A Christian Interpretation of Picasso's 1930 *Crucifixion*

Sadie McCloud

"A Christian Interpretation of Picasso's 1930 *Crucifixion*" considers the background and meaning of Picasso's painting with an Art Historical approach. It claims that although the subject matter of the *Crucifixion* is drawn from Christian iconography, it contains imagery which is antithetical to Christian beliefs and thoughts. This claim motivates the reader to question how a Christian ought to think about the interpretation of works of art.

Picasso is famous for his innovations within the art world. As he always professed to be a staunch atheist and a revolutionary desirous of reevaluating traditional standards, we often ignore that he was nonetheless fascinated by Christian iconography throughout his life. He continued to turn to the theme of the crucifixion in particular. In *The Religious Art of Pablo Picasso*, Jane Daggett Dillenberger and John Handley discuss several aspects pertaining to Picasso's interest in religious imagery. In *The Religious Art of Pablo Picasso*, Dillenberger and Handley claim that "we need not be theologians to recognize that . . . the works are . . . profoundly Christian insofar as the Christian narrative resonates in the paintings and drawings when one encounters this art."[1] In order to evaluate the claim made by Dillenberger and Handley, I will be exploring Picasso's interest in the imagery and ideas associated with the crucifixion, particularly as this manifested itself in his *Crucifixion* painted in 1930. I claim that although, the subject matter of the *Crucifixion* is drawn from Christian iconography, it contains imagery which is antithetical to Christian beliefs and thought.

Picasso was fascinated with the iconography of the crucifixion throughout his life. Timothy Hilton says that this was a theme "which from the evidence of his drawings must have moved him deeply from early youth to old age . . . being both a violent unspeakable crime and the traditional act of renewal of life."[2] His particular interest in the crucifixion seems to have been a result of three experiences where he closely encountered death. He seems to have become fixated on the crucifixion as a way to understand and express the raw agony and desperation of human emotion resulting from intense experiences with death.

The first of these experiences was the death of his younger sister Conchita from diphtheria when he

[1] Jane Daggett Dillenberger and John Handley, *The Religious Art of Pablo Picasso* (California: University of California Press, 2014), 89.
[2] Ibid., 1.

was fourteen. The young Picasso vowed to give up painting if God should choose to heal her. Her death was a memory he carried with him throughout his life. Dillenberger and Handley suggest that perhaps *Science and Charity*, painted in 1897 two years after his sister's death, was one way he coped with this event. In this painting, Picasso contrasts scientific prognosis and religious conviction both of which seem unable to heal the sick woman.

The second of these experiences was his close contact with the effects of war and defeat. When Picasso came to Barcelona in 1898, Spain was in a time of particularly great upheaval as it had recently been defeated in the Spanish-American war. As Dillenberger and Handley say, "Picasso found himself confronted everywhere with death: death in its aspect of decay and decadence of a dying century: death in the skull-like faces of repatriated soldiers: death in the pervading gloom."[3] In his painting *The End of the Road*, Picasso paints two streams of refugees, wounded, and mothers with young children who file slowly down the path towards a city above which hovers a ghostly winged figure which is often seen as the angel of death.

The third of these experiences and the one which most clearly explains Picasso's interest in the imagery of the crucifixion was the suicide of his friend Carlos Casagemas in 1901. Casagemas committed suicide because of an unfortunate love affair. Picasso was greatly shocked by this event and it affected his art for many years and accounts for his continued interest in the crucifixion. In *The Death of Casagemas*, he depicts his dead friend as though he were mourning in person by his bedside. In the upper right corner of the painting, the flame of a candle, the symbol of hope and life, overshadows the face of Casagemas.

In *Evocation (Burial of Casagemas)*, Picasso again uses the imagery of the crucifixion in order to cope with the death of his friend. In the lower portion of the painting, mourners surround the shrouded body of Casagemas previous to his burial. In the upper portion, a female nude embraces a figure, presumably Casagemas, who is being carried away on a white horse. Significantly, this figure has outstretched arms as though crucified. Somehow through his mourning, Picasso came to understand the suicide death of his friend as carrying the religious implication of a sacrifice over unrequited love. The image of the crucifixion shows up even more clearly in a drawing from 1904 entitled *Christ of Montmartre (Le Suicide)*. This crucifixion is undoubtedly tied to the suicide of Casagemas as the woman who drove him to suicide was a native of Montmartre. In fact, the features of Christ are considered to be those of Casagemas. In this untraditional portrayal of the crucifixion in which the Christ hangs lifelessly over the city, Picasso certainly succeeds in portraying the tragedy and anguish of the event.

This interest in the crucifixion is more clearly realized in his *Crucifixion* painted in 1930 which was heavily influenced by the *Isenheim Alterpiece* of Matthias Grunewald painted in 1512-1516. This influence can be clearly seen in the evolvement of Picasso's iconography in his studies for the *Crucifixion*. In one of Picasso's drawings, Mary Magdalene is bent over backwards with her face pressed against her buttocks. Her interlaced fingers and carefully drawn fingernails are reminiscent of the Mary Magdalene in *The Isenheim Altarpeice* of Matthias Grunewald. On the right the figure pointing with such a strong declarative gesture is clearly inspired by Grunewald's John the Baptist. Both drawings include many architectural details such as the columns and arches which in conjunction with the presence of an audience are reminiscent of the imagery of the bullfight. This reference to the bullfight can again be seen in the similarity of the centurion to the picador with his lance. An interesting and important development in his iconography is Picasso's placement of Christ. Christ himself is no longer the center of attention—we are only shown the bottom of his legs. Picasso is choosing to concentrate instead on the reactions and behavior of the observers. Christ is no longer conveying a sense of suffering for the common good. He has become merely a focal point for the concentration or responses, attention, and actions of the audience in the painting and the viewers of the painting. This placement of Christ as well as the use of imagery reminiscent of the bullfight lends these drawings ritualistic and ceremonial connotations.

In the *Crucifixion* painting, Picasso references

[3] Ibid., 26.

many of his previous paintings such as the trilogy of figures in *The Three Dancers* and the praying-mantis figure in *The Bather*. In the *Crucifixion*, Christ is the center figure with paddle-like hands. His figure is very similar to Cycladic and North African idols. This way of depicting Christ is certainly a visible departure from earlier crucifixions and places the painting in a tradition similar to that of surrealism. The small figure at the top of the ladder is driving the nail into Christ's hand. The inclusion of this figure was not common in crucifixions and so may indicate an excessive brutalism. To the left and right of Christ are figures which Dillenberger sees as representing the moon, the sun, and possibly the Virgin Mary. Ruth Kaufman, another art historian, thinks that these three figures may instead be a reference from *The Three Dancers*. In that painting the figure on the left is often identified as participating in some kind of magical rite. In the *Crucifixion*, she thinks that the figure to the right is likely a reference to cultic Mithraic imagery. This would align with Picasso's use of Mithraic imagery in later works. By placing Christ amidst such cultish figures of primitive religion, Picasso seems to be claiming that Christ is only one religious image among them. On the far left and right are the small Tau crosses of the two thieves. In the left foreground are two crumpled figures who both picture the two thieves and the revivification of Adam and Eve at the foot of the cross and in the right foreground are the soldiers gambling for Christ's garment. The most important thing to note about this painting is that although not so clearly depicted as in the study, Christ is again no longer meant to be the center of attention. This is a great departure from traditional crucifixion iconography.

The influence of Grunewald's Isenheim altarpiece on Picasso's *Crucifixion* can be seen in the emotive physicality which Picasso tries to depict and in the way Picasso chooses to depict Mary Magdalene. Picasso was particularly interested in extreme physical or haptic agony. He was very inspired by Grunewald's Magdalene, one of the most haptically agonized Magdelenes in Western art history. Elsen says that "the passionate sufferings of Mary Magadalene" are what particularly interested Picasso.

There is a long visual tradition of seeing Mary Magdalene as a figure of duality—sinner and saint, prostitute and virgin—but most significantly in Grunewald and Picasso as female and mediator. In Grunewald's altarpiece the Magdalene's role of mediation is represented by her placement on the border between the interior and exterior of the picture plane thereby mediating the action of the viewers and that of the painting. She is also shown as mediator by her placement between the virgin Mary, the representative of the Church, and Christ, the symbol of human salvation. Picasso follows Grunewald in his depiction of the Magdalene as mediator but further seeks to represent her duality by portraying her twice. In the *Crucifixion* she is represented both as the white figure with a claw-like mouth surrounding Christ's wound and as the tall distorted figure on the right. The imagery of the figure licking blood from Christ's wound has a long history in medieval Christian art traditionally representing the sexual and destructive aspects of the female and represents the female side of the conceived duality. The tall figure on the right convulsed in an agony of grief connects the heavens and the earth and creates a connection between humanity and divinity. The tension of the figure's hands, elbows, and drapery recalls the exaggerated posture of grief taken by the Magdalene in Grunewald's altarpiece and represents the side of the mediator in the duality.

In his *Crucifixion* and particularly in his depiction of Mary Magdalene, Picasso is primarily trying to portray the emotive physicality called into existence by the horror of the event rather than the event itself. He is attempting to capture the essence of spiritual emotion and sensual ardor. He sets out to "present his figures as vessels of his own feelings."[4] In his attempt to achieve an emotional response he drastically changes the traditional iconography of the crucifixion primarily by the different use he makes of the figure of Christ.

The authors of *The Religious Art of Pablo Picasso* claim that when looking at Picasso's religious paintings, "we need not be theologians to recognize that . . . the works are . . . profoundly Christian insofar as the Christian narrative resonates in the paintings

[4] Ruth Kaufmann, "Picasso's Crucifixion of 1930," *The Burlington Magazine* 111 (1969): 40.

and drawings when one encounters this art."[5] Ruth Kaufman comes to a much different interpretation of *The Crucifixion*.

In her article *Picasso's Crucifixion of 1930*, she explores the themes found in Picasso's *Crucifixion* from a different perspective than Dillenberger and Handley. Her article addresses the question of whether Picasso's *Crucifixion* is as "enigmatic as most authorities have claimed it to be."[6] She assumes from the beginning that this painting has already been clarified by other authorities as having very little meaning related to Christian sensibilities. She chooses to see the *Crucifixion* within the context of "Surrealist interest in primitive religious practices and art forms as manifestations of man's irrational nature."[7] Her interpretation of Picasso's painting is demonstrated through a critical analysis of his use of imagery. After comparing this painting to his later work *Guernica* she comes to the conclusion that in the *Crucifixion*, Picasso has chosen to look at "human irrationality in the form of hysteria, brutality and sadism—with the same approach derived from Surrealist interests—that of the anthropologist and psychiatrist."[8]

While I do not think that Kauffmann has given a broad enough interpretation to Picasso's work, I think that what she claims about Picasso's intentions is more accurate than Dillenberger and Handley's claim. I disagree with their claim and think that Kaufmann's claim is more deserving of attention. Although Picasso is painting Christian or at least religious subject matter, he alters the traditional Christian iconography of the crucifixion drastically enough so that the Christian narrative does not truly resonate in his *Crucifixion*.

I think that Picasso's *Crucifixion* does not accurately depict the Christian narrative primarily because in it Picasso attempts to desacralize religious imagery. This is in contrast to what seems to be Van Gogh's attempt to sacralize the ordinary by seeking to depict transcendence in the natural world—expressing the agony of Gethsemane without explicitly depicting it. Picasso uses fragmentation in an attempt to reconstruct a reality without transcendence and as he desires it to exist. Nicholas Wolterstorff said that because Picasso organizes and reorganizes what he takes to be the essential elements of reality to fit with his own understanding and ways of seeing, he deifies himself. In comparison with Grunewald he wants to express the raw human emotion intrinsic to religious experience but removed from it.

This desire to create reality as he desires is evidenced in the way Picasso reimagines the traditional iconography of the crucifixion and attempts to secularize the event. In the traditional iconography of the crucifixion, Christ is the center of the *Crucifixion* and gives it its purpose and meaning. The reality of the event is meant to exist apart from the viewer's imagination and exert a tangible influence on the viewer. However, Christ is no longer the center of Picasso's *Crucifixion*. Instead, he becomes a kind of repository for the emotions and reactions of the onlookers of the event. This changes the purpose of the onlookers in the painting from a supportive role to the central focus of the painting. We are no longer asked to join Mary Magdalene in her agony but to observe her suffering and even to manipulate it into an image of our own suffering. We are no longer asked to join in lamenting Christ's death but to use his death as an explanation and validation of our personal feelings. Christ no longer exists as an outside influence on our state of being but as an image onto which we can project our own emotions without testing their validity. This change in the role of the viewer invites us to shape the image of Christ into whatever we desire instead of allowing ourselves to be shaped into the image of Christ. This way of depicting the *Crucifixion* first deifies the artist and in a way deifies the viewer. Instead of depicting Christ as valuable in his true entity, Picasso asks us to view his Christ as a creation of our own emotional state.

Maritain, a twentieth century Thomistic scholar with important work in Aesthetics, writes "the religious quality of a work does not depend upon

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[5] Dillenberger and Handley, *The Religious Art of Pablo Picasso*, 89.
[6] Kaufmann, "Picasso's Crucifixion of 1930," 553.
[7] Ibid., 558.
[8] Ibid., 561.

its subject but its spirit."[9] I agree with Maritain that even though the subject matter of a work of art may outwardly appear to be depicting a certain theology, it can only hold value as a work of religious art if it is trying to express a true theological reality. While Picasso's *Crucifixion* does depict religious subject matter, its spirit is not truly religious in any Christian sense. Because of this, I do not think that Picasso's *Crucifixion* accurately depicts the Christian narrative.

These differing claims concerning where Picasso's *Crucifixion* is to be placed in Christian iconography and tradition introduce important questions for Christians engaging in the art world. How should Christians view such secular depictions of events of important to Christianity? There are many questions which must be asked before an adequately careful approach to viewing works of art in a Christian context can be formulated. The majority of these questions are related to the nature of the relationship between the intention of the artist and the interpretation of the viewer. Must we understand the intention of the artist in order to best view the work of art? If so, can we even determine the artist's intention? Is a work of art intrinsically tied to authorial intent or does it stand alone? Is the value of the work of the artist destroyed if the viewer interprets the work in a manner opposite from that intended by the artist? Can the uninformed viewer come to a certain level of correct understanding of the work? If the intention of the artist does not fit with a Christian world view, can the Christian choose to take what he or she desires from the painting?

I think that these difficulties are particularly manifest when we attempt to determine a Christian interpretation of Picasso's *Crucifixion* as Picasso's intentions are in contradiction to orthodox Christianity. As the subject matter is a *Crucifixion*, is it able to transcend any intention of the artist? How explicitly are Picasso's intentions communicated to the unknowledgeable viewer? As the subject matter is a *Crucifixion* which may not explicitly communicate his intentions to the uninformed viewer, must we completely disregard his work?

These are difficult questions to ask and ones which involve many areas of thought. However, they are questions which Christians must ask and think about in a serious manner. What is needed is serious Christian engagement with such art and careful consideration of methods of interpretation.

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[9] Maritain, Jacques, *Art and Poetry* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1943), 28.