



In the Shadow of the Idol: Religion in British Art Theory, 1600–1800

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*The arts of design were among the first impressions vouchsafed by heaven to mankind.*¹ (Benjamin West, 1793)

*Some kinds of religion appear to be the grave of arts, of genius . . . other religions have been the nurse and mother of them.*² (James Barry, 1775)

This article proposes that idolatry was a formative concept for British art discourse in the period 1600–1800. Through an exploration of three common themes – the origins of art, patronage and art’s moral status – it is argued that concern over idolatry shaped the form and content of British art theory in fundamental ways and that it lay alongside other key ideas, such as the idea of the public (to which it was intimately connected), at the heart of discussions about the role of art in British life. Before we proceed, it may be of some help to summarize what early-modern writers on art generally assumed their audience understood about idolatry.

All their readers would have known, and almost certainly have learned by heart, the Second Commandment:

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow downe thyself to them, nor serve them: For I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquitie of the fathers upon the children unto the third or fourth generation of them that hate me: And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keepe my Commandments.³

In early-modern catechisms, this was glossed usually by a simple two-part formula: that no representation of God should be made and the use of images to worship God was prohibited.⁴ However, there was considerable variation in the treatment of the Commandment in catechisms and most readers would have known something of the huge body of literature, contemporary and ancient, that dealt with the more complex issues that arose out of the wording of the Commandment. Much debate centred on the tension that arose from the apparent redundancy of the second sentence: if images were not to be made, why was it necessary to say that they should not be worshipped?

Detail from James Barry, *The Fall of Satan*, 1777 (plate 3).

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This was reinforced when the apparent contradiction of God's instructions regarding the use of images in the Tabernacle and Temple (Exodus 26 and 1 Kings 6–8) was brought to bear. The differences of interpretation in the early-modern period were marked: while some asserted that the prohibition actually included all images, mental and material, because no human image could be a truthful representation, others argued that it was only images of God the Father, who was spirit, not material, that were illicit. In addition, even if one had the latter narrow view of what constituted an idol, the dangers of sinful looking remained. Significantly, much of the concern expressed about idolatry was for the 'common people', who were thought much more likely to fall prey to the dangers of images than were those with education. Idolatry was thus a social, as well as a moral, issue. One final understanding that writers on art would have assumed to be common to their audience was that Roman Catholicism was an idolatrous religion. While Roman Catholic writers defended the Church against these attacks, Protestant apologists continued to make the accusation throughout the early-modern period and it became a commonplace. Idolatry, as a charge and as a concept, was fundamental to the continuing enactment and justification of the Reformation.

Despite the extent of the debate and the seriousness of the issues involved, the Church of England had no firm doctrine on religious images, either before or after the Civil War (1642–49). This was inevitable given the broad spectrum of religious opinion that the Church encompassed. Theologians and apologists offered a range of views, some arguing that it was much safer to do without images and others who expressed confidence that right religion had taken sufficient hold in the hearts of the British people that idolatry was no longer a matter of serious concern. Nevertheless, no religious writer seems to have gone beyond recommending the arts as appropriate ornaments of sacred space and suggesting their limited use as prompts to religious thought.⁵ Thus, in religious terms, representation had a very unstable status.

The writings under consideration here are distinct from this theological and apologetic literature because their primary purpose was to promote and discuss the arts.⁶ They were written by a diverse group of individuals: scholars, virtuosi and, increasingly, working artists, some of whom belonged to academies and some who did not. The chronology has been selected to cover the birth and flourishing of writing about art in English, from Haydocke's translation (and adaptation) of Lomazzo's *Trattato* in 1598 to the influential body of Royal Academy lectures of the early nineteenth century. It also encompasses the last two-thirds of the 'Long Reformation' (1500–1800), a periodization favoured by some early-modern religious historians to indicate that the Reformation was not a sixteenth-century event in Britain but a multi-faceted process of much longer duration.⁷ Despite profound and obvious differences in the prevailing historic conditions of their origins, these writings share common characteristics: an indebtedness to Italian, and later French, models, particularly in relation to academic notions of the hierarchy of the genres and the prestige of the arts for national identity. In addition, as this article will demonstrate, they all argued that religion was essential to the health and success of art and each grappled with the implications of this understanding for early-modern British art.

The Origins of Art

One origin story, about the birth of painting, that art historians have studied in some detail lies beyond this article's scope: the myth of the Corinthian Maid who traced her lover's shadow on a wall. The legend, derived from Pliny, had a marked popularity

as a subject for history painters in the late eighteenth century.⁸ However, although it was relished as a picturesque subject, it was rejected as a fable. As Henry Fuseli (1741–1825) put it, ‘if ever legend deserved our belief, ... [this] amorous tale ... appeals to our sympathy to grant it.’⁹ It was rarely repeated in writings about art, except to acknowledge, as Daniel Webb (c.1719–98) did, that it was a delightful story ‘prettily imagined’.¹⁰ While Pliny’s *Historia Naturalis* was still referred to as an authoritative source, painting’s origins were actually more commonly traced in print, rather than paint, from a complex conglomeration of evidence from the Bible and an array of ancient sources, including Plato, Ovid, Quintillian and early Christian writers, as well as favoured Neoplatonic sources, such as Hermes Trismegistus. Evidence of art’s long history was presented in a remarkably consistent way throughout the period under examination. While the emphasis and interpretation placed on it did vary to some degree, the scope of the arguments was fairly fixed. If attention is paid to any shifts, accounts of the origins of art from the whole of the period can be explored together.

At first glance, the inclusion of a discussion of the origins of the art of painting in British writings seems entirely conventional, a rhetorical device that was common to art literature: it had been used by Alberti and Vasari, for example.¹¹ As Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo (1538–1600) explained in his *Trattato dell’arte della pittura*, which was the first treatise on painting to be published in English, translated (and edited for Popish content) by Richard Haydocke in 1598:

... now as there are two things, which doe especially dignifie and nobilitate a man: first, nobility and the famousnesse of his ancestours; secondly, antiquitie, which addeth very much to the glory of nobilitie, and descent: so all sciences are so much the more famous, by how much the more famous, and ancient the inventors thereof have beene.¹²

Two hundred years later, a similar argument was deployed by Benjamin West in his first Discourse as President of the Royal Academy in 1792:

... you [who] have taken up the arts of design as your profession ... have embraced that which has not only been sanctioned by the cultivation of the greatest antiquity, but to which there is no antiquity prior, unless the visible creation.¹³

Both writers assert that painting is dignified by its longevity as a human activity. However, this does not mean that they were using the history of art’s origins for precisely the same reasons. No doubt West was asserting, in a similar way to Vasari, Alberti and Lomazzo, art’s qualifications as a liberal science but might other purposes for such histories have existed in the British context?¹⁴ An examination of the detail of the histories of art’s origins that British writers deployed will help to answer this question.

In 1728, Henry Bell’s *Historical Essay on the Original [sic] of Painting* was published posthumously, seventeen years after the author’s death. Bell was an amateur architect who is remembered for the Custom House in King’s Lynn and the church of All Saints and other buildings in Northampton (rebuilt after the town’s great fire in 1675).¹⁵ Bell’s *Essay* will be particularly useful here, as it is one of the most comprehensive accounts of the origins of painting, encompassing many of the various episodes with which others narrated the history of the early origins of art and he was very

dependent on two earlier writers: Franciscus Junius (1597–1677) and John Evelyn (1620–1706).¹⁶ Bell's book was reissued two years later as *The Perfect Painter*, with a quotation from Dryden, on its new titlepage:

By slow degrees the Godlike art advanc'd,
As man grew polish'd, Picture was enhanc'd.¹⁷

The history of art's advancement that the book traces is not just that of the far-off beginnings of representation but the subsequent rises and falls of art, up to the period where Vasari's *Vite* began, with the life of Cimabue. Such histories of the vicissitudes of art, which were common to European literature, had particular resonances in the British context and they will be addressed in the next section.

Bell divides his history into two parts: 'Some Probabilities and Pretentions to its Invention before the Flood' and 'Its Commencement again after the Flood, and its Progress through several Nations to the Time of Cimabue'. This chronological organization was a meaningful one to contemporaries. The Flood was not only the most dramatic demonstration of God's wrath and power over the Earth; it was the historical event to which the histories of nations, cultures and religions were commonly traced.¹⁸ Thus, while Bell's account is derived from the historiography of art it should also be seen in relation to a range of interconnected historical endeavours, which depended equally on the authority of the Pentateuch.

Bell begins his history, as was common, with God, the 'Divine Protoplastes', the 'true Prometheus', quoting Tertullian.¹⁹ As Junius had done, Bell describes Adam as the first statue, moulded by God, which was an apt and long-standing way of interpreting Genesis 2:7: 'And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.'²⁰ However, Bell then makes what is perhaps a surprising move, suggesting that Adam became, quoting St Augustine second-hand from Evelyn, 'the first inventor of letters and sculpture' (which presupposed, Bell had already established, a knowledge of design and thus painting). Bell admits that the evidence is slight, that:

... we can't [sic] absolutely depose that it was revealed to Adam, and from him propagated to his Posterity; yet we may without any scruple determine that the Antients had some Knowledge of it, and that it emerged to some competent Attainment before the Flood.²¹

If this evidence was so weak, why then did Bell, and Evelyn and Junius before him, include it?²² It was not a ubiquitous gesture: neither Alberti, nor Vasari, nor Lomazzo mentioned Adam in their accounts, although each deploys an analogy of some kind between God's creativity and man's. It must be conjecture, but the inclusion of Adam, the father of mankind, does allow a view of the arts as essential, natural, even perhaps innate to mankind (like religious belief for some) to merge with, even emerge from, what was emphatically the most authoritative account of human history for Protestants – the Bible. Its narrative of the history of human beings and their relation with God was, for most of the period under discussion, sacrosanct. Indeed, this was enough of an impetus in itself to justify the speculations that many engaged in with regard to art in the antediluvian period.

However, Bell's is the last account under consideration here to mention Adam directly. In later accounts, more naturalistic or stadial models of history are used to fulfil a similar function, appealing to a common-sense notion of human

development. Benjamin West, for example, justifies his comments that art was as old as creation, discussed above, in the following way:

... that the arts of design were among the first impressions vouchsafed by heaven to mankind, is not a proposition at which any man needs to start, who will look into all the evidences of its truth. The truth is manifested by every little child in the world, whose first essay is to make for itself the resemblance of some object to which it has been accustomed in its nursery.

In those arts of design were conveyed the original means of communicating ideas, which the discoverers of countries shew us to have been seized upon, as it were involuntarily, by all the first stages of society ... the Mexicans conversing with one another in that way, when Cortes came among them, and the savages of North America still employing the same means of conveying intelligence ... are among a thousand instances which might be adduced from every rude people upon earth.²³

This conjectural history of human development was a widely used approach, using a stadial model of social progress but it did not necessarily, nor even usually, imply a rejection of Biblical history. A conspicuous deployment of the conjectural model for the history of the arts was Sir Richard Westmacott's pediment for the British Museum entitled *The Progress of Civilization*, 1851 (plate 1), which shows man progressing from barbarity, through agriculture, to the practice of the fine, liberal and other arts.²⁴ The use of a conjectural model did not mean an abandonment of Biblical history: Westmacott's narrative is built around the figure of Religion, who shows man the light, the path from his barbarity (plate 2). As Colin Kidd points out, 'only at the sceptical extreme of the British Enlightenment were there outright criticisms of Mosaic history.' Even in the work of Scottish philosophers (David Hume excepted), where a different picture might be expected, 'the basic contours of the Mosaic paradigm ... [were] resilient.'²⁵ West, for example, asserts the intimate historical connection between art and religion:

... religion itself, in the earlier days of the world, would probably have failed in its progress, without the arts of design. That religion was emblematic. The emblematic spirit soon began to seize on the early mind. It was conceived to be more reverential, although it became in the end to be much more dangerous, to worship the SUPREME FIRST PRINCIPLE through the medium of an emblem than in abstract idea. But what could an emblematic theology do without the aid of the fine arts, and especially of sculpture, to give it all its

1 Richard Westmacott, *The Progress of Civilization*, 1851. Pediment Frieze, British Museum, London. Photo: Author.





2 'Man' and 'Religion', from Richard Westmacott, *The Progress of Civilisation*, 1851. Photo: Author.

effect, and to spread that effect through the earth? They sprang up therefore together, introduced by the same people, and they went hand in hand devoted to each other's spirit ... How soon that joint career commenced in the world, is not impossible to be told. Many of its early evidences however are still existing.²⁶

Art and religion were mutually dependent. West's argument, crucially, acknowledges the long history of idolatry. Turning back to Westmacott's pediment for the British Museum is instructive here. The sculptor described his design for the pediment, in a letter to the museum's Librarian, Sir Henry Ellis:

... commencing at the Eastern end ... of the Pediment, man is represented emerging from a rude savage state through the influence of Religion – He is next personified as a Hunter, and a Tiller of the Earth, and Labouring for his subsistence. Patriarchal simplicity becomes invaded and the worship of the true God defiled. Paganism prevails and becomes diffused by means of the Arts.²⁷

Westmacott does not show idolatry in the pediment, even though he understood, as West did, that the early arts were heavily implicated in the spread of idolatrous worship. This strategy allows the pediment to function in its contemporary context at the British Museum as a celebration of human progress. To note idolatry's absence from this pictorial narrative is to reveal the tension between British understandings of art's history and its ambition.

An adherence to a Bible-based account of art's origins and progress was thus maintained right through the eighteenth century. Indeed, Bell describes precisely the same mode of development as West and Westmacott did, but in the earlier pattern of closer adherence to the Biblical historical narrative:

... we need not travel far among the antediluvian patriarchs before we meet with Enos the Son of Seth, and Grand-Child to the sole Monarch of the World, the Patriarch Adam, who ... seeing that those descended of Cain addicted themselves to wickedness, which was Idolatry, erring from the Worship of the true God, he desirous to restrain them again into the true Worship, made use of Symbols and Hieroglyphicks, and by the Figures of Animals, Simples, Brute Beasts, and other Visible Things which fall under the Sence [sic], he endeavoured to draw them by Degrees to those things which were invisible.²⁸

There are two points worth drawing out here. The first is simply that idolatry is a part of the history of art that each of these writers tells. The arts were the means of false religion. Secondly, although Bell seems to be contrasting them to the idolatry of Cain's descendants, Enos's actions could be interpreted as idolatrous. Enos was the founder of West's 'emblematic religion', which he argued 'was conceived to be more reverential, although it became in the end ... much more dangerous'. In fact Bell and West adopt what were just two of the many positions that were available on the topic of the birth of idolatry. There was a much larger question here for religion and these different viewpoints had, in fact, a very long history. For example, the medieval account of idolatry by the Jewish theologian and philosopher Maimonides (1138–1204), who traced the establishment of idolatry to Enos, was widely quoted by some Reformers. Others used the authority of the early Christian theologian Lactantius (c.250–c.325) to argue for the institution of idolatry only after the flood. Both these positions, which were caught up in complex inter-confessional disputes had their adherents in the early-modern period. What was at stake here was the notion that there had existed a time of pristine religion, of true knowledge of God, unsullied by the sin of idolatry and thus, that true religion could exist again, as it had once existed.²⁹ More relevant in the present context is that idolatry was bound into, inseparable from, the history of art. It is perhaps worth remembering that the texts being examined here were all aimed at promoting the arts and knowledge of them and they do not together form a specially chosen subset of art literature from the period. Idolatry, it seems, could not be ignored. Nor once raised, could it be left unchallenged.

To counteract the uncertain implications of this history of co-existence, two arguments were commonly deployed: one was drawn from the Bible, the other was a common-sense precept, apparently sanctioned by the Biblical evidence. Under Moses's leadership, God commanded the Israelites to build a tabernacle (Exodus 31:1–11) and He called on two men in particular to make it and its ornaments – Bezaleel and Aholiah (or Aholiab). This took place, of course, after Moses had been given the Commandments. It is significant that some of the ornaments prescribed by God for the decoration of the tabernacle, especially cherubim, were to be found reproduced in many parish churches during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries ornamenting architecture as well as altarpieces. Bezaleel and Aholiah's work was holy work, for which they were given the necessary artistic skills or 'wisdom' by God. Henry Peacham (1578–c.1644) described their example as demonstrating clearly

that ‘carving or drawing ... be an especiall gift of Gods spirit’.³⁰ Junius argued in a similar way that ‘God is the author and supporter of these arts.’³¹ Thus, they provided a much more secure Biblical foundation for the view of the integrity of the arts than either Adam or Noah. As John Evelyn explained, to remember Bezaleel and Aholiah was to ‘recover [art’s] esteem ... beyond all prejudice’.³² Whatever God had meant to proscribe by the Second Commandment, these arguments suggested, He surely had not banned the making of images, nor even the making of images for use in His worship.³³

Evelyn’s use of the word prejudice is significant. He published his book in the year that the Church of England was re-established and many had to leave the Church, becoming Nonconformists (including approximately 2,000 ministers) as they were unable to assent to the terms of the Act of Uniformity because of matters of conscience. This division demonstrates the intensity and diversity of Protestant opinion that still existed even within the Church. Less than twenty years before, the destruction of images in churches had been high on the Parliamentary agenda and even Temple iconography did not escape the iconoclasts’ hammers, muskets and ropes.³⁴ The conception of idolatry hardened in the 1630s and 1640s, a position on images that did not disappear at the end of the Civil War, although the political conditions that ensured they were acted upon, did. Evelyn, however, is ready to reduce the views of the iconophobe to mere prejudice. So while Evelyn, and Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–92), who made a similar point 100 years later, might attempt to dismiss opposition to images as irrational, the lessons of Bezaleel and Aholiah’s works were important ones, used throughout the period to demonstrate that art was sanctioned by God. Thus, John Flaxman (1755–1826) argued in his Royal Academy lecture on Egyptian sculpture, the

... violent tendency to idolatry [of the Israelites] accounts for the strict injunctions, under which they were bound, by divine command, not to worship any image: whilst the same authority commanded statues of cherubim to extend their wings over the Ark of the covenant ... This proves the command was not against the images themselves, but the abuse of them for impious and idolatrous purposes, and on the contrary, is a testimony of approbation of such works, when representing the ministers of God’s providence, or the guardians of His holy laws; and indeed it is a most gratifying reflection to a practitioner of the sister arts, that the Almighty condescended to employ them as the handmaids of religion, and that He particularly inspired Aholiab and Bezaleel to produce the most admirable and lively decorations of angelic forms for His tabernacle.³⁵

The conclusion that Flaxman draws here, that God had seen the arts as fit for use in his worship, was extended in the form of a precept, which was often repeated that, as Horace Walpole put it, ‘painting, in itself, is innocent’.³⁶ As he went on to explain:

... No art, no science can be criminal; ’tis the misapplication that must constitute the sin. ’Tis when with impious eyes we look on the human performance as divine; when we call our own trifling imitations of the deity, inimitable gods: ’Tis then we sin.³⁷

Walpole argues that as all things are, the arts are capable of being misused, or abused (to use Flaxman’s word). James Barry (1741–1806) made a similar point from the

point of view of the maker: 'the fault lies not in the art, but in the artist, or in the employer who suffers the abuse.'³⁸ The fact that still late in the eighteenth century this needed repeating is surely telling.

To trace the origins of art was thus to gain doubtful advantage: at once art's longevity allowed British art to be a manifestation of a universal and illustrious human activity, while the long presence of idolatry in that history had to be acknowledged. It may well be that in the British context, origin stories were recounted not mainly to add to the dignity of art but to air an issue that undermined its moral propriety. This is not to say that idolatry was never treated in Roman Catholic art literature (a term that I hope will not appear so odd by the end of this article). It was, but in ways that were markedly different. One might compare, for example, the treatment of idolatry in antiquity in the introduction to Montfaucon's *L'antiquité expliquée* (trans. D. Humphreys, 1721) with Joseph Spence's *Polymetis* (1747), where classical antiquity and contemporary Catholicism are frequently compared.³⁹ The long histories of art that were a conspicuous presence in British art discourse were embedded in a framework that was Biblical, and religious, and more specifically, Protestant.

The Flourishing of the Arts

It was generally accepted in Britain that literature had flourished to the extent the nation's greatness indicated it should, reaching the very highest standards set by the ancients in, for example, the works of Shakespeare and Milton. However, in contrast, it was widely observed that the arts of painting and sculpture had not yet come close to the standards of the ancients (or the moderns, for that matter).⁴⁰ How was this so? Commonly, in making their observations that painting did not, or could not, flourish in Britain (the tense employed depended on the optimism of the writer), most commentators suggested that the absence of ecclesiastical patronage in Britain was crucial. So self-evidently sufficient are these explanations, no one has examined them very closely. In this context, however, it will be worth pressing a bit harder on them, to see just how, in what terms, the lack of ecclesiastical patronage was understood to be so great a problem for British art.

In general, writers give (or imply) two overlapping but distinguishable reasons why this was such a handicap. First, the Church of England was the largest institution in the country, with buildings in almost every community. Certainly in most towns and villages, for most of this period, churches were the only places where communities could gather together.⁴¹ The church fulfilled all sorts of roles beyond its core religious functions, representing a community to itself and promoting a sense of national identity: through the display of the Royal Arms, which with few exceptions hung in every church, the uniform liturgy of the Church of England and the remembrance of national events in prayers and sermons.⁴² It was certainly the only national institution (the monarchy included) capable of utilizing art on the scale thought necessary to allow art to develop to the standards achieved in Italy and France. Second, art made for churches was potentially of the kind that artists only rarely had opportunities to practice – art directed at the highest moral purposes, dealing in elevated subject matter and made for the public, in the tradition of grand manner history painting, which was, all these writers agreed, the apogee of art practice. As James Barry summarized it: 'churches [are] the natural receptacle for all interesting, serious, and manly art.'⁴³ It was logically impossible, given contemporary understanding of the hierarchy of art, for a nation's art to be great if artists could not practise in the highest genre, making art for the highest of purposes.⁴⁴

William Hogarth (1697–1764) dealt with these issues very vividly in some hurried notes for a planned *Apology for Painters*. Firstly, in relation to his own *Four Stages of Cruelty* (1751):

I had rather if cruelty has been prevented by the four print [sic] be maker of them than of the cartoons unless I lived in a roman Catholic country.

Hogarth suggests that while Raphael's *Cartoons* were the height of artistic achievement, in Britain it was his form of moral art that was the best that could be hoped for. Hogarth does not establish an equivalence here, the word unless is crucial; his art is not a substitute for the kind that Raphael practised. He goes on to explain this:

... it is not in the nature of things that these arts (painting and sculpture) should ever be required in this country in like manner they have been these [other] parts of the world. The reasons are plane: our Religion forbids nay doth not require Images for worship or pictures to work up enthusiasm. Reading books is common now even among the lowest. Pictures and statues now are only wanted for furniture.⁴⁵

The main point here is that it was religion that encouraged art that was serious, beyond mere furnishing. Secondly, Christian art has had two functions, Hogarth suggests: an educative one, as Gregorian books for the poor, which speak a universal language; and as the focus for 'enthusiasm', a word that carried the connotation of inappropriately excessive devotion.⁴⁶ This is strongly reminiscent of comments by Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury that:

... [it is] sad to consider that the occasional rise of painting, being chiefly from the popish priesthood, the improvement and culture of it ... has turned wholly on the nourishment and support of superstition ... and exaltation of that vile shrivelling passion of beggarly modern devotion.⁴⁷

Hogarth in fact sketches a longer history of the relations of religion to art in his notes:

These arts were carried to their greatest heights in Greece. they were politically considered and encouraged as necessary to the making great and good and religious. They spoke to eye in a language every one understood. There gods were painted and carved and virtuous action and bravery were depicted in there public places. when these motives ceased the arts druped force of arms required not their assistance.

Later he picks up the history again, observing that after the fall of the arts in Rome, 'it was Religion brought it up again'.⁴⁸ Hogarth understands the history of art to demonstrate that religion was essential to art's existence. It is no wonder, then, that he expressed at a number of different places in these notes, a pessimistic if logically concluded view of the scope for the arts in Britain without the impetus of religion.

Such a perspective was not unique to Hogarth, although none would suggest, as he did, a new form of art as the only possible response. It was rehearsed commonly, with small variations, throughout the period.⁴⁹ It appears strange, therefore, that Joshua Reynolds did not deal with the issue in his lectures to the Royal Academy. This is worth mentioning because Reynolds is perhaps the dominant figure of this period

of British art, and the *Discourses* have become the core text of eighteenth-century British art theory. Furthermore, the central theme of the *Discourses* is the importance, and the concerns, of history painting. Reynolds's failure to discuss this issue might suggest that it was of little importance, even irrelevance, to the activities of the Academy. Any explanation of an unacknowledged omission must be speculative, of course, but one senses in all Reynolds's writings a complicated tension between the highest ideals for painting and an enduring sense of pragmatism. British art, for Reynolds, especially in the *Discourses*, must be, above all, an art of the possible. He thereby asserted the dignity of British art and artists that he and his fellow academicians were engaged in establishing and defending.

Nevertheless, Reynolds did deal with the problem elsewhere. In 1781, he travelled to Flanders and Holland and while he was abroad he kept an extensive journal, written apparently with a view to publication.⁵⁰ It was, it turned out, first published posthumously in 1797. The relevant section is worth quoting at length:

Taking leave of Flanders, we bade adieu at the same time to History Painting. Pictures are no longer the ornament of churches, and perhaps for that reason no longer the ornament of private houses. We naturally acquire a taste for what we have frequently before our eyes . . . It is a circumstance to be regretted, by painters at least, that the protestant countries have thought proper to exclude pictures from their churches: how far this circumstance may be the cause that no protestant country has ever produced a history-painter, may be worthy of consideration.

When we separated from the Church of Rome, many customs, indifferent in themselves, were considered as wrong, for no other reason, perhaps, but because they were adopted by the Communion from which we separated. Among the excesses which this sentiment produced, may be reckoned the impolitick exclusion of all ornaments from our churches. The violence and acrimony with which the separation was made, being now at an end, it is high time to assume that reason of which our zeal seemed to have bereaved us. Why religion should not appear pleasing and amiable in its appendages, why the house of God should not appear as well ornamented and as costly as an [sic] private house made for man, no good reason I believe can be assigned. This truth is acknowledged, in regard to the external building, in Protestant as in Roman Catholic countries; churches are always the most magnificent edifices in every city: and why the inside should not correspond with its exterior, in this and every other Protestant country, it would be difficult for Protestants to state any reasonable cause.

Many other causes have been assigned, why history has never flourished in this country; but with such a reason at hand we need not look farther. Let there be buyers, who are the true Maecenases, and we shall soon see sellers, vying with each other in the variety and excellence of their works.⁵¹

There is a persuasive clarity about this argument: history painting cannot thrive in contemporary Protestant societies, so long as their churches categorically exclude paintings. However, the last paragraph sits in some tension to the rest. His reference to 'many other causes' is puzzling. He may have meant the climate arguments of

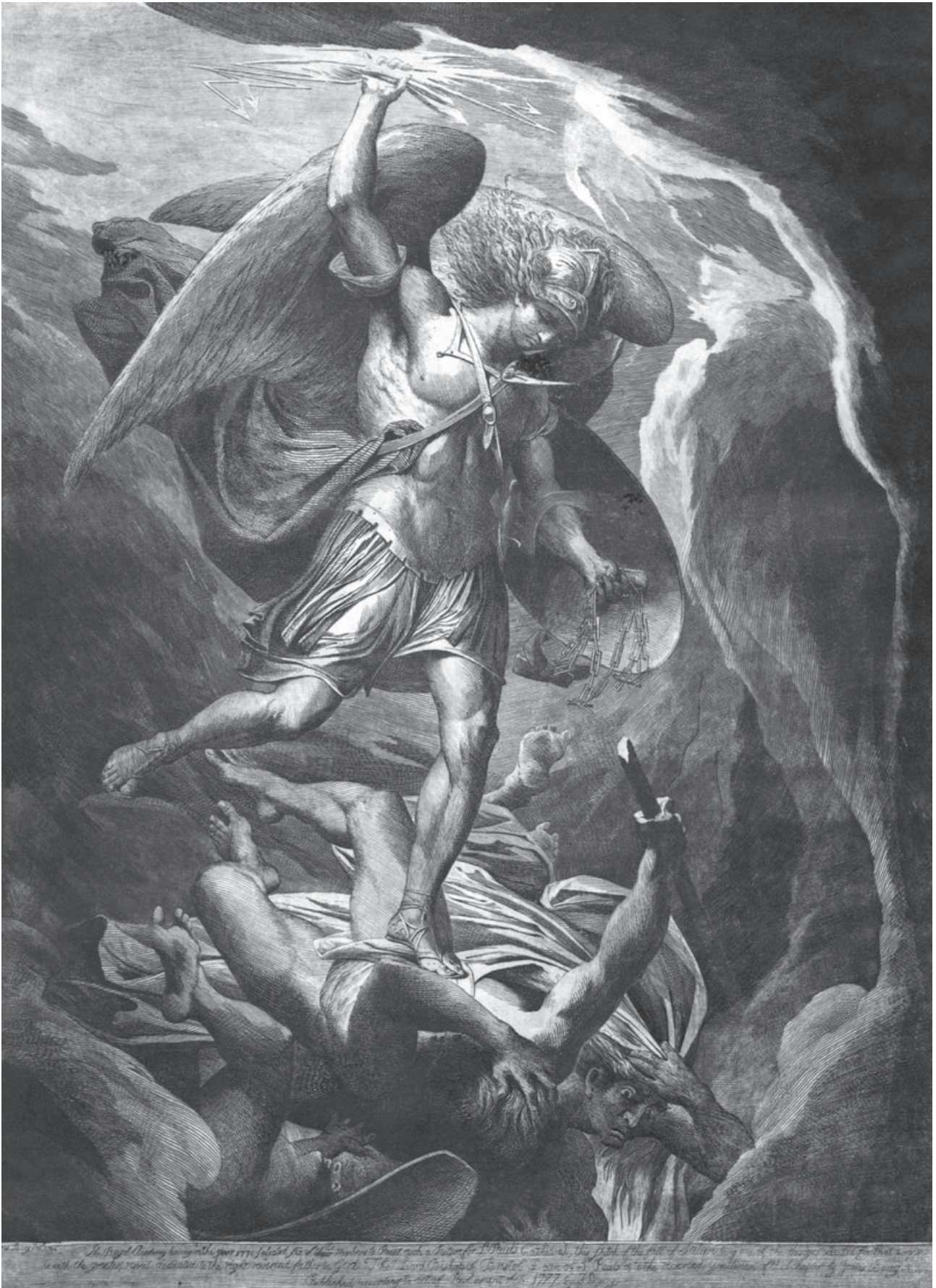
3 James Barry, *The Fall of Satan*, 1777. Aquatint and engraving, 84.4 × 60.8 cm. London: British Museum. Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum.

du Bos, Montesquieu and Winckelmann, which James Barry had challenged in his *Inquiry into the Real and Imaginary Obstructions to the Acquisition of the Arts in England* (1775). More puzzling still is the lack of resolution established by the last sentence, which is a *non sequitur*. Given that Reynolds had established that it was on religion that history painting was dependent and that Protestantism has no use for art, quite how the market was to substitute he does not make clear. But evidently Reynolds felt he had nowhere else to look for his patrons but the market.

Historical parallels of the kind Reynolds made here to Augustan Rome were frequently deployed in writing about patronage. Horace Walpole (1717–97), for example, echoing Richardson, Berkeley and many others, reminded his readers that ‘at this epoch . . . one may reasonably expect to see the arts flourish to as proud a height as they attained at Athens, Rome, or Florence. Painting has hitherto made but faint efforts in England.’⁵² To invoke the great cities where the arts had been seen to flourish most splendidly was to demand from the elite, or at least to suggest to them, a judicious patronage of the arts as the patriotic duty of a citizen.⁵³ John Barrell and David Solkin have explored in different ways the tensions that existed between the essentially private commercial market that Reynolds acknowledges for art and the language of civic humanism, which engaged changing models of the public, as the audience for history painting, over the course of the eighteenth century.⁵⁴ Reynolds’s argument here suggests that the language of civic humanism may have been so useful to contemporaries because they were operating in a vacuum that had been left by the Reformation, which in the British context at least, seemed to have denied art the power to serve religion.

Two further things are germane about the way Reynolds argues his point. Firstly, he adopts a rather black-and-white approach to it: there is no history painting in Holland, there are no paintings in churches, statements which a moment’s thought reveal to be inaccurate, and which Reynolds certainly knew to be so. Thus, the passage is not descriptive – it is rhetorical. Indeed, as he moves to make the comparison with Britain explicit, he repeats the claim that all ornament is excluded from ‘our churches’. This was also not true, as will be discussed. Hyperbole allows the issues to be simplified, and for his apparently rational argument to stand in starker contrast to that of the ‘irrational’ iconoclasts. Reynolds’s word ‘impolitick’ can be seen as cognate to Evelyn’s ‘prejudice’. Both men were engaged, not in act of description, but in an argument with others who did not share their point of view – those who saw images in church as inherently dangerous. Secondly, Reynolds implicitly denies that paintings could be idolatrous, or the focus for idolatrous looking, for otherwise to exclude images would not be ‘impolitick’. Such a position could only rest on an assumption that the Reformation had been completed, that the danger of idolatry had passed because people had been brought to a better understanding. Not everyone was convinced of this, and that is one of the reasons why a conception of a Long Reformation is a useful one because it reminds us that the fundamental issues on which the Reformation was enjoined were still in play. So despite what Reynolds said, there were indeed rational reasons why Protestants might argue that the inside of a church should not be ornamented to the degree its outside was.

But what of the art that Reynolds would have in churches? While he advocated that it be ‘amiable and pleasing’, to act as ‘ornament’, these terms are hardly precise and it is impossible to know quite what such art might look like. It may be that Reynolds did not know. Seven years before, the reality of the issues and obstacles involved had been brought home to Reynolds in relation to a plan to ornament St





4 After Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Painted Window of New College Chapel, Oxford, 1816. Stipple and etching in colour, 65 x 47.5 cm. London: British Museum. Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum.*

Paul's Cathedral. Reynolds and five other Royal Academicians had proposed that they would donate six paintings to St Paul's to hang under the cupola, in places that had been designated by Sir Christopher Wren. The scheme was intended to encourage other churches to follow suit. The artists had the enthusiastic cooperation of Thomas Newton (1704–82), the Dean of St Paul's and Bishop of Bristol who was a great friend to artists, particularly to Benjamin West. Reynolds knew Newton too, exhibiting his portrait at the Royal Academy in 1774. The plans for the Cathedral were squashed by Richard Terrick (1710–77), the Bishop of London and were apparently disapproved of by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Frederick Cornwallis (1713–83), as well.⁵⁵ Terrick was reported, by Newton, to have said that 'it would occasion a great noise and clamor [sic] ... as an introduction of popery'.⁵⁶ In fact, Terrick seems to have been an advocate for art in some religious settings but he was aware that others believed, and he may well have believed himself, that in the public space of a cathedral some might fall prey to idolatry.

Of the proposed paintings, the fullest record of James Barry's remains because he published a print of it, which he dedicated to Thomas Newton and the Chapter of St Paul's in 1777 (plate 3).⁵⁷ Barry's dramatic representation of *The Fall of Satan*, derived, no doubt, from Guido Reni's painting of the same subject, in *Sta Maria della Concezione* in Rome, suggests rather vividly the fragility of the notion of easily keeping art within the bounds of the 'amiable and pleasing'. It is a strong design, which is surely aimed at producing a sublime affect in the spectator. The vertiginous setting is depicted with dynamic contrasts of light and dark, of sun and lightening and cavernous depths, of hell below and heaven above. The figure of St Michael, an archetype of muscular and graceful masculinity, fills the picture space with a vigorous and yet elegant energy, which contrasts with the tense but impotent fleshiness of the humiliated figures of Satan and his angels that he is dispatching. It is not difficult to imagine how Barry's picture might have been seen as encouraging an engagement that strayed beyond the merely decorative or memorial, especially to an audience sensitized to idolatry's dangers.

Indeed, could the painting itself be described as an idol? Was St Michael's prominence meant to be iconic, and if so within what limits?⁵⁸ Did this image satisfy criteria of truth and if so, how? What in fact were the visual characteristics of the 'amiable and pleasing' religious art that Reynolds was advocating? What, in the briefest terms, did Protestant art look like? Could it look rather similar to Catholic art, or did it always have to embody in some way the constraints of looking and making that the Reformation had reasserted? In fact, all these interesting and relevant questions were immaterial, as Reynolds knew. For in the clash between the Royal Academy and the Church of England that took place at St Paul's the ultimate weakness of the artist's position had been revealed. While Reynolds and other advocates for art in churches insisted that idolatry was a thing of the past, it is easy to see why those charged with the care of souls might be less sanguine when faced with a painting like Barry's, or in some circumstances, any painting. What defence was possible if someone made the charge that a work of art could be the object of an idolatrous gaze?

There is a hidden but spectacular and telling irony here. While Hogarth and Reynolds denied that there was any art made for the Church, they and many of their closest friends and colleagues made at least one work of art for a church, for example, Hogarth's triptych for St Mary Redcliffe, Bristol and Reynolds's *Nativity*, painted as the basis for a window, by Thomas Jervais, for New College chapel, Oxford (plate 4), a work Reynolds himself confessed to be disappointed in but which had great influence. The figures of the religious virtues that filled the lower section of the



5 Harriet Gunn (?), after Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Female Personifications from New College Chapel, Oxford, 1831*. Oil and paper, pasted onto lower (probably later) panels of late medieval tower screen. Worsted, Norfolk: Saint Mary's Church. Photo: Author.

window were particularly popular and were used as the basis for numerous other ecclesiastical works, few of which are still extant (plate 5). In fact, as the comments of Hogarth discussed earlier hinted, the Church of England had no insurmountable doctrinal objections to art in church, to altarpieces, frescoes and so on. People did commission it; painters did paint it. However, it was not a part of a painter's practice that could be relied upon, so many still did believe it to be inappropriate, and although some like Robert Brown (c.1672–1753) early in the eighteenth century, and Benjamin West at the end, made a substantial number of works for churches, these commissions were nowhere near a regular part of any painter's work. Thus, Hogarth and Reynolds must have meant something else when they declared that the church had no use for art. In each case, their comments were responses to an unstable position, in which the problem was not precisely the doctrine of the Church of England, but rather, the associations of idolatry and popery that art in churches could still generate. Some art was finding a home in the Church but its status, moral and religious, was very uncertain; furthermore, its status as art was also unclear.⁵⁹ There was a problematic if understandable reticence about how art could serve Protestantism, in order that it might flourish, that was reflected in the imprecise, limited and formulaic expressions of 'ornament' and 'amiable and pleasing'. Such terms might have been deployed to assuage fears that Popery was being introduced but they appear weak when placed in the context of these same writers' discussions of the universal moral role of art.

The Ends of Art

It is curious to reflect that the exertions of art seem to arise from the disappointment of the human mind, sated, disgusted, and tired with the monotony of real persons and things which this world affords, so full of imperfection, and accompanied with so much misery, strife, and injustice. In proportion to the serenity and goodness of the mind, it naturally turns away from such a state of things, in search of some other more grateful and consoling; and it has a natural horror of those atheistical cavils, which would malignantly deprive it of all other resource, by mercilessly chaining it down to the scene before it. Hence it arises, that the minds of men in all ages and places where they were at leisure, and happily relieved from the apprehensions of war, tyrannies, and all their horrid train of consequent miseries, have naturally dilated, and found consolation in the objects of religion, which they would anticipate and realise by their endeavours to cut and carve them in blocks of wood or stone ... Whether this subject matter of religion be well or ill reasoned upon ... whether it be taken from the various incarnations of the Indian Vishn'u [sic], the more elegant forms and ideas of the Greek mythology, or from the more consoling and happily adapted matter which results from the more rational hopes and fears inculcated by the Christian religion; yet the whole together forms an astonishing chain of the most indubitable proof of the thirst of the mind for a more satisfactory state of things, and of its natural recurrence to the arts of design, as the first, the universal and natural language ... what should we have known of the ancient nations, their arts and knowledges, were it not for the stimulus which religion afforded to the human exertions? what other motives ever did or could supply its place?⁶⁰

In this passage from Barry's first lecture to the Royal Academy, 'On the history and progress of the art', the artist outlined a universal theory at the centre of which is the service of God: art's historic and highest purpose is to address that which is beyond the 'imperfect monotony of reality', the transcendent, which is specifically religious (atheists 'chain' man 'mercilessly' to the visible world). Here the essential connection between art and religion, which all our writers understood, is perhaps expressed more directly and dramatically than it ever had been before, in the British context.⁶¹ It might call to mind the final paragraph of Reynolds's thirteenth discourse:

... these Arts [poetry and painting] in their highest province, are not addressed to the gross senses, but to the desires of the mind, to that spark of divinity which we have within, impatient of being circumscribed and pent up by the world which is about us. Just so much as our Art has of this, just so much of dignity, I had almost said of divinity, it exhibits; and those of our Artists who possessed this mark of distinction in the highest degree, acquired from thence the glorious appellation of Divine.⁶²

The greatness of any work of art depended on the degree to which it addressed the transcendent, and Reynolds, like Barry, argued that art's highest function is to do this. Even as Reynolds acknowledged the essential connection between art and the divine, his language appears more elusively religious than Barry's. It has already been observed that Reynolds concentrated on offering a pragmatic programme for British

art in the *Discourses*, but it may also be relevant that Reynolds was not a practising believer.⁶³ By contrast, many writers did have a well-evidenced faith: for example, Jonathan Richardson (1667–1745), whose works exercised a considerable influence on Reynolds, are imbued with the sentiments of a personal devotion and a sense of art as an effective tool of religious instruction, as well as mediation with the divine.⁶⁴ However, as Reynolds's example shows, none of the arguments about the connection between art and religion were the monopoly of the religiously committed.

While the overall argument that Barry made was directed at establishing art's natural indebtedness to religion, he does distinguish Christianity from other religions, in terms of the more rational 'hopes and fears' it encourages. Elsewhere in his *Discourse*, Barry had already discussed at length a history of idolatry, comparing Christian and non-Christian manifestations of it, so we must understand his use of the phrase 'well or ill reasoned' to be universally applied. Idolatry is to be found among Christians and it is only reason that can counter it. This dependence on modern reason is common to all the writings being considered here. As the case of St Paul's Cathedral demonstrated, it was, by some at least, thought insufficient. Through Barry's argument and Reynolds's less direct articulation of the same point it is possible to begin to see the degree to which art in Britain was perceived to be in dislocation from its essential moral purpose: to address the divine.

Before we can pursue this issue further, one other strand of Barry's argument in the quoted passage must be addressed. In his discussion of the subjects of religious art, the artist confidently proclaimed that Christianity provided 'more consoling and happily adapted matter' for art. This phrase directs us to another context in which Barry's remarks ought to be considered: the future of the arts, and British art, in particular. For Barry's argument implies that if rational religion, that is Protestantism, prevailed, modern art could not only flourish but it could rival or surpass that of the ancients because it would deal in better subjects than were provided by Greek myths. Barry was in fact addressing a debate that had developed in the second half of the eighteenth century: whether Christianity was, in fact, ultimately inimical to the greatest art. This idea had received its most influential airing in Daniel Webb's *An Enquiry into the Beauties of Painting* (1760). Webb's overall argument is straightforward: only in classical antiquity had painters reached the apex of artistic achievement and this was because their subjects were the most sublime and they were able to depict the nude with more freedom, as they aimed for the Ideal. Christianity could never generate works to rival those of Timanthes, Parrhasius, Zeuxis and Apelles for two reasons. First, artists are 'forced into decency to clothe their figures' by a 'chaste religion'.

The result of this habit is evident, when our first artists come to design the nude: a comparison of Raphael's figures, in the *Incendio di Borgo*, with the *Laocoon* or *Gladiator*, would have much the same effect, as that of a Flemish coach-horse with an Arabian Courser.⁶⁵

Webb's use of Raphael is very striking, for he rejected the quality of grace that Raphael was most celebrated for, finding only weakness, which he assumed was the result of his being prevented from drawing the nude. Webb's second point is the nature of religion, of ancient paganism and modern Christianity, which always provided the most elevated subjects for art:

... the ancients had great advantages ... ; they had, not only their profane history, rich in the most glorious and interesting events; but their sacred,

whilst it furnished them with new ideas of the sublime, gave no check to the pathetic. Their gods, superior in grace, majesty and beauty, were yet subject to all the feelings and passions of humanity. How unequal is the lot of the modern artists? employed by priests, or princes who thought like priests, their subjects are, for the most part, taken from religion, which professes to banish, or subdue the passions ... Their characters are borrowed from the lowest spheres of life ... Even their divine master, is no where, in painting, attended with a great idea; his long strait hair, Jewish beard, and poor apparel, would undignify the most exalted nature; his characteristics, are qualities extremely edifying, but by no means picturesque.⁶⁶

Thus it was that artists had to waste 'their powers on crucifixions, holy families ... and the like', so that 'if at any time the subject calls for the pathetic or the sublime', they 'want nerve'. Webb exemplifies this with Raphael's *Transfiguration*, which shows excellence only in parts and fails to show 'Christ uplifted by divine energy, dilating in glory, and growing into divinity' because 'his pencil ... [was] timid and unequal' to the task. Webb's arguments are fragile for two reasons, which are relevant here: Michelangelo is mentioned only as a sculptor; his paintings in the Sistine Chapel, which might be thought to be more closely akin to the kind of art he was advocating, Webb did not mention.⁶⁷ Secondly, his comparisons of modern examples with the painting of the ancients could only be based on ancient ekphrases, rather than on the works themselves. This Webb acknowledged but he countered, arguing that the Apollo (Belvedere) and Laocoon were guarantees of the superior qualities of ancient painting. Despite these problems, Webb's argument was taken seriously: the book went through at least five editions and was addressed by Diderot in France, and in England by Fuseli, Barry and others. Diderot declared categorically that 'to state that the current superstition [i.e. Christianity] is as unsympathetic to art as Webb claims, is to prove oneself ignorant of art and of the history of religion.'⁶⁸ Fuseli reiterated the same sentiments, in his discussion of the modern rise of the arts in Italy, in his lecture *The Present State of the Art*:

Let no one to whom truth and its propagation are dear, believe or maintain that Christianity was inimical to the progress of arts, which probably nothing else could have revived. Nothing less than Christian enthusiasm could give that lasting and energetic impulse whose magic result we admire in the works that illustrate the period of genius and their establishment.⁶⁹

John Flaxman (1755–1826) went further still in a conversation reported by Ludwig Schorn, the arts journalist, in 1827:

... it was the purpose of my lectures to the Academy to show that art in Christianity can rise higher than in Paganism, since Christian ideas are more sublime than pagan ones, and the best that art of Greece and Rome has produced is to my mind, also contained in Christian ideas, for example the battle of the giants which the Apocalypse splendidly depicts. The sublimity of Greek art springs only from the memory of the idea of the single god and of the fall of man, which had remained from older times in the pagan world and which was only again made clear by Christ: truth, grace and the physical beauty of nature can be applied equally well to Christian subjects as to pagan ones, and I maintain that there are more suitable subjects to be found in the

Old and New Testaments than in pagan mythology.⁷⁰

Subscribing to the view that the monotheism of Adam and his offspring was gradually corrupted into polytheism after the Fall (an understanding which had been famously challenged by David Hume in 1757), Flaxman adheres to the universal, Biblical history.⁷¹ Christ's incarnation and sacrifice were the perfecting of God's covenant, and thus Christianity deals in 'more sublime' ideas than Paganism.

However, despite this advocacy of the Christian sublime, which it must be observed is limited to subject matter, one looks in vain for a writer addressing the religious sublime in terms of making, that is of a sublime affect, which was understood as central to the moral excellence of art. So, Henry Fuseli, for example, used what can be recognized now as a formulaic argument:

... surely in an age of inquiry and individual liberty of thought ... there was little danger that the admission of art to places of devotion could ever be attended by the errors of idolatry ... Who would not rejoice if the charm of our art, displaying the actions and example of the sacred founder of our religion and of his disciples in temples and conventicles, contributed to enlighten the zeal, stimulate the feelings, sweeten the acrimony, or dignify the enthusiasm of their respective audience.⁷²

Fuseli claimed that art in church would 'charm' (recalling Reynolds's form of 'amiable and pleasing'): the possibility of it moving the spectator in the profound way the greatest art should is not acknowledged here, rather art merely tempers and ameliorates religious feeling. The religious sublime is a theoretical possibility but when addressing the subject of British religious art, sublime affect is denied as an ambition. Instead, art's powers are only to be limited ones. While Michelangelo and Raphael's religious paintings were discussed, by most, by this time, as the height of achievements in addressing the transcendent mysteries of God, no one argued for the sublime in relation to British religious art in the same terms – as, in Fuseli's words, 'an engine to force an irresistible idea upon the mind and fancy'.⁷³ Such a conception of the power of art, derived largely from writings about the sublime in literature, could be advocated in some contexts but it very obviously could not be maintained in relation to religious art. While the sublime did not entail, as Fuseli's words might seem to suggest, the suspension of the rational faculties, to grant art even such limited power in the religious context was, it seems, impossible. Great art might in fact be the most easily misused. Thus, Thomas Tenison (1636–1715), who would go on to be Archbishop of Canterbury, argued in his strongly anti-Catholic work *Of Idolatry*:

... there is not so great danger in the images of things without life, especially if they be flat pictures, not protuberant statues, nor pictures which the artist hath expressed with roundness. The worse and the more flat the work is, the less danger there is of its abuse. Titian hath painted the Virgin and the Child Jesus so very roundly, that (as Sir Henry Wotton a very good judge both of pictures and dispositions of men, saith of it) a man knows not whether to call it a piece of sculpture or picture.⁷⁴

Tenison was not alone in understanding artistic excellence to be dangerous. Thus, Jonathan Richardson thought it necessary to remind his readers, as Richard Haydocke had done a century before, that the responsibility was the beholder's:

I plead for the art, not its abuses ... If when I see a Madonna though painted by Raffaele I be enticed and drawn away to idolatry; or if the subject of a picture, though painted by Annibale Caracci pollutes my mind with impure images, and transforms me into a brute ... may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, and my tongue forget its cunning if I am its advocate as it is instrumental to such detested purposes.⁷⁵

The causal link between artistic excellence and affect could not be denied. While Richardson looked to the viewer to evade danger, Horace Walpole refused to grant even Raphael the power to move the beholder to idolatry:

... the art [of painting] ... is one of the least likely to be perverted ... Pictures are but the scenery of devotion. I question if Raphael could ever have made one convert, although he had exhausted all the expression of his eloquent pencil on a series of popish doctrines and miracles.⁷⁶

The bids of Richardson and Walpole to alleviate anxiety about art's role in idolatry reveal the intractability of the situation British art theory and practice were in. While Richardson argued that idolatry was a problem for the beholder, a problem he could do nothing about, Walpole undermined art's potential for religious affect: it was only scenery.

British art was caught in a kind of double bind imposed by the prominence of idolatry in this culture: art had to serve religion to be great, but the basis for the greatest art, the sublime, was the point of most danger for the spectator. It is possible to observe the occasional recognition of the profound implications of this difficult situation:

There is every where a religion, which is either affirmative or negative, contracted or extended ... where religion is affirmative and extended, it gives a loose and enthusiasm to the fancy, which throws a spirit into the air and manners, and stamps a diversity, life, quickness, sensibility, and expressive significance over everything they do. In another place, religion is more negative and contracted; being formed in direct opposition to the first ... much pains were taken to root out and to remove every thing that might give wing to the imagination.⁷⁷

Thus it was that idolatry cast a long shadow over art in Britain, over its history and its ambitions, both in theory and in practice. This article has offered a preliminary survey of potentially rich territory: there is much more that could be done to test, broaden and reinforce the arguments offered here, not least in relation to ideas of the sublime and the analysis of particular works of art as experiments in facing the theoretical problems that have been outlined.

Notes

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- 1 Benjamin West, *A Discourse Delivered to the Students of the Royal Academy*, London, 1793, 18.
- 2 James Barry, *Inquiry into the Real and Imaginary Obstructions to the Acquisition of the Arts in England*, London, 1775, 216.
- 3 Exodus 20: 4–6 from *The Holy Bible. Quartercentenary Edition... of the King James Version*, Oxford, 2011.
- 4 Ian Green, *The Christian's ABC: Catechisms and Catechizing in England c1540–1700*, Oxford, 1996, 431–6.
- 5 For idolatry in early-modern Britain, the following texts should be consulted: Margaret Aston, *England's Iconoclasts: Laws against Images*, Oxford, 1988; Jonathan Sheehan, 'The altars of the idols: Religion, sacrifice, and the early modern polity', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 67: 4, 2006, 649–74; and Peter Harrison, 'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment, Cambridge, 1990. In relation to iconoclasm Jonathan Phillips, *The Reformation of Images: The Destruction of Art in England 1535–1665*, Berkeley, CA and London, 1973; and Julie Spraggon, *Puritan Iconoclasm during the English Civil War*, Woodbridge, 2003. For discussions of idolatry in relation to particular forms of art see Phillip Lindley, *Tomb Destruction and Scholarship: Medieval Monuments in Early Modern England*, Donington, 2007; and Nigel Llewellyn, *Funeral Monuments in Post-Reformation England*, Cambridge, 2000, where a persuasive case is made for funerary monuments as continuing the moral tradition of high art, through exemplary portraiture. Margaret Aston has written on these issues in relation to portraiture in 'Gods, saints, and reformers: Portraiture and Protestant England', in L. Gent, ed., *Albion's Classicism: The Visual Arts in Britain 1550–1660*, New Haven and London, 1995, 181–220; and *The King's Bedpost: Reformation and Iconography in a Tudor Group Portrait*, Cambridge, 1993. Tara Hamling's recent book, *Decorating the Godly Household: Religious Art in Post-Reformation Britain*, New Haven and London, 2010, on seventeenth-century domestic art is very welcome and contains significant discussions of idolatry in the private sphere. Much of the primary literature on idolatry, especially of the post-civil war period, has been largely ignored: for example, Thomas Tenison's monumental text *Of Idolatry* (1678), which is discussed very briefly below, has received very little attention.
- 6 There is also very little evidence of the interdependence of these literatures.
- 7 See Nicholas Tyacke, ed., *England's Long Reformation, 1500–1800*, London, 1998, esp. Jeremy Gregory's essay 'The making of a Protestant nation: "Success" and "failure" in England's Long Reformation', 307–33.
- 8 Robert Rosenblum, 'The origin of painting: A problem in the iconography of Romantic classicism', *Art Bulletin*, 39: 4, 1957, 279–90; and Ann Bermingham, 'The origin of painting and the ends of art: Wright of Derby's *Corinthian Maid*', in John Barrell, ed., *Painting and the Politics of Culture*, Oxford, 1992, 135–65.
- 9 Henry Fuseli, 'First Lecture on Ancient Art', in Ralph Wornum, ed., *Lectures on Painting by the Royal Academicians*, 1848, London, 349.
- 10 Daniel Webb, *An Inquiry into the Beauties of Painting*, London, 1777, 16.
- 11 Alberti's *Della pittura* was first translated into English by John Ozell, appearing, in 1755, under the name of Giacomo Leoni (c.1686–1746). See T. P. Connor, 'Leoni, Giacomo (c.1686–1746)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford, 2004; online edn., October 2007 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/16474 accessed 21 May 2011]. Parts of Vasari's *Le Vite* appeared first in English in Henry Peacham's *The Complete Gentleman* in 1622. The *Vite* were known in Italian in England at the beginning of the seventeenth century but Peacham used Karel Van Mander's Dutch edition (1604). See Luigi Salerno, 'Seventeenth-century English literature on painting', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 14, 1951, 234–58; and Lucy Gent, *Pictures and Poetry, 1560–1620*, Leamington Spa, 1981.
- 12 [Richard Haydocke], *A Tracte Containing the Arts of Curious Paintinge, Carvinge & Buildinge...*, Oxford, 1598, 6–7.
- 13 West, *A Discourse*, 19.
- 14 Vasari was of course writing from a 'reformed' position too. See Marcia B Hall, *Renovation and Counter Reformation: Vasari and Duke Cosimo in Sta Maria Novella and Sta Croce 1565–1577*, Oxford, 1979.
- 15 John Bold, 'Bell, Henry (bap.1647, d. 1711)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford, 2004; online edn., January 2008 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/37174, accessed 21 May 2011].
- 16 Francis Junius, *The Painting of the Ancients, in three bookes*, London, 1638; and John Evelyn, *Sculptura, or the History of Chalcography*, London, 1662.
- 17 The quotation is from Dryden's famous and complexly equivocal *To Sir Godfrey Kneller* (1694).
- 18 Don C. Allen, 'The legend of Noah: Renaissance rationalism in art, science and letters', *Illinois Studies in Language and Literature*, 33, 1949, 3–4.
- 19 Bell, *Historical Essay on the Original of Painting*, London, 1728, 6. The theme of Prometheus was also a fairly commonly invoked origin story. Prometheus, symbolizing Ingenuity, accompanied Hercules, as Labor, on the certificate of associateness of the Royal Academy designed and engraved by Cipriani and Bartolozzi in 1769. See British Museum reg. no. 1977.U.1086. A number of artists in Fuseli's circle in Rome in the 1770s made studies of the theme. See Martin Myrone, Christopher Frayling and Marina Warner, *Gothic Nightmares: Fuseli, Blake and the Romantic Imagination*, London, 2006. For a history of reception of Prometheus, see Olga Raggio, 'The Myth of Prometheus: Its survival and metamorphoses up to the eighteenth century', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 21: 1/2, 1958, 44–62.
- 20 Junius, *The Painting of the Ancients*, 91. Reconciliations, apparently spurious, of Biblical and classical history were common: for example, Lomazzo (trans. Haydocke) described Prometheus as the 'first inventor of Plasticke' after the flood, and as the son of Japhet ([Haydocke], *A Tracte*, 7).
- 21 Bell, *Historical Essay*, 10.
- 22 William Aglionby had already dispensed with the notion that there was evidence to trace the arts back to Adam in *Painting Illustrated in Three Dialogues*, London, 1686, 35, although he thought that it would be better if he could.
- 23 West, *A Discourse*, 18–19.
- 24 The displays of artificial objects at the British Museum and other collections were representations of the stadial approach to idolatry, as 'idols' from diverse places and times were placed together in what was intended as a coherent display. See Jonathan Williams, 'Sacred history? The difficult subject of religion', in Kim Sloan, ed., *Enlightenment: Discovering the World in the Eighteenth Century*, London, 2003, 212–21.
- 25 Colin Kidd, *British Identities before Nationalism: Ethnicity and Nationhood in the Atlantic World, 1600–1800*, Cambridge, 1999, 48–9.
- 26 West, *A Discourse*, 19–20.
- 27 Marie Busco, *Sir Richard Westmacott, Sculptor*, Cambridge, 1994, 121. See also Dominic Janes, 'The rites of man: The British Museum and the sexual imagination in Victorian Britain', *Journal for the History of Collections*, 20: 1, 2008, 101–12.
- 28 Bell, *Historical Essay*, 7–8.
- 29 See Jonathan Sheehan, 'Sacred and profane: Idolatry, Antiquarianism and the polemics of distinction in the seventeenth century', *Past and Present*, 192, 2006, 35–66. See also Peter Harrison, 'Religion'.
- 30 Peacham, *The Art of Drawing*, London, 1606, 1–2.
- 31 Junius, *The Painting of the Ancients*, 93.
- 32 John Evelyn, *Sculptura*, London, 1662, 16. See James Barry, 'History of painting', in Wornum, ed., *Lectures*, 66–7.
- 33 This same point was made by Vasari in his history of art that forms the Preface to the *Vite*. George Bull, trans., *Lives of the Artists*, Vol. I, Harmondsworth, 1987, 10.
- 34 See Trevor Cooper, ed., *The Journal of William Dowling: Iconoclasm in East Anglia during the English Civil War*, Woodbridge, 2001.
- 35 John Flaxman, *Lectures Delivered Before the President and Members of the Royal Academy*, London, 1865, 54–5.
- 36 Horace Walpole, *Aedes Walpolianae*, London, 1752, 99.
- 37 Walpole, *Aedes*, 101.
- 38 Barry, 'History of painting', 84.
- 39 Gary Stroumsa, 'John Spencer and the roots of idolatry', *History of Religions*, 41: 1, 2001, 1–23. Anne Betty Weinschenker, 'Idolatry and sculpture in ancien regime France', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 38: 3,

- 2005, 485–507. See below for a discussion of Diderot's views on religious art. As Weinschenker shows, idolatry was very largely raised in France by Huguenots and Jansenists before being adopted more widely in political debates later in the eighteenth century.
- 40 See, for example, the opening paragraphs of Jonathan Richardson's *A Discourse of the ... Science of a Connoisseur*; Horace Walpole, 'Preface', *Anecdotes of Painting in England*, 1765, ix; and John Opie, 'On chiaroscuro', in Wornum, ed., *Lectures*, 290–1.
- 41 For the role of the church in local communities, see Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town 1660–1770*, Oxford, 1991; and John Walsh, Colin Haydon and Stephen Taylor, eds, *The Church of England c.1689–c.1833*, Cambridge, 1993.
- 42 Pews in most churches were rented, and the elite often had more elaborate boxes, so church seating represented local traditions, hierarchies and governance. See Henry M. Cautley, *Royal Arms and Commandments in Our Churches*, Ipswich, 1974; Lori A. Ferrell and Peter McCullough, eds, *The English Sermon Revised: Religion, Literature and History 1600–1750*, Manchester, 2000; William Gibson, *The Church of England 1688–1832: Unity and Accord*, New York and London, 2001.
- 43 James Barry, 'On chiaroscuro', in Wornum, ed., *Lectures*, 197.
- 44 There is surprisingly little literature on British history painting as a genre. For an introduction see Brian Allen, 'Rule Britannia? History painting in eighteenth-century England', *History Today*, 45: 6, 1995, 12–18; and for its place in British art practice see David Solkin, ed., *Art on the Line: The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House 1780–1836*, New Haven and London, 2001, especially Martin Myrone, 'The sublime as spectacle: The transformation of ideal art at Somerset House', 77–92.
- 45 Michael Kitson, 'Hogarth's "Apology for Painters"', *Walpole Society*, 1966–68, 41, 81 and 89. Hogarth's grammar and spelling, which are reproduced here, are inconsistent.
- 46 Michael Kitson argued reasonably that these notes were probably written between 1753 and Hogarth's death in 1764. Hogarth engaged in a very elaborate exploration of enthusiasm in the print, which was eventually published in a substantially altered form as *Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism* in 1762. These two prints have been the subject of considerable scholarly enquiry. See Ronald Paulson, *Hogarth: Art and Politics, 1750–1764*, London, 1993; and Bernd Krysmanski, 'We see a ghost: Hogarth's satire on Methodists and connoisseurs', *Art Bulletin*, 80: 2, 1998, 292–310.
- 47 For a discussion of Shaftesbury's remarks in the wider context of the reception of art in relation to anti-Catholicism see Clare Haynes, *Pictures and Popery: Art and Religion in England, 1660–1760*, Aldershot, 2006, esp. 1–13, 136–9.
- 48 Kitson, 'Hogarth's "Apology"', 88, 91.
- 49 Of particular interest is Barry's *Inquiry*, which will be considered in the next section. Jonathan Richardson, Prince Hoare, Valentine Green, Horace Walpole each gave a telling account of this problem.
- 50 See Harry Mount's introduction to his edition of Sir Joshua Reynolds, *A Journey to Flanders and Holland*, Cambridge, 1996.
- 51 Reynolds, *A Journey*, 82–3. John Opie offered a very similar argument in his second lecture to the Royal Academy 'On chiaroscuro', in Wornum, ed., *Lectures*, 290–1.
- 52 Walpole, *Anecdotes*, xii.
- 53 For early expressions of this see Peacham, *The Art of Drawing*, 2–3; and 'The Preface' to Aglionby's *Painting Illustrated in Three Dialogues*, 1686. For the later context see Iain Pears, *The Discovery of Painting: The Growth of Interest in the Arts in England 1680–1760*, New Haven and London, 1988, esp. 133–56.
- 54 John Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt*. 'The Body of the Public', New Haven and London, 1986; and David Solkin, *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England*, New Haven and London, 1993.
- 55 Reynolds discussed the affair in two surviving letters. See 35 and 36 in John Ingamells and John Edgcumbe, eds, *The Letters of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, New Haven and London, 2000, 43–8.
- 56 Thomas Newton, *The Works of the Right Reverend Thomas Newton*, London, 1787, Vol. 1, 142.
- 57 Barry also reproduced it at the centre of his fifth picture at the Society of Arts, neatly aligned with the dome of St Paul's.
- 58 This is delicate. Barry was brought up as a Roman Catholic. However, he shows himself in other places to be completely attuned to Protestant understandings of representation. See his *Inquiry* and the first part of his description of the sixth of his paintings at the Society of Arts in *An Account of a Series of Pictures ...*, London, 1783. See William L. Pressly, *The Life and Art of James Barry*, New Haven and London, 1981; and Thomas Dunne and William L. Pressly, eds, *James Barry, 1741–1806: History Painter*, Farnham, 2010.
- 59 Evidence for the reception of religious works of art in Britain during this period is scarce. The several court cases over images that took place between 1680 and 1762 are thus very useful: see Haynes, *Pictures and Popery*, 102–35.
- 60 Barry, 'History of painting', 82.
- 61 Barry makes an important secondary point that certain political conditions, of personal leisure and a lack of war, must prevail if art is to thrive. They are preconditions for art's success but they are not its causes. See Barrell, *Political Theory*, 163–221, for an extended discussion of Barry's conception of the public. Barrell does acknowledge religion as important to contemporaries at various stages in the overall argument of the book but it is not always germane to the political ideas about the making of a public for art in Britain that are his main concern.
- 62 Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, Robert Wark, ed., New Haven and London 1997, 244.
- 63 Martin Postle, 'Reynolds, Sir Joshua (1723–1792)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford, September 2004; online edn., October 2009 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/23429, accessed 21 May 2011].
- 64 For Richardson's religious faith see Carol Gibson-Wood, *Jonathan Richardson: Art Theorist of the English Enlightenment*, New Haven and London, 2000.
- 65 Webb, *An Inquiry*, 49.
- 66 Webb, *An Inquiry*, 145–6. The anti-clericalism of this passage raises a significant issue that this essay cannot attend to: the possibility that Deism was an important motivation for art theory based on civic humanism.
- 67 Webb was not alone in this: the Sistine Chapel works had only recently begun to be recognized as modern achievements in the sublime. For Reynolds's early advocacy of Michelangelo's paintings as works of sublime genius, see Michael H. Duffy, 'Michelangelo and the sublime in Romantic art criticism', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 56: 2, 1995, 217–38.
- 68 Jean Seznec, 'Diderot and *Le Génie du Christianisme*', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 15: 3/4, 1952, 231.
- 69 Fuseli, 'The Present State of the Art', in Wornum, ed., *Lectures*, 552.
- 70 Quoted from David Bindman, ed., *John Flaxman*, London, 1979, 31.
- 71 David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, 1757, 1. Hume's target was, of course, much broader – it was all religion.
- 72 Fuseli, 'The Present State of the Art', 556.
- 73 Fuseli, 'On Invention', in Wornum, ed., *Lectures*, 419.
- 74 Tenison, *Of Idolatry*, 271.
- 75 Haydocke's comments on this issue are contained in the Preface to Lomazzo's treatise, where he explains his omission of the author's remarks on the uses of painting ([Haydocke], *A Tracte*, 3–4). Richardson's comments can also be compared instructively with Henry Peacham's in *Graphice* (1612), 9–10. J. Richardson, 'A Discourse ... on the Science of a Connoisseur', *Works*, 1792, 189. Richardson's writings were first published in the 1710s but were collected and reissued in 1773 and 1792. For further relevant discussion of Richardson in relation to idolatry and spectatorship, see Haynes, *Pictures and Popery*, *passim*.
- 76 Walpole, *Anecdotes*, xii.
- 77 Barry, *Inquiry*, 214–15.