

## 'The double helix proves the existence of God'

### Art and science in dialogue with Salvador Dalí's religious imagination

The later artistic work of Salvador Dalí demonstrates a dialogue involving new developments in science in the 1940s and 1950s as metaphysical clues to inform his religious imagination and inspire a new era in Dalí's art: nuclear mysticism.

IN OUR 2013 BOOK, *Theology and the Arts: Engaging Faith* (2013), Ruth Illman and I offered a proposal that combined the work of practical theology with the emerging discipline of theology of the arts. The theme of this conference provides an opportunity to reflect on religious imagination in the art of Salvador Dalí as a case study in a 'practical theology of the arts' that we have developed there. The article will limit itself in two ways: first, rather than examining all seven of the themes found in the book, the paper will focus on two aspects of a 'practical theology of the arts' – the role of dialogue in this approach to theology and the experience of 'otherness' that is at the heart of our proposal – and, second, to limit the examination of Dalí's work to the latter period of his long career, specifically the end of the 1940s through to his death in 1989. Among his masterworks from this period, four will serve as primary sources of reflection: *The Madonna of Port Lligat* (1949), *Christ of St John of the Cross* (1951), and *The Last Supper* (1955) and *Galacidalacidesoxyribonucleicacid: Homage to Crick and Watson* (1963).

#### A 'practical theology of the arts'

A 'practical theology of the arts' represents a move away from modernity's reliance upon dogma, positivistic claims, and a scientific/mathematical certainty in its theological approach. The Cartesian

dichotomy that sublimated practice to a role subservient to the central place of theory had the effect of privileging the rational, independent self relative to tradition, ecclesiology, and liturgy. 'Real' theology was what was conducted by the great doctors of the church whose intellectual, philosophical, and systematic process of rational analysis developed theological truth. Theology was, as a result, led through what Edward Farley and others have referred to as a 'clergy paradigm' (Farley 1983: 21–41).

As an alternative to this dominant theological approach, practical theology has proposed a theology that is dialogical, more horizontal than vertical, and more directed by *praxis* than by propositions. Joyce Ann Mercer describes the praxis orientation of practical theology as a 'mutual engagement of theory and praxis for the sake of emancipatory action in the world' (Mercer 2005: 12). Paul Ballard and John Pritchard claim practical theology is, simply, 'the practice of Christian community in the world' (Ballard and Pritchard 2006: 18), and continue, 'theology starts where God is to be found, in the concrete reality of the immediate situation' (33).

Jeremie Begbie has become a consistent contributor to the discussion of theology and the arts over the past couple of decades and his discussion of the arts connects well with Ballard and Pritchard's statements, identifying a fundamental encounter with transcendence as the creative character of the arts (Begbie 1991: xvii). Frank Burch Brown also describes art as a 'medium by which God becomes present to us' (Brown 2000: 121).

Paul Ballard and Pamela Couture (2001) directly connect practical theology and the arts as providing sources of understanding as well as means of grace. The arts, like practical theology, are dialogical in

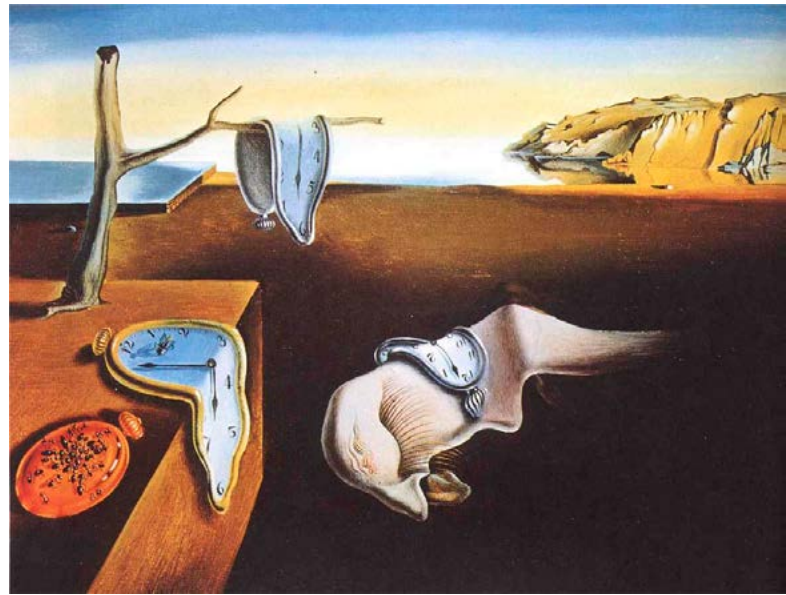
character, as Richard Viladesau states:

To the extent that we respond to this call positively, the other becomes for us not merely a function of our own existence or an object within the horizons of our minds, but another mysterious 'self' over against our own. . . . Dialogue is thus an event of purposely and freely uniting separate persons and is therefore (implicitly, and to different extents) a potential act of love. . . . Every true assertion is meant to contribute in some way to the other's being. (Viladesau 2000: 180)

The intention of a 'practical theology of the arts' is to do precisely what Viladesau suggests: 'purposely and freely uniting people' with God within what Parker Palmer has described as a 'community of truth characterized by dialogue and by a meaningful encounter with the *other*' (Palmer 1998: 90).

Richard Osmer explicitly identifies the post-modern character of practical theology as containing a moment in which one experiences being 'brought up short' by engaging in dialogue with another (Osmer 2008: 22). Jean-François Lyotard has claimed that this 'otherness' (what he calls *un differend*) is precisely what makes a person a *subject*, rather than a dehumanized *object* (Lyotard 1984: 77). As Illman and I have suggested, the sheer otherness of the artist's own horizon 'brings one up short' and confounds one's world-view enough to cause one to transform one's previous ways of making sense of the world (Illman and Smith 2013: 31). Every work of art offers its own claim to truth and meaning and that claim calls upon people to see the world differently. Robin Jensen claims 'Good art *is* about truth – a truth that transcends visually coded symbols in a catechism or a literalistic reproduction of a biblical story' (Jensen 2004: 177).

The kind of dialogue we discuss requires, first of all, *listening* intently and intentionally to the voice of the other, and the arts are among the most transparent means of accomplishing that objective. Bonnie Miller-McLemore has said that both practical theology and the arts 'arrest one's attention and suspend one's self-absorption. They help us pay attention to truth claims external to ourselves and help us connect persons to the particularities of the other as other' (Miller-McLemore 2001: 21). As Illman and I claim, 'The gaze of the artist and the focused activity of the



Salvador Dalí, *Persistence of Memory* (1931), Museum of Modern Art, New York.

practical theologian both begin with the otherness of the claim to truth being brought as a summons that "brings one up short", as Osmer puts it' (Illman and Smith 2013: 58–9). This summary is sufficient to set the stage for a discussion of the later work of Salvador Dalí as an example of an artist who represents these two elements of our 'practical theology of the arts'.

### Salvador Dalí's religious imagination

Even the most casual observer would recognize products of the spectacular imagination of Spain's Salvador Dalí. Whether one is viewing melting watches, fried eggs dripping off landscapes, flayed skin in the most unexpected of places, crutches propping up body parts, or double images that take advantage of an exaggerated sense of imaginative perspective, Dalí always viewed the world differently from the 'norm'. The majority of the public is familiar with his Surrealist work, which covered the late 1920s and virtually all of the 1930s.

*The Persistence of Memory* (1931), arguably among the most famous of all Surrealist paintings, pays homage to the influence of Sigmund Freud's claims about the unconscious and the importance of dreams – especially nightmares – upon those in the Paris-based Surrealist movement.

What is less known is Dalí's life-long love/hate relationship with his Spanish Roman Catholic environment and the effect that that internal, very

personal struggle had on the seismic change in his art during the final decades of his long and controversial career. He was raised in the extreme northeastern corner of Spain, near the Catalonian border with France, with a devoutly Roman Catholic mother and a domineering father who was a self-avowed atheist.

There were numerous sources for the private demons that became manifest in his Surrealist paintings. He bore a name that both energized and tortured him – he was named after his deceased older brother, who died three years prior to the artist's birth, as well as his bureaucrat father. He claimed his father gave him the name because 'he was the chosen one who was to come to save painting from the deadly menace of abstract art, academic Surrealism, Dadaism, and any kind of anarchic "ism" whatsoever' (Dalí 1965: 7). Throughout his life, Dalí struggled with unresolved issues in his own sexuality. He was obsessed throughout his life with what many Catalonians would have considered aberrant human sexual acts, contributing to the personal guilt that fuelled his response to traditional Roman Catholic morality as well as his attraction to Freudian psychoanalysis (Stuckey 2005: 118).

Two paintings from this early period illustrate both his anti-clerical and blasphemous rage against institutionalized religion. In *Profanation of the Host* (1929), the 'Great Masturbator' – an amorphous, flowing figure common in Dalí's work – overwhelms and ultimately defiles the host and the chalice to the delight of demons cavorting at the bottom of the canvas. Another painting from the same year, *The Sacred Heart* (1929), is a pen and ink outline of an iconic Roman Catholic image of Jesus of the Sacred Heart, over which he has scrawled (in French) the words 'Sometimes I Spit with Pleasure on the Portrait of My Mother' (Ana 2012: 3).

Yet Dalí's close friend and biographer, the artist Robert Descharnes, claims that Dalí was a mystic throughout his life, and explicitly so after the 1940s (Descharnes and Néret 1998: 96). Indeed, it was the occasion of gaining access to the journals of the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic, St John of the Cross, during a 1950 visit to Avila where he viewed a sketch of the crucified Christ the saint had drawn. This experience led to what Dalí described as a 'cosmic dream' resulting in his famous painting *Christ of St John of the Cross* (1951) (Frisch 2014: 112). At the same time, his voracious reading included the journal *Scientific America* and the works of the French paleontologist and Jesuit, Teilhard de Chardin who,

according to Dalí 'believed that the universe and cosmos are finite', thus providing Dalí with a link between his own religious imagination and the rapidly developing discoveries of science in the 1950s (Descharnes and Néret 1998: 187).

### **'I believe in God, but I have no faith'**

Dalí went through a series of dramatic transitions in the 1940s and later – much to the chagrin of the Surrealists and, especially, their leader André Breton. Breton dismissed Dalí's turn towards religion as a rejection of Surrealism. In response, Dalí refuted Surrealism's Freudian 'pure psychic automatism' (Dalí 1965: vii) and his own earlier 'paranoiac-critical method of painting' which he described as 'a form of image interpretation dependent upon the imaginative ability of the artist' (viii). Dalí railed against the 'decadence' of modern painting (including Surrealism), which he said 'was a consequence of skepticism and lack of faith, the result of mechanistic materialism' (Dalí 1951: 1). Matthew Milliner claims that for Dalí 'Modern Art painted nothing because it believed in nothing' (Milliner 2007: 1).

Dalí's attitude towards Roman Catholicism began to change as early as 1941 and his painting began to reflect an intentional dialogue with his Christian roots. Several factors contributed to this transformation. The ravages of World War II led Dalí, like many other European artists, to emigrate to the United States, where he 'came to believe in the possibility of a fusion between modern science, the mystery of religion and the traditions of classicism and began painting his wife Gala as a Renaissance Madonna' ('Dalí and Religion,' *Salvador Dalí: Liquid Desire* website). A mix of influences led to the development of a new approach to painting and personal theology/philosophy he branded as 'nuclear mysticism'. His *Mystical Manifesto*, penned in 1951, claimed there was nothing more subversive at the beginning of the decade than to become mystical and to be able to draw (Descharnes and Néret 1998: 157). Paul O. Myhre identifies the elements of 'nuclear mysticism' as follows:

Heavily influenced by scientific developments in the 1940s and 1950s, Dalí's aesthetics stewed within a mixture of Spanish Catholic mystical Christology and contemporary notions of theology, psychology, and scientific discoveries.



Dalí, *Christ of St John of the Cross* (1951), Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow, Scotland.

Coupled with an intense spiritual longing, Dalí concentrated his efforts toward finding a means of connecting with a mystical and material sacrality through two-dimensional art. Out of this diverse mix of influences and Dalí's own inner spiritual quest, he developed an aesthetic founded on what he called 'nuclear mysticism.' (Myhre 2005: 24)

Dalí saw continuity between these two apparently contradictory periods of his work: 'My present nuclear mysticism is merely the fruit, inspired by the Holy Ghost, of the demoniacal [*sic*] and surrealist experience of the first part of my life' (Dalí 1965: 20).

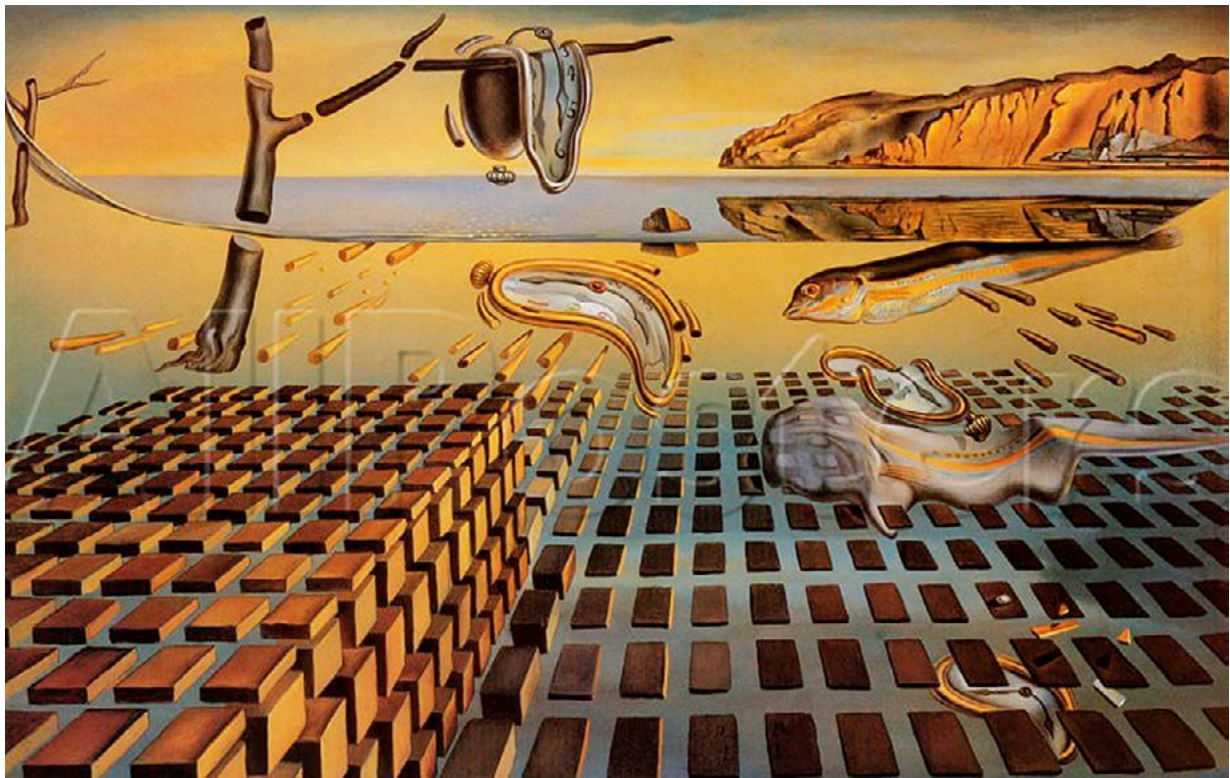
The convergence of new scientific discoveries and a renewed appreciation for what he regarded as the supreme artistic perfection of Renaissance painting were made clear with the end of World War II and the death of Adolf Hitler. 'Now I had to paint well, something that would be of no interest to anybody whatsoever. However, it was indispensable to paint *well*, because my nuclear mysticism could triumph on the appointed day only if it was incarnated in the most supreme beauty' (Dalí 1965: 20). Thus, when his encounter with the mysticism of St John of the Cross led to his 1951 masterwork, Dalí insisted his devotional painting would depict 'a Christ as beautiful as the God that He is' (Milliner 2007: 2).

### 'The progress of the sciences has been colossal'

One clear influence on Dalí's transformation at the end of the 1940s and through the 1960s was a series of dramatic advances in the sciences. When the nuclear era began with the United States' bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan in 1945, the results were much greater than simply the end of a horrendously destructive world war. Dalí claimed the destruction of Hiroshima 'shook [him] seismic-



*St John of the Cross*, sketch in ink (c. 1550), Monastery of the Incarnation, Avila, Spain.



Dalí, *Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory* (1954), Salvador Dalí Museum, St Petersburg, Florida.

ally' (Ades 1982: 174). A life-long interest in science found, in the new research on nuclear physics and quantum theory, a ready dialogue partner for his equally lengthy spiritual search for truth and meaning. 'It was as if his study of physics added a fourth dimension to the world he painted, another twist – not Surrealist but metaphysical – to the inner landscape he portrayed' (Etherington-Smith 1992: 330).

Elliott King reports that Dalí 'became captivated with nuclear physics. For the first time, physics was providing proof for the existence of God, he said, and it was now up to the artists to integrate this knowledge into the great artistic tradition' (Hamerman 2010: 2).

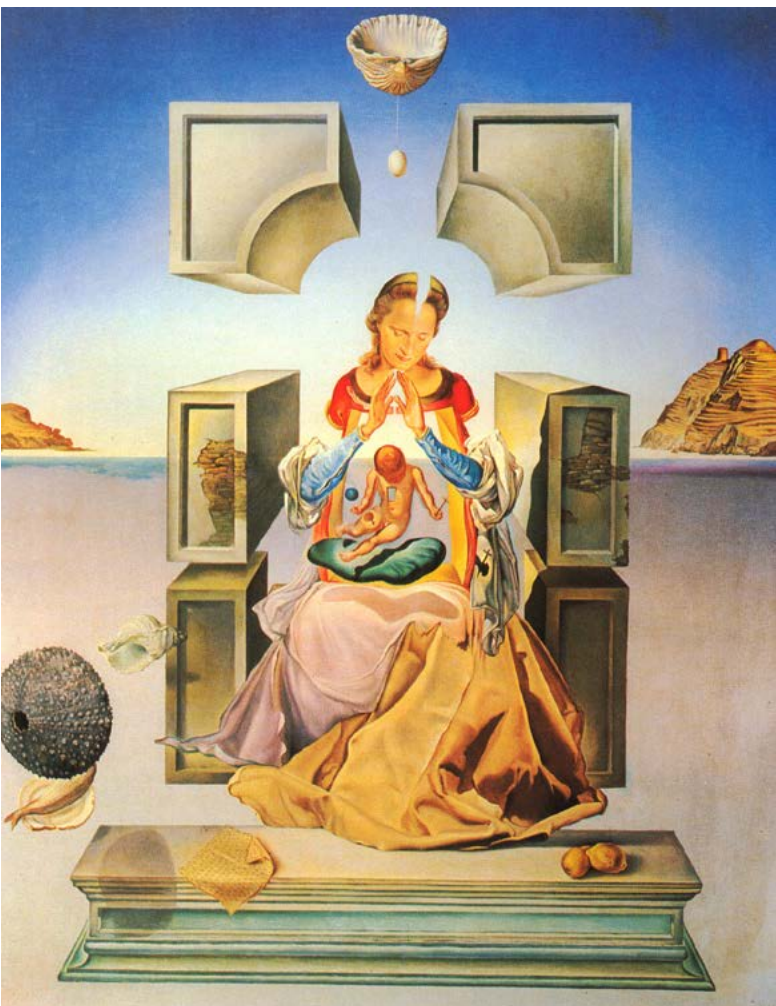
The 'cosmic dream' that resulted from Dalí's encounter with the work of St John of the Cross in 1950 was an ecstatic response to the scientific work of Robert Oppenheimer and Werner Heisenberg as much as it was to the mysticism of the Spanish saint.

In the first place, in 1950, I had a 'cosmic dream' in which I saw this image in color and which in my dream represented the 'nucleus of the atom.' This nucleus later took on a metaphysical sense;

I considered it 'the very unity of the universe,' the Christ! In the second place, when, thanks to the instructions of Father Bruno, a Carmelite, I saw the Christ drawn by Saint John of the Cross, I worked out geometrically a triangle and a circle that aesthetically summarized all my previous experiments, and I inscribed Christ in the triangle. (Descharnes and Néret 1998: 168–9)

His 1965 autobiography, *Diary of a Genius*, showed Dalí anticipating this scientific revolution even in his celebrated Surrealist period of the 'paranoiac-critical method,' stating his 'limp watches ... prophesied the disintegration of matter' (Dalí 1965: 13). Thus, Dalí felt compelled to re-visit his significant work, *Persistence of Memory* in 1954 with a version of the imagery that acknowledged the reality of the constant motion and component structure of nuclear elements in his *Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory* of 1954.

Robert Radford states that Hiroshima and the revelations of nuclear physics led Dalí to conclude that 'the physical world could no longer be conceived of, nor pictorially represented, in terms of fixed, unmoving, weighty objects, but rather in terms of



Dalí, *Madonna of Port Lligat* (1949), Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

isolated objects held in suspended relation to each other' (Radford 1997: 236). It was his recent dialogue with science that transformed his understanding of the truth and ultimately the meaning of Roman Catholic dogma.

The intentional dialogue between emerging scientific discoveries and what he refers to as a 'paroxysm' (a type of explosive revelation or 'aha!' moment of realization Dalí employs throughout *Diary of a Genius*) of metaphysical clarity is represented clearly in his 1949 masterwork, *The Madonna of Port Lligat*.

Here, Dalí presents a scene that quotes Piero Della Francesca's *Brera Altarpiece*, a Renaissance masterpiece (Ades 1982: 175). However, the effect of his nuclear mysticism has, as Richard Osmer phrases it, 'brought him up short' (Osmer 2008: 22). The sheer 'otherness' of scientific revelations and their claims of truth and meaning became enough of a shock to

the modern worldview and mystical atheism of his earlier work and thought that he listened to its voice as an opportunity for transformation, rather than as a threat he must reject. While the setting of Dalí's painting is a classic cathedral scene and the imagery includes the familiar elements of the baptismal shell (also symbolic of St James, the patron saint of Spain, who was said to have arrived on the shores of Catalonia in a scallop shell [Swinglehurst 2006: 103]) and an egg, complete with his wife Gala as a Madonna clothed in Renaissance-style robes and devotional pose, the fixed, solid subject of the painting now hovers almost weightless above the backdrop of Dalí's beloved coast of Catalonia's Port Lligat and touches nothing (Radford 1997: 236). Paul Myhre claims that the hovering figures symbolize '...dematerialization which is the equivalent in physics, in this atomic age, of divine gravitation' (Myhre 2005: 27).

The solidity one would expect of classic architecture has become disjointed and separated. The chest and womb of the Madonna are no longer firm and nurturing, but have become transparent windows upon the landscape as well as the location of a suspended Christ-child which itself contains a window revealing a half-loaf of bread. 'It suggests an idea that Mary the Theotokos bears the Christ, God the Son, who carries within him the bread of life. He is an embodiment of heaven and as such is the bread of heaven and the bread of life' (Myhre 2005: 26). It was an earlier version of this work that Dalí presented to Pope Pius XII in 1949, marking the artist's formal return to an association with the Roman Catholic Church and his official declaration of the end of his association with the Surrealist movement (Swinglehurst 2006: 103).

### Truth and deoxyribonucleic acid

The second significant advance in the sciences in the middle part of the twentieth century influencing Dalí's work was the discovery of the double-helix structure of the DNA molecule – the very building blocks of physical life on earth.

In a 1964 interview for *Playboy* magazine, he stated, '(a)nd now the announcement of Watson and Crick about DNA. This is for me the real proof of the existence of God' (Dalí 1964: 66). Dalí subtitled his masterwork, *Galacidalacidesoxyribonucleicacid* [a reflection on DNA as well as a warning about nuclear destruction]: *Homage to Crick and Watson* (1963).

‘For him, truth was somehow rooted and anchored in Deoxyribonucleic acid and expressed in atomic energy. Painting was his means of contact’ (Myhre 2005: 26). As Frank Burch Brown has noted, art can be experienced as a ‘medium whereby God becomes present to us ... [and] can also enact faith and love, vivifying and in a real sense ‘converting’ religious concerns sensuously and imaginatively, letting one taste and savor sacred delight’ (Brown 2000: 199–21). The arts ‘arrest one’s attention and suspend one’s self-absorption. They help us pay attention to truth claims external to ourselves and help connect persons to the particularities of the other as *other*’ (Illman and Smith 2013: 59). For Dalí, nuclear physics and DNA research became scientific partners in dialogue that functioned as *others*



Dnamodel.jpg

whose claims to truth and meaning were significant voices to which his rapidly changing approach to art responded dramatically.

His *50 Secrets of Magic Craftmanship*, published in English in 1991 showed his playful side, but it also gave a unique insight into the degree to which his artistic efforts had embraced the intentional, objective, and academic approach to painting (Maddox 1979: 84). Dalí devoted himself tirelessly to the study of quantum mechanics, DNA research, Plato’s ‘golden proportion,’ the Fibonacci sequence, and a fascination with the spiral logarithmic structure of the rhinoceros horn. As Ted Gott suggests, ‘After Francis Crick’s and James D. Watson’s discovery of the double helix structure of DNA in 1953, Dalí also frequently incorporated DNA imagery into his drawings and



Dalí, *Galacidalicideseoxyribonucleicacid: Homage to Crick and Watson* (1963), Salvador Dalí Museum, St Petersburg, Florida.



Dalí, *Christ of St John of the Cross* (1951), Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow, Scotland.

paintings, as further proof of nature ordered by a divine hand' (Gott 2009: 23). He was so fascinated by the metaphysical implications of DNA that he met with Watson in 1965 to discuss whether 'the double helix proves the existence of God' (*ibid.*).

*Christ of St John of the Cross* (1951) is among the most celebrated paintings of the last half of the twentieth century.

Although there was considerable controversy in Scotland when the masterwork was purchased by Glasgow Museum for £8,200, the painting is consistently identified as Scotland's favourite painting. Many introduce the painting's unique perspective on the Crucifixion as a 'God's-eye view' of the crucial event. A website covering the showing of the piece in Australia remarks that Dalí focuses on the serene beauty of Christ rather than the agony that has been characteristic of traditional Roman Catholic iconography. The site states

As the work was executed during a period in which the artist was seeking a religious faith that made sense to him in the light of contemporary science, it may indicate his desire to focus on a metaphorical reading of the crucifixion which transcends the purely physical, a theory compounded by Dalí's own comments that the drawing represented the nucleus of an atom which became for him a symbol of the unity of the universe. ('Discover More', *Salvador Dalí: Liquid Desire*)

In place of the suffering, tortured Christ of the crucifix the painting becomes a study in a physically impressive young male hanging suspended in space, part-way between the harbour at Port Lligat and heaven, attached to the cross without nails, crown of thorns, or spear-pierced side. As Myhre suggests, this gravity-free Christ represents a 'selfhood [that] transcends the ordinary bounds of space and time' in which Dalí sees not the broken body of Jesus, but the nucleus of an atom that becomes for the artist Christ as the 'very unity of the universe' (Myhre 2005: 26).

Dalí's concept of God is a creative mix of these disparate elements that emerges from his intentional, sometimes maniacal dialogue with intellectual, theological and scientific *others*: 'For [Dalí], God is an intangible idea, impossible to render in concrete terms. Dalí is of the opinion that He is perhaps the substance being sought by nuclear physics. He doesn't see God as cosmic; ... that would be limiting' (Descharnes and Néret 1998: 164). Descharnes and Néret continue by quoting Dalí, 'God is present in everything. The same magic is at the heart of all things and all roads lead to the same revelation: We are children of God, and the entire universe tends toward the perfection of mankind' (173). He saw nuclear physics and the DNA structure of all substances as being





Dalí, *Anti-Protonic Assumption* (1956), Private collection.

far closer to mysticism than to Newtonian rationalism (Radford 1997: 251). He believed his paintings provided a window into the essential structure of the universe that was exponentially more accessible than dogmatic statements or ecclesiological organization. It was his concentrated dialogue with science that led to this 'paroxysm' at the very end of the 1940s: 'the picture becomes the privileged locus of a geometry that translates not only the loftiest scientific and philosophical specifics, but also allows me, Dalí, to know the truth of time-space' (256).

Dalí came to understand subatomic particles as the scientific equivalent of angels for, 'in the heavenly bodies there are "leftovers of substance, because certain beings strike me as being so close to angels, such as Raphael or St. John of the Cross"' (Descharnes and Néret 1998: 166). He was convinced that science had finally provided a confirmation of the truth of doctrinal claims such as the Resurrection and Transfiguration of Christ, as well as the Assumption of Mary. In a lecture in Iowa, he claimed, 'Physicists

have proved the truths of religion. We now know how matter can be changed and it is no longer difficult for the scientific mind to understand how the Virgin may be taken physically into Heaven' (Myhre 2005: 28). Meredith Etherington-Smith claims Dalí's version of the Assumption – in works from this period such as the *Anti-Protonic Assumption* (1956) and *Assumpta Corpuscularia Lapislazulina* (1952), 'represented the culminating point of Nietzsche's feminine will to power, the superwoman who ascends to heaven by the virile strength of her own antiprotons' (Etherington-Smith 1992: 332).



Dalí, *Assumpta Corpuscularia Lapislazulina* (1952), Masaveu Collection, Oviedo, Spain.

Dalí's fascination with Crick and Watson's groundbreaking work in the early 1960s is particularly evident in *Galacidalacidesoxyribonucleicacid* (1963).

Gala, with back turned toward the audience, surveys a devastated nuclear landscape with a representation of the DNA structure of a salt molecule (composed of soldiers with rifles pointed at one another's heads) to her right and a model of Crick and Watson's DNA structure above her left shoulder. Yet, the image that dominates the painting is of God reaching down from above to lift the limp body of Christ. As Dalí stated, the theme of the painting is as 'long as the genetical [sic] persistence of human memory. As announced by the prophet Isaiah—the Saviour contained in God's head from which one sees for the first time in the iconographic history his arms repeating the molecular structures of Crick and Watson and lifting Christ's dead body so as to resurrect him in heaven' (Etherington-Smith 1992: 353).

### A return to classicism

In a guided tour of the Salvador Dalí Museum in St Petersburg, Florida, one is almost certain to hear multiple comments about the artist's technical 'painterly' skills, that his brushwork is exquisite, almost flawless. Among the many eccentricities of Dalí's art, one feature that must be appreciated is his voluminous notes explaining not only what he was attempting to accomplish thematically in each painting but also the technical elements in rendering every detail of his work (including such details as the specific brushes selected and how he mixed his paints to achieve the colours he envisioned). His archives are filled with sketches and studies from which the masterworks typical of his 'nuclear mysticism' period were produced, as well as lengthy reflections on his aesthetic and philosophical/theological claims.

A significant dialogue partner in this move to 'nuclear mysticism' was Dalí's almost fanatical determination to return to what he came to regard as the absolute height of painting: Renaissance classicism. James Thrall Soby points to Dalí's *Family of Marsupial Centaurs* (1940) as an indication of this shift toward the Renaissance, a move that 'summarized in extreme degree the artist's intention TO BECOME CLASSIC [Soby's emphasis], as the foreword to his 1941 exhibit proclaimed in bold type, to paint pictures "uniquely consecrated to the architecture of the Renaissance and to the Special Sciences"' (Soby 1968: 23). In

his autobiographical book, *Diary of a Genius*, Dalí claimed, 'Everything can be done badly or well. It is the same for my painting! Let it be known that the most astonishing vision your brain could imagine can be painted with the artisan's talent of a Leonardo or a Vermeer' (Dalí 1965: 81). The horrors and ugliness of living in World War II Europe contributed to Dalí's commitment to a return to a classical approach to painting.

As he stated in 1973, 'My art is handmade photography of extra-fine, extraordinary, super-aesthetic images of the concrete irrational' (Descharnes and Néret 1998: 34). Indeed, there is a sense of photo-realism in the way he rendered human faces and bodies (Cullum 2010: 2). One finds quotations of paintings by Raphael, da Vinci, Botticelli, and Michelangelo throughout his work – especially from 1949 onwards – as well as a nearly devotional appreciation of the artist he considered the soul of Spanish art: the master Velasquez. His attention to painting *well* led to his dialogue with these giants of painting as partners whose work and unique *voices* and claims to truth influenced the way he viewed art, truth, and meaning: 'All of my knowledge, of both science and religion, I incorporate into the classical tradition of my painting' (Golson 1983: 11, 35). This emphasis is clearly on display in *The Christ of St John of the Cross*, where there is attention to a finished product that is clean, smooth, and glossy – in the tradition of Fra Filippo Lippi, Titian, Velasquez, or, especially, Vermeer. Like da Vinci and Michelangelo, Dalí studied the human form meticulously, claiming, 'If you refuse to study anatomy, the arts of drawing and perspective, the mathematics of aesthetics, and the science of color, let me tell you that this is more a sign of laziness than of genius' (Dalí 1965: 81). This is quite evident in the careful way Dalí paints the shoulders, arms, and torso of the Christ who floats against the cross as though attached to it only by his own will and intention, rather than by a dictator's hammer and nails.

Conroy Maddox claims that Dalí's obsession with a nearly photographic accuracy in his painting resulted – at least in part – from his encounter with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood during his stay in England. The 'Brotherhood's' attention to symbolism and 'an almost obsessional attention to detail appealed to Dalí's own inner artistic process' (Maddox 1979: 78). His attention to the craft of painting, described in fine detail in *50 Secrets of Magical Craftsmanship* reflects

Dalí's artistic transformation from Surrealism in the 1940s: 'During the war, which disrupted Surrealism as a cohesive movement, Dalí allowed his inspiration to rise nearer and nearer to the surface of his mind, where dwells reason, the mortal enemy of the subconscious' (Soby 1968: 24). The lifelong dialogue with art, science, and religion in which he engaged became more intentionally objective and rational during and after the war.

There may be no single painting from this period of Dalí's work more controversial among art critics and theologians than his *The Sacrament of the Last Supper* (1955).

Theologian Paul Tillich considered the work 'junk' and deplored the depiction of Jesus as 'A sentimental but very good athlete on an American baseball team ... I am horrified by it!' (Novak 2012: 1). Likewise, another Protestant theologian, Francis Schaeffer saw the painting as evidence of 'Christian meaning being lost to a vague existentialism' (*ibid.*). Chester Dale, a banker and art collector, takes credit for inspiring the masterwork, if not directly commissioning it, by challenging Dalí to 'match the work of the Renaissance master Tintoretto' (Hamerman 2010: 2). It was Dale who presented the painting to

the National Gallery in Washington, DC. As a continuing witness to the lack of critical esteem for the work, the Gallery has hung it, unceremoniously, in such locations as the landing of a staircase and in a corner next to an elevator during its residence there.

The painting's classical focus can be found in the attention to detail found in the folds of the tablecloth, and the features of the disciples seated around the table with the central Christ figure. The broken loaf of bread looks edible; the beaker of wine could be held and tipped to waiting lips. The architecture of the room is based upon the classical vision of Plato's dodecahedron, which the philosopher claimed characterized the structure of the universe. The diagonal focus point of the painting is the clean-shaven, semi-transparent face of Christ – again an example of the craft of painting. Where da Vinci's classic *Last Supper* was set within an Italian Renaissance villa, Dalí's is set in his beloved coastal location in Port Lligat, Spain – and for the same reasons. Both da Vinci and Dalí used their artistic compositions to set the biblical event in the artists' own historical and personal contexts. Dalí said, repeatedly, that he understood heaven as being located 'neither above nor below, neither to the right nor to the left, heaven is to be found exactly in the



Dalí, *The Sacrament of the Last Supper* (1955), National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

center of the man who has faith!' (Descharnes and Néret 1998: 133) By recognizing the *otherness* of both the traditional Christian (and, more specifically Roman Catholic) doctrines associated with the Eucharist and the *otherness* of classical depictions of the event (like da Vinci's) Dalí has listened attentively to the voices encountered there and has entered into a dialogue with the claims to truth and meaning that have 'brought him up short'. In this painting, he pays tribute to theological tradition and classical art, yet allows it to engage in dialogue with his own unique intellectual and spiritual insight so that the result emerges from the dialogue itself. Always noted for his profound egotism, Dalí has not subverted Eucharistic doctrine to his own claim to truth. Rather, what has emerged is a unique, creative, *new* claim to truth that reflects the voices of all partners in the finished product.

Paul Myhre and Michael Novak both identify the Eucharistic character of the painting as a rebuttal to many of the theological critics who have reviled it. Novak states that the major difference between da Vinci's masterpiece and Dalí's is that da Vinci was attempting to depict a historical event – thus there are faces for each of the disciples present and a clear attempt to identify a moment of controversy through the positions of the members of the party relative to one another. In its place, Novak claims, 'Dalí gives us the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist' (Novak 2012: 3). While the disciples (who in reality are mirror images of one another, rather than twelve separate individual faces), with heads bowed, are focused on the altar and its Eucharist and are rendered in classical, near photo-realistic style, the figure of Christ that is at the centre of the scene is semi-transparent – as is the horizon in the coastal background that can be viewed through the torso and face of Christ. Dalí has also included himself as among those communing at the table. Likewise, the transparent torso of God floats above the scene, connecting the event at the table with God's presence in heaven. The construction of Dalí's scene draws the eye of the viewer to the central figure – Christ – whose arrested actions point, first to himself with one hand and simultaneously upward to God. Novak believes Dalí is depicting the passage in John 14:8–9 – 'Lord, show us the Father ... Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Jesus replied, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father"' (2). Novak concludes his discussion,

Dalí's intention is to make visible what occurs in every celebration of the Mass: that worship on earth makes present the realities of worship in heaven. The real presence of Christ means the real presence of the Father. The community drawn together in recognition of this miracle—the church—reveals the real presence of the Holy Spirit. Where the Trinity is, heaven is: unseen with our eyes, but sensed and recognized in our prayer. (Novak 2012: 3)

Myhre believes Dalí's 'paintings are products of an artistic imagination that not only sought to connect with a visceral experience of divine truth, but to challenge his viewers to consider questions of spirituality and human existence in an age that had witnessed the atrocities of war – the dropping of nuclear bombs on Japan and the Holocaust' (Myhre 2005: 24). In a way that reflects several of the claims Ruth Illman and I have stated, Myhre sees painting as a 'sacramental action' for Dalí, one that served as an 'access point to nuclear mystical truth. Much like Catholic sacramentals [*sic*] mediate some degree of grace so also were paint, brush, and canvas mediums of access to some undefined divine truth embedded in molecules and DNA' (*ibid.*). Christian sacramental theology functions, for Dalí, as a paroxysm – an explosive revelation – through the insights of the sciences.

The resurrection of Christ, the assumption of the Virgin Mary, the transformation of bread into the body of Christ began to become more real to him as he reflected on the fundamental building blocks of creation. Real presence could now be something more than a dogmatic assertion, doctrinal declaration, or assent of faith. For Dalí, the emergence of a mystical essence evoked ideas of an ever present God intimately linked with all molecules and thereby able to be accessed through materials like paint and visual images. (Myhre 2005: 27)

### **'The sole difference between a madman and me is that I am not mad'**

It seems fitting to title the conclusion to this study from a frequently quoted self-description by Dalí. The artist's imagination was outrageous, sometimes preposterous, frequently bawdy (or borderline pornographic) – but that *imagination* was always

self-evident. Even during the period being studied, Dalí continued to push the envelope of public decency beyond the level many in both the artistic and public community found acceptable. Much of the public *persona* of Salvador Dalí gave the appearance of insanity – and, to be honest, this was a finely calculated construction that Dalí and his wife, Gala, maintained throughout a long career as an artist.

It is his religious imagination that has been addressed here. His art was always intended to provoke and to challenge. His religiously-themed masterworks were no exception to that intention. If ‘the gaze of the artist ... begin[s] with the otherness of the claim to truth being brought as a summons that “brings up short”’ (Illman and Smith 2013: 59), one need look no further than to the work of Salvador Dalí. A critical examination of any of the masterworks on which this study has focused must lead the serious Christian viewer to re-examine her own theological assumptions in light of the claims to truth being offered by the artist. Dalí rarely shocks simply because of the personal pleasure this might give him. He offers his own understanding of the truth claims of the Christian faith in a way whose very otherness invites the viewer into her own spiritual dialogue.

At the same time, it is clear that Dalí also engaged in a kind of dialogue that transformed his own view of the world and of the truth of tradition. During the ‘classical’ period of his work, Dalí entered into dialogue with nuclear physics, Watson and Crick’s discoveries in DNA research, a re-discovery of the glories of Renaissance painting, and a renewed appreciation for traditional Roman Catholic claims about the Eucharist, the Resurrection, and the Assumption of Mary that truly honoured those doctrinal claims as *others* whose voices he felt compelled to honour and engage with. What resulted from this commitment is what results from a ‘practical theology of the arts’ whenever it is employed: the result of true *intersubjective* dialogue is always that some *new* claim to truth and meaning emerges from the process. Dalí’s artwork changed dramatically as a result of his dialogue with the multiple partners of his wild intellectual journey; but it is also true that Dalí *himself* was transformed – as an artist and as a person. He remained convinced that the seismic shifts of the 1940 and 1950s confirmed what he had anticipated – at least at a subconscious level – through his earlier Surrealist period. His commitment to dialogue and his willingness to listen to the voices of the numerous

*others* who served as his dialogue partners allowed his fertile imagination to push the understanding of art as well as science and theology in such a way that anyone ‘with eyes to see’ could not help but see the world and its God more clearly – and, with Dalí, much *differently* than it could without his unique artistic and spiritual voice. ■

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