

Reprint from

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Proceedings  
of the sixth international congress  
of aesthetics at Uppsala 1968

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Acta universitatis Upsaliensis,  
series Figura, n. s., vol. 10, Uppsala 1972.

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Religion as aesthetic presentation: current signs

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With the time at my disposal I can do little more than sketch some of the ways in which religion is being understood in creasingly as an aesthetic undertaking rather than as a conceptual response to a given state of affairs. With obvious reference to Johan Huizinga's work of 1905, "The Historical as Aesthetic Presentation", I am suggesting that religion can be understand as a kind of sensitivity to order, or an intrigue in the presence of delighting forms of aesthetic arrangement. That suggestion seems like an easy one to make; but I mean it not only generally, but quite specifically, and because of certain developments in recent religious selfconsciousness.

I think particularly of the interest created by Ernst Bloch's *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* among a growing number of theologians and students in religious studies in Europe and in America. Bloch's philosophy of the future attests that the new is never fully new, but is present at least in anticipations, in the image, the dream—principally, the day-dream—and, we might add, in the story. When there is speculation about the beginning or about the end of human history, there are stories—mythical accounts—of precise structure and arrangement. When one tries to render an account of the origins of things or of the ultimate destiny of things, he reaches for the meaningful tale, the descriptive story, the aesthetically precise imaginative portrayal. Hence Bloch believes that the imagination should be fired, because man can have the future that he dreams: the openness of the world is dependent upon the openness of man. And the openness of both is qualified only by the structure of the story man chooses to tell.

The interest created by Bloch's hope-philosophy would not be that significant were it not fed by recent apprehensions of the place of Immanuel Kant's *Critiques* in the history of religious self-consciousness. Everyone knows that Kant himself denied reason in order to make room for faith, and by that kind of limitation tended to find the rudiments of religion in the ingredients of the second *Critique*—the *Critique of Practical Reason*—rather than in the first—the *Critique of Pure Reason*. What is not as well known, although it surely is evident, is that the history of theology post-Kant consists of a series of attempts to square religious experience with the results of the first *Critique*. The question about the possibility of knowledge of God has so fully dominated the situation that Kant's choice of the second rather than the first *Critique* as the locus of inquiry about religion has been neglected, or, more precisely, regarded as the result of a failure which subsequent efforts might remedy. Generation after generation have witnessed renewed attempts to find the credibility of religion in the conditions of the first *Critique*. Overlooked, almost entirely, are the directives Kant gave regarding religion not only in his works about ethics, but in the critique about aesthetics: the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*.

However, this is a situation which may soon change, especially when it is more fully recognized that theology is a derivative from religion and not religion's source. When that is realized, the ties between Kant's proposals and Bloch's recent contentions can perhaps come together. As Kant observed in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: "the whole interest of reason, speculative as well as practical, is centered in the three following questions: 1) What can I know? 2) What ought I to do? 3) What may I hope? Kant's own programmatic suggests that the first question requires a critique which treats

epistemology; the second question requires a critique which deals with the basis of moral consciousness; and, significantly, the third question, the one concerning hope, is referred to a study of aesthetic sensitivity. The format itself suggests—as Bloch fully knows—that *hope* is accessible through an examination of the principles of aesthetic categorization. By the same token, presumably, the accessibility of hope is linked to and dependent upon an access to the future. In his presidential address to the American Philosophical Association, in 1965, Robert S. Brumbaugh suggested that “each of Kant’s *Critiques* is exact in its description of one aspect of reality, and that each describes one and only one of the three modalities of time.” (Cf. “Applied Metaphysics: Truth and Passing Time,” in *THE REVIEW OF METAPHYSICS*. Vol. XIX, No. 4, 1966, pp. 647–666.) The future belongs to aesthetics. Or, to turn it around, the interest in the future which accrues to religious concern about the purpose of human life is negotiable only through a cultivated aesthetic sensitivity. And that sensitivity is expressed in forms which allow aesthetic arrangement to be precise, i. e. in images, stories, folk-tales, and mythological accounts.

On the basis of these scattered observations I would like to draw the following conclusions: 1) that the first *Critique* serves as the paradigm for religious consciousness only by distorting it and abstracting its conceptual aspect; since the interest in origins and ultimate destiny cannot be immediately conceptualized, the elements of reason isolated by the inquiry of the first *Critique* are fragments, and do not belong first of all to religious experience; 2) since the mode of reflection affects its sensibilities to time, and the aesthetic model alone makes the future accessible, the religious interest in the future can be articulated only by schemes of aesthetic presentation. And these two conclusions introduce a proposal: Because religion has been closely tied to Kant’s first *Critique*, it has been regarded as a *response*—or a *reaction*—to a given state of affairs. The given state of affairs is set, and the religious man is called upon to respond to that set situation according to one or another of the religious options open to him. But, if our analysis is correct, this is a categorical error. If the aesthetic mode is the paradigm, and the scheme is future, not past, then the attitude is not one of *response*, or *reaction*, but one of *design*. If Bloch is right in suggesting that the future is the product of hope, and if Kant is right in proposing that aesthetic sensitivity makes the future accessible, then the expressed side of the religious venture toward hope is the design—albeit, the design of the future. Perhaps closer to the city-planner than to the analyst of conceptual thought, the religious man is called upon to concretize his intentions by means of the instrumentality of design. After all, the first Western man to seriously probe religious selfconsciousness, St. Augustine, the author of the classic *CONFESSIONS*, also wrote a major work entitled *DE CIVITATE DEI*. Perhaps the “rest” that is no rest “until it rests in Thee” is the “home” Ernst Bloch talks about: the destination which is in perpetual process of composition, since its reality resides in designs of aesthetic presentation.