Fig. 12.1: J. L. Lund, *Christ Blessing*, 1831. Søllerød Church. The National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen. Photo: Arnold Mikkelsen, 2018.

David Burmeister

Chapter 12

The Face of Salvation in Early Nineteenth-Century Danish Altar Painting

This chapter investigates a number of key innovations in Danish altar painting in the period 1815–1850. It demonstrates how the religious work of seminal artists such as J. L. Lund, C. W. Eckersberg, and Bertel Thorvaldsen strove to find an expression for contemporary religious sentiments; both by reinterpreting the traditional subject-matter of altar painting and by introducing entirely new themes, such as stories of his Ministry on Earth. The article aims to show how these new approaches transformed the altarpiece from serving a communal purpose to addressing the individual believer, and encouraging contemplation on one's personal relationship with Christ. It is argued that the concept of a heavenly Jerusalem and its iconography was employed in this process and in the new representations of Christ.

The role of the “New Jerusalem motif” in Danish art of the nineteenth century has not been the object of art historical studies. This lacuna can partly be explained by the fact that religious art has remained peripheral to both public and scholarly interest; even in spite of the general popularity of nineteenth century art. Furthermore, in line with the general characteristics of Danish art historical research of the twentieth century, the studies of nineteenth-century religious art have tended to focus on formal and biographical aspects of the paintings rather than meaning.¹ The single-most

¹ The pioneering article on religious painting of the Golden Age is Jette Kjærboe, “C. W. Eckersbergs altertavler,” *Kunstmuseets Årsskrift* (1975): 119–63. Kjærboe examined the paintings chronologically, by means of a formal analysis and examinations of archival documents pertaining to the pictures. Similarly, Nina Damsgaard approached the material through formal analysis, in her attempt to understand the relationship between the artistic trends in religious art of the nineteenth century and the different religious positions within the state church. Erik Fischer can probably be credited with focusing the art historical writing more towards the religious meaning of the paintings. Although Fischer was primarily interested in Eckersberg's life-long interest in perspective, the article also demonstrated that Eckersberg constructed the perspective of his *Last Supper* in such a way that it would stimulate the spectator to engage in the specific theological points of the Biblical passage chosen as the picture's subject matter. More recently, Ragni Linnet examined Søren Kierkegaard's theological thinking to better understand what was at stake in religious art of the 1840s. Nina Damsgaard, “Det danske altertavlemaleri i 1800-tallet og dets forhold til de samtidige religiøse strømninger” (Master's thesis, Aarhus University, 1979). Erik Fischer, “Om Eckersbergs altertavle

important reason why the use of the New Jerusalem motif in the nineteenth century has not been examined is probably that it functioned more as a subtext within the altar paintings than as the actual motif. There can be little doubt that the idea of a New Jerusalem still carried power in the nineteenth century. One need only to think of Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig's (1783–1872) hymn “On Jerusalem the New” [“På Jerusalem det ny”] (1837), or the many other allusions to the heavenly city in his poetry, to know that Grundtvig presumed that the average person was familiar with the idea and iconography of the New Jerusalem.

During the second quarter of the nineteenth century, several new approaches to the altar painting were developed; both with respect to its subject matter and to how the pictures addressed the spectator. The present chapter will focus on some of the key innovations in altar painting during the period ca. 1820–1850 by artists such as Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770–1844), Johan Ludwig Lund (1777–1867), and Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg (1783–1853). This chapter will examine how faith and salvation were approached and how the New Jerusalem motif was utilized in the process as a metaphor of the future salvation and more importantly as a metaphor of the spiritual community of believers in this life/world. I will argue that the period saw an increased individualization of faith, which manifested itself in the altar paintings of the first half of the nineteenth century. The process transformed the metaphor of New Jerusalem from pointing out towards a spiritual community in the world, to pointing inwards towards an individual, spiritual state that found its primary visual expression in the figure of Christ addressing the spectator.

Background

Altar painting was radically transformed during the nineteenth century, as more than 1,000 churches were supplied with a new altar painting or sculpture. This development reflects, in part, the hundreds of church restorations that were carried out, and the erection of new buildings to accommodate the changed demography of industrialisation. The restorations and the new builds both offered ample opportunity to rethink the altar painting. The key factor that propelled the innovation within altar painting was, however, the fundamental change in the religious climate of Denmark. The rise of both Pietism and Enlightenment in the eighteenth century meant that the church lost its institutional grasp on religious life. From the 1790s, Denmark experienced its own Great Awakening with Pietist groups of laymen forming all over the country; insisting on their right to practice according to their own faith which was

i Frederiksberg kirke. Tydning og tolkning,” in *Billedtekster*, ed. Erik Fischer (Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag, 1984). Ragni Linnet, “Imitatio Christi. Søren Kierkegaards forhold til den religiøse kunst,” *Transfiguration* 6, no. 1 (2004).

more aligned with the old rituals than the new, rationalist rituals. These groups were founded on the personal experience of spiritual awakening which led to a turn towards Christ. The new spirituality affected the religious thinking of the day strongly, as is evident in Grundtvig's work and in particular in the famous theologian Søren Kierkegaard's (1813–1855) religious thinking.²

This development in spirituality strongly influenced the church. The Danish state church remained rooted in Rationalistic theology. By the 1820s, however, Reason was increasingly understood as Man's God-given capacity to grasp the divine truth of Christianity, which allowed for a deeper and more personal inner revelation of Christ.³ The key figure of this so-called Supranaturalist theology was Bishop Jacob Peter Mynster (1775–1854), who in 1834 rose to become the government's counsellor on religious questions. For artists, this development meant that the role of the altar painting shifted towards addressing the individual believer's inner experience of God. Inner revelation had to be addressed in accordance with Rationalist thinking, however; that is, the paintings were often expected to adhere to the laws of nature while still pointing the spectator towards the supernatural.

Jesus's Invitation

In a certain sense, the first important step towards defining a new type of altarpiece suited to accommodate modern religious sentiments was taken by Bertel Thorvaldsen. In 1820, he was tasked with producing the new altar decoration in the cathedral of Copenhagen, The Church of Our Lady, which was being rebuilt in those years.⁴ In 1821, Thorvaldsen delivered his model for the sculpture of *Christ*, which was finished and placed in The Church of Our Lady as late as 1839 (Fig. 11.0).⁵ In this sculpture, Thorvaldsen sought to present Christ as a divine being by means of his classical beauty, superhuman size, and static pose; that is, as an elevated ideal. At the same time Christ appears to be both present and accessible to the individual believer, opening his arms in a loving gesture and inviting her in. In Thorvaldsen's words, the

² Kyle A. Roberts, "The Living Word and the Word of God: The Pietist Impulse in Kierkegaard and Grundtvig," in *The Pietist Impulse in Christianity*, eds. Christian T. Collins, Cristopher Gehr, G. William Carlson and Eric Holst (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2011), 120–8.

³ Jens Rasmussen, *En brydningstid, kirkelige holdninger i guldalderperioden 1800–1850* (Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2002), 22–4, 33–7.

⁴ The assignment was initially given to J. L. Lund, but Thorvaldsen's visit to Copenhagen in 1819–20 provided a unique opportunity to have one of the world's leading sculptors make the new altar decoration. Cf. Knud Børge Pedersen, "J. L. Lunds altertavle i Sankt Johannes Kirke i København," *Kirkehistoriske Samlinger* (2013): 104–8.

⁵ The plaster models of 1821 are now in Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen (inv. A82 and A83).

sculpture “expresses that [Christ] loves, that is embraces Man. To my thinking that must be the essence of Christ.”⁶

On the pedestal below Thorvaldsen’s statue one read the words “Come to me” [*Kommer til mig*] that initiates Christ’s invitation to humankind: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28). This quote appears to have spoken directly to the religious sentiments of the period. It frequently appears on altarpieces and it was developed into the leitmotif of Søren Kierkegaard’s *Indøvelse i Christendom* [*Practice in Christianity*] (1850). According to Kierkegaard Christ extends his invitation to each and everybody, and with Christ’s words “Come to me” he invites the believers into his arms and encourages them to remain there.⁷ Kierkegaard writes:

No, he who opens his arms and invites all – ah, if all, all you who labor and are burdened, were to come to him, he would embrace them all and say: Now remain with me, for to remain with me is to rest. The helper is the help. Amazing!⁸

To Kierkegaard this meant that the invitation is an offer to enter into a spiritual state of being *with* Christ that connects our lives in this world with our future lives in the next. The invitation “stands at the crossroads, where death distinguishes death from life.”⁹ Understood in this way, the invitation mirrors the Lutheran understanding of the heavenly Jerusalem as both a metaphor of a spiritual state of being in this world, and as an image of the Kingdom to come. The metaphor of the invitation, however, does not contain the communal aspect of Luther’s heavenly Jerusalem. It represents the believer’s personal relationship with Christ.

Looking at Thorvaldsen’s *Christ* with Kierkegaard transforms the sculpture into the very image of this invitation. Christ’s open arms become an expression of the idea of entering a privileged spiritual state in this life, that will grant us the eternal life to come. Indeed, this was how the art historian Julius Lange (1838–1896) perceived the statue. Writing in 1872 he felt well-nigh overwhelmed by the invitation, as Thorvaldsen’s Christ “assumes too much personal power, as it stretches its arms out towards me, the living human being, with an invitation, a beckoning, a calling that pertains to me personally for life and eternity.”¹⁰ Lange astutely describes the

⁶ Quoted from Julius Lange, “Thorvaldsens Fremstillinger af Kristus,” in *Kristelig Kalender for 1872*, eds. Harald Stein and Jakob Paulli (København: 1872), 38. “men saa udtrykker den, at han elsker, omfavner Menneskene, og det, har jeg tænkt mig, maa være Grundpræget i Kristus.” My translation.

⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Indføring i Christendom* (Copenhagen: Universitetsboghandler C. A. Reitzel, 1850), 12.

⁸ Kierkegaard, *Indføring i Christendom*, 16 (Quoted from Søren Kierkegaard *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 23.

⁹ Kierkegaard, *Indføring i Christendom*, 19 (Quoted from Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 25).

¹⁰ Lange, “Thorvaldsens Fremstillinger af Kristus,” 47. “om en Statue ikke tiltager sig for megen personlig Magt, idet den strækker Hænderne ud mod mig, det levende Menneske, med en Opfordring, en Kaldelse, der gjælder mig personlig for Liv og Evighed.” My translation.

physical sensation of being confronted with an invitation that affects both this life and the next.

Thorvaldsen's sculpture introduced a new type of relationship between the altarpiece and the congregation in which we are not merely beholding Christ, but also being seen by him. This direct, emotional interaction between Christ and the spectator was noted by the art historian Ragni Linnet in an important article of 2004. Linnet argued that Kierkegaard distinguished between *beholding* as an act of unengaged judgement of the world, from the position of oneself, and actual *seeing* as an act of reciprocity.¹¹ In the latter situation the person *seeing* engages herself compassionately in that which she sees, while at the same time allowing the world to see her. Kierkegaard points to Peter's denial of Christ and argues that Jesus reacted to Peter's denouncement of him by encompassing Peter with an accepting gaze.

To Linnet, Kierkegaard's understanding of Jesus's encompassing gaze, as a kind of sympathetic interaction of two bodies being presented to one another, is a highly useful analytical figure in our attempt at understanding the kind of visual interaction established in this type of representation of Christ.¹² She points to the considerable number of altar paintings which seek to engage Christ directly with the congregation assembled before the altar. Her analytical figure of Jesus's encompassing gaze is relevant to the first altar painting to adopt Thorvaldsen's schema: *Christ* (1831), painted by J. L. Lund for Søllerød Church (Fig. 12.1). Here we see Christ standing before us in full figure in an elegant room with a marble floor. Behind him are two columns that flank a green veil that alludes to the one that covered The Holy of Holies in the temple of Jerusalem; the veil serving as a symbol of how original sin had separated man from God. Christ is shown in full figure and crowned by a halo, and he faces the spectator directly while performing a blessing gesture towards the spectator. Following Linnet one can say that J. L. Lund activates the Kierkegaardian reciprocal act of *seeing*: we see Christ, but at the same time we realize that he not only sees us, but knows us, blesses us, and invites us in.

This sympathetic interaction between the spectator and the figure of Christ is seminal to the painting. Indeed, one could argue that the key function of the interior is to both stress Christ's proximity to the picture plane – most noticeably through the marbled floor – and to establish the pictorial space as an extension of the altarpiece. Indeed, the two columns behind Christ mirrors the columns of the old Renaissance altarpiece, and both stress the spatial depth of the picture and link the sacred space of the painting to the physical space of the altarpiece. Christ stands at the very threshold between the sacred space and our world; literally as the one who can bridge the two. This notion is further stressed by the green veil behind him, which by alluding to the veil covering the Holy of Holies points towards Christ as the one who atoned Original Sin

¹¹ Linnet, "Imitatio Christi," 73–4.

¹² Linnet, "Imitatio Christi," 75–9.

and bridged the gap between God and man. This notion of Christ as the path to the next state of being – that is, to the New Jerusalem – is further expanded upon by means of the open book Christ presents to us, as the pages read: “John 14,6. I am the way and the truth and the life” [“Joh: Ev: Cap 14 v6 - Jeg er Veyen, og Sandhed, og Livet”]. The quote would surely allow most of the congregation to finish the Biblical passage themselves: “No one comes to the Father except through me.” Quite literally then, J. L. Lund represents Christ as the very path to the eternal life in the Kingdom of Christ.

Although not explicitly referenced in the picture, the iconography of the New Jerusalem remains important. Indeed, one can argue that the interaction with the pillars of the altarpiece not only allowed Lund to establish his painting as a symbolic extension of the physical altarpiece; it also allowed him to let the Renaissance altarpiece accent the painting, as the temple-like structure of the frame alludes to the Church as a symbolic representation of the New Jerusalem. This set the stage for the main point of the painting: the representation of Christ as the path to both a privileged spiritual state of being in this world and ultimately to the future Kingdom.

It is significant that nineteenth-century altarpieces very often were modelled as a symbolic representation of the New Jerusalem. A good example of one such frame is the altarpiece in Ishøj Kirke made for Heinrich Eddelien's (1802–1852) painting of *Christ* (1846) (Fig. 12.2). Its neo-gothic style obviously imitates the architecture of medieval cathedrals, and thus the general notion of the church as a symbolic representation of Christ's congregation in the Kingdom to come, while the pinnacles may be understood as alluding to the traditional depiction of Jerusalem as a city with many towers. Furthermore, in adopting the appearance of an architectural opening – be it a window or a doorway – the frame establishes a sort of symbolic threshold between this world and the next, which becomes an active element in the picture's depiction of Christ standing on the very threshold of the opening, as if present before our eyes and engaging us directly and reaching into our space. Finally, it is worth noting that whereas Lund, in 1831, felt it necessary to explicate that his painting represented Christ as our personal path to salvation, this was no longer necessary in 1840, when Heinrich Eddelien finished his altar painting. Apparently, no later than the 1840s the image of Christ being present to and before us was conventionally understood as representing the idea of entering a new, spiritual state of being through the acceptance of Christ as one's Saviour. Presumably Thorvaldsen's Christ was instrumental in establishing this pictorial convention, having stood in Copenhagen's cathedral in the form of a plaster cast since 1829 before the marble sculpture was finally erected in 1839.¹³

¹³ It is worth mentioning that Thorvaldsen's *Christ* became the model for many paintings of Christ standing before the congregation. One especially interesting adaption of the sculpture is F. L. Storch's painting for Lumby kirke (1856) in which Christ has risen and now stands before the tomb – at the very edge of the painting – opening his arms in an invitation to the spectator, while the same Biblical passage as on the base of Thorvaldsen's sculpture is quoted below: “Come to me.”

Excursus: Representing Christ

In light of the re-orientation of the altarpiece towards Christ it is hardly surprising that the key discussion of religious painting during this period centred on the representation of Christ. As has been pointed out by several scholars,¹⁴ the art critics of the 1830s were deeply engaged in the question of how art could truthfully represent Christ. A key figure in this debate was the young theologian Karsten Friis Wiborg (1813–1885). His primary concern was to ensure that the many paintings being produced for the Danish churches should be appropriate within a *Protestant* context. He considered it instrumental that protestant artists departed from the figurative traditions of the Middle Ages, and he was particularly critical of the influence of the German Nazarenes, who strove towards reviving religious spirituality in art by approaching late medieval art. Wiborg addressed the issue of truly Protestant painting in his review of the exhibition at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in 1844. Writing on C. W. Eckersberg's (1783–1853) "Jesus Tempted by the Pharisees" (1843) he praised Eckersberg for his historical approach to the Biblical stories:¹⁵

What Eckersberg has done in this as well as in his previous paintings, and what has not previously been recognized, although in hindsight it surely will, is this: He has departed from everything that was rooted in the fantasy of the Catholic Middle Ages . . . that the heavenly were portrayed in every conceivable glory and with a vision in which, as far as possible, each and every trace of their reality was annihilated. . . . Eckersberg will not paint Biblical persons as if they were heavenly, since the scenes he paints took place on Earth. He paints them not as abstract beings, as they were real persons belonging to a particular Nation . . . What is important to him is to highlight that which is central to the biblical persons' actions and work . . .¹⁶

Wiborg considered it to be of national importance that Eckersberg had moved religious art toward a new and truer expression, based on the understanding of Christ

14 This subject was first raised by Kjærboe, "C. W. Eckersbergs altertavler," 156–158. Subsequently it was discussed by Emma Salling, "Altertavler på udstilling. Guldalderens religiøse maleri i samtidige kunstanmeldelser," *Troens stil i guldalderens kunst*, exhibition catalogue (Nivå: Nivaagaards Malerisamling, 1999).

15 Reproduced in Kasper Monrad and Peter Michael Hornung, *C. W. Eckersberg – dansk malerkunsts fader* (Gylling: Narayana Press, 2005), 318.

16 Karsten Friis Wiborg, *Konstudstillingen i 1844, betragtet med stadigt Hensyn til den sig udfoldende danske kunst* (Copenhagen: Universitetsboghandler C. A. Reitzel, 1844), 95. "Hvad Eckersberg baade i dette og i sine tidligere bibelske Malerier har gjort, og hvad der endnu ikke er anerkjendt, skjøndt det visselig engang maa blive det, er Dette, at han har forladt alt Det i sin Fremstilling, som kun var hjemlet i den katholske Middelalders Phantasi At de Himmelske bleve fremstillede i al optænkelig Pragt og med Aasyn, hvori, saavidt muligt, ethvert Spor af deres Virkelighed var tilintetgjort Eckersberg vil ikke male de bibelske Personer som himmelske, efterdi de Scener, hvori han maler dem, foregik paa Jorden; han maler dem ikke som abstrakte Væsener, efterdi de vare virkelige Personer, der hørte til en bestemt Nation . . . ; det er ham derimod om at gjøre at fremhæve alt Det, som er væsentligt i de bibelske Personers Optræden og Virken" My translation.

Fig. 12.2: Heinrich Eddelien, *Christ Blessing*, 1846. Ishøj Church. The National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen. Photo: Arnold Mikkelsen, 2018.

and his disciples as “real human beings.” Indeed, the only objection Wiborg could muster against Eckersberg’s painting was that some might perhaps understand Jesus as a “Godly human” [“*Gudmenneske*”], whereas we ought to understand his facial expression as a reflection of the particular situation depicted.¹⁷ Conversely, Wiborg was highly critical of Heinrich Eddelien’s Nazarene-inspired painting *Jesus Blesses the Children*, which was painted for Maarum Church (Fig. 12.3). Indeed, he was decidedly puzzled that an artist of Eddelien’s stature would “debase himself by painting a Catholic, ginger haired and exquisitely dressed Christ whose facial expression is entirely incomprehensible to anyone unfamiliar with the dogmas and world views of the Catholic church; a Christ who from top to bottom must be declared unreal and untrue.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Wiborg, *Konstudstillingen i 1844*, 97.

¹⁸ Wiborg, *Konstudstillingen i 1844*, 102–3.

Fig. 12.3: Heinrich Eddelien, *Christ Blessing the Children*, 1843. Maarum Church. The National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen. Photo: Arnold Mikkelsen, 2018.

Wiborg's critique has been seen as a reflection of the advent of historical awareness associated in part with the rise of Nationalism during the early nineteenth century.¹⁹ While this is undoubtedly true, I will argue that it is not the main point of his critique. Rather, Wiborg's insistence on historical correctness served to ensure that Jesus is represented as truthfully as possible; that is, as the *human being* whose life is recounted in Scripture, and not as a divine being "in every conceivable glory." This position was mirrored by Søren Kierkegaard, who considered Jesus's human nature as the pivotal aspect of Christian faith. It is because we cannot *know* that Jesus was indeed God, that we must *believe*. In other words: Christian faith grows from the very fact that Jesus was human and that his divinity is invisible to us. The only thing man can do, then, is to

¹⁹ Salling, "Altartavler på udstilling. Guldalderens religiøse maleri i samtidige kunstanmeldelser," 49.

trust the most humbled of men, when he claims to be God. This seems to be what is at the heart of Wiborg's insistence that Jesus must be depicted as a human being.

Within this line of thinking the depiction of Christ as a mere human is not contrary to, but a prerequisite of our inner appropriating of Christ's dual nature. Even though neither Wiborg nor Kierkegaard approved of depicting Christ as if he is addressing us from his Glory, their ponderings over the truthful depiction of Christ, on Christ's nature, on our existential connection with the Savior, and on the limitation of visibility, lay bare just how much was at stake in paintings of Christ in the first half of the nineteenth century; and which associations were activated, both when Eddelien painted the glorious figure of Christ and when Eckersberg painted him as a human being.

Conversations with Jesus

The understanding of Christ as embodying salvation and the importance of establishing a personal, spiritual relationship with Christ is also highly pertinent to the second important type of altar painting developed in the 1830s, in which the spectator was encouraged to invest herself in an inner dialogue with Jesus and in doing so adopt the Word as if spoken directly to oneself. The type was introduced when C. W. Eckersberg, in 1836, received the commission for a new altar painting to Hornbæk Church and opted for the story of Jesus's conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (Fig. 12.4).

The altar painting for Hornbæk kirke was completed in 1838. In this painting Christ, dressed in red garments, addresses the Samaritan woman with a speaking gesture, as she rests her arm on the water jar in contemplation of his words. When it was exhibited at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts the same year, its innovative approach to religious painting was immediately recognized. The leading art historian and critic of the day, Niels Laurits Høyen (1798–1870), was mainly favourable in his judgement. He noted that Eckersberg had abandoned the traditional narrative structure of religious painting and focused instead on the “life of the conversation,” which the spectator had to bring to its conclusion within her own mind.²⁰ Karsten Friis Wiborg agreed with Høyen's opinion of the painting, and praised Eckersberg for allowing us to read the entire story on the faces of the two figures: “Professor Eckersberg has portrayed Christ's face quite astonishingly and in my opinion genially and truthfully. The artist has abandoned the usual type for Christ's face in

²⁰ Niels Lauritz Høyen, “Udsigt over det Mærkeligste paa Konstudstillingen 1838,” in *Niels Laurits Høyens Skrifter*, ed. J. L. Ussing (Copenhagen: Thieles Bogtrykkeri, 1871), 105–6.

Fig. 12.4: C. W. Eckersberg, *Christ and the Samaritan Woman*, 1838. Hornbæk Church. The National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen. Photo: Arnold Mikkelsen, 2018.

which affection is the main trait . . . But in this painting it is different; it is the *thought*, which seems personified in this Christ.”²¹

Both Høyen and Wiborg recognized that Eckersberg’s picture marked an important shift in altar painting towards telling the Biblical story by means of the spectator’s contemplative investment in the conversation; that is, in Jesus’s words. It is surely no coincidence that this type of altar painting was introduced in the late 1830s, some twenty years after the foundation of The Danish Bible Society in 1814, and The Danish School Acts of the same year.²² The former had as its explicit goal to promote the reading of the Bible and distributed it by the thousands. Similarly, the Bible was frequently utilized in the schools’ reading lessons, and as a result, the generations growing up in the 1820s and 1830s not only had access to the Bible, but they were also capable of reading it and they were familiar with the stories.²³

Eckersberg introduced a type of altar painting that required the spectators to be intimately familiar with scripture and capable of not only recognizing the correct Biblical story, but even of recalling how the conversation unfolded. In this process Christ’s words were internalized, so to speak, as if spoken directly to you. It is, of course, interesting to note that with this type of altar painting Eckersberg’s not only severed the connection between the altar painting and the rituals of the church; he even seems to have made this the very point of the painting. The quote cited above the picture does not stress Christ’s offer of “a well of life,” as later paintings of the story would, but that worship of God takes place within the believer and is not bound to any specific location: “God is Spirit and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). While this choice may be in direct response to contemporary theological debates,²⁴ they also reflect a turn towards the individual and towards the inwardness of belief similar to what we found in Thorvaldsen and Lund. In a very literal sense the story of the Samaritan woman allowed Eckersberg

21 Karsten Friis Wiborg, *Kritik over de ved det kgl. Akademie for de skønne Kunster udstillede Malerier* (Copenhagen: J. H. Schiboths Boghandlings Forlag, 1838), 172. “Christi Ansigt har Prof. Eckersberg fremstillet aldeles eiendommeligt, og i mine Tanker høist genialt og sandt; konstneren har forladt den sædvanlige Typus for Christushoveder, hvorved det Følelsesfulde stedse er Hovedpræget . . . Men i nærværende Maleri er det anderledes; det er Tanken, der ligesom er personificeret i denne Christus.” My translation.

22 The Danish School Acts of 1814 was a set of laws that established a national system of mass schooling by making school mandatory (and free) for children between the ages of 7 and 14.

23 Jens Rasmussen, *Vækkelser i dansk luthersk fællesskultur* (Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2016), 224–5.

24 The early nineteenth century, and in particular the 1830s, was marked by a fierce discussion over the church rituals; Rasmussen, *En brydningstid*, 71–92. In that context the quote of John 4:24 can possibly be seen as stressing a Lutheran tenet defined in the Augsburg Confession of 1530, articles 7–8, that the church is simply the community of all believers and that “the Word and the sacraments are able to produce their results because Christ instituted them and commanded us to use them. This is true even when they are given and administered by evil men.”

to point towards Christ's divinity from within the confines of the Rationalistic theology, by asking the spectator to perform the conversation, and in doing so internalize Christ's words and personally experience their divine truth.

Høyen voiced his doubts that an image of a conversation would be ideally suited for an altar painting.²⁵ Nonetheless, Christ's many conversations with his disciples and with individual believers were quickly established as an accepted and highly popular motif for altar painting; not least among Eckersberg's followers. Even before Eckersberg himself managed to finish *Christ and the Samaritan Woman*, Christen Købke (1810–1848) had painted Christ's nightly conversation with Nicodemus for Ramløse Church (1838); Jørgen Roed (1808–1888) interpreted the story of the Samaritan woman for Nødebo Church in 1839; and Dankvart Dreyer (1816–1852) painted the first version of the story of the visit to Martha and Mary for Barløse Church in 1841. These paintings defined the conversation type and established its subject matter.

To illustrate what is at stake in these paintings we may look closer at a slightly later painting, Constantin Hansen's (1804–1880) *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* painted for Valby Church in 1846 (Fig. 12.5). On a raised terrace we find Jesus seated at a table standing before a doorway covered by a green veil. Mary sits at his feet, she has stopped sewing and is listening intently at Jesus's words, while Martha approaches them from the left. Martha has apparently paused while fetching water and she is still standing on the bare ground with only one foot raised onto the terrace, while she addresses Jesus with a gesture of the hand. Jesus replies by looking mildly at Martha as he seems to speak, while gesticulating towards Mary with one hand and pointing upwards with the other. The pointing finger obviously refer to the Heavens, but it takes on a much more specific meaning as Jesus literally refers both Martha and the spectator to the frieze of the altarpiece where a part of his reply is quoted: "One thing is needful" (Luke 10:42).

What we see is a painting of a conversation whose topic only becomes apparent through the picture's dialogue with the words Jesus points towards. These words, "One thing is needful," initiates the process Høyen noted: As the words do not properly explain the picture, each spectator must instead complete the painting within themselves by drawing on their personal knowledge of the Bible and virtually re-enact the story.

²⁵ There is a distinct discrepancy between Høyen's criticism of Eckersberg's attempt at transforming the altarpiece into a vehicle for the spectator's active engagement in Jesus's words and Høyen's definition that the Word is the very purpose of an altar painting; Niels Lauritz Høyen, "Om Kirkelig Konst. Foredrag paa det kirkehistoriske Selskabs Møde 1853," in *Niels Laurits Høyens Skrifter II*, ed. J. L. Ussing (Copenhagen: Thieles Bogtrykkeri, 1874), 28. Considering that Høyen identified Rembrandt's *Christ in Emmaus* (now in Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen) as an ideal for religious painting, it would seem that he simply favoured a higher level of narrative and emotional drama that Eckersberg's painting did not deliver.

Fig. 12.5: Constantin Hansen, *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*, 1846. Valby Church. The National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen. Photo: Arnold Mikkelsen, 2018.

And in doing so the spectator internalizes Jesus's words and his lesson about why Mary did right when she let chores be chores and concerned herself with the one needful thing: to know Christ the Saviour. In other words, the picture is not meant to demonstrate Jesus's lesson to us, we must demonstrate that we understand and can apply Jesus's lesson for the painting to truly work.

This approach reflects the understanding of religious painting that Constantin Hansen voiced in an undated draft for an unpublished speech "The Relationship between Faith and Art" ["Forholdet mellem Tro og Kunst"]. Picking up on the old discussion of how art can represent God's divinity, Hansen argued that an artist can follow two paths. The artist may either "signify" God by means of symbols. Or the artist may focus on a single aspect of God that is particularly relevant to the given situation, and thereby "awaken the spectator's imagination and inspire self-

activity.”²⁶ Hansen preferred the latter path. In an article of 1863, on religious works of art, he stated that art is a mere tool for the individual’s engagement with God.²⁷ This is exactly what the conversation-altar paintings aim to do. They present us with a scene designed to activate our knowledge of the Word and in doing so we complete the story by virtually reliving the conversation in our mind; thus bridging the gap between the picture and Jesus’s elliptically quoted lesson, and in doing so understanding its importance for our own lives.

It is important to note that among the many stories of Christ’s conversations, the artists of the 1830s and 1840s focused on those that stressed the importance of knowing Jesus as your saviour and of being *with* him. This is a key aspect of all the formative paintings of the conversational type. Jørgen Roed’s interpretation of the story of the Samaritan Woman, of 1839, stressed the first part of the conversation in which Christ offers the reward of believing in him: “The water that I will give him will become in him a well of life that lasts forever” (John 4:14). Similarly, Købke’s painting of Nicodemus resonates, of course, with both the lesson on the importance of spiritual rebirth and with Christ’s famous words: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). Similarly, in Eckersberg’s choice of *The Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven* (Matt 18:1–5) for St. Nicholas’ Church in Middelfart (Fig. 12.6) he focused on individual belief and the importance of accepting the Savior with the immediacy and humility of a child if one is to enter Heaven. It would seem that during this period the Biblical conversations were selected for their ability to engage the spectator in reflections on her individual faith and relationship with Christ as the prerequisite of salvation.

If we return to Constantin Hansen’s painting, it becomes apparent that the picture is constructed to assist the spectator in engaging in contemplating her individual faith and her personal relationship with Christ. Most obviously, the wine growing on the wall would surely remind the spectator of the Eucharist. But perhaps it would also remind her of the parable of the vine and its lesson; that only the branches growing on the vine (Christ) bears fruit. It is equally significant that Hansen has carefully positioned Martha and Mary in different zones of the picture. Mary knows Christ and is placed on the raised terrace, whereas Martha has not yet devoted herself completely to Christ and is standing on the bare ground next to the terrace, but with a foot raised upon it to indicate that she will soon have understood Jesus’s words. Elaborating on this theme of hierarchical spaces Christ is placed before an opening covered by a green veil, which bears an uncanny resemblance to the one in J. L. Lund’s *Christ* (Fig. 12.1).

²⁶ Quoted after Kjærboe, “C. W. Eckersbergs altertavler,” 156–7. “Men Nutidens Kunst maae gaae til Værks paa lignende Maade, lægge hele sin Kraft paa en enkelt Side af det Gudommelige: . . . den Side, som især fremtræder ved den givne Situation og saaledes vækker Tilskuerens Fantasi til Selvvirksomhed . . .” My translation. Cf. Linnet, “Imitatio Christi,” 96–7.

²⁷ Constantin Hansen, “De skønne Kunsters Enhed,” *Nordisk Universitetstidsskrift* 9, no. 1 (1863): 7–9.

Fig. 12.6: C. W. Eckersberg, *The Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven*, 1842. St. Nicholas' Church, Middelfart. The National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen. Photo: Arnold Mikkelsen, 2009.

Surely, this veil too alludes to the Holy of Holies and to the notion that only through Christ will we gain entrance to the sacred space behind him. This allusion is further amplified by the picture's frame, which is shaped as a Gothic cathedral window, further suggesting an opening into a sacred space. We might say, that in this painting the traditional motif of the New Jerusalem as a metaphor for salvation is utilized to strengthen the image of Jesus the Saviour.

Conclusion

The face of Danish altar painting changed considerably during the nineteenth century. I have sought to demonstrate how artists such as Bertel Thorvaldsen, C. W. Eckersberg, and J. L. Lund strove to develop new types of altar decorations – sculptures and painting – that allowed the spectator to engage in personal reflections

Fig. 12.7: C. W. Eckersberg, *The Incredulity of Thomas*, 1833. Skævinge Church. The National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen. Photo: Arnold Mikkelsen, 2018.

on their own belief in Christ, from which a personal experience of Christ's divinity could spring. This change in approach reflects the religious thinking of the day. The Danish church was still firmly rooted in Rationalistic theological thought during the first decades of the nineteenth century, even as the church, during the 1820s, came to be dominated by Supranaturalist theologians. Like the older generation of theologians, the Supranaturalists understood human reason as a God-given means to acknowledge the truth of Christianity. For the Supranaturalists, however, the faculty of reason was only the starting point for a deeper and more individual revelation of Christ's divinity.

In the arts, the reorientation towards the believer's inner life transformed Christ's divinity from something to be expressed on the surface of the painting, to something the spectator experienced internally, and it transformed the way the idea of the New Jerusalem was utilized in the works of art. As we have seen, the idea and iconography of the heavenly Jerusalem was frequently utilized in both the framework of the altarpieces, either by representing Christ as the path to the eternal Kingdom, or simply by alluding to the passage from one site—or state of being—to another, more privileged one. It is illuminating to compare the understanding of salvation expressed in these pictures with Martin Luther's description of the spiritual ideal of the New Jerusalem: "Now the heavenly Jerusalem above is the church, that is, believers scattered throughout the world, who have the same Gospel, the same faith in Christ, the same Holy Spirit, and the same sacraments."²⁸ Although Luther's starting point was the individual – that Christ is only Christ *pro me* (for me) – he defined the heavenly Jerusalem as a spiritual community in the world. This communal aspect, so prevalent in Luther's understanding of the heavenly Jerusalem, played a very limited role in the religious art of the nineteenth century. Here, the New Jerusalem refers less outwards towards a spiritual community than inwards, towards Luther's *pro me*. The altar paintings we have examined all share in transforming the altarpiece from being in a dialogue with the communal rituals performed in the church, to being an instrument for subjective reflection on personal faith. Indeed, some of the most innovative altar paintings of the period, including Eckersberg's *The Incredulity of Thomas* of 1833 (Fig. 12.7) and *Jesus and the Samaritan Woman* of 1838 (Fig. 12.4), even made the question of the believer's personal doubts and beliefs the focal point of the high altar.

Looking at these new types of altar paintings through the lens of Søren Kierkegaard helps us understand how the pictures established a sort of sympathetic mirroring of the beholder in Christ. To see and be seen by Christ encourages the believer to reflect on both her personal relationship with Christ, on who she is to Christ, and on taking Christ's lessons to heart and shaping one's life in accordance with them. That is: to become aware of one's sinful nature, but nevertheless be offered Christ's invitation and

²⁸ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works: Lectures on Galatians 1535: Chapters 1–4. Volume 26*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St Louis, Mo: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 439.

ultimately accept Christ as the Saviour. Seen through this lens the paintings we have examined express an ideal of entering into a privileged spiritual state by personally accepting Christ. In this context, the notion of New Jerusalem explicated and amplified the deeper significance of the image of Christ addressing us. The very figure of Christ became the vehicle for reflections on both the spiritual rebirth in this world and the future salvation, and as such the idea of the New Jerusalem can be said to have been embodied in the period's representations of Christ.