

CLOCKS, EGGS, AND OTHER THINGS LIQUID: SALVADOR DALÍ'S RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION AND PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

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In our 2013 book, *Theology and the Arts: Engaging Faith* (Routledge), Ruth Illman and I offered a proposal that combined the work of practical theology (including that of religious education) with the emerging discipline of theology of the arts.ⁱ The theme of this Annual Meeting for REA provides an opportunity to reflect on religious imagination in the art of Salvador Dalí as a case study in a “practical theology of the arts” that we have developed there. Rather than examining all seven of the themes found in the book, the paper will focus on two aspects of a “practical theology of the arts”—the role of dialogue in this approach to theology and the experience of “otherness” that is at the heart of our proposal. In addition, it will examine Dalí’s work during the latter period of his long career and focus on three masterworks from this period will be utilized to accomplish this objective: “The Madonna of Port Lligat” (1949), “Christ of St. John of the Cross” (1951), and “The Last Supper” (1955.)

A “Practical Theology of the Arts”

A “practical theology of the arts” represents a move away from modernity’s reliance upon a Cartesian dichotomy that placed “practice” below the central role of “theory” and had the effect of privileging the rational, independent self in relation to tradition, ecclesiology, and liturgy. “Real” theology was what was conducted by the great “doctors” of the church whose intellectual, philosophical, and systematic process of rational analysis developed theological “truth.” The church was, as a result led through what Edward Farley and others have referred to as a “clergy paradigm.”ⁱⁱ

As an alternative to this dominant theological approach, practical theology has proposed a theology that is dialogical, more horizontal than vertical, and more directed by *praxis* than by propositions.ⁱⁱⁱ Paul Ballard and John Pritchard describe practical theology as, simply, “the practice of Christian community in the world,”^{iv} and continue, “theology starts where God is to be found, in the concrete reality of the immediate situation.”^v

Paul Ballard and Pamela Couture claim practical theology and the arts both provide sources of understanding and means of grace.^{vi} The arts, like practical theology, are dialogical in character, as Richard Viladesau states:

To the extent that we respond to this call positively, the other becomes for us not merely a function of our own existence or an object within the horizons of our minds, but another mysterious ‘self’ over against our own... Dialogue is thus an event of purposely and freely uniting separate persons and is therefore (implicitly, and to different extents) a

potential act of love....Every true assertion is meant to contribute in some way to the other's being.^{vii}

Richard Osmer explicitly identifies the post-modern character of practical theology as containing a moment in which one experiences being “brought up short” by being engaged in dialogue with another.^{viii} Jean François Lyotard has claimed that this “otherness” (what he calls *un differend*) is precisely what makes a person a *subject*, rather than a dehumanized *object*.^{ix} The sheer otherness of the artist's own horizon “brings one up short” and shocks one's world-view enough to cause a transformation of one's previous ways of making sense of the world.^x

The dialogue at the basis of a practical theology of the arts requires *listening* intently and intentionally to the voice of the other. The arts are among the most transparent means of accomplishing this objective.^{xi} As Illman and I claim, “The gaze of the artist and the focused activity of the practical theologian both begin with the otherness of the claim to truth being brought as a summons that ‘brings one up short,’ as Osmer puts it.”^{xii}



Even the most casual observer would recognize the spectacular imagination of Spain's Salvador Dalí. “The Persistence of Memory” (1931, pictured above), arguably among the most famous of all Surrealist paintings, pays homage to the influence of Sigmund Freud's claims about the unconscious and the importance of dreams and—especially—nightmares upon those in the Paris-based Surrealist movement.

What is less known is Dalí's life-long love/hate relationship with his Spanish Roman Catholic grounding and the effect that internal, very personal struggle had on the seismic change in his art during the final decades of his long and controversial career. Raised by a devout Roman Catholic mother and a domineering, bureaucratic father who espoused atheism, Dalí struggled with personal as well as intellectual challenges that contributed to his turn toward the Surrealist movement.

Yet his close friend and biographer, the artist Robert Descharnes, claims that Dalí was a mystic throughout his life, and explicitly so after the 1940s.^{xiii} During a visit to Avila, Spain in 1950 he gained access to the journals of the 16th-century Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross and viewed a sketch of the crucified Christ the saint had drawn. This experience led to what Dalí described as a “cosmic dream” resulting in his famous painting “Christ of St. John of the Cross.” (1951)^{xiv}

“I believe in God, but I have no faith”^{xv}

Because of a series of dramatic transitions in the 1940s and later, Dalí began to rail against the “decadence” of modern painting (including Surrealism,) which he said “was a consequence of skepticism and lack of faith, the result of mechanistic materialism.”^{xvi} Matthew Milliner claims Dalí believed, “Modern Art painted nothing because it believed in nothing.”^{xvii}

Dalí’s attitude toward Roman Catholicism began to change as early as 1941, and his painting began to reflect an intentional dialogue with his Christian roots. During his emigration to the United States during World War 2 he began to envision a fusion of science and traditional elements of the Christian faith.^{xviii} The result of this mix of influences was the development of a new approach to painting and personal theology/philosophy he branded as “Nuclear mysticism.” Paul O. Myhre identifies the elements of “nuclear mysticism” as:

Heavily influenced by scientific developments in the 1940s and 1950s, Dalí’s aesthetics stewed within a mixture of Spanish Catholic mystical Christology and contemporary notions of theology, psychology, and scientific discoveries. Coupled with an intense spiritual longing, Dalí concentrated his efforts toward finding a means of connecting with a mystical and material sacrality through two-dimensional art. Out of this diverse mix of influences and Dalí’s own inner spiritual quest, he developed an aesthetic founded on what he called ‘nuclear mysticism.’^{xix}

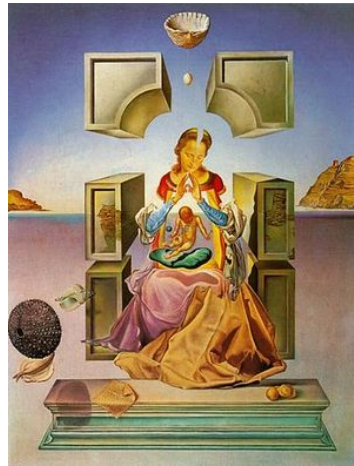
The progress of the sciences has been colossal

One clear influence in Dalí’s transformation at the end of the 1940s and through the 1960s was a series of dramatic advances in the sciences. Dalí claimed the destruction of Hiroshima in 1945 “shook [him] seismically.”^{xx} A life-long interest in science found, in the new research on nuclear physics and quantum theory, a ready dialogue partner for his equally lengthy spiritual search. “It was as if his study of physics added a fourth dimension to the world he painted, another twist—not Surrealist but metaphysical—to the inner landscape he portrayed.”^{xxi} Elliott King reports that Dalí “became captivated with nuclear physics. For the first time, physics was providing proof for the existence of God, he said, and it was now up to the artists to integrate this knowledge into the great artistic tradition.”^{xxii} As Dalí said:

In the first place, in 1950, I had a “cosmic dream” in which I saw this image in color and which in my dream represented the “nucleus of the atom.” This nucleus later took on a metaphysical sense; I considered it ‘the very unity of the universe,’ the Christ! In the second place, when, thanks to the instructions of Father Bruno, a Carmelite, *I saw the Christ drawn by Saint John of the Cross*, I worked out geometrically a triangle and a circle that aesthetically summarized all my previous experiments, and I inscribed Christ in the triangle.^{xxiii}

Robert Radford states that the developments led Dalí to conclude that “the physical world could no longer be conceived of, nor pictorially represented, in terms of fixed, unmoving, weighty objects, but rather in terms of isolated objects held in suspended relation to each other.”^{xxiv}

The intentional dialogue between emerging scientific discoveries and what he refers to as a “paroxysm” (a type of explosive revelation or “aha!” moment of realization) of metaphysical clarity is represented in his 1949 masterwork, “The Madonna of Port Lligat.”



Here, Dalí presents a scene that quotes Renaissance artist Piero Della Francesca’s “Brera Altarpiece.”^{xxv} The sheer “otherness” of scientific revelations became for Dalí enough of a shock to the “modern” worldview and mystical atheism of his earlier work that it became a partner in dialogue, rather than a threat.^{xxvi} Paul Myhre claims the hovering figures symbolize “...dematerialization which is the equivalent in physics, in this atomic age, of divine gravitation.”^{xxvii} The transparent windows in the chests of the Madonna and the suspended Christ-child open onto the world of Dalí’s beloved Cape Creus.^{xxviii} An earlier version of this work was presented to Pope Pius XII in 1949, marking the artist’s formal return to the Church and an official end to his association with the Surrealist movement.^{xxix}

Truth and Deoxyribonucleic acid

A second advance in the sciences in the middle part of the twentieth century was the discovery of the double-helix structure of the DNA molecule—the very building blocks of physical life on earth. In a 1964 interview for *Playboy* magazine, he stated, “And now the announcement of Watson and Crick about DNA. This is for me the real proof of the existence of God.”^{xxx} For Dalí, these two scientific partners in dialogue functioned as *others* whose claims to truth were significant voices to which his rapidly changing approach to art responded dramatically.

As Ted Gott suggests, “After Francis Crick’s and James D. Watson’s discovery of the double helix structure of DNA in 1953, Dalí also frequently incorporated DNA imagery into his drawings and paintings, as further proof of nature ordered by a divine hand.”^{xxxi} He was so fascinated by the metaphysical implications of DNA that he met with Watson in 1965 to discuss whether “the double helix proves the existence of God.”^{xxxii}



“Christ of St. John of the Cross” (1951, shown above) is among the most celebrated paintings of the last half of the twentieth century. A Web site covering the showing of the piece in Australia remarks that Dalí focuses on the serene beauty of Christ rather than the agony that has been characteristic of traditional Roman Catholic iconography.

As the work was executed during a period in which the artist was seeking a religious faith that made sense to him in the light of contemporary science, it may indicate his desire to focus on a metaphorical reading of the crucifixion which transcends the purely physical, a theory compounded by Dalí’s own comments that the drawing represented the nucleus of an atom which became for him a symbol of the unity of the universe.^{xxxiii}

Dalí’s concept of God is also a creative mix of these disparate elements that emerges from his intentional dialogue with intellectual, theological and scientific *others*: “For [Dalí], God is an intangible idea, impossible to render in concrete terms. Dalí is of the opinion that He is perhaps the substance being sought by nuclear physics.”^{xxxiv} Descharnes and Néret continue by quoting Dalí, “God is present in everything. The same magic is at the heart of all things and all roads lead to the same revelation: We are children of God, and the entire universe tends toward the perfection of mankind.”^{xxxv} He saw nuclear physics and the DNA structure of all substances as being far closer to mysticism than to Newtonian rationalism.^{xxxvi}

In a lecture in Iowa, he claimed, “Physicists have proved the truths of religion. We now know how matter can be changed and it is no longer difficult for the scientific mind to understand how the Virgin may be taken physically into Heaven.”^{xxxvii} Meredith Etherington-Smith claims Dalí’s version of the Assumption—in works from this period such as the “Anti-Protonic Assumption” (1956) and “Assumpta Corpuscularia Lapislazulana” (1952)—“represented the culminating point of Nietzsche’s feminine will to power, the superwoman who ascends to heaven by the virile strength of her own antiprotons.”^{xxxviii}

A return to classicism

James Thrall Soby points to an artistic shift that occurred simultaneously with his dialogues with science, a move that “summarized in extreme degree the artist’s intention TO BECOME CLASSIC (Soby’s emphasis), as the foreword to his 1941 exhibit proclaimed in bold type, to paint pictures ‘uniquely consecrated to the architecture of the Renaissance and to the Special

Sciences.^{”xxxix} This attention to painting *well* led to his dialogue with the giants of Renaissance painting as partners whose work as well as their unique claims to truth influenced the way he viewed art and truth.^{xl} This is quite evident in the careful way Dalí paints the shoulders, arms, and torso of the Christ who floats against the cross as though attached to it only by his own will and intention, rather than by a dictator’s hammer and nails.



Among Dalí’s most controversial paintings in this period was “The Sacrament of the Last Supper” (1955.) Theologian Paul Tillich considered the work “junk” and deplored the depiction of Jesus as “A sentimental but very good athlete on an American baseball team....I am horrified by it!”^{”xli} Chester Dale, a banker and art collector, takes credit for inspiring the masterwork, if not directly commissioning it, challenging Dalí to “match the work of the Renaissance master Tintoretto.”^{”xlii}

The painting’s classical focus can be found in the attention to detail that can be seen readily throughout the composition. The architecture of the room is based upon the classical vision of Plato’s dodecahedron, which the philosopher claimed to embody the universe.^{xlili} In this painting, he pays tribute to theological tradition and classical art, yet allows it to engage in dialogue with his own unique intellectual and spiritual imagination so that the result emerges from the dialogue itself.

Paul Myhre and Michael Novak both identify the Eucharistic character of the painting as an answer to many of the theological critics who have reviled it. Novak claims, “Dalí gives us the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.”^{”xliv} The classical rendering of the disciples is countered by a semi-transparent figure of Christ at the center of the scene. Likewise, the transparent torso of God floats above the scene, connecting the event at the table with God’s presence in heaven. The construction of Dalí’s scene draws the eye of the viewer to the central figure—Christ—whose gestures point, first to himself with one hand and simultaneously upward to God, perhaps a reference to John 14:8-9^{xlv} Novak concludes his discussion,

Dalí’s intention is to make visible what occurs in every celebration of the Mass: that worship on earth makes present the realities of worship in heaven. The real presence of Christ means the real presence of the Father. The community drawn together in recognition of this miracle—the church—reveals the real presence of the Holy Spirit. Where the Trinity is, heaven is: unseen with our eyes, but sensed and recognized in our prayer.^{xlvi}

Myhre points to Dalí's "artistic" and religious imagination that sought to connect with an experience of divine truth while challenging his viewers to consider questions of spirituality and human existence in a nuclear and post-Holocaust age.^{xlvi} Myhre claims painting was for Dalí a "sacramental action" that served as an "access point to nuclear mystical truth" and a means of grace.^{xlvi} Myhre continues:

The resurrection of Christ, the assumption of the Virgin Mary, the transformation of bread into the body of Christ began to become more real to him as he reflected on the fundamental building blocks of creation. Real presence could now be something more than a dogmatic assertion, doctrinal declaration, or assent of faith. For Dalí, the emergence of a mystical essence evoked ideas of an ever present God intimately linked with all molecules and thereby able to be accessed through materials like paint and visual images.^{xlvi}

The sole difference between a madman and me is that I am not mad.ⁱ

Dalí's art was always intended to provoke and to challenge. He and his wife, Gala, carefully constructed a public persona that emphasized a bizarre and often blasphemous lifestyle. His religiously-themed masterworks were no exception to that intention.

At the same time, it is clear that Dalí also engaged in a kind of dialogue that transformed his own view of the world and of the truth of tradition. In the final decades of his work, Dalí entered into a multifaceted dialogue that truly honored traditional doctrinal claims and scientific breakthroughs as *others* whose voices he felt compelled to honor. What resulted from this commitment is what results from a "practical theology of the arts" whenever it is employed: in a truly *intersubjective* dialogue some *new* claim to truth emerges from the process. Dalí's art work changed dramatically as a result of his dialogue with the multiple partners of his intellectual journey; but it is also true that Dalí *himself* was transformed—as an artist and as a person. His commitment to dialogue and his willingness to listen to the voices of numerous *others* allowed his fertile imagination to push the understanding of art as well as science and theology in such a way that anyone "with eyes to see" could not help but see the world and its God more clearly—and, with Dalí, much *differently* than it could without his unique artistic and spiritual voice.

ⁱ Ruth Illman and W. Alan Smith. 2013. *Theology and the Arts: Engaging Faith*. New York. Routledge. There are seven key themes identified as characteristic of a "practical theology of the arts": embodiment, regarding the "face" of the other, acknowledging the voices of ones who have been silenced historically, the central role of dialogue, attention to the "practice" of theology rather than to its abstract conception, the process of "clearing a space where the community of truth can be practiced," and a commitment to transformation rather than formation.

ⁱⁱ Edward Farley. 1983. "Theology and Practice outside the Clerical Paradigm." In Ed. Don Browning, *Practical Theology*. San Francisco, Harper & Row, 21-41.

ⁱⁱⁱ Joyce Ann Mercer. 2005. *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood*. St. Louis. Chalice Press, 12.

^{iv} Paul Ballard and John Pritchard. 2006. *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society*. London. SPCK, 18.

^v 33.

^{vi} Paul Ballard and Pamela Couture. 2001. "Setting the Scene. In Paul Ballard and Pamela Couture. *Creativity, Imagination and Criticism: The Expressive Dimensions in Practical Theology*. Cardiff, Wales. Cardiff Academic Press. np.

^{vii} Richard Viladesau. 2000. *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art and Rhetoric*. New York. Paulist Press, 180.

^{viii} Richard R. Osmer. 2008. *Practical Theology: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids, Mich. Eerdmans, 22.

^{ix} Jean François Lyotard. 1984. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press, 77.

^x Illman and Smith, 31.

^{xi} Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore. 2001. "Aesthetics, Hermeneutics and Practical Theology." In Ballard and Couture, 21.

^{xii} Illman and Smith, 58-59.

^{xiii} Robert Descharnes and Gilles Nerét. 1998. *Dalí. Salvador Dalí 1904-1989*. London. Taschen. 96.

^{xiv} Patricia Frisch. 2014. "An Alternative Paradigm to the Oppression of Nuclear War: Salvador Dalí's Painting of Christ of St. John of the Cross." *Crosscurrents. March*. 112.

^{xv} *The Dalí Dimension (DVD)*. 2004. Directed by Susi Marquès. Media 3.14. Barcelona. The quote can be found in numerous locations among Dalí sources.)

^{xvi} Salvador Dalí. 1951. *Mystical Manifesto*. Quoted in Matthew Milliner. 2007. "God in the Gallery." *First Things*. <http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2007/12/god-in-the-gallery>. 1 (accessed 7/15/2015)

^{xvii} Milliner.

^{xviii} "Salvador Dalí: Liquid Desire." Dalí and Religion. A National Gallery of Victoria (Australia) Education Resource. <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/dali/salvador/religion.html#d=DaliAndReligion&num=01>. 1

^{xix} Paul O. Myhre. 2005. "Painting as Sacrament: A Search for Dalí's Sacramental Imagination." *ARTS: The Arts in Religious and Theological Studies*. 17:2. 24

^{xx} Dawn Ades. 1982. *Dali and Surrealism*. New York. Harper & Row. 174.

^{xxi} Meredith Etherington-Smith. 1992. *The Persistence of Memory: A Biography of Dalí*. New York. Random House. 330.

^{xxii} Nora Hamerman. 2010. "A New Look at Dalí's 'Sacrament.'" *The Arlington Catholic Herald*. 2.

^{xxiii} Descharnes and Néret, 168-9.

^{xxiv} Robert Radford. 1997. *Dalí*. London. Phaidon Press Ltd. 236.

^{xxv} Ades, 175.

^{xxvi} Radford, 236.

^{xxvii} Myhre, 27.

^{xxviii} 26.

^{xxix} Swinglehurst, 103.

^{xxx} Salvador Dalí. 1964. *Playboy*. July. As quoted in Alan Lindsay Mackay. 1991. *A Dictionary of Scientific Quotations*. Philadelphia. Institute of Physics Publications. 66.

^{xxxi} Ted Gott. 2009. "Salvador Dalí and Science." *Chemistry in Australia. September*. 23.

^{xxxii} Ibid.

^{xxxiii} "Liquid Desire: Discover More." N.p.

^{xxxiv} Descharnes and Néret, 164.

^{xxxv} 173.

^{xxxvi} Radford, 251.

^{xxxvii} Myhre, 28.

^{xxxviii} Etherington-Smith, 332.

^{xxxix} James Thrall Soby, 1968. *Salvador Dalí*. New York. Arno Press. 23.

^{xl} Salvador Dalí. In Ed. G. Barry Golson. 1983. *The Playboy Interview*. 11, 35.

^{xli} Paul Tillich, as quoted by Michael Anthony Novak. 2012. "Misunderstood Masterpiece." *America*. November 5, 2012. 1. <http://americamagazine.org/print/154019>. Accessed 7/15/2015.

^{xlii} Hamerman, 2.

^{xliii} 1.

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- ^{xliv} Novak, 3.
^{xlvi} 2.
^{xlvi} 3.
^{xlvi} Myhre, 24.
^{xlvi} Ibid.
^{xli} 27.
^l Descharnes and Néret, 79