

FAITH IN PHOTOGRAPHY; TO SAY SOMETHING, TO WORK MIRACLES?

by

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Preface

During the past year and a half, while studying for a Master of Fine Art in Photography degree at the University of Ulster, I have been on a journey. A journey of uncertainty and yet self-discovery while I explored and considered who I was as a person and as a visual artist, driven by the practices of photography and my Christian faith. This journey has been one of complexities and questioning as I considered how I, as a photographer and a Christian, might better understand myself, the world around me and my belief in God, using my camera as a tool to do so.

In the months before starting the Masters course, a growing awareness was developing within me that how I looked at the world, through my camera, was shaped by my understanding of the Christian metanarrative.¹ That my framework for viewing reality and making sense of life and the world around me is inspired by a belief that my primary reason for existence is to love and to serve God. I got accepted onto the course and so commenced the opportunity and space to consider these matters more fully. This dissertation attempts to articulate my understanding of the relevant critical issues discovered and considered over the past eighteen months, and how I might best apply them to my personal practice.

My approach to *Faith in Photography; To Say Something, To Work Miracles?* is a personal introspective inspection of my motives and inspiration to be a photographer. I will consider how I might best be a photographer whose faith motivates the work that I do and I will consider what it is that I most want to communicate through the medium of photography. I will also consider how artistic self expression through photography, guided by my Christian faith, might change me and act to draw me closer to God and a better understanding of His often mysterious and miraculous ways.

For the practical element of the M.F.A. in Photography course I have been spending time at Calvary Christian Centre in Belfast, getting to know the staff, church members and the homeless who regularly visit the building. I was initially attracted to the church because of the work that they do with the homeless on Tuesday lunchtimes and Thursday evenings and because it was a space in which the Christian faith was being practiced in a practical and engaging way.

¹ A 'metanarrative' is what philosophy calls a worldview, i.e. a way of looking at all reality and seeking to interpret existence. For example, Marxism and Secular Humanism are both metanarratives. A Christian metanarrative is simply shorthand for saying the Christian worldview and the explanations it offers to the problems of origins, morality, ethics and ultimate meaning etc.

This study I'm about to undertake will help to better inform and guide me as I continue to produce work at Calvary and as I progress my career making photographs exploring the Christian faith. I appreciate that there are other faiths and metanarratives by which people lead their lives, for me though, it is the exploration of Christianity which I am most interested in.

Introduction

It has been noted that St. Augustine remarked in his *Confessions*² that he knew what time was until he tried to explain it. Similarly, “image” is a perfectly straightforward and understandable term until that is you begin to fully consider in depth its complex past and present usages.

Turning next to ideas of religion and faith, “CS Lewis admitted, when he was asked to set forth his beliefs, that he never felt less sure of them than when he tried to speak of them.” Having noted this, Adams (1994), writing in *Why People Photograph*, goes on to point out that “photographers know this frailty. To them words are a pallid, diffuse way of describing and celebrating what matters. Their gift is to see what will be affecting as a print. Mute.”

I can empathise with St. Augustine, C.S. Lewis and Robert Adams as I begin this journey to explore and consider *Faith in Photography*, trying to put into words, concepts and thoughts which might be better left unsaid.³ Perhaps the photographic process and viewing the end result of this process, a photographic print, is the best way to communicate the unspeakable, the mysterious, the miraculous? Nevertheless, I shall but try!

The direction and content of this dissertation was inspired in the first instance by a statement I discovered, made by the photographer Paul Graham:

“There's a line in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, by Sterne, where he says, more or less, ‘Are we doomed to become like monks, forever parading the relics of our religion without ever performing one miracle with them?’ [...] and that is what happens when one forgets that that is the whole point, to say something, to work miracles.”

(Graham,1996)

As a person of faith, I’m worried that I and my fellow Christians are often more concerned with “right belief” to the exclusion of doing right by others - too much talk and not enough action.⁴ I’m

² For an electronic edition St Augustine’s *Confessions* visit <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/confessions-bod.html>

³ James Elkins (2004) helpfully suggests the term “numinus”, in relation to visual art, as perhaps the closest one word definition which describes the power or presence of a divinity.

⁴ For an interesting discussion on ‘orthodoxy via orthopraxy’ visit <http://dreamtoday.ning.com/profiles/blogs/artistic-missional-practice>

keen to avoid the mistakes made by the “monks” as described by Paul Graham. The point of religion for people of faith is to “say something” *and* to “work miracles”. Photography has the power to say something, to communicate, to engage, to excite and to inspire a response.⁵ Photography used within the context of faith, I believe, can be useful, significant, persuasive, even miraculous.

As well as its power to communicate to others, a photograph can, and perhaps more significantly, impact powerfully the photographer who created the image. Robert Adams contends:

“... so that occasionally photographers discover tears in their eyes for the joy of seeing. I think it is because they’ve known a miracle. They have been given what they did not earn, and as is the way with unexpected gifts, the surprise carries an emotional blessing. When photographers get beyond copying the achievements of others, or just repeating their own accidental first successes, they learn that they do not know where in the world they will find pictures. Nobody does. Each photograph that works is a revelation to its supposed creator.”
(Adams, 1994)

The photographers challenge therefore is not to duplicate what has gone before, whether that be in his or her own practice or in the work of other photographers but to determinedly strive towards instinctive originality, in tune with their own inner stirrings and passions. I would agree with Adams (1981), this time writing in *Beauty in Photography*, when he argues that the job of the photographer is to “try to be coherent about intuition and hope”.

Hope is a theme I will consider further when later in this dissertation I explore the subject and audience for my personal work. It is feelings of hope rather than of despair that I would like to inspire through my photography. Faith has the potential I believe to encourage such hope, even when at times it is a more perhaps a matter of “hoping against hope”. Paul Barlow writing in *Tate Etc*⁶ about the painting *Hope* by George Frederic Watts asserts that it is about “the hope of those who refuse to submit to despair when it beckons”.

⁵ Two examples of such images, which have achieved iconic status and which powerfully convey ideas and shape opinions, are Nick Ut’s photograph of Kim Phuc running naked down a country lane after suffering serious napalm burns during the Viet Nam war and “Migrant Mother” by Dorothea Lange. Lange’s image has become a photographic icon of the Great Depression in America and directly resulted in 20,000lbs. of additional food supplies being sent to the camp in which the photograph was taken after it was published in a San Francisco newspaper.

⁶ *Tate Etc*, Issue 2, Autumn 2004. Accessed from <http://www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue2/wherethereslife.htm> [27/11/10]

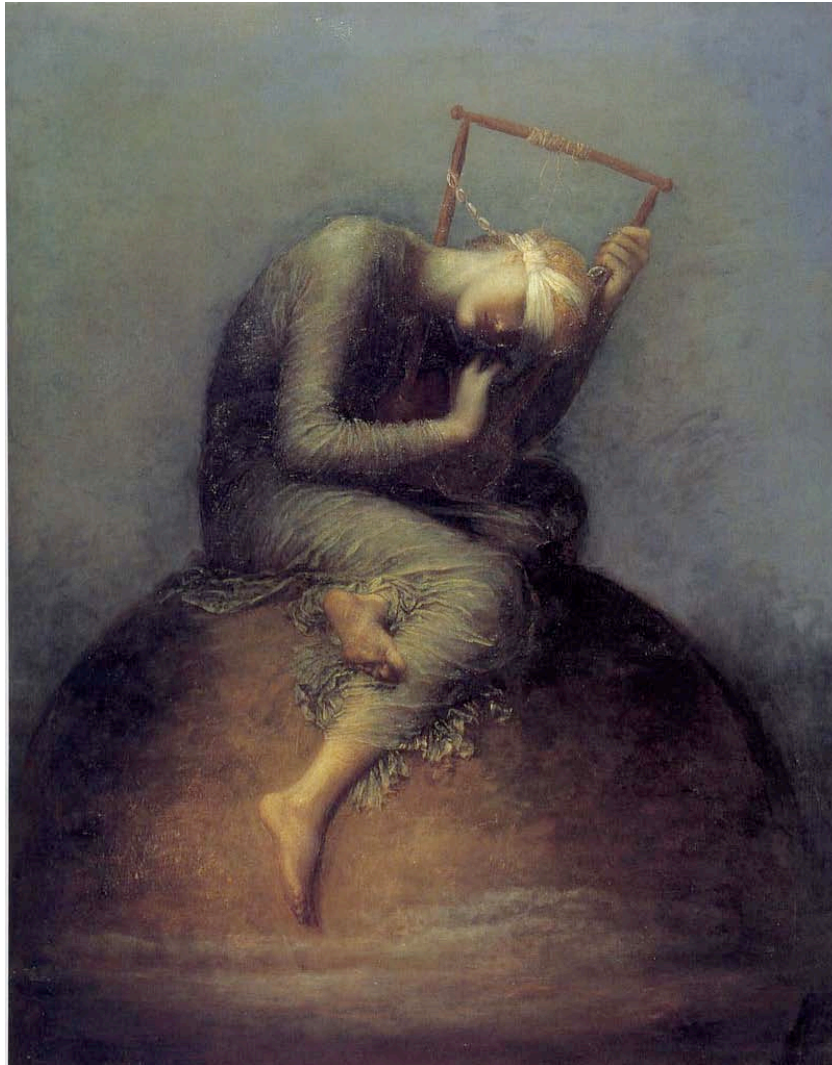


Fig. 1 *Hope* by George Frederic Watts (1886) [online image] Available at: <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=16034> [Accessed 4 October 2010]

In the painting *Hope* by George Frederic Watts (Fig. 1), Hope is blindfolded and seated on a globe and playing a lyre which has only one string unbroken. Watts wanted to find a new way to paint allegory based on universal themes. In the painting Hope's attempts to make music appear futile and several critics have argued that the work might have been more appropriately titled *Despair*. Watts explained that 'Hope need not mean expectancy. It suggests here rather the music which can come from the remaining chord.'⁷

Hope in people and society and hope in the potential to change and to improve, has been of interest to many photographers but in particular to "The Concerned Photographer". Cornell Capa (1968),

⁷ *Hope* by G. F. Watts is part of the Tate Collection.

who coined the phrase, believed that such a photographer “finds much in the present situation unacceptable which he tries to alter. Our goal is simply to let the world also know why it is unacceptable.” Within this tradition of photographic practice we see photographers interested in bringing to our attention both what is bad so we can oppose it and what is good so we may value it. These are the convictions which motivated Lewis Hine, during the early years of the twentieth century as he photographed, among other subjects, children working in the American cotton industry. Hine used his camera as a tool for social reform, in fact his photographs contributed to changing the then existing child labour laws in the United States. Hine’s photographs, however, go beyond basic documentation in that he looked for poses, facial expressions and gestures that not only would be perceived as truthful but would also encourage the viewer’s sympathy and provoke them to action. (See Fig. 2)



Fig. 2 ‘A young spinner in the Whitnel Cotton Mill, Whitnel, NC.’ by Lewis Hine (1908) [online image] Available at: <http://www.larrydewitt.net/SSinGAPE/hine/set3.htm> [Accessed 5 October 2010]

This tradition of documentary photography seeking to balance truth and aesthetics continues through to the present day, especially among the members of Magnum Photos. Henri Cartier-Bresson, one of Magnum’s founding members, described the co-operative as “a community of

thought, a shared human quality, a curiosity about what is going on in the world, a respect for what is going on and a desire to transcribe it visually.”⁸

- Method

As a Christian, the connection between my faith in God and my artistic expression is central to my photographic practice. I am interested therefore in examining and considering how I might best integrate the two further so as to help better inform and develop current and future photographic projects.

I’m eager to consider how photography may be used to share the ideas of faith with others. How photography can be used to “nudge” people in the direction of thinking about God. Kirk (2008) notes that the poet, T.S. Elliot reasoned that he was “not supposed to preach a theological system as a poet, but expose the reader to the ideas of religion, [...] what it feels like to believe that religion.” This sentiment resonates with me as I am aware of my limitations as an artists to “evangelise” but excited about the potential of photography to, in a respectful, relevant and engaging way, share the ideas of faith with others.

As an artist, my principal interest is in exploring and telling the story of the Christian metanarrative/worldview through photography - the story of God, the story of the Bible, the story of faith. I’m also keen to know if it is possible to make first rate art that is both religious and optimistic, pointing towards issues of eternal significance which transcend history.

To explore the above issues and themes, I will:

- Provide working definitions of key terms used within this dissertation.
- Consider what is photography?
- Explore the relationship between faith *and* photography, considering firstly a historical and theological context for doing so.
- Examine the relationship between text and image (within a Western Reformed Christian context).

⁸ Magnum Photos is a photographic cooperative of great diversity and distinction owned by its photographer members. With powerful individual vision, Magnum photographers chronicle the world and interpret its peoples, events, issues and personalities. Visit www.magnumphotos.com to view a selection of photographs from magnum members.

- Identify suitable subjects for my personal practice.
- Explore my faith *in* photography by considering in the first instance, my inspiration to be a photographer.
- Consider photography as an aid to explore issues of faith on a personal level and as a tool to share the ideas of faith with others.
- Finally, I will consider art which references faith as a source of inspiration by briefly reviewing appropriate examples, so that I might begin to apply lessons learnt to my personal practice.

- Working Definitions

I have included the following definitions to help with understanding this dissertation more fully. Words and concepts such as “faith”, “beauty”, “hope” and “miracle” could themselves be the subject of long and detailed studies and books. They are concepts which may have differing meanings, in different contexts, to different people but I trust that the brief explanations I set out below will explain the meanings which I am attributing to them.

Faith, in a Christian context, is a belief in a triune God, i.e. Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is more than just the practices of religion in that it suggests a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. My understanding of faith, God and Jesus is based on a Western Christian Protestant understanding and upbringing. My faith has many characteristics which include, for example, going to church, reading the Bible, understanding many aspects of God and His character based on spiritual apprehension rather than proof, being baptised, partaking in communion, doing good unto others and sharing my faith with others. It includes questioning and mystery, wrestling with uncertainties and doubts - being able to hold in tension uncertainty and belief.

Beauty is a characteristic represented in an image that provides a perception of pleasure, attraction and meaning. Arresting beauty goes beyond superficiality; it is deeper, truer and has the power to evoke strong emotions and feelings within the viewer. Within a photographic image its beauty may need to be searched for and contemplated upon.

Hope is a term which is more complex and deeper than one might first consider. As already identified, it may be more a matter of “hoping against hope”, represented so well in G.F. Watts

painting (See Fig. 1). During my time at Calvary Christian Centre I have been privilege to meet many people whose circumstances seem tough and desperate, yet have a hope which inspires and spurs them on. I believe that the relationship between faith and hope is interesting and significant.

A **miracle** is an amazing event or a wonderful experience. A miracle may be as simple and understandable as a bowl of soup and a pair of shoes being given to a homeless person or as remarkable and mysterious as a life transformed from drug taking, crime and despair towards hope, faith and love.⁹

⁹ I have spent time during the last year with the church family at Calvary Christian Centre but more especially with one individual in particular. He grew up in Dublin and was involved in taking drugs and serious crime. He became a born-again Christian, eventually heading to Singapore to be a missionary, putting behind him his old life of drugs and crime. His mission in life is to serve Jesus by providing practical help and love to others who find themselves in similar situations to how he once was; providing hope and encouraging them to make a new start in life.

What is Photography?

Much like with “time”, “image” and “faith”, a more extensive exploration and understanding of what the term “photography” means could prove challenging to summarise within the scope of this dissertation. Many books have been written on the subject and have considered at great length the history, theory and philosophy of photography. What I will endeavour to do is to best describe what photography is, pertinent to my own practice.

J. Y. Bryan (1986), in *Cameras in the Quest for Meaning*, when writing about the camera explains fittingly the opportunity the medium provides to communicate:

“The camera has been called ‘a mirror with a memory’. That metaphor has won charmed acceptance in numerous discussions of photography, spoken or written. Not in this one. Here we anticipate use of the camera as very much more than that, as an agent of thought and feeling, of vision probing beyond what is shown to what is implied or can be inferred from what is shown. We treat the camera as a tool for extending and refining our visual spectrum, for enhancing our range of awareness. The effort is to use it, not solely for recording visible facts, but for stimulating the sort of emotional and mental release conducive to sensing how visible details relate to the long flow of human experience.”

(Bryan, 1986)

J. Y. Bryan is arguing that the images produced by photography can be more than simple recordings of facts about the object, scene or person in front of a camera (a fraction of a second before the shutter release button is pressed), but rather that the images produced can connect and express emotions, thoughts and feelings with which others can relate to.

As noted above, photography has the potential to create images which are worthy of attention because they “relate to the long flow of human experience.” Continuing with the theme of importance and impact of photography Vilem Flusser (2000) in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, describes images made by the camera as “significant surfaces”. He believes that “images are the reductions of the four dimensions of space and time to the two of surface dimensions; that the significance of images is on the surface.”

I previously explained that the beauty in a photograph may need to be searched for and contemplated upon. Similarly, Flusser when he writes about the significance of images, argues that:

“One can take them in at a single glance yet this remains superficial. If one wishes to deepen the significance, i.e. to reconstruct the abstracted dimensions, one has to allow one’s gaze to wander over the surface feeling the way as it goes [and] in so doing, one’s gaze follows a complex path framed, on the one hand, by the structure of the image and, on the other by the observer’s intentions. The significance of the image [...] represents a synthesis of two intentions: one manifested in the image and the other belonging to the observer.”

(Flusser, 2000)

Photography depends upon the intentions of the photographer when they are making an image and on the observer taking time to “gaze” at an image long enough to ponder and contemplate the meaning and emotions expressed within it. Photography is a means by which photographers can communicate to others about issues that are important to them. Truly successful photography connects with issues that are important and meaningful to both the photographer and the viewer.

Faith *and* Photography

- A Brief Consideration of History and Theology

Much of what the Christian Church thinks about the arts and faith has been shaped by the Second Commandment given by God to Moses. It is recorded in the Bible in the Book of Exodus:

“You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow to them or worship them;”

Exodus 20 v 4-5a (NIV)

The Christian Church has had and currently has differing opinions on what exactly this verse in the Bible means when applied to art in the form of, for example, sculpture or painting. For some, all images are idols. Others believe that it is wrong to ban all images but rather it depends on the use they are put to. Still others feel that there is no problem using images as they believe that we cannot despise what God has created. It has proved to be a very important and divisive issue, playing a key role in the major points of division that has occurred within the Church.

At the Second Council of Nicea in AD 787 images were declared to be orthodox and the worship of them God pleasing. In 1054 the first separation of the Christian Church occurred when the Eastern Orthodox split from the Western Latin Church. Plate (2002) notes:

“The Eastern Church tended to see icons as “manifestations” of heavenly archetypes, where the sacred is actually present in the material image; the Western Church understood the images to be representations that aided in worship but always pointed beyond themselves and [...] not to be confused with the true presence of God.”

(Plate, 2002)

The next great split in Christendom was instigated in the sixteenth century during The Protestant Reformation. The Protestors emphasised the Word of God (the Bible), with the physical representation of Holy Saints, The Virgin Mary, or Jesus Christ, considered bad practice and bad theology.

The impact of Christian Iconoclasm¹⁰, which occurred during The Reformation period, is still felt today within the Protestant Church. If it did not lead to the actual banning of all images within the context and practices of faith and religion, it has certainly created an attitude of suspicion and criticism. Many Protestants believe that the power of images to produce meanings, in a way that text prevents by virtue of its preciseness, must be controlled. The argument continues that the mind is captured by what the eye sees and therefore to have the image present is to risk mistaking it for what it only represents.

My personal experience of growing up in a Protestant Presbyterian church in Northern Ireland, has been that there is a focus on the centrality of the Word of God and an absence of artistic works and images. There are some notable exceptions to this rule though, such as, the symbol of the Burning Bush¹¹ hanging from the pulpit and the architecture of the building itself. But ornate decoration is certainly kept to a minimum and the use of the written and spoken Word is predominant.

The most notable exception, and most encouraging I feel from my perspective, is the presence and acceptability of stained glass windows within the church building. I have always found it interesting to look for the message contained in stained glass windows, endeavoring to interpret the imagery and symbolism which the artist has incorporated into their work. Religious themes, doctrines, figures, saints and local heroes are often the subjects of such windows. Frank Rodgers notes in *Glass in the Glens*¹² that:

“Presbyterian churches tend to be functional and unpretentious in character, but from Ballycastle to Cairncastle there are fine churches which contain stained glass windows that not only embellish the buildings in which they are placed, but also gladden the eye of the beholder.”

(Rodgers, 2004)

¹⁰ Iconoclasm is the deliberate destruction within a culture of the culture's own religious icons and other symbols or monuments, usually for religious or political motives. It is a frequent component of major domestic political or religious changes. Visit <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iconoclasm> for further background information.

¹¹ The burning bush is an object described in the Book of Exodus in the Bible (3 v 1-21); according to the narrative, the bush was on fire, but was not consumed by the flames, hence the name. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland uses the Burning Bush as its symbol (logo).

¹² *Glass in the Glens* by Frank Rodgers is a very helpful study of stained glass windows in churches located throughout the Glens of Antrim.

Later on in the book Rodgers quotes G.K. Chesterton writing about the same subject when he argues that “Stained glass is more intoxicating than all the wines of the world.” Rodgers also makes reference to the thoughts of Abbot Suger, the great French twelfth century pioneer of Gothic architecture, when Suger claimed that the purpose of his new Abbey’s stained glass was to “illuminate men’s minds so that they may travel through it to an apprehension of God’s light”.

I shall choose to take great hope from this slightly peculiar situation of the historic and existing acceptability of stained glass windows within Presbyterian churches, as I continue to contemplate how photography can be used to illustrate and “illuminate” biblical themes, adding depth to the meaning of the spoken and written Word.

Historically, distinctively Christian art has taken three forms: symbolism (depictions of the cross, the baptismal water), icon (depictions of Christ), and narrative (depictions of Biblical events). At this point I would like to clarify that within my personal photographic practice it is not the creation of icons or symbolism that I am interested in - imagery which bothered so many during the Protestant Reformation. The photographs that I make will not be representations of “Holy Saints, The Virgin Mary, [or] Jesus Christ” but rather my work will be set in contemporary contexts within which faith plays a role. I am not trying to represent God in visible form but rather His Spirit working in situations and through (His) people. So rather than being an icon or idol to be worshipped, the photograph is merely a means by which issues of faith may be shared, considered and more fully understood.

- Text and/or Image

The argument for text *or* image versus text *and* image within the context of the Christian tradition is a very interesting, heated and nuanced by the religious position of debaters. I feel that the idea of image *instead of* text is perhaps a step too far for me to consider at this point. My inherent Presbyterian characteristics shudder ever so slightly at the prospect of removing the need for text all together! Nevertheless I’m keen to explore, even if only very tentatively, a movement towards some form of visual theology through which we begin to move away from only reading it or hearing it towards also seeing it; that is, the Christian metanarrative explored and illustrated using images. I am keen to consider and investigate an increased role for the arts, in particular photography, to visually expand understanding of the Bible.

The more I have considered the topic and themes contained within this dissertation, the more I have began to wonder if text and word are themselves in fact image, if thought is also image and if a photograph is (deeper) image? When I listen to a sermon spoken in church I imagine the narrative in my head - the stories of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and Moses, who received the ten commandments from God, and who led the Jews out of slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. Similarly, when I read the Bible, I think about the stories I'm reading in my mind and "paint" pictures of what the object, scene or person might be like. The photographic image therefore perhaps fits better with how our minds seem to naturally work and therefore may have potential for deeper and better understanding?¹³

Picking up again on the situation since the Protestant Reformation, which continues through to current times, there seems to have been a struggle on the part of Christianity, faithful to the text, against perceived idolaters. Vilem Flusser holds the view though that:

"The struggle is a dialectical one [...] Text admittedly explains images in order to explain them away, but images also illustrate texts in order to make them comprehensible [...] In the course of this dialectical process, conceptual and imaginative thought mutually reinforce one another. In other words, images become more and more conceptual, texts more and more imaginative."

(Flusser, 2000)

Flusser's argument makes a strong case for the complimentary approach of using both text and image to convey story and meaning, as a text enhances the significance of an image, an image can likewise do for text. George Pattison (1991) writing in *Art, Modernity and Faith* explores the impact caused in the wake of Christian Iconoclasm, suggesting that it has left its mark on virtually every period of church history since. He contends though that "it is by no means invariably dominant and is matched by an opposite impulse which aims to bring about and an integration of artistic production and enjoyment into the life of faith."

Pattison argues that this "opposite impulse" found its "supreme monument in the 'Christian Culture' of the Middle Ages, which to its many admirers, represents an unsurpassed - perhaps even

¹³ The National Art Education Association of America links to many articles and research papers from its website at <http://www.arteducators.org/research>, supporting the case for visual art education.

unsurpassable - fusion of art and faith.” During this period Christian art was part of an expression of an apparently universal worldview.¹⁴

Today’s situation for Christian art is far removed from the privileged position it found itself in during the Middle Ages. Some would argue that in the West we live in a post-Christian era where the ideas of faith and religion are at best seen as irrelevant and at worst, understood to be the cause of many ills within contemporary society. How might I therefore as a photographer operate in such a situation? What should be the subject of my work?

- Subject

As I begin to consider the subject for my personal practice I will again return to the painting entitled *Hope* by G.F. Watts (See Fig. 1). For it is in this painting that I see much that will guide and direct me as I develop my practice as an artist. Pattison (1991) notes that “even if art deals with tragedy or conflict it must do so by pointing towards an ultimate resolution, a happy ending.” In the painting *Hope*, it is “the hope of those who refuse to submit to despair when it beckons” that Watts is trying to represent. It is this understanding of hope, and its often close association with despair, that can bridge the gap between the ideal and the real, helping to avoid the creation of art which suggests that we have arrived when, in fact, we still have far to go, pointing ultimately towards matters of eternal significance. To faith. To hope. To God.

The subject and scope for my future photography projects will be those traditionally associated with the “Concerned Photographer” but with the added aspect of faith. For example, as previously noted, for the practical element of my M.F.A. in Photography I have been spending time with a small church community in Belfast. Within this context I have been helping out with their weekly ‘Soup and Stew Ministry’ to the homeless, attending Sunday services, getting to know the body of believers that worship there and more specifically, making work with one individual in particular who keeps pigeons on the roof of the church building.

Examples of photography operating within the context of faith, in a way that will help inform my own practice, are illustrated within the book *Picturing Faith: Photography and the Great*

¹⁴ Christian images have a long history within the Western art tradition. For an excellent introductory overview of the changing nature of the representation of key themes and subjects found in Christian art, including the Middle Ages period, read *Christian Art: A Very Short Introduction* by Beth Williamson (2004).

Depression by McDannell (2004). While many of the Farm Security Administration's photographs made during the Depression era in America, such as "Migrant Mother", are familiar, McDannell's book in particular looks at how the photographers represented religion during this period. Within McDannell's book she highlights images of people in prayer, domestic spaces, dinner graces, parishioners going into their churches, at revival meetings. McDannell's book provides the opportunity to consider how Americans of the Great Depression experienced the divine in their lives. (See Fig. 3)



Fig. 3 'Revival Mother' by Dorothea Lange (1938) [online image] Available at: <http://thephotobook.wordpress.com/2009/11/> [Accessed 12 December 2010]

In the next section I will consider in more depth the faith aspect of my work by firstly considering my inspiration to be a photographer. I will also reflect upon how photography can be used as a tool to explore issues of faith for myself and to share my faith with others. Finally, I will briefly consider three artists whose work is inspired and influenced by themes of faith.

Faith *in* Photography

- Inspiration

My inspiration to be a photographer is based upon the basic belief that because I am created in the image of God¹⁵ and because God is a Creator God¹⁶, I am therefore creative with an inbuilt desire and longing to express this creativity. It is important for me to understand what this means and to appreciate the ways in which I am able to express and share this God inspired impulse to create. I have found John Henry Newman's idea of the "very humble servant" to be particularly useful in this regard. Quoted in *Art, Modernity and Faith* by Pattison (1991) "the fine arts", he says, are "special attendants and handmaids of religion", but this acknowledgement is immediately followed by a caution that "they are very apt to forget their place, and unless restrained with a firm hand, instead of being servants will aim at becoming principals." Accordingly, it is of paramount importance that my practice as an artist serves the ideas of faith and religion, rather than my own agenda. Thereby avoiding the mistake of the viewer thinking more of my skills than the subject of the artwork.¹⁷

As I seek inspiration, meaning and significance for my work and in my work, it should be sought within the context of faith - a faith which is comfortable embracing a certain amount of mystery, innocence and questioning. Philip Pacey (1977) in *A Sense of What is Real* helpfully reasons that:

"It is in letting self go that we find our true self. As a hand finds its meaning in relation to the body it is part of, so we find our significance in experiencing our place in nature and realising it; and, as Keats knew, if that is truly felt, then it does not matter that nature remains, or contains, a mystery, the mystery of the origin and Being we may call God. For such harmony is meaning in itself, and leaves us without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. The moment of vision is the experience of seeing the world - some part of it - as if for the first time."

(Pacey, 1977)

¹⁵ See Genesis 1 v 26

¹⁶ See Genesis 1 v 1

¹⁷ Might I suggest that this is what happened during the Renaissance period when the meaning of art change, when for the first time works of art focused more attention and adoration on the artist, rather than towards its supposed purpose, e.g. the *Creation of Adam* by Michelangelo.

- As Therapy: Self

I'm interested in working on photographic projects which provide me with the opportunity to explore and consider issues of faith and religion on a personal, introspective level. If I may again refer to the example of being at Calvary Christian Centre, time spent at the church has exposed me to different forms of Christian worship and allowed for me to talk to and build relations with church members which have challenged and deepened my experience of faith and God.

In the future I would like to work in similar contexts within which evidence of faith and God are significant and present. For example, I have made initial contact with Ratanak International¹⁸ with the view of doing a social documentary photography project in partnership with their organisation. The goal of Ratanak International is to help the people of Cambodia rebuild their country and in so doing show them the love of Jesus Christ in a tangible way.

- To Nudge: Others

As well as having an impact upon myself I am eager that my photographic images might be significant to others. To describe what that impact might be, I will first turn to Martin Luther. Luther was one of the main Reformers during the Protestant Reformation during the sixteenth century, although he was much more liberal when it came to the arts than either Calvin or Zwingli. Luther states:

“I am not of the opinion that through the gospel all the arts should be banished and driven away. I have myself heard those who oppose pictures, read from my German Bible [...] but this contains many pictures of God, of the angels, of men, and of animals, especially in the revelation of St. John, in the Books of Moses, and in the Book of Joshua. We therefore kindly beg these fanatics to permit us also to paint these pictures on the wall that they may be remembered and better understood, inasmuch as they can harm as little on the walls as in books. Would to God that I could persuade those who can afford it to paint the whole Bible on their houses, inside and outside, so that all might see; this would indeed be a Christian work. For I am convinced that it is God's will that we should hear and learn what he has done; especially what Christ suffered. But when I hear these things and meditate upon them,

¹⁸ Visit <http://www.ratanak.org/> for more on the the work of Ratanak International in Cambodia.

I find it impossible not to picture them in my heart. Whether I want to or not, when I hear, of Christ, a human form hanging upon a cross rises up in my heart; just as I see my natural face reflected when I look into water. Now it is not sinful for me to have Christ's picture in my heart, why should it be sinful to have it before my eyes?"¹⁹

This quote from Luther expertly expresses why faith can be and should be expressed through art - if for no other reason than that it is hard, if not impossible not to picture the Bible in our minds, therefore why should we not have it before us to see in a painting, in sculpture, or in a photograph? The only thing I would like to add to Luther's sentiment, is that the stories told through photography need not necessarily be about events or people which appear specifically within the Bible but may, I believe, be about examples of where God is at work in the world today; using the examples mentioned already, in Calvary Christian Centre or through the work of Ratanak International. The resulting photographic bodies of work created within such environments may be observed by the viewer, taken into account and used as a basis to consider themes and issues related to faith.

T. S. Elliot wanted the readers of his poetry to experience "what it feels like to believe that religion". Through my photography I want to "nudge" the viewers of my images towards considering the ideas of faith.

- A Contemporary Context and Three Examples

Contemporary art is probably as far from organised religion as western art has ever been. Faith is now seldom mentioned, discussed or acknowledged in the art world. When religion does come up, it is often because there has been a scandal; someone has painted a Madonna using elephant dung²⁰, or put a statuette of Jesus into a jar of urine²¹. James Elkins (2004) draws the conclusion that "fine art and religious art have gone their separate ways".

¹⁹ Accessed from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther [16/10/10]

²⁰ *The Holy Virgin Mary* by Chris Ofili. The painting depicts a black African Mary surrounded by images from blaxploitation movies and close-ups of female genitalia cut from pornographic magazines, and elephant dung.

²¹ *Piss Christ* is a photograph by photographer Andres Serrano. It depicts a small plastic crucifix submerged in a glass of the artist's urine.

Is it time for them both to come together again? Can art and faith once again be happy bedfellows? Is this wishful thinking on my part? How can I create art which is good, worthy, interesting to the world of art *and* be informed and inspired by issues of faith. Is it possible to return to the values and ideals set forth by John Ruskin in his series of *Lectures on Art* published in 1903, in which he contends that “the great arts [have] three principal directions of purpose; first, that of enforcing the religion of men; secondly, that of protecting their ethical state; thirdly, that of doing them material service.”

Ruskin (1903) goes on to ponder the question, how far has art advanced the cause of religion it has been used to recommend and concludes that the “existence of the image beside us will often turn our thoughts towards subjects of religion, when otherwise they would have been differently occupied, ... the art makes us believe what we would not otherwise have believed.”

S. Brent Plate (2002) states that when someone takes the time to look well at an image containing religious significance, “an inner purity becomes perceptive and active.” He continues:

“The eye begins to take in the picture and go out to it in active response and exploration [meditation]. When such an annunciation and conception has occurred, it leaves a quite physical sense of enlightenment and fruition. “The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single [pure in concentration and response] the whole body shall be full of light.”” (Mat 6 v 22, KJV)

(Plate, 2002)

My hope is that through my photographic practice I might “nudge” people towards believing what they might not otherwise have believed, illuminating for them the the story of faith. The contemporary context is not promising for a reemergence of a “fusion of art and faith” within fine art practice, although there is always hope - even perhaps if it is a case of “hoping against hope”.

Modern art today seems particularly devoid of Christian influence and yet I believe that God still equips individuals with “the spirit of God, with ability, with intelligence, with knowledge, and with all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs.”²² In *State of the Arts: From Bezalel to Mapplethorpe*, Veith and Olask (1991), when speaking about the best Christian artists, contend that:

²² Exodus 31 v 3-4 (RSV)

“they manage to be contemporary while strenuously resisting the characteristic errors of their time. They may adopt a ‘modern’ secular style, but then challenge its assumptions in its own terms ... engaging[ing] the imagination of their age without selling out to it. Each is profoundly original while upholding and continuing the Christian tradition. Each draws on scripture for inspiration, resulting not in one static formula but a multitude of biblically informed styles. Each achieves the Biblical balance of form and freedom.”

(Veith and Olask, 1991)

Georges Rouault, Edward Knippers and Makoto Fujimura are three artists whose work is inspired by their faith, helping them to see the world differently, seeking to create a world that ought to be.

Georges Rouault (1871-1958)

The Catholic painter Georges Rouault, like many of his contemporaries painted prostitutes (See Fig. 4), but there was a difference, as noted by Steve Turner (2001) in *Imagine* when he quotes the art critic Louis Vauxcelles, “unlike Lautrec, when he [Rouault] paints a prostitute there is no cruel pleasure in seeing vice exalted [...] he suffers and he weeps.”

The Psalmist David said of himself in the Bible that he was “fearfully and wonderfully made”.²³ Art made by Christians should reflect this vein of humanity. People may lose their own sense of dignity, but they never lose their dignity before God. They are still fearfully and wonderfully made, and the Christian eye will see beyond the damage - as suggested in Rouault’s paintings of prostitutes. Hibbs (2008) states that:

“As Rouault’s career progressed, he moved beyond mere negation and social commentary by inscribing the characters of the judge, the prostitute, and the clown within a Christian narrative: Christ’s association with prostitutes and tax collector’s, his love of the poor and outcasts, the judgement of Christ by Rome, and the mocking of Christ as if he were a clown.”

(Hibbs, 2008)

²³ Psalms 38 v 14 (NIV)

Hibbs concludes his article, titled “Rouault as Modernist Christian Artist” by asserting, “Rouault gives dramatic visual testimony [that] the proclamation of a religion of a humiliated God finds a welcome reception in the hearts of those who ‘seek with groans.’”

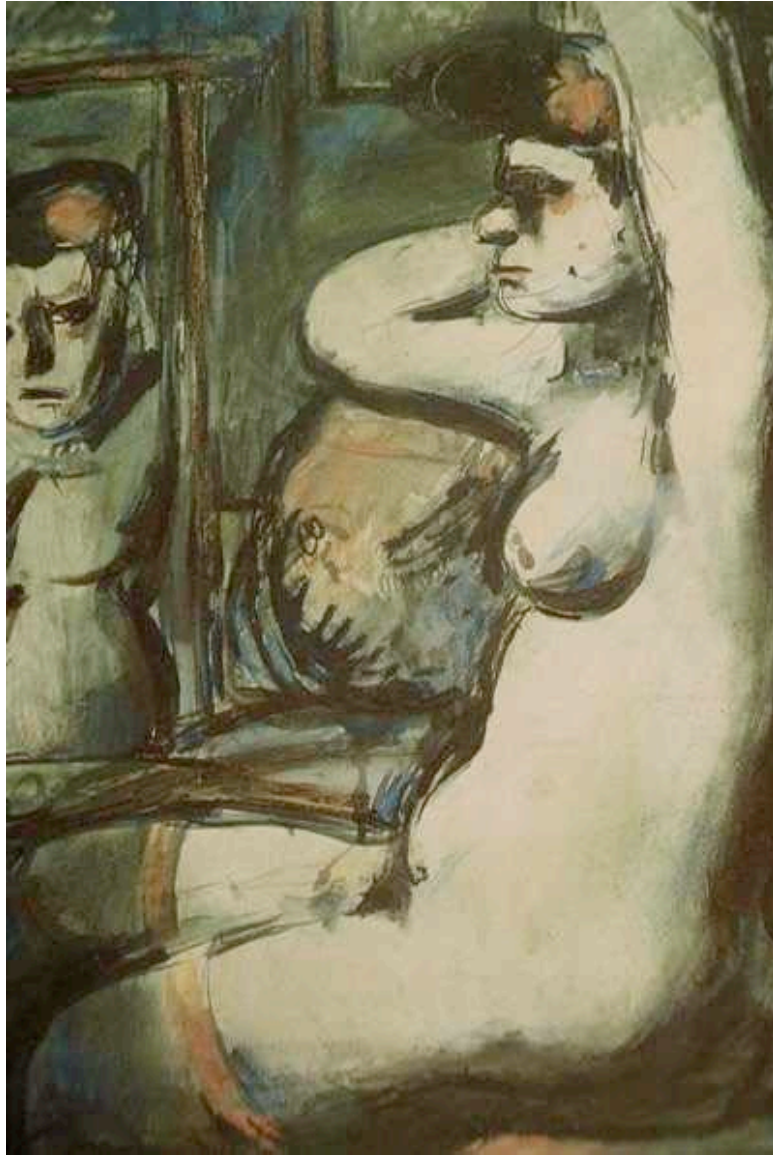


Fig. 4 ‘Nude in a Mirror’ by Georges Rouault (1906) [online image] Available at: <http://infinity.cos.edu/art/strong/module/history3/unit5/tosurre/default.html> [Accessed 12 December 2010]

Edward Knippers (b. 1946)

Veith and Olask (1991) describes Knipper’s work as “unabashedly narrative” in contrast to conventional Modernist theory which argues that art must be “pure” and far above the need to “tell a story”. He goes on to reason that:

“Whereas conventional modern art tends to be abstract or ethereal, Knippers work is blatantly physical. Whereas contemporary art might affect “spirituality” in a vague, mystical, New Age sort of way, Knipper’s art is explicitly, confrontationally Biblical ... Knippers is not advocating mere Bible illustration nor rote repetition of traditional subjects. He seeks to continue and revitalise what in fact Christian artists have always done.”
(Veith and Olask, 1991)

And what is it that Christian artists have always done? They have created visual representations of Biblical themes - the story of faith - coming from a believing heart inspired by relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and enabled by skilled hands trained for the task. (See Fig. 5)



Fig. 5 ‘The Pest House (Christ Heals the Sick)’ by Edward Knippers (1987) [online image]
Available at: <http://imagejournal.org/page/journal/articles/issue-3/prescott-profile> [Accessed 4
October 2010]

Makoto Fujimura (b. 1960)

Makoto Fujimura is a contemporary artist who is recognized as a cultural influencer by both faith-based and secular media. His art is on display at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, as

well as a number of museums in America. His most recent project, *The Four Holy Gospels*, is an illuminated manuscript to commemorate the four hundred year anniversary of The King James Bible, set to be released in January 2011. The illustrated copies of the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John provide another way of reading the text of the Bible and is one of the few recent examples where contemporary art and the Bible have met. (See Fig. 6)

The project, and the artists motivation, is explored in a video which appears in Fujimura's website.²⁴ In his art Fujimura expresses his relationship with faith and religion. His Craft, experience, creativity and faith combine to enable him to create works that say who he is by creating a visual language of abstraction, helping the viewer go beyond what one can understand towards a transcendent understanding of Creation. He is creating a new cultural language, as he articulates in the video, to "help bring people home".

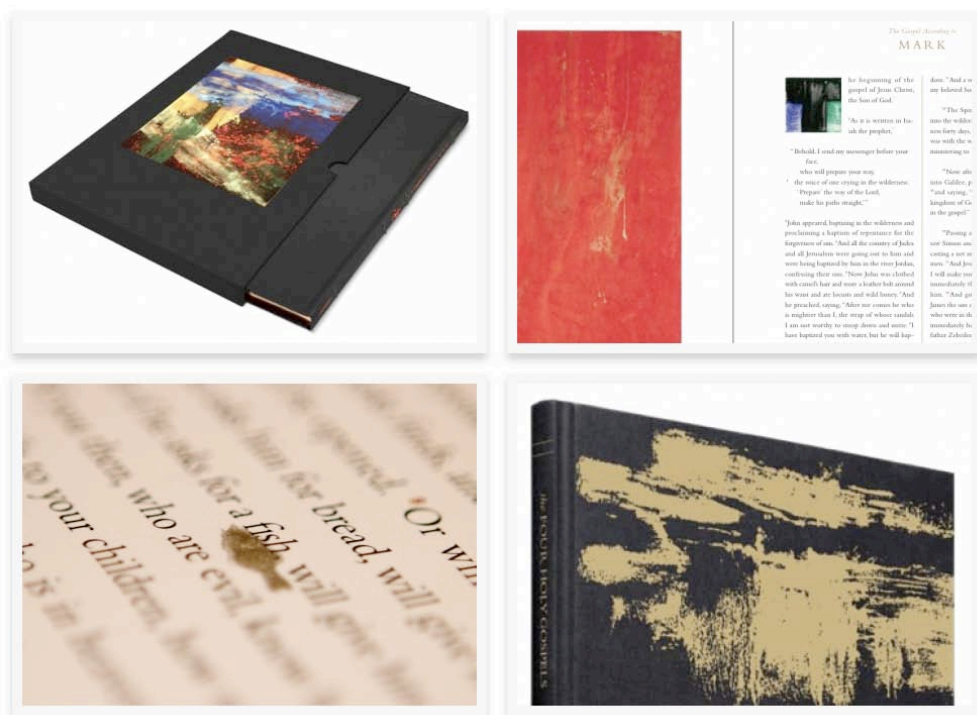


Fig. 6 'The Four Holy Gospels (Illustrated Bible)' by Makoto Fujimura (2011) [online image] Available at: <http://www.makotofujimura.com/four-holy-gospels/> [Accessed 2 January 2011]

Philip Graham Ryke (2006) writing in *Art for God's Sake* believes that, "at its best, art is able to do what Fujimura's paintings do: satisfy our deep longing for beauty and communicate profound spiritual, intellectual and emotional truth about the world that God has made for His glory."

²⁴ For more about Fujimura and his work visit his website located at <http://www.makotofujimura.com>

Conclusion

As I conclude this study of *Faith in Photography: To Say Something, To Work Miracles?* I will first consider what it is that I might learn from the work of Georges Rouault, Edward Knippers and Makoto Fujimura to help better inform my current and future photographic practice. In Georges Rouault's painting of prostitutes it is empathy with his subjects and sensitivity to their plight and ability to see something of their worth and dignity despite their apparent hopeless situation which inspires. With Edward Knippers work it is his visual representations of Biblical themes coming from a deep personal belief in God that I would also like to incorporate into my art practice. In the work of Makoto Fujimura it is his success in operating within the gallery space of the contemporary world while being upfront and clear that it is his faith which inspires and informs his art practice.

Having considered what is photography, beyond the basic definition of a means of recording whatever is in front of the camera, it is the mediums ability to communicate shared human experiences, with emotion and feeling which I want to explore in my work. Creating photography that encourages the viewer to "gaze" and to search for meaning - deeper meaning.

As I reflected on how my faith and my photography can best be integrated and shared, consideration of the historic and theological position of the Church with regard to art, idol and God has been a very useful exercise in understanding more fully the debate which surrounds these issues. I feel that within the Protestant tradition there is room for art practice, in a complimentary way fused with Word and text, to point towards and enable fresh and deeper understandings of the story of faith - photography used to visually expand understanding of the Bible.

My inspiration to be a photographer is based on a personal belief that I am created in the image of the Creator God, and as a result I am creative - with a deep desire to express this innate creativity. It is important though that I maintain the attitude of a "very humble servant" to ensure that my art brings glory to God, thereby avoiding either me or my artwork being worshipped or idolised.

As a photographer, working within situations in which people of faith are present and the story of faith is being lived out in practice, will help me on a personal level to explore and develop my own understanding of God. This has happened while being at Calvary Christian Centre as I have worked

on the photographic element of the M.F.A. and would also happen, I anticipate, if I am successful in my attempts to work with Ratanak International.

As well as helping me to consider and explore the story of faith personally, I would also intend that my work as a photographer has an influence on others - perhaps within a church setting but primarily within the contemporary art world and in the public square, so that people who might not otherwise have the opportunity, are exposed to the “ideas of religion”.

The Rev. Arch. Alexander (1914) in *The Glory in the Grey*, writing about the following verse from the Bible, “And it came to pass when the minstrel played, that the hand of the Lord came upon him”²⁵, notes how it may seem strange that God should speak in such a way, but he reasons:

“that we, too, are indebted, oftener than perhaps we realise, to agencies and instruments, as material and unlikely as Elisha’s minstrel, for effects and an inspiration as truly divine ... at times, the very dullest of us can catch, in the strains of some earthly minstrel, a meaning greater and diviner than the player knows.”

(Alexander, 1914)

Perhaps through photography I might in some small way be a “minstrel”; telling stories, helping those who can’t yet see it, creating readiness, nudging them towards perceptive insight.²⁶ I wonder, is there any greater miracle than this to be part of?

²⁵ 2 Kings 3:15

²⁶ Paraphrase of Mark 4:11

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