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## Art and Religion in Contemporary Society

Fredriksson, Malin

*Published in:*  
Approaching Religion

Published: 14/12/2016

*Document Version*  
Final published version

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[Link to publication](#)

*Please cite the original version:*  
Fredriksson, M. (2016). Art and Religion in Contemporary Society. *Approaching Religion*, 6(2), 186–188.  
<https://ojs.abo.fi/ojs/index.php/ar/index>

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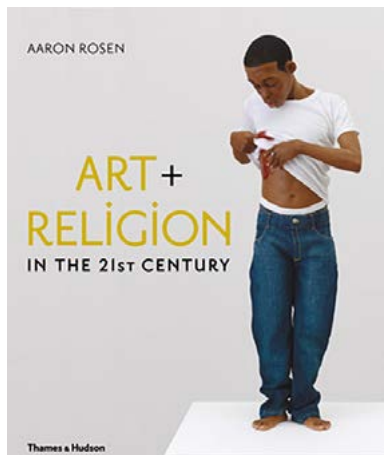
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# Reviews

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**Art and religion in contemporary society**

Aaron Rosen: **Art + Religion in the 21st Century** (London, Thames & Hudson, 2015), 256 pp.



Religion has been colourfully painted in the history of art. It is full of instances in which religious symbolism seems obvious, such as Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, the Buddhas of the Bamiyan Valley in Afghanistan, or the Blue Mosque in Istanbul. In modern visual art however, artists continue to draw on religious themes and imagery, but they also open up alternative approaches in which the religious connection is not as explicit. In *Art + Religion in the 21st century*, Aaron Rosen (King's College London)

explores encounters between religion and art today. Some of the most topical questions today are: how can art and religion be conceptualized in relation to each other; how do contemporary artists deal with religion; why is it of key importance to pay attention to religion in contemporary art in a globalized world; and last, but not least, what is religion?

One way to understand the relation between art and religion is to make a distinction between 'religion as art' and 'art as religion'. Religion as art refers to how religion is manifested in art; in other words, how aesthetics and beauty are used in religious traditions to express ideas of the sacred and the divine. Art as religion, on the contrary, refers to how enjoying aesthetics is a way of exercising contemplation and showing devotion. Contemporary artists have often been accused of being provocative, anti-religious and blasphemous, in contrast to previous times when art and religion were in peaceful co-existence, perhaps because religion was primarily connected to religious institutions and many artists served the interests of the institutions. Although Rosen acknowledges that this is an excessive interpretation, he wants to challenge the presupposed antagonism between art and religion today, and explore how art

and religion shape each other in dialogue, both as artistic expressions and in a theoretical setting. The study of religion and art has experienced major shifts in recent years. The predominance of the secularization paradigm among scholars of religion during the twentieth century has had the consequence that the interplay between religion and art was not seen as significant. Similarly, the predominance of formalism among art historians, which has emphasized form over content, meaning and interpretation, has rendered religious ideas irrelevant.

While some artists are rooted in a specific religious tradition, others are engaged in religion without being aware of their playing with it. In order to avoid simplistic categories such as 'Christian art' or 'Hindu art', the author has made the choice to have a thematic approach, where the various themes also provide different methodological approaches. The book is divided into five sections, which consist of two chapters each. Rosen begins with an exploration of art in the light of some traditional concepts in the study of religion such as myth, ritual, and religious figures and experiences, which are mainly associated with a theological and philosophical point of view. For instance, the question of how appropriately to depict Jesus is a debate which

still continues within (and outside) Christianity today. Contemporary artists use imagery from biblical stories, such as the Creation, the Last Supper, and the Crucifixion of Christ, to express concerns about current issues in society. The line between challenging tradition and rejecting it seems to be delicate.

In the philosophical debate concerning categories in aesthetics, 'the sublime' emerges as an essential but slippery concept which refers to a greatness which cannot be measured. The aesthetic experience bears strong similarities with religious experience. Aesthetic objects may be a source of religious experience, although the motivation or the point of reference is not explicitly religious in a traditional sense. Whilst some theorists claim that postmodern society, characterized by its advanced technologies, as well as capitalism and globalization, has provided conditions for a new sublime which is something other than the 'religious sublime', Rosen suggests that the conditions of contemporary society do not exclude the 'religious sublime': 'Perhaps staring into the abyss of late capitalism merely provides us with an updated metaphor for the greater mystery of the Divine' (77).

Later in the book, Rosen broadens his understanding of religion. Art is not only about aesthetic value – in its ritual dimension, for example, it also has a societal impact. Also, ritual is one of the fundamental concepts in the study of religion. Robert Bellah's concept of civil religion is a way of explaining how, through ritual, we shape collective identities in society. Art, meanwhile, is a means for a collective commemoration of the past. The Holocaust memorial sites are an example of how architecture creates a sacred space which brings people together. But collective identities and rituals are never entirely inclusive. Rosen recognizes the need to

be aware of how the diversity of identities such as gender, ethnicity and race, are expressed in art. This is essential, not least because art and religion together have a strong societal dimension; they shape identities, raise topical issues in society, and facilitate change. Rosen approaches diversity from the perspective of feminism and post colonialism, and makes an ambitious effort to apply the ideas of, amongst others, Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak to the context of art. In the politics of art and aesthetics, by means of visual strategies driven by creativity, artists negotiate positions of 'the Other' and create spaces for action and change.

The book cover, which represents the Australian artist Ron Mueck's sculpture *Youth* (2009), is an expressive example of how art embodies a statement. *Youth* is an interpretation of the biblical scene where Thomas the Apostle doubts Christ's return, at which Jesus says: 'Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe' (John 20:27). Rosen describes the sculpture as follows: 'No disciples accompany this small, vulnerable Jesus, incarnated as a contemporary black adolescent. In fact, Jesus seems to examine himself, as if requiring confirmation of his own (im)mortality, perhaps in the wake of a knife attack' (212). This hyperrealistic sculpture of a young man looking at his stab wound sheds light on how embodiment challenges the division between the profane and the sacred, flesh and the spirit. Simultaneously, this sculpture has a political message which refers to the violence many racialized individuals are exposed to – what does it take to make us believe and to open our eyes to what is happening in our society?

The author's intentions are undeniably ambitious, as he tries

to bring together over two hundred artists (with an emphasis on the English-speaking world), of whom some are well-known and others less so. Some artists are engaged in specific religious traditions, but in many cases the religious point of reference is more subtle. Rosen's guess that many of these artists will be surprised to find their art in this book is illustrative of this claim. After each subchapter follow several examples of artworks connected to the theme in question, provided with a short description of the art piece and the artist. The reader is, in most cases, well informed as to why certain works are included and what they may contribute from a theoretical point of view. However, for a reader who expects a thorough theoretical approach, this book perhaps does not provide a solid enough basis. Rosen sheds light on how contemporary artists are reshaping religion in society. Contemporary art challenges, in various ways, the distinctions between the sacred and profane, transcendence and immanence, spirit and flesh. This suggests that secular society is not so secular after all. Unfortunately, deeper reflections on, for instance, re-sacralization and post-secularity seem to be beyond the scope of the book, although the author does move away from narrow definitions of religion. The vagueness and the versatility of the concept of religion is constantly present. A weakness that many books of this kind suffer from is the impression of a degree of disorientation, which is a consequence of an effort to embrace an extensive content. Rosen successfully connects the smallest details to the larger context however, which results in a coherent picture.

It is hardly surprising that the visual realm is an essential aspect of this book's content – and in that respect it definitely meets expectations, since at least more than half

of the pages are filled with images and photos. Overall, the book is not theoretically heavy, and combined with the richness of the images and photos, it gives the reader a fresh and illuminating impression despite the number of pages. As the author is suggestive rather than definitive in his outline, the book seems to fulfil its purpose. It gives an inspiring introduction to a variety of approaches to how to understand encounters between art and religion, and thus it gives the reader a starting point for further study. I find the book useful for both students of religion and art, as well as for non-academic readers. ■

**Malin Fredriksson, MA**, is substitute assistant librarian at the Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History.

