The separation between art and Church is a fact that needs no proof. However, a trail of complex attempts to bridge this gap has resulted in a series of international exhibitions. Often, but not always, under church patronage, the exhibitions have been produced by museum people who, from their point of view, are attempting to plumb the depths of the broken relationship between art and religion and to document its counter-movement. We describe here the nine most important of these. They took place within a period of twenty years and had their showings in Germany (Berlin 1980 and 1990, Duisburg 1991), Italy (Trent 1994), Austria (Linz 1981 and Graz 1997), U.S.A. (Los Angeles 1986 and Chicago 1996), and finally in Australia (Melbourne 1998). These allow us to sketch out an overview of the most recent developments of a cultural process of differentiation.

Amidst all the differences, there is one thing that binds art and religion beyond all its separations: the way human beings search for direction in their life. Well into the Middle Ages this search for meaning was tied to an ordered society that also prescribed dogmatic orientations and their iconographically fixed images. This static ordering of meaning later turned into a modern, dynamic mediation of meaning. Renaissance and Baroque art formed its first pulsating elements, but late, amidst nineteenth-century churchly fears of change, these impulses dried up, only to be taken up again in a more lively way and developed further in art itself. Now human beings themselves penetratingly sought to work out their own complex of meaning. Although long separated from the institutionalized systems of religion, artists now found inspiration in the free-spirited and esoteric movements of their time. Wassily Kandinsky’s *Das Geistige in der Kunst* (On the Spiritual In Art) (1912), Piet Mondrian’s *Die Neue Gestaltung der Malerei* (Neo-Plasticism in Art) (1917), or Kasimir Malevich’s *Die gegenstandslose Welt* (The Non-Objective World) (1927) come to mind. What developments in religion and art have taken place in the last hundred years?
The surprising proximity of religion and art

The initiator and organizer of the first, and to this day perhaps the most important, stock-taking exhibition was Wieland Schmied, an art historian experienced at organizing important exhibitions. He was driven by the knowledge that even modern art in its essential beginnings was stamped with spiritual impulses. So, the obvious question for him was: to what extent was this the case with the different avant gardes of the moderns? This question was to be thematized in a projected exhibition and the answers documented in a practical way. The project was not explicitly about a so-called religious, or even Christian, art.

By the end of the 1970s the exhibition was ready. Schmied had gotten the working Art and Literature group of the Central Committee of German Catholics interested in this question and finally convinced to venture a corresponding project at the upcoming Katholikentag (National Catholic convention) in Berlin. The project finally came to fruition in the Orangerie of the Charlottenburg Palace in Berlin, in an exhibition relating the tension between art and religion in a controversial and eloquent title: Zeichen des Glaubens – Geist der Avantgarde (Signs of Faith – Spirit of the Avant-garde) (fig. 1). This motto neither pointed to a simple identification nor described an unbridgeable opposition. The dash between the paired concepts was to mark the two poles of an open field of tension: was it more a connecting dash, or a separating dash? What separated, and what bound together faith and avant-garde? This was the question of the organizer as he looked at the 225 works of ninety well-known artists of the period from 1890 to 1980.

This undertaking met with great skepticism, even rejection from many people of that time, and not just in ecclesiastical circles. Nevertheless, even after the closing of the moderately visited presentation, the exhibition continued to have an effect, and in the years following became very influential. Like hardly any other, it made history; it turned inevitably into a radically new interpretation of the art of the twentieth-century. Among the memorable exhibits were Barnett Newman’s Stations of the Cross (the only European presentation to this day of these works, now in the National Gallery, Washington, D.C.), the meditation room with the late paintings of Marc Rothko, the triptych Monopink. Monogold. Monoblu of Yves Klein, and the realistically presented Kreuze (Crosses) of Arnulf Rainer.