

## RELIGION, ART AND CONTEMPORARY CULTURE Claudio Carvalhaes

When I started writing this presentation, I think there was a ghost somewhere around or inside me speaking unintelligible words. In the midst of what seemed like mumbling and repetition, an indeterminate voice or sound echoed words like the ones said to the prophet Isaiah: “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? And I said: Here I am; send me! And he said, ‘Go and say to this people: Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand’”<sup>1</sup>. As I pondered these disturbing words, especially unseemly in relation to this meeting and my talk, I started to write the following:

I was delighted to read Betty H. Meyer’s book about the story of ARC. I got to know much better a society that I had only heard of, a society that was very important in the midst of the religious and artistic scenario of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and which was well known among artists, curators, theologians and intellectuals in general. I was amazed by its powerful take on and constant pushing of the relation between religion, art and culture, going against the grain in both fields, trying to break down the walls that divide them and fostering broader relations. As the society tries to re-envision itself and revamp its own structures, it has long and serious work to do if it wants to be relevant to our world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. ARC can still be a unique place for artists, intellectuals, believers, quasi-believers and non-believers. We are living both in very exciting and scaring times, and that must fuel our discussion and help us discover new paths into, and possibilities for the relation between art, religion and culture.

I will divide my talk in two parts. In the first part I will present a brief theoretical overview of the relation between art and religion in modernity and post-modernity. In the second part I will present practical ideas of how ARC can move forward in its projects.

### Part One: Theoretical Overview

The history of the relation between art and religion<sup>2</sup> in the Western world is too vast to be elucidated here. However, I will pinpoint few aspects of this relation. I believe that Mark C. Taylor is one of the leading thinkers in this connection and I am indebted to his work. The advent of the so-called post-modern, post-structuralist and post-colonial discourses have challenged modernity, challenged its structures and opened up entrances into the philosophical, religious and theological systems that had not been opened before. How so?

Autonomy, self-referentiality, self-representation, self-regulation, self-purposiveness, sublimity, disinterestedness, purity, inner-logic and inner-teleology were strong marks of modernity. Reflecting Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, the autonomies of pure reason, of

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 6:8-9 – Bible Contemporary English Version

<sup>2</sup> The idea of religion I am referring here mean mainly Christianity in one or another form and maybe once in a while Judaism.

practical reason and of aesthetic judgment turned the work of art in on itself, excluding any outside element that might transcend it. The work of art found purpose, meaning and beauty in itself, within in its own boundaries. This concentration of art in itself, this severance from outside elements has freed the work of art from all constraints of accountability, of practical value, of interest, of relation, of location. As a result, the work of art became a thing in itself, “art for art sake”, or in the words of Frank Stella, “what you see (in the work of art) is what you see”<sup>3</sup>. In a game of mirrors, always self-reflecting itself, the work of art was its own reference, representing itself, regulating itself, delineating its own properties, becoming an end in itself (inner-teleology). Maintaining its own purity meant not allow any other element into itself, any difference, any outside discourse. All of these would seem like contamination.

As a result, modern art, read “high art”<sup>4</sup>, did not enter into dialogue with any other field of knowledge, including religion. Religion in general had lost favor with the dawning of the Enlightenment, highly suspect because it purportedly neither relied upon nor provided empirical knowledge. Along the way, art gradually replaced religion as Hegel said it would. As Pamela R. Matthews and David McWhirter put it, “the birth of aesthetics is inseparable from the withdrawal of the divine”<sup>5</sup>; the sublimity of the work of art replaced the religious notion of the transcendent. Likewise, the aesthetical principle restated in secular form what had once been religious predicaments. Beauty replaced faith, sublimity and mystical disinterestedness replaced the need for a divine power. One of early modernity’s ways to prove God’s existence theologically was eventually translated into secular language to explain and demonstrate “natural beauty”.<sup>6</sup>

The advent of post-modernism and post-structuralism, which grew mainly out of 20<sup>th</sup> century continental philosophy, reacted against these monolithic discourses and searched for issues that had been left out within the history of both fields. In its attempt to deconstruct modernism, the post-modern critique does not negates or avoid the modern but rather, works within its structures and constraints as a way to think difference, to find cracks in the system, openings that had been negated by the rhetorical discourses of modernity but which nevertheless function as the very condition of their existence, be they art, theology or religion.

What the grouping of the post-modern, post-structuralist, post-colonial, post-feminist, race and queer studies, and etc. are trying to do is to sneak in to the totalitarian discourses of self-referentiality and self-containment and to bring forth the issues, topics, experiences, values and forms they consider to be “unreasonable”, *alterities* that have

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<sup>3</sup> Frank Stella, quoted in Terry Gross. “All I Did Was Ask. Conversations with Writers, Actors, Musicians and Artists. (New York: Hyperion, 2004), 255.

<sup>4</sup> The historical development of Kant’s aesthetics differentiated the work of art from high art and low art. Poorly speaking, high art was the art not given to value, to interest or utilitarian purposes but for inner-fruit. As for low art, it was art for the market, for profit, for purpose and for outside meanings.

<sup>5</sup> Pamela R. Matthews and David McWhirter (eds), *Aesthetic Subjects*. (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2003), xviii.

<sup>6</sup> George Santayana. *The Sense of Beauty. Being the Outline of Aesthetic Theory* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 1955).

been denied, forgotten, set aside, left out of these structures, working in and out of the limits of their boundaries, representations and appropriateness, transgressing settled modes of knowledge and experience. In this vast territory, Hal Foster compiles some of the issues pertaining to these critiques and says that the post-modern era “is an era of the death of the subject (Baudrillard) or of the loss of master narratives (Owens), to assert that we live in a consumer society that renders opposition difficult (Jameson) or amidst a mediocrity in which the humanities are marginal indeed (Said). Such notions are not apocalyptic: they mark uneven developments, not clean breaks and new days. Perhaps then, postmodernism is best conceived as a conflict of new and old modes, cultural and economic, the one entirely autonomous, the other not all determinative – and of the interests vested therein.”<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, and interestingly enough, the *alterity* searched and developed by these “post” critiques quite often do not include the religious in its listing of absent issues. Maybe fearful of what dominant or confessional religion can do to the still somewhat autonomous field of aesthetics, these discourses of critique do not allow the idea of the religious within its unframed frame of work. If one looks at the very recent book on art history and criticism called *Art Since 1900 Modernism, Antimodernism and Postmodernism* just published by four of the leading art critics working in United States, namely Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, one cannot find anything related to the importance of religion and the disruption it performs, within the field of art. On the contrary, they argue that “two kinds of absences structure the field of aesthetic experience at the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. One of them we could describe as the absence of reality itself as it retreats behind the miragelike screen of the media, sucked up into the vacuum tube of a television monitor, read off like so many printouts from a multinational computer hook-up. The other is the invisibility of the presuppositions of language and of institutions, a seeming absence behind which power is at work...”<sup>8</sup>

In most recent critiques of art history<sup>9</sup>, the religious is never “present”, always absent, denied, unfigured, left unthought. It was Mark C. Taylor who, criticizing this exclusion of religion in post-structuralist thought, coined the term *altarity*<sup>10</sup>. *Altarity* means *difference* or otherness, thought after the end of modern thought. *Altarity* relates both to the *altar* and to *aliter*, it has to do with the religious or sacred aspect of alterity, a way of contaminating post-structuralist alterity with perspective on or about religion.

On the other side of the binary between the religious/theological field itself also became very suspicious of the artistic enterprise and kept frail ties to the aesthetical perspective. For religion, art was only a helping tool toward faith, toward what was proper and meaningful, God. Art was seen as expanding theological possibilities, of mirroring and

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<sup>7</sup> Hal Foster (ed), *The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1998), xii.

<sup>8</sup> Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh. *Art Since 1900 Modernism, Antimodernism and Postmodernism*. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 48.

<sup>9</sup> For example, the very influential art critic magazine *October* never gives space for the issue of religion.

<sup>10</sup> Mark C. Taylor. *Altarity*. (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press 1987).

reflecting God. Like the modernist work of art, the modernist God was self-referential, *causa sui*, the *prima causa* of everything, regulating itself and keeping foreign influences at bay. Moreover, institutionalized religion explicitly tried to keep its own autonomy from the aesthetical field. One example of this was the creation of religious museums of art. Since “secular” museums never present faith “properly”, churches and religions institutions have created their own venues of dialogue with art. Examples of this are the *Knights of Columbus Museum* in New Haven, CT, and I suppose, the newest MOBIA- The Museum of Biblical Art, the nation’s first scholarly museum of art and the Bible here in New York. (Broadway and 61<sup>ST</sup>). These museums deal with religious art, a kind of art that interests one way or another to the purpose of a proper faith and does not enter into dialogue with what is not within the spectrum of organized religion. I wonder whether these museums would allow exhibitions of the artwork of Mapplethorpe? Most probably not. Only certain explicitly confessional art has been let into religious and liturgical places, experiences, creeds and dogmatic truths. Betty Meyer gives us a wonderful example of the tension and finally the split of this relationship when she mentions the controversy of St Peter’s Lutheran Church and the artwork of Willem de Kooning.<sup>11</sup>

Within and beyond the issue of autonomy, both fields have become increasingly complicated and at the same time flat and easy. Donald B. Marron, a well known curator within the field of art collection, describes the difficulties of surviving in the field of art: “It’s harder to categorize artists, because there’s much broader range of artists to work with... the issues of schools of art and the variety of artists. Art has gone to Europe, Latin America and the financial commitment involved”<sup>12</sup> have marked some of the uneasiness of the practical field of visual arts. Moreover, beyond the field of visual arts, there is the field of theater and performance arts. Where do we place these? And how are we to relate these fields to the religious without imposition or appropriation? Is it possible? Is it desirable? What consequences do they bring?

The complication within the religious scenario, on the other hand, can be seen in the contemporary tendency toward fundamentalism, conservatism and dogmatism. In US, religion has got imbricated with cultural wars and has made it into mainline media and marketing, trying to develop a key role in diverse segments of media such as radio, TV, movies, books and internet. These movements have clearly set the evangelical agenda over and against *other* cultural productions which are defined as relative, perverse “liberal”, and antipatriotic, among other things. This movement is trying to connect media, religion and art into a unified folding of thought and experience that sets apart what is not in their horizon of truth and faithfulness. A totalitarian discourse without difference.

This dualistic scenario presents a huge challenge for those of us who try to work to complicate it. As tips along the way, just provocations for our thoughts I would like to

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<sup>11</sup> Betty H. Meyer. *The ARC Story. A Narrative Account of the Society for the Arts, Religion and Contemporary Culture.* (New York: ARC and CrossCurrents Press, 2003), 85-87.

<sup>12</sup> “An Interview with Donald B. Marron”, in Ann Temkin, *Contemporary Voices. Works from the UBS ART Collection.* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 19.

suggest: 1) Religion should work as a way to stress *difference*, alterities, the other, what is left out within religious accepted discourses. By way of pointing out what is denied, demonized or turned into heretics, religion should complicate easy dogmatic assumptions that tends to work in a monotone hierarchical voice. This is a constant work constantly trying not to be commoditized, co-opted, sucked up into various normative discourses of God, faith, identities, ethics, etc.; 2) Be aware of the use of the notion of truth. Jurgen Habermas said that we should learn "not to deny the potential of truth to religious worldviews"<sup>13</sup>. Truth it is a huge component in religious organizations, discourses and practices. Feminist liturgies for instance, arguably base their experiences in the notion of "truth".<sup>14</sup> Thus, how not to let any notion of truth go unchecked? How to build a perspective on religion possibly with different "floods of truth"?<sup>15</sup>; 2) Make problematic the idea of the sacred, of the religious. We must find a way to develop a notion of the sacred as slippery, as that which escapes us, which cannot be fully grasped, completely understood, appropriated, or absolutely nailed down. How might we develop a sense of the sacred as that which breaks open the "religious" tendency to foreclose and narrow down its systems into untouchable structures of the same? A concept of the sacred that is always moving, changing, turning us into fools, lost in our ambiguities, ironies and paradoxes; 3) We should keep in mind a certain rhizomic folding<sup>16</sup> movement of the opening and closure of the sacred, with its ruptures and cuts, interruptions and postponements of the a-ha moment, keeping total understanding always at bay. This idea of the sacred would relate to what Saint Augustine said somewhere: "I know God until you ask me"; 4) We should ask how art is defined, expressed, experienced, represented, presented, mimetized. 5) We should ask how art performs that which humanity lacks, that for which it longs, to which it aspires. Are artistic productions religious in any sense? How might emptiness, nothingness, holes, imperfections and fissures be religious-secular elements in the work of art? 6) How to follow the Muses of creativity and plurality? As Jean-Luc Nancy says in his book *The Muses*: "The Muses get their names from a root that indicates ardor, the quick-tempered tension that leaps out in impatience, desire, or anger, the sort of tension that aches to know and to do. In a milder version, one speaks of the 'movements of the spirit'. The Muse animates, stirs up, excites, arouses. She keeps watch less over the form than over the force. Or more precisely: she keeps watch forcefully over the form. But this force springs up in the plural..."<sup>17</sup>

From and within this series of references, avoided absences, unavoidable gaps, confusion of intentions, "passionate love for the unknown" (John Caputo) and desperate need for accountability and inclusion, I believe ARC can work its way toward discovering forms of engaging, expanding, contaminating and disrupting these two fascinating fields of religion and art.

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<sup>13</sup> Folha de Sao Paulo on line. 05/24/2005. "<http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/fsp/mais/fs2404200507.htm>."

<sup>14</sup> Janet R. Walton, *Feminist Liturgies. A Matter of Truth*. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000)

<sup>15</sup> Catherine Keller. *The Face of the Deep. A Theology of Becoming*. (London, New York: Routledge, 2003)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy. *The Muses*. Meridian Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 1.

Part Two: Provisional Ideas

1) Origins: ARC came out of the Second World War and was marked by its wounds. We have to think the issue of origin, time and place again. What are the times and places in which we are located now? How are we to think origins in a globalized world? How do we relate to our new origins today in order to move us forward? What are our wounds, our marks, our impossible challenges today?

2) Re-Creation. We must not fall prey to the desire to define our identities and missions as fixed discourses. On the contrary, we should constantly re-imagine our subjectivities and discourses in the face of the constant challenges and uncertainties of our changing world. What is left to us is an unrelenting space of continuous struggle both in art and religion. Our world is a shifting place and we should be aware of the changes that take place around us. In that sense, I propose that we add to our mission statement that we are constantly changing, re-inventing ourselves and our understanding of the world, art and the religious, always walking on the edge of terms, missions, definitions and tasks. We should learn how to live in unsafe places since the world itself is not safe. Nor is religion about safety; rather it is a constant risk. Bonhoeffer talks about this risky aspect of faith in his concept of cheap/costly grace. As Mary Jane Irion, a member of ARC said: “I am uncomfortable with the notion of being comfortable” (p. 104)

3) Religion over Spirituality. I’ve heard in one of our meetings that one of the issues for this meeting is the possibility of changing the term religion to spirituality. Here I pull off my traditionalist view in favor of the term religion over spirituality and vote in favor of keeping the same name of the institution. Besides other reasons, I think that no name will ever be good enough, no proper term will accomplish our tasks, will encapsulate what we want or will relate entirely to our world. But if we want to think about these two words, I think that the word spirituality is saturated with new age movements and can lead us astray from a more comprehensive perspective that the word “religion” can offer. The word “religion” deals with structures of life, world overviews, philosophical thinking and includes types of spirituality. As for the word “spirituality”, it is a looser term that relates more to religious practices, emotions and feelings. In fewer words, religion includes spirituality but spirituality does not always include religion. Thus, I believe that change our ever provisory mission statement might be more significant than to change the name of the society.

4) Diversity and globalization. ARC was markedly a white North American Society with one European member, Paul Tillich. Along with the need to re-think our origins, we should think about our diversity. We need to broaden the scope of our membership and the issues regarding art and religion from around the world. The fact that we live in a globalized world brings radical consequences to religion and art. What globalization are we dealing here and what globalized art and religion? We need to open space to hear the voice of women, of black and brown and yellow people, of third world people, and to try

to get rid of the constant criticism leveled against ARC of elitism. This meeting is a huge movement towards this new place. Moreover, there is a need to reach out for young people who are starting now as students or artists on the making and get them at ARC, blending intellectuals with artists and students. We should not serve the church but the world!

5) Religion and Art. We should work as parasites in the both fields, of both art and religion, blending each complex of forces, fusing them into new and unthought possibilities. Using another metaphor, only by being unfaithful to each of these fields we can be honest to them and to our mission. We should destruct each field so that something new might arise out of its ashes. We should work on the melting down of each field, twisting, re-doing, amplifying and expanding this partnership into whatever possibilities it may bring. We should, again, work with what is left out in both fields, with their ambiguities, paradoxes, uncertainties, clash of references, opacity, negation, double-edges, alte(a)rity, undecidability and whatever topic or issue or presence both fields have denied and have systemically made absent in their history. Like Walter Benjamin's *Profane Illumination*, we should think about this relation as if the religious comes not as simply religious, but illuminated by the opacity of the secular not necessarily by the strident light of "religious truth".

6) Contemporary Culture and Networking. If we are to broaden the scope of this institution, we should expand its limits and its relation to other fields of knowledge and experimentation. We live in a live wired networking culture and world. What are our connections? How to think art and religion in the flux of the unlimited references of the internet? How to move within the clash of cultural productions?

7) New York. ARC must make the most of this city. There is so much art in this city and our task is to discover all of its happenings. New York has artists, theaters, museums, artists, students, intellectuals, media venues, all sorts of organizations, etc. We should try to catalogue some of its expressions in order to create new partners. For instance, the Drawing Center had a recent exhibition on modernism and spirituality. The "Scope Art, Global culture on the Verge" recently had a table discussion between art and religion. Nasa now has artists working on genome project. Last fall, The Brooklyn Academy of Music put together sounds of the universe provided by Nasa and the music group Kronos Quartet. The New York Times lists many of the staged performance arts (concertos, dance, theater, etc) that are going to happen during the summer. Moreover, we must pay attention to what goes on in the underground world of teenagers that are trying to find places, outlets for their own artistic expression. One example of that is the "NYC Collaboration Event" where musicians, artists, filmmakers, photographers and etc get together and as they say "helps people to know about different cultures, language, music, art, film and photography"<sup>18</sup>. Guillermo Gomez-Pena is a performer from Mexico working on the issues of borders, multiculturalism, religion and presenting his performances everywhere, from Guggenheim to streets and shopping malls.

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<sup>18</sup> [http://www.atoa.ws/cgi-bin/view\\_topics.pl?forum\\_ID=1&topic\\_ID=54](http://www.atoa.ws/cgi-bin/view_topics.pl?forum_ID=1&topic_ID=54)

8) Experience. Experience seems to be the key word for younger generations as it relates both to art and religion. Churches that add dancing to their services are growing. What can we learn from it? Museums are still giving opportunities for their audiences to interact with the work of art. How might we think religion and art through the body and its senses? How to understand this fervent passion that both art and religion offer to its audience? We need to provide a place for expansion of the concept of aesthetics and its possibilities to the religious. As Pamela R. Matthews and David McWhirter say, this might mean “a readiness to explore the pleasures contingent on encounters with objects and sites not traditionally invested with aesthetic value.”<sup>19</sup> The difficulties of representing and presenting the body are equal to its need to feel, to go *through* the experience of the beauty in its various dimensions, be it the delightful, the ugly, the picturesque, etc. To deal with the aesthetic in different spaces is to deal with the mischievous and with the slippery movements of both the religious and beauty.

9) Round Tables. We should think about creating round tables to deal with modernism, post-modernism, art, religion and culture. Let’s organize roundtables 1) With *curators* of various museums and ask them how they deal with religion, spirituality, God, etc; 2) With *artists* in general who are producing but are not yet top flight artists. 3) With *gallery people* and how they evaluate art, how they see its shifting trends, what people are interested, what they are buying, what role religion plays in their work, etc; 4) With *students* of art and what they are reading, creating, producing, and whether they are interested in religion or not; 5) With *students* of religion and theology and what they are reading, creating, how do they understand the role of art in religion, etc; 6) With *theater students, dance students, actors/actresses* and see if there is any correlation in their work and religion? 7) With *community college students* and learn if they have time to think about art or religion; 8) With architecture students and their views of the religious in their art; 9) With *film makers* and *professors* and *students* and try to understand why this amazing art that moves masses of people throughout the world criticizes, puzzles, infuriates, re-invents and re-inscribes so many possibilities of religious concepts; 10) With *magazines editors* and consider what editors take into consideration when they think about their next issue. For instance, how “Time Out”, self-described as “the obsessive guide to impulsive entertainment” see religion and how it informs the life of young people in New York City? Let us remember that what the book of Proverbs says: “Fools think their own way is right but the wise listen to advice”<sup>20</sup> There is wisdom in the multitude of advices. Let’s listen to them. It is also a way of networking and getting ARC known.

10) Community/Outlet. Can we offer an outlet for people interested in religion and art, a forum for discussions, a place for ideas and projects? Can we create a community, a community that might have nothing in common, that might not agree with everything but that wants to provoke, to spur, to create? The *New York Theater Workshop*, for instance has an artistic community called “Unusual Suspects”, a place where theater people get together and discuss their projects. Should we think about creating a space for people

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<sup>19</sup> Pamela R. Matthews and David McWhirter (eds), *Aesthetic Subjects*, op.cit, xvi.

<sup>20</sup> Proverbs 12:15 –The Holy Bible - NRSV

concerned with art and religion? What about monthly meetings somewhere to vent discussions and toss ideas beyond the regular events of ARC? I believe there are many middle-range artists looking for an outlet, students of art and religion searching for a space to talk about their projects or even people in general interested in a time together around issues of art and religion, letting an space open for art and religion to appear. Perhaps, it could be a new type of “wine cellar”.

11) ReligionS. Since ARC carries the name *Religion* and not Christianity in its title, we should also have roundtables with artists from other religions and improve our dialogue with Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Animism, Western as well as Eastern religions. We should become plural in every respect. Moreover, we should consider popular religions and popular forms of traditional religious, as well as the relation between religion, kitsch art and mass consumption.<sup>21</sup> Another aspect of this plurality refers to the variety of rituals. The movie *Baraka* shows powerful images of different religious rituals and movements around the world. We should think about considering religious rituals as work of art.

12) Events. Besides the three regular meetings of ARC, we should put together thematic exhibitions, videos, photos, theater plays, craft works, artifacts, etc. We should careful to include third world artists, foreigners, women, blacks, etc, creating inter-active events.

13) Marketing. We should think about creating pamphlets and make our website more dynamic. ARC should also make itself better known by sending material to seminaries, religious studies depts., art schools, churches, etc.

### Conclusion

Echoing the voice of Marvin Halverson in one of ARC meetings, I ask: “Is this a prelude of a postlude of ARC?” I hope this meeting might be both a postlude and a prelude, a moment in which we leave some things behind and find new ways to think and experiment art and religion. Tillich called MoMA “his home”. Could ARC expands the relation between art and religion and be called “home” for this relationship? The poignant question Nelvin Vos asked some of us in his last e-mail: “What is now the cutting edge in tension and counterpoint between the two (religion and art)?” needs to be considered over and over again. How to know were the signs and the traces of both religion and art are? The voice of the prophet is still pounding in my head “who will go? And I said: Here I am; send me! And he said, ‘Go and say to this people: Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand’”. How to listen to art and to religion and not comprehend? How to keep looking and not understand? Most of all, what to do with this unclear voice pounding our head and sending us forth?

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<sup>21</sup> The material is vast in this area and a good introduction to the issue in American culture see Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity. Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven, London: Yale, 1995)