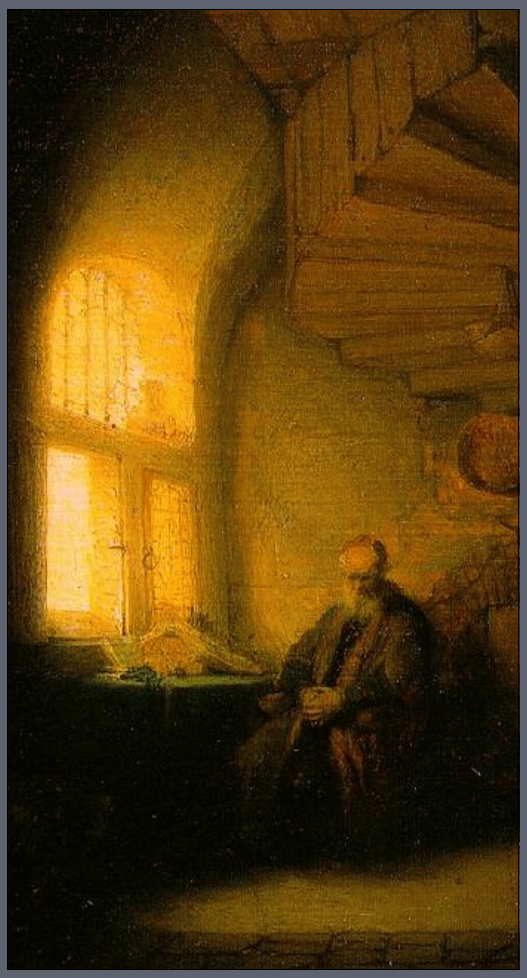

Light and Stillness

An Exploration of the Spirituality of Rembrandt

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Quaker Center
Ben Lomond, California

December 30, 2009

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An Exploration of the Spirituality of Rembrandt

In order to explore the possibilities which art offers as a vehicle for expressing spiritual truth, I am going to draw our attention to the work of three very well known classical people with whom you are already familiar. But we are going to examine their work in a way somewhat different than is commonplace.

The reason for employing well-known examples is to allow us to focus on the spiritual content of the works without needing to overcome the natural barriers which often stem from unfamiliarity where the arts are concerned – unfamiliarity where one has to struggle first with the vocabulary and the medium before being able to respond to the particular vision the artist is offering. It would be particularly difficult to undertake this exercise with respect to *avant-garde* art, refreshing and valuable as much *avant-garde* art admittedly is.

But the familiar also has its pitfalls. If we are so acclimated to seeing something which has become highly conventional, and which has centuries of traditional interpretation and scholarship associated with it, it can be difficult to take a new look.

In this session we are going to focus on the work of the Dutch painter Rembrandt Harmonszoon van Rijn, usually commonly referred to simply as Rembrandt. He made many paintings, drawings and etchings based on Biblical themes, which offer an obvious opportunity to try to detect a particular spiritual slant, or message, which the artist might be trying to convey, and we will spend most of our time with these works, or at least with some of them. But we will also examine some of his secular works for their spiritual content.

All of us know something about Rembrandt, but in order to be sure we are all on the same page, and in order to get some facts in order, let us first take a look at his life in its broad outlines.

Rembrandt was born in the Dutch city of Leiden in 1606 and died in Amsterdam in 1669 at the age of 63.

Thus, he lived well after the Protestant Reformation had gotten under way, but while the strife generated by the breaking apart of the Christian community was still very intense. The brutally destructive Thirty Years War, essentially a struggle between Protestantism and Catholicism, was waged during his lifetime, although its cruelest effects did not reach the Netherlands.

The Netherlands had become a center of Anabaptist, Mennonite, and Calvinist forms of Christianity, and there was a general atmosphere of tolerance which also embraced Jews. The Netherlands was under the sovereignty of Spain, a Catholic country, until 1581, when independence was declared and the Dutch Republic was established. Spain, however, did not recognize Dutch independence until 1648. During the period of conflict with Spain Catholicism was suppressed in the Netherlands. But in spite of the difficulties with Spain the Dutch Republic became a major seafaring and economic power, and during Rembrandt's lifetime Amsterdam evolved into a major commercial center.

Although the Dutch established a constitutional republic with its capital at The Hague when they declared independence from Spain in 1581, the great philosophers of democracy – Locke, Voltaire and Rousseau – were not yet born.

Rembrandt was the ninth son born into a well-to-do family in Leiden. He was given a good basic education and was then enrolled in the University of Leiden. But he apparently dropped out of the university very quickly in favor of painting. After two brief apprenticeships to well-known painters of the day, Rembrandt opened a studio of his own when he was a mere 19 years old. He himself was accepting students by the time he was 21. In 1631, when he was 25 years old, he moved to the rapidly developing commercial city of Amsterdam and pursued a career as a portraitist with great success.

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Rembrandt:
Saskia van
Uylenburg, 1634

When he was 28 years old he married Saskia van Uylenburg. His wife also came from a well-to-do family. In the same year he became a burgess of Amstersdam (that is somewhat like being a member of the City Coucil, or municipal governing authority). He circulated in establishment circles and exerted his own power and influence. In 1639, when Rembrandt was 33 years old, the couple purchased and moved to a prominent house in what was becoming the Jewish quarter of Amsterdam. The house is now a museum.

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Although Rembrandt remained a busy and highly regarded painter for his entire life, the promising trajectory of his early years did not last. Saskia's and Rembrandt's first three children died in infancy. Their fourth child, a son named Titus, was born only a year before his mother's death. With Saskia's death in 1642, when Rembrandt was 36 years old, his life, which had seemed like a triumphal procession up to that point, took a different turn. He became acquainted with loneliness and grief. Titus' nurse became Rembrandt's lover. She later sued him for breach of promise and was awarded palimony. Sometime later Rembrandt took up with a woman much younger than himself, and when she bore him a daughter without the benefit of marriage, she was put on trial by the Dutch Reformed Church. The outcome was that she was banned from receiving communion.

The affluence which characterized Rembrandt's years with Saskia somehow evaporated. The painter's financial troubles pose something of a mystery to historians. His income from painting ought to have enabled him to live well.

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Rembrandt: Self-Portrait, 1661

There is speculation that he made bad investments. He was an avid collector, and he apparently accumulated a huge assemblage of paintings and antiquities, as well as collections of stones and minerals, and even some Japanese armor. All this was eventually sold to settle debts, but the return from the sale was disappointing. He had to abandon the great house he and Saskia had bought. His trouble with women seems to have been due in part to his need to avoid marriage so as to maintain control of Titus' trust fund, which Saskia's will required him to relinquish upon remarriage. Although sales of his paintings remained brisk, the troubles with money and women caused the former burgess to be marginalized by the Amsterdam power elite. His indebtedness caused him to be expelled from the painters' guild, and he could no longer function commercially as an artist. To get around this Rembrandt's mistress and his son set up a business as art-dealers with Rembrandt as an employee. Titus and the mistress both pre-deceased the painter himself. As I have indicated, once Saskia died his life seemed to come unglued, and he was afflicted with troubles for the remainder of his days. Although no longer welcome in elite society during the second half of his life, a small group of friends remained loyal until the end. He died in 1669.

In the early twentieth century art experts claimed Rembrandt had produced over 600 paintings, nearly 400 etchings, and about 2,000 drawings. A controversial Rembrandt Research Project launched in the 1960s whittled the number of paintings down to 300 from the original 600, and reduced the authentic etchings from 400 to 300.

These dramatic reductions in numbers does not mean that there were many forgeries floating around, although perhaps some were forgeries. But Rembrandt may have signed paintings done by his students and by members of his studio who worked under his supervision, as was then common practice. In fact, in recent times, art experts have begun to attribute parts of some of these demoted paintings back to Rembrandt, under the assumption that he may have executed the more difficult portions of some works himself and then turned the painting over to proteges to finish. All this is made more difficult by the fact that Rembrandt deliberately trained people in his studio to paint just like he himself did (after all, that was presumably why they were studying with him), by the fact that he changed styles several times in the course of his career, and by the fact that he signed his paintings in several different ways and sometimes did not sign them at all. For our purposes we are not going to be concerned with these controversies over the actual creator of different works, since we are not art dealers or museum curators concerned with appreciating and depreciating prices. We are going to be concerned with a work of art as a vehicle for spiritual communication, no matter who painted it.

Rembrandt's works can be categorized in several different ways. There are paintings, etchings, and drawings. There are landscapes, portraits, and narrative paintings. (Narrative paintings illustrate an episode in some well-known historical, Biblical or mythological story). Some art historians subdivide the portraits into pictures of other people and self-portraits. There are over forty paintings which are self-portraits.

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Rembrandt:
Self-portrait, 1655

This does not appear to be some sort of narcissistic indulgence, for his renditions have a certain brutally honest and pitiless quality.

Rembrandt produced a great number of paintings devoted explicitly to religious themes. As has been mentioned, he lived in a Protestant society where the austerity of Calvinism was a strong influence. Elsewhere, the Roman Catholic Church had launched a Counter-Reformation through which it sought to reassert its dominance within the Christian community by mobilizing the same sort of resources which had characterized its hey-day in the Renaissance.

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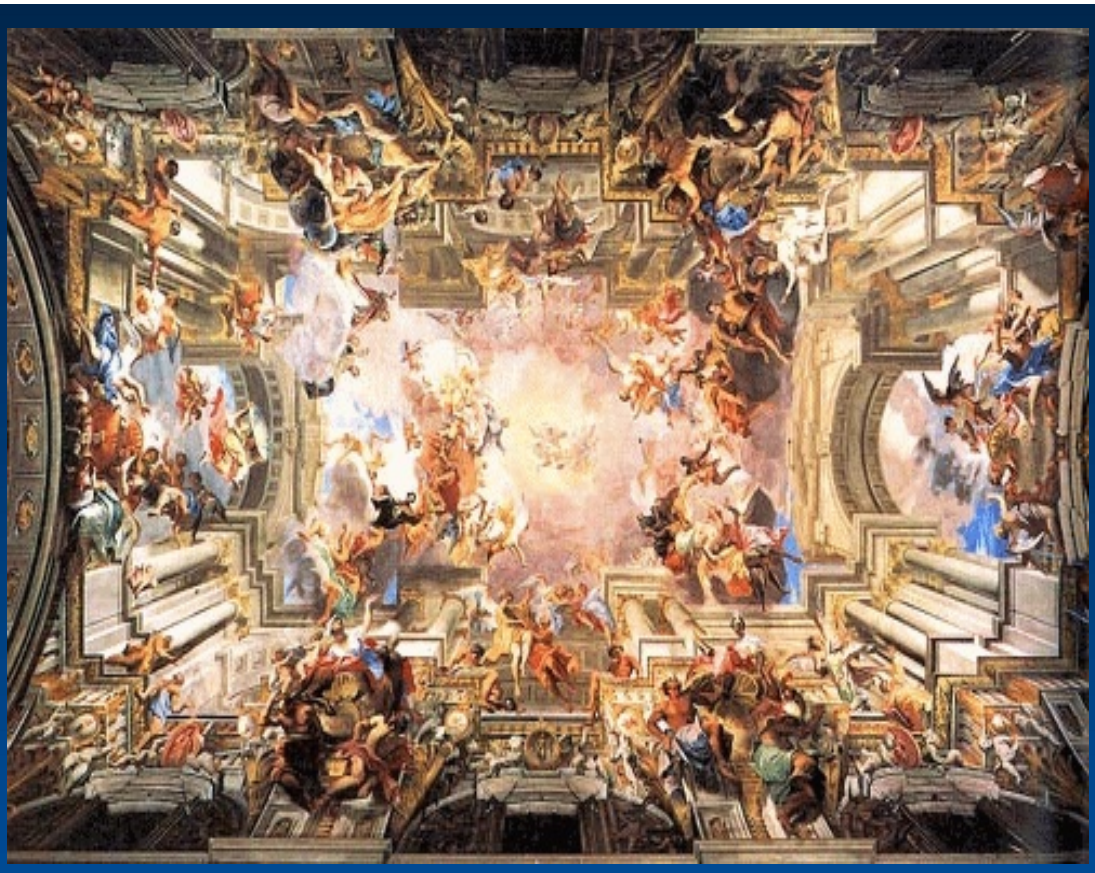

Fra Andrea Pozzo: The Glorification of Saint Ignatius, 1694

It deployed skilled artists to cover cathedrals, churches and monasteries with triumphal depictions of the Christian story.

In contrast, the Protestantism of the Netherlands, stemming at least in part from a reaction to the papal extravagances of the High Renaissance, favored more plain ecclesiastical settings.

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Emmanuel de Witte:
Interior of a
Calvinist Church,
circa 1660

This is a depiction of the interior of a Calvinist church by the painter Emmanuel de Witte. While it is not quite as simple as a New England congregationalist church, it is relatively austere.

One Dutch painter of the Seventeenth Century complained that, since the churches were closed to their work, artists had to content themselves with lowly things for their subjects. This complaint is somewhat overstated, for later we shall see that Rembrandt made a good deal out of so called "lowly things." But it is true that in Rembrandt's time and place great religious themes play a very minor role in the commerce of art, and Dutch painters, aside from Rembrandt himself, rarely took Biblical themes as their subjects. The Dutch Reformed Church, unlike early Friends, did not condemn religious painting outright. But the Church did not provide commissions, and private people mainly ordered portraits. So a painter had no reason to choose religious subjects other than his interest in them. It is presumed that Rembrandt's large output of Biblical paintings, etchings and drawings were done out of his love for the subject rather than for commercial purposes.

Peter Paul Rubens:
The Raising of the Cross, 1610

There was a great Catholic Counter-Reformation painter in Antwerp, a Catholic area not far from Amsterdam. Today, Antwerp is a mere two hours drive from Amsterdam. This great Catholic Counter-Reformation painter was named Peter Paul Rubens. Rubens was a generation older than Rembrandt, but his career overlapped Rembrandt's life by 34 years. I am going to be using Rubens as something of a foil to highlight the alternative direction taken by Rembrandt's sensibility.

Like many of his Baroque colleagues, Rubens' work emphasized movement, color and sensuality. Even his depiction of so somber an event as the raising of the cross expresses a kind of frenetic energy and ebullience. A very buff Jesus Christ seems not so much the worse for his ordeal. Here is an example of how the spiritual content of a work of art can exist somewhat independently of its literal content. As is often the case with art, which can express something which words cannot, one ought not try to paraphrase what the spiritual impact of a painting like this is, exactly. But one does recognize how it could serve to reinforce in the faithful the idea that they belonged to a religious community which was on the winning side of a cosmic drama, a cosmic drama the hero of which is Jesus Christ.

Rembrandt: Christ in the Storm in the Sea of Galilee, 1633

Rembrandt's early Biblical works seem to emulate Counter-Reformationists like Rubens. Here is his depiction of "Christ in the Storm in the Sea of Galilee." This is a painting with highly refined brushwork and a lot of dramatic movement. The painting dates from 1633, relatively early in Rembrandt's career.

Now let us look at a later painting, based on the Gospel account of Jesus' post resurrection appearance at Emmaus. You will remember that a few days after the Crucifixion two disciples were walking along the road to Emmaus, lamenting the disastrous turn of events and wondering at reports that Jesus' tomb was discovered to be empty. A stranger joins them, and stays with them for the evening meal. While sitting at the table the travelers suddenly recognize the stranger who has joined them as none other than Jesus Christ himself.

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Rembrandt: Christ at Emmaus, 1648

As time passed beauty and virtuosity ceased to be ends in themselves for Rembrandt. He realizes that beauty must serve something else if it is not to be an empty shell, falsifying the reality of life. If beauty accepts this part of serving truth, it acquires a new substance through which the eternal shines.

Let us compare the "Storm" painting with "Christ at Emmaus." Here Rembrandt portrays the character of Jesus without any concrete action or noisy stage-like effects. A moment before this person appeared to be just another traveler about the break bread with two fellow pilgrims. But here, now, he is the resurrected Christ whose tender presence fills the room. Without any commotion Rembrandt convinces us that we are witnessing the moment when the pilgrims recognize who their companion really is. A great calm and a magic atmosphere prevail, and we are drawn into the sacred mood of the scene by the most sensitive suggestion of the emotion of the figures, as well as by the mysterious light which envelopes them. Nothing could be further from the conspicuous theatricality of Rubens or of the earlier Rembrandt.

Rembrandt: The Blinding of Samson, 1636

Here, again, is a picture from Rembrandt's earlier period: "The Blinding of Samson." Typically, it shows Rembrandt reaching for the dramatic, for visual tension and movement.

Now let us consider again how Rembrandt moved away from this approach. We can do this by considering two versions of the same subject.

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Rembrandt: The Presentation of the Christ Child in the Temple, 1631

An elderly man named Simeon appears in the Gospel according to Luke. Mary and Joseph are bringing Jesus, their firstborn, to the Temple for dedication according to the Law. There was a man in Jerusalem who is described as being righteous and devout. The Gospel text says that Simeon was waiting for the consolation of Israel, with the Holy Spirit upon him. The Holy Spirit promised him that he would see Israel's savior before he died. Moved by the Holy Spirit, Simeon went to the Temple courts to wait. When Joseph and Mary arrived with the infant Jesus, Simeon took him in his arms, recognizing in the infant the one who was promised.

In Rembrandt's 1631 version of this event, we see majesty, drama and color. Although there is not the exaggerated motion of some other early works, Rembrandt fully exploits the theatrical possibilities, showing the magnificent Temple architecture receding loftily into the shadows, with the action occurring in a dramatically lit island of light showing everyone in magnificent costumes. Simeon is shown with an excited, ecstatic reaction, which contrasts somewhat with the spirit of the terse Biblical passage.

Rembrandt: Simeon with the Christ Child in the Temple, 1661

In contrast, in his later painting, Rembrandt no longer seeks to exploit the Bible, but to interpret it. He no longer inserts himself between the Biblical word and the spectator, nor directs attention to technical devices, to his own skill with the means of artistic expression. He seeks to allow the Bible to speak for itself, where Simeon says: "Lord now you are letting your servant depart in peace," the sort of sentiment not readily brought to mind by the pageantry of the earlier work.

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Peter Paul Rubens: Jesus Meeting Mary Magdalene on the Way to the Crucifixion, 1618

Consider now Peter Paul Rubens' depiction of Jesus meeting Mary Magdalene while on the way to his crucifixion. Simon of Cyrene holds the cross, although Jesus himself seems not much in need of assistance. Ruben seeks to show divine qualities by heightening, intensifying and exaggerating human qualities. Here Christ seems a superman.

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Peter Paul Rubens: Christ Bearing the Cross, 1634

Even where the suffering Christ is explicitly portrayed in Counter-Reformation art – here, again, we are looking at Rubens, in this case his "Christ Carrying the Cross" – our eye needs to search out the Christ figure amid the pageantry of mounted troops making grand gestures and waving banners. We feel we are witnessing a triumphal procession, as the brutal fact of an execution seems forgotten.

Rembrandt, apparently taking his cues entirely from his private reading fo the Bible rather than from any ecclesiastical authority, either Protestant or Catholic, strives for a much more paradoxical depiction of Christ. He depicts Christ not by deifying human nature, but by showing that God became humbled in his human form.

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Rembrandt: Christ Presented to the People, 1655

Jesus' humanity is not a demonstration of God's almighty power and glory. Using his incredible technique, Rembrandt portrays a Christ whose human form is an insignificant figure without any particular beauty or power, a form which veils rather than reveals divine majesty. Here where Jesus is presented to the people who shout for the liberation of Barrabas, the Christ figure looks more insignificant than the people around him. And yet, if we look just a little longer, that weak, faltering being becomes the only really firm one, and all the other strong and substantial figures are uncertain and almost uprooted beside him.

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Rembrandt: The Three Crosses, 1653

Moreover, in Rembrandt, the terror and desolation of the crucifixion is not masked, as it tends to be in Rubens. Rembrandt is as realistic as the Gospels, and in no way relieves the events of their brutality and scandal.

Between 1648 and 1661 Rembrandt painted no less than eleven portraits of Jesus – that is to say, paintings which represent the head of Christ alone. It is practically impossible to find any precedent in the history of art for these paintings.

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Rembrandt:
Head of Christ,
1650

This is not the majestic Christ of the Byzantines or Michelangelo, nor the Christ which above all is to be pitied, as in so much medieval art, nor is it the classic youth of Renaissance painters, nor the heroic figure of the Counter-Reformation.

First, of course, is that for the first time in hundreds of years of Christian art we have a Jesus who looks as if he might just possibly be Jewish. Second, this is a very human Christ. There is an earthy reality here. This is a Christ who has come to be with and among ordinary people, who is at once meek and lowly of heart, and yet who calls with unmistakable authority all who are weary and burdened. Everything he sees he recognizes and takes in, forgiving and blessing as he does so.

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Raphael: The Transfiguration of Christ, 1515

This is a painting called "The Transfiguration of Christ" by Raphael, an artist of the High Renaissance known for the perfection and grace of his paintings and drawings. Upon seeing it, an art lover once asked, "In this miracle of his, does Raphael believe in anything at all? Yes, he believes above all that the accurate choice and arrangements of the figures and the felicitous depiction of drapery is supremely important."

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Rembrandt: Christ Preaching, 1652

Unlike the Renaissance and Counter-Reformation artists, Rembrandt did not try to convey the nature of Jesus through outward show and magnificence. To do so would be to fail to recognize the true meaning of faith. The true reality of the incarnation for Rembrandt cannot be communicated by direct visual impressions. Here we see a another depiction of a rather ordinary Jesus whose significance is hinted at only indirectly in the way people are listening to him. The novelty in the technique of Rembrandt is the way he indicates that this frail and insignificant figure, without beauty or power, is nevertheless the one upon whom everything seems to depend.

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Rembrandt: Christ Healing the Sick, circa 1659 (The Hundred Guilder Print).

The official title for this etching is "Christ Healing the Sick." Its popular title is "The Hundred Guilder Print." In reality the etching should simply be called "Matthew Chapter 19" because Rembrandt conveys the entire contents of that chapter in one image.

The Gospel account tells us of great multitudes following Jesus seeking healing. What appears to be a stream of human misery is groping its way towards Jesus from a corridor to the right. Social differences disappear before Jesus. The crowd includes people in all walks of life, with the wealthy side by side with beggars. All are expecting a miracle from Jesus, as revealed by the fervent prayer of the woman looking up to Jesus with her hands clasped, and the gesture from the blind woman on the pallet.

The picture shows the moments after the Pharisees had challenged Jesus with a trick question. They have turned away from Jesus in the upper left, rejecting his blasphemy. One of them is smiling ironically, another is looking indignant. They are beginning to ask themselves how they can get rid of this troublesome fellow.

This is also the Chapter in which Jesus rebuked the disciples for trying to keep children away from him. One woman is bringing her child, while another mother

is hesitant, being pulled forward by her son tugging on her skirt. Peter, at Jesus right hand, is about to turn the mother and infant away, but Jesus blesses the mother and child. The rich young man, who was told to sell what he owned and give the proceeds to the poor, is sitting depressed in his finery, with his chin in his hand, since he is too tied to his riches to give them up. There is one person, a stalwart figure in the foreground at the far left, whom we do not recognize from the Gospel story. His feet planted firmly, as if rooted to the ground while both hands clasp his walking stick, he seems to represent the eternal looker-on, the one who is neutral. Nothing moves this man, as he stands rooted and impassive in the midst of the excitement around him.

In the composition, Jesus is the key figure. He is placed in the center, and the flow of movement is either towards him, as is the case with the sick people and the parents and children, or away from him, as with the Pharisees. The people not moving, the neutral on-looker and the rich young man, we must assume will move away. Although it is not a conventional halo, light emanates from Jesus' head. But beyond this Rembrandt does not feel it is his duty to persuade the spectator. Neither Jesus' appearance nor his action invite people to recognize him as a Saviour. He is standing amidst the people without any visible difference, without an obvious confirmation of who he is. In a century when propaganda replaced witness, when Christian art was mainly concerned with proving Christ's divine nature by outward signs, Rembrandt seems content to show Jesus in the shape of a servant, constantly resisting the temptation to paint an obvious and glorified Christ.

Before offering some general conclusions about Rembrandt's art as a vehicle of spiritual communication, it will be useful to look at some portraits – secular works not explicitly related to Biblical themes.

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Rembrandt:
Johannes
Wtenbogaert, 1633

Rembrandt's Biblical works have elicited much enthusiasm. Many publishers have come out with so-called "Rembrandt Bibles" – Bibles illustrated with the hundreds of paintings, etchings and drawings Rembrandt produced on Biblical themes. Yet it is with respect to his work as a portraitist that Rembrandt has also accomplished something astonishing and quite unequaled before or since, something which, although bearing no direct reference to religion, nevertheless seems to convey an attitude of deep and significant spiritual import. Relying on our supposition that the value of artistic communication resides in its ability to convey something beyond what mere words can do, it would be a mistake to try to paraphrase the spiritual message contained in each of these paintings. But perhaps there are a few things which can be said which at least point to the sort of experience these paintings offer to many who see them.

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Rembrandt: Woman with a Pink, circa 1660

The first thing that is notable is that, although a lot of Rembrandt's commissions as a portraitist were for people of financial means, his portrait work actually embraces people of all walks of life, and he expresses the same compassion and sympathy for all his subjects, regardless of their wealth, age or gender. In a time when art was wholly given over to depicting great mythological figures, or people of aristocratic lineage and great wealth, or significant heroes of history, in Rembrandt's work, where equal tenderness and skill is applied to everyday contemporary subjects from all walks of life, we seem to get a glimmering of the democratic attitudes which would eventually burst on the scene but which had not yet been articulated. It might, perhaps, be to much to make of Rembrandt a precursor of anything so specific as political democracy, but there is something very riveting about the universality of his empathy for the human condition.

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Rembrandt: Man with a Magnifying Glass, circa 1660

There is something uncanny about the way Rembrandt seems to capture the personality of his subjects. Did he only capture their mood on a particular day? Or do these painted visages successfully capture a summation of the sitter's character? It is impossible for us to know. But whether one or the other, these paintings seem to most viewers to represent a certain non-judgmental, loving embrace of the subject, an embrace in which the material and the spiritual seem to be seamlessly melded together. In this, the paintings seem to affirm that profound spirituality is available all about us, had we the capacity to see it. The inbreaking of the divine is not something which occurred only in heroic ages of the past. Perhaps, through his art, Rembrandt is managing to show us how humanity might have been regarded and understood by Jesus or the Buddha, had they been walking the earth in seventeenth century Holland.

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Rembrandt: Girl in a Picture Frame, 1641

Rembrandt: Old Woman Cutting Her Nails, 1658

Rembrandt: The Mill, 1648

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It will be useful too look at two other paintings before I offer a conclusion

Some of you may have seen this painting, or reproductions of it, where the sky has a distinctly yellowish or orange cast, as if it were a sunset. The painting has recently been cleaned, and the former coloration was discovered to be due to many layers of varnish. I originally saw this painting before it was cleaned in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. On a recent visit I sought to see it as refurbished; alas, it was not on display. But I did confirm with a docent that the National Gallery still owns the painting, although she did not know if it is out on loan or simply rotating through storage.

Pictures of windmills are hardly unusual in Dutch painting. So, too, is the incorporation of homely scenes nestled in the landscape a popular convention. Here we have a wife and child apparently coming to the shore to greet a returning fisherman, while a suitor chats with a young woman doing laundry. This same sort of convention occurs in Chinese ink paintings, where pavilions sheltering various human activities are nestled among the mountains, waterfalls and pine forests. But more than other artists, Rembrandt's vision here seems to tie

intimately together these prosaic everyday human scenes with the vastness of the cosmos suggested by the sweep of sky framing the windmill. This sense of unity between the human estate in its humblest manifestations and the vastness of the creation is the essence of the mystical experience, which often manifests in a moment of great, concentrated stillness such as seems to be represented by this painting.

Rembrandt: The Philosopher, 1632

Here is an indoor scene which conveys a similar spirit. While kitchen chores are carried out in the lower right, and a stairway suggests prosaic domestic quarters above, the philosopher meditates in an island of light created by dramatic sun rays. The sun rays suggest the vastness of the heavens outside the window and the scope of the thinker's ruminations. Once again we sense a great, concentrated stillness, in spite of the activity in the painting.

Rembrandt devoted much of his effort to explicitly religious paintings. Most artists who did this were commissioned by religious authorities, and were hired to make a point which the ecclesiastical officials desired. Rembrandt is unusual in that he produced a large body of religious work which, as far as anyone can tell, was prompted entirely by his own inner leadings. It is clear that he was a dedicated reader of the Bible, and his subjects are drawn widely from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, although as time went on he was drawn more and more to Gospel stories. As mentioned, his Biblical interests are far-ranging enough that

many publishers have brought out so-called Rembrandt Bibles – Bibles illustrated entirely with the artist's paintings, etchings and drawings.

Every individual painting which an artist produces, if it has any merit, elicits a response from us in its own right. What other works and artist may or may not have produced which may be situated elsewhere are irrelevant to the relationship between a viewer and the object before him or her. But, obviously, when an artist produces a large body of work on religious themes it is also tempting to look at the *ouvre* as a whole to see if any consistent message, or any evolutionary pattern, is disclosed. We have already referred to one evolutionary pattern in terms of Rembrandt's technique – he evolved in his brushwork from very meticulous and finely wrought surfaces to brushwork which was at once more spontaneous and expressive, but also coarser. And, as has just been mentioned, his interest focused more intensively on Gospel stories as time went on.

People have tried to analyze Rembrandt's work to see if they could detect a theology, or a clue to the painter's sectarian sympathies at a time in history when religious strife provided the prevailing political and social context which most people experienced. In this connection several things have been noted about Rembrandt's choice of subjects. While his interest ranged over the whole scope of the Bible, he did not handle at all certain obvious themes, such as the Last Supper, while he depicted the meal at Emmaus at least 18 times. He treated the story of Abraham thirty-one times, and the parable of the Good Samaritan fifteen times. Although he depicts John the Baptist, he shows him preaching rather than baptizing. There is no Last Judgement and no Wedding Feast at Cana.

There is no record of Rembrandt having been a member of the Dutch Reformed Church, a Calvinist-oriented denomination which was the pre-eminent religious movement in the Netherlands during Rembrandt's time. When his mistress was summoned to an ecclesiastical trial for bearing a child of Rembrandt's out of wedlock, Rembrandt was not similarly summoned, although he was known to be the father. This might be assumed to be part of the double standard which often obtains in such situations, but scholars note that other men of the time were rebuked under similar circumstances, and so it must be assumed that Rembrandt, not being a member of the Church, avoided facing its jurisdiction .

Was he, then, a Mennonite? The Mennonite movement was strong in the Netherlands in Rembrandt's time. The Mennonites were one of several branches of religious dissenters known as Anabaptists. Anabaptists opposed infant baptism, claiming that only adult Baptism occurred in the Bible. But their concern in this regard was not only based on a scriptural technicality. They sought a community of believers whose faith was living and authentic, and they thought this would only be possible if people were baptized, or inducted, when they were mature enough to make a decision based upon a sincere commitment. But this was a radical political statement as well. Remember that all this was occurring at a time when our familiar concept of the separation of Church and state was unknown, and, in fact, all government claimed legitimacy on theological or religious grounds. Rulers asserted their authority in the name of God. Quarrels

over religion and over the legitimacy of the prevailing power structure were inseparable. It was assumed that all citizens would belong the church to which the monarch owed allegiance. Thus, the Anabaptist suggestion that adults had the right to choose their religious affiliation based on conviction sounded extraordinarily subversive to Catholic, Lutheran and Calvinist authorities alike, which is why the Anabaptists were vigorously persecuted almost everywhere. The tolerant atmosphere of the Netherlands' was extraordinarily unusual for its time.

Rembrandt was know to have Mennonite friends, and he painted portraits of several Mennonite leaders. Certainly he was familiar with their religious attitudes, but there is no record of his having belonged to a Mennonite congregation. Since the Mennonites practiced communion with bread and wine, there would seem to be no reason to suppose that Rembrandt's overlooking of so traditional a theme as the Last Supper represented a particularly Mennonite slant. Although some people have argued vigorously in favor of a Mennonite agenda in Rembrandt's paintings, others have been unable to detect that the Biblical themes and traditions which Rembrandt omitted are in any way alien to Mennonite thinking, nor are the themes Rembrandt preferred unacceptable to the Dutch Reformed perspective. In short, it is my own view that attempts to detect a denominational commitment from Rembrandt's choice of subjects or from his way of treating these subjects is simply inconclusive, except that it would seem that his method of privately contemplating the scriptural text and arriving at his own interpretation of it is a quintessentially Protestant rather than a Catholic approach.

Rembrandt sometimes put himself into his Biblical paintings. For example, in one painting he is one of the people crucifying Jesus, and in another he is one of the grief stricken followers of Jesus managing the descent from the Cross. While he lent ethnic realism to his Biblical scenes by borrowing Jewish neighbors to pose as such people as Abraham and Jesus, he also engaged in a kind of counter-realism by dressing Biblical characters in the costumes of his own time, or perhaps in the dress of a mere hundred years earlier. It seems unlikely that this can be attributed to archeological naivete. Whether or not Rembrandt had an explicit didactic purpose in doing this or not, it does seem to suggest that he thought of Biblical dramas as ongoing realities in which we all participate as both the good people and the evil-doers, and not as one-time events in a distant past, the sole responsibility for which belongs to ancient people entirely other than ourselves. Rembrandt seems to be preoccupied with the availability of the Holy Spirit to those ready to respond, and to be disinterested in sacraments – Baptism and Communion specifically – as a channel for connecting to this Holy Spirit. It would be far-fetched to call Rembrandt a Quaker painter, but Friends can feel a kinship with the painter's approach. Spiritual illumination, Rembrandt seems to be saying, is available to all those with a capacity to respond to the world about them in a certain elevated way, without a need for outward sacraments.

But all these issues of a theological agenda which might be revealed by his selection of subjects, or the reason why he put himself in Biblical paintings or dressed the characters as he did, and whether he can be characterized as a

Dutch Reformed painter or a Mennonite, relate to what might be called the didactic possibilities of art, art which seeks to re-convey knowledge which can be explicitly expressed in words and where the function of art is to make what is already obvious more obvious, or, perhaps, more persuasive. But we are interested in art as a vehicle for communication, in particular, spiritual communication, in ways that transcends mere words. Most sensitive people concur that Rembrandt accomplishes something very unique and powerful in this impossible-to-paraphrase sphere of communication. Is there anything at all we can say, however indirectly it may be necessary to do, so as to suggest of what it is that this special communication consists in Rembrandt's case?

For me, this subtler mode of spiritual communication which Rembrandt accomplishes is a quality shared equally by his Biblical and his secular paintings. As I mentioned earlier, all the works of his mature years express a distilled sort of stillness, and invite the viewer to a present-centeredness, to a vision of the interpenetration of the material and the spiritual, and to a feeling of compassion and unity with respect to all things great and small. This is the essence of the mystical experience. For however ordinary we may think our lives, or however ordinary we regard any particular situation, we are always on the threshold of some mysterious radiance in the profound stillness of a now where there are no doubts or anxieties, but only a compelling capacity to surprise and exceed ourselves.

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December 30, 2009
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