

Problems of 20th Century Artists Disclosed

“Why,” asked Nietzsche in 1883, “was Europe behaving as though it hadn’t heard of the death of God?” During the seventeenth century God was doubted; in the eighteenth He was displaced by the Age of Reason, which would dispel hatred and war and replace them with freedom, equality and fraternity. In the nineteenth Darwin published his “Origin of Species” (1859) and many thought that God was dead.

How did artists respond to this, and how did the response vary between Jewish and Christian artists? This was the question addressed by Simon Blond, of Curtin University, on Sunday, 4 May in the Temple David Boardroom. CCJWA members and friends were treated to a fine exposition on “The Problem of Representing God for 20th Century Christian and Jewish Artists”. Illustrating his presentation with an excellent slide show as he built on the following points, Blond demonstrated the ways in which religious art has been influenced by changing concepts about God.

Both Jewish and Christian artists and intellectuals are uncomfortable with claims of their religions to a special relationship with God; the twentieth century became the age of embarrassment about God.

In a way, Jewish artists had an advantage in that it is forbidden for Jews to portray God, as pictures count as graven images, which are forbidden by the Torah. Christian artists are inhibited by the iconography of earlier ages, which look feeble and unconvincing in the modern scene.

Artists turned away from religion to new forms of spirituality. They preferred totally abstract art which moved the viewer’s feelings like a piece of music: a representation of the unrepresentable. Fresh interpretations of items of Christian faith such as the resurrection are depicted with new media, such as by Bill Viola in “The Crossing”.

Perhaps we can hope that we have entered a new era that supersedes the death of God.

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