



## IMPACT OF RELIGION ON ART

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**Abstract:**

*Art and religion are the two forms of the same phenomenon from prehistoric times to the present day. First is the attitude of the man towards the supreme and secondly the meaning of existence. The religion has served as a motive and a starting point for the creation of work of art. These two, art and religion have permeated into each other in the course of history.*

**Keywords-** *Religion, art, sensuality, eternal bliss, aesthetic sensibility, patronisation, eternal bliss.*



The word 'art' is applied to so many forms of human activity, from the loftiest human activity to competence in hair doing or chess. But if we restrict art in terms of plastic or visual art i.e. music, literature, drama, painting, sculpture, architecture and handicrafts, we can acknowledge that the creative impulse is the primary force in all the art.

As in heaven god is the ultimate power. On earth, religion is the ultimate tool to power. A religion is an organized collection of beliefs, feelings, dogmas and practices that define the relations between human beings and the sacred or the divine.

What is the connection between religion and art? Art is the reflection of the society. From the change in art of early man to the art of civilized man there is no change in the values of the religion into which the artist is born. The only difference is in the habits and beliefs of the societies. The society is intertwined with the threads of religion, science and politics. The study of civilization of a particular period is determined by what the man of that period thought and felt which is expressed in the form of art. The essential and the only element we can never dispense is the sensibility i.e. we can call it sensuality. In art and as in religion it is this element of sensuality which can never be dispensed. It is man's sensuality towards things which is attained from the values of his religion; either they are emotions of fear or sense of glory. The priests of religion are identical with the creative artists and art only exists as a function of worship. The artist was required to be meditative, to be able to enter into the state of deep absorption.

Art is said to be one of the purest ways to attain and also become one with the Divine. Hence nothing can approach near to true religion than art.

The musician creates things that are good to hear, the writer creates things that are good to read. The painter, the sculptor, and the craftsman create things that are good to see. Hence art is simply defined as an attempt to create pleasing forms. It is the thrill of creation, the excitement of making new thing, that each does labour. As his creation comes to life, the artist experiences the pleasure of the supreme power. But on the other hand, what is religion? It is also the ultimate tool to the supreme power. Hence the ultimate goal of art and religion is the same- the pleasure of the supreme power, which is the eternal bliss.



A person is attached to a particular religion since his birth. And art has always remained the aesthetic dimension of religion. Religion has its origin in and derives its power from the encounter with the natural world, which provokes fear and threatens. For e.g. Worship of sun god, rain god, performance of sacrifices, were performed to overcome these natural disasters. Hymns (mantras) from Vedas (Holy Scriptures) were recited to appease them. Vedas were everything. But with the advent of Jainism, Buddhism and Brahmanism, the perception of god came into being. Vedic gods are formless. They had no other

entity than the sound. So the art of image making did not flourish too much during Vedic period. During this time the rituals such as mantras, hymns and sacrifices were performed to appease the Gods. But the sages had a quite developed sense of crafts, colours and geometrical constructions. In some sacrifices they used to make idols of animals of flour paste of various size and shapes. In navagraha (nine planets) sacrifice, they used to make mandala (geometrical sketch) with nine kinds of food grains of nine colours. To make altar for sacrificial fire, they constructed it geometrically. In Rajasuya ceremonies embroidered vessels with representations were used in ritual functions. In Brahmanism all images of god and goddesses from Indra to Yaksha were conceived as human beings with supernatural powers. But in Buddhism and Jainism, whose founders were Buddha and Mahavira, were represented as normal human beings or symbolic representations were given to them in the Kushan period in Indian history. In this period the practice of erecting the stupas on the ashes of the Jains (the Tirthankaras or the conquerors) was first seen. They were decorated with relief of god and goddesses and few sculptures including the scenes from the life of Tirthankaras were also depicted. Hence, we conclude from the above that religion provoked artist in man. It is rightly said by Coomaraswamy “Indian Art is handmade of religion.”

Thus, in the ultimate analysis, the root of art lies both in the thought process of man, i.e. the man’s own perception of things and the visual form which he gives to his perception. Hence perception and creation turn out to be of equal importance in all studies of art.

The religious forms in the empirical world are used to symbolize the ultimate so that men have relationship with what is beyond. The religion expresses fundamental features

of the human psyche, like deeply embedded symbols, developmental structures. For e.g. Jain worshipped chaitya trees, dharma chakra, ayagapatas, dhvaja pillars, auspicious symbols like swastika, srivatsa mark, the full-blown lotus, a pair of fish etc. From early times the supreme power was represented not as human beings but in iconic form. These representations had different meanings. The forms which are purely decorative or artistic have some religious meaning attached to them.



Similarly, the idol of Jina represents the symbol of Mahapurusa and is not the likeness of Mahavira. The worship of Jina image did not take place during the lifetime of Mahavira. In the Jain worship, the introduction of Jain image is a later development.

All Jain art specimens were created under the patronage of followers of Jain faith. The religion consistently finds itself between those who are in power and those who are not. Often it provides a reason for imbalances in economic, political or social power. But it can also provide the structure for advancement, as in Sunga period King Kharavela of Chedi dynasty (150B.C) followed Jainism and he along with his queen provided shelters to Jain monks in the caves in Udayagiri and Khandhagiri in Orissa. These caves are noteworthy of Jain relics. There

are Jain sculptures in the caves and on the frieze also. Hence art prospered with patronisation. Some religions like Jainism and Buddhism laid great stress on one's moral and code of conduct which had suffered much in the dark ages, as an after effect of Great War of Mahabharata (History of Greater India). To cast influence on the mind of commoners the pioneers of this new faith, i.e. Jainism and Buddhism had made pillars, edicts etc. with teachings inscribed on them and statues of prophets to recall their teachings and services to their fellow men and secondly the religious texts were illustrated to spread the religion further. The visual impact of the religious texts gave more understanding to the laymen.

In Sikhism (Sikh religion) there are ten gurus. Out of the ten gurus Guru Nanak Dev (1469-1539) authored many hymns, collected in the Grant Sahib. Guru Angad also penned hymns and developed Gurumukhi script an alphabet of 42 letters. Guru Arjan Dev completed the Golden temple. Guru Gobind Singh was also writer of hymns which are collected in DasanGranth. Thus, this authenticates that in the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> century also religion and

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art were linked. The art was often used as a tool to tell religious stories.



By contrasting oriental and occidental art, Coomaraswamy shows that, while in Western art a great precedence is given to a presentation of the appearance of objects from specific viewpoints, in oriental art there is great impact of the mind of the creator. Oriental artists do not depend on models for their pictorial representations but depend more on the “mental constructions”. This is a process which highlights the role of artist’s imagination rather than merely recording of the appearances of natural forms. Often Western art too, tells a religious story. More than an aesthetic pleasure a work of art has a message. In Western art Istoria paintings that retell stories from Bible were most important form of story painting. Paintings were

commissioned for churches. Western art since the Renaissance is discordant, at times it reached the highest point in some particular masterpieces, and at times there is no art at all. Finally, it is concluded that there can be no great art or great periods of art, without an intimate link between art and religion. Even where great artists have created their masterpieces in apparent isolation from any religious faith, the more closely we look into their lives the more likely we are to discover the presence of what we can only call religious sensibility.

The Indian subcontinent produced vast mythologies of gods and goddesses, semi divine beings, yakshas and yakshis. To the Indian, God is nirakara (formless), nirguna (without attributes) and nirvikalpa (beyond time). When the artist tried to translate the idea of god in plastic terms, he gave him attributes to suggest his power. Since it was imagined that the power of god was great, he was given numerous hands to hold the physical symbols to power like the bow and the arrow, the trishula and the chakra. The numerous heads of the deity are merely suggestive of his great wisdom. Similarly the nimbus of the Buddha is represented for his Bodhi tree.

Generally deities are represented as standing on a lotus. It is not a human god standing on a real lotus. The pictorial representations are mainly symbolic. The artist was

aware that a lotus cannot sustain the weight of a human being. The artist used the lotus as a symbol of purity and of self creation. As the lotus springs from water, God too springs from the Primeval Waters.

Indian religious and Shilpa texts make frequent mention of the hand poses, pedestals, weapons and other objects which are associated with Indian deities. They have great significance in iconography. Each god and goddess has his or her cognizance symbols which help to distinguish him or her from other god and goddesses of the pantheon. The Indian sculptor was thus required to be fully conversant with religious texts which described the various Indian icons. Every posture of hand is full of meaning, every stance of a god is suggestive of some mood, and every object carried in the hand has some purpose. Hence there lies Art.

Some of the religious texts i.e. manuscripts such as Kalpasutra was illustrated and artists seem to have encouraged illustrating certain texts, probably in order to fill the minds of the faithful with teachings which were thought to be essential and to make them more easily understandable. It is for this reason that the text illustrated included works which were regarded as cosmological, edifying stories, descriptions of the principle episodes of the life of 24<sup>th</sup> Jaina prophet and Jainism's basic doctrine. Many of these manuscripts are enhanced with miniatures painted in clear colour. Hence the visual impact has a greater bearing on human mind than the textual matter.

Coomaraswamy holds that Indian art is essentially a spiritual activity. Emphasis is laid on an idealised vision of the world rather than its imitation. The artist in this tradition is essentially seen as a visionary who idealizes nature and creates forms to symbolize his ideals. Both the creator and the beholder meditate. The former in order to crystallize the ideal image meditates and the latter in order to derive joy from it. In the end it is ecstasy which temporarily captures the experience of a mystic. This ecstasy is born out of a transcendence of the pragmatic and the mundane.

Similarly, in the West in Egypt during ancient period, one aspect of Egyptian religion had the greatest bearing on art, namely their idea of the future life. They considered it as an extension of earthly existence with all its requirements. Therefore, they preserved the body by mummification. Offerings of food and other material satisfactions and comforts were put into the tomb to permit a normal continuation of physical life in the world spirit. Statues and painted reliefs of servants filled the burial chambers to be at the beck and call of their deceased masters. Hence, creativity was born through religious rites.

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In the change from art of primitive man to art of the civilized man, there has been no real change in the psychological workings of the artists mind. The difference is in the values of their respective religions, not in the artistic sensibility. The aesthetic sensibility has remained same what have changed are the habits and beliefs of the societies into which the artists are born. Though values in different religions remained same, but ever remained rigid .But when a

person is passive to other religions, he is led to destructive activities. So art too is transfigured or distorted. Today somewhere in the complex strand of human development there is a pure strain of aesthetic sensibility, perhaps it can be isolated. But usually it is intertwined with threads of religion, science, and politics according to the number of twists of these threads the aesthetic sense is distorted and transfigured.

So today art and religion have become two separate fields without any bonds and both lack spirituality and human innocence which is the link to the meaning of existence.

### Conclusion

In the historical contest art has developed from ideological to the formalism of the present day. Similarly, religion too has passed from direct to symbolic and then to the socializes from the present day. But the religion has always served as a motive and a starting point for the creation of art works. A harmonic unity between art and religion together with adequate development of technology would provide healthy and quality of life of the human kind. It is time to bring spiritually back in art the roots of all art and the true meaning of the existence.



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