Imaging the Infinite

Graham Sparkes

Protestantism, particularly as expressed through both the Reformed and radical dissenting traditions, has struggled to find a place for art in faith and worship. The fear of falling into idolatry has always haunted its approach. This paper seeks to show that the twentieth-century move to abstraction in art can be seen, at least in certain respects, as a response to such Protestant concerns. Artists such as Piet Mondrian and Mark Rothko illustrate this, and offer us an important way of understanding and appreciating how abstract art can deepen the spiritual journey.

Keywords

Protestantism; idolatry; abstract art; Mondrian; Rothko

Introduction

The question is sometimes asked, 'What is Christian art?' Any answer is always likely to prove problematic, but no doubt there are many of us who would immediately point to images that portray some aspect of the life and person of Jesus, or perhaps depict a particular scene described within scripture, or illustrate the lived experiences of the people of God. In other words, we would define Christian art in terms of its content – the particular story a painting seeks to represent. It is an obvious way of trying to answer the question, but it is also one that excludes many alternative and exciting possibilities, including the idea that modern abstract art might in some sense be understood as 'Christian'.

In the past this is not an idea that has found much support amongst evangelical writers reflecting on culture and the arts. Indeed, the move towards abstraction has often been interpreted as a sign of decline and failure that should be regarded with considerable suspicion.[1] Yet there has been an increasing recognition that there are abstract artists and abstract art that display profound links with Christian spirituality. More specifically, there are connections with Protestant theologies growing out of the Reformation that ought to be recognised and that give added force to what these artists were seeking to do.

[1] See for example the writings of Hans Rookmaaker and Francis Schaeffer.

It is these connections that will be explored, with a discussion of two significant abstract artists of the last one hundred years – Piet Mondrian[2] and Mark Rothko[3] – and brief reference to others including James Turrell.[4] Some of their links with Protestant convictions are clear and obvious; others are more diverse in origin; but together they help us see why those of us who belong within the dissenting traditions might learn to pay attention to abstract art and recognise its potential to enrich our faith.

The Journey towards Abstraction

It has to be said that the task of learning to value and appreciate abstract art has proved challenging for many, irrespective of their Christian allegiance. It is not unusual for such art to be greeted with incomprehension and bemusement, and more hostile and less polite reactions have also been known.[5] This is not art that has instantly attracted great popularity; it tends to leave us discomforted, perhaps because we cannot instantly name and identify (and so contain) what is portrayed on the canvas. Yet, since the early 1900s, abstraction has become an established stream within modern art. Its origins are hard to identify, though Wassily Kandinsky[6] is often credited with being the first to create floating forms that did not obviously represent anything, and his paintings were certainly a radical departure for people who thought they knew what their art was all about. This was clearly not history, portraiture, or landscape. It did not fit the known genres. So, what was going on and why? Does abstract art do no more than illustrate a cultural slide towards emptiness and lack of meaning, as is sometimes thought?

To abstract something is to separate it from its normal reference points. In the visual arts that leads to a process of simplification of forms, lines, and colours, as what is represented on the canvas is separated or pulled away from any literal depiction of an original object, person, or landscape. For some artists that may lead further to art based purely on geometrical lines and shapes that have no immediate referent in the world around us. So, the most obvious – and challenging – feature of this new form of art is the sense

---

[2] Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) was a Dutch artist, a pioneer of abstract art, and founder of the *De Stijl* movement that sought to reduce art to essential forms and colours.

[3] Mark Rothko (1903-1970) was born in Latvia and arrived in the United States in 1913. He became known as an abstract expressionist, noted in later life for his colour field paintings that express a yearning for the infinite.

[4] James Turrell (1943-) is an American artist concerned with light and space. His installations challenge our seeing in ways that enable sight to become revelatory.

[5] The controversies surrounding the 2007 documentary film, *My Kid Could Paint That*, is an example of the very mixed responses that abstract art can engender.

[6] Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) was a Russian painter. His abstract paintings included those that brought together his love of both music and art – he believed in the phenomenon of synaesthesia whereby colours could trigger particular sounds. In 1911 he wrote a text called *On the Spiritual in Art*.

that it is non-representational. That is actually a little misleading, as abstract art may well correspond to things in certain ways, but it is fair to say that such art does not give us a picture of the world as we see it, and as was expected of art in previous generations.

One of the most obvious catalysts for this new and radical movement in art was the development of photography. By the late nineteenth century, the camera provided a way of capturing the exact likeness of a human face or of a landscape scene that rendered redundant the skills of artists intent on doing the same thing, and so artists needed to explore new meanings for their work. But a more profound reason for the development of abstract art had to do with what was going on in science: it was the discovery that our apparent solid and material world is actually made up of atoms that are not nearly as solid as we imagine. How, then, to represent this strange reality so recently discovered? How could the artist paint the world as it was now seen and understood by science? A new way of picturing reality was needed that was prepared to follow science in letting go of established reference points. As Barasch points out, we may not be able to argue that the 'dissolution of the atom' directly led to the development of abstract art. However, 'The *indirect* impact of science on art and art theory was no less significant. By shaping the conceptual and emotional orientations of a period, science necessarily also affects the arts.'[7] Such a view is supported by the writings of Kandinsky himself who, though he may not have understood the new scientific developments, speaks of how they shaped his artistic development.[8]

One way of beginning to make sense of abstract art, then, is to see within it a process of taking away the surface inessentials in order to uncover the underlying essence. An artist might begin with a realistic portrayal of an object, but slowly set about the task of identifying that which lies at the very heart of what is seen; to pare down the image, untying it from its appearance in the world in order that its deepest form and meaning can be exposed. A good example of an artist working in this way is Georgia O'Keeffe,[9] who in 1930 painted a series of six images of the Jack-in-the-Pulpit flower. The first is an easily recognisable realistic representation of the flower, though magnified and enlarged in a way that was typical for O'Keeffe, but each subsequent canvas moves us further in the direction of abstraction, with the sixth and final one offering us a very simplified use of form and colour.[10]

---

[7] Moshe Barasch, *Modern Theories of Art 2: from Impressionism to Kandinsky* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p. 295.

[8] Moshe Barasch, *Modern Theories of Art 2: from Impressionism to Kandinsky*, pp. 296-7.

[9] Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) was an American artist who is best known for her desert landscapes and for her close-up paintings of flowers. By magnifying a flower, she wanted people to learn to see detail, colour, and shape.

[10] For a full discussion of this series of paintings by O'Keeffe, see Richard Kidd and Graham Sparkes, *God and the Art of Seeing: Visual Resources for a Journey of Faith* (Oxford: Regent's Park College, and Georgia: Smyth & Helwys, 2003), pp. 116-125.

Here were artists wanting to imitate the scientists by looking beneath the everyday appearance of things and seek the real essence of what was to be seen, and we will return to this approach shortly when considering the work of Piet Mondrian.

There was another significant impetus to the development of abstract art that must not be underestimated – the influence of a range of different spiritual beliefs. On the one hand, it is clear that a number of artists began following the teachings of theosophy with its esoteric mixture of spiritual beliefs and practices.[11] This offered them a belief that hidden forces were at work in the universe that are beyond science and reason, opening up a deeper reality that they wanted to explore. On the other hand, many artists drew on the established faith traditions that had sustained and nurtured them during their formative years. This not only rooted them in their own past, but also in the history of art that they were now taking in new directions. Both these dimensions have been noted as they emerge in the art and writings of Kandinsky, with his background in Russian Orthodoxy.[12] But what also needs to be understood is the particular ways in which Protestant theology shaped the development of abstract art, giving it meaning and direction alongside the other influences that have been noted.

On the surface, such connections might appear unlikely. Puritan, Reformed, and Baptist traditions, with their roots in Calvinism and the radical strands of the Reformation, feel like stony ground on which to grow any links with the visual arts. But a deeper exploration will show that some of their concerns can be seen as related to the emergence of abstract art.

The Dangers of Idolatry

From the thirteenth century onwards, it is possible to identify ways in which images became the focus of increasing popular devotion, invested with spiritual power and significance. While the Reformation response in sixteenth-century Europe was certainly not uniform, leaders such as Karlstadt, Zwingli, and Calvin were unequivocal in their rejection of this use of images within worship, which they regarded as dangerous and harmful, and one of the strongest arguments used was the sin of idolatry. Calvin begins his 'Institutes of the Christian Religion' by declaring his intention to

[11] The Theosophical Society was founded at the end of the nineteenth century by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, and its speculative search for mystical, psychic, and spiritual wisdom attracted many artists including Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich, Klee, and Gauguin. For a brief discussion of its influence, see Pam Meecham and Julie Sheldon, *Modern Art: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 66-70.

[12] See Moshe Barasch, *Modern Theories of Art 2: from Impressionism to Kandinsky*, pp. 299-307.

seek after knowledge of God,[13] and in recognising our inherent human limitations in gaining such knowledge, including our fall into arrogance and pride, he warns of the capacity of our imaginations to lead us towards superstition and the setting up of idols. Attention becomes focused on Exodus 20.4, with Calvin declaring that God 'curbs any licentious attempt we might make to represent him by a visible shape'.[14] The sovereign transcendence of God means that no human attempt to image God can ever be acceptable. Any move to offer a figurative image of the divine – a shape or a picture that represents God – amounts to blasphemy. While art allows us only to imagine what is illusory, true knowledge of God is gained through the use of the intellect that can then guide the will through sound reasoning.[15] Central to that development of sound reasoning is the teaching of Scripture.

Calvin's beliefs and convictions were written up for children in his 1542 Catechism. Having been asked to repeat the second commandment, the following exchange takes place between minister and child:

> M: Does God wholly forbid the painting or sculpturing of any images?
>
> C: He forbids only these two – The making of images, for the purpose of representing God, or for worshipping him.
>
> M: Why is it forbidden to represent God, by a visible image?
>
> C: Because there is nothing in him, who is an eternal and incomprehensible Spirit, that resembles a corporeal, corruptible, and inanimated figure.[16]

Calvin did allow a place for images. They might, for example, appear in the home, in the form of pictures of creation or of family and neighbours, both of which can be regarded as imaging the presence of the divine all around us in the world. Sculpture and paintings are no less than 'gifts of God',[17] he said, but it is important that they portray only what we can see. God cannot be seen, and an attempt to image God merely abuses the gift we have been given.

There are certainly those of us who would want to question Calvin's complete rejection of the use of images for devotion and worship. Although Baptists, along with many others within Protestantism, owe a debt to his reforming work with its emphasis on worship rooted in the preaching of scripture, there are those of us who would want to recover the importance of 'seeing' alongside 'hearing'. It is worth exploring the incarnational implications of our faith whereby Christ takes human form and likeness and

---

[13] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols, trans. H. Beveridge (London: James Clarke and Co., 1949), I.I.1-3.
[14] Calvin, I.XI.1.
[15] Calvin, I.XV.7.
[16] John Calvin, *The Catechism of the Church of Geneva*, trans. E. Waterman (Sheldon and Goodwin, 1815), pp. 43-44.
[17] Calvin, I.XI.12.

so in some sense offers us an image of God, and to recognise the reality of mental images that are often deliberately provoked by the words of scripture that seek to describe the nature of God.

Yet the second commandment does have undeniable force. Calvin's iconoclastic approach may be extreme, but at the same time we do want to continue to affirm the unbridgeable gap between the Creator and the created: that the infinite surely cannot be imaged in the way we might represent in paint something we can see. Could it be that this truth is exactly what abstract artists have also wanted to recognise in imaginative and creative ways? Are the concerns of iconoclasts such as Calvin actually mirrored in the work of artists such as Mondrian and Rothko?

Piet Mondrian

The abstract art for which Piet Mondrian is best known is both instantly recognisable and also very difficult for many to comprehend. From the 1920s he produced a series of paintings that used horizontal and vertical black lines of different widths to create a grid of different sized squares and rectangles, and then filled particular squares and rectangles usually with one of the primary colours.[18] We are therefore confronted with an asymmetrical geometric pattern that is very ordered and even instinctively beautiful, but clearly abstract in its failure to reference the way the world appears.

Mondrian grew up in a Dutch Calvinist home, and throughout his early training and development as an artist he retained an active involvement in the life of Reformed churches. At this early stage in his artistic development he produced conventional realist paintings, including completing Protestant commissions for churches and organisations, though even then his willingness to take risks and experiment can be seen in the way his landscapes challenge the convention of painting low horizons and dominant skies. It is also true that in the early years of the twentieth century he moved away from his Calvinist and Protestant roots, and began an involvement with theosophy. As already noted, its mixture of spiritual beliefs was attracting a number of artists at the time, but in the case of Mondrian there are well-developed arguments that suggest it would be a mistake to ignore the continuing influence of his Protestant roots on the development of his abstract art. In other words, we should regard theosophy as supplementing rather than replacing his 'mother tongue of Dutch Calvinism'.[19]

One way of making this argument is to concentrate on the language that Mondrian uses to discuss his paintings and the ways that this echoes

[18] Mondrian's paintings are widely available to view online.
[19] Joseph Masheck, 'A Christian Mondrian', *Bavinck Review*, 6 (2015), p. 39.

Calvinist theological concerns, and this is developed at length by Masheck.[20] We are familiar with 'justification' as one of the key words within the story of the Protestant Reformation, expressing the vindication of the human soul through the sacrifice of Christ, and Calvin expresses this as the debit of our sin being paid by the credit of righteousness gained through grace. In other words, a balanced equilibrium is restored – there is justification. Masheck writes, 'Concepts of justice and justification play a steady part in Mondrian's unfolding view of art. While justification concerns the vindication of the individual soul before the judgement seat... Mondrian's term "equilibrated relationship" plays this role in painting.'[21] Further, this idea of 'equilibrated relationships' leads Mondrian to a wider vision of a just society. 'He saw aesthetics and ethics as deeply linked', suggests Anderson and Dyrness, his artistic aims bound up with questions about 'the rightness and justness of social relationships'.[22] So there emerges an eschatological hope of a world that is finally complete and put right – the fulfilment of the kingdom of God. While Masheck proposes that Mondrian would have been particularly attracted to the Reformed theology of Herman Bavinck, Anderson and Dyrness identify analogies with the neo-Calvinist Abraham Kuyper. Either way, Mondrian's language suggests a considerable debt to his Protestant Calvinist upbringing.

But it is perhaps more helpful to try to understand the paintings themselves, and to put these alongside the language used in order to make sense of the task that Mondrian set himself. The Mondrian painting regarded as one of his most important is 'Composition with Red, Blue, and Yellow' from 1930[23] and represents the height of the style he developed and named as Neo-Plasticism – a new approach to the plastic arts of sculpture and painting. It is a small canvas (just 46 x 46 cm) and deceptively simple. Through the use of those familiar black lines and blocks of primary colours, we are presented with a work that has two contrasting features set alongside each other. It is clearly a well-ordered painting that, as is typical of Mondrian, represents a search after balance and harmony. Whether it is the large area of red off-set by the much smaller square of blue, or the direction of the brush strokes that appear on the surface of the canvas, the apparent simplicity is actually the result of long periods of exploration in the search for a stillness that holds the painting together.

At the same time as offering us harmony and balance, this painting offers us something else: a desire to go beyond stillness in order to achieve

---

[20] Joseph Masheck, 'A Christian Mondrian', pp. 37-72.
[21] Joseph Masheck, 'A Christian Mondrian', p. 46.
[22] Jonathan Anderson and William Dyrness, *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2016) p. 184.
[23] A reproduction of this painting can be found here: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/piet-mondrian/composition-with-red-blue-and-yellow-1930> [accessed 2 September 2019]

an element of creative movement and energy. It is introduced, for example, through the double thickness of the black line on the left side, and the fact that the black line on the left towards the bottom does not extend to the edge. The lines are key to the presence of this energy, together with the fact that the edges of the canvas are unframed. A tension is introduced that allows the painting to live, and this was a new and significant step for Mondrian.

In taking the path of abstraction and producing a painting such as 'Composition with Red, Blue, and Yellow', Mondrian is wanting to uncover the essence of things – to explore the fundamental ways in which relationships give shape and meaning to the world. For him, a painting that merely reproduces a landscape scene only succeeds in hiding these deep-down structural relations that are at the very heart of creation. Such a painting makes us think too much about the particular subject matter that is portrayed; what is needed is art that identifies the very basic relationships of colour and shape within which are held all other possibilities. Thus, Mondrian uses the pure primary colours from which all other colours are derived, and works with vertical and horizontal lines between which all other lines are constructed. While the actual lines and colour combinations may appear random, they are the result of years of training and very careful work designed to attain the basic qualities we have already noted: the virtues of balance, harmony, and symmetry, and also the virtues of life, energy, and movement that are central to the creative processes. As Anderson and Dyrness put it, 'His paintings increasingly simplified into asymmetrical grids of primary colour: iconic figurations of the immutable ground of being from which all concrete, mutable existence is given.'[24]

What lies behind these abstract compositions is nothing less than Mondrian's belief in the sacred beauty of the created world, a conviction that stays faithful to his Protestant Calvinist roots. He believed in God as creator, as the one who holds all things together, as the one who justifies all things, and the one who deserves our humble worship. Idolatry must be avoided at all costs, and so Mondrian seeks to paint such as to capture within the structure of his abstract image a finite glimpse of the infinite beauty and unity of life. He wrote:

> Nature is that great manifestation through which our deepest being is revealed and assumes concrete appearance. (Nature's disclosure) is far stronger and much more beautiful than any *imitation* of it can ever be... precisely for the sake of nature, of reality, we avoid imitating its natural appearance.[25]

In other words, as Anderson and Dyrness argue, there is a sense in which Mondrian is taking Calvin's iconoclastic arguments one step further. Just as

[24] Jonathan Anderson and William Dyrness, *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture*, p. 181.
[25] Quoted in Jonathan Anderson and William Dyrness, *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture*, p. 182 (italics original).

it is dangerous to portray religious subjects in art and heretical to attempt any image of the divine, so Mondrian's sense of the goodness of the world means that for him even representations of this natural world destroy their essence. He rejects figurative art because it distorts the holiness and beauty of all God has made. Rather, out of love for all things, the artist must abstract the real depth of creation, seeking to capture the balance, relationship, and energy that reflect the Creator's vision and intention.

It is worth recalling Paul Tillich's 'Protestant Principle': the sovereignty of the Divine must be acknowledged over against any human claim – there can be no claim to absoluteness on the part of any human person or group whether political, religious, or artistic. It is not just the church that can try to take to itself an authority and ultimacy that is illegitimate and so fall into the trap of idolatry, for there are many cultural temptations to enclose and contain what is transcendent and infinite. In his abstract paintings Mondrian wants to affirm this principle, as he points towards the vast and limitless experiences that the Creator offers through creation, and he does so by offering a glimpse of what is most profoundly real.

Mondrian described his style of painting as 'abstract-real'. He wanted to capture an expression of pure reality beneath the forms and colours all around us. Whether or not we think he is successful, and whatever questions we might want to ask of his methods, there is no denying that Mondrian is an artist who turns to abstraction precisely because he wants to affirm the reality of the infinite God whose sovereignty must be upheld.

Mark Rothko

If the roots of Mondrian's abstract art lie very clearly within the European Protestant tradition, what are we to make of developments across the Atlantic? Following the Second World War, New York increasingly became the centre of the art world, and with it came the rise of a different form of abstract painting – it became known as abstract expressionism. How much did this new direction also reflect Protestant convictions and values? Can it, too, deepen and inspire the spiritual journey?

The context within which abstract expressionism developed was the crisis created by war and the ways it exposed our human vulnerability and capacity for violence. It left people with fractured emotions that lacked any outlet, in a society struggling for a sense of identity and direction. Abstract expressionism provided a way for artists to respond and it reflected a number of different emphases, including: the expression of deep feelings charged with meaning; the attempt to uncover universal truths about the human condition; the value of individual actions and decisions over those of society;

and the significance of finding a place for mystery and the unknown. As Barnett Newman said, 'We felt the moral crisis of a world in shambles... it was impossible at that time to paint the kind of paintings that we were doing – flowers, reclining nudes, and people playing the cello.'[26] While abstract expressionism is not a unified movement with one style, one of its groupings that included Barnett Newman became known for paintings that consisted of large areas of colour – colour field paintings.

Mark Rothko was also part of this group. He is one of its most prominent artists and perhaps also one of its most complex. The latter part of his life was given over to producing vast canvases where the fields of different colours extend right to the edge, and there is nothing else to be seen except these blocks of colour.

It really does not help us to try to analyse Rothko's abstract expressionist paintings.[27] They need to be seen and felt! Sometimes they offer us a kind of horizon between two blocks of colour that invite us to peer into the distance; sometimes there is a kind of door or window that seems to reveal little but further mystery; sometimes the paintings seem to envelop us and hold us, or even to illuminate us with a kind of inner light. Rothko actually declared that he was not really interested in colour as such, but rather with the light that he sought to generate by thinning the paint and then applying many layers in order to create a luminous effect. His last paintings used colours that were increasingly dark and brooding, none more so than the fourteen canvases hanging on the eight walls of the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas. They are a very deep purplish colour, almost black, and yet at the same time they have that strange translucent effect he deliberately sought through the techniques he adopted.

Somewhat surprisingly, Rothko claimed he was not painting abstract art at all. His art was about something! He wanted to paint the concrete reality of human drama, to portray the tragedy of our human condition, and to lead people towards an experience of the transcendent. Moreover, he wanted to do this in a way that was contemporary. He said, 'In a sense, the whole artistic process since the Renaissance can be described as a nostalgic yearning for a myth and a search for new symbols that will enable art to symbolise again the utmost fullness of reality.'[28] He was wanting to give expression to that which might bring everything together into a unity, and it is interesting that just as we have noted Mondrian's declaration that his paintings were 'abstract-real', so Rothko also expresses this quest for the

[26] Barnett Newman, *Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John O'Neill (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), p. 287.
[27] Rothko's paintings are widely available to view online.
[28] Mark Rothko, *The Artist's Reality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 96.

deepest levels of reality. Here are abstract artists wanting to deal with matters of ultimate spiritual significance.

Where do Rothko's roots lie, and why might we see in his abstract expressionism links with our Protestant spirituality? Though he lived most of his life in the USA, Rothko was born in the Russian Pale and his Jewish heritage was certainly one of the factors that shaped his life and art, despite renouncing any formal allegiance to the faith. Another was the Protestant Puritan culture that continues to be a dominant force in the USA, and the fusion of these two influences is worth exploring.

It would be difficult to make a case for Rothko having a formal religious commitment of any kind, though there are plenty of suggestions that religious and spiritual experience was part of his make-up. As we will explore in a moment, his willingness to design a chapel is one illustration of this, as is his famous comment that the 'people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when painting them'.[29] It is hard to know what Rothko might have meant by his 'religious experience', but that is his phrase. What we can note, firstly, is that the issue at the centre of Calvinist aversion to art was one that Rothko was very conscious of – the second commandment not to make graven images. No doubt it was part of his Jewish upbringing, and he discussed it at some length in 'The Artist's Reality'[30] where he expressed his dismay at how this text had been used against artistic endeavour. Yet the non-representational abstract canvases Rothko produced suggest that the commandment never lost its influence. Reflecting on his heritage, Christopher Knight concludes that 'for Rothko, art was a sacred calling and his temple would become very much a Jewish temple. The abstract, sacred spaces of his mature works are not violated by graven images; his Jewishness helped Rothko become an abstract expressionist.'[31]

If Rothko's Jewish roots were significant, then these would have been matched by the Protestant ethos that was – and still is – a feature of the American cultural life he experienced. This ethos is one that emphasises the individual, whether applied to work ethic or personal faith. Rothko was inspired by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, whose existentialism emphasised the individual – the importance of the personal choices and commitments one makes – as well as the infinite distinction that needs to be maintained between God and humanity. At the same time, this prevailing ethos also holds to the importance of community and togetherness. As well as understanding his art in terms of a search for unity, Rothko wanted to see

[29] Mark Rothko, *Writings on Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 119-120.
[30] Mark Rothko, *The Artist's Reality*, pp. 6-8.
[31] Christopher Knight, *Omissions are not Accidents* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010,) p. 108.

himself as standing within tradition – whether it was the Patristic writers he read or the works of Fra Angelico that he studied.

In his discussion of Rothko's art, Simon Schama makes the interesting observation that one of the problems that Abstract Expressionists encountered was 'how to stay loose and free without becoming entirely random, tediously incoherent'. He says, 'The dialogue between freedom and limits was, of course definitely American.'[32] And, we might add, typically Protestant! The tension between allowing all to read and interpret scripture, while at the same time determining the boundaries of such interpretation, has always haunted the churches of the Reformation, and this very Protestant struggle found its way into Rothko's art.

But perhaps the most obvious way of identifying the influence of Protestant values on Rothko is in the construction of the Rothko Chapel,[33] already referred to, and this despite the fact that it was commissioned by observant Catholics. Rothko had an intimate involvement with the entire project, including the design and the furnishings for the chapel as well as his canvases that hang on the walls, and what immediately strikes one when entering into its small dimly-lit space is its sparseness. It is plain with grey walls and just simple wooden benches to sit on, offering the kind of simplicity one would expect of a nonconformist chapel. It is of an irregular octagonal shape with no focal point, of the sort that might suit Baptists, where the gathered community is of central significance. It takes us out of the harsh light of a Texan sky into another world, reaching deep into another place. It is, in fact, designed to be a non-denominational space for worship and reflection.

The paintings themselves took Rothko many months to complete. At first sight they may appear dark and uninteresting, but as one stays with them the complicated layering of the paint begins to allow different light tones to play on the surface. Their apparent monochrome nature gives way to a sense of the independence of each canvas, including those deliberately placed in triptychs, and yet they also interact in order to achieve a mutual coherence. There are in fact two groups of seven – one made up of black rectangular paintings against a dark purple background, and one made up of monochrome purples and mauves. To sit before them makes us feel our smallness, and this combined with their darkness almost inevitably confronts us with the tragedy of our human condition. They are paintings about the frailty and mortality of our existence. Yet they also offer an invitation to the viewer to enter a silence and emptiness in order to find a presence. Here is

[32] Simon Schama, *The Power of Art* (London: Bodley Head, 2009), p. 415.
[33] The official website can be found at <http://www.rothkochapel.org/> and contains a video showing the inside of the Chapel [accessed 2 September 2019]

expressed something of Rothko's search for transcendence, for a glimpse of the infinite. Dore Ashton writes,

> He was like a mystic in that he had an over-weaning private hunger for illumination, for personal enlightenment, for some direct experience – or at least the quality of that experience – with the transcendent. He was a mystic in the way Nietzsche described "a mystic soul … almost undecided whether it should communicate or conceal itself."[34]

Rothko's abstract canvases do evoke both presence and absence, revelation and hiddenness, the seen and the unseen, and in doing so they open us to mystery – to the contemplative silence that is the only appropriate response to the God who is beyond understanding. Indeed, there is always an ambiguity inherent within Rothko's work. On the one hand, there is the sense of a God who has fled, leaving behind only darkness; on the other hand, his ability to allow a light to emerge from within the darkness speaks of a God always waiting to be discovered. What is certain, of course, is that such a God can never be captured by words or images, and so Rothko's paintings provide us with a truly Protestant space within which to worship.

Faith in Abstract Art

In 1971, when the opening of the Rothko Chapel took place, an address was given by Dominique de Menil, who had been one of its commissioners. She paid tribute to Rothko's art, though he himself had sadly died a year earlier, and she then spoke of how in our age of visual clutter, 'only abstract art can bring us to the threshold of the divine'.[35]

Such a statement seems a long way from those uttered by Calvin. But we have attempted to show that the gap is not nearly as unbridgeable as we might think – that actually abstract art can be understood as an outworking of deeply held Protestant principles. There are those of us who, despite the legacy of Reformers such as Calvin, want to recover the significance of art and the visual for the Christian journey. At the same time, we continue to recognise the threat of idolatry in all its forms, and see in abstract art an affirmation of the transcendence of God who cannot be imaged but whose mystery we continue to seek. Indeed, there is the opportunity to discover in abstract art the apophatic dimension of spirituality that has sometimes been neglected by the inheritors of radical Protestantism.

James Turrell is a contemporary abstract artist whose parents were Quakers. Whether or not he has been influenced by the well-known Quaker conviction that there is something of the light of God in everyone, Turrell's

---

[34] Dore Ashton, *About Rothko* (Oxford: OUP, 1983), p. 194.
[35] Quoted in Susie Babka, *Through the Dark Field* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2017), pp. 270-1.

art has been notable for its exploration of light as a source for contemplation. Whereas our tendency is to use light in order to look around us and see spaces and objects clearly, Turrell wants us to see light itself. 'Light,' he claims, 'is not so much something that reveals as it is itself the revelation.'[36] Thus he creates rooms and spaces where the possibilities and the limits of human perception can be explored, where sometimes this causes severe disorientation, and where we learn to see ourselves seeing. Some pieces create the illusion of walls and barriers; others challenge us with apparently solid objects floating in the air. We see something, and yet there is nothing there. We are left feeling insecure and confused.

In his helpful reflection, Kosky shows how issues of power and control become central to Turrell's work.[37] We have learned to use light – most notably through the modern so-called 'enlightenment' period – in order to bring the world into the light, so enabling us to gain knowledge, understanding, and truth. It has been a project driven by us and under our control. But as a result, we have lost the quiet path of contemplation wherein we learn to see light in itself, and allow ourselves to be seen. We have treated mystery as a problem that we can solve by our own efforts, and forgotten that the divine mystery reveals itself only to those who wait in quietness and stillness, however uncomfortable and challenging that may prove.

If we allow it, abstract art can deepen the spiritual journey. Whether it is the colour patterns of Mondrian, the dark canvases of Rothko, or the light installations of Turrell, abstract art throws at us questions and refuses us easy answers. These artists stand alongside the iconoclasts in refusing to offer us images of God, or indeed any images that might be too easily controlled and defined. Instead, they give us space to contemplate what is transcendent, forever hidden, and infinite.

Revd Graham Sparkes is President of Luther King House, an ecumenical centre for theological learning and ministerial formation, partnered with the University of Manchester in England.

[36] Jeffrey Kosky, 'Contemplative Recovery: The Artwork of James Turrell', *Cross Currents*, Vol. 63, No. 1, p. 48.
[37] Jeffrey Kosky, 'Contemplative Recovery: The Artwork of James Turrell', pp. 44-61.