What do we mean when we speak of religious art? Do we mean that religious themes are depicted in the art? Do we mean that religious persons were the artists? Do we mean that some special religious group or church has decided that the art is orthodox and therefore official?

All of these definitions have been used at one time or another to define religious art. The most common definition is that religious art is that which depicts biblical themes. Such art abounds, particularly that done in earlier centuries; but it is still prominent today. The next suggestion —that art is what religious artists do—saw its highest expression in the Renaissance when the church employed great artists who experimented with themes not only from biblical settings but from classical mythology as well. Often in history, "religious art" was what the church officially declared to be religious art. The most extreme example of this style is to be recalled in the Inquisition of the sixteenth century and in iconoclastic excesses right up to the present time.

Now the fact is that the very expression religious art is problematic. Biblical themes may be used in a painting but for irreligious purposes. The religion of the artist is ultimately irrelevant to the quality of his work, so that "faithful" painters may not be any more successful in doing "religious" art than nonbelievers. Some of the most powerful "religious art" of recent times has been done by artists professedly skeptical of the values of religious traditions.

It may well be that the interest that church folk show in defining religious art is but an example of the bad religious habit of the church to divide the religious from the secular, the O.K. and the not O.K., the clean and the impure. Such an attitude is contrary to the highest sense of the Christian view of the world and history and the intention of the gospel. God speaks to the world through its fullness and its roughness as well as from its particularity and its religious traditions.

What do we mean by the word religion? It comes from an ancient Latin word that means simply "to tie things together." Religion is the human quest for coherence and meaning in the understanding of the world. When the most primitive cultures first sought to see some connection between birth and death and the seasons of the year, they were constructing a religious view. When various forms of idolatry became part of their effort to influence the world, they were merely trying to tie all things together, to make sense out of a world that often proved hostile to human feelings. Religion is the generic word for Christianity. It is not synonymous with Christianity. Christianity is a form of religion, although to many of us it is the highest form. Religion is whatever posture is taken toward the world and its events and power that seeks to tie all things together into a coherent and experiential whole.

Now it is easy to see where all the trouble in the definition of the term religious art arises. According to the above argument, art does not have to have biblical subject matter to be "religious." Any felt passion or insight about the world, expressed with power, ought to be considered religious art. In fact, we know that in earlier cultures, religion and art were almost the same thing. The religious buildings, icons, and music of a culture are art; and its art is its religion.

"Art" is the process of expressing in concrete form or event human emotions and aspirations, ranging from the simple joys of being to complex philosophical expression. A work of art is a concrete thing, an event that helps the participant to bridge his experience with that of the artist or the group or the religious values expressed therein. If one accepts this definition, there is no such thing as "art"; there are only the things we make to tell our stories as human beings with religious purposes. Sister Corita Kent, the famous pop artist, once said in a poster, "We have no art here. We only do the best we can."

Somewhere we received the idea that art must be pretty or polished or symmetrical or restful. It may express those possibilities. But, if our definition is correct, it must also at times be ugly, rough, asymmetrical, and jarring. Why? Because men and women sense their world that way some of the time — maybe most of the time.

How then are we to judge whether a work of art is a good piece of art or whether it is religious art? The answer is that this is probably an irrelevant question. The most important question is this: Is the work of art expressive of a powerful view of life and, regardless of subject matter, does it stir some religious sensitivity in the viewer?

The late Paul Tillich, a great Christian theologian, suggested that a work of art could have religious subject matter and still be an irreligious statement. On the other hand, a work of art on a non-biblical subject could be expressed with such power that it would be a profoundly religious painting. These statements may seem contradictory to you. But let us look at them carefully.

Tillich believed that just stating a religious theme was not adequate. A religious painting of this type would seem to carry the entire religious message. The experience of the viewer would be limited to his knowledge of the particular religious scene. On the other hand, a treatment of a comm on event in human life and experience, so touched by human sense that its power still grips the viewer, is unmistakably a "religious" event. It ties things together.

Look at the painting of Holman Hunt's "The Light of the World." It is pretty. It expresses a fine personal sentiment. It is full of rich symbols. It contains religious subject matter. But it falls short of being a powerful statement of human emotion or aspiration. Now look at the painting of Georges Rouault's "Old King." It shows a powerful mo narch who sits with a frail flower in his hand, his jaw tight, as he contemplates the finality of life and the emptiness of temporal power. Which painting is more religious? They are both "religious," but only Rouault's is also great art.

Let us now check our theory by looking at two artistic statements about Jesus. Look at the widely loved "Head of Christ" by Warner Sallman; and then consider the head of Christ by Matthias Grunewald from the Isenheim altarpiece in Germany. Sallman's Christ is theatrical, handsome, European, blond. The full emotional weight of the painting is carried in the flaccid expression and the uplifted eyes. The face is that of a slightly effeminate and untroubled person. In short, it is our culture's expression of confidence in a le ss than powerful, prophetic, and effective Lord. Grunewald, on the other hand, depicts Christ in suffering on the cross. A frightful expression of shock and pain is the dominant theme. The skin of our Lord is bleeding, and the crown of thorns is pressed do wn to draw blood. By superficial standards this is an "ugly" Christ.

The question we must now ask is this: Which of these depictions of the Lord speaks more nearly to our sense of the power and mystery of God's mighty act of Incarnation? Is it the calm, c ool, and effeminate Lord, or is it the victim —the one who took into himself the suffering of the world to reveal God's love? Modern people may want to like Sallman's Christ, but the tragic events of our time make the sixteenth-century Christ of Grunewald m ore powerful. We can identify with this Christ.

This insight brings us to the final problem in our discussion of religious art. Art is so important in the life of man and society that from the beginning of civilization tyrants have tried to control it. Ke ep the horizons of art no wider than the expectations of the rulers and you have kept a people under control. That is why the Nazis in Germany and the Communists in Russia have caused

artists much trouble. That is why any attack on the artist in our cultur e is ultimately an attack on our own freedom to know and believe.

Even Plato suggested that in his perfect Republic the artists ought to be rigorously controlled. We live in a free society; and if artists are free, they can be prophets in that society. Th ey tell us what we may not have the imagination to see and think. They tell us secrets of our own hearts which religious traditions may not permit us to confess. In short they perform a kind of religious task for us all. They keep us open to the spirit of newness and innovation in the quest for meaning in human history and life. Without them, life would be merely the dull routine of what is apparent and not real, what is accustomed and not novel, what is required and not daring.

Religion is life, and the life that is lived without questions and spiritual wrestling is really a dull life indeed. When our minds and religious senses become dull and corrupt, then the glory of God and the blazing intentions of our Lord for our lives are unable to register in ou r daily existence. That is why religion and art are part of the wider quest for meaning. That is why we need them both.