Aesthetics and Religion

1 Introduction

1.1 Aesthetics

The notion of aesthetics derives from the Greek word αἴσθησις – 'to perceive' or 'relating to the senses' – and at first sight this seems to have little to do with its other meaning – 'philosophy of art'.

In its first meaning – ‘relating to the senses’ – aesthetics belongs inextricably to the field of religion. Lived religion is literally sensed religion. Religion is never separate from the senses and the body; it is always embodied. Whether it concerns Buddhist, Hindu, Greek or Roman temples, Romanesque churches or Gothic Cathedrals; whether sound bowls, mantras, organs, praise bands, talking drums or choirs; whether bread, wine, sacrificial meat or umqombothi (traditional beer in Xhosa rituals); whether a laying on of hands, rustling ritual garments, anointing oil, holy water or baptismal water; whether incense or scented spices, – religion is a sensory phenomenon. The senses, seeing and hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling, are hermeneutical instruments we use to interpret the world around us and also the world which we ordinarily perceive to be beyond this one, the domain of religion.

Aesthetics in the sense of ‘philosophy of art’ is also associated with religion. In the Western world, the Enlightenment assigned religion its legitimate place “within the bounds of bare reason”, as Immanuel Kant said at the end of the eighteenth century (Kant 2009). From a theological perspective, we can say that with the breakthrough of pure reason, the demolition of the metaphysical domain and of onto-theology began to gain momentum. At the same time, the spiritual, religious, or sacred is re-localized in the arts, whereas, to quote anthropologist Carol Duncan, “the appearance of art galleries and museums gave the aesthetic cult its own ritual precinct” (Duncan 1995, 14). It is here that the aesthetic becomes connected with beauty. The aesthetic experience is “a moment of moral and rational disengagement that leads to or produces some kind of revelation or transformation” (Duncan 1995, 14).

The re-localizing of the spiritual, the religious or the sacred in the arts developed into the dominant conception of the museum in the twentieth century. It became a contemplative space for the meditation of art, that results in, as Ives Gilman of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts formulated in 1918, “a profoundly transforming experience, […], an intense and joyous emotion, an overwhelming and ‘absolutely serious’ pleasure that contains a profound spiritual revelation” (Duncan 1995, 16). The museum visitor in turn becomes a “devotee who achieves a kind of secular grace through communion with artistic geniuses of the past” (Duncan 1995, 17). It is striking that
Gilman and Duncan talk about the museum in emphatically religious terms: spiritual revelation, devotee, grace, and communion.

In our late-modern time the concept of religion was broken open, as we will see below. Religion no longer refers as self-evident to accurately delimited beliefs and practices that create ‘model believers’. The same applies to the concept of the museum. It is no longer assumed that museums produce model visitors, but that social identities are negotiated between exhibited objects, visitors, museum staff and affiliates etc., in short: they are negotiated through museum culture (Bouquet and Porto 2005, 5). The museum includes objects as well as social networks in which objects are at the centre of a “signifying process” (Bouquet and Porto 2005, 21). Here, religion comes to the fore.

It is claimed that the much-discussed disenchantment of the world is answered by a deliberately sought magic or re-enchantment of secular rituals that “[...] seem in some sense to fill a void created by the ‘crossed-out God’ of rational, post-Enlightenment mankind” (Bouquet and Porto 2005, 3. 20–22). Museums are partners in this re-enchantment; it has been demonstrated how “museum collections are constituted and technologically manipulated [...] through the interplay of science and magic” to achieve this aim (Bouquet and Porto 2005, 4).

We can, of course, wonder whether this is still about religion. So, the question remains: what is religion exactly?

1.2 Religion

Religion is inextricably linked to the physical world that we inhabit bodily and perceive with our senses, as mentioned above. But it is precisely the relocation of religion into the aesthetic domain that results in religion not always immediately being recognizable as such; or that makes one consider certain phenomena as being religious, while another might view it very differently. The relocation of religion, and the movement of religion away from traditional domains such as the church and temple (among other spaces) towards the field of the arts (but also for example into daily life), makes religion a rather invisible phenomenon: Religion hides in the world and cannot be distinguished from it. So much so, that in contemporary Religious Studies it is even questioned whether religion does indeed ‘exist’.

From this follows a matter of principle in the contemporary practice of Practical Theology. Religion is hiding in the world, we said. But ‘the world’ is always a specific world, a specific time and specific place, in short, a specific culture. I am a white, Protestant, Western European, strongly influenced by secularism, and that determines my view of the world. The way I ‘know’ the world is determined by my locality and temporality. Put differently, my epistemology is determined by my ontology. There is no such thing as ‘objective’ positivistic knowledge (Dreyer 2016, 102–103). More than that, my knowledge is driven by values, in my case, more specifically, by the desire to embed Protestant-Christian religiosity, into a broader, multi-layered,
pluralistic post-secular religious discourse. I do so because I believe that the globalization and pluralization of our world requires such an approach: in the end peace is served by an understanding of the other, the stranger, who undoubtedly has a different view of the same world as I do. The case study that I present in a moment is an example in which, in my opinion, that desire takes on a good form.

Religious Studies, and certainly academic theology, are, at least in the Western world, involuntarily dominated by an ecclesiastical, even Protestant, comprehension of concepts and convictions (Nongbri 2013, comp. 85–105). What we understood by religion in the Western world was for a long time akin to the Protestant faith, driven by accurately delineated and isolated beliefs and convictions. Nowadays, Practical Theology sees it increasingly as its task to give a podium voices and phenomena that have not been conceived of before as religious, and that move beyond the demarcation lines of the past. In that context, religion is being sought more and more in a non-isolated domain, for example in everyday life, in the domestic realm, in the public domain and in sports, in justice and peace, for women and children, in health, and in collective memory and museums, as well as in the arts. Thus, theologians and scholars of religion investigate a part of the social and cultural reality that cannot easily be isolated, but that in everyday language points to something that we call ‘religion’ and that intuitively also means something. In other words, religion is a discourse rather than an isolated phenomenon. Religion is not so much ‘something out there’, but the notion of religion is of use to approach an existential phenomenon that cannot easily be understood in other conceptualizations (Nongbri 2013).

Religion often cannot be identified as a demarcated domain or as an independent category, and yet within half a second, Google gives more than a billion results for ‘religion’. The notion of religion is ‘of use’, although its ‘existence’ is scientifically more difficult to establish. Whether a phenomenon is a religious phenomenon depends to a large extent on how it is named or, abstractly formulated, on the discourse in which it is incorporated. Religion hides and at the same time reveals itself in ritual and artistic expressions, thoughts, and actions. These expressions, thoughts and actions can be determined as religious either through popular discourse, or in isolation, through analysis and investigation with academic theological methods and concepts. It is quite possible to consider a museum as a completely secular institution, but at the same time, to see it as loaded with religious meanings.

The world of arts and museums is a symbolic one. It consists of symbols that have multi-layered meanings and that are valid within a certain culture. In other words, symbols only have diction within a specific cultural code. It thus requires an active attitude of the viewer or visitor in order to generate and understand these meanings. ‘Objective symbolic forms’ and ‘subjective meaningful orientations’ go together in culture and in everyday life. Religion is a symbolic world as well, its symbols refer to the ultimate, or the absolute, or the infinite. Lived religion is “the culture of symbolizing ultimate horizons of meaning” (Gräb 2006, 33). In other words, in religious discourses culture is interpreted “in terms of the infinite or of an absolute sense” (Gräb 2006, 68). Or, again, in other words, a religious discourse
makes use of “symbolic statements [...] which cannot be proved using encyclopaedic knowledge, knowledge which informs our normal understanding of the world” (Stringer 2011, 16). Symbols and artistic expressions accomplish “more than its context would suggest” (Long 2010, 70–71) and so point to a ‘beyond’, to which a religious discourse adheres. That also applies to the Christian religion, which is a ‘subjective meaningful orientation’, a discourse that can incorporate many phenomena. God is God in the midst of the gods; Jesus is Lord in the midst of the rulers; the feast of liturgy is celebrated in the midst of other festivals; the inspiration of the Pentecostal spirit blows through artistic inspiration.

Finally, at the end of the previous section we asked whether magic such as late-modern museums evoke it is also religious. In fact, this magic is about ‘conjuring magic’, a manipulation of the public, which in turn knows it is being manipulated (Luhrmann 1998, 299). It is illusion, which can nevertheless evoke or keep awake the hope of a supernatural cause. So, yes indeed, ‘magic’ may also be religious.

1.3 Aesthetics, Arts, Religion and Practical Theology

The connection between the arts and religion is almost inherent to Practical Theology. Only decades after the relocation of the religious, spiritual, or sacred to the domain of the arts, the father of Practical Theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher, states that the two are inextricably linked (Barnard 2001).

In his conceptual framework, self-consciousness (Selbstbewußtsein) is the relationship between the pure self and Infinity or God. Infinity, or God, touches or – again in the terminology of Schleiermacher – ‘heightens’ (erhöht) the self-consciousness that, as a consequence, expresses or represents itself (in an indirect way)¹ in artistic forms. Thus, Infinity manifests itself in an act of representation. ‘Self-consciousness’ is therefore a dynamic concept that exists in the activity of manifesting itself, or, in German, in a darstellende Tätigkeit (Schleiermacher [1821/1822] 1980, §9; [1830/1831] 2003, §§4–5; comp. 1850, 71–72; [1832/1833] 2021, 120). According to Schleiermacher, manifestations or Darstellungen of the religious mood are possible in a subjective way by means of artistic and ritual forms, and in an objective way by means of discursive beliefs. In this article we focus on what he calls the subjective way. Self-consciousness can also be touched or ‘heightened’ by a finite cause – for example visiting a museum, looking at art or participating in worship. This ‘heightening’ also leads to a manifestation.

Worship – sermon, song, and music – and the arts are manifestations of the heightened mood and, as a consequence, are closely related to each other. It will

¹ A representation of heightened consciousness is tempered by intermediate moments of mood and prototype. Mood or Stimmung places the momentary impulse in a bed of constant affection. Furthermore, there are prototypes or ideal models of representation in the human mind under which direct representations of self-consciousness are subsumed (Barnard 2001, 191–192).
be clear that these expressions are eminently *symbolic* in nature: they hold together two domains, the infinite and the known physical world.

Rooted in the individual, these manifestations ask for an understanding community or ‘an identity of life’ so they can be *shared* (Schleiermacher 2021, 12). As we said above, a symbolic order can only be activated and understood within a specific culture with a specific cultural code. For that reason, the aim of worship is ‘the representational communication of a more stimulated religious consciousness’ (*die darstellende Mitteilung des stärker erregten religiösen Bewußtseins*) (Schleiermacher 1850, 65). The perception of a manifestation of a heightened mood activates the perceiver and heightens their consciousness. This is comparable to the consideration of the German-American theologian Paul Tillich, that art has the unique characteristic of deepening religious experiences. “For the arts do both: they open up a dimension of reality that is otherwise hidden, and they open up our own being for receiving this reality” (Tillich 1987, 247).

### 1.4 Religious and Artistic Expressions Are Gratuitous

According to Schleiermacher, touched or heightened self-awareness reaches its goal in the *Darstellung* or manifestation. For that reason, the arts and also worship are goals in themselves, they are gratuitous. They rest in themselves and serve no purpose at all (Schleiermacher 1850, 37.75; 2021, 42). Religious mediation – through elements from this sensual world – is stripped of all functionality and instrumentality. This also applies to the arts. The religious sensory experience rests in itself and the same applies to the religious ritual of worship. In that sense they are separate from the everyday world, or, better still, from the everyday world in which functionality and instrumentality are dominant.

This theory returns in its own way in the existential philosophy of Martin Heidegger, which in turn underlies the sacramental theology of the French theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet, probably the most prominent sacrament theologian at the moment. With Heidegger, the open-minded vision of the pair of farmer’s shoes that Van Gogh painted grants a passage to being itself; with Chauvet, by analogy, an open-minded taking, and especially breaking or opening of the bread in the Eucharist grants passage to Christ himself.

Without going into Heidegger’s philosophy here, we point to a famous passage that the philosopher dedicates to this painting by Vincent van Gogh, now in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, of a pair of farmer’s shoes (Heidegger [1950] 2002, 13–16). In Heidegger’s interpretation not what we already know is at stake, that shoes serve to cover the feet and that their shape depends on their function: dancing, working the land or walking. Rather, these functional aspects of the farmer’s shoes rest in ‘the fullness of an essential being’ (Heidegger 2002, 14), in what they are ‘in truth’ (Heidegger 2002, 15).
From out of the dark opening of the well-worn insides of the shoes the toil of the worker’s tread stares forth. In the crudely solid heaviness of the shoes accumulates the tenacity of the slow trudge through the far-stretching and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lies the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. The shoes vibrate with the silent call of the earth, its silent gift of the ripening grain, its unexplained self-refusal in the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread, wordless joy at having once more withstood want, trembling before the impending birth, and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the earth and finds protection in the world of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself (Heidegger 2002, 14).

Analogous to how with Schleiermacher, expressions of heightened self-consciousness are indirect representations of the infinite or God (without the infinite ever being able to be fixed or detached from the manifestation), with Heidegger the work of art gives passage to being itself (that cannot be fixed either).

### 1.5 Also the Sensory Act of Celebrating the Sacraments Is Gratuitous

If the senses play a role somewhere in the Christian religion, then in the sacraments: we feel the baptismal water, take, and eat bread, smell and drink wine. Referring to the philosophy of Heidegger, Chauvet elaborated on the Eucharistic gift of the bread. How could we understand the moment that we touch, break, taste, chew and swallow the Eucharistic bread? The ‘reality’ of the bread is not primarily its biological and chemical qualities, but its symbolic characteristic, that is, the way in which it is socially or culturally (in culture and in the cult) instituted. Thus, bread, at least in the Western world, feeds and fuels the body, but it is also socially instituted as a symbol for what one shares (precisely during a meal). Bread “is the mediation of fellowship as much as of the maintenance of biological life” (Chauvet 1995, 397). Moreover, within the Christian community the bread is offered to God as giver of the grain and bread. In other words, “it is presented to God as the highest word of recognition by human-kind: recognition of God as God” (Chauvet 1995, 397). Finally, in the Christian cult and faith, the bread is recognized as “the gift of God’s very self, as the autocommunication of God’s very self in Christ” (Chauvet 1995, 398). This is the very essence of bread (Chauvet 1995, 400) that happens in the act of the breaking, of the opening of the bread: it reveals the coming of Christ that however never can be fixed or preserved; it is advent and retreat at the same moment.

Presence-as-trace; trace of a passing always-already past; trace thus of something absent. But still trace, that is, the sign of a happening which calls us to be attentive to something new still to come (Chauvet 1995, 58).
Faith is always mediated, as the sacraments show; it does “not exist except as inscribed somewhere” (Chauvet 1995, 402). Thus, faith and especially the sacraments are inescapably embedded in human existence and in specific cultural settings.

From these considerations, it is a relatively small step to a case of a medieval city church in Amsterdam that became a museum of modern art, but in which an ecclesial congregation still meets and celebrates the Eucharist weekly on Sunday.

2 Art Installations in the Old Church in Amsterdam

The medieval Old Church in the heart of Amsterdam’s red-light district is owned by a foundation and used on Sunday as a place for worship, but also has official status as a museum. High-profile and controversial exhibitions of modern art are organized by director Jacqueline Grandjean in the church. As the exhibitions are always site-specific, they are excellent examples of the interweaving of religion and art. The discussions that the shows evoke among art lovers, churchgoers, and advocates of cultural heritage at the same time make clear that this interweaving is not self-evident and undisputed. We present three examples.

In 2015 the Japanese artist Taturo Atzu constructed a huge platform on top of the building, The Garden Which is the Nearest to God. Through staircases on a scaffolding that led up along the walls and the huge gothic windows of the church, the visitor ended up on a platform where the roof-turret stood out. The artist stated: “I want to activate people to look more actively and freely. [...] That old church is a strange, fascinating place, surrounded by prostitutes and urinals. As I walked through those narrow alleys, I realized that I wanted to create a space that was large and open: the largest roof terrace in the distant environment” (Smallenburg 2015). And a reviewer from a national newspaper:

The Red Light District was clean, sweet, well-arranged and cool from here, and the condom hats from the British bachelor’s clubs seemed to be cute, dangling. But the best thing was the lead work and the pattern of drop-shaped slates on the church roof, so close at once. Long ago laid by many hands, only to please the birds (and the Lord, if you want). It was thoughtful and relativizing, a bit astronaut (Prisser 2015).

The uselessness of the project is striking and generated a lot of discussion. In other words, the cultural code was being challenged and the work contested. The title of the work of art alone, The Garden Which is Nearest to God, is a religious reference, no longer specifically Christian, but much more generally religious. The same could be said of the space and openness that it realized above the spatial narrowness of the neighbourhood. Probably, it even deepens the understanding of infinity and per-

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2 I used the artworks and the here presented interpretations also in other publications: Barnard 2019, Barnard 2020.
haps of absoluteness in the middle of a busy populated city-centre which is to a large extend devoted to the immediate satisfaction of lusts. The work clearly refers to a ‘beyond’ the daily reality of the red-light District. As far as I know, the work did not actively interact with the Sunday services of the Christian congregation meeting in the church.

In 2017 the French artist Christian Boltanski carried out the exposition NA (Dutch for ‘AFTER’). He designed site-specific installations in the church building that referred to the many names remembered in the church, especially on the tomb slabs. He also constructed enormous towers of agricultural plastic on the graves, which were higher as more people had been buried there. The visitor walked between the towers and came into contact with coats hung on a wooden skeleton, which when you approached asked very personal questions, such as ‘Are you lonely?’ Jackets of local residents spread out on the floor served as reminders for what a human being leaves behind after their death. At the Lord’s Table in the choir of the church lay a thick layer of flowers that were slowly wilting.

On one of the last Sundays before Advent, at the end of the liturgical year, where traditional themes such as death and resurrection, destruction and purification, restoration, and return (of Jesus) are central, the ecclesiastical congregation designed a church service in which the churchgoers passed singing between the towers of agricultural plastic. I was one of the presiders in the service. I composed the prayers from excerpts of Jesus’ sermons about the last things, prescribed for that Sunday. Thus, the artwork was emphatically brought into the Christian liturgical narrative, and the art-
work also allowed for this. The NA/AFTER to which the title of the work of art refers is given an interpretation within a biblical liturgical narrative: the coming of the Son of Man. The installations deepened the understanding of the NA/AFTER: death is a massive force and power, and the voluminous presence of the plastic towers emphasized the non-obviousness of an AFTER. Or, framed in the language of the liturgical discourse, the revelation of the Son of Man is a radical break with the familiar and with what lies within human power.

The Kyrie-litany:
Minister: Holy places are being desecrated,
temples will all be thrown down,
not one stone will be left upon the other (Matt 24:1).
All (sung): The end is still to come (Matt 24:6).
     AFTER the horrors
the sign that heralds the Son of Man
will appear in heaven (Matt 24:30).
Minister: Refugees
— they flee into the mountains,
leave behind their homes and possessions,
their coats on the land,  
— coats, jackets, everywhere,  
who were wearing them, where are they?  
Fled, disappeared, killed, drowned. (Matt 24:16, 18, 20)

All: The end is still to come.
AFTER the horrors  
the sign that heralds the Son of Man  
will appear in heaven.

Minister: They flee, pregnant women  
with a child at the breast;  
they flee in the cutting wind  
through an ice cold winter. (Matt 24:19)

All: The end is still to come.
AFTER the horrors  
the sign that heralds the Son of Man  
will appear in heaven.

Minister: Wars and rumours of wars,  
nation that goes to war against nation,  
kingdom against kingdom (Matt 24:6a, 7).

All: The end is still to come.
AFTER the horrors  
the sign that heralds the Son of Man  
will appear in heaven.

Minister: Famines in many places (Matt 24:7).
All: AFTER the horrors  
the sign that heralds the Son of Man  
will appear in heaven.  
The end is still to come.

Minister: The earth trembles (Matt 24:7).
All: AFTER the horrors  
the sign that heralds the Son of Man  
will appear in heaven.  
The end is still to come.

Minister: False messiahs and false prophets  
produce great signs and wonders,  
mislead God’s chosen ones. (Matt 24:24)
All: AFTER the horrors  
the sign that heralds the Son of Man  
will appear in heaven.  
The end is still to come.

Minister: Death everywhere,  
dead everywhere,  
a labyrinth of tombs,
a jungle of towering black tombs,
as high as the number of deaths underneath.

All: The end is still to come.

When we celebrated the Eucharist, the cups and plates of Holy Supper stood in the midst of the wilting flowers on the table, and its looks and smells gave deep meaning to the Eucharistic prayer, which included this clause:

Minister: O Lord, come to our aid!
All: The configuration of this world will pass.
Minister: O God make us alive
All: and sanctify your name.
Minister: Thanks to the God of David
All: through Jesus his servant,
Minister: who in the same night that he was betrayed
...

In 2018 the Italian artist Giorgio Calò transformed all the windows of the church by covering them with red transparent foil. The Reformation, in 1578, turned the church into – as Milan Kundera says in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* – a ‘white hangar’, a void of no significance. Calò ‘teared up’ the decor of that emptiness by reddening it, to an impressive effect, especially when on the longest day in June the church stayed open until the sun had set and the red light became more and more intense, until it slowly dissolved in the dark night.

One could say that completely new meanings were unlocked. Red has, to quote the color teacher Johannes Itten, ‘an irresistible radiation power’, it is ‘a fiery force’,
and can express a ‘feverish-like, combative passion’. It is connected ‘with war and demons’, but also with the colour of ‘spiritualized love’. And a more extensive quote:

> There are a lot of red-modulations, because one can vary it to cold – warm, dull – radiating, and light – dark, without destroying its red character. From the demonic and gloomy vermilion red on black, to sweet angelic Madonna-rose, red can express all the stages from the subterranean to the celestial life. Only the etheric, spiritual, transparent-airy remains inaccessible to the red, because in that area the blue prevails (Itten 1961, 134–135, o.t.).

The red, like every colour, is full of ambivalences: It consumes, and it warms, it is the colour of fire and of blood, of death and life, of enthusiasm and ire. In a medieval church building like this it also evokes references to the ecclesial canonical colours, to the liturgical red of the Holy Spirit and of the faith witnesses, the martyrs. But unmistakably in this specific church building it also refers to the district in which the church stands, and which is named by this same colour, the Red Light District. At night the church mimics the brothels around it. No illusions, the artwork seems to say, the boundaries between church and square are wafer thin and the red therefore evokes “all the stages from the subterranean to the celestial life”. The red has meaning both from the cultural code in which the church is set, and the spiritual code within the church. And at the same time, it transcends all that through its powerful rule. It is this world, but different, this world in the perspective “of the infinite or of an absolute sense” (Gräb 2006, 68): Anastasis, Resurrection.

### 3 Anthropological and Theological Considerations

Earlier in this chapter we outlined a general theological and philosophical framework in which senses, art and museums were kept together in their coherence. We mainly referred to fundamental theological and philosophical thinkers such as Schleiermacher, Heidegger, and Chauvet. After a description of several art installations in the museum and church building of the Old Church in Amsterdam, we now introduce the exemplary in a contemporary theological-philosophical discourse, in order to show the relevance of the encounter between art and religion.

#### 3.1 Radical Theology

In the first section of this chapter, we refer to the religious dimensions of the museum, in the ways that Carol Duncan, Mary Bouquet and Nuno Porto describe. Carol Duncan develops her narrative starting with the development of the public art museum in the Enlightenment, through nineteenth-century bourgeois culture that conferred an educational and civilizing value to the art museum. This story culminates in the narrative of the twentieth-century modern art museum and its corresponding search for spiritual transcendence of the nothing-beyond-the-empirical-observable
earthly world. The religious language that frames the narrative of Mary Bouquet and Nuno Porto is far more fragmented, due to the changes that museums underwent and the complex apparatuses into which they developed. The encyclopaedic oversight is diversified, the public pluralized, the museum entered into dialogue, there is no overarching unified idea anymore (Bal 2011, 530–531, 540).

It is here that postmodern, so-called *Radical Theology* joins the debate. ‘The holy’ is ‘the complete other’ that manifests itself to people and phenomena (Otto [1917] 2014), *and especially in art*, which Richard Kearney calls ‘the poetics of the possible’ (Kearney 1988, 371). The ‘poetics of the possible’ point to the non-available, the non-representable, in short, the stranger. One could also say: the in calculable (Chauvet 1995, 49). Or, in other words, the ‘indeconstructable’, the promised for, the called for. It is always to come, never a fixed entity. It is an event that uncovers or constitutes ‘truth’ (Chauvet 1995, 49; Caputo 2006, 6). Eventually the three installations in the Old Church of Amsterdam escape description and only poetry suffices to trace their meanings. Art evokes art. Or, to frame it in the language of Schleiermacher: being touched by an expression of heightened self-consciousness heightens the self-consciousness of the one who is touched, which evokes a new expression.

Analogous to Bouquet and Porto, but unlike Tillich, Kearney speaks of art as referring to ‘a quasi-belief in a quasi-God. It suspends the question of God’ (Kearney 2011, 130). When speaking about God, he speaks of a ‘God-perhaps’ and joins the notion of ‘the radical other’ in which religiosity was caught in twentieth-century discourse. He proposes his project as “an invitation to revisit what might be termed a primary scene of religion: the encounter with a radical Stranger who we choose, or don’t choose, to call God” (Kearney 2011, 7). It is precisely the arts that are pre-eminently a place where the question of God can be asked without having to be answered. Again, whether the encounter with art is interpreted as religious depends on the viewer and the discourse in which he or she participates. Because a discourse is never individual, the community and culture in which the viewer participates plays a role in that interpretation.

Further, Kearney refers in his work to sacramentality. “Imagining the other as other is what enables the self to become a host and the stranger a guest” (Kearney 2011, 41–42). The notion of the ‘sacramental’ refers to welcoming ‘the stranger into the here and now’ (Kearney 2011, 85); it refers to the artistic process of ‘consecrating’ whatever ‘corporeal situation’ into ‘a second order reference of creative possibility’. Kearney names this proceeding the ‘aesthetic of transubstantiation’ or ‘eucharistic aesthetic’ (Kearney 2011, 90–91, 97). It is: “The word made everyday flesh” (Kearney 2011, 87). Whether this sacramentality is religious aesthetics or aesthetic religion, remains undecided (Kearney 2011, 99). Going one step further, opening to God’s condescension in the sensory and physical remains dependent on a human response “to the sacred summons of the moment” (Kearney 2011, 87).

Kearney makes a correct reference to Francis of Assisi, and especially to his *Cantico delle Creature*. His “mystical panentheism [...] was a way of restoring God to the world, of rediscovering a living God amidst the ashes of a dead one” (Kearney 2011,
The question of ultimate meaning, of God perhaps, can arise on a roof terrace on a medieval church building high above the narrow alleys of the city, between towering tombs of agricultural plastic in the same building, and in a mysterious red light that illuminates the oldest church of Amsterdam. Religious aesthetics may turn into an aesthetic religion.

3.2 Final Practical Theological Considerations

Christian theology can be defined as the border traffic on the roads between the areas of ‘church’ and ‘culture’. In order to be able to carry out their task, the theologian must participate in both areas, wholeheartedly and with a critical sense. We belong to both areas, to two regimes. Practical Theology can be defined as the border traffic between ecclesiastical and cultural practices. Practical Theology that deals with the aesthetic and the arts can be described as the border traffic between ecclesiastical and cultural artistic practices. In the late modernity in which we live, the boundaries between both areas are not always clear (if they have ever been). In the ‘true’ work of art a way opens up for being to disclose itself, in the ‘true’ ritual or sacrament, a path opens up for Christ to reveal himself. But their coming cannot be fixed or empirically established; it is ‘Presence-as-trace; trace of a passing always-already past; trace thus of something absent’.

Bibliography


