline, form, freedom, image, incarnation, suffering, and word. It is interesting that neither “religion” nor “sacred” are in this list. The latter especially surprising, but perhaps this is a result of the editor’s awareness of the poorly defined terms and the poor distinction between them, with many scholars using them interchangeably or with apparent overlapping meaning. Instead we see the words “faith” and “mystery” introduced. These seem to be a refinement of the concepts that had been easily confused in the earlier parts of the conversation, as when Taylor gave a religious history as example of sacred art, or when Martland sees art and religion as merging in the process of jarring us, without mention of the sacred. It would be interesting to track the use of this language over the journal’s 23 year history.

Though the journal includes images of visual arts, it is primarily a publication of poetry, fiction, and essay, that it, the art of words. Yet, it clearly is dealing with the same issues of sacred in art as seen in the editor’s reflection on the use of language in the introduction of essays called “The Word-Soaked World; Troubling the Lexicon of Art and Faith”. The editor states:
Perhaps language itself even offers an image of the divine. Some would even go so far as to say that language is what makes religious experience possible, ... Sometimes language seems able only to point to things just outside its reach, things we crave but can’t grasp, things we dare not approach, things we draw back from in awe or revulsion. (Wolfe, 2012 p. 35)

These ideas of language as an image of the divine and as the struggle to reach the unreachable, both reiterate the experience as described by our earlier authors.

Looking more closely at one of the essay we see another similarity, but also an advancement. In the essay called ‘Form’, Harmon (2012) made an observation very similar to what Eliade, forty-eight years earlier, called “fascination with formless”, and Taylor thirty-six years earlier observed in the giving up of form as moral imperative. Harmon notes that the word “form” has acquired a bad reputation for being rigid, rote and boring, in a world that prefers the informal with its free expression, “just be yourself” attitude. He defines form as that which makes an item recognizable as that item. This would include physical qualities or more abstract characteristics. This author traces this informalism all the way back to nominalist beginning in the time of Plato. He states that the idea of nominalism, with its intent to rid the world of unnecessary complication, was very practical and focused on detaching words from the item they represented. They recognized that there was really no real connection between the word “rock” and the item we arbitrarily call a “rock”. Harmon says that this detachment of meaning is a moving away from universals and absolutes and that, when applied to modern times, it can create a relativism that devalues the whole idea of the form of any item or concept in consideration.

Harmon (2012) says that when things become so informal and relativistic we begin to lose the true meanings and understanding of some important issues, such as the understanding of ourselves, who we are, what our form really is. Recognizing our own form as an individual is “to know what we are, to know both our capabilities and our incapabilities” (p. 72). He quotes Walker Percy saying, “Lucky is the man who does not secretly believe that every possibility is open to him” (p. 72). So Harmon believes that the philosophical idea that moved culture and art toward freedom from forms leaves us unmoored. This feels very American to me, the idea that anyone can do anything. This part of the American dream, Harmon implies, is based on the misguided relativistic ideals of a formless way of thinking.

**Attempts to Tie Together, Make Sense, and Move Forward**

This statement, that formlessness has led to misguided relativism, may seem a long way from the exploration of art as sacred, but this shows the movement in the conversation over time. Kandisky’s initial assertion, or at least one, was that art feeds the spirit and draws from the same well as other spiritual activities. The conversation has explored the historical and cultural changes, including decrease in formalism, that have created the atmosphere for blooming of expressionism and freeing of art from the bonds, first, of religious institutions, then from moral logic, then finally from secularization.

The conversation has explored the work of art in its spiritual nature and function including art as a tool for transcendence, for penetrating deep into meaning, in fear or veneration; creating hope by seeing the sacred in material as part of the cosmic; enhancing direct, immediate experience with intrinsic worth stepping out of the mundane; creating a moment of new awareness or understanding, a moment of intense seeing; contemplation of deeper abstract concepts of human existence, dark and light, life and death, beautiful and ugly; expressing an ultimate reality experience; and jarring us to see new reality, to get us out of our comfort zone.
Building on these basics, the conversation has moved past the examples of spiritual nature of art to explore more fully how these functions of art influence people and society, as in Harmon’s argument. While many authors note that the movement from formalism to informalism is part of what opened the door for a new expressionism and more full use of art in spiritual and sacred terms, Harmon (2012), in most recent thought, says that the abandonment of formalism also lead to a relativism that has left us without an anchor for even the most basic knowledge, like the knowledge of who we are. This boarder application seems to contradict the earlier ponderings, with the earlier scholars saying this loss of form was a good thing, allowing for art in spiritual transport and the later scholar, Harmon, saying it was a bad thing, because it leaves us uncertain of our own form or identity. But as is often the case in academic conversation the concept has grown, being molded by new information, new attitudes and increased intricacies of advancing scholarship and thought. The mark of a true academic conversation is the existence of multiple points of view.

It seems well established by many artists, philosophers, theologians, and scholars that there are spiritual qualities and functions in art. Our examples did not discuss the possible differences in the impact in varied experience, skill or quality of the art or artist. It seems to be implied by our scholars that it is the effective and impactful use of the spiritual qualities that makes art good art. By extension we would say that when a piece fails to transcend, or look at deeper meaning, or do one of the numerous functions, it is not good art, it is only decorative, which seems to be less desirable to most serious artists, though decoration has its place in life. Of course, the subjective nature the experience of art makes it difficult for anyone to judge decorative or deeper characteristic in a given piece, except for their own experience. Sometimes this more superficial art is called kitsch, some of which does seem to have community agreement when viewed with informed eyes.

With the acceptance of the thesis that art has a spiritual quality there arises a question about the distinction between the religious and the secular. Historically, at least for the past several hundred years, religious and secular had been two distinct realms in the mind of most people in the Western world. Related to this, is the concepts of religious and spiritual. Until the 1980s the religious and spiritual were used interchangeably (Zinnbauer and Pargament). The religious was the spiritual. The spiritual was the religious. In the 1980s people began to distinguish between the two. It seems that it is not a coincidence that this vocabulary change occurred in the same decade as the classic text on the sacred in art. With the acceptance that art, traditionally considered secular, has, by its nature some spiritual qualities people needed a way to recognize this without saying it is religious. So the concept of spiritual was separated from the religious and applied to that which had been secular. If secular art has spiritual qualities, as does religion, the distinction between secular and religious is blurred and can be seen as an artificial, man-made separation (Gorringe, 2011).

These authors also have not discussed empirical scholarships in this area. These articles are highly theoretical and experiential in nature. As in any abstract aspect of human experience creating an empirical study can be a challenge. It seems that further exploration of this conversation will lead to expanded research approaches, both in the growing branches of the conversation, but also the history of the conversation, like the varying and evolving vocabulary. The phrase “spiritual in art” was introduced over one hundred years ago. The conversation has used “religious”, “sacred”, “faith”, and “mystery” as well. Tracking the use of these types of words may give a more detailed exploration of the conversation and help make distinctions, which have not been
fully clarified in the part of the conversation tracked in this essay. The conversation will continue, perhaps because of this lack of clarity, as people attempt to understand themselves and our human experience better.

Conclusions

This paper has tracked the conversation regarding the sacred and spiritual in art. It has shown that art, through the centuries, moved through phases that set the stage for its position as a spiritual experience, which is where Kandinsky entered the picture in early twentieth century. Throughout that century scholars, theologians, artists and art historians have observed how art and the spiritual are similar in various ways, including offering hope, healing, challenge and transcendence. This paper has highlighted several of these views, noting the ever-expanding conversation, as seen in changes in language and new notions of the essence of the sacred and the spiritual. It has been suggested that because art, often considered secular, contains spiritual qualities, similar to religious experiences, that the separation between the secular and the religious is a man-made distinction and not as clear as often thought. This paper has also pointed to some possible direction for future exploration of this topic, recommending the development of some emperical studies as well as linguistic studies of the conversation. What is clear is that in this moment in time many people accept the idea that there is a spiritual nature to art, but, it is also clear that the conversation continues with disagreements, as all good conversations do.

References


