Introduction: Art and Aesthetic Experience as Signals of Transcendence?

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More than forty years ago, Peter Berger asked in his book *A Rumor of Angels* if there is still room for the transcendent and the supernatural in a modern world.¹ The background of the question was the widespread thesis that modernization and secularization are two sides of the same coin. According to this thesis, which was pretty much a dogma in the first decades after World War II, the religious belief in the transcendent would disappear concurrently with the progress of modernization. A thoroughly modern world consists of nothing but what can be empirically ascertained and sensed. God is dead and religion belongs to a pre-modern period. Against this background Berger raised the question of whether this picture of secularization as an unstoppable, triumphal progress in the wake of modernization had overlooked some basic phenomena or signals of transcendence in human existence. He pointed in particular to five aspects in this perspective: the human being’s tendency to *create order*, to *play*, to *hope*, to *condemn misdeeds* and *humor*. To Berger all these were signals of transcendence within the empirically given human situation.²

Much has changed since Berger wrote his book about signals of transcendence in a modern world. At the time it was the secularization thesis which dominated the view of the relation between religion and modernity. Today religion has made a surprising ‘come-back’ in the modern, western world, and the belief in the unstoppable, victorious progress of secularization is not quite as indisputable as it was ten or twenty years ago. In a post-modern world, old and new forms of religion can live side by side with modern forms of secularity. Nevertheless, Berger’s question concerning transcendence in a secularized world is still important. The question is not primarily whether modernity and religion may live side by side, but whether it is possible to talk of transcendence in a modern, secularized world, and not only next to it. The challenging question is whether it is possible to find room for speaking of the transcendent on modern premises. Is the transcendent only an addition to the modern world, or is it also found in the modern world? Is there, in the natural sensory world also something that transcends this world?

Berger’s starting point was anthropological. What he referred to with the expression ‘signals of transcendence’ was phenomena that belong in human life as it exists to us as empirically given, at the same time as they seem to point beyond this empirical reality. He did not use the word ‘transcendence’ as a term belonging strictly to the philosophy of religion, but as the everyday term for that which seems to transcend or go beyond the world as it seems to appear to us in our daily life.

Berger did not mention aesthetic experiences as a sign of transcendence, but he might easily have done so, since art can also be an expression of the human being’s creating order, of playing and hoping and, for that matter, also of damnation and humor. The question, however, is whether a signal or sign of transcendence in a modern world can also be found in art as art and hence as an expression of a more comprehensive form of aesthetic experience. Even though there is hardly any generally accepted definition of what art is, literature, drama, music, visual arts and architecture have historically been recognized for centuries as particularly intensive, meaningful, non-dogmatic and sensory approaches to the world. Without having to or being able to define or delimit the concept of art, it is therefore meaningful to ask: do these forms of ‘art’ give us access to forms of experience which transcend the sensory world in depth, so that it becomes not less sensorial than before, but more so?

Two circumstances in particular make this question a point of departure for the articles in this book. First, the new interest in religion and religiosity has created a renewed interest in religion and aesthetics, not only in academic contexts, but also among people in general. In the kind of religion that has returned, aesthetics plays a more prominent role than before. We see a significant affinity between aesthetic and religious experience, and a new interest has grown forth, both in the aesthetic forms of expression found in religiosity, and in religious aspects of the visual arts, literature, architecture and music. This ‘aesthetic turn’ is a noticeable trait in what is often called the return of religion, not least in Northern European culture and its Lutheran cultural tradition.

In the ‘come-back’ of religion, then, aesthetics plays a new and thought-provoking role. Hence, on the one hand, connections are made that go back to the 19th century Romantic-idealistic linking of religion and aesthetics (F.D.E. Schleiermacher), and the view of art as a truer substitute for institutionalized religion (Richard Wagner). On the other hand, the aesthetic turn also appears as a notable aestheticization of institutionalized religion. The aestheticization takes place, not only outside but also within institutionalized forms of religion. Therefore it is a central question for theology how it can understand and relate to this new convergence between religion and aesthetics.