Introduction

The founders of abstract painting, and hence abstract art—Vasily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, and Kazimir Malevich, together with the younger El Lissitzky, who brought abstraction into the wider world—were, from youth and early adulthood, adherents of institutional as well as "revealed" (meaning biblical) religion. I phrase this statement in this way because in three of the four cases, inquiring art lovers have been told for some two generations that anything that could be considered "spiritual" in their work must derive from the ersatz religion of Theosophy. True, probably only one of these four artists remained a religious practitioner in later life (in at least one case, possibly owing to divorce and remarriage), but this is a study of the protagonists' ideological origins and enduring worldviews on faith, which can resonate in their later work.

None of these painters is a religious artist as such. To make that claim, one would have to import religion as a moral impetus external to aesthetics. That can be done only under circumstances of unusual compatibility, such as the influence of St. Francis of Assisi on Giotto. Kandinsky had to leave Russia once his work started to seem too private, even when not keyed to religion, which some of it was. After moving to Paris, Mondrian let his church membership lapse: if there is any evidence of his seeking out an equivalent church there, in London, or even in New York, where he lived near two Calvinist churches, I have not seen it. Malevich, who would have been treated as at least schismatic (if not heretical) by most Russians, not to mention the secret police, manages in his art practice to divulge aspects of a more-than-ethnic Catholic identity while maintaining a "popular front" attitude toward the Communist government. The only one to succeed in projecting a pursuit of abstract art in concert with the religious destiny of humanity under Socialism was Lissitzky in his earlier art practice, where his Jewish messianic and socialist outlooks were effectively one. Later on, he would have seemed as secular as anybody else—we can only say, perhaps including to himself.

In the end, a semipatrician Kandinsky turned inward. A middle-class *honnête-homme* Mondrian, also usually in foreign society, wrote about religion but would probably have been too polite to talk about it. Malevich and Lissitzky, both outsiders in different ways, were more social: the one most comfortable as leader of a revolutionary utopian art sodality, the other a secularized social prophet with Old Testament roots.

Most Americans were still committed to traditional religious faiths in 1970, when the art world was excited to learn of dabbling in semioccult Theosophy by some of the founders of abstraction. At the close of a widely influential book *The Sounding Cosmos: A Study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting*, exploring the significance of Theosophy for early abstract painting, the Finnish art historian Sixten Ringbom avoids discussing the Christian faith of Kandinsky's admitted "spirituality" and made creedal culture sound merely happenstance, akin to what people used to consider a mere change in cultural style: "By and large, . . . the spiritual message and religious element of Kandinsky's art has disappeared from public consciousness, mainly, it appears, owing to the social mechanisms conditioning twentieth-century taste."[1] I have found this an exceedingly odd claim to make at that time, when organized religion was doing so much for social justice on many fronts. No other book did more to expunge institutional faith from the history of modern art than Ringbom's. I know it has often been defended as somehow advancing spirituality (hence, somehow, religion?) in a nondescript manner; but that is "part of the problem." While *Faith in Art* stands against Ringbom, it is not an anti-Theosophical tract. It ought only to be considered culturally constructive—or reconstructive—to highlight the scripturally revealed faiths in which abstraction was rooted as authentically "spiritual" in telling statements or actions by the founders of abstraction; that is to say, ecumenically constructive rather than secularist.

Important cultural background to the topic of religion in early modernism is the Symbolist aesthetic, into which Theosophy stylistically played. Symbolism, sometimes distinguished as a style by a capital letter and sometimes by the French term *symbolisme* (to avoid confusion with what people ordinarily mean by literary symbols), originated in the mid-nineteenth century in French poetry and belles lettres. By the turn of the century, it was rampant in all the arts. Central to the Symbolist poetic is a sense that the poet or artist or composer, besides being an extraordinarily sensitive receptor of sensations from the world, can be a marvelous combiner of material stimulations (spoken words, pigment, the physically evident tones in music). Such combinations, assembled with

sufficiently perceptive sympathy (a Symbolist could say, *magic*), are to foment in the receptive sensibility of the spectator the same sensation that had first been provoked in nature, except now *artificially,* which is to say, *by art*—like a drug whose chemical formula would effect, say, a sensation identical to a humid jungle or a desert sunset. A very taste for artificiality—for undeniable mediation—effaced the common sentiments attached to nature, especially on the part of intellectual city dwellers. This same move away from nature—and almost by definition towards abstraction (sometimes by way of decoration)—also led numbers of Symbolists to convert to Catholicism, thanks to the sheer nonnaturalism of ritual and to the literal aesthetic sensationalism of incense, mediaeval chant, and organ music (spectacle over and against theology). Since sensations were to be synthesized into something unique, beyond nature, even the synthetic, like the artificial (however ironically), became a possible predicate of aesthetic approbation: sophisticated "artificiality" guaranteed *art.*

It was a persistent attraction to the more occult resources of Symbolism that led art historians to ignore biblically centered revealed religion, Jewish or Christian, in favor of assimilating whatever seemed spiritual in early modern art to Theosophy: an Orientalizing element of turn-of-the-century culture devised in New York in 1875 by Madame Helena Blavatsky and a U.S. Army colonel, Henry Olcott, a Buddhist convert. Like much Buddhism in America, Theosophy prevaricated about whether it was a religion or not; but in any case, it put itself odds with the biblical faiths. The Christian painters Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Malevich all had flirtations with it, but despite its supposed antiquity Theosophy was only a newly influential type of spiritualism.

Other similar tendencies came to the fore in the culture surrounding Symbolism. A major case of spiritualism concerns the Swedish occultist painter Hilma af Klint, claimed by some to have invented abstract painting before Kandinsky. There has been much speculation about her work since the 2018–19 exhibition *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. My reasons for not including her among the founders of abstraction reflect what is at stake philosophically, theologically, and art-historically in the cases of those who did move into full abstraction.

Klint was basking in the glow of Symbolism, as were others who dabbled in Theosophy without, as she claimed, painting literal transcriptions of directives sent from another sphere of reality. But her case poses questions. First, a logical quandary: according to accepted testimony, her breakthrough paintings were made to order following direct instructions from extraterrestrial powers named "High Masters" or "Lords of the Mysteries." She accessed these directives

through séances and similar events. As reportage issuing from outside the artist, the resultant images want to claim a certain unearthly objectivity (they might even be subject to "correction" by subsequent extrasensory contact). But then they cannot also claim to be *non*objective, as proper abstract paintings are required to be.

There is such a thing as the representation of a naturally impossible thing by virtue of visible contradiction: one example of this is the mythological gryphon, part eagle and part lion, a popular motif in Symbolist literature and painting. El Lissitzky was intrigued by such motifs in baroque synagogue decoration (Chapter 4), where, precisely as figmental, they satisfy the commandment of *not* representing the nature that is divine Creation.

Theologically speaking, if the spiritualist accounts of Klint's paintings are valid, she had serious trouble with an avowed Christian faith. In her thirties, before leaving representational painting behind, she had taught Sunday school as a member of the Church of Sweden, which is Lutheran. A decade or so later, after experiments with automatic writing in association with a small group of spiritualists, Klint became the follower of the spirit Ananda, who told her in 1904 "that she was to execute paintings on the astral plane"; and with that procedure underway in 1907, "Hilma worked wholly as a medium; she was not aware of what she did" while painting "without preliminary drawings" (7).[2] By 1912, she is said to have been both unconsciously and consciously painting "as a partial medium, so she was able to influence the composition of the pictures" (8). But whether fully or only partially prompted by unearthly guides, it is inconceivable that, as a Lutheran Sunday-school teacher, Klint never studied Martin Luther's *Large Catechism,* where a heart, misled by an idolatry prohibited by the Commandments, "seeks help and consolation from creatures, saints, or devils. It neither cares for God nor expects good things from him sufficiently to trust that he wants to help, nor does it believe that whatever good it receives comes from God" (§21).

More ordinary theological questions arising in Western painting concern errors of iconography (mistakes in symbology) or else a vying with divine creation by extreme naturalism. Explicit false worship is rarely a problem in the modern West, but it is here. According to another account, in 1905, one of Klint's assignments for the High Master Amaliel began with prayer and fasting as well as preparatory sketches for the "Temple" works of 1907 to 1915.[3] She was told to pray, "O Thou, give me the picture of inner clarity. Teach me to listen and receive in humility the glorious message that Thee in Thy dignity deign to send the children of the earth."[4] Here any serious monotheist wants to know, what is the identity of this "Thee"?[5]

Art-historically speaking, taking Klint's works as formally original abstractions runs into problems of sources, for whatever the High Masters said, there are earthly—indeed, European—stylistic sources for at least some of her formal vocabulary. Most blatant are the poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's botanical diagrams concerning the *Urpflanze:* his search for the "primal plant" (*The Metamorphosis of Plants,* 1790), a proto-evolutionary concern that by Klint's day had already influenced Theosophy. Closer still may be the even earlier engravings of diatom-like forms and shells, in books of the freewheeling Protestant mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772)—founder of Swedenborgianism—whose father had been considered a pietist heretic by Klint's own official church.

Klint now joins a queue of aspiring pre-Kandinskyan proto-abstractionists that includes the Czech František Kupka and the Lithuanian Mikalojus Čiurlionis. True, the turn-of-the-century reclusive spiritualism that dominates her production is something that Kandinsky, in the same generation, sometimes appealed to early on in order to counter the positivism of the time. But after his first German Expressionist work he went back for a time to a new Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic that, for a precious historical moment, had yet to force an oppressive Bolshevik disenfranchisement of religion and thus could appeal to his somewhat upper-crust Christianity as a decent way of finally getting down to the social brass tacks of the Gospel. After the Russian Civil War, however, the government reacted with harsh *ressentiment* against faith—notably the state church—opting for religious repression instead of reformation.

In the cases of each of the early abstract painters who are the subjects of this book, I will engage primarily in a critical discussion of their writings since all four published extensive theoretical texts. Each case will also analyze examples of the artwork with a view to revealing one form of religious connection or another with the four artists, in order of birth.

Their social identities are quite different. As a well-heeled young Russian Orthodox legal scholar turned artist, Kandinsky inherited the local pictorial context of the Russian icon as an antinaturalistic, schematized sacred image, while also possessing a sophisticated operational understanding of Holy Scripture. He eventually transitioned from expressionism to full abstraction, to the point of adopting a formal geometry parallel to, if not really allied with, constructivism.

The Dutch Reformed Calvinist Mondrian, son of a school principal, began his artistic life as a sort of general-purpose Symbolist, gained traction as a post-impressionist, and then used cubist disassembly of form as a stepping stone to

his pure—some would say *purest*—form of abstraction, including a kind of idealist structurality that can be affiliated stylistically with constructivism.[6] But constructivists are usually materialists having nothing to do with theology, and Mondrian seems to have been affected substantially by the interesting contemporary revisionist theology coming out of the Free University of Amsterdam.

Malevich, a Catholic, was the son of a Polish engineer. He was raised in Ukraine and studied art in Moscow, where he also absorbed the icon tradition—on, I am convinced, a secondary, non-Orthodox basis. Malevich began (as provincial art lovers sometimes still do) with an attraction to impressionism, followed by an interest in a local variety of post-impressionism. He moved closer to the avant-garde with a still somewhat homemade and remedial "cubo-futurism," a phase that, however, made possible suprematism: Malevich's signal contribution to the history of art. Malevich shows evidence of religious instruction only in the family, absorbing certain basics, including prayers and the explanations that would go with them, from his mother (with whom he lived for his whole life) and a father who was ecumenically inclined, sometimes attending Orthodox as well as Catholic services. (Note: in the chapters follow, only Malevich's works are titled in accordance with a catalogue raisonné [N], given discrepancies between sources, as to titles and dates.[7])

El Lissitzky, who studied art, architecture, and engineering, concerned himself with the survival of Jewish culture in the increasingly irreligious new Soviet Union. If not one of the originators, he was a most important early enthusiast of abstract painting who proved indispensable to the expansion of its composition-into-construction aspect (often alluded to from about 1920 by Kandinsky without engaging this soon politically troublesome subject); this expanded his purview from painting into graphics, photography, installation, and architecture. Lissitzky's involvement with Judaism was more than folkloric: the Bolsheviks were a blessing to the Russian-Jewish population in terms of social assimilation *only*. Yiddish literature and theater were permitted to thrive but only on a secularist basis. Jewish religiosity is not all centered on the synagogue, yet it proves possible to see Lissitzky as managing to be somewhat more religiously Jewish than what the new secularism outwardly obliged. His sense of the future of human history is also remarkably ecumenical; and as for the human future, his can be considered more religious than Malevich's far-fetched, socially irrelevant late utopianism.

In each of these four artists' cases, the evidence for various religiosities is substantial but interestingly different. Still, some might ask, Why write a book

that many modernists and contemporary artists would scorn for being slanted toward religion (and not a postmodern salad either), yet which many remnant believers would find distastefully devoted to "irreligious" abstract art? Both difficulties need attention, and both perhaps against the common background of the abolition of metaphysics that was the legacy of positivism, and another century of accumulated popular ignorance about art as hopelessly beholden to nature.

Apropos of antimetaphysicalism: in the aftermath of the First World War, John Dewey placed what might once have been considered a religious type of hope in science (*Reconstruction in Philosophy,* 1920), quite side by side with "progressive" Soviet atheism, although Kandinsky had already spiritualized science while by no means discounting religion in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911; see Chapter 1). Religion managed to persist as a major feature in Western culture beyond the Second World War, despite a cult of science and its attendant philosophy. Once the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, and capitalism became the only game in town, ever more Americans and Europeans no longer bothered about God—as if the "jig" were simply "up." A side benefit of the present survey, however, is its showing up as at least possible, a certain scope for altruism in regard to social virtue on the part of believers and nonbelievers alike, before Stalin.

A century after its beginnings, a peculiar antipathy toward modernist art does still prevail among many practicing American Christians, as though there were something ungodly about abstract painting. As essentially aniconic, Judaism never had a problem with nonobjective art. Given the history of Reformation iconoclasm, this is a phenomenon peculiar to still supposedly majority Protestant countries like Britain and America. Those concerned do not as a rule seem prepared to assume that a picture of *nothing* (however praised by irreligious aesthetes for purity) must be even worse than a picture of *anything.* There are already too many books on iconoclasm, however: we now need to deal with affirmative nonobjectivity by investigating how four great pioneers left behind evidence of their religiosity. Study of the evident religious backgrounds of those who founded abstraction is unlikely to convince dyed-in-the-wool skeptics of either God or abstract art, but it might at least stir up new thinking.

As far as terminology is concerned, I try to avoid some words germane to the subject when I cannot be sure what they mean or connote. This includes "absolute," especially as capitalized; I am not qualified to say how much of that problem is thanks to G. W. F. Hegel and German idealism and consequent romanticism. In *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*

(1975), Robert Rosenblum calls attention to the emphasis by the Lutheran Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) on interior piety, as provoking a popular theological sea change: his "theological search for divinity outside the trappings of the Church lies at the core of many a romantic artist's dilemma: how to express experiences of the spiritual, of the transcendental, without having recourse to such traditional themes as the Adoration, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, the Ascension, whose vitality, in the Age of Enlightenment, was constantly being sapped."[8] But if that statement strikes me as resting on an inadequate notion of religion, then what do I mean by religion? I try to hold to the definition put forth in 1912 by the great sociologist of religion Émile Durkheim: "*A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them*" (emphasis original).[9] As for God: much that I have read and heard throughout my life convinces me that I have a decent sense of what believers normally mean by using that word, which, however difficult to define adequately, seems quite centered, and as such, a lot less vague than "spiritual"; and as for lacking a definition of "God" as the unmoving center of the whole problem, we are told that Sir Isaac Newton (who was also a theologian) was at pains to define gravity.

This explanation will account for distaste on my part toward notions like the French *laicité* or the Russian *duoverie*. *Laicité*—"laicism"—is an extreme of sometimes aggressive state "neutrality" toward religion: a phenomenon that would be inappropriate in Britain, with its state church, or even for the United States, where pluralism, not to mention ecumenism, promises a more vital unity than such as operationally atheistic principle. Is it possible that *laicité* was a reaction to French *symboliste* extremism? A century ago, soon before *laicité* became law, Téodor de Wyzewa, cofounder of the arch-Symbolist *Revue wagnérienne,* in translating into French the classic thirteenth-century book of the lives of the saints, Jacobus de Voragine's *The Golden Legend* (1902), observed in his introduction that the text he had inherited was already "essentially an attempt to vulgarize *or 'laicize'* religious scholarship" (emphasis mine).[10]

Duoverie is a special Russian term for the simultaneous practice of two faiths, especially paganism and Christianity, which occurred in the remote Russian folk culture explored, early on, by Kandinsky. But Kandinsky certainly understood that for a literate adult Jew or Christian, subscribing to *duoverie* would no doubt break the commandments of any monotheistic faith. Being a Jew or Christian entails *not* being a pagan, religion being a social as well as an individual affair. "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (the First Commandment, or the

second, Talmudically speaking) cannot be elasticized to include "other gods beside me." This must be why, as a Christian, Kandinsky makes a point of stressing in his "Reminiscences" the two equally objective-scientific determinants of his early expedition to the Russian hinterlands: to study the principles of peasant criminal law, on one hand, and the ethnology of pagan and/or dualist practices of the same indigenes, on the other (K1:365). That meant systematic analysis on both counts, and sympathy for the people would have entailed no misplaced sympathy for old pagan practices on the part of this dutiful scholar who also went to Mass.

I am likewise wary of the word "mystical" in view of its indistinct boundary with the occult. Nevertheless, the text that follows proves that there is a great deal of authentic religion left once the matter has been cleared of these few problematic terms.

Three of our four artists experienced life in revolutionary Russia, from which the fourth, Mondrian, was culturally cut off by an Allied blockade until 1922. Western culture has become so thoroughly secular that we now have to stop and consider how ordinary citizens at the time had been familiar with general religious concepts taught at school as well as in church, in Russia as well as in Mondrian's Netherlands: concepts such as the Kingdom of God.

Soon after the 1905 revolution in Russia, something of a religious revival had actually ensued in the Russian Orthodox Church, including leftists. During the portentous year 1917, the situation was remarkably vexed because the church as well as general society's contingents of left and right wings. This affected Alexander Karensky's inauspicious 1917 Russian provisional government, which lasted from February to October (or March to November, New Style), when many Russians were also exercised by the question of reestablishing the state Church's high "Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus'," abolished by Peter the Great in 1721. Given reform elements within the Church—notably against the power of tyrannical bishops—an wide range of views was entertained before the patriarchate was indeed reestablished. Such decisions might be made on nationalist or other political grounds, but also, not to forget, for a normal religious reasons. Even as the government moved to take over parish schools, the Moscow Church Council was asked by General Kornilov (ostensibly supporting the provisional government but involved in a rightist coup) to pray for his army. But the Council said no: it would only pray for both sides.[11] And the patriarchate was in fact restored four days after the Bolsheviks took over, on October 28 (N.S. November 11), 1917.

While it is true that by 1919 a Russian churchgoer could not be a member in good standing of the Communist Party, it is also true that any sense of immediate secularization is disproved by the stupefied 1920 report of the British atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell, who writes about what was still the "Russian Soviet Republic" just then: "Religion is still very strong. I went into many churches, where I saw obviously famished priests in gorgeous vestments, and a congregation enormously devout. Generally more than half the congregation were men, and among the men were many soldiers. This applies in the towns as well as in the country. In Moscow I constantly saw people in the streets crossing themselves."[12] The state church had already been disestablished two years earlier (with its governmentally restored patriarch). Even into the early 1920s, however, advocacy of atheism was not obligatory in schools, where many teachers were still religious, though they could no longer teach religion as a subject.

The deep embeddedness of Christianity in Russian culture in the early revolutionary period does warrant consideration. For their first ten years, the Bolsheviks had as People's Commissar for Education Anatoly Lunacharsky, who, though totally unreligious himself, understood quite uncynically the Christian Socialism implicit in Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy. Of Dostoyevsky, Lunacharsky wrote: "It . . . seems to him that at least the best of [the] officials of the priesthood and the very 'spirit' that informs them are, in their own way, 'revolutionary.' 'Come, oh come!' exclaim the inspired monks of Dostoyevsky's works. What is it that they thus invoke? What is 'to come' is that the Church, with its charity and brotherhood, should, at some stage, overcome the state and all society founded on property, that—at some future time—the Church would build some special, almost unearthly socialism."[13]

With Kandinsky, Malevich, and Lissitzky, we will often have reason to refer to the culturally and artistically crucial four to five years after 1917, after the Bolsheviks won the Civil War. That religion was still alive during this hiatus of golden-age modernity, when food was very scarce but spirits were very high, is never brought up in respect to the development of modern Russian and Soviet art. But it was there, at very least as part of the range of "utopian" possibilities that opened up until crude atheism stamped everything else out.

As to revealed religion's foundation in scripture, one particular book of the Old Testament seems paramount in the artists' regard: Isaiah, with its inspiring concern with the coming Kingdom of God. This long prophetic book is best known for its unforgettable image of beating "swords into ploughshares, and . . . spears into pruning hooks" (Isa. 2:4), as well as the splendid prophecy, "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth" (65:17)—a perfect "New Jerusalem"

open to all, including the poor and oppressed. But I cannot help also thinking that these artists, with plenty of here-and-now practical concerns, would not also have discovered in Isaiah an intimation of the Marxist notion of art as compensation or antidote for alienated labor: "They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; . . . and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labour in vain" (65:22–3).

The four artists I discuss in this book diverged in their faith backgrounds. None was religious in any conspicuous way, but they believed that art had something formative to say about the possibility of a new, more humane society, by a faith ultimately based on scriptural, and sometimes surprisingly theological, intellectual formations.

Conclusion

The ambiguous title of this book—*Faith in Art*—is deliberate. One is invited to settle on the nuance of one or another preposition for oneself. No ambiguity, however, clouds its wider purpose, which is to depose of the prevailing idea that whatever might seem at least vaguely "spiritual" here is surely unconcerned with biblical truth and the social, institutional life of what Durkheim called "church." By countering assumptions about supposed irreligion of early modern artists (not to mention the thoroughly mistaken sense of its dependence on Theosophy), the book may more broadly also serve to introduce readers largely ignorant of religion to certain basic theological concepts that were known to all educated people at the time when abstract painting first took off.

Our four abstract pioneers, however, had in childhood and youth been encouraged to take up their own basic presumptions of faith in revealed religion, meaning religion based on Holy Scripture (and the complex hermeneutic and historical interpretations of it that account for denominational differences). We today might presume secularism as every modern person's basic script, but the first questions that stump us all as we grew up are more metaphysical. And just as one's mother tongue is a singular language, with not only a special vocabulary but a special grammar and even intonation, one's religious ideology likely has a confessional aspect, specifiable as to creed.

Later in their lives, three of our four artists had to deal with Marxist political ideology in Russia as well—not necessarily instead of, but in addition to, their bedrock faith. Even the fourth artist, Mondrian, was in his own solitary way sufficiently concerned with biblically based social justice to allow justification as such to condition his pictorial compositions, and even how to explain them. In his case—and in Lissitzky's late *Abstract Cabinet*—religion can be seen to visibly inform abstract painting,

Obstructing or ignoring the question of religion is a prevalent aversion in modern art, which did after all arise in secularist circumstances; but the positivist, scientistic extreme was as dogmatic as any creed (see Kandinsky, in Chapter 1).

Even today, many intelligent religious folk are so culturally reactionary that abstract painting strikes them as categorically transgressive. True, some devotees of abstraction want to avoid metaphysics entirely, in the interest of a certain kind of "purity"; they may still wish to approve certain works as more "spiritual," however vaguely, at least instead of being "merely decorative." Thus this book, concerned with religious faith, tends to abjure the word "spiritual" almost completely (despite Kandinsky's special attachment to it).

Nevertheless, all four of these artists are noteworthy for their concerns, however differently inflected, with a biblically promised "Kingdom of God," which we are told will be more just than the present world; and which we are also often encouraged to help bring about. We know that these artists knew all about that because in one way or another they wrote about it. Liberals now call such a belief utopian, sometimes dismissively; cynics now call it "utopic"—apparently, all the more farfetched, just in order to guarantee that the rest of us don't think they are foolish enough to believe it.

Kandinsky's Christian Orthodoxy can probably be said to have a more private side than any of the others: his otherwise altogether quite "institutional" church affiliation still has a distinguished meditative tradition that has been encouraged for centuries among religiously inclined laity as well as clergy. It also has a sense of communion designed to engender contemplation of the Kingdom to come. There no mystery in Kandinsky's always writing about the *inner significance* of his work. Orthodoxy's long and vital icon tradition is also radically personal, involving personal communion with, and the kissing, of holy images. This special, practically sacramental role of images, I argue, continues to impact Kandinsky's abstractions.

The Calvinist Mondrian seems, from early on, to be averse to figural images, in favor of such motifs as the exterior of his parish church, where he would go to hear the Word of God preached, or unpopulated landscapes, before developing into a most rigorous abstractionist. Mondrian's case practically intersects with theology because his own thinking is so akin to an important contemporary theologian of neo-Calvinist ilk, Herman Bavinck, whose theology dwells extensively on the Kingdom of God to come.

Malevich is not generally recognized as a Catholic. The unfortunate reason for this seems to be that Catholics don't care about him or, for that matter, any of the other abstractionists since—with the enormously important exception of Continental Europe—the Catholic Church is largely uninterested in abstract art (a more provincial American reason to write this book). At the same time, because the matching of Malevich to the flat and stylized Russian icon has, in the

new millennium, become as much as a critical cliché, *Faith in Art* attempts to show that Malevich actually has, besides a certain iconic modality, a more Roman Catholic aspect.

The Jewish aspect of El Lissitzky also pertains to an ultimately religious emphasis on the coming Kingdom of God, foretold by the prophets—notwithstanding Lissitzky's compatibly enthusiastic Marxism, which can be considered to be Jewish at a "universalistic" instead of ethnic extreme. To employ one of his own notions: Lissitzky functioned knowingly as a kind of "transfer station" between the irreducibly idealistic abstraction of Malevich's suprematism and the practicalities and materialist emphasis of constructivism; and he was likewise interested in a Jewish universalism, for his purposes transcending Christianity by way of an idealistic Communism.

Inspiration drawn from religion surely did inform the early abstract modernists: this is a fact. That religious faith and abstract art, each with some claim to universality, both tended to be denied by repressive regimes is not surprising; nor that positivism could not tolerate any (*other*) sort of faith as valid. But this does not obliterate the presence of faith in abstract painting, where it did inform modern abstraction from the start as this study has shown.

The principal parallel between all four artists here is indeed their common, but surprising, familiarity with the Word of God and, second, their distinct knowledge of their characteristic denominational practices in liturgy. Only Mondrian, the Calvinist, seems not to have been affected by liturgical practice (a fairly common Calvinist position). Malevich not only understands both Western and Eastern modalities of holy images (especially the liturgical involvement of images in the East), but he proves capable of negotiating between them and was even brave enough to speak out publicly on the forbidden topic of God. Even the most Communist Lissitzky, as declaredly engaged in thoroughgoing world reconstruction, loved Ecclesiastes. He it is, who would seem to have left anything religious quite behind, who most calls to my mind the activism of the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "It is the theme of the whole Bible that . . . God's kingdom is to be upon the earth, that his will be done on earth."[1]

The preceding chapters have explored how embedded religious motifs, themes, and behaviors were taken for granted as given, sometimes as material to be transmuted into abstraction, by means of form as a cultural birthright. That presumption needs to be revisited now because it was first ignored and then forgotten

In the course of their unfolding, the chapters demonstrate that religion was very much at hand for these founding modernists. This is of some intellectual

significance after negotiating postmodernity. It is no betrayal of principle to articulate the more idealist motivations that served to bring about distinctly modern modality in painting. Indeed, the wider critical contribution of *Faith in Art* is to show critical art theory had overcompensated when it seemed necessary to articulate the validity of form on exclusively its own terms: we can now presuppose a formalism of cosmopolite richness.

The marketplace has now created shell games of supposed alternative "value"—and many art people care primarily or wholly about investing to increase their portfolios—but even art-world manipulation does not change the integral knowledge informing art, its conceptual substance. If that is permitted to defend itself, then a further significance of this study would be to provide us all with a depth of knowledge on early abstract painting that could liberate studio practice, freeing us that much more from the prevailing clichés that sustain the consideration of art as a mere commodity.

Most affirmatively as well as specifically, this study has concerned itself with the religions that helped inform these artists' highly singular senses of abstraction; these can now be understood to have been concomitants of initial abstraction itself. Without being remotely uniform, these four abstract modernists found ways of thinking about abstraction and their religious place in the social world that served to generate creativity within their diverse frames of reference. This book strives to give us a view into that privileged perspective, a century later.

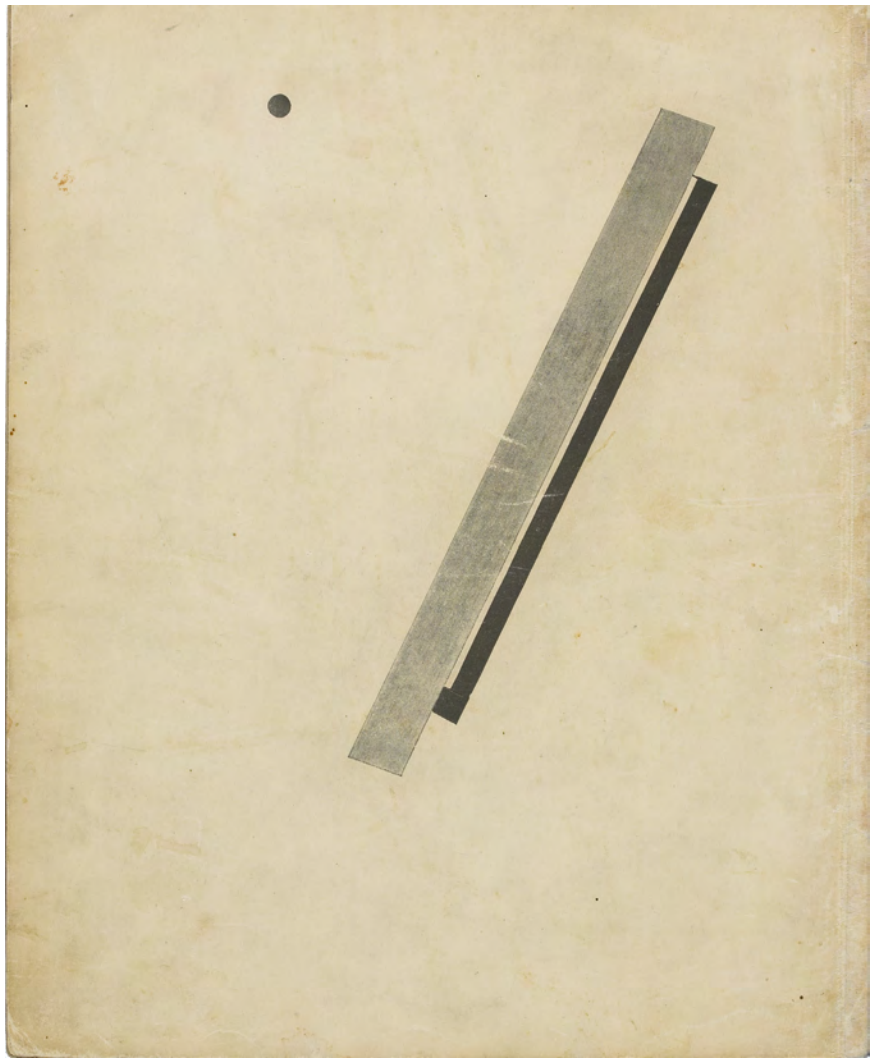

Figure 4.8 El Lissitzky, *About Two Squares: A Suprematist Tale of Two Squares in Six Constructions* (in Russian), 1922 [back cover], Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (85-B4897). © El Lissitzky / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

1

An Orthodox Kandinsky

Background

This chapter is longer than the others, largely because Kandinsky read and wrote much that was concerned with religion. Also, while three of our four progenitor artists were also concerned with the Russian icon, Kandinsky had the most religiously direct experience of that specific, and in a sense timeless, form of religious art.

Vassily Vassilyevich Kandinsky (1866–1944) might have remained a provincial landscape painter had it not been for the exalted role of the icon in the Russian Orthodox Church, of which he was a lifelong member. The term "icon" has become so abused in present-day culture that it is best to establish its fundamental meaning as deriving from the Orthodox Church, where it is a highly regulated image (almost always painted) of a holy person or persons addressing the spectator by offering intercessory access to God by prayerful appeal to the holy persons represented. A "cradle Orthodox," such as Kandinsky, is taught at an early age to see icons as sacred images akin to Scripture: holy images standing in for Christ, the angels, the Virgin Mary, and the prophets or saints, either individually (normally accompanied by an identificatory attribute) or as part of a known narrative from the Bible or subsequent sacred history.

The role of the icon in Christianity had been seriously vexed in the earlier Middle Ages—well before the separation between the Eastern Greek (and then Russian) Orthodox Church and the Western Latin Catholic Church in the Great Schism of 1054—by iconoclastic disputes that condemned all images as violations of the Second Commandment (sometimes counted as part of the First): "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image." St. Basil the Great articulated a justification for images in the fourth century with the principle that the honor paid to a proper icon passes directly to its prototype. However complex the argument became, this basic reason for having an image at all was established

at the Second Council of Nicaea, in 787. But after the Great Schism, the Eastern and Western churches developed very different systems of representational painting.

From an early age, in Russia, Kandinsky was taught Orthodox tenets: notably the icon as a practically sacramental sign of sacred presence—quite differently from the Western empirical tendency to think of painting as beholden to nature (even if, God-in-nature). In the twentieth century, many a modernist seemed to think the icon put Eastern Christians on an inside track to modern painting, if only for the icon's strong conceptual aspect and formal stylization, whereas the Catholic Church, understanding religious painting as a "Bible for the illiterates" less stringently (Orthodox icon painters are traditionally called "writers"), fomented in the West more naturalistic forms and narrative action than was deemed proper for the nobly static and formulaic-ceremonial icon in the East.

The basic history of Russian icon painting was also something with which Kandinsky, as a believing intellectual, was familiar, such as the complications that began when Patriarch Nikon of Moscow, in the seventeenth century, sought to bring the national church into liturgical alignment with the venerable but more reformed Greek Orthodox church (heir to Byzantium) —including openness to a more naturalistic style for icons. The effort backfired, producing the schismatic Old Believers, especially in remote areas, supported (as perhaps is ever the case) by wealthy opponents of progressive change in the institutional church. These schismatics preferred to have old icons copied again and again to counter the Westernizing icons that they saw, devotionally speaking, as going to pot side by side with the secular baroque painting (too Catholic) that became fashionable under Peter the Great. In the early twentieth century, however, a revived aesthetic and a sustained religious interest in the best mode of the older icons reemerged, which—to complicate the story still further—even concerned the anti-religious Soviets insofar as the icons had become a matter of national treasure. Kandinsky would be active in the midst of that.

One may think of this philosophically inclined painter and Orthodox Christian who worked for the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, relating the old problem of iconic Westernization to Hegel and Marxism. For what can be considered the earlier, false modernity of Western naturalistic influence on Russian icon painting, might compare, for Kandinsky, with Ludwig Feuerbach's arguing for "perfecting" religion instead of abolishing it under Marxism—as critiqued by Marx's collaborator Friedrich Engels in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1885; 1888). This book is the source of the famous idea that Karl Marx took Hegel's dialectic and "placed

it on its head; or rather, . . . placed it on its feet" (383).[1] In it, Engels criticizes Feuerbach's adoption of a form of Enlightenment worldview and "lumps it together with the shallow, vulgarized form in which the materialism of the eighteenth century continues to exist today in the heads of the naturalists and doctors" (369). By analogy (I am presuming), Kandinsky would have recognized this as akin to the artistic problem of the naturalistic European baroque as in fact contaminating the Eastern icons under the "reformist" Patriarch Nikon, who had instituted the Orthodox Westernizations. So Nikon would have seemed to parallel the false modern start of philosophy when Hegel could proclaim "the self-movement of the concept going on from all eternity, no one knows where, but at all events independently of any thinking human brain, . . . [an] ideological perversion [that] had to be done away with" (383). It also comes closer to both the icon and to modern painting for Engels to credit Marx, against Hegel, for his comprehending "concepts in our heads more realistically—as images of real things instead of regarding the real things as images of some or another stage of the absolute concept" (383).

Kandinsky was the son of an upper-middle-class tea merchant with a touch of Asian aristocracy (Mongolian) on his mother's side. After studying art as a youth, he was educated as a lawyer; but in 1896, at the age of thirty, he turned down a law professorship at what is now the University of Tartu, in Estonia (then in the Russian Empire) and moved to Munich to study painting. As an active exhibiting painter there, he was an early participant in German Expressionism, and before long a founder of the group *Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider), between 1911 and 1914.

In the countryside outside Munich, Kandinsky took an interest in a local South German mode of folkloric painting termed *Hinterglasmalerei* ("painting on the back of glass"), especially during the writing of *Concerning the Spiritual in Art.* It is tempting to parallel this with the icon, but the two modes have little in common except for both being unnaturalistic (in the Bavarian folk works, by default?) and both taking stereotypical motifs from the Bible or standard lives of the saints. Kandinsky's *Hinterglasmalerei* also entailed a personal "ecumenism"; for between about 1909 and 1914, he and his German Lutheran companion the painter Gabriele Münter enjoyed collecting local *Hinterglasbilder,* giving these Catholic "holy pictures" a home in Münter's country house at Murnau, near Munich. During that time, half of Kandinsky's thirty or so known glass paintings were executed in one year—1911—while he was finishing *Concerning the Spiritual in Art,* which was also the pivotal time for emergent abstraction. In that year, only three of his *Hinterglasbilder* are secular.[2]

That his *Hinterglasmalerei* was sentimentally—and indirectly, religiously—connected to Münter as much as excuses Kandinsky's coming surprisingly close to touristic or "airport" art. In 1914, the radical Russian formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky would publish a denunciation of such in an essay that would have drawn Kandinsky's interest just by its title: "The Resurrection of the Word." A quotation will show how, despite not finding Kandinsky's *Hinterglasmalerei* as lacking interest, I do see it approaching populism:

> The broad masses are satisfied with market-place art, but market-place art shows the death of art. . . . In eras when the forms of art were alive no-one would have brought bazaar monstrosities into the house. When artisan icon-painting spread in Russia in the 17th century, and 'in the icons there appeared such violence and absurdities as were not fitting for a Christian even to look at,' this meant that the old forms were already superseded. Nowadays, the old art has already died, and the new has not yet been born . . . Only the creation of new forms of art can restore to man sensation of the world, can resurrect things and kill pessimism.[3]

Also relevant to Kandinsky would have been Shklovsky's 1919 theorization of a non-narrative element in folk literature, "*syuzhet* constuctions" (emphasis original), whereby motif complexes are subject to thematic abbreviation and condensation (the complex of a diagonal lance plus a mounted rider and even just a dark blob might as well *equal* St. George).[4]

There is a tendency to lump *Hinterglasmalerei* together with icons, which smacks of the secularism that would prefer reducing both to a common denominator of ethnology by the simplistic exclusion of religion; but in truth, the problem is really more dialectical. By about 1920 it would become a political matter, in art, to oppose (old) idealistic composition with (modern) materialistic construction. In regard to *Hinterglasmalerei,* however, church legalities would have excluded *Hinterglasbilder* from counting as icons; but they already took materiality into account in their own way. For it was, and presumably still is, forbidden to paint a proper Russian Orthodox icon on glass "inasmuch as it is a thing that can be shattered."[5]

As an enemy alien, Kandinsky had to leave Germany during the First World War, only to have to return when, after the Russian Civil War, the Bolsheviks finally clamped down on religion and anything thought to be related, such as philosophical idealism (not a very *dialectically* materialist approach, but there we are). In the early revolutionary period, Kandinsky was busy "down on the ground," with art in public service, including museum reorganization. This was obviously "his world," in something of a proprietary way, and he even managed

to regain the large apartment he had owned before the revolution. In 1919, he not only lived there but rented space to a pair of young artists who would wind up in the opposite aesthetic party of constructivism (versus composition): Aleksandr Rodchenko and Vavara Stepanova. He even joined with them to form the Institute of Artistic Culture (INKhUK), under the IZO-NARKOMPROS (Department of Fine Arts, in the People's Commissariat for Education), where he worked and of which he would soon become president. Unfortunately, the triumph of the Bolsheviks meant that all aesthetic concern with composition in painting would be ruled out officially as deplorably bourgeois. As a government official, Kandinsky must already have had to keep mum about that development as he pulled up stakes in December 1921 to leave Russia, as it turned out for good, returning to Germany to teach at the Bauhaus.

The last year or so in Russia must have been strained, even at home in his apartment building. As a responsible Russian patrician, Kandinsky had the decency to hold on as an arts administrator, giving the new Russia his best shot, with no time to paint. His arch-constructivist housemate Rodchenko, albeit a brilliant photographer, was principally a graphic designer (though Kandinsky, at about the same age, actually *had* once worked as a graphic designer in Moscow). But Kandinsky's sense of Christian fellowship likely encouraged amity: he was aware of that notion of progressive thinkers in the Russian Orthodox Church around the turn of the century called *sobornost'—"catholicity,"* a real-world, altruistic sense of commonality to which Christians were meant to aspire, like an accessible idealization of what Durkheim meant by *church*.

In my view, Kandinsky's works that come closest to iconic tradition were painted at the Bauhaus, in Germany, in the 1920s (as if thinking of home), as will be considered below. Kandinsky clearly understood the lingering problem of Old Believers demanding repetition of traditional types, giving the icon, as such, an onus of cultural conservatism in the modern world. Fortunately, that view of icon painting is a romantic and reactionary exaggeration. It is not necessarily dishonorable for an icon to differ from classic types: if that were the case, none could ever bear the designation "first appeared." That the Russian icon tradition tends to consider originality a Western folly, does not mean that inspired compositions are not valued.[6] One can think of this situation as analogous to military discipline, whereby officers trained to respond to situations by routine are nevertheless aware that, in a tight spot, the nonstandard solution may win the respect of history.

It is interesting that the devout believer Kandinsky never presumed to paint official church icons (it would be interestingly ironic if Rodchenko had, early on,

mother being an Old Believer). Neither do his *Hinterglasbilder* impinge upon the formation of abstraction. I can imagine them as a diversion during the writing of the artist's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*.

On turning to his texts, it is evident that Kandinsky was well read, including in philosophy, even as Orthodox Christian theology—with a capital O—was likely the core of his worldview. Hegel was obviously important, as were latter-day Russian religious philosophers and likely advocates for Christian anarchism, including Tolstoy (Kandinsky's own early anarchist side involved participation in demonstrations at Moscow University as a student).

Evident in Kandinsky's thinking about art is the Hegelian pressure of history. Art, in Hegel's *Aesthetics,* having already moved through two of its three great stages, is "now" (meaning starting *then*) positioned—first in the Romanticism of 1818–29 but somehow lastingly in modernity—not so much to "end" art as to *realize* or fulfill it in modern form. Art does this after emerging from religion (stage two): specifically from Christianity, where Protestantism is Christianity's final form—something no doubt more troubling than a mere detail for Kandinsky's Orthodoxy. Hegel's three stages (not always consistent) are intended successively to approach "the Absolute" (basically, God), as follows. "Now the *first* form of [art] … is an immediate and therefore *sensuous* knowing, a knowing in the form and shape of the sensuous and objective itself, in which the Absolute is presented to contemplation and feeling"; primeval symbolic idols are art's starting point. In the next steps, the implications for Kandinsky are clear: "Then the second form [religion] is a *pictorial* thinking, while the third and last [philosophy] is the *free* thinking of absolute spirit."[7] Hovering at the threshold of self-conscious modernity, this tipping point must have coincided with what Russian religious Hegelians—that is, "Right" Hegelians, like Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944), a college friend of Kandinsky (more on him below)—saw as the transition from the second to the third phase in the great sequence from art to religion to philosophy, functioning in analogy with the Christian Trinity.[8]

So much for the metaphysical framework. One can hardly read two pages of Kandinsky without encountering the concept of "inner need" or the more logical "inner necessity." At the time, artists and art people involved with German Expressionism were already acquainted with such figures of speech owing, especially, to the art historian Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style* (1908). But while these and kindred terms are mainstays of Kandinsky's thinking, Hegel himself finds a similar way of speaking, though his words also resonate with Luther's translation of the Bible.

Notable (using the 1545 version) is the verse, "Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner (*innerliche*) nature is being renewed every day" (2 Cor. 4:16); or the blessing, "That, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man" (Eph. 3:16). This usage, predicated on an authenticity of the inner that extends back to Luther, suggests that whenever Kandinsky charges meaning to "internal necessity," he may also imply the needs of the soul in an ultimately religious sense. Eventually he will also speak of the needs of the artwork with a similar empathy.

Kandinsky was indeed a prolific and articulate writer as well as a great painter, notably in terms of the intuitive aspect of painting; and his intellectual viewpoint is quite available (very few of the 900 pages of his *Collected Writings* concern specific works of art). So it is quite possible to discuss religion as part of his outlook, seeing that he took it seriously. In the early twenty-first century, many people in the Western world take pride in considering themselves "spiritual but not religious." I believe that Kandinsky would consider that view *deficiently* spiritual, being aware, from his own experience, of how spirituality—never a solitary state if it includes the divine—grows out of religion, which is social.

Kandinsky, on the contrary, was religious, period. Trained as an academic lawyer, his interest shifted from social science to studying painting and then to teaching it and writing about it. In an early exhibition review written for a St. Petersburg (Russia) journal in 1910, he praises some Persian miniature paintings by saying that each "seemed unbelievable [in] that [it] could have been created by human hands. Standing before it, I felt it had come into being of its own accord, as if it had come down from heaven, like a revelation" (K1:74). The description may now sound commonplace, but many Russians would have understood these words as an allusion to the principle of the *acheiropoieta*—an Orthodox icon so excellent as to be considered "not made by human hands."

Other theological themes enter the artist's theorizations. An example from 1910/11: "As long as the soul remains joined to the body it can as a rule only receive vibrations via the medium of the senses, which form a bridge from the immaterial to the material (in the case of an artist) and from the material to the immaterial (in the case of the spectator)" (K1:87); and that now marks the beginning of a new age, "the epoch of the great Spiritual," already beginning in art as social counterpoint to a hopelessly materialistic world (K1:88). Evoking the Hegelian historical procession, not to mention semitheosophical, this statement also highlights Kandinsky's enduring sense of painting as capable of being spiritually utilitarian or soulfully efficacious.

Concerning the Spiritual in Art and a Russian Shadow Text

The question of religiosity arose as Kandinsky began to experiment with nonobjective or abstract art. Much evidence rests in his book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art and Painting in Particular*, published at Munich in German, in December 1911. As the painter's single most influential piece of theory, it has often been discussed, if not usually from the viewpoint of religion.

Translations of the book differ, sometimes even omitting entire sections of text; hence it is advisable to consult more than one. Omissions do seem to concern religion, especially when that is being considered a disputable—if not disposable—subject. For example, the Peter Vergo translation of *Concerning the Spiritual* states that painting can be spiritually efficacious as likened to Holy Communion, since certain "periods of decline in the spiritual world" are like times "when the transubstantiated bread remains inaccessible" (K1:135). Other translators may have misunderstood that, but it does support the notion that if art can aspire to something like sacramental reality, it might make for a communion of souls. In the otherwise important translation by Michael Sadleir (born Sadler), the same statement is rendered much less sacramentally: "Such periods, during which art has no noble champion, during which the true spiritual food is wanting, are periods of retrogression in the spiritual world" (KS7). What is the upshot there? Possibly a desire to be neutral; but if you want to make a Kandinsky statement sound as Protestant as Hegel, it may miss something of what this artist means by the spiritual office of painting.

We must face up to the concept of *spiritual* in the title. Students of Kandinsky are aware of the ambiguity in German of the word *Geist*, spirit, what with *geistig* and *geistlich* meaning mainly mental and spiritual. In German these are less than synonymous, but not so much in English, where reader and writer must settle on what is meant. Kandinsky knew the value that Hegel invested in these terms, which for Right Hegelians, at least, can connote the Holy Spirit. Many nonbelievers, including the old Bolsheviks, would take all religion (not to mention all metaphysics) as "mystical," however at odds that is with Durkheim's fairly centrist, social conception of religion.

The larger problem at hand concerns the extent to which the "spiritual" of Kandinsky's title relates to or is a function of religion, especially revealed religion—meaning, once again, religion constitutionally founded on singularly sacred texts whose meanings have venerable histories of hermeneutical critique. To rein in the term *Geistige* in Kandinsky's title —*Über das Geistige in der*

Kunst—as, by standard usage, purely "mental," would purport to present it as a treatise in psychological science: *Concerning the Mental in Art*, at serious odds with the drift of the book. One would have had to think that art has no intellectual content to begin with to take that in stride as an alternative title. On the other hand, anyone who believes in, and worships, God, as Kandinsky did, is unlikely to take as spiritual anything too removed from divinity to permit auratic implication. Around 1900 there was widespread reaction against the severe materialism of the previous century, which, everyone agrees, concerned Kandinsky. He could deal with science as inquiry into created nature; but he was concerned about materialism as, ever increasingly, modern culture's default philosophy. In reaction, he sometimes makes common cause with features of late nineteenth-century Symbolist (or *symboliste*) culture, a tendency I discount for two reasons: it tends to make painting the acolyte of a literary movement; and it makes it more difficult to define a self-sufficiently nondecorative and nonobjective painting approach as more than visual mood music.[9]

Worse: after the Russian Revolution, the Communist government considered formulating a new atheistic religion, as had happened after the French Revolution. The Russians called this "God-Building," and Kandinsky's boss, the otherwise intelligent and often liberal Commissar of Education Lunacharsky, was involved—in this case, all too liberally. It is inconceivable to think of Kandinsky being a willing party to such a project, being too Christian not to see it as false, idolatrous, and massively contrary to the precedent of Judeo-Christian revealed religion. Both before and after the Revolution it is possible to track Kandinsky's characteristically spiritual ideas and expressions to the Bible and relevant theology.

For *Concerning the Spiritualt*, I tend to rely on Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo's *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, except that on the subject of religion I favor Sadleir's first English translation, of 1914—almost stubbornly titled *The Art of Spiritual Harmony*—which has almost no qualms about faith. He and his father met Kandinsky, bought his work, and were the first to bring it to Britain. Sadleir says in his introduction, "Religion, in the sense of awe, is present in all true art. But here I use the term in the narrower sense to mean pictures of which the subject is connected with Christian or other worship" (KS xvi:n1). Frankly, while I would never use the word "picture" for an abstract painting, which *depicts* nothing, I respect Sadleir for already establishing that religiosity is indeed in Kandinsky's work, including theory. He has Kandinsky say, "Our minds, which are even now only just awakening after years of materialism are infected with *the despair of unbelief*, of lack of purpose and ideal.

The nightmare of materialism, which has turned the life of the universe into an evil, useless game, is not yet past; it holds the awakening soul in its grip" (KS1–2; emphasis added).[10] Furthermore, Sadleir's version was also chosen as the basis of a posthumous edition with unpublished artist's emendations copyright by Nina Kandinsky.[11]) What Kandinsky himself would have meant by Spirit (though all nouns are capitalized in German) probably did extend to the third person of the Blessed Trinity, *der Heilige Geist:* the Holy Ghost or Holy Spirit, given the many ostensible signs of faith even in this his primary book. Whatever, exactly, our painter meant by *geistige*, he was certainly not "spiritual but not religious."

Concerning the Spiritual in Art has two parts, "About General Aesthetic" and "About Painting," as well as an introduction containing the "despair of unbelief " passage quoted above. Kandinsky invites the reader to imagine first a gallery of paintings devoted to heartless art-for-art's- sake. Next, he invokes the vision of an art of "deep and powerful prophetic strength," inspiring one's spirit to move "upwards and forwards," even though the effort required to do so entails "a bitter cross to bear" (KS3–4)—a recurrent motif in Kandinsky's writing that alludes to the Passion of Christ (or the Stations of the Cross).[12]

Chapter 1, "The Movement of the Triangle," condenses the notion of upward and forward movement into a "spiritual triangle" (or pyramid) diagramming the progressive sociocultural effect of art as an altruistic social force. The painter pictures a gamut of low to high cultural understanding thusly: "A large acute-angled triangle divided horizontally into unequal parts with the narrowest segment uppermost. . . . The whole triangle is moving slowly, almost invisibly forwards and upwards." The lowest and widest level of the triangle represents ignorant mass culture, and at times there is only one artist at the triangle's apex, such as Beethoven, "standing solitary and insulted," until he is joined, in time, by those who can comprehend his genius (KS6-7). There is the implication that art makes upward movement possible.

Speculating on the origin of this device, I want to call attention to a thought-motif used by Arthur Schopenhauer to exemplify the human lordship over nature: "Accompanied by all the grades downward through all the forms of animals, through the plant kingdom to the inorganic. . . . They form a pyramid, of which the highest point is man[kind]."[13] Kandinsky's notion is more dynamic than that of Schopenhauer, which smacks of the Hindu caste system. A closer parallel for the triangle or pyramid motif may come from a Russian literary artist who was also an aesthetician and a serious Christian (even when the

Russian Orthodox Church would not have him)—Leo Tolstoy. I will discuss him further as a source in an alternative text to *Concerning the Spiritual in Art,* below.

In any case, Kandinsky's choice of this geometrically triangular figure to explain how art assists in the upward and ongoing efforts of humanity concerns, in Christian terms, the Trinity, with its Third Person—the Holy Spirit—inspiring human creativity. The conception of the Holy Spirit as generated eternally by the interacting love of the Father and the Son, implicit not only in Hegel but in Bulgakov and other Russian religious philosophers, belongs to a prevalent commonality of thought. From it, theological religiosity breaks free of the obfuscating quasi-religious mistiness of late nineteenth-century Symbolism. Art, instead of providing pseudo-spiritual aesthetic perfume for naturalistic bodily figuration, is being called upon, as Kandinsky writes, to supply "the spiritual food of the newly awakened spiritual life. . . . no longer the material, objective 'what' of the former period, but the internal truth of art, the soul without which the body . . . can never be healthy, whether in the individual or in a whole people" (KS9).

"Spiritual Revolution," Kandinsky's third chapter, tells it like it is on behalf of modern art (and music). As an artist, he starts out confrontationally prophetic, like the great Lutheran theologian of the early nineteenth century Søren Kierkegaard (whose text can seem sometimes rudely to talk back to the reader: "You're no believer: if you were, you would . . ."). Kandinsky claims that, as members of society priding themselves on their progressive attitudes, most of his readers think of themselves as Jews, Catholics, or Protestants but they're functional atheists; politically, they are "democrats and republicans" (not, of course, in modern American sense), and economically, most of them seem like mild-mannered democratic socialists. In fact, Kandinsky continues, society's "higher segments are not only blind atheists but can justify their godlessness with strange words, for example, those of Virchow, so unworthy of a learned man." This remark takes on the late Rudolf Virchow (1821–1902), a leading pathologist whose recklessly antimetaphysical positivism is enshrined in his legendary comment that Kandinsky references in *Concerning the Spiritual:* "I have seen many corpses, but never yet discovered a soul in any of them" (KS11). A believer can only wonder what foolish definition of the soul Virchow had in mind: obviously not that of Baruch Spinoza, who dressed down René Descartes for expecting to locate the soul in the pineal gland in the *Ethics* (Pt. V, preface). Naturalism was obviously the dominant aesthetic of this positivist ilk—if, in such hands, it can be considered aesthetic at all.

Kandinsky had already employed the Virchow anecdote in 1911, in an opening remark in his essay "Whither the 'New' Art?" in an Odessa journal. He accompanied it with a statement more optimistic than the present "Jews, Catholics and Protestants" quip: an allusion to the theologically complex but magnificent passage in the eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, where the wild shoots of gentiles come to be grafted onto the same olive tree as the Jews, all thriving through the one trunk from the same venerable roots (another biblical idea touched on in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*). In "Whither the 'New' Art?," the metaphor is evoked when Kandinsky writes—partly inspired by the new work of his friend, the composer Arnold Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony*—about modern versus classic art: "So the new branch is the continuation of the same tree. And the leaf is of the same branch" (K1:102). The scriptural trope of the olive tree becomes a favored figure in Kandinsky's writing.

Still in the chapter "Spiritual Revolution," Kandinsky touches on the question of Theosophy, a movement that he never actually joined. That Theosophists ordinarily hold all gods equal to that of Abraham, violates the First and theologically most important Commandment: precisely what led Rudolf Steiner to found the rival movement Anthroposophy, about a year after *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* was published, to avoid that imputation. Spiritualism did belong to the Symbolist cultural prelude to abstract art, concerned as it was invisible forces and disembodied entities; though it probably also disguised the embarrassment of divergent religious systems to people too unsure of their own groundings to pursue ecumenism.

By illuminating the past as well as signaling the future, the same chapter looks back to already notable modern masters. To Kandinsky, Cézanne's inherently phenomenological attitude disposes him to a God-in-everything immanentism: he "made a living thing out of a teacup, or rather in a teacup he realized the existence of something alive.... he was endowed with the gift of divining the inner life in everything. His colour and form are alike suitable to the spiritual harmony" (KS17). And saying that Henri Matisse "endeavours to reproduce the divine" (KS18), Kandinsky cites the recent German translation of his "Notes of a Painter" (in *Kunst und Künstler,* 1909), singling out an expressivity beyond formalism in its statement: "When I see Giotto's frescoes in Padua, I don't worry about knowing which scene from the life of Christ I have before my eyes; but at the same time, I understand the feeling (*Gefühl*) that these frescoes are developing. It is in the lines, in the composition, in the color; and the titling can only confirm my impression."[14] Some might take this comment as a

sidestepping of religion, but in context it seems rather a retrieval of religious significance.

The first half of *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* closes with a summary statement based on Kandinsky's trope of the progressive cultural pyramid in which the vast majority of people, down below, have no concern with the world of the spirit, while the prophetic artists at its apex deal with art's salvific role. In between, the creative individual can ascend: "Every[one] who steeps himself in the spiritual possibilities of his art is a valuable helper in the building of the spiritual pyramid which will some day reach to heaven" (KS20).

The second half of the book, titled "About Painting," begins with Chapter 5, "The Psychological Working of Colour," in which the word "soul" is used repeatedly. The chapter ends with an emphatic, italicized statement: "*It is evident therefore that colour harmony must rest only on a corresponding vibration in the human soul; and this is one of the guiding principles of the inner need*" (KS26; emphasis original). To this Sadleir adds a note that, without turning religious, serves to objectify the matter: "The phrase 'inner need' (*innere Notwendigkeit*) means primarily the impulse felt by the artist for spiritual expression, . . . but also the actual expression itself" (KS26n4).

In the more densely technical chapter that follows, Chapter 6, "The Language of Form and Colour," the phrase "outer meaning" consists of the limiting boundaries between colors on a surface, but it can also be "abstract, describing only a non-material, spiritual entity . . . with life and value as such" (KS29). Such outer meaning can seem anything but willed: Sadleir notes: "Form often is most expressive when least coherent. It is often most expressive when outwardly most imperfect, perhaps only a stroke, a mere hint of outer meaning" (KS29n7). It is exciting for us to realize, retrospectively, how one important Kandinsky claim would soon be out of date: "Purely abstract forms are beyond the reach of the artist at present; they are too indefinite for him" (KS30), a thought that concerns the spiritual because "the abstract idea is creeping into art, although, only yesterday, it was scorned and obscured by purely material ideals" (KS31).

An important detail omitted from this chapter by Sadleir concerns the word "talent" (also *Talent* in German), despite his previous translation of the same word without incident. In the Vergo-Lindsay translation, for example, a sentence appears: "The sense of feeling with which the artist is born resembles the talent of which the Bible speaks, which is not to be buried. The artist who does not use his gifts is a lazy servant" (K1:177); here Sadleir is oddly silent: the sentence is simply missing. But *talent* is a word occasionally found in the artist's writing, and one whose biblically figurative origin is often thoroughly blended into

ordinary discourse. Here Kandinsky himself makes a point of scriptural sources: the "Parable of the Talents" in the Gospels (Mt. 25:14–30; Lk. 19:12–27). In the story, a rich man who needs to travel leaves with his servants many "talents" (an ancient coin whose name was already a metaphor for a material weight). These coins can be either buried, safely but unproductively (= negative), or else their value can be increased by economic activity (= positive). The scriptural metaphor in this parable is so forceful that both the German and English words derive from it, and the connection is even retained in today's ordinary notion of a personal talent, such as a talent for music. Although Luther's German translation of the Bible did not use the word *Talent*, Huldrych Zwingli's did, and the near-pun of the ordinary word still holds true of the word *talent* in Russian, so that a biblical sense of talent was clearly in play when Kandinsky employed it here. Acknowledging the talent provides a vivid point of contact with the New Testament, but others are equally so.

In the same chapter, Kandinsky speaks of blue as "the typical heavenly color," saying, "The ultimate feeling it creates is one of rest" (KS38)—possibly supernatural rest. His remark is supported not only scripturally but also by an emphasis on materiality as the basis of transcendence, putting many a materialist disqualification of metaphysics dialectically to shame. Stadleir must know that Kandinsky's claim that "the way to the supernatural lies through the natural" (KS38n20) is an allusion to St. Paul: "Take note, the spiritual was not first: first came the natural and after that the spiritual" (1 Cor. 15:46; NAB). Another telling religious detail, one that most Europeans would once have understood, appears here too in regard to orange: "Orange is like a man convinced of his own powers. Its note is that of the angelus, or of an old violin" (KS41). Here Kandinsky refers to the Angelus, a brief devotion sometimes used in the Anglican or Lutheran churches as well as the Catholic; practiced wherever out of doors one happens to be, it is signaled by the ringing of a church bell, and involves recalling the Annunciation by saying the Ave Maria and a special prayer.[15] Having the Angelus bell normally rung at 6:00 a.m., noon, and 6:00 p.m., also lent meaning to the secular work day.[16]

Under "Theory," in Chapter 7, Kandinsky discusses the analogy of music and abstract painting. Many readers will think of the renowned observation of Walter Pater that all the arts "aspire to the condition of music," expressed in his essay " The School of Giorgione" (1877).[17] But as a reader of the late eighteenthcentury German poet-philosopher Novalis, Pater may have been aware of Novalis' pointing to the music–painting affinity, and in fact taking painting, where "each element in abstracto appears so incomplete," as " 'nobler' than music, . . . one step closer to the holy place of the spirit" (*Logological Fragments*, II.17). Just as a

composer can compose sounds in imagination, so "in a similar way a painter, as a master and inventor of colored shapes, knows how to change them at will, place them against and next to, to multiply them, and produce all possible kinds and single examples" (*Last Fragments,* no. 42).[18] Perhaps Kandinsky, so fond of musical analogies, knew of this more directly philosophical route from German romanticism to what he was saying. While this passage has only an incidental connection with religion, it helps to establish an aesthetic concern with music as often taken as a matter of immaterial form.

Wherever *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* posits an analogy between abstract painting and music, it benefits by considering instrumental music is the purest form of music for being unencumbered and uncompromised by literary meaning. Any such conviction would have been strengthened by resort to a widely read treatise in the modern Viennese musical tradition, Eduard Hanslick's *On the Musically Beautiful* (1854). Ten German editions had already appeared when Hanslick died in 1904, and his book has never been out of print. Thanks to Hanslick the instrumental-music notion is no stray conceit, but rather an accepted critical principle. There is even forensic evidence that *On the Musically Beautiful* was a direct influence on our painter. Both Hanslick's book and Chapter 7 of *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* cite the nonobjective patterns of a kaleidoscope (KS47). Hanslick does so just before he also cites nonobjective arabesques as specifically important in dance history, while Kandinsky adds dance's origins in primitive sexuality and, importantly, religious ritual (KS50)—in a manner that plausibly suggests he is elaborating on Hanslick.[19]

"Art and Artists," Kandinsky's eighth and last chapter, presents the practicing painter as a "spiritual" leader anchored in religious faith, and includes connections with his own Russian Orthodoxy. In negotiating them, a view emerges that there is a difference between a call for "absolute freedom" from artistic convention (KS53) and being "free in art but not in life" (KS54) by commitment to altruistic purposes. Science is something that it would actually be better to follow blindly than to reject. He seems to have in mind the laws of created nature, perhaps including evolution—certainly something more than the inert "nature" of academic art. Science-as-truth prepares one to return to the triangle of progress: "Painting is an art, and art is not vague production, transitory and isolated, but a power which must be directed to the improvement and refinement of the human soul—to, in fact the raising of the spiritual triangle"; thus, "When the soul tends to be choked by material disbelief, art becomes purposeless and talk is heard that art exists for art's sake alone" (KS54). Even art for art's sake, however, is at least "an unconscious protest against materialism, against the demand that everything

should have a use and a practical value," and "further proof of the indestructability of art and of the human soul, which can never be killed but only temporarily smothered" (KS54n4), as Kandinsky notes.

At this point, however, Sadleir leaves out something else that can work against disbelief, namely, prayer. For he omits Kandinsky's vivid allusion to the Lord's Prayer—taught by Christ himself, as Communion services testify—as an antidote for mere aestheticism:

> Painting is . . . a language that speaks in its own unique way to the soul about the things that are for the soul its daily bread [*tägliche Brot*], which it can only obtain in this form. . . . Always at those times when the human soul leads a stronger life, art too becomes more alive, for soul and art complement and interact upon each other. While in those periods in which the soul is neglected and deadened by materialistic views, by disbelief, and their resultant, purely practical strivings, the opinion arises that "pure" art is not given to [people] for a special reason, but is purposeless; and that art exists only for art's sake. [*l'art pour l'art*].
>
> K1: 212

And in a footnote, the artist continues: "This view is one of the few expressions of idealism to be found at such times. It is an unconscious protest against materialism, which would have everything practical and purposeful. It is further proof of how strong and inviolable art is, and of the power of the human soul, which is living and eternal, which can be numbed, but never killed" (K1: 212n).[20]

Having explained in various citations what Kandinsky means by the spiritual, including authentic art's overall altruism, its "nobler purpose," one can understand how much religion is entailed in the statement: "Painting is an art, and art is not a vague production, transitory and isolated, but a power which must be directed to the improvement and refinement of the human soul—to, in fact, the raising of the spiritual triangle. . . . when the soul tends to be choked by material disbelief, art becomes purposeless and talk is heard that art exists for art's sake alone. Then is the bond between art and the soul, as it were, drugged into unconsciousness." We can even be reminded by one of several instances of Kandinsky's Passion motif that this may mean "hard work . . . which often proves a cross to be borne" (KS54).

"Art and Artists," which concludes *Concerning the Spiritual in Art,* sees Kandinsky asserting that the artist is a "priest of beauty" who must seek beauty "according to the principle of the inner need, . . . measured only according to the size and intensity of that need. *That is beautiful which is produced by the inner need, which springs from the soul*; . . . And this property of the soul is the oil,

which facilitates the slow, scarcely visible but irresistible movement of the triangle, onwards and upwards" (KS55; emphasis original).

Yet at the last minute, he winds up thinking of something more conscious, almost as if to intimate *Point and Line to Plane* before the fact. I infer that in thinking of himself as a serious priest of art, Kandinsky may have realized that deriving one's priestly efficacy from "inner" capabilities alone is not only egotistical but also theologically suspect. It would bring him close to the Protestant (and anciently Donatist) tendency to hold that the efficacy of a sacrament depends on the moral worthiness of the priest, which is heresy in both Orthodoxy and Catholicism, and Anglicanism too (where it is even part of the Articles of Religion). The learned Kandinsky would have known that he could not push this notion without running into the formidable opposition of Augustine. The idea that the artist-priest could be "free in art but not in life" may have been an attempt to save the theological day, conceivably based on the scrupulosity of old-school icon painters who not only hoped to be in a state of grace but also to purge their bodies before painting.

Kandinsky also composed a shorter version of his treatise as a lecture, written in his mother tongue and delivered by another artist at the meeting of the Second All-Russian Congress of Artists at St. Petersburg held on either December 29 or 31, 1911. The lecture, known as "On the Spiritual in Art (Painting)," was published in the congress's *Transactions* in 1914. Differences between *Concerning the Spiritual* and this text are significant. In addressing Russian artists specifically, Kandinsky seems less inhibited here about religious display. For example, when he states that modern art resembles forms of past ages in two opposite ways, he dismisses the first—"outward resemblance"—as being that of "faithlessness" and having "no potential." The second way—"inward resemblance"—he introduces through an initially Hegelian figure: it "contains the seeds of the future. . . . After the era of materialist trial and temptation which seemed to enslave the soul, but which the soul, in fact, rejected as the temptation of Satan, the soul is being born again, refined by its struggle and its sufferings"; as such, this type of modern art is less apt to fall into the "vulgar feelings such as fear, joy and sadness which were available as subject-matter during the period of temptation" (64).[21] This second form allows a "stirring *prophetic force*" in the artist-seer, which, however, "can become a cross to bear" (65; emphasis original)—in that recurrent Kandinskyan figure.

For this Russian and considerably Orthodox audience, Kandinsky's special motif of the forward-moving triangle not only carries over but takes on distinctly Eucharistic overtones, as Kandinsky explains that the "Spirit of Evil" is countered by Holy Communion's overcoming of "spiritual hunger (consciously or, more

often than not, unconsciously) for spiritual bread" (66)—a sustenance that "often becomes the food of those who already abide in the higher segment" of the triangle. If the sacrament is taken for granted, the soul of the artist as a supposedly superior person becomes corrupt, and a person's "gift, his [or her] talent ([N.B.] in the Biblical sense) can become a curse. The artist [then] uses his [or her] strength to serve vulgar demands; … introduces impure content into … ostensibly artistic form; . . . deceives people and helps them to deceive themselves into imagining that they suffer a spiritual thirst and that they can quench it at a pure spring." In such circumstances, "creative works do not assist the movement upwards: they impede it, they repel that which would forge ahead . . . (67)."

Kandinsky's audience of Russian artists would surely have recalled here a well-known and originally Byzantine icon theme: in stating, "Art is deprived of a noble creator and of the bread of enlightenment, . . . Souls fall constantly from higher segments into lower ones" (67), there is surely understood an allusion (again) to the popular icon type of St. John Climacus's vision of a ladder from earth to heaven (derived from Jacob's Ladder) with many souls falling off before reaching the top.

Another sort of point that never seems to intrude on *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* is that an element of its intellectual support—especially against art for art's sake and anything like a bourgeois sense of beauty—likely gained impetus from a widely read Russian aesthetic classic of the generation before Kandinsky: Tolstoy's *What Is Art?* (first published in English at Philadelphia in 1898 but circulated illegally in Russian beforehand). Tolstoy's overall religiosity may be more important to Kandinsky than is generally supposed, despite the anarchist Christian novelist's excommunication from the Russian Church. I am not the first to adduce Tolstoy as an influence on Kandinsky's theory of art, but a relevant article on the subject only touches once, and incidentally, on religion.[22]

With Kandinsky's spiritual triangle in mind, consider Tolstoy's previous stratification: "The appreciation of the merits of art—that is, of the feelings it conveys—depends on people's understanding of the meaning of life, on what they see as good and evil in life. Good and evil in life are determined by what are called religions. Mankind ceaselessly moves from a lower, more partial and less clear understanding of life to one that is higher, more general and clearer. . . . Religions are indicators of the highest understanding of life accessible at a given time in a given society . . ."(42).[23] Tolstoy says, quite adumbrating Kandinsky, that an artist "must experience *an inner need* to express the feeling he conveys"; and if a work "does not proceed from the author's *inner need*, then it is not a work of art" (122;

emphases added). He even wants to think that good art can lead people, on utterly Christian terms, to "sacrifice themselves to serve others freely and joyfully [such a Kandinskyan phrase!] without noticing it" (166). The link between Tolstoy and Kandinsky would seem inherently religious, including Tolstoy's concern with the Russian icon.[24]

Stepping back from the two Kandinsky texts, it seems possible to affirm that a major difference between Kandinsky's published *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, still read by art students today, and his much more obscure lecture "On the Spiritual in Art (Painting)," is how much more evidently the latter encourages an artist to take the activity of painting as almost sacramental.

"On the Question of Form"

The Blaue Reiter Almanac (1912), edited by Kandinsky and his friend Franz Marc (who as a youth intended to study for the Lutheran ministry), still interests artists and art lovers for the global diversity of "spiritual" art, including tribal art, illustrated in this first and only issue of the journal. Here Kandinsky's dense essay "On the Question of Form" functions mainly as a text for those who can already understand "the external expression of inner content" as a good definition of form (K1:237), "especially today, [when] many people cannot see the spirit in religion, in art" (K1:235). This motif of not seeing the spirit is a version of the essentially biblical figure, in both testaments, of "eyes that see not" (Is. 6:10, Jer. 5:21, Mt. 13:15, Acts 28:27, Rom. 11:8). And speaking to the at least artistically converted, Kandinsky says, "It is not in the form (materialism) that the absolute is to be sought," and an artist "should not . . . *seek* . . . *salvation* in any one form" (K1:237, emphasis added).

There is a firm religious basis here. The word God—not just a generalized "absolute"—is invoked in an allusion to idolatry (K1:239); and when Kandinsky reinforces his appreciation of a children's art unspoiled by teachers, he cites Christ's words, "[Suffer] the little children [to] come unto me, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven" (K1:252; Mt. 19:14; Mk. 10:24; Lk. 18:15–17). In context, the essay's penultimate sentence—"Only through freedom can what is to come be received" (K1:257)—may even allude to "The truth will make you free" (Jn. 8:32). By this point in the text, the reader is aware that what is at stake in nonrepresentational art requires a leap of faith.

The essay's last sentence betokens Gospel rhetoric, only to turn unexpectedly obscure: "And one should not stand to one side like the barren tree under which

Christ saw lying, already prepared, the sword" (K1:257). By its parabolic drift, this statement conveys something despite its ultimately vague final remark—almost as if a willing misprision might indicate the authenticity of quoting by memory. The sentence shows three points of contact with the Gospels: twice the simple cursing of the fig tree, called barren, which fails to supply a hungry Jesus with food (Mt. 21:18–22; Mk. 11:12–14), and then the more full-blown parable of the fig tree in the vineyard that Jesus allows to be given one last chance, with cultivation, to prove itself before being cut down (Lk.13:6–9). That none of the references conflated here mentions a sword does not spoil the overall drift, despite eliciting a gnostical air. But here, at the end of the text, Kandinsky advances the sense of an urgency that we must rise to the occasion of modernity and not hold back. (Liturgically speaking, the simpler story from Matthew and Mark could also have reminded observant Russian Orthodox believers of a chant during the Great Monday service in what Westerners call Holy Week, prior to Easter.)

"Reminiscences" and a Russian Shadow Text

"Reminiscences," published in German for a 1913 exhibition at Der Sturm Gallery, Berlin, and revised in Russian in 1918 (although published later), is a major document of Kandinsky's return to Russia from late 1914 to late 1921. Comparing the well-known original text with that eventually published in Moscow highlights changes in the relation of the writing to the outside world. It places the painter on the side of Socialism even as it identifies him as religiously aware. Up to a certain point, one sees the painter in some basic social agreement while holding privately onto his religious faith, even as others lost theirs.

Not that it is always easy to distinguish who holds onto a belief from those to whom it is merely a figure of speech. A good example of this ambiguity occurs in a Kandinsky text of this period: "On the Artist," published in an exhibition catalogue of 1916: "The unfree individual recognizes life only in the form, and thereby often mistakes the dead for the living" (K1:410), which alludes—if you know your Gospels—to Luke, at the Resurrection: "Why do you seek the living among the dead" (Lk. 24:6). (A skeptic could probably not assume the moral weight of supposing that many would look at an insipid form in a painting and pronounce it organically dead.)

In "Reminiscences," Kandinsky writes, "The word *composition* moved me spiritually . . . This word affected me like a prayer. It filled me with awe" (KH30;

emphasis original). As a state official after the Revolution, his 1918 Russian version of the essay does not include the word "prayer" but "inner vibration," though, like the word "palette," it "filled me with reverence" (KB57). Before the very end of the Civil War in 1922, *composition* would be the usual position of artistic conservatives, while leftist artists rallied to *construction*: that Kandinsky typically respected both is already evident in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. But things were changing.

Until the end of the Civil War, atheism was not obligatory, and the Revolution might even have raised messianic hopes in our fairly religious painter, at least until matters became impossible. It would have been unlikely for an artist so drawn to the Apocalypse not to think of the consequent coming of the Kingdom of God. Millions of Russian Orthodox believers, most of whom were hardly "mystics," were prepared by their very faith for a new age of justice.

"Reminiscences" documents Kandinsky's life and artistic outlook all the more when its two versions are read together. Appropriately, this text is self-reflective. The artist is inclined to pair up analogous topics, stressing underlying principles. For example, he highlights the connection of his political activities as a student activist at Moscow University against "violations of the old liberal Moscow traditions" (KH24) with the leftist politics of his successful merchant father. Likewise, writing about his early postgraduate ethnological trip to remote Vologda, where some prefer to imagine Kandinsky condoning pre-Christian paganism, despite his mentioning here "the remnants of their heathenish religion" (KH28). There in the backwaters he had actually met "many solitary and deeply devoted workers of future Russia, content to remain in the obscurity of their humble surroundings. Not least amongst them were the village priests, who deserve the very highest praise" (KB59n)—phraseology here retained, believe it or not, in the (admittedly then unpublished) Moscow version. Kandinsky pairs this same recollection with his boyhood memory of his father's faith: "It was a special treat for me to hear him, with love and affection, enumerate the ancient, haunting names of the 'Forty times Forty' Moscow churches" (KB72).

Aesthetically speaking, after an initial insight thanks to one of the *Haystacks* of Claude Monet—"Previously I had only known realistic art, . . . And suddenly for the first time I saw a *painting*" (KH26, emphasis original)—there came an unforgettable epiphany, for pure abstraction to come. On walking into his studio at the approach of dusk, he noticed what turned out to be one of his canvases lying on its side: "I saw an indescribably beautiful picture drenched with an inner glowing. At first I hesitated, then I rushed toward this mysterious picture, of which I saw nothing but forms and colors, and whose content was

incomprehensible. . . . Now I knew for certain that the object harmed my paintings" (KH32).

Another point in Kandinsky's essay concerns a simplistic notion of both sexual and colonialist conquest that will be developed more sophisticatedly in *Point and Line to Plane* and is here intertwined with other figures of speech. The passage, "I learned to battle with the canvas, to come to know it as resisting my wish [= dream] [*sic*], and to bend it forcibly to this wish," is followed up by one not carried over into the 1918 Russian version, where virgin imagery takes on an political tinge: "At first [the canvas] stands there like a pure, chaste virgin, with clear eye and heavenly joy—this pure canvas which is itself as *beautiful* as a painting. And then comes the willful brush which first here, then there, gradually conquers it with all the energy peculiar to it, like a European colonist, who pushes into the wild virgin nature, hitherto untouched, using axe, spade, hammer, and saw to shape it to his wishes" (KH35). (We will see similar imagery used very differently.)

The version of Kandinsky's essay revised in Moscow in 1918 recalls the difficulty of life at the time, when food was scarce, even as the new Russia produced a cornucopian outpouring of avant-garde artistic activity; this new Russia was an enterprise for which Kandinsky put his own art aside in order to play a major governmental role. The native Muscovian who had returned at the end of 1914 (owing to the First World War), took up several positions as of 1918, before leaving at the end of 1921. Lunacharsky hired him for the Department of Pictorial Art (IZO) of that commissariat, whose acronym was NARKOMPROS; Kandinsky's wife, Nina, also worked there.[25] His work at IZO involved organizing a constellation of provincial museums, while teaching at the great Vkhutemas (Higher Art and Technical Studios) and editing a journal titled *Visual Arts*. In 1919, Kandinsky also became director of the Museum of Pictorial Culture in Moscow; in 1920 he founded and directed the Institute of Artistic Culture (INKhUK), and in 1921 the State Academy of Artistic Sciences (GAKhN).

Certain key points concerning faith can be singled out from the Moscow version of the memoir. Kandinsky speaks enigmatically of a time of "unbelief" on his part (KB68), as if of a passing phase. The whole memoir has an air of hope, even of *sobornost'*, that special Russian, mainly churchly emphasis on a community of many sorts of people thriving in social harmony. Four areas of specific religious mention in Kandinsky's Russian "Reminiscences" merit attention.

(1) A paragraph that begins "Art is like religion in many respects" (KH39) in the Munich version becomes utterly tongue-tied in the Russian (without its seeming to be a question of translation): "The development of art, like that of abstract knowledge, is not governed by new discoveries which take the place of

the older truths and proclaim the latter to be illusions and falsehoods (as is apparently the case in science)" (KB68).

(2) A favored symbol expounded: "When a new branch grows on a tree, the trunk does not become superfluous, for it must feed the growing branch. And the latter is but a new part of the tree trunk from which it sprang. All his continuous and unceasing ramification, which may seem so hopelessly confusing, is, in fact, nothing else but the inevitable development of the same body, which, in its entirety, forms the green mass of the tree itself" (KB68). This metaphor seems fresh, despite Kandinsky's having used it twice before—if not so powerfully—pertaining to society as well as artistic style. In its fullness, it derives, once again, from the wonderful eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, where a venerable olive tree first represents the eternal Old Covenant, however detached and reattached its branches may become; this as joined by outsider, gentile branches of the New Covenant that will eventually, in the Kingdom of God to come, belong to the same living tree.[26]

(3) A Christian view of Old Testament legalities as (problematically if understandably) warranting a sense of general moral progress in society: "The same can be said for moral evolution, which has for its origin the religious rules and directives. The original, Biblical laws of morality are simple and unequivocal, as, for example—'Do not slay; do not commit adultery.' In the next, Christian, period, they are couched in gentler, more elastic form. Their primitive angularity gives way to a less stark and freer outline" (KB68). But here the modernist Kandinsky may also be rediscovering the "third-age" theory (A is to B as B is to C) of the coming Kingdom of God and of justice, as framed by the twelfth-century Christian theologian Joachim of Fiore's exegesis of the book of Revelation (see Chapter 4). In the 1913 version Kandinsky understands that he had no intention to "overthrow" the old art and hopes only for "the demand of *inner* life in painting," writes: "To my astonishment I realized that this demand grew on the same foundations which Christ set forth as the foundation for moral qualification. I realized that this view of art is Christian and that at the same time it shelters within itself the necessary elements for the development of the 'third' revelation, the revelation of the Holy Spirit" (KH41; emphasis original).

(4) How it is that even the Russian Revolution would seem to have a role in this development: "Christianity in its evolution weighs not so much the rigid outer actions, as the more flexible inner impulses and thoughts. Herein lies the root of the continuous, ever [*sic*][27] new revaluation of values, which eternally (and now as always), slowly creates the future, and is the foundation of that inner spirituality which we are gradually able to discern in art, and which actually is

occurring in a vigorous and revolutionary way" (KB69). There could not be a more forthright statement of revolutionary political philosophy by a person of faith during these contentious years.

Point and Line to Plane

Kandinsky went back to Germany to teach at the Bauhaus (i.e., the Staatliches Bauhaus, or literally, State Constructional Institute), which, founded in Weimar in 1919, relocated to Dessau as of 1925. The extraordinary school was understandably associated with an antimetaphysical viewpoint and a consequent constructivist style—very much what came to dominate the newly named USSR just as Kandinsky left. But the Bauhaus faculty included Jews and Christians, and even a neo-Nestorian who taught in a cassock, Johannes Itten (then on his way out). There was at least one practicing Catholic, Josef Albers, who married Anni, who was Jewish, at a church in Berlin in 1925.[28] It was here that Kandinsky prepared and published his other theoretical book, *Point and Line to Plane* (1926), an official "Bauhaus Book" designed in-house. If Kandinsky felt expelled from his native Moscow, here he could prepare to spell out his message, like a missionary writing a dictionary for indigenous peoples whose language he had already mastered, even as his painting style proved itself surprisingly adaptable to the times, while some features of the new book seem surprisingly theological.

Important points do carry over from *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, which of course had also been written and published in Germany. But even as the "spiritual" pitch has changed from the expressionist ambience of the first book, in accord with prevailing Constructivist thinking, religion—however less likely—is still in evidence. Kandinsky notes that art study now entails two aspects: "the analysis [which] borders on the problems of the 'positive' sciences" and "the nature of the development [which] touches the problems of philosophy" (KD19). The book begins systematically by discussing the point but for less simple a reason than one would expect: "Only by means of a microscopic analysis can the science of art lead to a comprehensive synthesis, which will extend far beyond the confines of art into the realm of the 'oneness' of the 'human' and the 'divine'" (KD21).

In the "Point" chapter, the single point emerges in drawing and painting thanks to an "initial collision" between a tool with the material plane, the "basic plane": "The basic plane is impregnated by this first collision" (KD28). This figure

of speech develops metaphorically and metaphysically. As the physical point takes on dimensionality, it disappears as a point, and "the plane in its stead embarks upon its embryonic existence" (KD30).

This is even true in printmaking. For in dry-point etching, it is possible to say that color can be "applied thickly to the whole plate, and then cleaned off in such a way that the little point lies simply and naturally in its bright *womb*" (K2:564, emphasis added). And in lithography, one can sand color off so that "the stone returns . . . to its original [N.B.] chaste condition." Thus, in printing, we have the paper touch "impartially the entire block and reflect only the parts which have been fructified" (KD49; "fertilized," in K2:566). Meanwhile, "technical possibilities [have grown] in just as functional and purposeful a manner as any other potentiality, whether it be 'material life' (spruce tree, lion, star, louse) or in the spiritual realm (art work, moral principle, scientific method, religious idea)" (KD47).

Making an apparently evidential mistake while advancing his case at the end of this section, Kandinsky criticizes "prints composed entirely of points, . . . in which the points are intended to produce the effect of lines," adducing the example of "a famous *Head of Christ*." He says: "It is clear that this is an unjustifiable use of the point, since the latter, stifled by the representation and with its inner sound weakened, is condemned to a poverty-stricken half-life [*zu einem armseligen Halbleben*]" (KD53).[29] Kandinsky here is likely thinking of Claude Mellan's *Head of Christ* or *The Sudarium (Veil) of St. Veronica* (1649), a stipple engraving known, if not quite for points becoming lines, rather for a single line constituting an entire image: a line that starts on the tip of the figure's nose.[30] This error cannot be excused on grounds that stipple engraving produces what could be considered micropoints because Kandinsky already says that properties "dictated by technical necessity" are something else entirely (KD53n1).[31] However, in terms of visual thinking, this is a clever way for Kandinsky, on the cusp between a chapter devoted to that geometrically nondimensional entity, the point, and that geometrically single-dimensional entity, the line, to negotiate conceptually their practically undepictable distinction.

The chapter titled "Line" includes the only place in Kandinsky's writings where the theology seems irregular. Comparing traditional Christian and traditional Chinese attitudes toward color and death, the idea concerns the visually opposite but equivalent sign values of black and white. But the ethnological problem is not the theological problem, which concerns ignoring the notion of the immortality of the soul and personal resurrection in an effort

to equate with Chinese understanding. Yes, the Chinese customarily use white for mourning whereas Christians traditionally use black;[32] yet Kandinsky infringes on both the Apostles' Creed ("resurrection of the body") and the Nicene Creed ("resurrection of the dead") by saying, "After thousands of years of Christianity, we Christians experience death as a final silence, or, according to my characterization, as a 'bottomless pit' [*unendliches Loch*], whereas the heathen Chinese look upon silence as a first step to the new language, or, in my way of putting it, as 'birth'" (KD76–7). For once, our ex-lawyer artist seems to be asleep at the wheel, though it was a theological wheel.[33]

In the next chapter, "The Basic Plane," Kandinsky develops an earlier line of thought that might have easily been ignored or merely touched upon, into an incisive aesthetic application of the Christian theology of the Annunciation (Lk. 1:25–38), whereby the Virgin Mary received the archangel Gabriel and assented to becoming the *Theotokos* (the Greek Orthodox term for the Mother of God). If there was a premonition of this symbolism in Kandinsky's use of the "chaste maiden" in the "Reminiscences," now the idea has become striking. The operative passage begins with a likely mention of the venerable celestial hierarchy apropos of the basic plane:

> That every living thing stands in a fixed relationship to "above" and "below" and must without question remain that way, is a fact true also of the BP [Kandinsky's abbreviation for "basic plane"] which, as such, is also a living thing. This can be partly explained as association or as transference of one's own observations. We must assume without question, however, that this fact has deeper roots and that the BP is a living being. . . . We must . . . definitely assume that every artist feels—even though unconsciously—the "breathing" of the still untouched BP and that he feels—more or less consciously—a responsibility toward this being and is aware of the fact that frivolous abuse of it is akin to murder. The artist "fertilizes" this being and knows how obediently and "joyfully" the BP receives the right elements in the right order. This somewhat primitive and yet living organism is transformed by the right treatment into a new living organism, which is no longer primitive but which reveals, on the contrary, all of the characteristics of a fully developed organism.
>
> KD116–17

This formula might have induced a spiritualistic reading, except that all its features constitute elements of an Annunciation, which is to say, an extraordinary scriptural event despite being a biological, and thus earthly, figure.

For decades I have discussed this explication in college classes, where it has always been found convincing. Certainly any Christian who understands the

Annunciation ought to find it a telling analogy to the painter's appeal to inspiration in approaching the "virgin canvas." A decade later than *Point and Line to Plane,* in an article on the "Empty Canvas, etc." (1935), Kandinsky develops the last footnote of *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* into an interesting Old Testament parallel for the Virgin's acceptance at the Annunciation. For if the empty canvas is somewhat frightening "because it can be violated" (though being "more beautiful than some paintings"), Kandinsky reminds his reader, in relation to the Virgin's Annunciational yes-saying, of several of the Hebrew prophets' enthusiastic responses to God's appeal: *Hineni,* in Hebrew: "HERE I AM!" (K2:780–83).

Iconic Inheritance

Kandinsky was from childhood onward cognizant of the Orthodox icon and the Orthodox faith. As an artist just beginning his career at middle age, he would have been interested in the modern reputation of the Russian icon as something more than either a distant remnant of late Byzantine art or a matter of folk art.[34] Certainly he was aware of the historically crucial 1904 cleaning of centuries' of candle smoke and incense vapor from Andrei Rublev's large Old Testament Trinity icon (or *The Hospitality of Abraham*), painted in either 1411 or between 1425 and 1427 for the Trinity Lavra (monastery) of St. Sergius at Sergiyev Posad, not far from Moscow. Not to mention, soon after entering the realm of abstraction, the exhibition of great icons, cleaned and restored, in celebration of 300 years of the Romanov dynasty, titled "Masterworks of Ecclesiastical History" in the Kremlin Armory, held from March 14 to October 1, 1913. At that time Kandinsky was in Germany, but he went home for the summer. Revealingly, he would tell Lothar Schreyer, first master of scenography at the Bauhaus, in 1922, "not [to] . . . be . . . dismayed when I tell you that I understood my images as Christian, particularly since I started making abstract [paintings] . . . This became undeniably clear to me ten years ago"—that is, in the time of that exhibition. Kandinsky also told Schreyer that he learned much about both art and religion from icons.[35]

Many discussions of the impact of Russian Orthodox icon painting on Kandinsky concentrate on abstract or quasi-abstract compositions that can be formally affiliated with St. George and the Dragon, for they are many and easily recognized. A large pole-like diagonal, indicating a lance, will be obvious: it can be associated with anything resembling a mounted figure; often, the lower end of

the lance will poke a dragon, as a metaphoric devil or the Devil as such—though even an indistinct blob at the bottom of the pole will do, so long as the basic set-up is established. I tend to ignore the St. George motif, in spite of its commonness, mainly because George is also semiotically emblematic of the city of Moscow.[36] Thus, as Kandinsky's interest in St. George might will have stemmed as readily from his home town as his religion, I find the motif too compromised to function as evidence for religiosity.

Other common icon motifs do occur in Kandinsky's pre-abstract and abstract paintings, and his Russian contemporaries;[37] for example, the inclusion of a large red disc as perhaps a wheel may be derived from motifs of "Elijah and the fiery chariot."[38] Visually literate observers may also trust their own "inner necessity" to pick up on less obvious correspondences, which others may then accept as relevant.

The eminent late Soviet art historian Dmitrii Sarabianov pointed out that once Kandinsky had "found eyes" for abstract painting through Impressionism (wherein "painting . . . com[es] to the fore"), the Russian icon highly influenced him. "I value no painting as highly as our icons," the painter later recalled: from them he learned "the best . . . not only artistically, but religiously." Finding the early *Mountain* (1909; Stätisches Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich), Kandinsky's most "icon-like" work, Sarabianov says it rises to the abstraction of "plastic signs, almost losing their semantic connection with real prototypes, but retaining in themselves . . . some excit[ations]of impressions." By scale and centrality, Kandinsky's metaphorical mountain portends the Mount Tabor of Transfiguration icons, even as brushstrokes of the iconic mountain may connote a poetic *hoeing* of earth; and "the red and yellow stripes, flowing around the silhouette of the mountain, resemble the Tabor light coming from Christ [in a Transfiguration icon, as] conventionally interpreted by iconographers."[39] If not a believer, Sarabianov was nevertheless willing to meet Kandinsky halfway as one developing a fundamentally new principle inspired by the quasi-abstract meaningfulness of the Orthodox icon.

By 1920, the German art world had incorporated a modern, albeit secular, interest in the Orthodox icon, due, to some extent, to the influence of Kandinsky.[40] Except for variations on St. George, and apocalyptic All Saints, I do not think many paintings by Kandinsky have specific iconic prototypes. Proper cases include the large diagonal ladder with figures falling off, comparing a famous Byzantine icon type of St. John Climacus with his Ladder of Heavenly Ascent, with Kandinsky's *Ladder Form* (1929; Kunstmuseum, Winterthur). One might also regard the strikingly tumbling figures of the sleeping apostles

on the hillside in the lower half of Theophanes the Greek's icon of the Transfiguration (1403; State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) as akin to certain Kandinsky paintings featuring small rambunctious forms in a field, such as *Relations* (1934; private collection), *Capricious Forms* (1937; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York), or *Sky Blue* (1940; Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris).

Two mid-career paintings do seem to derive from icons, in one case from a strong traditional type, and in the other from a surprisingly affective icon which, though not popular, is renowned among devotees. Both were painted in 1926 at the Bauhaus, just as Kandinsky was attaining fame. If this marvelous school, known for the rationalization of artistic processes in response to industrial culture, was hardly an incubator of religion, we have already noted the surprising "confessional" diversity of its staff. Years later, living in Paris, Kandinsky frequented the St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral there, and apparently was also a churchgoer in some measure in Dessau (with two Orthodox churches an hour away) or, for a grander Mass, at Dresden, where he and his wife often visited friends.

Before proceeding to these two Bauhaus works, it is worth considering how personally invested in religious devotion Kandinsky likely was. More so than our other artists, especially if one acknowledges as worship the Orthodox monastic *Hesychast* (from the Greek for "quiet") tradition, originating in monasteries on Mt. Athos, of silent prayer.[41] This practice traces back to the Gospel of Matthew: "But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Mt. 6:6). The character of Kandinsky's paintings surely benefitted from a Hesychastic encouragement to free the prayerful imagination from attachment to the ordinary world, in harmony with Kandinsky's striving for nonobjectivity.

For this practice, prayerful Orthodox rely on an extensive collection of texts called the *Philokalia* (Love of the Beautiful), used for prayer by laypeople as well as clergy. The *Philokalia*, compiled by St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth at Mt. Athos from writings of the fourth to the fifteenth centuries (first published in 1782), contains a multitude of brief texts ready to complement Kandinsky's abstract aesthetic by positively discouraging the believer from imagining anything pictorial. Two typical samples will show its remarkably antipictorial emphasis. The first is from the fourth-century Evagrios the Solitary's "On Prayer": "When you are praying, do not shape within yourself any image of the Deity, and do not let your intellect be stamped with the impress of any form; but approach the Immaterial in an immaterial manner, and then

you will understand."[42] The second is from the eleventh- or twelfth-century St. Peter of Damascus: "The devil will fail in his purpose if we apply the counsel of the holy fathers: that during the time of prayer we should keep our intellect free from form, shape, and colour, and not give access to anything at all, . . . and that we should do we can to confine our mind solely to the words we are saying."[43] Such a well-read Orthodox as Kandinsky could not have been unaware of these hallowed texts, which he may have used devotionally himself.

Turning to the two mid-career Kandinsky paintings: one implicates a specifically Russian icon type by its unique symmetrical structure: the 1926 *Accent in Pink* (Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris; Figure 1.2). Nothing else in the painter's oeuvre could more specifically evoke the Russian icon than this compositional scheme, which clearly derives from the prominent centerpiece of many an important Russian church's iconostasis. (The iconostasis is a partition, a sanctuary barrier reminiscent of the Holy of Holies in Solomon's Temple, that was probably first structurally effected in eleventh-century Russia.[44]) Typically covered with icons arranged in horizontal registers, and separating the sanctuary of the ordained from the nave of the congregation, an iconostasis has a central "holy" or "royal" door, opened during Mass only when the people are permitted to see the otherwise hidden liturgical actions taking place behind—a ritual practice often taken as a virtual glimpse into the heavenly Kingdom of God. Such an iconostasis "has long been inseparably associated in people's minds with the concept of 'Russia.'"[45]

The presentation of icons on a classic iconostasis conforms to set patterns of saints in the tiers, but prominent at the center of many Russian ones, over the "holy door," is an icon type generally called Christ in Glory: see Figure 1.1 for the basic structure.

Important examples of the type are by Theophanes the Greek (1405), for the iconostasis of the Annunciation Cathedral in the Kremlin; by Andrei Rublev and Daniel Chorny (1408); from the Dormition Cathedral at Vladimir (1408); by Rublev on his own (dated *c.* 1414); and by Dionisius (1500)—all, at one time or another, in the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow—plus another of the late fifteenth century, possibly from Novgorod, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. All these display a rectangular cloth of honor, usually of rose color, appearing as if tacked up like a blanket or tarpaulin at the corners. Upon this stretched fabric-like form is a mandorla, atop which appears another, smaller rose-colored cloth, tilted to make a rhomboid or diamond-shaped form (with corners extending to the top, bottom, and sides of the mandorla, as shown in the diagram in Figure 1.1. The tilting of the smaller background cloth against the perpendicular

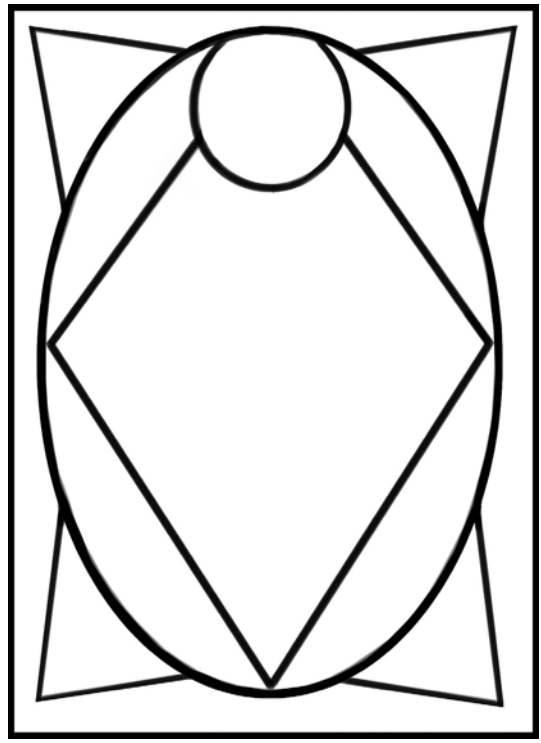

Figure 1.1 Diagram of a typical Christ in Glory icon for a Russian church iconostasis. Courtesy of Alexandra Halidisz.

produces an eight-pointed star, said to allude to the eighth day of Creation as the commencement of the Kingdom of God. Finally, in the middle of this structure would normally sit the enthroned Christ.

Kandinsky knew the greatest examples of this Christ in Glory icon type, whether in their assigned positions in prominent Moscow churches, as seen during boyhood visits, or at the State Tretyakov Gallery, where many such paintings were moved to save them during the Revolution (perhaps with Kandinsky's own assent as a bureaucrat active in museum reorganization). Some of the icons moved to the Tretyakov have since been returned to their home churches. Theophanes the Greek's Christ in Glory, for example, is now restored to the Annunciation Cathedral in the Kremlin, where Kandinsky was first introduced to it by his father. A version painted by Andrei Rublev and Danill Chorny is still in the Tretykov; and Rublev's own example, called *The Savior Among the Heavenly Powers* (and now dated to *c.* 1425), has been returned to the cathedral of the Trinity Lavra.

Comparing the insistently symmetrical Christ in Glory structure to Kandinsky's *Accent in Pink* makes apparent a structural influence of the basic gestalt of the icon on the abstract painting. In Kandinsky's work the largest form, normally associated with the rose "tarpaulin" of the lowest layer, is mottled yellow, suggesting burnished gold (see Figure 1.2). In parallel with the iconic Christ in Glory is a conceivably torso-like central area (replacing the figure) of a dark-blue square bulging with overlapping disk forms, while the layering of forms distinctly recalls the iconic source.

Nobody is going to mistake Kandinsky's painting for a representation of Christ in Glory that deserves a kiss and a prayer from an Orthodox believer. But the religious Kandinsky would not have thought *aesthetic* contemplation as something to be despised, either. Does Kandinsky's adaptation, in effect, secularize the iconic source, even if the artist had the sacred subject in mind? Not necessarily. For a knowledgeable viewer, contours and tensions of the believer's icon may be confirmed by contours and tensions of forms and colors in an abstract painting, without necessarily collapsing the whole effect into just another case of the mood-music of spiritualistic Symbolism. The relevant question would be, Whether *Accent in Pink* could be used to substitute for a Christ in Glory in a culturally sophisticated church, by allusion to the familiarity of the basic pattern as a predisposition to prayer. One can imagine differing responses.

The other case from 1926, Kandinsky's *Yellow Center* (Museum Boijmans-Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; Figure 1.5) may entail two historical iconic lineages, one general and the one specific. On the general side, many surveys of Russian icons begin with a great Byzantine *Virgin of Vladimir,* originally from the late eleventh or early twelfth centuries, a highly recognizable, archetypal icon, even for people who have never known its name.[46] In it, the curved edge of Mary's dark *maphorion* (head cloth) is articulated by a fine sequence of angles emphasized by folds in their striped edging ribbon. Plausibly, a combination like the forehead's curvature and its accompanying sequence of angles—indeed, such a famous sequence of them—might appear echoed in several Kandinsky paintings with an irregular polygon as a central form, such as *Yellow Center.*

The more specific historical icon type that may adumbrate *Yellow Center* has a much different central feature consisting, not of a face at all, but of a cavity that finds an analogue in the (often stony) cave at the center of icons of Elijah in the Wilderness. St. Elijah[47] icons actually became politicized in the 1920s, when Soviet atheistic propaganda was obsessed with a primeval popular cult of Elijah with pre-Christian roots still found among the peasantry: the thunder god Perun. On that basis, much propaganda concerned a (supposedly obvious)

Figure 1.2 Vasily Kandinsky, *Accent in Pink,* 1926, oil on canvas. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (Donation Nina Kandinsky). Alamy Ltd.

superstitious appeal to St. Elijah for relief from thunderstorms; some was a more positive pitch for rural electrification.[48] For Christian believers in the immortality of the soul, however, the question of intercession (appealing to saved souls as by definition in the company of God) cannot be taken so simplistically. Notwithstanding objections of the Protestant reformers, for Orthodox Christians,

Catholics and some Anglicans, intercession relates—as Kandinsky certainly knew—to the "communion of saints" in the Apostles' Creed, which underwrites the entire cultic aspect of icons.

Yellow Center also inherits a wide range of images of Elijah in the Wilderness, on Mt. Horeb, with a cave at the center, as possible sources for the structurally kindred work of the modern artist. In this situation, simple *sufficiency* (*sans* necessity) will allow for the potential availability of motifs existing in many versions. Consider the cave looming large at the center of a remarkable late-fifteenth century classic Russian icon, from Novgorod, of Elijah in the Desert (Iconen-Museum, Recklinghausen, Germany; Figure 1.3).

Similar formal dispositions can be found in later icons of the same subject, including a marvelous, retrospectively "Old Believers" example from Novgorod, dating precisely to March 25, 1670, "written" (the proper verb for icon painting) by a pair of artists known only as John and Boris (Figure 1.4).[49] There, a bearded Elijah seated at the entrance to his cave is likewise centrally enclosed by a roughly circular surround. Tufts of weeds or small shrubs punctuate knolls of bare earth, on one of which Elijah sits in this biblical "desert" setting (in the sense of wilderness). The spots of plant life are compact nests of brushwork, while their sky has patchy clouds consisting of a few white strokes. What appears in the old Recklinghausen version as a dark triangle, fitted neatly into the lower left-hand corner below Elijah's foot is, for John and Boris, Elijah's saving "brook" (1 Kgs. 17:4), rendered as a shallow diagonal slash across the bottom of the image. Kandinsky likely knew this work in the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow (again, as a museum official he might even have sent it there for safe keeping).

The modern image of *Yellow Center* does uphold having a fair-sized ring centered in the pictorial field, surrounded by thin linear forms (a few suggesting paintbrushes) projecting radially outward, along with two diagonal bands, one light, one dark, inside the circle (bands that echo the position of Elijah's arm in some icons of this type). At the same time, the left half of Kandinsky's ring, curved on the outside with angled facets inside, agrees with the angled cave entrance in the older Recklinghausen Elijah (as well as the unforgettable curve around the face of the Virgin of Vladimir surrounded by its angular folds). Is this enough to show connectedness? None of these Russian icons is an obvious source for *Yellow Center;* but taking them together, they seem collectively and artistically reclaimed by the modern artist.

Although an icon antiquarian might conceivably work out a more rigorous genealogy, I mean to suggest something else by the logical plausibility of the John and Boris icon as adumbrating Kandinsky's painting: namely, how

Figure 1.3 *The Holy Prophet Elijah in the Desert,* late fifteenth-century icon, Novgorod school. Iconen-Museum, Recklinghausen (Germany). Courtesy of the Museum.

successive formalizations of a conception can actually *accrue* meaning as well as beget it. In this case, that the "father of abstract painting" is seen to ally himself with the Elijah who battled the false worshippers of Baal, by way of an "icon" (certified in later Christian church history as no graven image), could hardly have been more apt. Even if Kandinsky drew inspiration from what is now

Figure 1.4 John and Boris (icon writers), *Elijah in the Desert*, icon, Novgorod school, 1670.

considered the conservative movement of the Old Believers, the point would have been that as a modernist he was on John and Boris' aesthetic side, having no use for anything mistakenly supposed to be "progressively" *naturalistic*.[50]

Kandinsky's writings do show him a theologically literate Christian of Russian Orthodox persuasion. After a happy aesthetic romance with Bavarian peasant painting, his more profound commitment to the Orthodox Christian icon was a grounding influence for a new mode of painting that would escape narrative and

even symbology in the interest of nonobjective expressivity. The modality of the Russian icon was not a superficial ethnicity that should have made Kandinsky paintings look like tourist icons. Even genuine icons with conventional traits are hardly archaic and rarely primitive. But in Kandinsky's work, signs of the iconic reveal themselves, based on a remarkable biblical literacy that acts as a generative force guaranteeing coherence. The entire situation, including this painter's theological understanding, established an attitude of high seriousness in the

Figure 1.5 Vasily Kandinsky, *Yellow Center*, 1926, oil on canvas. Museum Boijmans-Van Beuningen, Rotterdam. Studio Tromp, courtesy of the Museum.

early practice of abstract painting. By quite different but parallel means, the works of Mondrian, Malevich, and Lissitzky will also show evidence of their groundings in religious faith.

Appendix: A Thematic of Annunciation

Kandinsky's nephew Alexandre Kojève (1902–68) was a Russo-French Left Hegelian philosopher who, in 1936, wrote an essay (long unpublished) on the painting of his uncle. Ten years before, at the time of the painter's *Point and Line to Plane* (1926), Kojève had finished a doctorate at Heidelberg with a dissertation on *The Religious Philosophy of Vladimir Solovyov,* this work later revised and published, between 1934 and 1935, as *The Religious Metaphysics of Vladimir Solovyov*—not long before his Kandinsky essay.

Kojève's essay, "The Concrete Paintings of Kandinsky," shows a shrewd Hegelian with no sense of painting but a relevant sense of Solovyov, who may have influenced the painter's understanding of the Annunciation as a principal thought motif. This subject could become interesting all over again in the latter part of the twentieth century when a new abstract painter drew attention to the same theological theme, provoking a major historian of Constructivism and an art critic to defend him on that basis.

Vladimir Solovyov (1853–1900), Kojève's dissertation subject, has always been popular as a Russian "mystic." A practically trademarked element of his thought is a concept that seems more a personage than a figure of speech: *Sophia.* Notwithstanding her Greek name as suggesting Sophia as the personification of Divine Wisdom, the beautiful Sophia was intuited directly by Solovyov, like an apparition, and always addressed as female. She is the very fulcrum of Solovyov's so-called "Sophiology."

There was a living conduit from Solovyov to both Kandinsky and Kojève: Solovyov's student, Sergei Bulgakov. A little younger than the painter, he had the same thesis adviser.[51] At the time of the 1905 Revolution, Bulgakov had belonged to the Brotherhood of the Christian Struggle, a Russian Orthodox group that included clergy and hierarchy and which called for a Church synod to deal with social reform.[52] In *Karl Marx as a Religious Type: His Relation to the Religion of Anthropotheism of Ludwig Feuerbach* (1906), Bulgakov managed to detach Marx from Marxist atheism. Kandinsky always held onto an autographed abstract of his 1908 article "The Intelligentsia and Religion"; and he also hoped to publish Bulgakov in a second *Blaue Reiter Almanac*, which never occurred.

I do not find "The Concrete Paintings of Kandinsky" enlightening; but I find it most fascinating that Kojève was quite taken by Bulgakov's *The Tragedy of Philosophy (Philosophy and Dogma),* published in Germany in 1927, too late for his dissertation, though in time for his Kandinsky essay. That is also a year later than *Point and Line to Plane,* in which the unexpectedly theological notion of the Annunciation seems to crop up; but we are talking about ideas that likely took time to germinate in a rather small circle. One particular idea, concerning the Annunciation, was influenced by both Solovyov's "Sophiology" and Bulgakov, and would surely have interested Kandinsky.

In the dissertation, Kojève wrote that, for Solovyov, ideas are idealistically "abstract subjects, endowed . . . with a kind of will," as if "genuine people, self-aware, concrete, and living" (25); not unlike the way a "Word made flesh" understanding of the Incarnation makes for a "Divine Humanity" (31).[53] Kojève's essay on Kandinsky also touches on this sense of an embodied idea, positing a "tableau [picture] 'Tree'"—painted from a concept without an empirical referent—which supposedly "incarnates that abstraction."[54]

Even today, most Orthodox icon theory goes back to the early medieval iconoclast controversy to emphasize the distinctly incarnational argument that when God took on human form, the Son of God, and prophets and saints, not to mention ordinary people and all of Creation, might validly be represented. This standard, incarnational narrative, however, can be taken to slight the Virgin (as noted above, *Theotokos,* or "Mother of God" in Orthodoxy), as a mere accessory to the Incarnation proper. In Bulgakov's account, however, she has a considerably more critical relation to the unfolding of Christology: she materialized the connection between humanity and God before Jesus was born. *No Annunciation, no Incarnation; no Incarnation, no salvation.* Because I believe that Kandinsky knew and alluded to this view, I shall turn from Kojève—if not Bulgakov—to affirm my speculation on Annunciational imagery in *Point and Line to Plane* after the fact, by elaborating the importance of the Annuncation in the context of modern painting with the help of a modern theologian, an abstract artist and an modernist art historian.

In exploring the question of the Russian icon, the present-day theologian Aidan Nichols has centered on Bulgakov's understanding of it by resort to his publications through the expatriate Russian community founded in Paris in 1925, the St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute, which included Bulgakov. Their press published his books in Russian, such as *The Icon and Icon-Veneration* (1931). Certainly by that time, Kandinsky was aware of this new Russian theological scholarship being published on his Parisian doorstep.

From these Bulgakov works, Nichols has developed a sense of the newly vital creative import of the Annunciation that goes along, in the 1920s, with what seems alluded to in *Point and Line to Plane,* namely, an uncommon understanding of the deep theological question, as projected into human history, of the "hypostatic union" of Christ's human and divine natures. Bulgakov amplifies the already important Marian aspect of the Annunciation event as a posture of divine inspiration. Is it even possible for him to have been stimulated by the account of the painter confronting the empty canvas in the then recent *Point and Line to Plane?*

Now Nichols elucidates Bulgakov's theology of the icon as specifically *not* resting on the conventional rationale of the Incarnation, where permissible representability depends on the human birth of Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity, as (so to speak) miraculously naturalistic. Instead, Nichols first has Bulgakov stepping back to take all of humanity as already in God's image, as Genesis literally says (1:27). That humankind is already "theomorphic" (76) opens up a societal and churchly dimension of constructive appeal to the spectator. Bulgakov can speak (almost as if to defend abstract painting) of "'the lordly power of man in the world as its eye, its ideal mirror.' [The person] is the being who sees the images . . . as well as the one who makes images"; and artistic naturalism offends him as much as it does Kandinsky because it "'replaces by a subterfuge the fundamental task of the iconisation of being'" (78).[55]

Secondly, however, in explicating the Bulgakovian approach, Nichols illuminates the huge importance of the Annunciation, which iconically permits the mother-plus-child complex to illustrate "the totality of human hypostases [as] not simply male but male and female." For it is the "theomorphic" humanity in Bulgakov's "doctrine of divine imagehood" that "satisfies this precondition" (77–8).[56]

This also permits Nichols to attack apophatic theology broadside, for taking the divine as something of which we cannot speak (let alone depict). If Genesis says we all resemble God, the latter cannot be so hopelessly unfamiliar. Thus, to the apophatic "thesis, the proper . . . counter-thesis is not some claim about Christ's human nature. The counter-thesis should read: God is in himself sheer relationship" (80)[57] (as we understand through human relationships). Nichols continues, in light of Bulgakov, that "apophatic theology, once brought into some attempted relation with iconology, spells death to the icon. This is the truth that the Iconodule Fathers [anciently in favor of icons but for incarnational reason] failed to see . . . If the divine is absolutely beyond all images, it is plain that no

image of Christ's humanity has any relation with his being as God, albeit God incarnate" (82). For Bulgakov, "the sophianity of the entire created realm finds voice" thanks to the Virgin of the Annunciation, who "remains herself, Mary of Nazareth" (85).

More than a generation ago, Annunciation theology was introduced, amazingly enough, into the discourse of contemporary abstract painting by a suite of early works by Brice Marden, and immediately critiqued by Stephen Bann, a leading scholar of constructivism. In 1978 Marden produced a suite of five large paintings based on the theological stages of the Annunciation as analyzed in a sermon by a late fifteenth-century friar, as recounted in Michael Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (1972). Details concern the successive mental states of the Virgin in interaction with the archangel Gabriel.

Bann's essay takes up the most widely important matter to which Marden's effort relates, in the face of a then new generation's recourse to Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility" (1935), to declare painting a reactionary artistic modality—in effect, resuming the ever-so-modern antimetaphysicalism with which Kandinsky himself had to contend. Understanding how the Soviet anti-painting crusade once gave Kandinsky and Malevich such a hard time, Bann saw that what Marden was not at all about static materiality, but rather a dynamic sublimation (in Bann's title) "From the Material to the Immaterial."

Bann puts the radical shoe on the other foot by observing that to consider a painting only in "terms of the processes and materials used to fabricate [it]" is precisely to "situate" it "in the realm of Utopia." Marden himself is "on record as having written, in 1971–2, that the effect of the practice of such 'fundamental painting' [as his Annunciations] resides precisely in the dialectical reversal which it produces—in its refusal to bow to the censorship of the 'not metaphysical.'" His own thinking has its Kandinskyan moments: "'The rectangle, the plane, the structure, the picture are but sounding boards for a spirit.'"[58]

Bann sees a new critical dogmatism forming in the early 1970s against painting, especially against its openness to metaphysical, let alone religious, meaning, which viewers were being trained to ignore or discount: this he reads Marden's "Annunciations" as essentially going against.[59] A BBC television series is quoted, using a crude paraphrase of Walter Benjamin to pronounce that anything religious in an artwork must belong either to magic or "bogus religiosity" (9–10).[60] Answering this, Bann writes:

> We are obliged, surely, to act with the suppleness of a Houdini in order to extricate ourselves from the constricting half-truths with which contemporary critical discourse is beset. For example, Brice Marden paints a series of "Annunciations," each of which bears a title deriving from a 15th-century devotional formulation of the Virgin's response to the Angel Gabriel. Our immediate reaction, perhaps, is to feel that this is not a "real" Annunciation … The separate "stages" are no doubt a simple pretext for setting up a differential series, in which certain colour combinations can be tried out in sequence … Yet when all is said and done, such an interpretation quite fails to account for the distinctive quality of the work.
>
> 10–11

Quite aside from paintings that either attempt to rehearse traditional iconography or "exploit culturally rich titles in the interests of a formalistic exercise," Bann writes, "Would it not be relevant to point out that the Annunciation signifies, not simply a type of iconography or a particular formal scheme, but the incarnation of spirit in the material world? … When … authors … talk vaguely and disparagingly about 'spiritual value,' they entirely neglect the specificity of the cultural context in which Western painting has developed." The Annunciation theme "is not a vaguely idealist direction, in which 'spiritual' values are preferred to those of the material world, but a unique tradition of immanence… which … provides the prototype for a paradoxical conjuncture of divine spirit and created matter" (11). Even Kandinsky's ultra-Communist nephew Kojève might have to acknowledge that his uncle's "materialist" *Point and Line to Plane* helps to make it possible for Bann to say so.

This excursus on Annunciation has not proved definitively that Kandinsky intended *Point and Line* to refer directly to the "mystery" of that theological doctrine. A nonbeliever might take references to the Virgin's hesitation, or to the womb, as evidence simply of Freudian libido as the driving force of creativity (though a believer could then manage to take that as all the more, rather than all the less, to be sanctified). This is a perfect case where religious belief as such deserves at least alternative theoretical space, especially in respect to an artist whose religious convictions are a matter of record.

2

A Protestant Mondrian

Background

Much has been written about the lingering interest of Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) in Theosophy as a presumed source of spiritual-to-artistic intuition, while too little has been written about the foundation of Mondrian's faith, which was Reformed Christianity.[1] This religious underpinning is important for a painter whose greatest works arose from the effort to liberate himself from nature. For if nature and the divine are conceived as one thing in Theosophy, John Calvin (1509–64), the founder of the Reformed tradition that bears his name, more critically insists, in conjunction with St. Paul, that with the Fall, not only humanity but all of Creation "groaneth and travaileth" (Rom. 8:22), the verb travail being noteworthy as the origin of "labor pains"—taken, like all suffering and illness, as one of the many punishments of the Fall.

The modern aesthetician Francis Sparshott quotes a statement from the eighteenth-century English critic John Dennis's *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704) that relates to Paul but is ramified aesthetically: "The great design of arts is to restore the decays that happened to human nature by the Fall, by restoring order: The design of logic is to bring back order, and rule, and method to our conceptions. . . . Those arts that make the senses instrumental to the pleasure of the mind, as painting and music, do it by a great deal of rule and order."[2] Dennis's aesthetic statement on Adam's sin and the consequent Fall shows a sense of correcting (by idealist-classical means) a wayward nature that was once part of a common consciousness even in secular society, in his case, of eighteenth-century Britain but also still widely understood as such even in nineteenth-century Europe and America.

The Fall was the consequence of the apple mentioned in Genesis 3. Eve had been instructed not to touch or eat the apple, but she plucked it and offered it to Adam; the conclusive act came when Adam took a bite, making for unanimity in

the offence. A contract between God and humankind was thereby broken: a situation defined as inherited Original Sin in Catholic Western Christianity ever since Augustine (represented here by Malevich), whereas Eastern Christianity (represented here by Kandinsky) resembles Talmudic Judaism (represented here by Lissitzky), prefering to speak of a human proclivity to sin rather than an inherited Original Sin. But we are not yet finished with legalities here, because Calvinistic Protestantism (represented here by Mondrian) developed its own competing theologies concerning the mechanisms of salvation and damnation. Given Mondrian's background, his manifest interest in contemporary Calvinism, and the prevalence of major discourse on this theme among well-read Calvinists at the time, it is impossible to think that Mondrian never pondered it.

While Calvinists could surely appreciate traces of God's glory in the natural world, one can picture the young Mondrian sitting up straight to hear that nature as well as humanity could only be restored thanks to the Resurrection of Christ. Contemporaneous with Mondrian, the important Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) taught that all of God's handiwork, including humanity, will be eventually restored in view of the *parousia*, the Second Coming of Christ (B1:501). Theosophists, Bavinck says, could not appreciate this because they "do not comprehend sin" and "regeneration, which annuls and conquers sin" (B1:346). For decades since Ringbom's *The Sounding Cosmos* (1970), art history has encouraged us to attribute Theosophical influence to both Kandinsky (see Chapter 1) and Mondrian (and sometimes to Malevich), by complete indifference to anything Christian.

Before considering the parallels between Calvinist theology and Mondrian's classic operational style as a painter, one needs to know how his approach to painting came about, with its characteristic *relational compositions*—which is to say, compositions in which elements of different sizes and colors are combined with a view to constituting a wholly interrelated order.[3] Thus I begin by indicating the artistic background to this stage and its development, before dealing with a neglected religious facet of Mondrian's own theoretical writing; and next I turn to the writing of an important contemporary Dutch theologian, with attention to possible theoretical analogies. The theologian in question, Bavinck, died just as Mondrian entered his classic phase, which, as open to development as it proved to be, can be considered to have lasted through the remaining twenty-three years of his life. Finally, by showing how Mondrian's basic style thrived well beyond Bavinck's demise, I will point up the lasting nature of his neo-Calvinist intellectual influence as something more enduring than a passing period.

Approaching the Classic Phase

Art history is accustomed to taking Calvin's iconoclasm negatively, as the reason why the painting of religious subjects was disallowed, since the Reformation, in the Protestant and Calvinist Netherlands. A significant project in Mondrian's juvenilia is an eight-foot-long figurative but uninhabited canvas *Thy Word Is Truth*, its title taken from John 17:17. Painted between 1893 and 1894, when Mondrian was twenty-one and just beginning to study art at the Amsterdam Academy, the work was intended for display at the Christian national school where his father was headmaster.[4] The image is an allegorical still life, enshrining a Bible with a big doubled drape that recapitulates a seventeenth-century Dutch *repoussoir* device to provide internal framing just inside an image, like a "wing" on a proscenium stage, and as sometimes seen in trompe l'oeil.[5] But in *Thy Word Is Truth*, young Mondrian's quite literal anchor of faith has a chain whose end points to a citation on the Bible's cover to the Epistle to the Romans 5:1: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ"—a verse that can be considered the very cornerstone of the Protestant Reformation.[6]

The iconoclasm of the Netherlands during the seventeenth century is well typified by the whitewashed interiors of old Dutch churches, with their heraldic and almost aggressively secular coats of arms, often in lozenge form, by artists like Pieter Saenredam and Emanuel de Witte, such as the latter's *Interior of the Nieuwe Kerk in Delft* (1664; Residenzgalerie, Salzburg). In Dutch, the very word for painting, *Schilderij*, is closely related to "shield"; and such escutcheons—nonrepresentational paintings that displaced pre-Reformation holy pictures—are a curious Calvinist adumbration of the lozenge paintings (square canvases rotated by 45 degrees) of Mondrian's classic phase, such as *Lozenge Composition with Yellow, Black, Blue, Red, and Gray* (1921; Art Institute of Chicago).[7] Today, such escutcheons seem to testify to wealth and earthly power, almost as if to exalt the moneychangers in their temple; earlier on, they might have connoted taking the Word of God into the world—though as differently as possible from otherwise socially equivalent baroque paintings or statues dedicated to patron saints of the wealthy in Catholic baroque churches.

The early Mondrian painting of religious but non-figurative subject matter appears to be unique, unless one wants to count images of churches as religious paintings—which indeed the early Calvinist church interiors were, by iconoclastic default. It does seem relevant for modern Dutch art that Mondrian's early Bible still life came only a few years after Van Gogh, himself a failed Dutch Reformed

lay preacher with ecumenical sympathies, had already painted still lifes not only of a Bible but also—and also perhaps instead—of secular novels. Yet in early maturity Mondrian took happily to painting a church exterior as a motif many times, like repeated portraits of a favorite sitter.

Painted at home in the Netherlands, such works as the planar facade of the *Church at Domburg I* (1911; Kunstmuseum Den Haag, The Hague) are essentially post-impressionist until he begins to experiment with cubism in Paris, which lasted until war broke out in 1914, when he went home. A drawing called *Church Façade I* (1914; Kunstmuseum Den Haag, The Hague; Figure 2.1), is cubistic, its oval field beautifully stuffed with vivid intersections and curves and featuring an audacious semantic displacement of the steeple to the bottom of the field. Such images portrayed Mondrian's local, part-Gothic town church—Reformed, of course. Already he is more at home with the stable, regulated relief of such a geometrically interesting building façade—itself only a question of landscape by omission—than with figuration.

It was back in the Netherlands after 1914, taking up this favored category of landscape with architectural structures, that Mondrian would make his end run to abstraction. From the seaside at Domburg come his "Pier and Ocean" images. A clear dialectic is at work in them between the natural and the humanly made, and between atmosphere and scope. The charcoal-and-watercolor drawing *Pier and Ocean 5; Sea and Starry Sky* (1915; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Figure 2.2), and the painting *Composition 10 in Black and White* (1915; Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo), both deriving from a view of sky and sea seen from a pier projecting toward the horizon, show something very great emergent. Regarding the former work, I once responded spontaneously in a television interview that it occurred to me how the setting and the observer's viewpoint evoke a famous remark of Immanuel Kant, near the end of *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788): "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above and the moral law within."[8]

Philosophy is indeed relevant here; and Yve-Alain Bois is right that Mondrian's development is inherently dialectical, though he is not alone in referring anything philosophical, such as Kant or Hegel, to the contemporary Dutch reactionary popularizer Gerardus Bolland.[9] There is, however, a problem today with Hegel himself, concerning the crucial notion of *Aufhebung,* that dialectical principle whereby something is negated yet "sublated" in overcoming the negation. Many Hegelians today are insufficiently dialectical about religion:

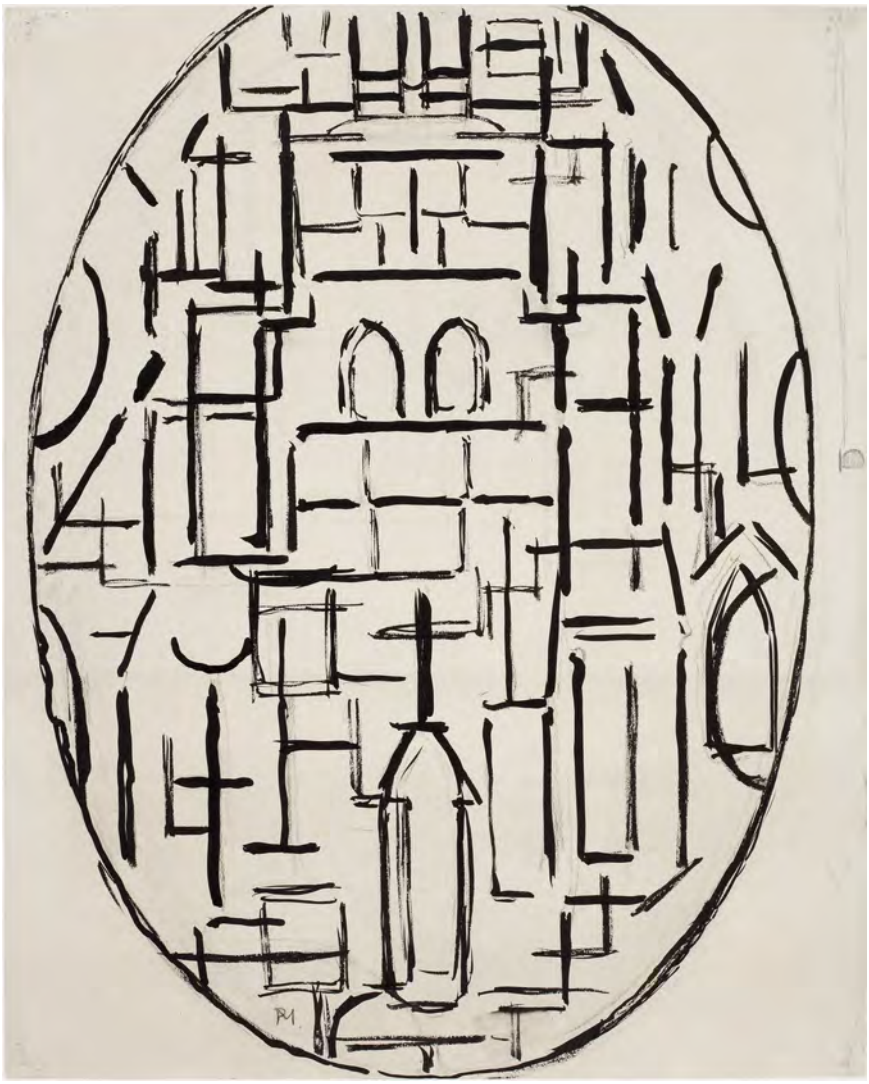

Figure 2.1 Piet Mondrian, *Church Façade 1,* 1914, charcoal and ink on paper. Kunstmuseum Den Haag. The Hague. Courtesy of the Museum.

applauding only Left Hegelianism, they ignore the Right Hegelianism that claims Hegel as a Lutheran believer.

Hence religion as such is also relevant. One might never have thought of Luther's philosophical horizon as encompassing the now seemingly Left Hegelian notion of *aufheben* (to sublate), but the Luther Bible offers an astute use of the

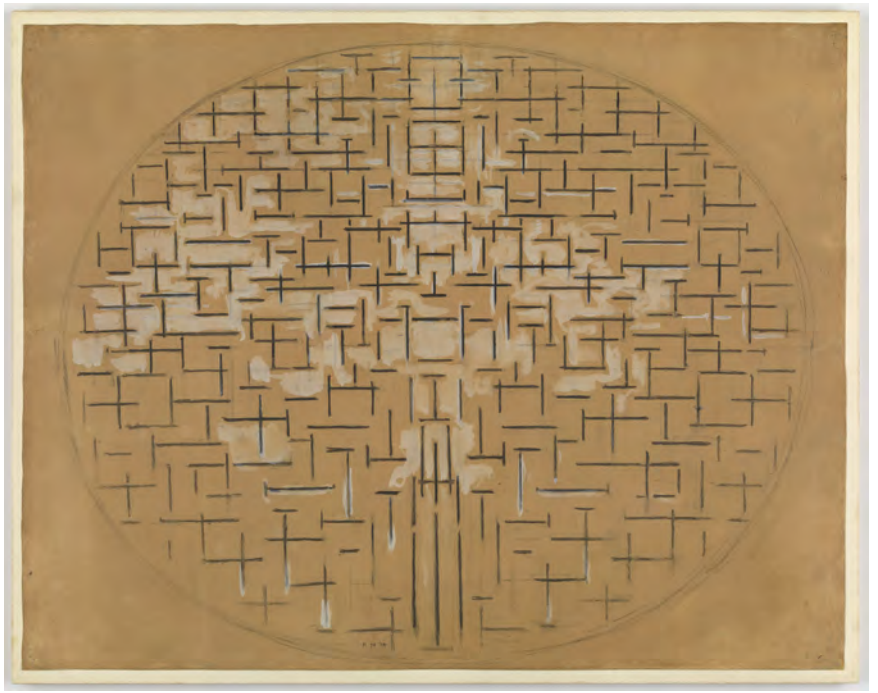

Figure 2.2 Piet Mondrian, *Pier and Ocean (Sea and Starry Sky),* 1915, charcoal and watercolor on paper. Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence.

same verb in a stunning passage of the Epistle to the Romans: "Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of their faith and the uncircumcised through their faith. Do we then overthrow the law by this faith [*Wie*? *heben wir denn dass Gesetz auf durch den Glauben*]? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law" (Rom. 3:29–31).[10] The German version in which I first noticed this is a British and Foreign Bible Society edition published at Berlin in 1925; but as modern editions of the *Lutherbibel* sometimes alter Luther's original phraseology, I have verified this vital passage in several earlier editions including a facsimile of the 1534 original.[11]

Mondrian's work *Composition in Line* (1916–17; Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo)—echoing his prior experience with cubism plus "Pier and Ocean" works—brings the artist only a step or two away from his first paintings with irregular ranges of color patches; *Composition in Color B* (1917; Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo), has line and color zones that overlap and/or syncopate.

In *Self-Portrait* (1918; Kunstmuseum Den Haag, The Hague), the painter identifies himself, by the painting behind his head, with his series "Compositions with Color Planes" from the previous year. The painting-within-a-painting there is a ghostly white-on-white summary version of the series. *Composition with Color Planes 3* (1917; Kunstmuseum Den Haag, The Hague; Figure 2.3), is a fine example of the type, which relates better to the classic works to come than its pastel colors might indicate, thanks to the highly intuitive placements of the elements. In fact, the classic paintings favor not so much primary colors as what could be called *categorical* colors, whereby a red is red enough to establish itself in respect to anything categorically yellow or categorically blue.

Emphasis on the placement of such elements as astutely intuitive can be inferred by comparing them to contemporary works of an altogether different style but a similar compositional modality: witness the arrays of squarish snippets, supposedly determined by chance, in the Dada collages of Jean Arp, such as *Untitled (Squares Arranged According to the Laws of Chance)* (1917;

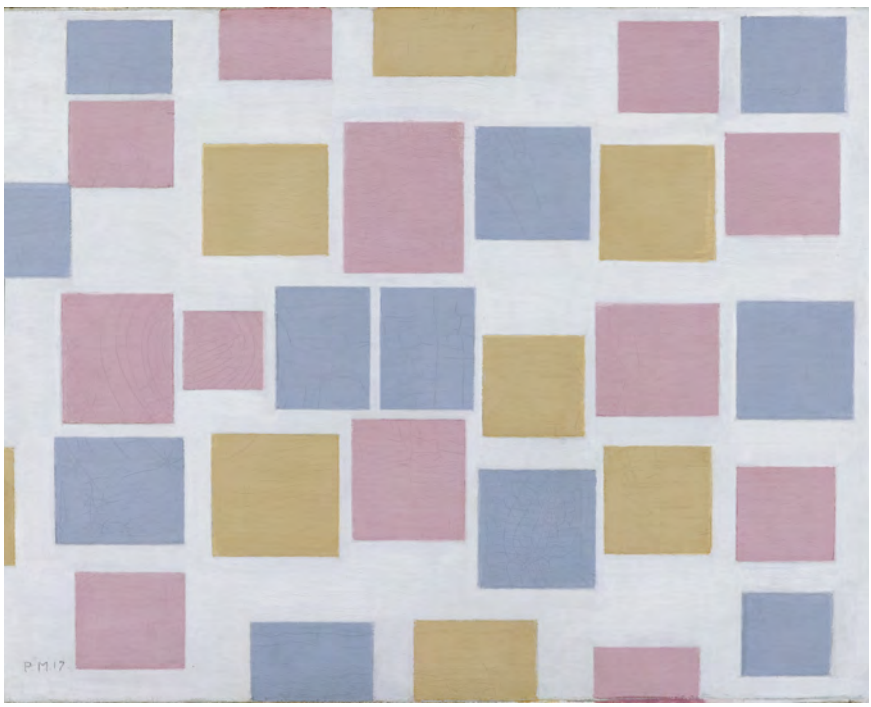

Figure 2.3 Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Color Planes 3,* 1917, oil on canvas. Kunstmuseum Den Haag, The Hague. Courtesy of the Museum.

Kunstmuseum Den Haag, The Hague). I have always admired this Arp series, but except for Arp's pulling the pieces out of a bag, I do not think they have much to do with chance because their "arrangements" look artfully composed. Dadaists don't believe in predestination, do they?![12]

Important for Mondrian, however, is that his series "Compositions with Color Planes" already has something similar to the sort of electromagnetic field of his classic paintings, wherein each form responds visibly to its neighbors, positioned determinately in regard to multiple adjacent effects (up and down, left and right). Yes, we can already say "determinate"—but uniquely determinate rather than uniform, which has a certain acuity in this situation where Calvinist predestination is to be seen as personally at stake. To begin, Mondrian will include line, with asymmetrical lattices of first gray and then black lines, together with rectangular color zones, to formulate his quintessential style.

Equally important is that in Mondrian's mature work, the "determinate" character never implies a uniform grid, which could limit the free exercise of judgment. Were grids the case, one might speak of the simple "commutative" equality of their constituent units. However, having nothing to do with the commutative interchangeability of units in a grid (except for a few experiments in 1918 and 1919), this painter's compositions can instead evoke an Aristotelian "distributive" proportionality.[13] This very aspect of Mondrian, whereby the qualitative aspect of proportion—instead of the fixed armature of a mechanical grid—makes such compositions more than constructivist. Analogous is the way Malevich's suprematism manages to be virtually *anything but* "geometric art" (Chapter 3).

Mondrian's best-known classic phase of the 1920s and 30s developed when the artist returned to Paris after the First World War.[14] His compositions now consist of black rectilinear lines upon a field of white, or whites, with interstices between them, some as areas occupied by categorical colors. A wonderful example is *Tableau 2* (1922; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; see Figure 2.5), which shows the painter's rectilinear composition attaining an extraordinarily active and vital equilibrium. Here one sees the relative weights of the color patches in remarkable asymmetric balance as the three colors manage to touch all four sides despite one entire corner being given over to a comparably solid rectangle of black. The black patch, together with two discernibly different whites, comprises something like a rival triad of non-colors. Slim partitioning bands either do or decidedly do not touch—or exceed—the edge, while the halving of the open zone at the top, split between white and yellow, is like the halving at the left between white and blue, which also makes for a whole corner

wide open to white as counterpart to the similarly two-sided corner devoted to black. However difficult to describe, the painting testifies to an incisive play of visual intelligence, striking all at once, like a strong, pure chord. The practically magnetic interdependence of parts is a pure form of that "relational composition" which long served Western painting as an armature for standard pictorial representation, now purged of descriptive reference. We will revisit this work again.

Justification and the World to Come

Artists often write about their worldviews in the subjective modes of letters, diaries, and notebooks, the intended destinations of which are sometimes problematic. Fortunately, Mondrian addressed posterity with a great deal of formal published writing, more of it touching on religion than people normally notice, and some of it even seemingly analogically theological. As a lifelong admirer of the artist, I have long retained a sense that his abstract Neo-Plastic compositions of the 1920s and 1930s practically thematize theological justification, which is to say, as a compensatory reversal of the Fall of Man. Often Mondrian uses the term "equilibration" in his writings, as in, to bring into equilibrium. Because this shift likely entails a justification out of a previous disequilibrium, once the white canvas has been painted upon, the theological terminology of justification in respect to the Fall seems apposite. And insofar as what is justified may advance the ultimate utopia of the New Jerusalem, or the Kingdom of God and His justice (an expression owed mainly to Isaiah), Mondrian's ongoing mentions of religion in published statements signal a mission that was more than ordinarily altruistic for a painter and evokes important contemporary Dutch theological parallels.

A markedly Calvinist point arises whenever Mondrian stresses that his equilibrations are determined, thanks to the place of predestination in the Calvinist frame of mind. The principle that the immortal destiny of everyone is known in advance by God is not what Jews and other Christians have in mind when they imagine God as having the freedom of an artist; it springs from a wholly different attitude. In Mondrian's first published essay, "The New Plastic in Painting" (1917), written at home during the First World War (when the Netherlands remained neutral), he says, "The abstract plastic of relationship expresses [the] prime relationship [of extreme opposites] *determinately*[15]—by the duality of position, the perpendicular. This relationship of position is the

most equilibrated because it expresses the relationship of extreme opposition in complete harmony and includes all other relationships" (M30; emphasis original). Conspicuous in this statement, supporting the stress on rigorous perpendicularity (and altogether unlike romantic notions of artistic creation), is an overarching sense of right contrivance.

At the same time, Mondrian minimizes Theosophy as offensively occult, a matter of the "veiled wisdom" that modern religion as well as science are right to discourage. By associating the Theosophy problem with Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*—as a categorically modern primary text—he can blast "the old religion with its mysteries and dogmas" (a charge with special Calvinist resonance) while parenthetically throwing Kandinsky a special lifeline for taking Theosophy as more or less merely antimaterialistic and *"not as it commonly appears"*; it might just be something merely spiritual in a broad sense, such as any other "expression of the same spiritual movement we now see in painting" (M44n.u; emphasis added). That is about the last we hear of Theosophy in Mondrian's writings.

Theologically, the crucial concept at work in Mondrian's art is *justification*, for which *equilibration* is the aesthetic stand-in. Justification, which atones for Adam and Eve's sin and forgives it by grace, is a matter of divine economy. One speaks of the remission of sins, signifying that something is remitted through justification like payment for a debt. In the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin's sense of justification consists of a remission of the debit of sin thanks to the gratuitous credit of the righteousness of Christ (III.xi.xx).[16] We can surmise that the play of variables in an abstract painting by Mondrian—including proportions and colors of the rectangular areas and their positions and relative distances apart—will seem, when attuned, "justified," in a sense analogous to the theological meaning of the term.

Speaking of justification as such: there is a point in the New Testament that quotes the Old—a point that everybody aware of the Reformation is on the lookout for—in which the RSV version shows a proliferation of the verb "to reckon," carrying decided connotations of accountancy or bookkeeping in regard to humanity's redemption from the Fall. I am referring to the fourth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, from just after the Luther reference made above. It will be sufficient to give only the first and most momentous of no fewer than eleven examples of forms of the word "reckoning," establishing an affinity with justification: "What then shall we say about Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? 'Abraham

believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.' Now to one who works, his wages are not reckoned as a gift but as his due" (Rom. 4:1–4; compare Gen.15:6 and other New Testament examples). In Luther's German text, the equivalent recurrent verb to this use of "justify" is *gerecht*, as in "to set right," and the equivalent of "reckoned . . . as righteousness" is *zur Gerechtigheit gerechtet*, which seems doubly forceful, like saying "rightly set aright" or "rectified to rectitude." What is more, in the Dutch *Statenvertaling* (the original 1637 Dutch equivalent of the Authorized Bible, as known to Mondrian), much of this same emphasis is consistently true through the whole chapter, with obviously parallel meanings. Looking so closely at this Protestant hot spot highlights something important to Mondrian's apperceptive religious outlook: namely, that whatever comes to us is completely *unreckoned* (the Calvinist point being, it is certainly not earned), acknowledging that even our own faith is itself a pure grace from above.

A sense of justification as something more than what is merely repaired can be imputed to Mondrian. The church politics of maintaining the justification arguments of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation for 500 years are not our concern here, especially in view of the great reconciliation finally accomplished in our very day.[17] On the long road to resolution, some already saw grounds of agreement, such as philosopher Herbert Arthur Hodges (1905–76) who, as an Anglican appreciating both Calvinist and Catholic views, believed that once evenness and balance is restored to the relationship between humankind and God, something better than the merely equitable holds sway. Hodges even commends, on the Catholic side (always caricatured as good works quite instead of faith), the Council of Trent's decree on justification (Session 6, Chapter 7) for proclaiming something more than the neutrality of returning to zero-degree blame or error by insisting that justification "is not remission of sins merely, but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward [person], through the voluntary reception of the grace, and of the gifts whereby [one] unjust becomes just, and . . . an enemy, a friend."[18] One could say that the composition (or composure) of a person's human relations is improved thanks to a general "'infusion' of righteousness."[19]

It is noteworthy that the theology of justification also has a common-sense aspect, including respect for craft, which is not irrelevant to painting. Craftspeople know justification as a setting right, getting things "squared away": the carpenter justifies edges by eliminating a discrepancy; the printer justifies type in respect to column and page—both, no doubt, with a good feeling of making things right. Mondrian must entertain disunity before making good on it; but once

equilibrium has been achieved, some idealistic things prove to be worth the effort, as if the painting could say, Now who's being "realistic!" As a matter of fact, Mondrian *did* like to say that—as against any spurious realism settling spiritually for so much less. Cardinal Newman was still an Anglican when he wrote: "In the abstract [justification] is a counting righteous, in the concrete a making righteous . . . Serious men, dealing with realities, not with abstract conceptions, . . . not refuting an opponent, but teaching the poor, have . . . taken it to mean what they saw, felt, handled . . . When they speak of justification, it is of a wonderful grace of God, not in the heavens, but nigh to them."[20]

From the time of the formation of the De Stijl movement in Amsterdam in 1917 onward, Mondrian identified his artistic ideal as the achieved asymmetric balance of an "equilibrated plastic" relationship. Eventually, in "The New Art—The New Life: The Culture of Pure Relationships" (1931), he would allude to the theological underpinning of the Fall of Man: since Adam enjoyed "perfect equilibrium" before the Fall, afterward achieving justification became a struggle that required "outside opposition"—no doubt, grace (M256). The necessity of such (after Eden) may be seen to explain the sense of active equilibrium entailed in a classic Mondrian composition: the reason why such a work appears *rendered to be* asymmetrically perfect.

Mondrian's wonderful asymmetric equilibrations were a revelation to me in my youth. I have never forgotten looking at examples of Mondrian's paintings in New York's Museum of Modern Art at age fourteen or fifteen while overhearing a nearby docent highlighting the relational character of a certain painting's color patches. He must have pointed to red or yellow patches because, some sixty-five years later, I remember him saying, "How much blue does the eye need?" I understood that this was how I already saw Mondrian's paintings; they had to do with actively effecting an asymmetric balance, which before long I could understand as a freshly perennial justification, with the Reformation in mind. Let us then refer the constant refrain of plastic equivalence—found everywhere in this painter's writings—to the notion of justification in the mind of this Protestant among the "fathers" of abstract painting, especially in respect to the settled asymmetries of his characteristic works of the 1920s and 30s. If this view of Mondrian's work seems single-minded, it is, nevertheless, comprehensive.

As early as his essay "The New Plastic in Painting" (1917), it is clear that we have a believer on our hands: *"In abstract-real plastic man has an opposition to the natural through which he can know nature and thus gains knowledge of the spirit. In this way art becomes truly religious"* (M50; emphasis original). Again: "truly modern man sees things *as a whole* and accepts life *in its wholeness:* nature

and spirit, world and faith, art and religion—man and God, as *unity*" (M51; emphases original). As the painter says, in the same the same text, the new "free" painting developed as modernity brought recognition that *"every expression manifesting life—including art—is good and justified; that all expressions of real life are completely justified, even in their imperfection*" (M62; emphasis original). Such a statement already compares with the most famous dictum of Dutch neo-Calvinism: the claim of the renowned Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper, which I will discuss further, that over "every square inch" of Creation the risen Christ says, "This is mine!"? Here, too, Mondrian finds both pietistic religion and secular Socialism inadequate to the spiritual requirements of humanity: the one being too inward and the other too outward; "Thus true socialism signifies *equilibrium* between inward and outward culture" (M66; emphasis in original).

The philosopher Hendrik Mattes has raised the question of justice, aside from religion, in elucidating what Mondrian meant by an "exact plastic of mere relationship," speaking of his "Neo-Plastic prophetic vocation" of heralding "the realization of universal harmony." He quotes him, from a 1918–19 issue of the journal *De Stijl*, eponymous house organ of that movement, to the effect that "equilibrated relationship in society signifies what is just."[21] But having already heard Mondrian speak of religion, one wants to see how this notion related to contemporary Reformed theology. In the "Dialogue on the New Plastic" (1919), published a year after Mondrian's *Self-Portrait*, the painter writes, "If . . . we see that equilibrated relationships in society signify what is *just,* then one realizes that in art too the demands of life press forward when the spirit of the times is ripe. . . . All expressions of life—religion, social life, art etc.—always have a common *basis*. We should go into that further: there is so much to say" (M78; emphases original). In "The New Art—The New Life: The Culture of Pure Relationships" (1931), he will note concerning people's readiness to take on the utopian morality of the world to come: "Today's mentality is not capable of realizing [it], but it is capable of *observing the logic of justice*" (M273; emphasis original).

Begun in the Netherlands and finished after returning to Paris, Mondrian's text "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality: A Trialogue (While Strolling from the Country to the City)" (1919–20) is a conversation between an "abstract-real" painter, a naturalistic painter, and a layman. Shifting into his classic style, our "abstract-real" painter here spells out the play of reciprocities in the new painting as the principle of a harmonious society: "*Pure plastic vision must construct a new society, just as it has constructed a new plastic in art—a society where*

equivalent duality prevails between the material and the spiritual, a society of equilibrated relationship" (M99; emphasis original). The future is seen eschatologically: before the world to come, the abstract-real painter should expect first to see "joy and suffering . . . *opposed in equivalence*"; only then, after a "*repose*," will come a "deepened beauty enabl[ing] us to experience the feeling of freedom, which is joy" (M118; emphases original). The new society will integrate material and spiritual human needs, but "we must begin by sacrificing ourselves for an ideal, because at present the new society is no more than that. *In everything we do* we must begin by *creating an image of what society must one day make a reality*" (M119; emphases original). Hence, showing forth nothing but plastic equivalences or "justifications," the artist-author of those words makes the utopian condition imaginable.

Mondrian composed the short book *Neo-Plasticism: The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence* (1920) in French, while he was living in Paris, as a summary theoretical statement applied to the plastic arts at the launching point of his definitive Neo-Plastic phase. Basically, the plastic arts mean painting, sculpture, and architecture as arts in which material accepts the forms imposed by the artist. The equivalent Dutch term *Nieuwe Beelding*—which, with the advice of a native speaker, I venture to translate as "New Rendition"—had some Dutch cultural currency around the turn of the century, including in Theosophical circles.[22] But Neo-Plasticism, as Mondrian propounds in this robust position paper, was now being framed almost as a trademark new approach to painting and the other arts, of which he would be captain.

It seems important in this context to eliminate the idea that art has anything to do with subjective sensibility, as associated with a romantically distasteful sense of "tragedy." It might seem that the tragic is derided in favor of a more optimistic modernity, but what is bad is the *unequilibrated* tragic—that is, tragic affect (emotion), which does not participate in a dialectic of equilibration. It is interesting to see our Calvinist painter point out that, unfortunately, the general population thinks profound art must be dour: "The old conception, which desires the tragic, predominates in the masses. Because of this we have art as we know it, our theaters, cinemas, and concerts such as they are. Tragic plastic is a negative force by which the old conception imprisons us. It serves in moralizing, preaching, and teaching" (M137).[23]

Again and again, this extended text comes out against description of any kind. Description can only produce "morphoplastic" formalism—a stylization of nature as given. Even Gregorian chant tries to "deepen the dominating natural by simplification and purification," which can only "achieve another form of

sentimental expression" (M145). Disdaining subjective effects, what Mondrian seeks is the harmony between the individual *"universal in us"* and the social *"universal outside us"* (M134; emphases original) as the grounding of Neo-Plastic painting:

> It can equally be called *Abstract-Real painting* because the *abstract* (just like the mathematical sciences but without attaining the absolute, as they do) can be expressed by plastic reality. In fact, this is the essential characteristic of the New Plastic in painting. It is a composition of rectangular color planes that expresses the most profound reality. It achieves this by *plastic expression of relationships* and not by natural appearance. It realizes what all painting has always sought but could express only in a veiled manner. The colored planes, as much by position and dimension as by the greater value given to color, plastically express *only relationships* and not forms.
>
> M137; emphases original

While Mondrian's 1920 book *Neo-Plasticism* does not talk about religion—possibly because it is directed to the French—Mondrian soon afterward reveals himself to be sufficiently at home with his Calvinism to joke familiarly about it. Many will think about the famous late painting *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* (1942–3) on reading "The Manifestation of Neo-Plasticism in Music and the Italian futurists' *Bruiteurs*" (1921), where, hoping to extend his Neo-Plasticism to music, Mondrian manages to effect two gentle insider blasphemies against Calvinist strictness. The backstory here is Calvin's wishing to confine church music to the singing of psalms. Accordingly, the painter writes, "most people do not understand that the 'spiritual' is better expressed by some ordinary dance music than in all the psalms put together" (M151). Again: once our barbarous nature is overcome, like the futurists, we will come to prefer citified sounds, and "*with regard to its timbre,* the rhythm of a pile driver will affect [us] more deeply than any chanting of psalms" (M153; emphasis original).

The 1922 essay "The Realization of Neo-Plasticism in the Distant Future and in Architecture Today" voices one of Mondrian's most Hegelian statements (that is, in respect to the development of art in Hegel's *Lectures in Aesthetics*): "Art advances where religion once led." He continues, however, with a Calvinist claim about the fallenness of the world:

> Religion's basic content was to *transform the natural*; in practice, however, religion always sought to harmonize man *with nature*, that is, with *untransformed* nature.
>
> M169; emphases original

"Home—Street—City" (1926) testifies that fine art, in our intermediate provisional state, can be a compensation during the construction of the world to come (M200–01). A few years later, however, our painter becomes more political about the unredeemed world, extending justification to an external sense of social justice in "Pure Abstract Art" (1929): "Pure abstract art becomes completely emancipated, free of naturalistic appearances. It is no longer natural harmony but creates equivalent relationships. The realization of equivalent relationships is of the highest importance for life. Only in this way can social and economic

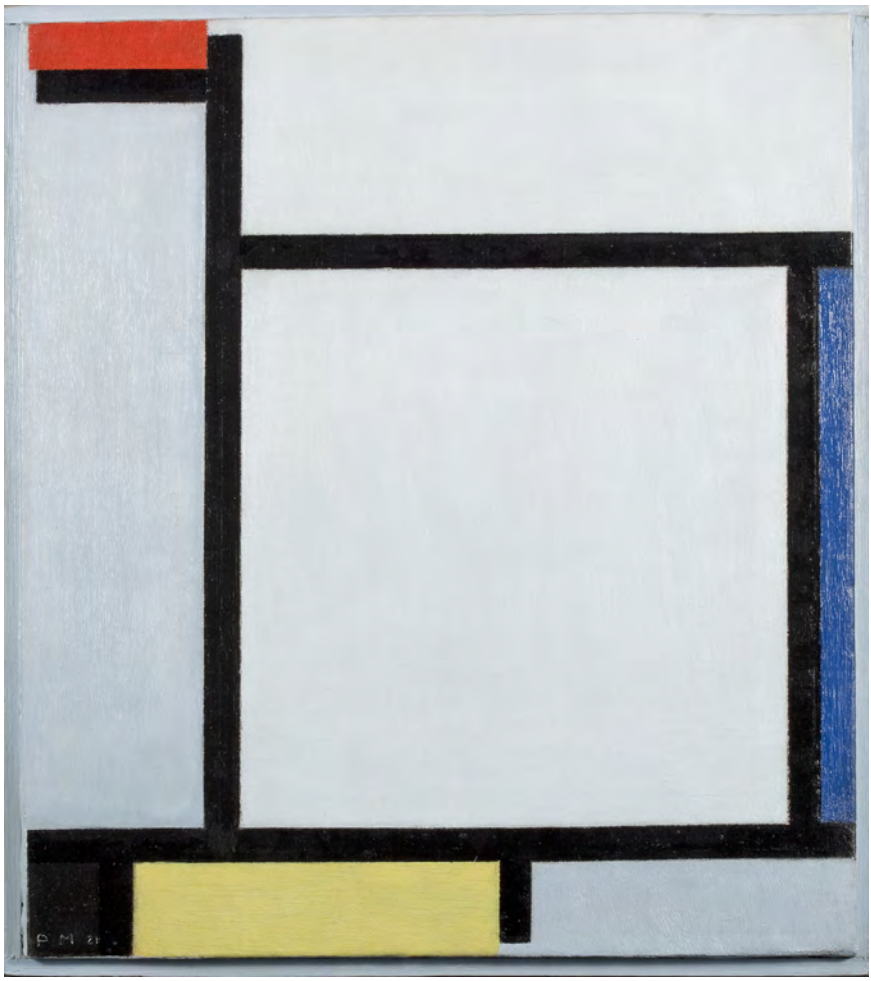

Figure 2.4 Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Red, Blue, Black, Yellow, and Gray,* 1921, oil on canvas. Kunstmuseum Den Haag, The Hague. Courtesy of the Museum.

freedom, peace, and happiness be achieved. . . . Inequivalent relationships, on the other hand, the domination of one over another or over others, have always led to injustices" (M224). In his great later essay "Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art" (1936), dissatisfied with the public reception of his project, Mondrian wonders if his aim is "attempt[ing] the impossible." After all, attempting to make art "comprehensible to everybody" *is* attempting the impossible. You cannot reach everybody because "the content will always be individual"; besides, "Religion, too, has been debased by that search" (M291).

Mondrian's apparent belief in principles congruent in all but name with justification and the Kingdom of God is striking in respect to contemporary

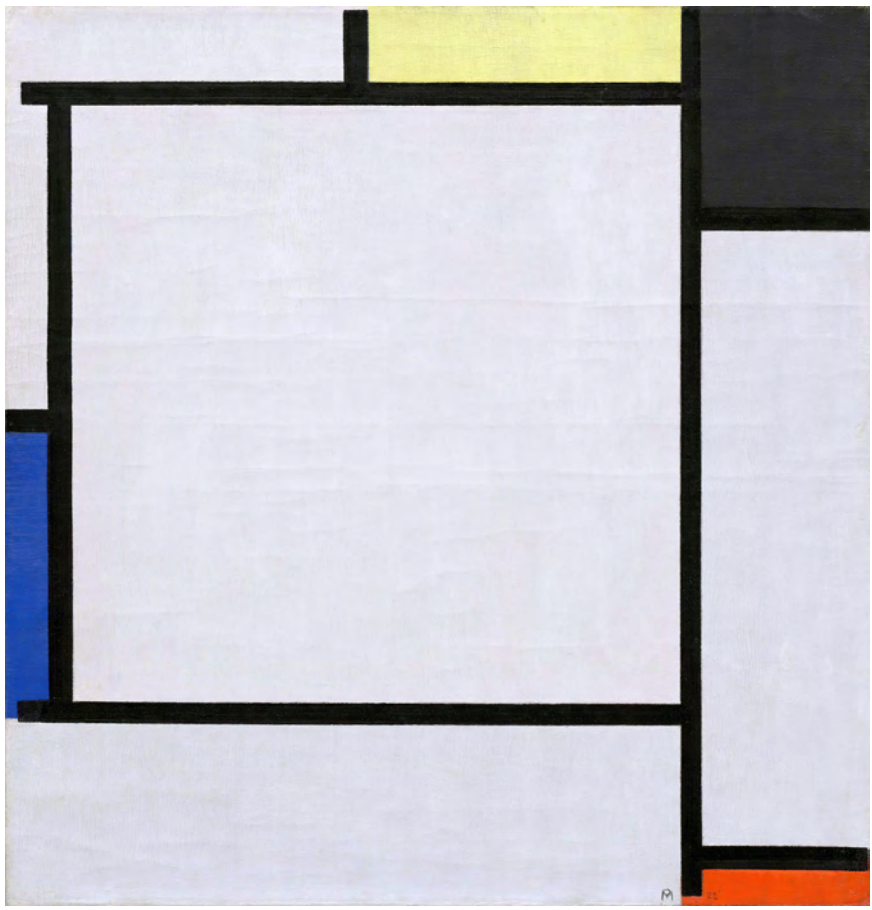

Figure 2.5 Piet Mondrian, *Tableau 2,* 1922, oil on canvas. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Alamy Ltd.

Dutch neo-Calvinism. We can now consider directly important religious goings-on in the cultural setting of the painter's religious formation, especially contemporaneous neo-Calvinist writing. Such topics are also what was being preached and talked about—including neo-Calvinist extramural applications of Christian commitment.

But between the two textual parts of this discussion, let us juxtapose another classic painting from the year before *Tableau 2*, namely *Composition with Red, Blue, Black, Yellow, and Grey* (1921; Kunstmuseum Den Haag, The Hague; Figure 2.4), as an equal and opposite to *Tableau 2* (Figure 2.5). One can comprehend *Composition with Red, Blue, Black, Yellow, and Gray* as, in fact, a predecessor but also almost a twin to *Tableau 2.* Most obvious are left-right and top-bottom compositional inversions. Even black-and-white illustrations show, by their different tones, that what affiliates in the first painting as a horizontal oblong, adjacent to or atop its accompanying perpendicular lines in the upper left, appears in the later painting as underneath the perpendicular lines in the lower right. Each work offers certain alternative parallels to the other, subject not to negation but to exchange on par.

Aesthetically speaking, relationships of this kind, especially of color, imply that the painter has brought into the rhythms of related paintings a concept like the shifts in jazz (which Mondrian appreciated) from one instrument to another in taking up more or less the same melodic device. At the same time, shifts from one version (canvas) in such a series to another do not prioritize one version as a master copy—as happens in classical theme-and-variation situations. Here there is no logical priority for the first instance. This comparison makes for something quite antihierarchical, which some might consider democratically Calvinistic; but it is also characteristically Mondrianesque.

The temporal succession of these two paintings, however accidental, also resembles the way we are about to take the theologian Bavinck as prior to, and underlying, religious attentions we see Mondrian articulating. Meanwhile, the relationships within and between many of Mondrian's classic paintings also become "meta-relationships," without compromising the integrity (to make use of another musical term) of either thematic rendition. Looking at one of these two paintings is hardly neglecting the other.

Herman Bavinck and the Kingdom

For a long time, anything supposed to be spiritual in Mondrian's art was swept under the carpet of a supposedly extensive dalliance with Theosophy; so much

so that Mondrian's is sometimes taken as the strongest case for direct theosophical influence. The basic evidence for this is that the painter always held onto a printed 1908 lecture by Rudolf Steiner. But that is irrelevant in that Steiner was beginning to formulate his alternative to Theosophy: Anthroposophy (see Chapter 1), specifically to avoid intimations of false worship. It is possible that the treasured lecture was already not orthodox Theosophy; and even that becomes a red herring if the artist was basically a committed Reformed Christian. It is not surprising for the private Mondrian to have been a more reflective Calvinist, or rather neo-Calvinist, than has been generally supposed.

Different artists had different views, of course, though sometimes compatibly. A minor Dutch painter and nearly exact contemporary of Mondrian's, who took a different route away from symbolistic mysticism to become a Catholic and a Benedictine monk, with church art as his special calling: Jan (Dom Willibrord) Verkade (1868–1946). Raised a Mennonite Protestant, he had his Symbolist curiosity stirred early by one Édouard Shuré's cult book *Les grandes initiés* (1889). Interestingly, when eventually he came to write in *Yesterdays of an Artist Monk* (1930), Dom Willibrord voiced a comment on grace that Mondrian might have assimilated to Calvinist "common grace": "Theosophy does not reckon with the soul's need of grace . . ."[24]

It is widely known that Mondrian left his pious father's Dutch Reformed Church. What is barely known at all is that when he moved to Amsterdam to study art, in November 1892, he joined a new church, the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (Reformed Churches in the Netherlands), which included parishes attached to the celebrity preacher and politician Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920).[25] Kuyper was a liberal hero who became prime minister on the strength of his antirevolutionary party, thanks to a policy of segregating Protestants, Catholics, and others (which sounds rather like apartheid to me). Mondrian's father was a friend of Kuyper's, though not a member of his church. On moving to the cultural capital, the twenty-year-old Mondrian began confirmation classes in the new church; and from July 1893, he was listed as confirmed. Five months later, he started to paint *Thy Word Is Truth*. Only some twenty years later, on moving to Paris, was Mondrian's church membership "de-registered"—an administrative procedure not implying withdrawal.

The new Gereformeerde Kerken were a hotbed of a tendency called neo-Calvinism, in which all worthy contributions to social life and culture could be considered practically churchly. Much less well known than Kuyper, however, is his protegé Herman Bavinck, who was in the next generation of clergy and closer to Mondrian in age. Like Kuyper, he too studied modern culture at the University

of Leiden, though on finishing his doctorate, he reflected that while such secular studies had benefits, they might also lead to a "spiritual impoverishment" (B1:13; intro.). Kuyper was the celebrity, while the younger Bavinck was more like the introspective Mondrian.

Scholars have already brought the popular Kuyper into the orbit of the painter;[26] but though he pioneered the notion of culture as part of a Christian mission, Kuyper was more of a nineteenth-century figure. His response to impressionist painting in 1894—"At first sight one sees . . . bubbles and daubs of paint, and even tints and lines, but not *the image*; and only after repeated attempts a view is finally obtained"[27]—amounts to visual fundamentalism. He was better on the more traditional aesthetic question of external relations, the representational coordination between a subject and the outside world.

That he was also bound to literature, practically over and against the fine arts, permitted Kuyper to approach a certain threshold—almost to a notion of visual abstraction—without having the sufficiently visual imagination to cross over it. Thus in his *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology* (1893–4), he arrives at an independent visual sign—"ahead of" nature, if you will—but he expects even that to be capable of being cashed in, in natural terms: "The artist created harmonies of tints, which presently are seen to be real in flowers that are unknown to him. And more striking than this, by our abstract thinking we constantly form conclusions, which presently are seen to agree entirely with actual relations."[28]

This was also a problem of stylistics because Kuyper's modernity got stuck in literary *Symbolisme*. The more widespread critical problem here is that before post-impressionism was named as such (1910) or became widely understood, the default category for that incipient style was the exorbitantly literary *Symbolisme*, which for Kuyper connoted decadent aestheticism and even Anglo-Catholic churchmanship.[29] Speaking on "Calvinism and Art" in his 1898 Stone Lectures in America, Kuyper wanted to react against all that, so he praised the triumph of ordinary folks in Dutch realism, but the closest his text comes to anything modern is Rembrandt[30]—about whom there was, in fact, a conservative, antimodernist cult at the turn of the century. Actually, Bavinck would follow his predecessor's anti-Symbolist cue, writing in "Modernism and Orthodoxy" (1911) of a vast modern gnosticism. He views the entirety of this present state as "the result of symbolism, which is akin to pantheism, having confused religion with art and religious representation with atheistic sentiment. In art, and to a certain extent in worship, there is a place for symbolism, but religious representations cannot survive without faith in their truth"[31]—a potential stimulus to our faithful Reformed Christian painter two steps away from abstraction.

Bavinck, the newer theologian of the new church, took over the chair of theology at the Free University of Amsterdam after Kuyper and also went to deliver Stone Lectures in America, in 1908 and 1909. In his lecture on "Revelation and Culture," art is not a special theme, but Bavinck is decidedly more culturally discerning than Kuyper.[32] Besides, artists were likely to be interested in Bavinck because he champions a sense of divine "creativity" in the face of the fallen world, with his "trinitarian idea that grace restores nature" (B1:18). This view allows Christians—and anyone else receiving what Calvinists call "common grace"—to remake the fallen world, "creat[ing] no new cosmos but rather mak[ing] the cosmos new" (B1:19). In this cerebral younger theologian, we discover a brilliance that would have attracted Mondrian.

Admittedly I am drawn to Bavinck by preferring not to take the easy route via the public-intellectual Kuyper—but my intuition is also that Mondrian, who dropped out of one Calvinist church only to be confirmed in another, was not necessarily a constitutional liberal and may well have been interested in the most serious Reformed Dutch theologian of his age. In Mondrian's maturity, I can even imagine him in accord with Bavinck's opposition to Theosophy. Kuyper did not like it either, but Bavinck attacked it directly, saying point-blank that the theosophical founders Madame Blavatsky and the younger Annie Besant, in London, were apostate Christians drawn to Buddhism (B1:200).

With Mondrian's artistic thought in mind, one can inquire into the themes of individual justification and the more social dimension leading into the Kingdom of God in Bavinck's definitive *Reformed Dogmatics* (1895–1901), published while Mondrian was a student. One must be selective, faced with a 3,000-page treatise, but Bavinck gives certain key themes, such as justification, the prominence and repetition of musical refrains.

We have acknowledged how, in painting, all of Mondrian's unremitting compositional adjustments, each relative to the others, advance an effect of successive resolutions. Insofar as compositional justification is indeed actively compositional, it is reconstitutive. (Such is an obvious theological analogy, though not particularly Bavinckian, being the doctrine of *felix culpa:* the Fall of Man as "fortunate" [Latin, *felix*] in that it occasioned sublime salvific things to come, preeminently the Passion and resurrection of Christ.). Mondrian's compositional adjustments do seem to produce a sense of successive resolution, much more so than if everything had been equal at the start. Bavinck brings out justification's special asymmetric reciprocity as a concept:

> In the gospel God brought to light a righteousness apart from the law. . . . This righteousness, therefore, is not opposed to his grace, but includes it as it were and paves the way for it. It brings out that God, though according to the law he had to condemn us, yet in Christ has had different thoughts about us, generally forgives all our sins without charging us with anything. . . . Justification, therefore, is not an ethical but a juridical (forensic) act; nor can it be anything other than that because all evidence of favor presupposes favor and every benefit of grace presupposes grace.
>
> B4:206

So "the word as such allows us to understand by it the entire work of redemption. Just as the work of re-creation . . . can in its totality also be called a rebirth . . . so it is also from beginning to end a justification, a restoration of the *state* and the *condition* of the fallen world and humankind in relation to God and to itself" (B4:208).

The asymmetry that is conspicuously important to Mondrian's *modus operandi* has a Bavinkian counterpart. It has been said that a symmetrical arrangement of objects on a mantelpiece shows the maid's idea of order, and the same is true for the drill sergeant; in both cases, it is because symmetry is a default position of orderliness in situations where no one knows (or cares about) a more aesthetically engaged order or has the power or authority to effect it. But Bavinck projects a Mondrianesque sense of ex post facto asymmetrical reciprocity in his principle of justification: "Before the elect receive faith they have already been justified. Indeed, they received this faith precisely because they have already been justified beforehand," thanks, according to Scripture, to "the decree of election when they were given to Christ and Christ was given to them, when their sin was imputed to Christ and his righteousness was imputed to them" (B3:583). After all, what could be a more profoundly asymmetric reciprocity than one's puny sins versus the righteousness of the Son of God.

For Bavinck, Calvin's sense of justification "gained a double advantage" over Martin Luther's by separating faith and repentance: "Faith could now be much more closely related to justification, and justification could now be viewed in a purely juridical sense as an act of acquittal by God. . . . Reformed theology owed to Calvin its clear insight into the religious character of justification." This, too, is where we can begin to see how the Mondrian of "equivalent plastic relationships" hoped that comprehending his paintings might actually inspire people towards effecting God's kingdom. That might seem a pipe dream unless one heard something like this in a sermon: "Faith and justification . . . are not the sum and substance of the order of salvation. Luther tended to favor stopping there."

However, "since repentance was included in the Christian life, Calvin could do justice also to its active side . . . faith cannot stop at the forgiveness of sins but reaches out to the perfection that is in Christ, seeks to confirm itself from works as from its own fruits, girds itself with courage and power not only to live in communion with Christ but also to fight under him as king against sin, the world, and the flesh, and to make all things serviceable to the honor of God's name" (B3:527–8).

At the end of his mammoth *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck links personal justification with the Kingdom, since after the Second Coming and the Last Judgment, a general "Renewal of Creation" is to occur. This event ought to surpass even such secular hopes for an optimistic conclusion as "the extravagant . . . expectations of the Socialists [surely this does not apply to the small number of religious socialists at the time, given the next phrase], these millennialists of unbelief, who think that in the future state of their dreams all sin and struggle will have vanished, and a carefree life of contentment will be the privilege of everyone" (B4:646). What then *does* await the blessed? In the end, believers and fellow travelers "enter into" a "fellowship" that, "though in principle it already exists on earth, will nevertheless be incomparably richer and more glorious when all dividing walls of descent and language, of time and space, have been leveled, all sin and error have been banished, and all the elect have been assembled in the new Jerusalem" (B4:723). At this point, "the organism of creation is restored," and "the great diversity that exists among people . . . is . . . made serviceable to fellowship with God and each other" (B4:727).

What could be more Mondrianesque than the sense of a finally perfectly balanced, abstract composition, offering a world in which all men and women are uniquely justified and enjoy a happy society that is by no means without contradiction yet is reciprocally cooperative? To consider this world a utopian pie-in-the-sky dream must be wrong because the promised Kingdom of God, or the New Jerusalem, ought to be as material as the present world—in fact, it *is* this world, transformed. And note: "All this spells the collapse of spiritualism" (B4:718).

Fine art may actually bring us part of the way to the Kingdom in Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics.* If it "cannot close the gap between the ideal and reality," it can, at least, give "distant glimpses of the realm of glory." Bavinck's very hesitations on this large point are marks of his candor (and his freedom from the metaphysical hoax of Symbolism) in his assertion that art "does not induct us into that realm and make us citizens of it" (B1:267). Yet even that remark may entail a higher aspiration along the revolutionary lines of "we have our citizenship

in heaven" (Phil. 3:20), so that it is possible to maintain that perhaps Mondrian's painting does go the step farther of offering less distant glimpses of sheer justification than most representational art—surely all deliberately illusionistic art—manages to do.

Here is a passage from the *Reformed Dogmatics* which is applicable to the implicit social relationality symbolically built into this compositional relationality of Mondrian's painting:

> In short, the counsel of God and the cosmic history that corresponds to it must not be *pictured* exclusively . . . as a single straight line describing relations only of before and after, cause and effect, means and end; instead, it should also be viewed as a systemic whole in which things occur side by side in coordinate relations and cooperate in the furthering of what always was, is, and will be the deepest ground of all existence: the glorification of God. Just as in any organism all the parts are interconnected and reciprocally determine each other, so the world as a whole is a masterpiece of divine art, in which all the parts are organically interconnected. And of that world, in all its dimensions, the counsel of God is the eternal design.
>
> B2:392; emphasis added[19]

Can we pair such a sense of parts that so actively participate in an "orchestral" whole in Mondrian's *Tableau 2* with something as comprehensively Bavinckian in theology? Between 1919 and 1920, when Mondrian wrote "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality: A Trialogue . . . ," the painter's preoccupation with the internal relations of the work were established: "Yes, all things are a *part* of the whole: each part obtains its visual value from the whole and the whole from its parts. Everything is expressed through *relationship*. Color can exist only through *other* colors, dimensions through *other* dimensions, positions through *other* positions that oppose them. That is why I regard relationship as *the principal thing*" (M86; emphases original). There is a beautiful passage in the *Reformed Dogmatics* that could almost have inspired the then implicit social ideal of relationality in Mondrian's classic paintings: "The image of God can only be displayed in all its dimensions and characteristic features in a humanity whose members exist both successively one after the other and contemporaneously side by side" (B2:577).

In imagining the New Jerusalem of the world to come, Bavinck blames Theosophy for, in effect, a *symboliste* blurring of reality that produced bad theology, if not bad Hegelianism, by positing an intermediate form of corporeality and fudging the opposition between matter and spirit with a so-called immaterial

corporality that "seeks in vain to reconcile the false dualism of spirit and matter . . . of thesis and antithesis" (B4:620). Bavinck thinks no worldly or naturalistic detail has a place in prophecy: "The error of the old exegesis was not spiritualization as such but the fact that it sought to assign a spiritual meaning to all the illustrative details," so that "the realistic interpretation . . . becomes self-contradictory" (B4:659)—an idea that Mondrian, who liked to think of his own abstract paintings as *really* realistic, would have enjoyed. Mondrian would also have liked Bavinck's discussion of the essentially symbolic ideas in Ezekiel's vision of the future (B4:660) and the way, in regard to the last days described in the Book of Revelation, the fate of Satan as scourge of humanity departs from realism in a narrative that is "not in chronological sequence" but rather has "a logical and spiritual sense" (B4:684).

In the same passage where he "spells the collapse of spiritualism," Bavinck writes, "Whereas Jesus came the first time to establish . . . [the] kingdom of God . . . in a spiritual sense, he returns at the end of history to give visible shape to it. Reformation proceeds from the inside to the outside. The rebirth of humans is completed in the rebirth of creation. The kingdom of God is fully realized only when it is visibly extended over the earth as well" (B4:718). In this light, Mondrian's justifiably utopian view of the Kingdom as a projection of the Neo-Plastic culture of equivalent relationships, in one or another diagrammatic, hardly seems far-fetched as a Christian destination. The external way things will look in the End Time is far from Bavinck's mind: the point is the finally just and logical armature by which by the new world's details are organized. As the theologian says, "But although these are ideas interpreted . . . by images, they are not illusions or fabrications, but this-worldly depictions of otherworldly realities. All that is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, and commendable in the whole of creation, in heaven and earth, is gathered up in the future city of God—renewed, re-created, boosted to its highest glory" (B4:719–20). What an obvious point of departure for projective utopian thinking on the ultimate relation of artistic representation to a changed surrounding world, such as we find in Mondrian's own more utopian prophesies. Bavinck summarizes:

> More glorious than this beautiful earth, more glorious than the earthly Jerusalem, more glorious even than paradise will be the glory of the new Jerusalem, whose architect and builder is God himself. The state of glory (*status gloriae*) will be no mere restoration (*restoratie*) of the state of nature (*status naturae*), but a re-formation that, thanks to the power of Christ, transforms all matter (ὑλη, *hylē*) into form (εἶδος, *eidos*), all potency into actuality (*potentia, actus*), and presents

> the entire creation before the face of God, brilliant in unfading splendor . . . Substantially, nothing is lost. . . . But in the new heaven and new earth, the world is as much as restored."
>
> B4:720

Or, one could say, finally *justified*.

Continuity and Afterlife of the Classic Phase

Mondrian was still in Paris during the second decade of his classic phase in the 1930s until, in 1938, he moved to London to escape the Nazis.[33] A surprising artistic development of this time—which would not have been momentous for a less rigorous composer—was his twinning, now and again, of the black line.[34] Over time he moved from linear singularity to duality and plurality, but the first momentous move was at or about the moment of *Composition with Yellow and Double Line* (1932; Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art; Edinburgh; Figure 2.6).

It is tempting to consider relating this new feature of otherwise consistent and homogeneous compositions to one or another statement by Bavinck concerning dualities, as will soon be discussed. On more worldly terms, the double-line device could conceivably derive from a British painter known to the artist in Paris, Marlow Moss (1889–1958),[35] who, at the time, was emulating Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism—itself an act of doubling. However, the twinned line belongs to a development within Mondrian's oeuvre of attending to line as much as to color. On the threshold of the classic period, we find contiguous irregular color patches separated by gray lines that look like bands scored on either side by finer black lines, as in several "Compositions" of 1920. But a more obvious provocation for the twinning of lines derives from practice. Mondrian shows a habit of speedily doubling his lines in sketching out compositions, even in his little off-the-cuff drawings on opened cigarette packets, where folds in the thin cardboard suggest formal divisions in painting. This impulse seems as reflexively unintentional as when construction workers hastily plan out what they need to sketch in fast parallels on the nearest flat surface; the artist, in likewise executing his own working drawings, could easily have provoked the twinning idea.

In any case, the Edinburgh work—bought from the studio by another British painter, Winifred Nicholson (1893–1981), wife of the painter Ben Nicholson (1894–1982)—is excellently concise, not simply "reductive" (Figure 2.6). A violin sonata is not necessarily more reductive than a violin concerto. It also stands at the start of a group of several other significant works. *Composition with Yellow*

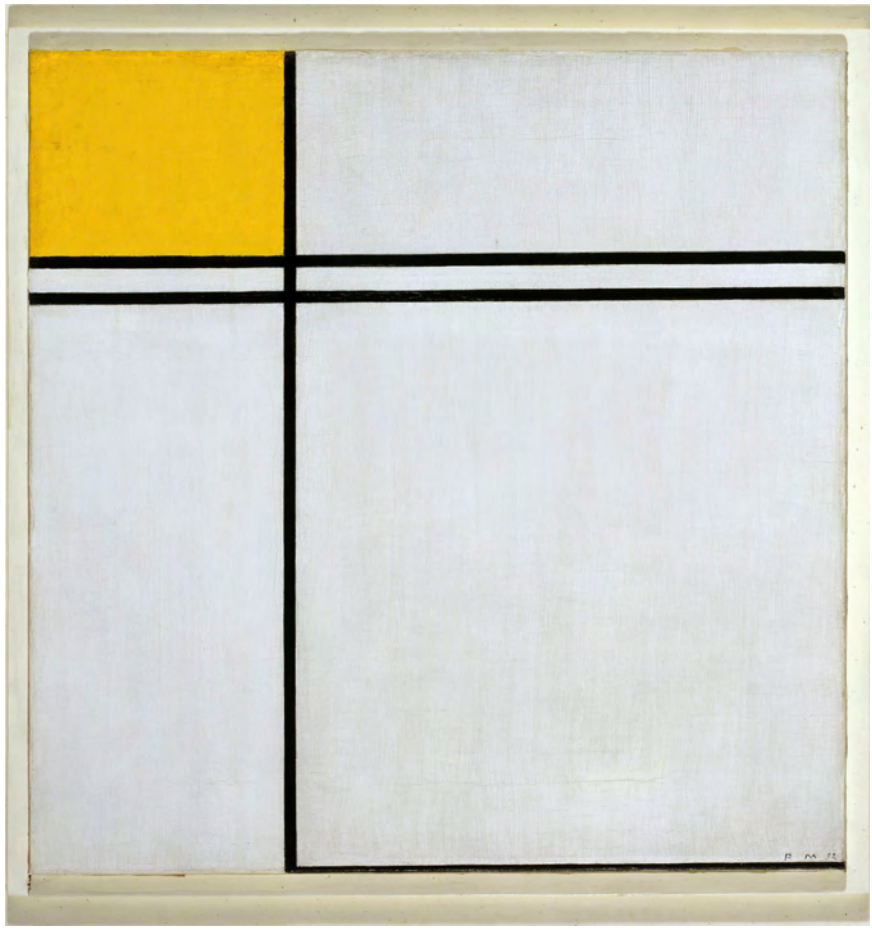

Figure 2.6 Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Yellow and Double Line,* 1932, oil on canvas. National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh. Alamy Ltd.

and Double Line has only four lines. Two are in a tidy parallel pair, with a white space between them that is wide enough to be a band. The two other lines could not be more different: forming a perpendicular, of different lengths, the bottom one is split in two as it skirts the very edge of the canvas, half atop the surface and half along the stretcher edge—as if it wants to be "(½ + ½)" instead of just "1." Also, the resulting slim right angle along the bottom edge, makes, with so few lines, certain clear partitions on the canvas: the top edge is divided into three fields by the one vertical line; the left side is divided into three fields by two lines; and the right side also appears to be divided into three by three lines (as if that were possible!). Then at the bottom edge, we could almost say there is a line that

goes on, infinitely long and undivided. And there is also a diagonal relation: the edge of the half-on/half-off line at bottom-right affiliates with the yellow color patch at the upper left, which also bleeds over two edges of the stretcher on the side as well as at the top (almost as if to suggest an enamel compartment in metalwork).

Once I happened to show this work to my cousin Donna Reihing, who asked with authentic inquiry what was particularly interesting about it. This happily provoked me to answer that in an artistic situation with so few variables, every one may become important for its potential sign value; so that if Mondrian shows us that he can take one of his lines over the stretcher edge, a range of alternatives opens up about whether to do that or not, and we get to see that an intellectual decision has been made before our eyes. Some reserve is also called for, too, because to treat more edges in the same way, or to the same degree, might well produce a run-on, unforeseeably decorative effect, instead of a structurally considered one.

This last point, which concerns the painter's reserve, may also concern how or why there can be no simply linear genealogy to Mondrian's work. It is as if, as soon as one noticed the repetition of a certain characteristic, arrangements involving it became more complicated by noticing previously discrete collateral traits. The Edinburgh painting has a slightly younger sibling: *Composition with Yellow, Blue, and Double Line* (1933; private collection, Basel). There the half-line at the bottom becomes slightly wider, with a blue area below it. This situation often develops in the classic phase: the painter has an essentially variable formula as his basic idea and renders it repeatedly, as if with alternative turns of phrase. The widening of a line, for example, as here, may take on a categorical aspect as a source of conceptual variability, moving from a line to a stripe or a band.

Such distinctions take on great subtlety, as in—five years after the Edinburgh painting—*Composition of Lines and Color, III; Composition with Blue* (1937; Kunstmuseum Den Haag, The Hague). In this work, no fewer than three line or stripe widths surround the vertical blue rectangle and the similar white rectangle above. A similar manipulation is evident by a thematic of yellow (multiple rhizomes can often thus be followed) in the painting *Painting* (sometimes called *Composition*) *No. 9* (1939–42; Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; Figure 2.7), which was begun in London and finished in New York, where Mondrian went to live after barely escaping a Nazi bombing raid on London. This work has almost no line variation but it does insert tabs between twin and triplet lines, which serve to connect the Edinburgh Mondrian with the later work.

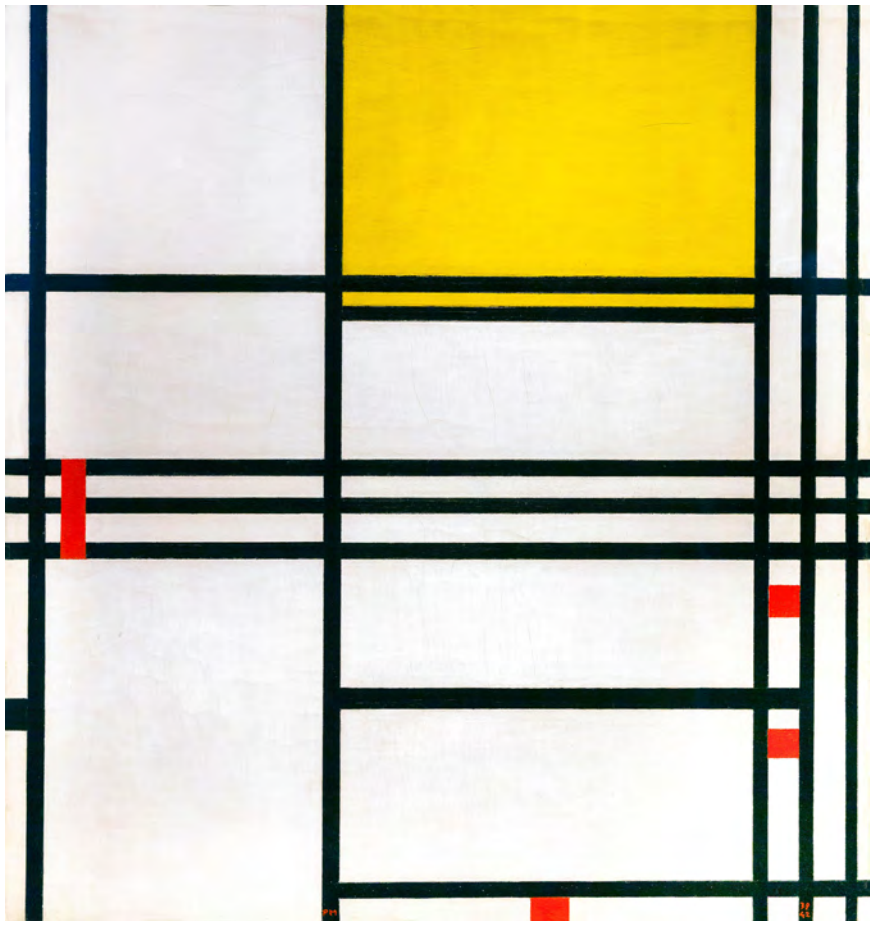

Figure 2.7 Piet Mondrian, *Painting No. 9,* 1939–42, oil on canvas. Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C. Alamy Ltd.

Mondrian was a doyen of abstract painting in New York from 1938 until his death in 1944 (he is buried there in Cypress Hills Cemetery, Brooklyn). His understanding of other artists' entirely different notions of abstract painting was on such a broad-church basis that he was one of the earliest to affirm the importance of Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), with his utterly different approach to abstraction.[36]

In 2012, the gallery of the Courtauld Institute of Art in London mounted a dual exhibition of Mondrian and the British painter Ben Nicholson, which occasioned a review in the *Guardian* by Frances Spalding, accompanied by a strange photograph: a detail—a mere detail—of a classic Mondrian painting,

Composition B (No. II) with Red, 1935 (Tate Modern, London).[37] This partial image was stunning evidence that there is something hopelessly inadequate about any detail a Mondrian composition. A mere part of a Mondrian, however large, can only prove essentially unjustified or unjustifiable, but understanding this fully would require a modicum of theology. That said, the way his works show such a wonderful intellectual vitality, precisely as integral totalities, indicates to me that they may be considered religious in a specifically Bavinckian light.

A Calvinist Trope in Light of Mondrian

Since the time of Calvin's immediate followers, some Calvinists have scrutinized what is termed "the logic of God's decrees." Bearing in mind God's omniscience, some have felt it presumptuous to track divine "decrees," meaning judgments as to the election (salvation) or reprobation (damnation) of souls in the next world. But owing to the importance of predestination in Calvinism, as well as the principle that divine logic must be perfect, some Calvinist theologians developed a deep scrutiny of two opposed views on this "lapsarian" question. What was at stake in this theological controversy concerning alternative forms of lapsarianism may still seem highly technical to non-Calvinists, but the basic principles may have known to Mondrian because they would likely have been at least touched on in his confirmation course, if not also in talks with his father, who himself was an active neo-Calvinist.

The lapsarian question arose early on in the Calvinist reformation, when it was first posited that, well before the Fall of Man, God might have preordained some souls to attain salvation while others would be damned. Supralapsarianism (also called antelapsarianism or prelapsarianism) was defined to pertain to all of time, even before Adam and Eve were created. What became the opposite position, infralapsarianism (also called sublapsarianism or postlapsarianism), held that, after Adam and Eve were created and then committed their initial sin, God would save some souls and condemn others. Eventually, our modern Bavinck attempted to synthesize both theories, undertaking the investigation with the hopes of making denominational peace.

Bavinck begins simply: "Generally speaking, the formulation of the ultimate goal of all things as God's will to reveal his justice in the case of the reprobate and his mercy in the case of the elect, is overly simple and austere" (B2:391). Soon after that, he makes a more complex statement that plausibly resembles

Mondrian's dialectic of "equilibrated relationships" in painting and, as he hoped, in social life:

> Given our limitations, we can only put ourselves in one or the other position, so that the proponents of a causal and the proponents of a teleological world-and-life view may at any time clash with each other. But for God the situation is different. . . . His counsel is one single conception, one in which all the particular decrees are arranged in the same interconnected pattern in which, a posteriori, the facts of history in part appear to us to be arranged now and will one day appear to be fully arranged. This interconnected pattern is so enormously rich and complex that it cannot be reproduced in a single word such as "infralapsarian" or "supralapsarian." It is both causally and teleologically connected. . . . *The whole picture* is marked by immensely varied omnilateral interaction.
>
> B2:392; emphasis added

Beyond attending to Bavinck's meaning in relation to a general sense of Mondrian's classic paintings, one can also be struck by a formal similarity in Bavinck's own phraseology. Here a *"whole picture*" is adduced, which, thanks to "immensely varied omnilateral interaction," produces a "single conception" where elements "arranged in" an "interconnected pattern" (here related to another such pattern as "causally and teleologically connected") become something "so enormously rich and complex that it cannot be [summarized] in a single word" (ibid.). As complex as Bavinck's statement must be, one can imagine it as structurally resembling the typical Mondrian abstraction to which it can be referred.

Bavinck's analysis of the problem manages to make peace between the two traditionally opposed theological positions predicated on the Calvinist sense of predestination. Mondrian would likely have appreciated Bavinck's parallel between two effectively similar but opposite approaches: that is, his parallel between the opposed extremes of (a) an unrepresentable chaos in an already utterly fallen world versus (b) an equally demanding wealth of possibilities confronting one creating from scratch. I am prepared to believe that even something like the dynamic content of the Calvinist dispute—the opposed forms of lapsarian before-ness and after-ness—has a certain application to painting where one thinks of Mondrian's penchant for painting compositionally close alternative versions of more or less the same composition with more or less consequentially equivalent or alternative (or "opposite") color positions. In the abstract, what is closest to the two disputing Calvinist views here is an interplay between temporal sequence—in both painting and the sequence of thought—and logical priority.

A good example occurs if *Composition with Red, Blue, Black, Yellow, and Gray* (1921; Kunstmuseum Den Haag, The Hague) is also brought into juxtaposition as another close match to the composition of *Tableau 2* of 1922, discussed above. That the earlier measures 39.5 by 35 centimeters and the latter 55.6 by 53.4 centimeters hardly matters proportionally, since both canvases are just slightly taller than a true square. What matters are the significant inversions: in *Composition with Red, Blue, Black, Yellow, and Gray*, a small red horizontal oblong is adjacent to or atop its accompanying perpendicular lines in the upper left, while in *Tableau 2*, a small red horizontal oblong is underneath the perpendicular lines accompanying it in the lower right. Another inversion consists of a black square plus narrow equal rectangles of yellow and white along the *bottom* of the first painting, as countered by a sequence of narrow equal rectangles of white and yellow plus a black near-square along *the top* of *Tableau 2*. Something like an algebraic equivalence is posited by such affiliated paintings, and Mondrian's classic oeuvre has many of them.

Could one ever expect to find a closer visual counterpart to Bavinck's discussion of the two opposite theories as equal-and-opposite complementary deployments? Each painting offers certain alternative parallels to the other, as if in exchange at par value. We may think of their temporal succession of 1921 to 1922 (even as constructivist denunciations of composition grew conclusive in a sealed-off Russia) as similar to the way we are taking Bavinck as here logically prior to, and underlying, religious considerations that we already find Mondrian articulating. Relations within and between such kindred classic paintings as these also contribute toward meta-relationships without compromising the integrity of the unique renditions. Not unlike the twin Calvinist theories, either, is that to engage one of the paintings compositionally, in such a pair, is hardly to neglect the other.

Certain conclusions rise up out of the speculations of this chapter. It is encouraging that scholars have begun to lose patience with the placebo Theosophical view of Mondrian, as if one of the great painters of the West had no spiritual mother tongue and had to make do with Esperanto. I have tied to identify the tongue in question as then contemporary Dutch neo-Calvinism, especially as articulated comparatively more closely by the newer theologian Bavinck rather than the popular Kuyper. We have seen important parallels with the general idea of justification in the Protestant, and especially the Calvinist, sense, and we have traced approximations of the very mechanisms of justification in Bavinck's neo-Calvinist reckoning in Mondrian's paintings. Thinking of this theological order was demonstrably at stake in Mondrian's Reformed generation in the Netherlands, and it ought to be admitted into our hermeneutics of interpretation.

Mondrian may even help to sharpen a sense of the "spiritual" that Kandinsky always left somewhat fuzzy. I find similarly problematic appeals to the "transcendental" in art, especially nonobjective art. However, that term holds some promise if we take a second look at Kant. Even those at odds with Kant's aesthetics may appreciate, in *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), how the transcendental, as such, is by no means something floating above us inaccessibly in the ether, but, quite otherwise, it is that which underlies our every presupposition. A foundation of that kind is what has been sought here in scrutinizing Mondrian's mature thinking, where a certain sublimation of religion—real theological religion—would hardly have meant its abandonment.

Appendix: Beyond Iconography

Some art historians observe a convention of terminology which distinguishes between "content," in terms of semantic specificity, and "meaning," in terms of symbolic scope. Both entail communication between art object and viewer, and both can warrant affective response—general in the former case, specific in the latter. As a stalwart defender of abstract art, I was long consoled by Nelson Goodman's notion that art is not necessarily a matter of *communication* at all. Not that it was supposed to be merely formalistic (form versus content); but on the positive side, it was to glory in the "cognitive in and for itself."[38] I still respect what Goodman was saying, but obviously my attending to "the Bavinck in Mondrian" is more specific than cognition per se. It is what can be called the meaningful "contentlessness" of Mondrian and kindred abstract artists that needs to be acknowledged.

In the common culture, Mondrian's essentially Protestant approach has sometimes subjected his paintings to an obsessive reading of many an innocent perpendicular intersection as a supposed Christian cross of the plain type. Now, it is supposedly one thing for Protestants to accuse the often heavily figurative crucifixes of the Catholics and Orthodox of unseemliness, if not superstition, but somehow not so to "think" the Cross of Christ "into" the carpentry of ordinary domestic doors.[39] With Mondrian, this difficulty arises mainly in paintings of the 1930s having parallel orthogonals sufficiently far apart to suit the gestalt of a simple "Christian" (in the French sense of Protestant) cross.

Mondrian himself likely knew that populistic cross-fetishism ought not to be blamed on Calvin, who refused to fetishize the cross any more than anything else. In the *Institutes* he says that people may learn more about Christ's

justification of humankind by reading the Gospels than from "a thousand crosses of wood or stone" (I.xi §87). Cross motifs purportedly imputed to paintings come up against the intentional fallacy; or better, a sort of "reverse-intentional fallacy," thanks to the painter's repeated cautions against it. Mondrian had already written in 1917, "Ancient wisdom represented the fundamental inward-outward relationship by the cross. Neither this symbol, however, nor any other symbol, can be the plastic means for abstract-real painting: the symbol constitutes a new limitation, on the one hand, and is too absolute, on the other" (M45–6). In 1919 or 1920, he cautioned that seeing right-angular forms in themselves is violated by deferring their formal significance in preference to the "literary" aspect of a Christian cross or even "the arms of the windmill" (M99). If a painter cannot control the interpretation of single motifs, he can at least foreswear motifs as such: under the title "No Axiom But the Plastic Principle," in 1923, the cross becomes a form spoiled by conversion into any external statement, true or false (M178).

In 1965, the French critic Michel Butor tried to be chivalric by defending as "tragic," especially in Mondrian paintings from 1935 to 1939, forms that struck him as Christian crosses—just what I am rejecting here.[40] His effort would attempt to override the painter's penetrating sense of his own work, as early as 1917: "*The artist sees the tragic to such a degree that he is compelled to express the nontragic*" ("The New Plastic in Painting," M53n.b, emphasis original). The limits of signification in painting's content, especially abstract painting, are not so readily demarcated.

Can semi-mistaken contentlessness support appropriate affective meaning? With the right context, it would seem. I am prompted to pose this question by a major Christian theological misprision attached, since 1890, to an important old master painting. The account about to be assessed has been read incorrectly as to theological content by two learned philosophers (unless one posed a narratological ploy), yet with little compromise of overall aesthetic meaning.

My own teacher William Lyons' essay "On Looking at Titian's *Assumption*" (1997), is based on a principal text by William James, dealing with affective reports on painting. Lyons responds to an extended anecdote of the philosopher and psychologist James in his *Psychology* (1890), about an event supposed to have occurred in the Accademia Gallery, in Venice. In James's narrative, an "English couple" is overheard conversing about Titian's *Assumption of the Virgin,* on which the woman comments, "What a *deprecatory* expression her face wears! What self-abne*gation!* How unworthy she feels of the honor she is receiving!"[41]

The operative context here is Professor Lyons' concern with the question of emotions in painting, from production to reception. James's amusing if patronizing remarks set the scene:

> Their honest hearts had been kept warm all the time by a glow of spurious sentiment that would fairly have made old Titian sick. Mr. Ruskin somewhere makes the (for him terrible) admission that religious people as a rule care little for pictures, and that when they do care for them they generally prefer the worst ones to the best. Yes! in every art, in every science, there is the keen perception of certain relations being right or not, and there is the emotional flush and thrill consequent thereupon. And these are two things, not one. In the former of them it is that experts and masters are at home. The latter accompaniments are bodily commotions that they may hardly feel, but that may be experienced in their fulness by crétins and philistines in whom the critical judgment is at its lowest ebb.[42]

Lyons' concern is for emotion as affective response to stimulation by the work of art. Communicated content, however, may be as mistaken as it proves to be here; and one has to wonder how much control either James or Lyons had over objective error in this fictional communication. For the limited intellectual enthusiasm of the English couple turns out to be largely, though not entirely, misplaced: the emotional reactions noted by James simply do not comport with an *Assumption,* which, for one glaring thing, is gloriously sky-bound, not privately earth-bound.[43] Yet James's comments just quoted are altogether typical and correct for an earth-bound and introverted *Annunciation* ("deprecatory expression," "self-abnegation," "unworthy … of the honor"). Is James being satirical, even as he makes his point?

Why should that matter here? Only thus do the woman's affective comments—pronounced as if reading from the objective evidence of a Baedeker guide book, *but a wrong page!*—have any importance to the case, whether ironically or straightforwardly.[44] Tellingly, affects expressed by the English couple *do* manage to agree, from a certain distance of engagement, with the iconographically (or semantically) different content of having the Blessed Virgin Mary as central figure of an *Annunciation* instead of the bargained-for *Assumption.* That is what highlights the aptness with which the image the couple is viewing has a literally mistaken identity but nevertheless proves a serviceable conduit—at least for a receiver with no more churchly or iconographic finesse—for fortuitously sympathetic content.

Was there any mistake? If this is in effect a joke by William James, it is no mistake at all, despite supplying a hermeneutical impediment. Even that would be not be sufficiently mistaken to impede understanding of Lyons' overarching concern with the nonverbal conveyance of emotion by works of art, despite erroneous inferences regarding the content, if not the overall meaning, of the art object in question.

A generation after James, another philosophical psychologist, C. G. Jung, wrote of James's framing of a dual personality typology in such a way as to evoke the present ambiguity: "The empiricist finds similarities frankly tiresome and disturbing, something that actually hinders him from recognizing the object's singularity"; whereas, "The abstract thinker seizes on similarities quickly, puts general characteristics in the place of individual objects, and shapes the stuff of experience by his own mental activity . . ."[45] One could take this as practically an algorithm by which a perhaps impatient empiricist James supplied promising material to Lyons as an abstract thinker working on a more comprehensive problem.

I have had to bring up the art-historical iconography not because it really matters either to James's or to Lyons's argumentation, but because only that testifies that there is a kink in James' message at all. Only the iconographical discrepancy shows that despite (or because of) the invalidity of its specific "communicational" message, the painting managed to relay an affective sympathy, even to a limited extent generally appropriate (given that both doctrines inherently concern the body of the Virgin as maternal vehicle of the Incarnation, one being preparatory and the other her departure from earthly life). As wrong as the target theological principal proved to be, it was within emotional range for a pair of visiting low-church British Protestants on holiday in Italy, with only a nodding acquaintance with the Blessed Virgin.

However fictitious James's narration ("a glow of spurious sentiment" might be a giveaway), the mistaken subject matter of the painting as object to which the couple responds with charmingly semi-appropriate affect, does suggest a burlesque framing the feelings of a caricaturally Anglican "English couple."[46] That must have amused James's Boston high-church Anglo-Catholic friends from the Church of the Advent, on Beacon Hill, all the more for its confusing two "mysteries" of the Blessed Virgin—a topic on which Advent people would still to this day probably be theological sticklers.

The whole James story might only have been interesting background here, had not Professor Lyons called Mondrian to the witness box to show that art can demur from demonstrable specific emotional expression and yet sustain a flow

of emotion between feeling-invested object and beholding subject. In art history such a characteristic often points to a classical style, which Lyons touches upon; but he is more concerned with affectivity as something that can be "on" or "off" (like communication in general), so that just being *on* is already significant—and in Mondrian, sentient. Thus Lyons can "tak[e] some steps back from any clearly articulated communication with the viewer," to accommodate such a Mondrian as "*Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue*" as being "designed to make it clear that no particular response is expected or overly sought."[47] Lyons is on a cusp here, and a lofty one: without implying that any response will do, or even that only people who know about the Annunciation or the Assumption of the Virgin—or for that matter, Herman Bavinck—will understand. His pursuit of meaningfulness, in the face of contentlessness, is much in the spirit of Mondrian.

As for the likes of Bavinck: obviously no one could understand the elements of Calvinist justification as a determinant of Mondrian's classic paintings for the first time "without a program"; though once one had understood it, he or she might recognize its shadow, and even agree that it paralleled the dynamic content of Bavinck's thought, with appropriate meaningful (if not content-laden) affect. I would agree further that Mondrian's classic paintings do take up Bavinck's "vibe," even perhaps contributing something to its dissemination, like a musical accompanist. That very contention gains support, specifically for Mondrian, from Lyons' emphasis on meaning.

Early in life, William James—whose father, Henry James, Sr., was a Swedenborgian—studied painting. Then he went to study medicine in Berlin, attending lectures by, of all people, Virchow, the very physiologist despised by Kandinsky for saying he could not find the soul in a human body (see Chapter 1). After a personal crisis, James went on to become the humane founder of American philosophical psychology that we know (as well as a card-carrying Theosophist). His analysis of the "wrong" painting begins to clear a space for nonobjectivity as a site of artistic meaningfulness quite apart from specifiable content. The ex-painter in James who understood the "perception of certain relations being *right* or not" in painting, might well have appreciated Mondrian's advance into a realm where an artist's communication—not to say, communion—of purely visual relations, might be meaningfully but also emotionally manifest.

3

A Catholic Malevich

Background

Kazimir Severinovich Malevich (1879–1935), born to a Polish family living in Ukraine, was baptized as an infant into the Roman Catholic Church at the cathedral of St. Alexander at Kyiv. His father, who came from the lesser Polish nobility (or Volynian, in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth), was a middle-class engineer who managed a succession of sugar refineries in Ukraine. On his father's side was a model of radical republicanism: an uncle (Lucjan Malewicz) exiled to Siberia for twenty years for participating in the 1863 rebellion against Russian imperial rule in Poland.

Malevich acquired his religious basics from his mother, Liudviga. In a notebook notation from about 1917, she illuminates the sort of instruction she conveyed: basic prayers, a sense of moral rectitude, and pity. Alluding to a letter from her deceased husband (or his will), she writes of the alienating effects of the Fall and at the end paraphrases a verse from the Lord's Prayer, which she surely taught to young Kazimir (she also exhibits same ever-meandering rhetoric of her son):

> Your Father asks that there be love among you Brothers and Sisters; when he wrote this, times were such that God still lived within people; but now, when He has gone far away from people, and people declare themselves Princes, man is God. But I explain it differently; maybe my reasoning is wrong, it just seems to me that Man can really cultivate only good in himself, and if he succeeds in being a good person, only then can he call himself a worthy creature, but he cannot award himself such a great title; however, I won't take it upon myself to judge, for things turn out differently in my philosophy, because despite all his long years of science, man has still not achieved anything to explain his oppressed nature. . . . And yet I will go to the grave with my heart broken to pieces, with these wounds, because I don't see what I taught. . . . Everything in the world has

> died away, and I will close my eyes with pain in my heart . . . *because [my will] will not be done*, they will forget one another.
>
> MS2:55; emphasis added

We do know that the childhood home, despite the parents not being Orthodox Christians, did have a so-called "red corner" for icons. But a crucial passage by Malevich describing this nook can be read in more than one way: "The furnishings were simple, there were icons that were hung up more for the sake of tradition, *for others,* than out of religious feelings . . . Thus icons had no associations for me" (MS1:41; emphasis added). It is clear from many related statements that this is not a pretense of atheism. What is being conveyed is how the icon corner of this assimilated Catholic family was simply not a matter of Orthodox Christianity: being Christian, there was nothing irreligious about it, but since the family was not Russian, and especially, not Orthodox, it was literally for the neighbors.

The painter's sister, Wictoria Zaicev, testifies that their parents wanted him to become a Catholic priest, like one of his uncles. Andrew Spira writes: "She maintained that their family was more religious than Malevich admitted and that he had understated the case in his autobiographical writings for philosophical and political reasons."[1]

Irina Vakar's overview of Malevich's life points up much of religious pertinence and establishes a sense of the wider religious grounding. She emphasizes that, for example, from quite early, Kazimir's "imagination gravitated toward limitlessness, in which earthly antinomies would be overcome."[2] At home, where "like most people of his time, Malevich knew both the Christian rites and the Holy Scriptures from childhood," his mother was the boy's main religious source. Some of this early knowledge would come to be "reflected in his writings." But Vakar also suggests more sophisticated later understanding when she notes that Malevich eventually used a biblical term, *architekton* (master blacksmith, craftsman, or architect), for his later experimental architectural sculptures, underscoring the religious overtones of this choice: "Surely the teaching of a simple, uneducated carpenter [*tecton*] of Galilee could not have gone around and captured the entire universe, if there did not bodily reside in this *tecton* the celestial Architecton?" (MS2:569b, with ref.).

It is important to consider a family story that Malevich told more than once, likely with differences subject to exaggeration in retelling and translation; he probably also repeated it frequently since he was amused by it, but it has serious logical content. For these reasons I shall first simply give the set-up of the story myself, to bring out its contradictory points of view. It seems that Malevich's

father, Seweryn, liked to invite to dinner two local priests, both Catholic and Orthodox, in order to hear them argue at the table. Some people think this is wildly funny, likely assuming utter detachment from religious concern on Seweryn's part. Others, including myself, find it amusing but also think that it also indicates a definite modicum of interest in theology, since it is unlikely that such dinners would occur more than twice without both priests and Malevich's father saying anything of theological substance.

Among biographical events relevant to Malevich's religiosity is an early but enduring relationship that entailed some ten years of liturgical activity. In about 1894 or 1895, the sixteen- or seventeen-year-old artist-to-be met an important Russo-Ukrainian composer-to-be, Nikolai Roslavets, at Konotop, now in Ukraine, one of the towns with a sugar refinery where the Malevichs lived. Eventually both families moved to Kursk; and years later, the two men kept in touch in Moscow. Malevich's late unpublished text "Konotop" recounts how this long-lasting friendship had involved his pal organizing a choir of as many as forty people, in which, he says, "I took a big part." Sometimes this choir sang secular music, but Malevich was proud when they "sang in the main cathedral in Konotop."[3] If that meant the Orthodox cathedral of the Ascension, then this act was also an ecumenical gesture on the young Catholic's part that would have pleased his father.

Vakar posits a crisis during Malevich's time in the provincial city of Kursk, when he was between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five: he "turned from a well-behaved youth to a rebel and a nihilist" (57) while working as a railroad clerk, studying art part-time, and consorting with artists. During this time he also got married and even decided not to baptize his children—despite the fact that doing so would eventually cause them much bureaucratic trouble (MS2:571). This period can be considered the artist's beatnik stage, a time when many an artist has allowed religious fidelity to dissipate. Note that since Malevich's first marriage to Kazimira Zgleits (from 1902 to 1909) ended in divorce, his marriage to Sofia Rafalovich could not be celebrated in a Catholic church, and hence was purely civil. But this second marriage, to Sofia, could well have been celebrated in an Orthodox church. This is a major point for the abiding institutional Catholicity of Malevich.

In 1909, he is also known to have been excited by the "iconoclastic" play *Anathema* by Leonid Andreev, performed at the Moscow Art Theater—a drama condemned by the censor of the state church (MS2:572), which of course was not Malevich's. He likewise had nothing personal at stake in a contemporary cultural kerfuffle over the Orthodox excommunication of the anarchist Leo

Tolstoy (MS2:575–6). Malevich himself found anarchism quite sympathetic: he wrote "every few days" for the journal *Anarchy* until it was closed down in 1918;[4] and although it is almost never discussed, *The Back Square,* Malevich's most famous painting, also resembles the design of the official Anarchist party flag.

By the time Malevich died in 1935, Russians were already accustomed to considering any obvious cross form a "mystical symbol," and thus the committee of suprematists that arranged the painter's wake (consisting of Ivan Kliun, Nikolai Suetin, Anna Leporskaia, and Konstantin Rozhdestvensky) decided not to follow his direction to hang a cross painting (of equal-armed, "Greek"-cross type) above his head as part of a set of three large early black-on-white paintings: on the left the circle, in the center the square, and on the right (distinctly not the center) the cross, even though, as Kliun would recall, they had hoped to execute Malevich's last wishes as accurately as possible. Vakar writes that in this decision, "They all perceived the cross motifs in Malevich's painting as formal elements. But Malevich never thought in purely formal categories" (MS2:606).[5]

Malevich occasionally spoke of making suprematism a "new religion." A hundred years ago, literate adults were much more careful about saying such things than they are now: virtually anyone who made such a claim would have understood that they were proposing to violate the First, and most serious, Commandment. Given what else we know about his Christianity, such remarks—which are few—must have been facetious. Practically everybody knew that starting a new religion was playing with fire; and when the postrevolutionary government began their "God-Building" campaign to do just that, it flopped (sorry to say that the otherwise intelligent Lunacharsky, People's Commissar for Education, was for it). Vakar negotiates such new-religion outbursts by Malevich skillfully by taking remarks like "Art requires truth, but not sincerity" (MS2:590) along the lines of Oscar Wilde's witticisms. More telling is the case of Malevich: according to an unpublished text on his funeral, written by Ivan Kliun within a year's time, at the actual interment of the artist's ashes, both his Catholic mother and his then Jewish mother-in-law grumbled together, "We hadn't buried him properly"—obviously lamenting that the ceremony lacked a true religious aspect (MS2:97).

Despite Malevich's often erratic writing, he seems to have understood—not clearly but deeply—something that many academic leftists, at least in America, prefer to ignore: that any properly dialectical materialism necessitates idealism—religion being the prime source of precisely that for most people. I venture to say that Malevich would likely have understood well the present situation in the United States where so many bourgeois academics want to seem tough by

projecting a "pure" but scrupulously theoretical (hence hardly dialectical) "Marxist" materialism, while decrying anything like hearing the Torah or the Gospel preached as hopelessly idealistic. Personally, I think Malevich would have hated that.

Unlike the well-educated Russian Orthodox Kandinsky, whose writings are peppered with scriptural references and allusions, or Mondrian, who seems to have been apprised of up-to-date Dutch Reformed theology, Malevich was a foreigner whose pre–art school education was confined to a vocational school for agriculture. He was an autodidact in everything but studio art. He never pretended to be learned in philosophy but liked to pose what he considered philosophical questions and then try to think them through, however raggedly. Yet we now know, thanks to Aleksandra Shatskikh's work in the Malevich archives, that Malevich "reacted" to readings that engaged him by copying many passages out in notebooks and commenting on them. Moreover, Alexandra Shatskikh's scrupulous perusal of those notations has revealed something extraordinary: "The longest excerpts that he copied were from the Gospels."[6]

The Eastern Root of Suprematism

The famous *Black Square* (1915; N/S-116, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow)[7]—which exists in several autographic versions and is reproduced in huge numbers of books and easily accessible on the internet—is by far the best-known suprematist painting. But not the first. Malevich made many in that pioneering year. But *Black Square* is a sort of emblem of that radically nonobjective movement. Moreover, it was a conspicuous presence at the first suprematist exhibition, the *0.10: The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings*, in Petrograd (later Leningrad, now St. Petersburg), from December 19, 1915, to January 17, 1916.

The work consists of an entirely black square, created with painterly brushwork, on a surrounding white field, with the white showing as a border. It hardly looks like an Orthodox icon as an image, and in some ways, it is not a typical suprematist painting either.[8] Curiously, one way in which this image does resemble an icon is that there are several presumably equal versions of it, painted as late as 1930 or 1932: after all, many Orthodox icons have been copied innumerable times over centuries. But at the *0.10* show, Malevich hung the work in a conspicuously iconic manner, high in the corner of the room, fastened to the two adjacent walls so as to resemble, for any Russian, the red corner ("red" also means "beautiful" in Russian) in a home where a family would hang its best icons (Figure 3.1). Hanging *Black*

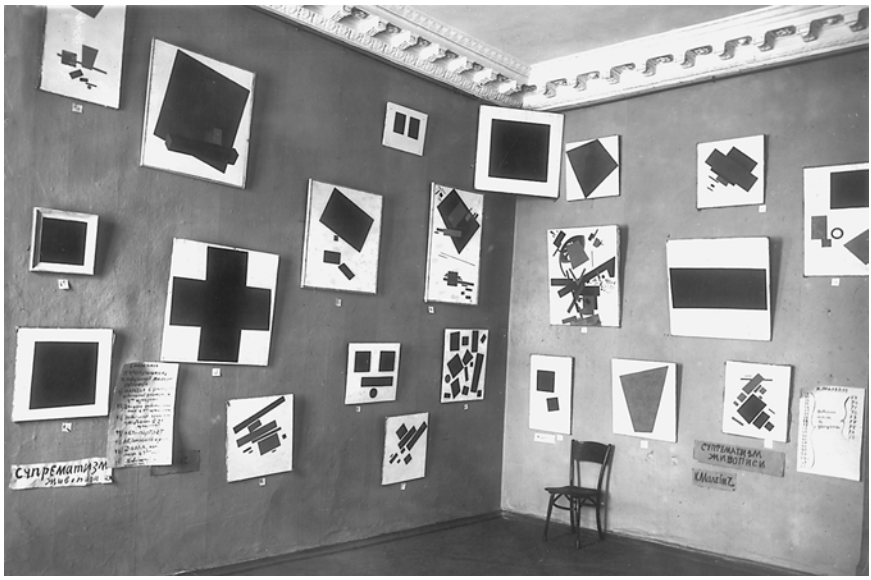

Figure 3.1 Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square,* 1915, oil on canvas, as shown in "The Last Exhibition of Futurist Painting: 0.10," Petrograd (now St. Petersburg), 1915–16. Alamy Ltd.

Square this way is said to have occasioned a fistfight on the exhibition's opening day between Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin, who displayed his radical "Corner Reliefs" also in corners at the exhibition. By mimicking the hanging of an icon, Malevich was putting forth the idealism of his new form of abstract painting in analogy with sacred painting and as against the flagrant (if also beautiful) materialism of Tatlin's abstract sculpture (normally all sculpture is considered too categorically material to count as an Orthodox icon). Ironically, given that he was Russian Orthodox to begin with, Tatlin himself had studied icons more familiarly than Malevich. It was *Black Square*'s hanging that made it such a *succès de scandale* at this first important exhibition of works in the new style.

Natalia Goncharova is understood as a more nationalistic "neoprimitivist" progenitor of suprematism, but who did approach the matter of icons as an Orthodox believer. She wrote: "Others argue—and argue with me—that I have no right to paint icons. I believe in the Lord firmly enough. Who knows who believes and how?"[9] Malevich did have some knowledge of Russian icons, which he had more naively admired since boyhood, but he also seems to have been stimulated by Goncharova (MS2:577), whose maternal grandfather was an Orthodox priest and church historian. Her work *The Evangelists* (1910–11),

exhibited at the Moscow group Donkey's Tail side by side with Malevich in 1912, is related stylistically to icons. In fact, it looked enough like an icon to be confiscated by the censor as blasphemous. (Yet, interestingly enough, Spira claims Goncharova's iconic style is somewhat too Western to be exemplary, stating "much of [her] Christian iconography is related to later Catholicizing icons [from Ukraine], that had themselves departed from the Byzantine tradition."[10])

Finally I must add that suprematism is not called suprematism for the sake of the absolute finality of the *Black Square:* if it were, it would not apply to all the other truly suprematist works that do not resemble it. Anyone can see that the term implies superiority, but its etymology is problematic. Its implicit idea is of an absolute ultimacy of the style—which by definition must pertain to more than one object. Shatskikh would seem to be on the right track when she writes: "The word had its roots in Malevich's native language, Polish, to which it had come, in turn, from the Latin of the Catholic liturgy. *Supremacia* meant 'superiority,' 'dominance'; for the artist in this initial stage, 'suprematism' established the supremacy of color energy in painting. In time, suprematism fully revealed its morphogenic power and the potential of its all-encompassing style."[11]

The notion that the term suprematism derives from the liturgy of the actual Mass as such is untrue. No cognate of *supremus, suprematism,* or similar, occurs in the Orthodox liturgy, and no form of any such word is found in the pre-1962 form of the western Latin Mass either, which would have been Malevich's basic Mass of memory.[12] I can only point to the adjective *suprémae* in the first line of the third stanza of the *Pange Lingua* ("Sing, My Tongue"), a famous Catholic hymn of the thirteenth century written by St. Thomas Aquinas, which is sung on Holy Thursday and on the feast of Corpus Christi, celebrated by Catholics, Anglicans, and Western Orthodox. Yet even that only supplies the unprepossessing "last" in "Last Supper," without sense of superiority, only indicating the end of a sequence. Not that the tune of the hymn wouldn't have pleased Malevich, insofar as it is supposed to follow from a Roman army march, "Behold, The Caesar Now Triumphs Who Subdued Gaul."[13]

Nevertheless, Malevich's own sense of this image is interesting, for by its white edge it has the containment of an image, though a housepainter could have painted it (true, the surface is not in good condition): this is palpably *not* true of most suprematist paintings, where "touch" matters a good deal. But his referencing it as "a living, royal infant" makes it sound, sight unseen, like some form of Catholic "holy picture," perhaps as kitschy as an "Infant of Prague" image. The

"royal infant" quip derives, early on, from a passage in the artist's *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting*:[14] "The square is not a subconscious form. It is the creation of intuitive reason. It is the face of the new art. The square is a living, royal infant. It is the first step of pure creation in art" (MK1:38). The last part here is an exaggeration because Malevich had been working on suprematism for the previous year, but it is a great trademark of this important new abstract modality of painting.

Now that suprematism is detached from automatic affiliation with Orthodoxy, it deserves to be understood on its own nonconfessional terms before attempting to affiliate it with Malevich's confession. What is aesthetically at stake in suprematism is not mysterious, but it is subtler than it looks to those who think they are looking at pure and simple plane geometry. Given that in Malevich's teaching suprematism in general follows "intuitive reason," with general emphasis on what he is said to have called "feeling," one wants to know what was entailed in the painting process. On this, Charlotte Douglas has written definitively:

> It is important to make quite explicit just what Malevich understood by *oshchushchenie* (sensation). At times this has been translated into English as "feeling," and it has given added emotional coloring to Malevich's statements. By sensation Malevich meant an ultimately material phenomenon but one which is subliminal. That is, an inner physiological separation which is so slight, so subtle, that it does not reach the threshold of physical consciousness. He saw the artist's task as cultivating these direct experiences and making them available to the intuition in the role of true creator. The representation of these experiences upon the canvas is partly a product of the ability to perceive sensation and partly a product of the state of development of the intuition, the intuitive reasoning.[15]

(May we not even draw a similar distinction with religion, insofar as feeling has less than one might think to do with faith?)

One must obviously pass beyond the *Black Square* to appreciate what Douglas means; but when one does, her explanation puts warranted emphasis on sensation in the philosophical sense of empiricism, of knowledge gained by direct sensory interplay with the outside world—not only from "nature" but even in respect to an artist's procedures. Douglas's insight likely extends even to the very moves made in the realization of a work: in drawing, what sort of stroke should be made next in view of those already drawn?; in improvisational jazz, what note should a saxophonist intone next in relation to those already sounded.

Even if one cannot call the first *Black Square* "suprematist painting number 1," it might well make sense to call it "suprematist painting number 0" because, as

Malevich implied and as his protégé El Lissitztky sought to spell out (see Chapter 4), this work opened up a new realm beyond the old art, even including cubism as subjected to the natural world. Beyond the 0 of *Black Square* is the infinite freedom of -1, -2, -3, -*n*. This is already clear in quite a concrete manner with some of Malevich's other early relations of this piece: some are not black, and some are not square because the four angles are almost conspicuously not right angles, charging the so-called square form with sufficient vitality to slightly flex or shimmy (early examples include N/S-126 of 1915 and N/S-127 of probably 1916–17).

It seems extremely suprematistic here to have to face up to what to do next. One can go on from a black square(-ish) form to a black oblong form, in two clear examples (N/S-129 and N/S-139, both with the motif of 1915 as rendered in 1920). Or else (fasten your seatbelt!), one can be more phenomenological and note that, on second thought, we have failed to recognize that a couple of earlier *Black Square* iterations were already slightly "alive," too, which one may not have recognized due to our rational desire to preserve the tidy category of "square." Two fine examples of this involve "vital" red squares: a small *Pictorial Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions; Red Square,* 1915 (N/S-126) and a larger, similarly titled version of approximately 1915–16 (N/S-127; State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg).

There is no need to illustrate either example because I am addressing a general idea that holds true for many suprematist paintings. It would be wrong to reduce what we are discussing here to simple geometric "irregularity," as such, but such slight enlivening deviations from regularity apprise us of a certain kind of human irregularity that involves the sensibility of the spectator: the spectator cannot be as passive as many viewers of even secular art are and expect to have the aesthetic message of this art come through. In my opinion, this necessity of spectator engagement concerns the primary reason for taking a painting as "spiritual," namely that it presents itself as the work of a soul. If perhaps one could combine St. Thomas Aquinas's definition of the soul as the capability of movement in a thing with Baruch Spinoza's early modern understanding of vital metaphorical *movement* as voiced in his *Ethics* (1677), we might be well prepared to understand the irregularities of suprematism.

Explaining this phenomenon of Malevich's significant geometric irregularity to students over many years, it helped, visually speaking, to defer to the great nineteenth-century art critic John Ruskin, who deals with aesthetically advantageous imprecision in *The Laws of Fésole* (1877–8). There Ruskin diagrams and describes a device derived from a composition by the early Renaissance

painter Cimabue: a lectern with slanted top, on the sides of which a diagonal ornamental quadrangle must be irregular owing to the slant. So what would ideally have been a diagonal square, like a diamond, is instead *un-square,* because it has to suit the nonrectangular side of the slanted lectern. But for Ruskin this situation is not at all regrettable: it is downright aesthetically advantageous since the artist has been able, by careful adjustment, to cooperate with circumstances to make something more imaginatively responsive than any standardized result: "You may thus for yourself ascertain the accuracy of this outline, which otherwise you might suppose careless, in that the suggested square is not a true one, having two acute and two obtuse angles . . . But this is one of the first signals that the [work] is by a master."[16] A good reason to think that Ruskin would have understood and appreciated suprematist intuition.

Still in 1915, Malevich added to the square single-image motif, two or three more black "fundamental elements" of suprematist painting, making for a triad of related elements: a so-called circle or disk and a thick-limbed, symmetrical Greek cross. Malevich seems to have sought to add a fourth element to this set, a single wide lateral oblong—an "extended plane"—within the square format. This last motif, however, never seemed logically reciprocal with its siblings, for its length looked arbitrary compared with the centralizing bilateral symmetry of the others.

By itself, the extended plane could be said to have morphed into the black crossbar of an often reproduced Latin-type Christian cross painting with an equally wide red vertical staff, *Suprematist Hieratic Cross* (1920–1; N/S-564), and as also subsumed into a similar *White Suprematist Cross* (1920–1; N/S-565), both in the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. While the fundamental elements of suprematism do not concern religion, howbeit "iconically" representing basic geometric forms, it is curious that the extended plane (rejected, one can say, as impossibly absolute) comes to take part in these two decidedly vertical Latin-cross paintings, differing from the symmetrical Greek crosses with their fundamental elements.

Malevich's couple of sets of square, cross, and circle motifs, with or without an extended plane, were first painted in 1915 on 32-inch-square (more or less) canvases, then repainted on a larger scale of about 42-inch-squares in 1924, so that they appear like large church icons (perhaps for the Venice Biennale?). Interesting for the development of suprematism is how the triplet of motifs is differently managed. A square simply recapitulates *Black Square.* A cross becomes thick, with less rigid, almost flexing edges. Most radical, in response to the challenge of allowing a circle to be somehow irregular without ruining it, a circle

or disk bobs up within the white field like a blimp, in the upper-right-hand corner of the canvas. The result for the circle is that, as opposed to a steady square with regular white border, it is now the surrounding field that becomes irregular. Especially as ensembles, these formal fundamentals prove a tour de force of suprematist thinking.

A complex but wonderfully iconic suprematist abstraction is Malevich's *Suprematism: Abstract Composition* (1915; N/S-420; Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts, Russia; Figure 3.2). Despite, of course, lacking human figuration, it evidences a feature that is fairly exceptional in icon painting, a vitally asymmetric composition (anyone can arrange things tidily A-B-C-D-A). The painting is obviously flat and carries only regular forms; it is also obvious that it shows

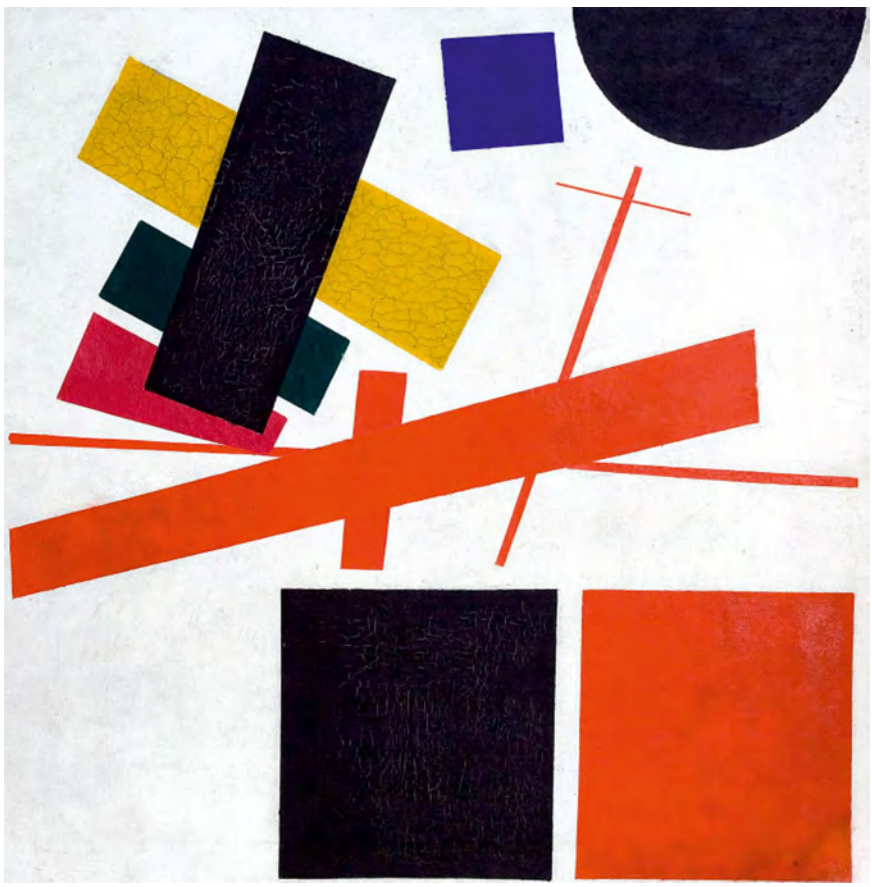

Figure 3.2 Kazimir Malevich. *Suprematism: Abstract Composition,* 1915, oil on canvas. Yekaterinburg (Russia) Museum of Fine Arts. Alamy Ltd.

repeated forms in different colors—patently identical back and red squares and wide black and yellow bands—in a composition with both symmetrical and asymmetrical features. I approach this painting as oriented with its pair of squares to the lower right, as I have seen it hung at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and in books. (I have sometimes seen it reproduced on its side, but Malevich's suprematist paintings are so compositionally self-contained that some were hung even by the artist with different orientations.) Presented this way, the image has a distinct similarity to the many icons in which a half-length figure holds a Gospel book open to a two-page spread in the lower-right corner. To suggest a parallel without implying that Malevich necessarily used it: I am thinking of an icon of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker from the twelfth or thirteenth centuries (State Tretyakov Gallery), in which the held rectangle in the lower right is a single framed rectangle, representing a closed Gospel book and appearing surprisingly abstract, even if other Nicholas icons more closely resemble *Suprematism: Abstract Composition* by showing a two-page spread of the book. As in all icons of St. Nicholas, the bishop's white collar is adorned with thick dark crosses, not unlike the two wide crosses in Malevich's painting, which also has a black half-circle motif that can be considered structurally equivalent to Nicholas's white halo.[17] Needless to say, we are not talking about specific painting-to-painting influence here but about parallel pictorial devices that can reveal the closeness of some elements of "[articular" modernism to the "Eastern" icon tradition.

A compositionally simpler work by Malevich, but perhaps all the more profound, is the marvelous *Suprematist Painting: White on White,* 1918 (also called *White Square;* N/S-477), in the Museum of Modern Art, New York (Figure 3.3). It is easy to think of it as opposed to *Black Square,* but it is completely different and quite ingeniously composed. *Suprematist Painting: White on White* is a formal marvel in which the inner and outer "squares" are distinguished only as two different whites, with the rotated inner "square" not square at all: it only has one right angle, while its four corners all touch the edges of the field at different distances. By the way, Malevich said he associated white with *pure action;* relatedly, in the Orthodox icon tradition, a square halo (like a mortarboard) identifies a saint depicted still living his or her active earthly life.

Might it be possible to consider this extremely iconic suprematist Malevich in a Marxist vein, and might that be considered, in a way, "ecumenical," too? Malevich might have read some Marx, at least later, when he had to defend himself against the apparatchiks (bureaucrats) as things came to a political head in the Twenties. (Should it even have mattered to the sophisticated artist, not

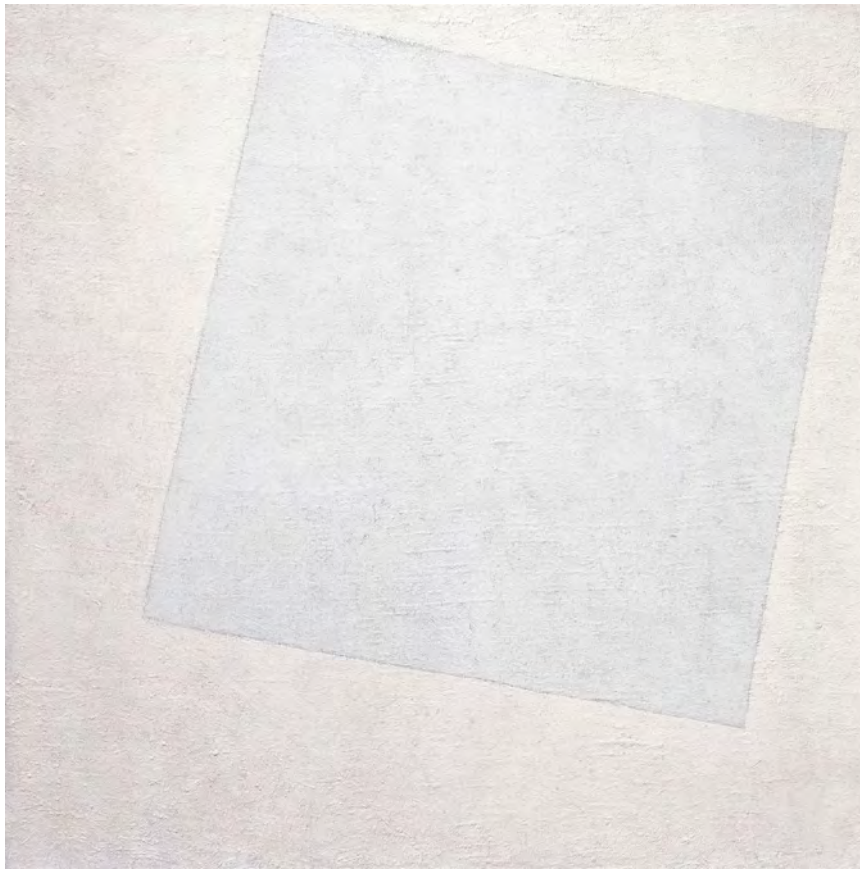

Figure 3.3 Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Painting: White on White,* 1918, oil on canvas. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Alamy Ltd.

reading Marx would have had nothing to do with being a Catholic, because Marx was never listed on the Counter-Reformational "Index of Prohibited Books.") What would have been most important in Marxist theory concerned alienation, which it is the office of art (and some would say, of religion, as well) to absolve. Unfortunately, until the aesthetically important "humanistic" works of Marx's early years became widely circulated in the 1960s, Communists were as dogmatic about abstract art as many churchgoers. Recently, however, Allison Leigh has written an excellent critical reclamation of this splendid painting in a Communist history journal, calling attention to the "dyadic incongruity" of *Suprematist Painting: White on White.* It is impossible for me to quote any less than the following from Leigh's astute essay, which I take to be fully in the suprematist spirit:

> But the title suppresses something that is just barely perceptible in person—a thin gray line that separates the two from each other. The white square swimming in the limitless abyss is bounded by a sinewy charcoal contour. It is the firmest sign of the artist's hand, his presence forever in the painting, at the site of its revolutionary making. That line takes us forever back to 1917 and to the questions asked in that moment: "What will the new Nation ask of Art and of the artist?" The man who asked such questions is long gone. The line is all that remains of him. *White on White* is therefore an object utterly outside of time, free of it in a way that we will never be. It promises instead the infinity of a space beyond human fear or perception, a universe of colorless neutrality, beyond politics or aesthetics. At least initially then, instead of red, there was only the boundlessness of white.[18]

The painting shown on the cover of the present book is Malevich's *Suprematism of the Spirit* (1919; N/S-570), in oil on wood panel, in the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Panel painting—resembling the format of an Orthodox icon much more than does anything on canvas—is exceedingly rare in Malevich's oeuvre; one other example, also suprematist in style, is one of the paintings titled *Mixed Sensations,* this with motifs of 1916 but executed in around 1921 or 1922 (N/S-382), featuring several crosses.

Our *Suprematism of the Spirit,* on the cover, consists of a slender cross, with thin doubled stem against a white field with a white square obscuring its center. The square is an application of the singular image of *White on White*, which substitutes as a cypher for nothing less than the *corpus* of the holy suffering body of Christ. In *Suprematism of the Spirit*, the central white "square" is also, in the suprematist manner, just slightly taller than it is wide and surrounded by cross slats of different sizes. This motif of *White on White* is prominent on slim Latin-type crosses in four Malevich drawings (executed 1919–27) and the present painting, plus a matrix for a wood engraving of 1920; all being called *Suprematism of the Spirit* (N/S-568-71bis, 572). This rare panel painting is indeed on wood, which is to say the prescribed material format of an authentic Orthodox icon, and it also has a Russian-style suppedaneum (footrest) even though the suppedanea of the related drawings go every which way. Possibly this variation in this unusually "iconic" case is due to Malevich's non-Orthodoxy, since, as a Catholic, he may not have been able to recall in which diagonal direction a Russian suppedaneum properly slants.

Given its white center in place of the corpus of a crucifix, *Suprematism of the Spirit* is a more specific counter to the generality of the *Black Square,* created only four years earlier, which some have taken as apophatically theological, meaning concerned exclusively with what cannot be said about God, as Lyons

has discussed.[19] But Christian theology can convert the black square of general negation concerning divine representation into the positively white Incarnation of the fully human son of God, as beheld by Moses and Elijah in the Transfiguration, arguably the most important theme in Orthodox icon painting, partly because it concerns visibility as such. Shatskikh is right to invoke the Transfiguration in respect to Malevich's *White on White* canvases: Christ's garments became "white as light" (Mt. 17:2), "glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them" (Mk 9:3), and "dazzling white" (Lk. 9:29).[20] Much of the same significance devolves onto *Suprematism of the Spirit.*

Further details in *Suprematism of the Spirit* are worth exploring. The horizontal beam is black (not unlike *Suprematist Hieratic Cross*, above), while its vertical shaft is twinned with a band of creamier white visible along its left edge, starting below the top and ending below the bottom (like the two whites in *White on White*). The attachment of these twinned stripes recalls Malevich's interest in magnetism as an invisible force inseparable from electricity, a new twentieth-century modality, as opposed to the mechanical "forces" of the nineteenth century. (The cubo-futurist opera *Victory over the Sun* of 1913, which had provoked Malevich's first suprematist moves, concerns the liberation of electric lighting instead of dependence on sunlight.) Below and behind the twinned shaft appears a traditional Russian Orthodox suppedaneum, tilted from upper left to lower right, which, at least today, is a dark orange in color. But the twinned shaft, as a paired dark-and-light form, may also relate to an intriguingly Jewish image on the back cover of Lissitzky's famous suprematist-into-post-suprematist artist's book *Of Two Squares: A Suprematist Tale of Two Squares in Six Constructions,* of 1922 (Figure 4.8; see Chapter Conclusion).[21]

Appropriate to the spare rectitude and grace of *Suprematism of the Spirit,* which would make many think of the Crucifixion, are two reminiscences of the Russian constructivist sculptor Antoine Pevsner (1886–1962). Pevsner recalls, around 1918, a "deathly pale" Malevich saying, in the time of his white suprematism, "I feel a wilderness around me. Lost in the jungle, I found only one path to salvation. It is what you see and admire: the white square on the white ground. These are my very latest works, my ideal" (MS2:162). Additionally, when Malevich's gifted suprematist associate Rozanova (1886–1918) died that November of diphtheria, at age thirty-two, Pevsner said, "With tears covering his haggard face he was a tragic and pitiful sight. When he saw me, he said, quite softly: 'We will all be crucified. I have prepared my cross already. You have noticed it in my works, of course'" (163). The following year, 1919, the year of *Suprematism of the Spirit,* Malevich also said, "The cross is my cross."[22]

Of Malevich's other, obviously Christian cross paintings, a few have interesting specifics. *Mystical Suprematism* (1920–2; motif of 1916–19; N/S-612), features a solid, halo-like disk tending toward the upper right, and a different *Mystical Suprematism* (1920–2; motif of 1918–19; N/S-613), has an oval mandorla. The well-known Latin cross with a wide red vertical bar and wide black overlaid horizontal staff, called *Suprematist Hieratic Cross,* already mentioned, may remind either a Catholic or an Orthodox Christian of beginning prayer by making the sign of the cross on one's torso, first by moving the right hand from forehead to breast and then, from shoulder to shoulder, either from to left to right (Catholic) or right to left (Orthodox), to identify oneself with Christ. It is possible that such an ecumenical ambiguity occurred to Malevich while executing this painting with his own arm, which would have entailed being conscious of the painting's own left and right.

Any personal interest Malevich may have had in icons began to wane at a certain point, to some extent along with painting itself. In a letter dated April 3, 1920 from Vitebsk to the critic Pavel Ettinger, Malevich complains that Igor Grabar was spending too much public money restoring icons. Yet he can still frame current realities in religious terms: "I know, Suprematism arrived at '*objectlessness*' in order to construct a new spiritual and '*utilitarian world,*' but here too an enormous speech could be unfurled and it really should be unfurled, because it contains the development of the new testament of the world" (MS1:127). This "unfurling" may already portend the germination of his lecture and small book, *God Is Not Cast Down* (1922). But he may have also discussed this notion of a *new* New Testament with Lissitzky, at the Peoples Art School, in Vitebsk. On the very next day after Malevich wrote to Ettinger, April 4, Lissitzky also wrote to the critic, speaking of Malevich's greatness in begetting a grand style but also either anticipating, influencing, or confirming his own great text "Suprematism in World Reconstruction" (1920; see Chapter 4): "Here before us," Lissitzky wrote, "is the ascension that will culminate in the stupremat [*sic*] of the Spirit—religion. Here comes the SUPREMATIST TESTAMENT to replace the Old and New Testaments" (M2:212; emphasis original).[23]

The Western Root of Suprematism

I have been skeptical about the Eastern root of Malevich's Suprematist painting for a simple compensatory reason. Malevich obviously understood the ecclesiastical function as well as the formal nature of the Russian Orthodox icon,

and its exalted place in Orthodox culture. This understanding likely came up for discussion during either of the revolutions of 1917, when he was first elected chairman for art by the Moscow Soviet of Soldiers' Deputies and then appointed to supervise the national art collections in the Kremlin, including its four cathedrals with their many icons.

The neglected side of the story, however, concerns a great ethnically Polish modernist who grew up accustomed at least as largely to Western artistic stimulation, even for religious painting. The greatest contradiction between tradition and modernity in Malevich's artistic education must have been his initial Moscow stint in the private school of Fedor Rerberg, in 1906–10, where the immediate lessons concerned how to make a typical Western perspectival painting even as any contemporary excitement, in the world outside school, was new but also equally Western, impressionism.[24]

Malevich's attitude toward the Orthodox icon may have been more oblique than one might think, being accustomed to the visual aspects of two churches. From around the time of suprematism's public emergence in 1915, Malevich wrote in an unpublished long poem called "I Am the Beginning . . ." (compensating for what seems a badly translated first sentence): "I am a great beginning, will I be capable of [covering] my face with the wisdom of oecumenical glory?"—with the word ecumenical used twice on the same page (MK4:12), revealing its importance for one whose Christianity crossed church lines. This free-verse poem is largely religious, Trinitarian in fact. But it also rather gives away its Catholicity in a line—"Cleanse your hearing and wipe away the old days" (MK4:13)—that resembles the priest's invocation before reading the Gospel in the pre-Vatican II Catholic Mass: "Cleanse my heart and my lips" (as God cleansed Isaiah's lips).[25] Malevich continues: "Christ has died and his spirit has not returned again to his body—so it has built itself another: the church" (MK4:26).

Because Malevich's suprematism has such artistic affinities with Russian icons' flatness, stylized forms (like drapery folds in icons), and quite often, autonomy of color, we are perhaps too accustomed to the analogy with the icons of the national church, in a country where the painter was, in fact, an immigrant, failing to consider that Malevich was a "cradle" Catholic. That is why we need to scrutinize his reliance on his own tradition.

I think there are multiple levels to the more general problem of "the Russian icon" and Malevich. The most fundamental concerns religion versus irreligion. On this level, religion is considered at best "mystical," that is, incomprehensible and likely delusionary but harmless when not standing in the way of progress.

But here the icon can be entertained as charmingly folkloric, even though, to both simple and sophisticated Orthodox believers, such a view is practically blasphemous. In the early twentieth century this attitude was supported by the abolition in philosophy of whatever could be considered metaphysical, blaming the problem on Kant (despite his pioneering efforts to solve it) and forcing too many Christian thinkers into sterile Scholasticism. Before long there would be no reason, whether in the Stalinist East or under Western capitalist "materialism," not to equate the learned icon tradition with *lubki*— ordinary popular graphics— in order to take the icon's metaphysical status down a peg.

The Orthodox icon-painting tradition seems at first to have been serviceable to our artist, not merely formally but as a means of conveying "semi-abstractly" a directly apprehensible diagram of metaphysical principles, according with religiosity. The government promotional campaign for atheism of the new Soviet Union in the 1920s was pointedly anti-iconic, by often mocking the icon's sacred character. Comic strips by the great proletarian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky contributed to this campaign. Endless versions trade on the all-too-easy easy parity between St. Elijah and the old Slavic pagan god Perun. In one, the first panel of a sequence depicts a thin, bearded man crouching down to the floor with awkward absurdity to address or kiss an icon of Elijah before a hanging candle or lamp; in the next panel, the man kneels before the icon to pray; and in the next, his house burns down. At the end, the same fellow, in hardier physical condition, sits on a log reading a likely scientific book while a wrathful old God the Father in the sky is frustrated in directing a lightning bolt onto his rebuilt house because it is now equipped with a lightning rod. This extremely popular vein of humor is completely beholden to the nineteenth-century trope of science being necessarily at odds with faith, proceeding by utterly simplistic substitution. One would, of course, have to put paganism on par with revealed Judaism and Christianity in order to countenance the replacement of Perun (considered responsible for the sky, thunderstorms, war, and such) by the great prophet Elijah—himself an esteemed crusader *specifically against paganism*—merely as a holy man with *metaphorical* access to heaven. Indeed, the whole Perun/Elijah project was as ethically as well as logically bad as any capitalist propaganda campaign predicated on the fact that stupidity really does sell.

In the mid- and latter part of the last century, some Western scholars and critics became attuned to the fact that the painting style of Malevich, in particular, had qualities in common with specifically Christian art in Russia. The émigré sculptor Naum Gabo, in his Mellon Lectures at the National Gallery, Washington, D.C., in 1959, juxtaposed part of a fourteenth-century mural icon from Novgorod

with Malevich's *Suprematist Painting: Eight Red Rectangles* (1915; N/S-45; Museum of Modern Art, New York).[26] This was one of those books that every artist had, mainly for its visual juxtapositions, but nobody ever read.

But in 1971, the painter Marjorie Welish, reviewing Troels Andersen's still-standard English edition of Malevich's *Essays on Art* (1968), which made American artists aware of Malevich, invoked the similar embroidered semiotic "cross" patterns on Russian Orthodox liturgical vestments on view in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, as a parallel to Malevich's suprematism, without sidestepping religion. Citing the historian Nicholas Vakar, Welish called attention to German idealism's having "penetrated" modern Russian "aristocratic circles and the intelligentsia"; hence "the ground was prepared for the theories of Hegel and Marx whose acceptance, paradoxically, can be seen as the final consequence of the old Russian religious impulse." Thus, "the work of Malevich should be analyzed . . . not only in terms of a European art tradition he was fully aware of" (and to which we shall return here) "but in terms of the dilemma of the Russian intelligentsia of which he was a part. What appears to us now as some of the clearest statements in European art history take on a double significance—a hidden, tradition-rooted dimension," markedly theistic.[27] For once the "religious impulse" was not being dismissed.

Today, some fifty years later, the question of Malevich's suprematism in regard to the Russian Orthodox icon tradition has become a widespread art-historical cliché, with religion reduced to an antiquarian sidebar. Now it is time to acknowledge that that religious affinity was one of two strong and no doubt competing art-historical influences from Christian representational art on Malevich's abstraction, the other being his own, pictorially quite different, Catholic visual background, specifically as Baroque-derived. Western influence is bound to seem exaggerated in the following account because it is the one which, without ever having been taken for granted, has disappeared (many Catholics still manage to abhor abstract art). What deserves to be kept in mind is that there is no reason not to think of Malevich as not being as artistically ecumenical in practice as his father taught him to be ecclesiastically.

Malevich held to a similar dichotomy regarding the artistic modalities of Old Master and modern painting. In a letter written on July 23, 1924, to his former student from Vitebsk, Lev Iudin, he mentions Rubens and Cézanne in the same breath, bespeaking the opposition between old art and modernity on such opposed terms that he can say, "take as a measuring stick Rubens as the aphelion and Cézanne as the perihelion"—the aphelion being when earth is at its farthest point away from the sun, occurring around (however counterintuitively) the

summer solstice, and the perihelion being when earth is at its nearest point, around the winter solstice. Given that Malevich and most other modernist painters have taken Cézanne as their artistic prophet, it is easy to infer how this might lock Rubens out altogether—and Malevich is not usually one to let that name pass without an allusion to obese nudes. Nevertheless, Malevich so appreciated Rubens on his own terms, not to mention as a Catholic (likely unaware of Cézanne's Catholicism), that in the same letter to Iudin, he advises, "I suggest that you work more intensely in the Hermitage [museum] studying *the painterly structure of Rubens*" and other great masters (MS1:169; emphasis added).

When the subject of default realism in Western European Catholic art comes up around Malevich, the bugbear is indeed normally the great Flemish Catholic painter of the baroque, Sir Peter Paul Rubens. Prince Evgenii Trubetskoi, a Russian Orthodox religious philosopher, is responsible for a notorious instance of this recurrent critical trope in a 1915 essay on icon painting, where he reports that, on visiting the Hermitage Museum soon after visiting an icon collection, the sight of a bacchanal by Rubens "made me feel sick to my stomach." That the subject was "gorging on meat and necessarily killing in order to gorge," and Trubetskoi had the vivid impression that Rubens's baroque painterliness was all too attuned to "fat shaking flesh, delighting in itself."[28] In a 1918 essay, Trubetskoi formulates his objection to this entire aspect of Westernizing taste—aptly represented by Rubens—as "the dreary spiritual *meshchanstvo* [Russian for genteel petty-bourgeois vulgarity] that has engulfed the modern world," including "the forgotten icon."[29]

It is unlikely that Malevich would have thought all Western religious painting, including Rubens's baroque, as necessarily bad, even if he did occasionally join in local Rubens-bashing (perhaps to be a good sport). As a theoretician of art, Malevich surely knew that his own declared commitment to the aesthetic party of color was a commitment to the painters' politico-aesthetic party of Rubens (versus Poussin). And while we understand the modern appeal of the icon, it seems unlikely that one so ambitious as a painter and alert to art history would not also have looked for masterly examples within his own league.

A major revelation took place in 1977, thanks to Alan Birnholz. He proposed that another Malevich white-on-white painting, *Construction in Dissolution* (1918; N/S-501; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam) derived from a small sketch called *Suprematist Composition: Expressing the Feeling of Fading Away* (1916–17; Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York; Figure 3.5), with this image based on the composition of likely Rubens's single most celebrated painting, the *Elevation of the Cross* (1610–11; Antwerp Cathedral).[30] For a generation after this

Figure 3.4 Anonymous carte-de-visite photograph, *c.* 1858–66, of Peter Paul Rubens, *Elevation of the Cross,* 1610–11. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Courtesy of the Museum.

Figure 3.5 Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition: Expressing the Feeling of Fading Away*, 1916–17. Pencil on paper, sheet: 6 1/16 × 4 3/16 inches (15.4 × 10.64 cm). Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York; Gift of Marlborough-Gerson Gallery, 1968 (RCA1968:6). Photo: Tom Loonan for Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York.

article appeared, I presented and discussed this comparison in my modern art survey courses, but I have never met another art historian who paid any attention to it. I think they thought it was a fluke, but I have an answer to that.

The immense repute of Ruben's Antwerp altarpiece must be acknowledged. Malevich never saw it; but Rubens's *Elevation of the Cross* was considered a masterpiece of European art deserving to be published as such in photo-reproduction as early as the mid-nineteenth century. For instance, the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, preserves an anonymous carte-de-visite photograph of the central composition dating from between 1858 and 1866 (Figure 3.4).

Having a tiny drawing in Buffalo reflect the influence of one of Rubens's most monumental paintings upon an important Malevich suprematist work probably seemed too improbable for people to handle, especially in light of the prevalent view that Rubens personified the worst elements of Western religious painting by virtue of his extreme painterly fleshliness. Knowing that all too well, Birnholz quotes Trubetskoi's scornful comments and writes: "It was Rubens above all other western European artists who was scorned as the clearest example of what an artist portraying religious subjects should *not* do." But Birnholz adds: "The Buffalo drawing appears as possibly a modernized and purified version of such celebrated works by Rubens as his *Elevation of the Cross*," especially insofar as "the shoulders, waist, and thighs of a human form" in the Rubens inform the concentric axes of the top, middle, and bottom of the Malevich composition.[31] The Rubens scholar John Rupert Martin comments on Ruben's original figural disposition in such a way as would have appealed to Malevich: its diagonal heaving up of the weighty cross bearing Christ, instead of a normal perpendicular Crucifixion, was something that Rubens employed on other occasions as well because he "obviously enjoyed working out solutions posed by the formal problem of this subject."[32]

In his Malevich *Catalogue raisonné*, Andréi Nakov dates the Malevich painting in question to 1918 (NS-501), and the five related drawings, including the Buffalo one, as after the fact; however, he dates their "motif" to 1917 and 1918, surely as studies for the versions of suprematist painting of 1920 (NS-502–04) and 1927 (NS-505, 506). Malevich must have been as fascinated and enthralled with his, in effect, quite "ecumenically" abstract painting as Rubens had been with his unusual figural device for the Crucifixion. For with just the addition of a small extra crossbar for the feet (the suppedaneum)—in formal agreement with the concentric radial curves of the crossbeam and the corpus's torso—Malevich might be seen thinking how, in *Construction and Dissolution,* he has converted a Catholic Rubens Crucifixion into a more compatibly Orthodox crucifix type.

Malevich was quite familiar with the very feel of a Russian icon, but there is no reason to think him ever unmindful of his own kind of high Catholic Counter-Reformation religious art—quite beyond familiarly deriding it along with Orthodox friends. Many writers discussing Malevich's relationship to icons are modernists hoping to sway aesthetic conservatives toward Malevich as formally allied with Russian holy images. But Malevich was too insightful a student of art history to be limited by that polemic to a total exclusion of the whole all Catholic baroque. Is it possible to detect other aspects of Rubens, in particular, as germane to his suprematist painting?

Yes, Rubens's name was practically a swearword in the sophisticated Russian artistic milieu. Then again, Malevich always had one foot out of that circle since he was not Orthodox. Some works of Rubens that are, in a sense, all the more Catholic than the *Elevation of the Cross* altarpiece are his ceiling paintings of 1620–1 for the Jesuit church in Antwerp (later dedicated to St. Charles Borromeo). This project featured "holy pictures" in the most blatantly realistic Western sense, including martyrdoms, as well as the near-martyrdom of Isaac. The actual paintings perished in a 1718 lightning fire, but their compositions were preserved not only in the form of preparatory drawings and oil sketches but also in prints. These I find suggestive of Malevich—obviously not as motifs, but as radically projected bodily axes and masses, and architectural forms, especially projected sharply upward—a baroque technique called *di sotto in sù,* or worm's-eye view, that Rubens absorbed from the Venetian Renaissance.[33] As against the otherwise modern-compatible refusal of icons to deal with conventional Western perspective (even indeed to *reverse it*), such pictorial dispositions give a decidedly uplifting, aspirational character to the structures portrayed, especially against a high white sky. (The worm's-eye perspective was used in film by younger Sergei Eisenstein, whom Malevich knew.[34])

These skyward views of Rubens adumbrate not only Malevich's suprematist white fields as a way of overcoming the earth-mindedness of a blue sky but also speak to his later ambition, with its science-fictional cast, of seeking to penetrate the wider cosmos, a goal that would include architectural experiments projected as space stations. Curiously, in 1898 Jacob Burckhardt (teacher of the great formalist art historian Heinrich Wölfflin) was anxious about just such a wild aspect of these very Rubens compositions, not to mention their shocking popularity (!): "I find some difficulty in believing that he, whose composition was so perfect and so absolutely adequate to a vertical surface, can have found great pleasure in handing these figures, all of which had to be violently foreshortened. Yet commissions for such things must have poured in upon him because of a universal preference for

his ideas, composition and style."[35] Such heavenward compositions are as characteristic of suprematism as the birdseye view of Impressionism or, for that matter, the 30°-60°-90°-angled graphics of constructivism.

A telling example from the church project is Rubens's *Saint Athanasius Overcoming Arius*, of which there is a drawing in the Hermitage, St. Petersburg,[36] as well as an engraving by Jan Punt from 1753, also in the Hermitage (Figure 3.6), after a drawing by Jacob de Wit. In a general way, this Rubens composition, preserved and disseminated in print form, can compare with Malevich's *Supremus No. 58: Black and Yellow,* 1916 (N/S-438; State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg; Figure 3.7). Besides Malevich's sweeping gray C-curve as broadly relating to the saint's billowing cape seen from below, shared compositional elements include the similar axes of Athanasius's bishop's crook and Malevich's long black diagonal, and the jutting position of the recumbent Arius's right leg and Malevich's white bar; also, Athanasius's hooded head in relation to Malevich's stack of four or five black bands eclipsed by a face-like white rectangle.

Conceptually as well as formally speaking, such a source would provide a peculiarly vivid example of an extremely Catholic baroque and absolutely anti-iconic, artistic practice, whereby what might have been worldly baroque naturalism in extreme form is employed as visible grounds of overtly metaphorical truth.[37] In Rubens's *Saint Athanasius Overcoming Arius*, few adults would assume that Arius is intended to be conquered physically by Athanasius: most would grasp that Athanasius's conquest was intellectual, even before finding out that he triumphed specifically in metaphoric combat against a priest who did not accept the divinity of Christ. However interesting it would be to know whether Malevich had recourse to any of the Rubens prints of this image when conceiving and rendering *Supremus No. 58*, one can already see that, in this case, he employed something like an ordinarily naturalistic, Catholic-style compositional modality, quite at odds with an Orthodox iconic view, in the negotiation of his own suprematist composition.

Other possible parallels of this type appear among the Rubens's Antwerp ceiling panels. *The Sacrifice of Isaac,* featuring splayed, slat-like forms of the angel's and Abraham's angular limbs silhouetted against the white sky, is suggestive of the both wonderful and popular early suprematist canvas *Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying* (1915; N/S-48; Museum of Modern Art, New York), with its two sets of smaller and larger irregular rectangles in yellow and black (suggestive of a then still futuristic biplane silhouetted against the sky). In the panel of *Saint Ambrose,* the saint's hefty body, standing on a symmetrically angular cloud bank, is seen from nearly directly underneath,

Figure 3.6 Peter Paul Rubens. *Saint Athanasius Overcoming Arius,* 1620–1; engraving by Jan Punt after drawing by Jacob de Wit, 1753. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Photograph courtesy of the Museum.

Figure 3.7 Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematism (Supremus No. 58)*; or, *Suprematist Composition: Black and Yellow,* 1916. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg. Alamy Ltd.

while putti (cherubim) unfurl his dark robe in loose symmetrical triangles, like a giant winged bird against the light sky. In the *Martyrdom of Saint Eugenia*, corner blocks of a collapsing classical temple to a pagan deity are seen from below, as partly occluded rotated squares.

I am not arguing for point-to-point sourcing here, but for something that is both more generic and also both formidable and overlooked. These exciting compositions from among Rubens's destroyed ceiling paintings of prophets and saints in the Antwerp church, disseminated in the form of prints publicly available in Russia, are most striking for their aspirational, upward-looking—let us say, Malevichian—point of view.

Rubens was also considered all too Catholic by Pavel Florensky (1882–1937), art theorist and iconographer—as well as electrical engineer, Orthodox priest, and martyr. The problem again was Rubens's supposedly merely worldly fleshiness, as well as Florensky's belief, not uncommon in Orthodox circles, that engraving and similar forms of printmaking—as modes of mechanical reproduction—are far too rationalistically Protestant. In *Iconostasis,* his treatise on the icon, written in 1922 (though unable to be published in the Soviet Union until 1972), Florensky compares Catholic and Protestant art modalities, each being found wanting as compared with the Orthodox icon, of course. On the Catholic side, Rubens is taken to follow a general stream of Germanic mysticism, which encouraged "pantheistic phosphorescence" and "a shining instance of the self-luminescence of large heavy flesh." Such is part of "the practice in Catholic countries . . . a ceaseless attempt to slip the sensuous into the logic of affirmation and negation." At the same time, "there is this inner affinity between Protestant rationalism and the figurative linearity of engraving," unlike the "inner affinity with between Catholic esthetic imagination and the sensuous techniques if oil painting."[38]

In our day, Boris Groys has accused Malevich, who, after all, had already been elected to secure state art by the soldiers in revolutionary Moscow, of wishing to destroy the museums in order to advance a better future for art by referring to Malevich's essay "On the Museum."[39] But in that essay, dated February 23, 1919, of the futurist journal *Iskusstvo Komuny* (Art of the Commune), under the editorship of the aggressive atheist Osip Brick, Malevich is being outrageously Marinettian and futuristic (MK1:68–72). Two issues earlier, Malevich had written on the bad results of Lenin's monument competition (which Lissitzky wished to enter; see Chapter 4), under the semi-blasphemous title (influenced by Brik?) "Monuments Not Made by Human Hands."[40] Now, on February 23, Malevich sounds more rhetorically like an Italian futurist than ever. He states that we do not need museums nor churches either, what with their "droning of

vaults and candle soot," and he adds an absurdist, Marinettian affront to the pope: "Is the Roman pope's cap necessary to a two-six-four engine racing like lighting over the globe and trying to take off from its back" (MK1:69). What is telling about the degree of seriousness here is a remark both equating Rubens with the Great Pyramid of Cheops and dismissing both as superfluous (ibid.)! Unless I am beholden to a defective translation, it would seem that Groys, who himself cannot resist indulging the trope of Rubens's "fat asses," does not seem to appreciate Malevich's fairly gentle witticism about religion.

Every mature Christian, and doubtless every Russian Orthodox adult in 1917, has thought about the problem of the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God and how, in the End Times, the earthly institutional church becomes ultimately superfluous. A priest I know said recently in a sermon that when the Kingdom of God comes, faith and hope will no longer be necessary, only *caritas*, love. How shall that affect art? It is justifiable to hold that art, too, including that created by Rubens, could finally go by the boards, as well as (unless for joyous praise) churches. But it is also plausible to take the likes of Rubens—and now Malevich—as already gifts from above that everybody, not just an elite, are able to share. By not being able to envision the world so transformed, Groys risks one of the only two unforgiveable sins—*despair*—whereas the Bolsheviks flatly proceeded to commit the other—*presumption*.

Nevertheless, the radical worm's-eye point of view of the Rubens compositions, which would horrify devotees of Orthodox icons even today for their excessive reliance on the worldliness of (what many consider) objectively scientific perspective,[41] plausibly adumbrate a whole utopian aspect of Malevich's work concerning earthly sky as an intimation of the vast cosmos. Malevich's interest in the Russian icon is no surprise, but the extended domestic aspect of his Western Catholicism (recall his devout mother living with him for his whole life) and the easygoing ecumenism of his father would also seem to have been lasting influences. This painter, a dreaded "formalist" in the time of Productivism, who survived several Soviet government attempts to curtail his work and teaching, had reasons never to disavow the formal resources of Rubens and perhaps other Western masters of religious painting as well.

However circumstantial or coincidental, it seems appropriate to observe that Rubens's own management of a corps of engravers for making just such reproduction prints as *Saint Ambrose* is hardly dissimilar from the way Malevich surrounded himself at the Vitebsk school with student printmakers from his UNOVIS club. In Malevich's case, these printmakers were devoted to the more modern medium of lithograph. Rubens had hired some dozen engravers from

the studio of the Dutch painter Hendrick Goltzius, "trained . . . to a more athletic line and more flashing contrasts"; as A. H. Mayor states, "By retraining the pupils of one man, Rubens united his engravers under one epoch-making style that liquefied undulations from light to dark in an inspiring new splendor. . . . [He] had learned . . . to dramatize . . . a design so rugged that it survives execution by others."[42]

Aesthetically speaking, what Mayor implies here by the dramatization of a design or composition allows for appeal to the interesting—to interestingness, as such—as going altogether against the centrality of beauty in the classical Mediterranean tradition. Despite its aesthetic unorthodoxy as characteristic of northern European art, such an attitude was effectively struck in the 1580s, during the Catholic Counter-Reformation, by St. Robert Bellarmine, writing on how holy images ought to "hold people's attention lest they be distracted by empty reveries."[43] There is no denying that this would effectively have violated the (ultimately neo-Platonic) contemplative restraint of the Eastern icon and assisted in opening up the wider field of baroque "holy pictures," such as those by Rubens.[44]

The exaggerated upward perspective in the Antwerp ceiling paintings, and the widely diffused prints derived from them, bring to mind another important interpretation of a Rubens affiliation. Walter Benjamin appreciated precisely this optical point of architectural view as specifically Catholic baroque. In the closing pages of his book *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), he gives an extensive citation from Karl Borinski's 1914 work on antiquity in European art theory down to romanticism, including the remark: "The impression of supernatural forces is supposed to be aroused in the powerfully projecting and apparently self-supporting structures precisely in the upper regions . . . What else can be the purpose of the . . . violence of the supporting and supported forces, the enormous pedestals, the doubly and triply augmented projecting columns and pilasters, the strengthening and reinforcement of their interconnecting elements . . . What other function have they than to emphasize the soaring miracle above."[45]

Our painter's frequent irreverent comments on Sir Peter Paul Rubens become so commonplace as to approach fraternal banter—even knowingly, Catholic to Catholic. Undoubtedly, not everything Malevich has to say about Rubens is dispassionate aesthetic critique. Being able to target extremes of baroque naturalism in Rubens was an easy pedagogical trick even as the well-heeled Rubens, with his social standing and powerful patrons, was the best artist it was most fun to hate. Yet once, near the end of his life, Malevich actually turned this critical slapstick around, in a letter to an unknown artist written on September 5, 1931: "Rubens is good, and Raphael's no dummy either" (MS1:242).

Letter to a Jewish Friend

Malevich's friendship, as a Catholic, with the Jewish philosopher, cultural historian, and critic Mikhail Gershenzon (1869–1925) is engaging in terms of faith because the two men were fellow "others" to each other, as both different from the Russian Orthodox around them. Gershenzon was also ten years older, learned and culturally sophisticated, but he appealed to the intellectual anarchist in Malevich: "The originality and independence of his worldview with its denial of intelligentsia nihilism and Christian orthodoxy alike placed Gershenzon in the position of a lone thinker, not fully understood by his contemporaries" (MS1:109n).[46] I think their considerable commonality entailed not only a shared feeling of religious otherness in the new Russia but also some basic fidelity to their remembered faiths. Vakar writes, in her afterword to the omnibus edition of Malevich's papers (2015), that "without Gershenzon, the world would never have seen either *God Is Not Cast Down* or *The World as Objectlessness*" (MS2:583).

Gershenzon, the first president of the Moscow Union of Writers after the Revolution, also knew the religious philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, who was devoted, however eccentrically, to the Orthodox Church. Gershenzon held onto Judaism as a "pantheistic religion of the cosmos."[47] Eventually, this happy ecumenical circle, consumed with faith, broke up once Gershenzon finally "rejected institutionalized religion, relying on cosmic thinking."[48]

Without being interested much in painting, Gershenzon otherwise had a generally cultivated aesthetic outlook, with an impetus that suggests something of a Kamdinskyan sense of interior motivation. Brian Horowitz provides an overview of it:

> Gershenzon's aesthetics parallel his metaphysics. In the concept of "vision" we find all the elements of cosmic consciousness; we discover the idea that the source of art is an outside (cosmic) force, that it enters the poet through the will, and that inspiration occurs exactly when the poet is visited by these forces, which denote *revelation* [emphasis added]. Thus, to derive the source of art, the poet [or presumably artist] should not look outside, but within, in order to glimpse the ideal vision of the universe. In this way, the creation of art is a religious act, since by witnessing the vision, and sharing it, the poet [or presumably, artist] makes unconscious experience (the link between the individual and the cosmic will) clear and perceptible to consciousness.[49]

Howowitz is aware that the sources of this outlook trace, through contemporary Russian religious philosophy, back to Friedrich Schelling in German idealism (and, let us add, contemporaneously in the history of art, with Wilhelm

Wackenroder's *Outpourings from the Heart of an Art-Loving Monk,* of 1797). If one could imagine Mondrian lecturing Kandinsky on how artistic insight is a gift from God—a grace that is neither innate nor earned and hence is something *put into* the heart—I would venture to say that that is something Malevich tacitly understood.

Of Malevich's letters, the most engrossing I have read in respect to religion belong to an extended interreligious correspondence that Malevich carried on with this "soul brother" Gershenzon, especially a long and rather confessional one from Vitebsk, written on December 21, 1919. It could be called the Christmas letter, having been written on the Sunday four days before the Catholic (but not Orthodox) Christmas Day, which was also during Chanukah; and Malevich may have been feeling homesick. In it, he analyzes his feelings at length on his seemingly recent visits to services in three "temples"—namely, of the Catholic, Orthodox, and Jewish faiths, in that order. In the letter, the artist seems to be accounting for his own religious affects and orientation.

The Catholic church building, discussed first. Abbreviating here, it seems like "velvet against the background of a ray of sun, full of life united with a field and people," built as vertical "wedge [an important suprematist motif], which stubbornly dissects the cupola and goes [further upward] . . . It is not standing on the ground anymore, but is on its way over it" (MS1:116–17). We shall return to this characterization below, which may derive from the old Catholic Cathedral of St. Barbara and St. Paul, in Vitebsk, built in a Neo-Romanesque style in the 1880s, with two lofty faceted towers.

Second, the Orthodox church building, "thick with mahogany-colored sunlight, that is not touched, sated," has an air of "finality," of "nowhere to go, it is under the lid of the sky that is holding onto the Earth, so that the wind will not turn it over [implying a dome], it is sinking into the ground, being lit by a mournful wooden torch" (MS1:116–17). This may or may not refer to the domical eighteenth-century Orthodox Cathedral of the Holy Assumption in Vitebsk, apparently originally built as Uniate (that is to say, Orthodox in form but Catholic in church polity).

The third temple, the synagogue, is "crystal, colorless, no temple at all, illuminated by a small bright sun, not a live sun but a reflected one, which gleams strong and tremulous, does not warm and is not colorful, it illumines the same gray, faceted world, covered by mountains on which neither plants, nor animals, nor people are visible" (MS1:116–17). This characterization cannot be linked to a specific building because, of more than fifty synagogues in Vitebsk at the beginning of the twentieth century, only a ruin of one survives; many old Jewish

places of worship were made of wood. In the letter, the synagogue "stands to the side, but one cannot say where exactly. Its structure cannot be called a structure, rather, it is not present at all [this may conceivably imply it was a product of folk woodwork, not striking Malevich as architectural], there is only its reflection."

There follows a mostly inscrutable stream-of-consciousness sentence that, in noting a multitude of biblical inscriptions on the walls and likely the thought of sacrificial blood (apropos of the Jerusalem Temple), may have put Malevich the Catholic in mind of the old Catholic-versus-Protestant dichotomy of the Mass pitted against Bible: "Its world is filled with letters as if it had absorbed all the plants and lives," while there "glides" through its spaces "the spiritual bloodless action of ringing, which needs neither suns nor plants, [and which] . . . does not leave the cavity of countless letters" (MS1:117). Such "bloodless action" points up a distinction: "Catholic is spicy, soft, velvety *with a small quantity of blood.* Orthodox is *full of blood* revolving in the soil, aspiring to rise and ascend, but the cupola of the sky oppresses. When I was attending religious services, I sensed in myself a journey such as I briefly described: in the synagogue I flew along the letters, *having lost my body and blood*—or else I would not have been able to see that sun and that World" (ibid.; emphasis added).

For Malevich as artist, the most important theme in the Vitebsk synagogue was the striking abundance of inscriptional lettering, and some ornamentation, rather than any figural mural painting, a method chosen to satisfy the commandment against natural image making. The young Lissitzky may already have told Malevich, as early as 1919 at the Vitebsk School, about this aspect of his study trip to the old wooden synagogue at Mogilev, Belarus, which also featured plant and animal ornamental murals and inscriptions, in particular fictive, hybrid animals like gryphons (see Chapter 4).

Visiting his three temples was a typically ecumenical mission for Malevich. (So also is the omission of Protestantism, which the Orthodox also tend to avoid.) His own Catholicism is affirmed when, in saying that he visited the Orthodox church in the company of the religious philosopher Sergei Bulgakov—a longtime friend of Gershenzon and a former Marxist who became an Orthodox priest—he can only wonder why Bulgakov has not converted either to Catholicism or Judaism since he "yearns for one Deity." Actually, it might be wrong to imply that Bulgakov has quite "left the religious church" (MS1:117), because three or so years later, he would be exiled on the "Philosophers' Ship" to continue his priesthood and theology in Paris. Malevich goes on and on about Bulgakov, despite having met him "only once and hav[ing] never read a single one of his books" (MS1:119).

As if coming up for air, he tells Gershenzon:

> I will return to the church . . . Something different hangs over spirituality now, the spirit has been defined as strength by summing up the entire universe of spiritual materialism, the perfection of the breathing world culminates in it. The moment is coming when this world will be no more [a phrase that probably amalgamates John 16:16, "A little while, and you will see me no more . . .," with Revelation], its forms are old, worn out. The new world is coming, its organisms are soul-less and mind-less, will-less, but mighty and strong, they are alien to God and church and all religions, they are living and breathing, but their chests are not moving, and their hearts are not beating, and the brain which has migrated into their bodies moves them and itself using with a new force. . . . You asked me to write about the other-worldly, of course such writing is the most real, real in that it must be understood not by the mind, it is great scripture, it is great for it describes or studies nothing, there was no such scripture, every scripture wrote about God and perfections and meanings and truths, it wrote about origins, and about what I am, and what happened in me and how, and in general everything in it concerns this world.
>
> MS1:119

At almost its end, the letter closes with a peculiarly insistent biblical device whose import concerns the world's ending and then starting again with the coming of the Kingdom, as prophesied by Isaias, Daniel, and others. The painter writes (somewhat crudely concerning the negative and positive aspects of his apocalyptic dialectic), "The moment is coming when this world will be no more, its forms are old, worn out. The new world is coming, its organisms are soul-less and mind-less, but mighty and strong, they are alien to God and church and all religions" (MS1:119). Such prophetic words are an allusion to an extended discourse in the Gospel of John, beginning with Jesus saying, "Yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also" (Jn. 14:19), and continuing, "A little while, and you will see me no more; again a little while, and you will see me" (Jn. 16:16). Shortly thereafter Jesus says, "Truly, truly I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy" (Jn. 16:20). Two other sorrow-to-joy motifs follow (Jn. 16:21, 22), and finally Jesus ends: "I have said this to you in figures; the hour is coming when I shall no longer speak to you in figures but tell you plainly of the Father" (Jn. 16:25). All this is an extraordinary, extended biblical riff, even for Malevich. Even this brief discussion of the letter reveals Malevich's depth of feeling for the Roman Catholic Church at the age of forty, after the Bolshevik Revolution and toward the end of the Civil War.

Malevich could be politically candid with his great friend Gershenzon when persecution set in, and both were ecumenical. On February 11, 1922, he wrote from Vitebsk, on Pablo Picasso's cubism as something superseded by suprematism: "Picasso struggled with the objective world, getting tangled up in its fragments, but that was good, it was already easier for me to remove the objective garbage and display infinity, non-practicality, non-expediency, and for which the Moscow INKhUK [State Institute of Artistic Culture] is persecuting me for not being a materialist. At one of the meetings, all of them ganged up at on me, but if they were all innovators, and not objectivists, then they would never have exchanged Art for the depiction of a saucepan for cooking grub" (MS1:161). Driven here to express his frustration to his learned Jewish friend, Malevich's last phrase carries an allusion that Gershenzon would surely have recognized. He is referencing Psalm 106:20, a wonderful verse against idol worship: "They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass,"[50] a verse also echoed in the New Testament by St. Paul: "Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles" (Rom. 1:22–3).

In a letter to Gershenzon two years later, written on October 13, 1924, Malevich, at his wit's end with his critics, quotes John the Evangelist (except confusing him with John the Baptist, and to a rather twisted pont): "They are all gravediggers who want to bury such semi-literate people as myself in the grave of their documents; . . . we are darkness for them and they are the light; thus John the Baptist spoke, 'God is light, in which there is no darkness'" (1 Jn. 1:5). Another New Testament allusion in the same letter is apparent where the painter writes: "I was expelled from the Academy, but the Christians did not expel Paul, even though he was not always in the same place, but I was expelled, therefore I am thinking of shaking the dust from my feet" (MS1:175)—the figure of shaking the dust from one's feet is from Matthew 10:14.[51]

Gershenzon was an important friend whose understanding of religion Malevich knew he could rely on. Much later, on June 15, 1931, he began a letter to the Jewish painter Lev Antokolsky: "I had one other person who understood what I am writing about. This was Mikhail Osipovich Gershenzon, who wrote *The Trinary Image of Perfection*" (1918) (MS1:240).

God Is Not Cast Down: Art, Church, Factory

The insistent current of Malevich's 1922 book *God Is Not Cast Down: Art, Church, Factory*[52] is a justification of the modern factory that attempts to equate devotion to perfection in both factory and church, making for a somehow both heartening and socially fulfilling result. Malevich never minded being counterintuitive: the point is an idealist one that insists on making room for the godly dimension of life even under the industrial system. Under a title sounding more attuned to revolution when rendered as "God Is Not Overthrown," the artist considers both the church and the factory effectively as shrines of perfection, with that as a divine attribute; the church being productive in its way, and the factory beholden to divine creation in the form of science. The very idea of elaborating such a scheme would prove a field day for a twenty-first-century cynic, but the important thing to recognize in the present context is that the whole effort depended on Malevich knowing full well what good can come from "church."

Much had happened in Malevich's artistic development and in the life of Russia between his stage designs for the futurist opera *Victory over the Sun,* mounted in prerevolutionary St. Petersburg in 1913, and this post-Civil War lecture on God "not being cast down" at the postrevolutionary Museum of Artistic Culture in what was now the city of Petrograd in June 1922. Subsequently these ideas were published in one of Malevich's small books (calling them "booklets" trivializes these theoretically important missives) by the UNOVIS club.

As for UNOVIS: The students had already founded a suprematist activist club called MOLPOSNOVIS, acronym for "Followers of the New Art," in 1920; on Malevich's joining it, it was renamed UNOVIS, "Champions [or Affirmers or Exponents] of the New Art."[53] Members wore a badge consisting of a small black square sewn onto their cuffs. Shatskikh suggests that the many Jewish students from Vitebsk in the school would have appreciated the UNOVIS sleeve patch as a two-dimensional counterpart to the small black box-shaped *tefillin* (phylacteries) worn by Orthodox Jewish men for morning prayer.[54] UNOVIS did hold Jewish meaning for El Lisitzky (see Chapter 4). But to the tefillin association I might add, as an ecumenical tit-for-tat, a different element of religious haberdashery with which of Malevich, as the privately Catholic leader, may have been aware: a certain small white-upon-white cross badge that Catholic—but apparently not Orthodox—priests have embroidered on the cuffs of their liturgical albs.

UNOVIS published the book version of *God Is Not Cast Down* as one of Malevich's small "artists' books." The manuscript is dated 1920; publicly, the text began as a pair of lectures, first at the Latvian Club (renamed Communist Club),[55] in Vitebsk, on April 9, 1922, and then in the first week of June at the Petrograd Museum of Artistic Culture. Malevich designed a poster for the June lecture in Petrograd (N/S-641), also produced by UNOVIS at the lithographic workshop of the school. The poster is extraordinary for resembling the reverse of an Orthodox icon, with two lateral horizontal slats called *shponki*, meant to brace a wooden panel to prevent warpage. Such a "material allusion" is already interesting because it shows Malevich managing to fight back against arrogant constructivist, antimetaphysical materialism—just what he disputes in the lecture—by overcoming any onus of being so idealistic as a formalist painter as not to think or care about the material and structural peculiarities of an icon's physical chassis.

In this text as a whole, the word God so proliferates that one would never know that Russia was at the start of its huge atheistic campaign—that speaking of God would effectively be forbidden—and hardly because of the commandment against taking the Lord's name in vain (the name of God is never used derisively here). A single paragraph uses "God" or "Godly" fourteen times; "Christ" appears only twice, and "the Trinity" only twice, likely in deference to the Jewish majority of the students and Malevich's protégé Lissitzky, who was now on the faculty; Lissitzky organized and helped with the printing of the book and posters. Too dense for synopsis, the text can be "test-drilled" for key points.

When the Trinity is first mentioned, God's unity is stressed. As ordinarily Christian as that is, it is more profoundly theological that Malevich addresses the Trinitarian "procession" (conceived as occurring outside of time): "Man's reasoning built God in the three principles of God [the Father], the Spirit, and the Son" (§22; KM1:209). This is the Orthodox sequence of procession, not the Catholic one of Father to Son to Spirit: Malevich may have been taking his audience into account. The same passage is accompanied by a definite Catholic topos, almost as if in compensation: an allusion to Christ's commission to Peter as the "rock" (Mt. 16:18), which Catholics appreciate as a pun because "Peter" is from the Aramaic for "rock"—a fact touched on no fewer than three times here by Malevich, in addition to the use of "rock-like."

Malevich argues again and again, mainly by example, that factory and church should be equal because both are devoted to "perfection," especially with regard to human progress. He claims industrial perfection can be as inspiring and even aesthetically rewarding as divine creation. He may or may not know that he is

skirting a serious theological issue on the progress side, the Pelagian heresy, though by not being central, this need not bring down the whole argument. Pelagianism holds that humanity can save itself without God's grace, by its own progressive secular means. Instead of acting like an inquisitor accusing Malevich of Pelagianism, however, I would give him some benefit of the doubt by quoting, from our own historical moment, a line from Pope Francis's 2013 encyclical on behalf of the environment, *Laudato si'*: "Technoscience . . . can also produce art and enable men and women immersed in the material world to 'leap' into the world of beauty. Who can deny the beauty of an aircraft?" (§103).[56]

In this important text by Malevich, the word "art" hardly appears. The triad in question boils down operationally to an opposition between church and factory, as industrial perfection vies, in modern times, with divine creative perfection, while, here and there, "spirit" stands in for art. Late in the essay are the only three sections in which the word "art" appears at all. But as art takes center stage, as if in a finale, much of the entire exposition becomes clearer, especially how Malevich hoped aesthetico-politically to assuage the constuctivists, who sought to abandon the felt humanity of suprematism as insufficiently rational and modern.

In section 27, life's three paths are given as "the spiritual or religious, the scientific or factory, and that of art," all separately signifying perfection and advancing "towards the absolute" or God. Beauty might be taken (unfortunately, I think) as an embellishment for both religion and the factory, though it is possible to read this as having nothing to do with superfluous embellishment because the factory is equally serious: "Like religion, so equally the factory moves solemnly in art" (MK1:216).

Section 28 praises religion, including as strong a defense as the painter can muster of the immortal soul, which he considers "nothing other than a particle of immortal God" (MK1:216), an idea originating before Christianity with the Stoics and which Malevich believes quite firmly. However obscure it might seem, a Catholic might also associate this figure of a particle of God with the "Fraction" or *fractio panis* (bread-breaking) in the Mass, where the priest breaks his own host before distributing Communion.

Art—which Malevich suddenly reminds himself ought to be "most important"—comes up again in section 29 but only in the form of one word, indeed a name. A personification of art speaks here, from such a wholly advantageous position of complete harmony that sin is impossible. In terms of the painter's situation in Russia from 1920 to 1922, this concerns the tremendous advantage of liberation from alienation and beyond social class: "All the rest are

still divided into ranks, great and small, holy and sinful; they still make war and suffer in blood and chains. Let anyone that wishes to listen to the harmony of rhythms follow my path" (MK1:217–18). He speaks of a socially efficacious formalism far beyond art for art's sake. How can we not note that Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Lissitzky (to come) all had such religiously inspired and not necessarily merely "utopic" concerns.

In section 31, both art and religion "make bliss" (which I believe might better be translated as "happiness"), indicating that both concern abolishing alienation:

> Making happiness is making truth, for truth in factory production has not yet attained the happiness achieved by Religion and art, for here everyone makes his [or her] own happiness, and develops [their] spiritual basis. Factory workers make happiness for the enjoyment of others and therefore the new teachings of socialism are striving to make people produce their own happiness and to see that whoever does not make it does not enjoy it either. Therefore the church says: "He who does not pray and make [happiness] will not enter the kingdom of heaven"; the factory has produced a similar slogan, "He who does not work does not eat."
>
> MK1:218–19

Only Malevich's typically Catholic, and ever shaky knowledge of scripture allows him to say that! He had touched on the same theme in a letter to Pavel Ettinger of April 3, 1920, from Vitebsk, where he writes about how much effort it is to produce his small books: "There is a hell of a lot of work invested in them, but, as the current saying goes, 'he who does not work will not eat,' while a second one says 'he who does not pray will not enter into the kingdom of heaven,' so the priest is in accord with the proletarians" (MS1:127). Between the 1920 draft of *God Is Not Cast Down* and its lecture delivery and publication in 1922, Malevich produced a long tract on *Sloth—The Real Truth of Humanity* (1921), in which he speculates that "in order to get rid of death," Socialism and Communism outdo earlier systems by keeping everyone busy; however confusedly, he adds, "This is why the cruelest of laws in this inhuman system stated: 'He who does not work, does not eat,' this is why it fights Capitalism, because Capitalism gives rise to 'lazy people,' . . . so that the highest curse given by God to man—work—receives the highest blessing in the Socialist system" (MK4:74). One appreciates the irony, despite the confusion, but this awkward effort to make Christian and Marxist principles agree seems to forget the more powerful evidence of 2 Thessalonians 3:10–13: "If anyone will not work, let him not eat," which was said in order to

admonish those living idly off the labor of others. More fascinating, too, while Malevich was likely working on *Sloth*, one M. M. Adamovich, a designer (1921–2) for the state porcelain factory (formerly the Imperial Lomonosov factory), produced a hefty, popular dinner plate, of what Americans call Buffalo chinaware, in a modernist design, including Natan Altman's portrait of Lenin along with the inscription, "He Who Does Not Work Does Not Eat." Malevich himself would have surely seen the design when he went to work there in 1923, by which time he might have been reminded of the missed chance of citing the Epistle.

In *God Is Not Cast Down,* Malevich also draws from church teachings to describe a man or woman in heaven, free of pain and suffering, "seat[ed] . . . on one side of God's throne; in eternal prayer, he will be free from any bodily cares, for in the Kingdom of heaven perfection has been reached: there is no need to feed the body, or to overcome anything, for everything has been done and overcome—only spiritual action remains. What then, does the factory or industrial plant expect to attain? It expects by labour to attain liberation from labour" (MK1:219). Summarizing: "It is clear in all these comparisons both church and factory are moving towards the same thing (God, [though] I am not saying the [same] place)" (MK1:220).

Who can say what might have happened in Russia had decent elements of the state church chimed in with non-Bolshevik socialists not dogmatically committed to atheism, so that the Christian social conscience might have made common cause even with the nonaggressively unchurched. Horrors of church suppression might have been avoided, and great social advances could have been made in a spirit of blessings for all—"blessings" as if to obviate gratuitous Pelagianism. Having Marxists overcome dogmatic atheism might almost have been easier than the lurking problem on the churchly side in an ostensibly Christian but selfishly capitalist society. We cannot solve this problem here, but Malevich's younger colleague Lissitzky would push it further by becoming a Communist for ultimately religious reasons, as we will discuss in the following chapter.

When Malevich does eventually get to art, he writes, "[Humanity] has divided . . . life into three paths, the spiritual or religious, the scientific or factory, and that of art," these being "the three paths along which [people move] towards God. In art God is conceived as beauty simply because in beauty there is God." Insofar as beauty is associated with art, Malevich implies that truth is associated with science and that goodness (especially productiveness) is associated with factory. These homegrown transcendentals make it possible for him to also say, "Religion and the factory summon art to adorn them with a cloak of beauty"—the most

unmodern statement I have ever seen imputed to Malevich. The paths are in competition with one another but at one in their commitment to perfection, a word that Malevich drives home at every opportunity for its aspirational quality (§27; KM1:216).

Remarkably, our painter hopes, near the end, to make peace with the new society, equating social happiness with the divine. Significantly, religion is, as much as permitted, generally superior because all three ways to God are deemed forms of "church": "Factory workers make [happiness] for the enjoyment of others and therefore the new teachings of socialism are striving to make people produce their own [happiness] and to see that whoever does not make it does not enjoy it either" (§31; MK1:218). Here, once again, Malevich shows that he does not quite understand that 2 Thessalonians 3:10 adumbrates Marxism on the lazy bourgeoise (MK1:218–19). Yet he does reintroduce the notion of the Kingdom of God: "Religion's [happiness] consists of attaining the Kingdom of heaven"—described conventionally enough but with the kind of telltale mistake of memory that a trained believer would make: the believer "will seat himself at one side of God's throne" (MK1:219). Although the saved are traditionally seated to the right of God the Father in Western as well as Eastern iconography, here Malevich seems instead to be misremembering the Apostle's Creed, where it is specifically Jesus who is "seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty." The misprision strongly suggests that Malevich had once known the Creed word for word, a prayer ordinarily learned in childhood from one's mother.

Over all, Malevich's pronouncements in *God Is Not Cast Down* do register the influence of being the baptized son of two Catholics, with a father who was a supervising engineer in a factory with a known amateur interest in theology. A conclusive passage occurs close to the end of the book, as Malevich makes his own faith known while being as conciliatory as possible and perhaps as complicated as possible to the new atheist state: "Hence, in order to destroy God one must prove the death of the soul, or the body as matter; but since the sciences and various other attempts have failed to prove the latter, it is impossible to cast God down. Thus God is not cast down." Since modern physics shows that matter is never destroyed but only takes on a different constitution, he reiterates, "Appearances are destroyed, but not the essence . . . Thus God is not cast down" (§33; KM1:223).

By the post–Civil War time of this publication, in 1922--when the Soviet Union was inaugurated on December 30,--the great ideological dispute in Russian art, between purportedly advanced, materialistic "construction," on one side, and purportedly reactionary, idealistic formal "composition" on the other, had come to a head. Christina Lodder expects to make a clean-cut materialist

point by maintaining that Lenin's New Economic Policy of 1921 made "this struggle . . . necessary"; but I find it counter-intuitive to suppose that it should have been the new "limited market economy . . . foster[ing] the re-emergence of wealthy bourgeois social elements who could exercise patronage" that closed down fine art once and for all.[57] At that moment Kandinsky, for one, was decidedly employing both terms, "composition" and "construction," sometimes in the same sentence, in his writings—though perhaps defensively. Aesthetically speaking, this opposition still has consequences in art and criticism at the beginning of the twenty-first century. But in *God Is Not Cast Down*, the religious question of Pelagianism arises as it had to once Russian culture was being totally laicized. Now that our current Western culture is so secular, few understand that it used to be possible not only to believe in God but also to believe that a revolution, even the October Revolution, might be a portent of just what the prophets had hoped for. What a tremendous disappointment must have set in for progressive leftist believers circa 1921.

The lecture alone would have constituted a major addition to Malevich's police dossier once religion was legally forbidden, especially for someone on a state salary as teacher and researcher. Charlotte Douglas writes that the book received generally "harsh criticism . . . as soon as it was published" (an important journalistic aftereffect is soon to be specified); and then, when Lenin died, in 1924, "Malevich's open philosophical idealism was increasingly vulnerable to attack, as right-wing artistic opinion gained ascendency, and lent its support to the popular AKhRR—the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia—a large aggressive network of realist artists that advanced its nineteenth-century derivative styles as the only genuinely 'proletarian' art."[58] Malevich actually wrote a heartfelt eulogy to Lenin, which would not likely have been politically motivated because it could only confirm his scorned idealism.[59]

In June 1926, an exhibition of his experimental architectural forms in Leningrad at GINKhUK, the State Institute of Artistic Culture, where he had been heading the Formal and Theoretical Section of the research studios, provoked devastating criticism. A young radical critic named Grigory Seryi published a "deliberately crude" review in the Leningrad Communist newspaper *Pravda* on June 10, 1926, under the headline, "A Government-Supported Monastery"—proclaiming its damning pseudo-religious accusation of Malevich's studio. Seryi wrote:

> A monastery has taken shelter under the name of a state institution. It is inhabited by several holy crackpots who, perhaps unconsciously, are engaged in open counterrevolutionary sermonizing, and making fools of our Soviet scientific establishments . . . .
>
> The Control Commission and the Workers and Peasants Inspection should investigate this squandering of the people's money on the state support of a monastery.
>
> Now, when gigantic tasks are towering before proletarian art, and when hundreds of really talented artists are going hungry [so was Malevich], it is criminal to maintain a huge, magnificent mansion so that three crazy monks can, at government expense, carry artistic debauchery or counterrevolutionary propaganda that is not needed by anybody.[60]

This effort was successful: this campaign, based solidly on clichés casting Malevich as a religious airhead, resulted in the artist losing his job and the institute being closed.

In 1927, after returning from showing his work in Warsaw and visiting Berlin and the Bauhaus, Malevich was detained by the police. In 1929, the art historians of the State Institute for the History of Art had him and his associates expelled. A longstanding consensus held that when he was imprisoned for over two months and questioned on his views on modern art in 1930, friends burned many of his papers, presumably including anything incriminatingly religious. That view is now considered exaggerated.[61] Yet, as far as religion is concerned, in the standard Troels Andersen edition of the artist's writings, which came out in 1968 for texts published in the artist's lifetime (MK1 and 2), and in 1976 and 1978 for unpublished texts (MK3 and 4), the unpublished group includes approximately twice as many references to God, religion, or the church—a seeming indication of increasing state censure of religion. In any case, Malevich was undoubtedly brave to stage the lectures and promulgate the book.

A Note on "Suprematism"

A short text on suprematism by Malevich, called "Non-Objective Creation and Suprematism," appeared in April 1919 in the catalogue of the *Tenth State Exhibition: Non-Objective Creation and Suprematism,* in Moscow. It touches religion at one point, by recourse to the term "incarnation"—for the sake of comprehending the space inside things (MK1:121).[62] But the principal text on the subject is Malevich's essay on "Suprematism," published in German at the

Bauhaus in 1927, in an official Bauhaus book titled *Die gegenstandlöse Welt* (The Nonobjective World). It consists of two essays, "Introduction to the Theory of the Additional Element in Painting" and "Suprematism." The former prepares the reader by covering pre-Suprematist modern painting and how Suprematism came to be, while the latter presents this "supreme" style of our age.

"Suprematism" opens with the stirring definition: "Under Suprematism I understand the supremacy of pure feeling in creative art" (67).[63] Here religion is not hidden, but it has become politically problematic. It is no longer possible to expect religion and the state to stand side by side under the good graces of art, which is what Malevich wished could happen, so that the Suprematist way of thinking could encourage people to think about life in a *spiritually utilitarian* manner: "The art of the past which stood, at least ostensibly, in the service of religion and the state, will take on a new life in the pure (unapplied) art of *Suprematism,* which will build up a whole new world—the world of feeling" (68; emphasis original). This statement brings out precisely what is problematic about Malevich's intersections with religion: Malevich's great lesson is that the pure abstraction of suprematist art inculcates a state of working creativity with a *spiritually utilitarian* viewpoint. The problem is that to defend this proposition, as he states repeatedly here, he needs to show religion, twinned with the state, as somehow playing second fiddle to art. At most, this effort is to support the notion that suprematism—as a view of life being revealed visually in art and not a mere style of painting—is really an dynamic mode of creativity which could benefit persons active in both church and state, as well as others who might be able think more inventively.

Here Rubens is also implicated, with his occidental equals Raphael and Rembrandt, as all too accommodating of the (can we say—) *capitalistic* cult of material thingliness (an opposite Eastern caricature might be a Russian peasant mesmerized by a church icon in a precious metal *riza* embellished with gemstones). For—"Suprematism is the rediscovery of pure art which, in the course of time, had become obscured by the accumulation of 'things.'" Even the painting of Rubens and his peers "has become nothing more than a *conglomeration* of countless 'things,' which conceal its true value—the feeling which gave rise to it. The virtuosity of the objective representation is the only thing admired. If it were possible to extract from the works of the great [Western] masters the feeling expressed in them—the actual artistic value, that is—and to hide this away, the public, along with the critics and the art scholars, would never even miss it. So it is not at all strange that my square seemed empty to the public." (74).

A certain unapologetic idealist element here also concerns religion. Art may gain in seriousness when it resembles religion; but obsessive thingly likeness and fanaticism are similarly offensive. The contemporary idealist philosopher Ortega y Gasset elucidates an analogy of both art and religion to sport, in an essay "Signs of the Times" (1923): "If the final aim of the task which gives sense and value to effort is to be found in work, the spontaneous effort which dignifies the result is to be found in sport. . . . Tasks that are valuable are only completed through the mediation of this anti-economic type of effort: scientific and artistic creation, political and moral heroism, religious sanctity, are the sublime results of 'sporting' efforts."[64]

Religion, for its part, ought to be pleased that the new art categorically avoids idolatry by avoiding representation, even as iconoclasm toward past art can be helpfully restrained by attention to formal beauty, over and against pagan or irreligious content. As Malevich says in the same place: "An antique temple is not beautiful because it once served as the haven of a certain social order or of religion associated with this, but rather because its form sprang from a pure feeling of plastic relationships. The artistic feeling which was given material expression in the building of the temple is for us eternally valid and vital but as for the social order which once encompassed it—it is dead" (78). At that point, formalism saves Malevich from paganism. But then there may even be an element of Catholic partisanship in his defense of Amiens Cathedral as a great work of art that succeeds in being somehow "objectively" other than the feudal system that erected it and that otherwise still historically infuses it. Malevich does keep to himself a notion that the Gothic cathedral may be exceptionally appropriate for prayer. After all, he wants Marxism itself to take on more a suprematistic-humanistic scope—more than the rapacious capitalists could ever do—because the feudal system is indeed quite dead, even as Amiens's artistic splendor, as affiliated with suprematist aspirational formalism, manages to live on. So a small but hardly incidental episode, reminiscent of the Gershenzon letter, with the ancient pagan temple poised against the prayerful pre-reformation cathedral, already puts the reader in mind of Malevich's aiming for higher, broader social horizons without being divorced from faith—in state, church, and art.

The revelation now is that, after Malevich entered a wider world of international secular modernity, excused, as it were, by his aesthetic sympathy for the Russian icon, there was always "more to it" than that, even if, two generations later, students would no longer even know what is meant by referring

to God. There is a tendency to blame the Bauhaus itself for some of the West's cultural turn away from religious faith; but the school was actually "all right" with belief. Malevich's in-house editors had more faith left in them than one might think: Walter Gropius was basically Lutheran, and László Moholy-Nagy successively converted to the Hungarian Reformed Church in 1918 *and s*upported the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919. One can only wonder if Malevich could have gone as far as to speak of suprematism as a *vehicle of grace?* His cosmopolitan editors did permit him various forms of the term "religion."[65]

In a curious coda to this essay published by the Bauhaus—though reminiscent of *God Is Not Cast Down*—Malevich writes: "Both the Church and industry tried to monopolize those artistic abilities which, being creative, are constantly finding expression, in order to provide effective bait for their products (for the ideal-material as well as for the purely material)." Even faith has become curiously fickle: "The aggregated reflections of feelings in the individual's consciousness . . . determine his 'view of life.' Since the feelings affecting him change, the most remarkable alterations in this 'view of life' can be observed: the atheist becomes pious, the God-fearing, godless, etc." (88). Finally, the painter adds: "We have seen how art, at the turn of the century, divested itself of the ballast of religious and political ideas which had been imposed upon it and had come into its own—attained, that is, the form suited to its intrinsic nature and become, along with the two already mentioned, a third independent and equally valid 'point of view'" (94, 98). No one had to tell Malevich, who likely considered himself sort-of-religious as well as quite political, even as he was thoroughly devoted to art, that such a statement would hardly mollify the powers that be.

4

A Jewish Lissitzky

Background

This book has thus far had to face up to the conventional wisdom of referring anything suggestive of faith as a grounding of "spiritual" value in the cases of three Christian painters—Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Malevich—simply to Theosophy. Happily there is nothing of that to deny in the case of the important Russian Jewish abstract painter, architect, designer, and photographer El Lissitzky (1890–1941). Indeed, many of his devotees would never be tempted to consider him "spiritual" at all. Lazar Markovich Lissitzky was born in Lithuania when it was part of the Russian empire. Like his Russian colleagues he strove to carry over the artistic high-mindedness of abstract painting into the next generation of constructivist art, notwithstanding that their ever more dogmatic constructivism became the nemesis of his older mentor and colleague Malevich. But Lissitzky's outlook was not so indifferent to organized, as well as revealed, religion as has been supposed.

When Lissitzky visited Paris as a young man in 1911, he met up with Osip Zadkine, a friend from Yu Pen's art school in Vitebsk, where he had taken art lessons as a boy. As involved in debates about the future of Jewish art as Zadkine was, it might seem odd to defer as an authority on Jewish culture to one whose mother is supposed to be "Scottish" and whose father may have converted to Christianity. But from him Lissitzky learned of two polarizing views at the time regarding contemporary Jewish art. First was the notion that a people whose homeland was in the Near East ought to look to the art of the ancient Near East, such as Assyrian and Egyptian art, alongside European modernists who were interested in such. Then there was the more Jewish, antiquarian view of the Russian Empire. Adherents of this latter group produced a simple visual publication named *Makhmadim* (Treasure) by pre-photocopy means; Shatskikh describes it as "textless, it was made up of drawings and graphic illustrations of subjects from the Bible and Jewish folklore—in their stylized decorativeness it

was easy to recognize an affinity with modernism."[1] Lissitzky was adept enough to be inspired by the challenge of engaging with but also overcoming the folkloric, in order to advance his becoming both genuinely Jewish and modern.

In Lissitzky's case, conventional wisdom expects to consider his Jewish book illustration, especially for children's books, as a charming ethnic prelude to his important career, which somehow managed to expand design concerns even to the interior architecture of exhibition spaces but whose devotion to the Communist state is either ignored or made to seem oddly inexplicable. I believe, instead, that Lissitzky's art and its implications encouraged a sense of basic and enduring religiosity that led quite naturally into Communism as a conceivable fulfillment of age-old Jewish aspirations for the Kingdom of God and divine justice. Even one as Orthodox Christian as Pavel Florensky (finally killed by Stalin in 1937), considered every icon, Old Testament or New, as "*the image of the future age*" (emphasis original).[2]

Lissitzky grew up in a middle-class Jewish family; his mother was observant but his father, a white-collar railroad employee, was not. A significant, collectively religious feature of their home life, nevertheless, was that the family liked to read the biblical book of Ecclesiastes together. At age twenty-one, Lissitzky wrote a letter to a friend while reading Ecclesiastes by himself: "I . . . have been working from six in the morning till six at night. Now, I'm sitting on a sofa at home, reading Ecclesiastes and thinking that there is more sense in this hour of sitting and reading than in a week of my work. If I'm finally convinced of this I'll send it all to hell."[3]

In 1921, Lissitzky became a cultural attaché for revolutionary Russia in Berlin, where, in 1922, with the also Russian Jewish writer Ilya Ehrenberg, he started the Russian-German-French constructivist journal *Veshch / Gegenstand / Objet,* which lasted for three issues, with the last one banned from the U.S.S.R. This moment is often regarded as a tipping point, when Lissitzky stopped being in harmony with suprematism and came to support a more categorically materialist constructivism, though even that would now no longer be good enough back home.

In an article titled "The Victory over Art" (also translated as "Overcoming Art") in the Yiddish journal *Ringen*, in the same year of 1922, he affirms his loyalty to Malevich and to suprematism as one who, rather than being beholden to the engineering in which he himself was expert, "believe[s] more in creative intuition, which creates its method, its system outside of mathematics and drawings but according to laws which are also as organic as the shape of a flower."[4] Yet in the same article, he says (as observed above), "Just as we were

victorious over religion, so we are fighting with our new accomplishments for victory over art." The possibly rhetorical remark raises a question: since Lissitzky's practice did *not* abandon art in 1922—especially in comparison with the more severely anti-aesthetic productivist standards of Alexsi Gan, who in his book *Constructivism,* also of 1922, voiced utter hatred of religion—couldn't Lissitzky's own more dialectical spirit then have accommodated a view of religion as an abiding antithesis? Any such thing had become impossible.

An Old Synagogue in Modern Time

It was in 1923 that Lissitzky published a searching text on his relation to the Jewish artistic and architectural past: his article "The Mohilev Synagogue: Reminiscences," on the Mogilev (or Mohilev) Synagogue, in the twin Berlin journals *Milgroim* (Yiddish) and *Rimon* (Hebrew). The fascinating essay concerns Lissitzky's expedition with his student friend, the painter Issachar Ber Ryback, in approximately 1916. The friends sought out this seventeenth-century timber synagogue in Mogilev, Belarus, only about fifty miles from Russia, and saw a number of related works as well (Figure 4.1).[5] The article is often cited for Jewish folkloristic reasons, but at least as strongly it evinces religiosity in a modern cosmopolitan situation. True, early modernism had a reserved place for a certain amount of folklore, especially of a romantic national or liberationist nature, and the repute of this fabled building to this day depends on its folkloric murals, executed around 1740 by one Chaim, son of Isaac Segal. Lissitzky and Ryback's report on the murals and their own drawings and watercolors became inestimably important from an antiquarian viewpoint once the building, which had first been landmarked after the Revolution, was dismantled for its materials under Stalin in 1938. At the time of the 1923 article, however, the Mogilev Synagogue seems also to have had a distinctly nonfolkloric, not to say modernist, appeal for Lissitzky, as by no means compromising its great Jewish interest.

When patronizing artistic admirers of the folkloric find charming or exotic whatever religiosity may be close to the surface in folk art, anything like an exercise of faith in the form of worship, scripture reading, prayer, or charity is today, as a rule, out of the question. It is almost as if sheer *lack of faith* has become a more socially acceptable substitute for belief, despite the negative valence. What, then, could even survive of a supposedly unspoiled folkloric "spirituality" besides its own exclusionisms: we saw much the same problem with the aggressively secularist attitude toward Kandinsky's interest in Vologda peasant

Figure 4.1 Mogilev (or Mohilev) Synagogue, *c*. 1680 (destroyed *c*. 1938); photograph by Solomon Yudovin, 1913. Courtesy of the Russian Ethnographic Museum, St. Petersburg.

culture, as discussed in Chapter 1. Similarly, some writers on Lissitzky's interest in the Mogilev Synagogue cannot use the word "Jewish" in a sentence without adding the word "national," which, perversely enough (if you expect to consider your artist assimilated), would have to mean other-than-truly Russian.

Contrast with that viewpoint a modernist painter and architect who seems to have felt close to God in a landmark synagogue while also trying his best as a decent Communist to effect the Kingdom of God's justice in the ever problematic present. This will not sound so counterintuitive if one thinks of people as divided between those who manage to believe in God along with some form of social harmony making for divine justice and those who cannot project beyond themselves in either direction. It seems quite possible that Lissitzky was able to negotiate on both sides of the matter and that he was not as conflicted as one might think. If conservatives might not wish to countenance Lissitzky's up-to-date materialist constructivism, even as radicals would prefer not to countenance his residual idealist suprematism, how surprised can a critical person be?

As for the elaborate old mural paintings in the Mogilev Synagogue, they were perhaps most interesting in a quasi-conceptual way. Through their antinaturalistic

figuration—not in the sense of depiction but, on the contrary, of recourse to tropes that violate nature (such as a lion with human face)—they not only circumvented the important biblical commandment against representing created beings but had a sort of invented modern interest on a collage principle.

But it is possible that giving so much attention to these essentially folkloristic murals has completely overshadowed a likely more penetratingly modernist architectural response to what must have been a magnificent early building of about 1680. Lissitzky himself sets the scene by situating his own youthful, provincial artistic ambitions and those of his Jewish friends: "Searching for our identity, for the character of our times, we attempted to look into old mirrors and tried to root ourselves in so-called 'folk-art.' Almost all the other nations of our time followed a similar path" (149). But Lissitzky also says that, on first sight, he saw this building as "resembling a granary"—a remark that needs scrutiny, given the interest European modernist architects were taking in Western Hemisphere grain elevators at this historical moment, as expressed especially in Le Corbusier's *Towards a New Architecture* (1923). Several huge grain elevators (boxy and noncylindrical in form) from North and South America had already been published by Gropius in a German Werkbund journal in 1913, where they could easily have been consulted by our architectural-engineering student in Germany, before being reused, a decade later, in Corbusier's instantly classic book.[6] And on wider theoretical terms, there was the modern notion that the progress of architecture depended on the sublimation of utility. For instance, this line of thinking held that the Gothic cathedrals would have been impossible without the development of the bay system for ordinary barns, developed around the year 1000.

I am speculating that in the article on the synagogue, Lissitzky may have been toning down a more extreme modernist admiration that might have caused trouble in the journalistic (not to mention religious) press: namely, that the beauty of the timber synagogue resembles a particularly beautiful contemporary factory—not just any factory, but Erich Mendelsohn's great Steinberg, Herrmann, and Company Hat Factory in Luckenwalde, Germany, which was built only thirty-five miles from Berlin, between 1921 and 1923. This structure is a longitudinal, hip-roofed, volumetric prism with similarly chunky chamfering of the ends in the manner of the venerable synagogue. One can easily sympathize with young Lissitzky, asking townsfolk where to find this splendid synagogue, only to be directed instead to "some 'beautiful' stone synagogues with boudoir lamps and freshly painted cornices and panels in the style of a provincial movie palace[!]" (ibid.). Relevantly, the first building built by Mendelsohn, Lissitzky's

Jewish contemporary, was probably thanks to his father, a small Jewish liturgical space: a funerary washing and enshrouding hall (*Bet Tahara*) in his hometown of Olsztyn, Poland, in 1913. By about the time of the article, Mendelsohn and he were colleagues.

Also on the religious side of the matter is a minor yet extraordinary detail in Lissitzky's article. In describing the synagogue interior, Lissitzky as much as ritually identifies with it by calling subconscious attention to wearing a yarmulke, or else to having forgotten it (which amounts to the same thought motif), in his description: "The synagogue has a square ground plan which passes into an octagonal vault closely resembling a skull-cap. The transition between the square and the octagon is achieved by triangular pendentives. The walls and the ceiling are articulated with a powerful sense of composition. This is the very opposite of the primitive. It is the product of great culture" (150).

Mendelsohn likely saw Lissitzky's article. Whether the construction of his wonderful factory at Luckenwalde was still sufficiently unfinished for the roof of its monumental dyeing hall to be influenced by it or possibly even by the still-standing synagogue itself, one cannot say. The specific point of comparison is formal, to be sure, but it is also the major element in both cases: the manner in which a low-pitched surrounding roof frames the taller upper roof of either the sanctuary of the synagogue, in the one case, or a ventilation attic, in the other case.[7] Regardless, Lissitzky had a demonstrably modern interest in a building, religious and Jewish at that, which is still only celebrated for its "heritage" value, a condition that resembles taking Russian icons merely as folkloric pictures, not to mention Malevich on "art, chruch, factory."

Books "For all, all children"

Hiding in plain sight in Lissitzky's early career are his illustrated books ostensibly for children—but not only—as thought-provoking manifestations of religious faith. Unlike his mentor Malevich, whom Catholics don't even bother to identify with, Lissitzky has the peculiar distinction of being a celebrated modernist while also being a celebrated Jewish artist. Judaism is never hidden in the realm of his illustrated books, especially his children's books in Yiddish. We may briefly consider Lissitzky's illustrated books to uncover, more than is usually stressed, evidence of the artist's religious faith.

Even before the first Russian Revolution, many Russians sought both modernization and the overcoming of Western European cultural dominance by

identifying with Russia's Slavic roots. Well-known writers, musicians, and artists flaunted local nationalist pride in language and folk arts. It was natural for Jews to do so especially after the 1905 revolution, when Yiddish publications were legalized in Russia. After the October Revolution, however, it even became politically opportune for an increasingly atheistic state to encourage Yiddish culture as a harmless marginalization of the Jewish religion per se, converting faith into hardly more than ethnology.

Lissitzky was also involved with secularly oriented Yiddish cultural groups, including the Kultur Lige (culture league), headquartered at Kyiv, which came to displace religion with ethnicity, supporting a new Yiddish secular culture. In 1922, Lissitzky illustrated *Ukrainian Folktales*; the fact that it was published directly by the Jewish Section of the (still only Russian) Commissariat for Education, just as Ukraine was being brought into the new Soviet Union, would seem to make this publication, together with a similar *White Russian Folktales* (1923), one of a pair of early semi-propaganda projects by Lissitzky—using that term innocently, in the changing social context.

Although Lissitzky produced too many illustrated Yiddish books to survey here, it is important to think of them as more than a childhood concern in the postrevolutionary period, when they paralleled the government's "Likbez" (Elimination of illiteracy) campaign. The disgraceful condition of public schooling under the tsars meant that, just before the turn of the century, only about one-quarter of the Russian Empire's population could read; this provoked Lenin's remark: "Without literacy, there can be no politics; there can only be rumors, gossip, and prejudice." Of course there was also political advantage to the Communists in disenfranchising Judaism as a religion by repackaging it as just another ethnicity deserving of merely ethnological attention: a religion without theology—paralleling the situation of icons in the state church. But the situation was more politically serious to the powers that be because Yiddish publishing, thriving since 1905, could be conveniently politically leftist; and the language itself also had an inherently internationalist aspect.

More to the point at present is the question of the extent to which the otherwise worthy activity of producing books about Jewish folk culture was itself a matter of religious practice. Our artist did love the way that the Hebrew letters used for Yiddish can be rendered in boxy forms, which could count as authentic, if ancillary, modern approval. We need to look at some examples of the illustrated books to see just what was religiously at stake.

In 1916, Lissitzky produced his first book design, the cover for a book of poetry by the important Russian poet Konstantin Batyushkov (1787–1855). And

in 1917, he accompanied his illustrations of Moyshe Broderzon's *A Legend of Prague* (or *Small Talk: A Legend of Prague*) with a most creative binding of sorts: a premium edition of the book issued as a scroll rolled into a wooden box, recalling the Torah scroll. One would think a literate Christian audience would have understood the principle of the scroll in its case, given the Jewish content, but a newspaper reviewer described this book as "in the Japanese style and . . . very exquisite."[8] The amusing misunderstanding inspires certain queries: the lingering question of whether *A Legend of Prague* (which is not a children's book) is thematically Jewish enough or sufficiently theological to count as a religious book. Also the fact that the first edition of *Had Gadya* (One Kid)—Lissitzky's best-known illustrated book—could well look "Japanese," with its binding of boards tied together with ribbons. On the inside of *A Legend of Prague*, in both the codex and scroll editions, the pages are single- or double-columned, with brightly colored, exuberantly figural images above, below, or across the columns of type, like colored fifteenth-century book illustrations yet also rather like the wildly popular nineteenth-century French mass-produced *images d'Épinal*, which included Catholic holy pictures as well as secular historical subjects.

Had Gadya (1919) is surely religion in plain sight even though it is meant to appeal to children as a bouncy "cumulative song" (like "Alouette" or "The Twelve Days of Christmas"). But, coming at the end of a most sacred ritual, the Passover Seder, its child-friendliness has a profundity that concerns the passing on of the religious tradition to the next generation, even as the "adult" wording of the ritual hopes to extend the tradition of freedom to the whole world. *Had Gadya* is on a cusp between a traditional old style and a new modern one, with figures and animals of a doll-like character but with flattened forms of black, red, ochre, and white, against a white field. The colors have a tight, enameled look, and the figures are disposed imaginatively (a black-and-white edition was published in 1923). Narratively speaking, it is often noticed that the last panel, in which the hand of God smites the Angel of Death, shows the death angel as wearing what is presumed to be the tsar's crown.

True, the postrevolutionary government was keen on Yiddish folklore as a way of placating the Jewish population—given a history of anti-Semitism in Russian society, including a contemporary pogrom in Kyiv in 1919—though quite without actually encouraging Jewish religion. In that functionalist sense, Lissitzky's "Jewish" books were really more "Yiddish" books, helpful to the government for camouflaging Judaism as one among many minorities. One of the less artistically advanced books that contains religious practice is Lissitzky's illustrated *Yingl-Tsingl-Khvat* (The Mischievous Boy), written in verse by Mani

Leib, who immigrated to New York in 1906 (Lissitky's mother was dissuaded from doing the same only by her rabbi). The first edition was published at Kyiv and Petrograd in 1919; the second, at Warsaw in 1922. *The Mischievous Boy* is about a brave little boy who is given a horse and the magic power to cause snow during an unusually bleak and rainy winter when people were thinking of spring and Pesach (Passover). It is important to the book that the setting for the tale is a town where Jews and Christians live together worshipfully and harmoniously, as "brothers" who "share" and "help" each other. But this year, spring does not seem to be coming, and to illustrate a verse describing how the Jewish boys studied until into the winter darkness, Lissitzky shows them around a table, all in skullcaps, with their rabbi at the head, before having to go home in the dark and cold. Appropriate parallel religiosity is also indicated by the audible singing inside the Jewish synagogue and the church bells of the Christian church.[9]

Lissitzky's *Of Two Squares: A Suprematist Tale of Two Squares in Six Constructions* (1922), which the artist had been thinking about for two years, his major work in print, is illustrated in most accounts of Lissitzky. As the source of the phrase "For all, all children" (an American would say, "For children of all ages"), this book demonstrates that it was always intended to be more than a picture book for young readers. Most significant: it entails profound similarities and differences, especially stylistic, between Malevich and Lissitzky—particularly in regard to the irrepressibly individualistic "idealism" of suprematism and the ever-honed, machined, and "materialist" look of constructivism (of which, to give credit where it is due, this is one of the most important early exemplars).

As for what may be hiding not quite in plain sight: the cover illustration of our present book shows Malevich's so-called *Suprematism of the Spirit* of 1919, just before such antisuprematist, proconstructivist impulses as we have begun to observe became manifest. But the back cover of Lissitzky's *Of Two Squares* displays a stripped-down version of a similarly slim, doubled vertical, set at an angle but without either crossbar—hence simply *not* a cross (Figure 4.8). Considering the same device in a more positive way, however, it can be thought of as quite like a Jewish mezuzah: the small case intended to be mounted on every Jewish house's doorpost, as here set properly at an angle, within which one could expect to find a transcription of Deuteronomy 6:4–9 and 11:13–21. We can notice, in addition, a faraway planet towards the upper left of the cover, which may seem to intimate a cosmic, Malevichian surrounding space.

The notorious ultimate panel of *Had Gadya*, often understood to show the tsar as an angel of death, deserves a further comment. The fact of the hand of

God is of course generally significant for Lissitzky owing to the Bible. The single book of the Bible that we know affected him deeply from early on is Ecclesiastes, and this *manus Dei* motif occurs twice in Ecclesiastes, almost but not quite contradictorily (which would only have piqued Lissitzky's interest). First there is Ecclesiastes 2:24–6: "There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the man who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind." The second instance, all the more stoical, points to what would become the last and otherwise inscrutable sentence of the artist's "Reminiscences" essay on the Mogilev Synagogue:

> But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God; whether it is love or hate man does not know. Everything before them is vanity, since one fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As is the good man, so is the sinner; and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that one fate comes to all; also the hearts of men are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion.
>
> Eccl. 9:1–4

Let us leave the crypto-revolutionary last sentence to speak for itself, as young Lissitzky did, what with the animal dualities of the synagogue.

Revolutionary Works

Malevich and Lisitzky's avant-garde student association at the People's Art School in Vitebsk, became, on Malevich's joining it, UNOVIS: once again, a Russian acronym for "Champions of the New Art" (see Chapter 3). It lasted only from 1919 or 1920 (sources differ), when Lissitsky became head of architectural design and graphics at the school, until 1922. For a revolutionary art club, the name has a certain mock-militant air, like the acronym of a military unit (such as "COMSEC," for Communications Security, in the U.S. Navy). Similarly

abridged is the term Lissitzky chose for his extended personal project in painting and related design: "Proun."

Remarkably, "Proun" (pronounced *pro-oon*) may have had Jewish religious overtones. Birnholz has pointed to the Cabbalistic (mystical-Jewish) device of making a word up out of initial or terminal letters of words of a phrase—which so far would be no more religious than "UNOVIS"—but in this case, Birnholz sees the conjunction as managing to imply a Cabbalistic sense of divine expansion and contraction in Creation, even to the point of expressing Lissitzly's effort to expand art beyond easel painting. If few would have understood that, Birnholz also notes that anyone who knew Hebrew, as many of the students in this famously Jewish town did, the term could still suggest words for "light-tower" and "to support or maintain a lead," not to mention a Yiddish word for "trying or attempting"—all tending to validate the outward-bound, forward-looking, experimental nature of Lissitzky's "Proun."[10]

Famously, Lissitzky always characterized the Prouns as "transfer stations" between painting and architecture; but in light of Birnbolz one might also consider transfer between Hebrew and Russian, not to mention faith and humanity. Most Prouns are abstract and in the orbit of suprematism. Their embrace of volume employs axonometric drawing (whereby parallels remain parallel and do not diminish in space), a system not in accordance with normal Western artistic perspective practice. However, Western engineers have long used it in order to preserve equal measurements in planes not parallel with the picture plane (as Chinese painting had already used it for millennia).

I shall first adduce two early works that both concern Lissitzky's ideological faith in Communism and then compare a later, nonpolemical Lissitzky painting with a painting by Malevich. Happily, the two early Marxist-affiliated pieces do not fall into the pointless game, pursued far too often in the West during the Cold War, of pretending that Communism was a religion with scriptures, prophets, and so on. I believe that the reason why Lissitsky never succumbed to that view—even Malevich was tempted to when Lenin died—was the strength of his commitment to the Talmudic version of the first half of the Second Commandment: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (not to mention the second half, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image").

The two early works in question are a celebrated poster from the Civil War—doubtless Lissitzky's best-known work—and a probable study for a painting memorializing the martyrdom of a great humanist-socialist, whose moral influence was felt even in Christian theology. Although the first, which is also the most famous political poster of the Russian avant-garde, poses an interesting

problem of sources, I will focus primarily on the second for its politico-religious implications.

Many people would recognize *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (sometimes dated to 1919 and sometimes to 1920), with its sharp, acutely triangular red wedge coming from the left and penetrating a white disc or globe—the whole not unlike an animated newsreel of a battle, with the red wedge standing for the Red Army, supporting the Bolsheviks, and the round white quarry, for the Whites, or White Guard, meaning practically everybody else. It is such a forceful design that one may be disappointed to learn how close its basic geometric configuration is to two Italian futurist works, a 1914 or 1915 diagrammatic line drawing from early in the First World War, *Syntesi Futurista della Guerra* (Futurist Synthesis of the War), designed synthetically by five different Italian futurists while in jail for a political demonstration, though it may ultimately derive from a dream by Marshal Joseph Joffre about his winning a battle. In book form, the diagram was plausibly passed on to Lissitzky by Malevich at the Vitebsk School. But Birnholz also notes that *Beat the Whites* would also have connoted for Russian Jews a striking back against Christian antisemitism, thanks to the resemblance of the phrase *Bei zhidov* (Beat the Jews) to *Bei byelikh* (Beat the Whites), but also "the promise of a better world."[11]

But the diagram was only the basis of a more simplified and composed futurist color print of 1918, which looks much more like *Beat the Whites*. In the diagram, the big wedge is marked "Futurism" while the penetrated disc or globe is marked "Past-ism" (*Passatismo*). The print, which is titled *Sintesi della Guerra Mondiale* (Synthesis of the World War, 1918), and often attributed to Carlo Carrà (one of the original five artists), is much closer to Lissitzky's work and has a red wedge marked "Liberty" penetrating, however, a green disc or sphere marked "Barbarism."

It was the true believer in Lissitzky who was capable of combining the formal materials of the futurist sources with the pithy black, white, and red (basically suprematist) color scheme to produce such a forceful visual polemic for his side in the ongoing Civil War. Admittedly, this has nothing to do with religion; but it can be mentioned that the Italian Futurist sources for Lissitzky's famous poster relate to the sometimes quasi-religious sense of palpable hope with which Malevich often invested the very notion of futurism. It also seems fitting, in light of UNOVIS, that *Beat the Whites* was from its very beginning, in the prison diagram, a collective artistic effort and, as such, would become an important transitional project between the suprematist and the constructivist outlooks. Curiously, a century ago *Beat the Whites* was so completely taken for granted as

a mere poster that the copy in what is now the Russian State Library may be the only known preserved example of the original edition.[12]

The second work exists in just two preparatory drawings, as an unfinished project. The fact that the work could be by nobody other than Lissitzky is a telling example of how Prouns can evidence the "pure" Lissitzky, where remarkably singular forms are "applied" to life. Just such a spirit must have moved the painter to enter a government competition for a painting that would have been part of Lenin's "monumental propaganda" program, started in 1918, on the first anniversary of the October Revolution. As a faithful Communist, Lissitzky's response would be a painted abstract composition concerned with the Polish Jewish Communist Rosa Luxemburg, active in Germany and one of the great political orators of the age. In that sense, this work presaged the later, more purely propagandistic art commissioned directly by the Soviet state, which for the time being was still only the Russian Soviet Republic.

The first version is known as *Untitled (Memorial of Luxemburg)* or *Untitled (Rosa Luxemburg)* (1919–21; Costakis Collection, State Museum of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki; Figure 4.2), a roughly four-inch square. The second, larger version is called *Proun* (1922–3; Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven), just under a twenty-inch square, which was presumably closer to being the *modello* for the painting. The latter is the larger and more finished version of the same, shall we say, compositional construct of a black square placed off-center in a red circular disk, surrounded by segmental concentric rings and one or two other forms. This second work reiterates the first but does not bear the name of Rosa Luxemburg, which is almost obliterated but still visible, and extremely important, in the first.

Formally, these two almost-identical constellations of elements seem more suprematist in the earlier case and more constructivist in the later incarnation, while the same radial structure seems remarkably balanced between the categories of composition and construction. In both, the black square within the central red disk seems a suprematistically asymmetric pair of Malevichian forms, while the surrounding irregular but segmental red, white, and black broken rings, their beginnings and endings radially determined, have a smooth, tightly fitted character, like machined bearings and, as such, they seem of more constructivist ilk. Note: if there are any disk-shaped Russian icons, they are rare, though there are other disk-shaped Prouns; many a rectangular Russian icon of Elijah in his fiery chariot rising to heaven does, however, contain a large red disk for the sun.

As similar as the two dispositions are, the small first one has a suprematist look as it appears more handmade, while the second has a more constructivist

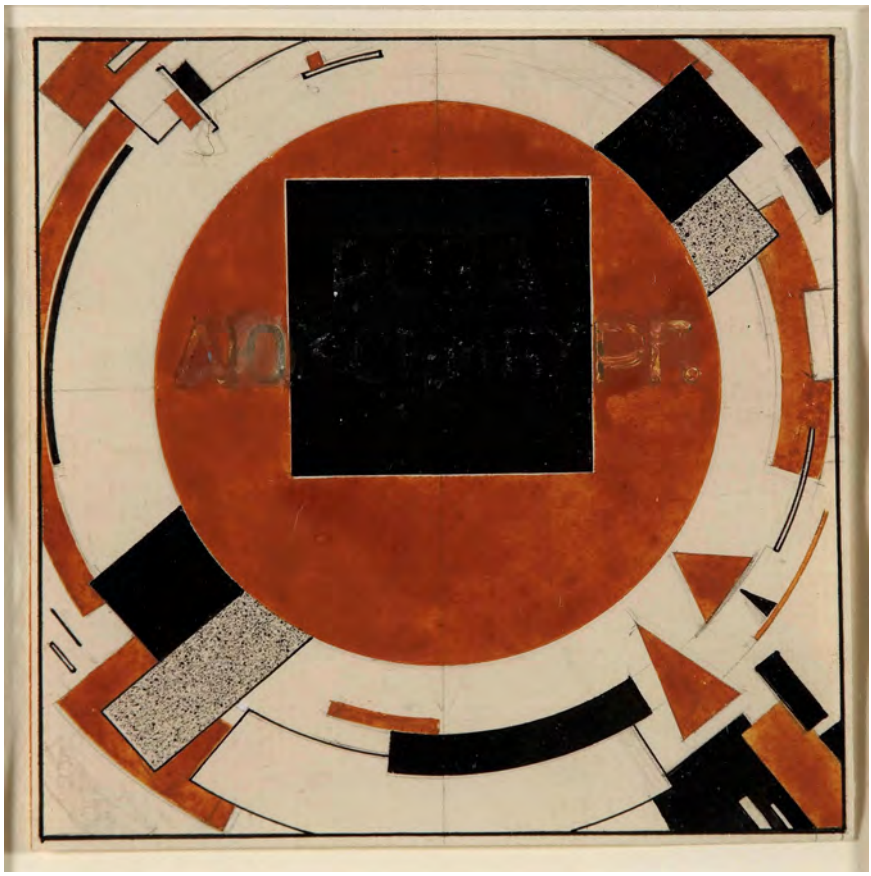

Figure 4.2 El Lissitzky, *Preliminary Study for a Project Commemorating Rosa Luxemburg,* 1919[–20?], gouache, ink, pencil. State Museum of Contemporary Art, Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki. Alamy Ltd.

look, appearing spiffy and machined, like the pilot wheel of a ship. For that matter, it anticipates the cameraman Eduard Tisse's thrilling, perfectly centered shot of the naval canon that may or may not fire at the end of Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). Additionally, the square-upon-disk disposition in both works appears atop a Malevichian brace of similar yet different diagonal bands, while small triangles pokily invade the outer orbital reaches in a way reminiscent of *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*.

It is the small but more fascinating earlier study that offers an unusual opportunity to see Lissitzky possibly engaging with the Russian icon tradition, in memorializing, on a broad Russian basis, an international socialist martyr. But it

also evokes a liberationist element in Judaism that has a universal dimension, insofar as there is something implicitly universal in the Haggadah, at the Passover Seder, proclaiming: "Everyone who discusses the exodus from Egypt at length is praiseworthy."

Luxemburg had first been a member of the German Social Democratic Party, and she became a Communist only when her own party refused her strongest pleas for peace and insisted on proving their patriotism by beating the drums for the First World War. She and her political colleague Karl Liebknecht (a descendant of Martin Luther, whose Lutheran godfathers, by proxy, were Marx and Engels), founders of the Spartacus League who then joined the Communist Party of Germany, and had their skulls crushed by the rifle butts of paramilitary veterans in Berlin on January 15, 1919. When the Soviet competition for monumental art was announced, Lissitzky apparently initiated his unfinished project in response.

Despite its modest size, the first study is charged with an urgency of inspiration: something uplifting must be carrying the artist along. The manner in which the large red disk is inscribed with the name of the fallen socialist-humanist hero can almost be considered balanced between composition and construction in that the base line of the inscription hovers just above the horizontal center of the red square, and the superimposed black square also hovers, decentered and higher than expected. Both features seem suprematistic in their intuitive placement, giving a pneumatic, aspirational sense of uplift. This feeling becomes all the more vivid in comparison with the appreciably more normalized constructivist design to follow. One could rationalize the change as having a more "advanced industrial" character appropriate to the subject, who had written her doctoral dissertation on *The Industrial Development of Poland* (1898).

T. J. Clark writes that for the first drawing, in which the honoree's name remains visible if somewhat obscured, "The symbolism is more or less transparent." But he is so concerned with its word-and-image format as a statement that he considers the disappearance of the lettering (which he describes as "script," though it is in Latin letters, befitting a public memorial) in the larger second version as merely optically determined: "The letters float, and take on airy substance. They sink back into the black square."[13] But any "symbolism" here does not seem so "transparent." The lettering does not just happen to "sink into the black," which simply blocks it out, as much as it visibly sinks only partway into the red, which is incapable of submerging it. Did Lissitzky suppress Luxemburg's name for political reasons? That would have been a major move, entailing a certain violence to the pasty gouache of the little drawing, which may have indicated that the Luxemburg project was off.

Both preliminary designs for the commemorative memorial are close to the UNOVIS emblem that meant so much to Lissitzky: a square rising upward in a circle, with the more Malevichian black square up front, rather than the more Lissitzkian red. But the design also carries some appropriateness to Luxemburg's identity. The repeating concentric structure and strong sense of inside/outside interface in the relation of the black square to its surrounding red disk might well evoke a main point in Luxemburg's theoretical contribution to Marxism: her criticism of Marx's failure to grasp that capitalism demanded an outside into which to expand, so that imperialism is of its essence. This core belief is why her treatise *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913) was long thought heretical by Marxist theoreticians.

But there may also be, built in, an expressive appropriateness to Luxemburg's outlook, as caring for the status of the individual even in great social enterprises. As early as her 1897 Zurich dissertation, she finds Polish factory workers not only more likely to be literate, and "more individualized in [their] way of life than Russians," whose confinement to barracks can "[lead] to the stunting of individuality."[14] For the tsarist imperial system seeks not only by Russification "to spiritually level the various parts of the Empire," but also to "give the unity of the Empire a firm material frame by this economic welding process, and to press the whole thing together in the iron clamps of absolute power."[15] How similar, yet significantly different, from such clamps is the way this same design suggests willful social engagement with the heavy-duty machinery—cams, pistons and such as ship's equipment—on which the camera lingers admiringly in *Battleship Potemkin*.

The earlier form of the Luxemburg memorial idea also materially refers to the Russian icon tradition, quite apart from the many icons of Elijah. For occasionally icons are inscribed with the depicted saint's name in letters protruding from either side of the head, as if interrupted by neck or torso—an uncommon but not eccentric device. I have in mind a particular sixteenth-century icon from Novgorod in the State Russian Museum, at St. Petersburg, of, appropriately enough, a third-century woman preacher clothed in the red of martyrdom—St. Paraskeva Payanitsa. Had Luxemburg had reservations about Mikhail Alpatov's description of the Paraskeva icon as an "image of lofty femininity, chastity and piety," she would have been more politically pleased by the rest of his statement: "There are no grounds for thinking that as he prayed to St. Paraskeva a Novgorodian had only the next market day in mind."[16]

We might not expect to turn so readily from such a politically engaged and potentially official work as the abstraction honoring Luxemburg to religion, but,

thanks to the background of the Christian Socialist movement in nineteenth-century Europe, the great Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth found himself, by 1915, "entirely in sympathy with Rosa Luxemburg," notwithstanding that the revolutionary, build-the-Kingdom-right-now position did not constitutionally suit him. In early 1919, a month after Luxemburg's assassination, Barth—whom Pius XII is said to have called the greatest Christian theologian since Thomas Aquinas[17]—preached a sermon on Matthew 9:20–2, telling of the miraculous healing of the hemorrhaging woman after touching the edge of Jesus's cloak ("Your faith has saved you"). In addressing the coming of the Kingdom of God as by no means contingent on our managing to attain perfect personal faith, hope, and charity—nor even perfect liberty, equality, and fraternity in society—Barth acknowledged what had been happening "in Russia and here and there in Germany" as in some sense an attempt to establish the Kingdom.[18] After another month, preaching on what comes just before and after the Matthew text (verses 9:18–19 and 23–6, the reviving of the synagogue official's child and the return to her house, where revelers could not believe she was alive), Barth spoke of the dread currently attached to Bolshevism, the Spartacus League, or Communism.

With Luxemburg's assassination on January 15, 1919, one wonders at what stage of production Barth was on his great book *The Epistle to the Romans* (1919), which speaks critically of revolution in a very Protestant way. I say this because revolution can mean tyrannicide writ large, and tyrannicide has never been sinful in Catholic tradition, whereas the Calvinist Barth worries about presumptuous tampering with the social order as divinely ordained. Still, the idea does engross him. In condemning a Christian for going after "high things," including even "ideals," because the Christian is only—only—"to condescend to things that are lowly,"[19] Barth's ethical extremism reminds me of Luxemburg's writing, famously, a shortly before her death: "A world must be overturned, but every tear that has flowed and might have been wiped away is an indictment; and a man hurrying to perform a great deed who steps on even a worm out of unfeeling carelessness commits a crime."[20] This memorable topos which characterizes Luxemburg's humanistic radicality, actually inherits classical German humanistic culture by deriving from Goethe's *The Sorrows of the Young Werther* (1774).[21]

It is not difficult to imagine Luxemburg (or even Bertolt Brecht) agreeing with the spirit of Karl Barth's writing as inspired by Paul: "Christianity knows itself at least more akin to ascetics and pietists, strange though their behavior may be, than to 'healthy evangelical national piety'; more closely related to the '*Russian Man*' than to his western brothers. . . . Christianity displays a certain

inclination to side with those who are immature, sullen, and depressed, with those who 'come off badly' and are, in consequence, ready for revolution. There is, for this reason, much in the cause of socialism which evokes Christian approval." Not that the tables cannot turn wrongly, if and when "the Proletariat may have become blunderingly and coarsely dogmatic."[22] But Luxemburg did not shrink from telling Lenin that he was not giving the proletariat much of a chance to take that risk. It would be fascinating to know whether Barth had been able to retouch the following passage in his text after the murders of January 15: "To us, at least, the reactionary presents little danger; with his Red brother it is far otherwise." Better to let him finish with this heartier Pauline irony: "The revolutionary Titan is far more godless, far more dangerous than his reactionary counterpart—because he is so much nearer to the truth."[23] No one can accuse religious activists of being irreligious when believers are forever being asked by their most sacred revelational texts *where their activism is*.

Lissitzky stands in his own right as a pivot or transfer point—using his own favorite figure—to the constructivist-materialist from the suprematist-idealist. The question becomes, Can aesthetics carry over? Rosa Luxemburg was willing to forgive Dostoevsky's political reaction and Tolstoy's "mystic teachings" which "at least only play around with reactionary tendencies" in the interest of the "rousing, edifying" liberation that art can give. She even wrote, idealistically, that "for a true artist the social medicine that he prescribes is of secondary importance: it is the source of his art, its animating spirit, not the aim which he consciously sets for himself, which is of paramount importance."[24]

"Spiritual" here, would seem simply too weak and "mystical," practically coy, for anyone willing to face up to religion in such a Barthean—but also Luxemburgian, not to mention Lissitzkyan—manner. Lissitzky's Luxemburg project is vital for a problem in constructivism that can be posed from both extremes, once the new outlook of productivism sought to eliminate even constructivist art in the interest of purely utilitarian design. It became possible to accuse constructivism of being merely geometric art—mere art vis-à-vis productivism but merely geometric (a subtler charge) vis-à-vis suprematism.

There is no denying that Lissitzky's second and more finished Luxemburg design looks more perfect and more efficient, but it also looks somewhat glibly graphic, more like something Rodchenko would do. The first work aspired to something arguably spiritual, namely memorialization; it visibly carried conviction, as if the always ethical Socialism preached by Luxemburg really meant something to the painter in, can we say, a more suprematist-affective way. Something of faith does seem conveyed there, as if speaking of divine justice

were by no means a socialist absurdity. In fact, it seems to convey that only a socialist of some sort would be capable of doing so. Lissitzky made it possible to imagine this socialist as precisely an *artist*, seconding the definition of faith given by St. Paul—that great pivot or hinge or transfer station between Judaism and Christianity: "The assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1–2).

We cannot pass by this pair of artworks, especially the inspiring smaller first version, without deeming it a high achievement of twentieth-century "faith in art." Did anyone perform a greater sacrifice for the Kingdom than Luxemburg? And is any artistic commemoration of one who worked for justice more suitably progressive in style? Luxemburg outdid so many believers who might dismiss her as an atheist; for how many times did Rabbi Jesus say that it is those who *go out and do it* who are the blessed? Lissitzky's larger, more finished version, which lacks the hypothesized prophet's inscribed name, seems to leave the conception of the whole project in abeyance. Maybe even that is suitable, as so much spiritually as well as ideologically unfinished business.

Parallels between Malevich and Lissitzky's Prouns are apparent, not only in terms of socially "applied" projects, like Malevich's graphics for the Congress of Committees on Rural Poverty, in 1918 (N/S-622–8), but also in "pure" painting. For example, *Proun (Study for Proun S.K.)* (1922–3; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Figure 4.3) is a mature work that invites comparison with Malevich's *Suprematist Composition* (1916–17; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Figure 4.4). Both have a similar formal vocabulary of regular ovoids cut off by the edge of the support, strong diagonal axes toward the center, plus affiliated parallel diagonal bands. Malevich's forms inhabit an orthodox suprematist white-painted field, whereas Lissitzky's paper field with white-painted ovoids upon it, makes a constructivist point of its materialities: besides two kinds of paint (watercolor, gouache), there is ink, graphite, waxy conté crayon, with varnish on what may or may not have been buff paper to start—as if the paper too refers to yet another material property to come, unbleached linen. The principal forms of Lissitzky—geometrically similar ovoids set, quite statically, at similar angles from the corners—display a virtually engineered rigor in comparison with Malevich's looser suprematist arrangement. All the forms in the Malevich are unique, even when paired, whereas in the Lisitzky almost all the forms are doubled—rhymed, let us say.

This comparison demonstrates a problem of constructivist aesthetics to which Lissitzky and Ehrenburg point without comment in their editorial in the first issue of *Veshch / Gegenstand / Objet.* They call up "eternal laws of clarity,

Figure 4.3 Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Painting,* 1916–17, oil on canvas. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Alamy Ltd.

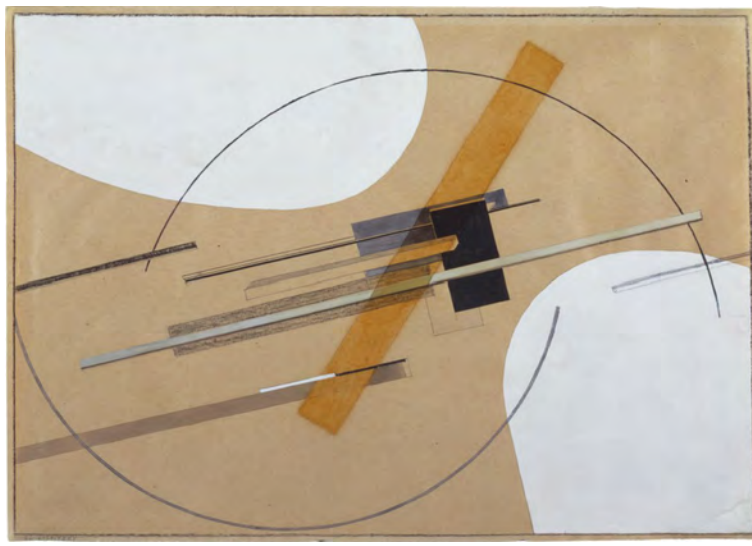

Figure 4.4 El Lissitzky, *Proun (Study for Proun S.K.),* 1922–3, watercolor, gouache, ink, graphite, conté crayon, and varnish on paper. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Alamy Ltd.

economy, and proportion," praising the great baroque classical painter Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665).[25] That points to a larger problem, how to negotiate the rhythmic satisfactions of geometric order without fomenting retreat into the pseudo-classical, semi-modernism of politically conservative *rappel a l'ordre* (call-to-order) art, architecture, and design, including art deco, after the First World War.

Religio-Utopianism

Hovering between his two studies for the Rosa Luxemburg memorial paining, in 1920 Lissitzky produced a major speculative text concerning the role of the new art in, one can almost say, salvation history: his article, "Suprematism in World Reconstruction," which dares to offer a practically redemptive promise for humanity in suprematism, has an especially grand conclusion. Needless to say, Lissitzky's spirited closing lines, concerning an ultimate supersession of Communism itself (as supposedly the finally perfect form of Socialism), would have upset Communists of the day. No matter that in Lissitzky's eschatological projection, no such wonder can occur before Communism should come to fruition:

> and if communism which set human labour on the throne and Suprematism which raised aloft the square pennant of creativity now march forward together then in the further stages of development it is communism which will have to remain behind because suprematism—which embraces the totality of life's phenomena—will attract everyone away from the domination of work and from the domination of the intoxicated senses. It will liberate all those engaged in creative activity and make the world into a true model of perfection. this is the model we await from Kasimir Malevich.
>
> AFTER THE OLD TESTAMENT THERE CAME THE NEW—AFTER THE NEW THE COMMUNIST—AND AFTER THE COMMUNIST THERE FOLLOWS FINALLY THE TESTAMENT OF SUPREMATISM.
>
> L334

From the Christian point of view, as from the Jewish before it, this tack runs some risk of blasphemy (not something that would trouble the autodidact Malevich in his swashbuckling writing), a strong defense being that the infraction was for the sake of the good, which was true for both Malevich and Lissitzky. In a sense, this was a recasting of Marx's Communism as fulfillment of Socialism as a secular, would-be scientific, perfect state, wherein it would seem rather lame to

imagine keeping a utopian "ought" alive, as increasingly hard-nosed constructivism vied for supremacy over idealistic suprematism.

The rousing conclusion of the previous statement follows in the footsteps of the father of abstract art, Kandinsky—that faithful Orthodox Christian whom the Bolsheviks rejected as a hopeless bourgeois idealist in his attempt to stay on and work with the new state. In his "Reminiscences" (1913), Kandinsky declares that, unlike the field of science where established truth is negated by new discoveries, both art and religion develop by insights of "new perspectives." "Would the new testament," he asks rhetorically, "have been possible without the old? Would our epoch, the threshold of the 'third' revelation have been conceivable without the second? . . . Christ, in his own words, came not to overthrow the old law. When he said, 'It was said of you, . . . and I say unto you' he transformed the old material law into his own spiritual law." Such then also became "the more abstract form of sins of the mind" (K1:378), In a footnote to *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911), Kandinsky had already written, "The way to the spiritual lies through the natural" (KS38n.20), a strong paraphrase of the great (proto-dialectical) principle of St. Paul, now all the more meaningfully in a Marxist context: "Take note: the spiritual was not first; first came the natural and after that the spiritual" (1 Cor. 15:46; NAB).

Now where has one heard such a phraseology of supersession even before Marx? What bears repeating here from the chapter on Mondrian (Chapter 2) is the momentous Pauline "Q and A" on the Second Covenant (Christian) upon the First (Jewish) as something quite other than displacement or mere substitution. For Paul also says, "Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of their faith and the uncircumcised through their faith. Do we then overthrow the law by this faith (*heben wir denn dass Gesetz auf durch den Glauben*)? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law" (Rom. 3:29–31). As early as its employment in Luther's Bible, finds that Paul's wording engages none other than the great dialectical term *aufheben* (as defined in Chapter 2). *Aufhebung*, the nominal form, indicates "sublation," that active form of negation that both modifies and upholds: it may not be farfetched, in the spirit of Lissitzly, to extrapolate Paul's argument to cover a Communism that does the Lord's work of building the Kingdom of God.

On the Orthodox Christian side of the fence, Lissitzky's remarkable argument also distantly echoes an analogy of the two testaments and the promised Kingdom explicitly in terms of painting, framed by St. John Chrysostom in

regard to the Epistle to the Hebrews, which was itself quoted later in an anti-iconoclast treatise of St. John Damascene (*c.* 675–749):

> In a certain way the first is an image of the second, Melchisedek [an image] of Christ, just as one might say that a sketch of a picture is a shadow of the picture in colors; therefore the law is called a shadow, grace truth, and reality what is to come. So the law and Melchisedek are preparatory sketches of the picture in colors, and grace and truth are that picture in colors, while reality belongs to the age to come, just as the Old [Testament] is a type of a type, and the New [Testament] a type of reality. I.53[26]

Whether Malevich or Lissitzky knew either text is unimportant because they were participating in a living discourse: even today the Damascene's writings are known and discussed among laypeople in the Orthodox church. His theorization that the icon is to Christ (or one step further away, a Christlike saint) as Christ is to the Father is a notion intended to inspire the viewer to become more Christlike, by prayer and doing social good; as a Jewish artist, Lissitzky would have been all the more interested in the way the Christian argument may be a special case of the general principle of all persons already being icons of God. The Damascene view, with its Jewish basis, could rationalize even Malevich's occasional monomania, allowing for a potential socialist universalism, a possibility that has been noted by others besides Kazimir Malevich.

But we have yet to appeal here to an important figure of the later Middle Ages, for the eschatological point of view taken in this major statement by Lissitzky. It is in close accord with a utopian eschatology of the high Middle Ages: namely, "third-ageism," from the theory of history of the Italian monk Joachim of Fiore (*c.* 1135–1202). Joachim is not considered to be part of the prehistory of Socialism only because his thought is entirely religious (what kind of reasoning is that?). His writings have quasi-Communist consequences insofar as his third and last phase of society, beyond the Christian and previously Jewish covenants, would be governed monastically by those with vows of poverty, hence without private property, who would administer everything to the community. Joachim has had a lasting religious influence on utopian thought on the Left. The theologically inclined Jewish Marxist cultural philosopher Ernst Bloch, in his marvelous book *The Principle of Hope* (1954–9), refers to Joachim's sense of the End Times by "teach[ing] that there are stages of history, and each one of them comes closer to the Kingdom," meaning the Kingdom of God.[27]

For Joachim of Fiore, it was a synthesis of the two covenants that would lead the human race into the heavenly third stage (*status*) of history. Thus in Chapter 8 of his *Book of Concordance*, "the letter of the Old Testament was committed to the Jewish people, the letter of the New to the Roman people. The spiritual understanding that proceeds from both Testaments has been committed to the spiritual [people]." In Chapter 20, he reiterates: "The first *tempus* [of the first Testament] is reckoned from Abraham to Zachary, [and] the second from Zachary to the consummation of the age, . . . there is one person who proceeds from the two [ages], and he is called the Holy Spirit." In table 14, "The Seven-Headed Dragon," of Joachim's *Book of Figures*, the communal society of the third age is described: no one will be idle, which would harm both the individual and those who depend on him; each will have his craft, "and the individual trades and workers shall have their own foremen," who censure those who have not done enough work; clothing will be simple; and women will spin wool to benefit the poor and give tithes to support the clergy. Tithes are given "in case they have more than they need and the rest have less, . . . the surplus will be taken from those who have more and given to those who have less so that there may be no one in need among them but all things held in common" (Table 12, "The Arrangements of the New People of God Pertaining to the Third State After the Model of the Heavenly Jerusalem").[28] But Joachim of Fiore had Jewish counterparts.

Lissitzky's Judaism could never have been merely ethnic if he was this attached to the notion of a profoundly Jewish origin as the starting point of a future utopian age. In this lineage, Socialism would have been derived through the New Testament as itself derived scripturally from the Old Testament. A purely Jewish third-ageism consists of the three progressive world ages of "Chaos, Torah, and Messiah,"[29] which has an historical sequence has an independent medieval Christian parallel: *ante legem* (before the Law), *sub lege* (under the Law), *sub gratia* (under grace). Insofar as Lissitzky's ideas were neither simply Jewish nor simply Christian, but understandable as a synthesis of both, some would say they became secularized; others could say they were only the more ineradicably religious.

Christianity, of course, believes in a better world to come thanks to Judaism. In the first faith such is expressed by Joachim's great philosophical counterpart and almost exact contemporary, Moses Maimonides (1138–1204). Additionally, thirteenth-century Spanish Kabbalistic Judaism saw a similar contemporary development to Italian Joachimism, with its three ages and final "jubilee." Gershom Scholem thought this was not a matter of influence but a parallelism. In the Jewish version—"although the Torah was read in different ways during the various successive periods, without however being changed in its literal content

as the secret name of God, i.e., that it is capable of revealing more than one meaning." The present age is one of "stern judgment, i.e. that which is dominated by the . . . the divine quality, of rigor, . . . in accordance with the present reading of the Torah. But in the coming aeon . . . Torah will no longer contain prohibitions, the power of evil will be curbed, etc., in brief, Utopia will at last be realized."[30] It seems fair to say that any awareness of this on Lissitzky's part would only have encouraged an appreciation of both historical systems.

Igor Dukhan has broached the fascinating notion that around the time of Marc Chagall's departure from the Vitabsk school in 1920—often considered to signal more than a shift in pedagogy—not to mention an in-house political win for Malevich as a progressive—Lissitzky's attitude changed. It became more profoundly Jewish. It is as if the Christian teacher had released something religious for which there had been no room in modern secular Jewish culture, in particular a religiosity that must have been altogether missing in Chagall's romantic naïvete.[31]

Lissitzky's Jewish third-ageism was on Malevich's mind when he wrote, in the first issue of the UNOVIS *Almanakh*, in 1920, the politically heretical statement: "The Suprematist gospel is coming to replace Communism" (MS2:159n)?

The Last Suprematist "*Victory*"

The ultimate origin of suprematism had appeared in Malevich's stage designs for the futurist opera *Victory over the Sun,* performed at St. Petersburg in 1913. The opera was revived—with noise music—at the People's Art School in Vitebsk in 1920, but the "last gasp" of *Victory over the Sun* consisted of Lissitzky's costume designs for an electrified puppet version which was never performed but was published in 1923 as a suite of lithographs by the artists' association Kestner-Gesellschaft at Hanover under the title *Figurines: The Three-Dimensional Design of the Electro-Mechanical Show "Victory over the Sun."*

Christine Poggi has critically pondered this set of Lissitzky prints, analyzing their relation to Malevich's quite differently costumed figures of mostly, but not quite the same male characters, dressed according to their working occupations.[32] The nine prints in question derive from a set of gouache-and-ink drawings with collage that Lissitzky had made between 1920 and 1921 in Vitebsk. Lissitzky's characters bear subtly different but parallel titles to Malevich's.

In 1922, the year before the prints, Lissitzky had announced to the world, "In precisely the same way that religion was overcome, we are now struggling to

overcome art using our newfound abilities"[33]—a much less subtle formulation than Malevich employed in his "Suprematism" essay. This was an exaggerated fanfare, insofar as his work would be "art" anyway; and the statement itself was published in *Ringen* (Warsaw), the Yiddish literary magazine that might be considered part of the ethnicity-quite-instead-of-religion campaign, though it would publish his important article on the Mogilev Synagogue a year later. Neither Malevich's nor Lissitzky's *Victory over the Sun* figures has anything ostensibly to do with religion as such, but Poggi brings to a head the way a residual pre-revolutionary humanism was finally cresting at the time into something else.

Malevich's costumed figures are stocky and somewhat overbearingly bodily, whereas Lissitzky's tend to look robotic or machinelike, like stand-ins for human figures. The best known one looks like completely prosthetic body, and can be said to parody "bourgie" humanism by resembling the most (capital "H") Humanistic figure in the Italian Renaissance artistic tradition: Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man,* the famous male nude with limbs outstretched so as to encompass both a circle and a square. Appropriately, Lissitzky's version is called simply *The New:* one could imply "new man" (in a terminology associated with St. Paul) or "new human." It has a red square for the torso, like a secular Communist version of Malevich's Christlike *Suprematism of the Spirit* (in Chapter 3): with limbs like tensed wire, it is an industrially modern individual who is as prepared for action as a taut bow.

Poggi takes Lissitzky's *Victory Over the Sun* players as a revisiting of the early Malevichian avant-garde with a certain progressivism evident but radicalized. "The critical space opened by the reenactment of a pre-revolutionary theatrical model allowed Lissitzky to reflect on the legacy and aporias of Russian futurism's earlier myths of triumphs over natural law, tradition, reason and 'femininity,'" in the new postrevolutionary world of Lissitzky and Ehrenburg's *Veshch / Gegenstand / Objet*, where "Malevich's Suprematist art appeared, but merely as a precursor to the newer Constructivism" (122).[34] Despite the fact that the puppets were not produced, "Converted into miniatures, they quite reconceive [the librettist Aleksei] Kruchenykh's *Victory over the Sun* in the register of children's play" (122–3), not unlike Lissitzky's illustrated books for children of all ages.

If there is nothing ostensibly religious in this final putting-to-bed of Malevich's inaugural "Victory," it might be taken as at least standing *against irreligion,* by serving to eradicate the pseudo-sanctity (if not crypto-paganism) of Renaissance Humanism. And speaking of dialectic: Poggi has taken the residual set of prints and shown how what, style for style, could have been a mere Oedipal reaction to Lissitzky's honorable teacher as anachronistic, proves to be something his mentor could have been proud to have had a hand in.

Theory in 1925

Lissitzky's effort to advance from suprematism is expressed in his notion of the Proun, often defined as a "transfer station" between painting and architecture. What he had in mind is a new method—actually, only new for the Western world—for the pictorial representation of constructed space. As a term, the "transfer station" was an up-to-date literary figure of speech in 1925, when John Dos Passos published the novel *Manhattan Transfer*. The title refers to a special railroad station in the New Jersey Meadowlands (from 1910 to 1937) that was used only for transfer from the steam trains of the Pennsylvania Railroad Main Line to an electric train traveling a short distance under the Hudson River to Manhattan. But Dos Passos' term also had a political aspect by an overall socialist viewpoint.

Lissitzky's chief theoretical support for superseding conventional Western Renaissance perspective by means of his Proun is his essay "A. and Pangeometry" (1925), in which "A." is simply an objectifying substitute for "art." The text is a sort of prelude to pangeometry (which means modern geometry, anything other than the ordinary Euclidean version). Divided into four sections on "planimetric," "perspectival," "irrational," and "imaginary" space, it is, in fact, an important statement on the pluralism of viewpoints in a most literal sense (which could also be applied to religion).

Let us take "planimetric space" last, for it has broader relevance to this chapter and book, and begin with "perspectival space." In that section, a triple diagram compares (a) a table in reverse perspective, noted as "Chinese," (b) a square with diagonals as "the perspective representation of a pyramid," and (c) a diagram of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*, as if extending the length of the refectory where it is seen (L353). By "Chinese," Lissitzky must not mean the style of the table, but rather the non-Western (anti-Renaissance) perspectival system to which it submits.

What Lissitzky called "irrational space" was important to him. Owed to Malevich's suprematism, Lissitzky took it to have "swept away from the plane the illusions of two-dimensional planimetric space, the illusions of three-dimensional perspective space, and has created the ultimate illusion of irrational space, with its infinite extensibility into the background and foreground" (L354). Whether or not that the mathematics necessary to comprehend this cannot be visualized, "the achievements of the futurists and the Suprematists are static surfaces which indicate the dynamic (by symbols). . . . We are standing now at the beginning of a period in which A. is on the one hand degenerating into a

pastiche embracing all the monuments in the museums, and on the other hand is fighting to create a new expression of space . . . . There now arises the task of forming imaginary space by means of a material object" (L356).

"Imaginary space" has so far encompassed actual movement by means of film. Here Lissitzky speaks out against any form of monumentality except "the perpetual expansion of human achievement." Having "traced the variability of our conception of space and the corresponding forms of A.," Lissitzky writes, "I have arrived at an a-material materiality. That sounds paradoxical. Yet facts prove that 'progression consists in our being led to consider certain views as obvious and necessary which our forefathers considered incomprehensible, for they were incapable of comprehending them'" (L357).

I have long surmised that this "planimetric space" part of Lissitzky's text was likely stimulated by a major art-historical essay on pluralistic viewpoints by Aloïs Riegl, first published posthumously in 1906.[35] Riegl was concerned with a pair of gold Bronze Age cups from Crete or Greece, each decorated with a frieze of captured bulls. These so-called Vapheio Cups became a famous problem in art history thanks to his article, which relates to Lissitzky's later essay in a number of ways, including an offhand remark apropos of icon painting. But the closest point of contact with Riegl is a pair of diagrams where Lissitzky first shows a row of three bulls as processing to the right, first one after the other—as "1 + 2 + 3"—and then overlapping as parallel in space—as "1, 1½, 2."

It is not possible to explore here Riegl's astute concern with the repercussions of what he is saying relative to the contemporary art of his own time (around 1900). But it is quite possible to come close to Lissitzky's modern Russian concerns, first, by inference to the icon and, then, by an unexpected secularist note, namely an interest in the remarkable lack of religion in the ancient art at hand. Riegl speaks of a bull whose head is turned away from the spectator as an "instance of objectivism," such as classical art would adopt first and that the late antique icon would repeat more deliberately, since "it was Christian art that first firmly established the rule of direct dialogue between the head and the viewer" (120).[36] This analysis of the ancient cup departs from the centuries-old convention that "images of religious belief dominated all conceptions of nature and all conditions of life, and art and religion were essentially identical, the idea behind a work of art has the least to contribute to a purely artistically critical evaluation, because the artist had little or no latitude for individual design" (120). What seems so premature here is the abandonment of the ancient Near Eastern "identity of all art with religion, that is, of the identification of all appearances and all events with the working of an objective personal deity" (124). Only much later,

when the northern European peoples without an ancient Near Eastern legacy became dominant, "perspective, painterly composition, representations of phenomena not purely for the sake of religious meaning—won the upper hand" (126). Lissitzky may well have known this classic essay in early modern art history, which was also reprinted soon after "A. and Pangeometry."

Lissitzky had already published the 1922 essay "The Victory over Art," praising Malevich's invention of suprematism for having more "modernity" than Kandinsky, thanks to "its organization and . . . the new painterly expression of space which it has provided"—which "chopped down the arched blue sky and went off into white infinity"—and also as the basis for his own practice of the Proun. The Proun "describes nothing, it constructs only volumes, planes, and lines for its own sake, in order to create a system of the new composition of the real world." Note his striving for political coexistence between composition (supposedly rightist) and construction (leftist) that flexibly allows for blatant contradiction:

> Proun—this is the way by which we will arrive at the new composition. If science and the engineer have come, at present, to create their realities by mathematical tables, by drawings of projects, we do not categorically consider this the only way. We believe more in creative intuition, which creates its method, its system outside of mathematics and drawings but according to laws which are also as organic as the shape of a flower. Proun does not compose, it constructs. This is the basic difference with [mimetic] represention. . . . Proun has no single axis which is perpendicular to the horizontal, as in traditional painting. It is constructed and brought to an equilibrium in space. . . . Proun is made of material [= leftist] and not of any aesthetic [= rightist].[37]

At this point, Lissitzky had been representing the Russian government since the previous year as something like a cultural attaché in Berlin. He had to watch his p's and q's concerning the endless dispute at home, where the constructivist and then the ultra-constructivist "productivist" side was winning. Lissitzky also needed to stay in the good graces of the government, in which he fundamentally did believe. But in "The Victory over Art," Lissitzky makes a remark we have heard before: "Just as we were victorious over religion, so are we fighting with our new accomplishments for victory over art." He continues, "We are far removed from the period of the hunter who chased the animal and captured it."[38] The second statement, I think, shows that Lissitzky not only knew Riegl's essay but had it on his mind, even as the first statement unexpectedly raises the subject of religion in order to pack it away.

What does this rather surprising antireligious statement really mean? As an artist and architect for whom formal aesthetics did necessarily matter, Lissitzky

had to try to make a public point of maintaining a proconstructivist, anticompositional stance. In 1928, when anything aesthetic was considered bourgeois, Lissitzky could be found testifying before a governmental Building Committee that constructivism itself was simply the offspring of capitalism.[39] Knowing that by his title, "The Victory over Art," Lissitzky meant there could now be real and possibly better art after the "anti-art," I could not initially understand why that should not also be true of religious faith, on much the same basis. Then I realized that "The Victory over Art" was published only in the Warsaw Yiddish journal *Ringen*. There, the statement "Just as we were victorious over religion, so are we fighting with our new accomplishments for victory over art" had the prominence of a stand-alone paragraph at the start of a section, in an article whose outside political purpose must have been to display publicly that Lissitzky was concerned with Yiddish culture *rather than* the Jewish religion.

A Quasi-Liturgical Exhibition Space

In the mid-1920s, Lissitzky also worked on an expansion of the Proun idea to encompass entire interior architectural spaces. Dutch painters of the De Stijl movement had been designing entire rooms even before the end of the First World War. But most of their projects simply expanded what were essentially painting compositions onto adjacent walls and ceilings; and between the mid- to later 20s, they went largely unexecuted. In a note to his "A. and Pangeometry," Lissitzky, praising Mondrian's paintings for their "utter flatness," remarks: "When the *De Stijl* [artists] transpose the Mondrian principle to the three planes of space, they become interior decorators" (L358n5). Mondrian's own studios were a unique and private case.

In 1919 Malevich had speculated on taking on a whole room as a singular suprematist work, as a sort of "model universe,"[40] but it was Lissitzky's own Proun idea, as a deliberate intermediary between painting and architecture, that inspired him to take up the special problem of fitting out galleries in such a way as to encourage interaction with his Prouns, with other related contemporary paintings, and with the compatibly designed surrounding room itself.

Frankly, these galleries always struck me as so completely utilitarian that it had never occurred to me that they could pertain to the artist's faith outlook, least of all in terms of divine liturgy. Nonetheless, it happens that the most radical and comprehensive of these spaces is related to the spatial, kinetic, and even prayerful social experience of worship in a synagogue. So, while it is indeed

correct that Lissitzky had no interest in contemporary German artists of "mystical" ilk,[41] that had little to do with his operative sense of faith.

The executed De Stijl spaces are basically normal static rooms compared with the flexible, even surprisingly phenomenological exhibition spaces that Lissitzky designed in 1923 at Berlin (*Proun Room*), in 1926 at Dresden (*Space, or Room, for Constructive Art*), and most extraordinarily, between 1927 and 1928 at Hanover: the *Abstract Cabinet.*[42] As a spatial ensemble, this last is a marvel in its own right—of what could be called contemplatively applied painting.

Here an important design element carries over from a simpler wood format in the second design (the *Space for Constructive Art*), to painted sheet metal in the final *Abstract Cabinet,* namely, a wall treatment that accommodates the spectator's movement across it in space. It consists of closely parallel vertical slats that serve to surround changing exhibits of various abstract paintings and graphic artworks arranged in asymmetrical rectilinear clusters. These slats, like vertical blinds, might be taken for granted; but they are so carefully modulated to this space that they appear to be of one color from the left (*white*), another from head-on (*gray*), and a third from the right (*black*), like those two-way novelty photos giving what is known as the "Wilson-Lincoln effect" (Figure 4.5).[43]

Figure 4.5 El Lissitzky, *Abstract Cabinet, c.* 1920–31 (destroyed 1936), Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (950076).

There is discussion about the extent to which this remarkable project was a collaboration with Alexander Dorner, the progressivist director of the Provincial Museum at Hanover. Dorner's quasi-ideological enthusiasm must have been part of the mix. On the other hand, the slat device has sources in new Russian constructivist architecture and scenography. Lissitzky had conceived of something similar in his 1922 lecture "New Russian Art," where he called attention to a new generation of designers after the Revolution, especially architects for whom there was no building work, applying their talents the theater, such as the constructivist brothers Vladimir and Georgii Stenberg and Kazimir Myedunyesky, as a matter of innovative stage design using vertical wood moldings, like vertical Venetian blinds, with attention to the bodily movement of actors (L343). Lissitzky had used similar vertical slats in his Proun gallery spaces in Germany, without any hint of religious connotation.

With the *Abstract Cabinet*, however, Lissitzky has produced a considerably more than normally experiential realm where colloquies of independent and changeable paintings, drawings, and prints, all in frames that themselves are organized in a perpendicular yet also asymmetric and irregular manner, as contemplative complexes on a non-predetermined path of other such things, itself more like a field of possible relations than a simply linear path. This unusual way of engaging the beholder and actively enjoining him or her to make decisions that determine a subjective experience of interaction, in what is also a social experience, is what originally made Alan Birnholz analogize the experience of the *Abstract Cabinet* to a liturgical experience of identifiably Jewish form.

On a mundane level, an outsider might be surprised that in an Orthodox Jewish service, people may come and go (if not, of course, at every moment). Birnholz generalizes, with the *Abstract Cabinet* in mind: "emphasis on the participant making discoveries by himself [or herself], as . . . mov[ing] through [Lissitzky's] room at [their] own pace, parallels the ritual of the Jewish service, in which within a general structure of communal worship there remained the opportunity to proceed as one wished."[44]

But Birnholz was pointing to something considerably more religiously specific as well. A central prayer of many Jewish liturgies, daily and additionally on the Sabbath or a Holy Day, is the *Amidah* (or *Tefilat HaAmidah),* meaning "The Standing Prayer" (implying posture but also, metaphorically, standing before God). Also called the *Shemoneh Esreh* ("The Eighteen"), for its successive benedictions, the *Amidah* integrates separate individual and collective voiced responses.[45] The worshipper recites it quietly at his or her own pace, addressing

God with personal as well as familial and social intentions, after which the entire prayer is repeated for the whole congregation by the cantor. Important from the Lissitzkian point of view—corresponding with his views on the theater in the "New Russian Art" lecture—is the fact that the individual worshipper's body moves in space. For, in reciting the *Amidah,* one stands and then walks three steps forward when reciting the prayer, in order to give God royal respect (and then back up). This rocking recitation—suggestive of the lateral coloristic variations of the slats—is no obedient, drill-like, linear regime. There is a murmur as different worshippers recite more or less quietly, at different rates. Birnholz's analogy between the *Abstract Cabinet* and actual liturgy illuminates how the disposition of the gallery encourages phases of distinctly private contemplation with specific works of art as deliberately separate episodes in the social flow, even as it underscores a surprising remnant of religiosity late in Lissitzky's life.

Maria Gough calls attention to the fact that this later and most important of Lissitzky's "Demonstration Spaces," engaging the populace through spatial movement in the experience of art, also drew on the good graces of Dorner.[46] In that situation in particular, Lissitzky was working with a museum director whose museological stance would still be considered activist today.[47] The synagogue interpretation of the Hanover *Abstract Cabinet* by Birnholz (who has done much still unacknowledged for the art-historical reinterpretation of Malevich as well as Lissitzky), now renewed and developed by Gough, is almost the last to be heard of religion in the present narrative.

Government Work

By the end of the 1920s, Lissitzky had gone over to constructivism. That there might be two great "plastic" modalities, even of geometric art, that of visual space (conducive to metaphor) and that of tangible materiality (conducive to metonymy), might to be have accommodated Malevich's *planits*, which were not altogether unlike the contemporaneous Lissitzky Prouns and possibly even the applied formalism of Malevich's *architectons.* But in his impressive picture book on new Soviet architecture, known in English as *Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution* (1929), Lissitzky as much as discredits his own UNOVIS mentor as somebody left over from the so-called Dark Ages: "The leader of color perception, . . . a painter (Malevich), could not recognize the facticity of the world; he only ever looked at it through the eye and remained captive to the non-

objective."[48] Saying that is tantamount to politically capitalizing on architecture as *concrete* formality! I like to think that, as Malevich himself had turned to architecture as a matter of pedagogically justifiable formalism, this interest of the architecturally trained Lissitzky was yet a new "transfer station," carrying him over, in new circumstances, to a more productivist artistic practice, when acknowledging Malevich would not have been opportune.

Lissitzky had become adept at the constructivist-to-productivist medium of photocollage during the Twenties, and by the time of his architecture book, he also enjoyed a new career as an exhibition designer for the Soviet state, which enabled him to escape Stalin's outright repression of modernist art and artists. His poster and catalogue cover for a Russian exhibition at the Museum of Applied Arts in Zurich in 1929 is not his only example of the device of overlapping faces, so that two faces share three eyes, fusing the figures in an image of solidarity (Figure 4.6). This device is adumbrated in the Russian icon tradition, even if it tends to make Western viewers think first of Giotto's *Meeting at the Golden Gate* in the Arena Chapel; an iconic example is the relation of the two faces of Christ and one of the Marys in a fifteenth-century icon of the Entombment, now in the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow.

Eventually, however, the spirit departs from even Lissitzky's socially applied art. He had given everything to the cause, but the cause was proving itself unworthy, aesthetically as well as ethically, what with Stalin's antimodernism and the imposition of socialist realism as the state's official painting style as of 1932. Having invested much of his later thinking into astute forms of exhibition design, it must have been devastating to have his designs for the Soviet Pavilion at the 1939 World's Fair in New York rejected. In addition, his health was failing.

The photograph in Lissitzky's Second World War poster *Make More Tanks*! (Figure 4.7), produced posthumously in 1942, disappointingly naturalizes and normalizes the paired heads of the more structurally astute photomontage used on the Zurich catalogue cover (Figure 4.6). In the Zurich design, a male and female couple, as detached from nature as a pair of dolls (though based on the artist's photograph called *Lenin Youth,* where the structural overlap of one eye of each is already apparent) rises up, as if metaphorically, from the base of a giant abstract constriction of concrete, likely a dam. In *Make More Tanks!*, the structural ambiguity of the eyes is dispensed with, and everything else is put metonymically in place for as much normalcy as possible: tank below, airplane above, and a factory floor as "connective tissue" behind the two workers. Well, at least Lissitzky did not wind up taking official photographs of slave labor, like

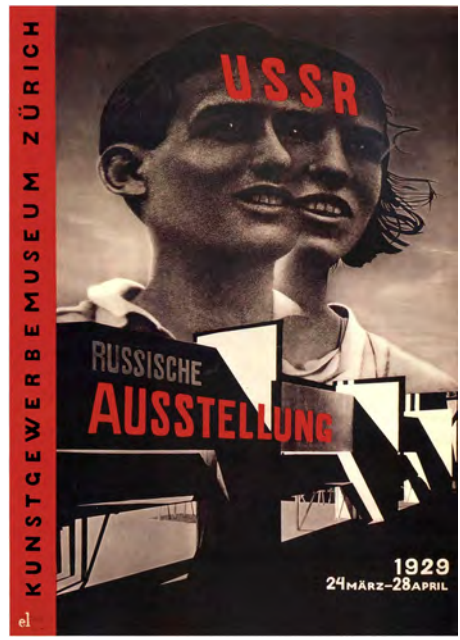

Figure 4.6 El Lissitzky, cover of catalogue for the Russian Exhibition at the Kunstgewerbe Museum, Zurich, 1929. Alamy Ltd.

Figure 4.7 El Lissitzky, *Give Us More Tanks* (poster), 1942. Alamy Ltd.

another former avant-gardist of constructivist ilk. And yet, even here, with Malevich already dead for seven years and Lissitzky himself recently passed away, one can detect a remnant of suprematist vitality in *Make More Tanks!* in the trimming down of the rather old-fashioned photograph in a rhombus shape that puts up some formal Malevichian resistance to being taken for granted as a square.