

Aqua Lateris Christi, Lava Me: Religious Symbolism and Humanism in Contemporary Thought

Robert Nelson Besana

Introduction

I have been involved in academia for the past two decades, currently holding the Executive Director position in the School of Multimedia and Arts at NU-Asia Pacific College. In addition to my academic pursuits, I actively pursue my career as a visual artist. On March 24, 2024, I participated in a group exhibit entitled *Waterscapes*, organized by The Center for Art, New Ventures and Sustainable Development (CANVAS) in collaboration with Manila Water and Manila Water Foundation. I submitted an artwork that I believed aligned perfectly with the theme, reflecting my personal perspective and artistic style I developed over the years.

The show's central theme is centered on water, utilizing art to raise awareness and foster appreciation for this vital resource that is frequently overlooked yet plays a pivotal role in our environment, history, economy, and future as an archipelagic nation. More than one hundred artists were invited to express their reflections on the essence of water - its fluidity, tranquil qualities, and indispensable role in supporting life. They were also challenged to incorporate elements related to water in their artworks. Consequently, each piece represents a fusion of artistic creativity and environmental advocacy.

The title of my entry is *Aqua Lateris Christi, Lava me*, derived from the Latin prayer *Anima Christi*. In English, it means "water from the side of Christ, cleanse me." This phrase came to mind immediately when I learned about the theme, but I knew I needed to discuss it with the curator, fellow visual artist Jaime Jesus Pacena

II. I explained that I intended to create a piece with strong religious symbolism, depicting Christ's suffering with water flowing from the wound on his side. Jaime supported my idea, noting its connection to water and relevance to the upcoming Holy Week and the exhibit's opening on Holy Tuesday.

The painting is created on a medium-sized canvas measuring 40 inches in height and 30 inches in width and mounted on a museum board. I utilized oil as my primary medium for this piece. The artwork mostly features a gray-scale color palette, with the addition of gold oil paint for the slashes incorporated into the main element. These slashes are a recurring motif in my body of work, present in most pieces with a religious theme, often accompanied by red roses symbolizing prayer, specifically the rosary. Although the roses are not included in this work, they have been a symbol I have repeatedly used in past pieces.

Creative Process

The exhibit's title, *Waterscape*, sparked my interest, especially in its religious connotations. I reflected on various biblical stories involving water, such as the transformation of water into wine at the wedding in Cana, Jesus walking on water in front of Peter, and the symbolic act of washing the apostles' feet. These stories highlighted the significance of water as a conduit for miracles and a representation of Christ's role as the redeemer of humanity from sin through his sacrificial death on the cross. I was particularly drawn to the image of water flowing from Christ's wound, mingled with his holy blood. This led me to choose the suffering Christ image as the focal point of my work.

But coming to Jesus, when they saw that He had already died, they did not break His legs; but one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately there came out blood and water.

~ John 19:33-34

I began by sketching some ideas and then used Midjourney, an AI (Artificial Intelligence) text-to-image platform, to create an image. I have used this AI technology for my last seven artworks, three of which have been exhibited. My initial text prompt was to depict Christ in a state of suffering with water flowing from his side. However, I encountered difficulty in getting the AI to portray this accurately. Instead of showing the water flowing from Christ's side, most of the generated images depicted Christ's crucifixion on a rainy afternoon. One image even showed water coming from an external source rather than from Christ himself. I admit that my initial text prompt may have been too simple: "photo of crucified Christ with water flowing from his side."



Figure 1. Robert Nelson Besana, *Aqua Lateris Christi, Lava me*, 2024. Oil on canvas (40 x 30 inches). Image courtesy of the artist.

How can I effectively use an AI text-to-image generator? I have not delved deeply into prompt engineering before, as I typically rely on traditional mediums for my art. However, I see AI art being used as a standalone art form, while in my studio, it serves as a reference for my traditional oil paintings on canvas. Despite multiple iterations of my text prompt, I could not achieve the desired image direction. Realizing this early on, I adjusted the artwork directly after further experimentation.

Over the past years, my focus in oil painting has been on creating a fresh and fluid application of the medium. I aim for a thin viscosity in my paint, particularly in the initial layer, to allow the pigment to flow smoothly on the canvas. During the first stage of my process, I integrate various painting techniques, starting with very thin layers to quickly cover the area. This approach often results in dripping paints and splatters, which help blend the values together. I use these techniques when sketching the image. I use a mixture of odorless solvent and Galkyd Gel as the medium for my paintings. The ratio I follow is five parts solvent to one part Galkyd to achieve a fluid consistency with my pigments. This allows me to easily employ techniques like splattering and dripping that are typically only achievable with thin paints.

After establishing the general form, I added more depth to my painting using less medium. Working in grayscale allowed me to focus on texture and form without the distraction of color. I intentionally blurred the edges to achieve a softer look, as I prefer avoiding harsh lines in my artwork. The painting was completed over two to three days. Once fully dried, I added the gold slashes to the piece. While I typically do not apply varnish, I always oil out my works once they have dried to ensure a consistent finish. For the oil out process, I mix one part solvent with one part Galkyd to achieve a glossy finish.

Religious Symbolism

The parable shared by our adviser for a Catholic organization in high school has stuck with me ever since. It raised a thought-provoking question: “Why do sailors surrounded by water on the vast sea constantly feel thirsty?” We were able to delve deeper into the meaning by adding, “Fresh water is needed to quench their thirst.” The parable highlights the allegory of the impossibility of drinking salt water, symbolizing the insatiable longing for worldly things represented by the vast ocean. Consuming these material goods will never provide satisfaction, only leaving a person wanting more, increasing dissatisfaction that may even cause illness. It is essential to bring fresh water on the journey to survive. Fresh water not only quenches thirst but also cleanses bodies of impurities. The water that flowed from the side of Christ symbolizes this purification. It washes away sins and heals souls, demonstrating that only the word of God can satisfy spiritual needs.

The reason for creating my artwork, *Aqua Lateris Christi, Lava me*, conforms, as I intend, to the generally accepted understanding of religious symbolism. Symbols are representations of meanings beyond the perceptible objects utilized. In religious symbols, they are visual expressions of how the world is conceptualized, which serves as a medium and communicant of another world, i.e., of the imperceptible but conceivable transcendent realm.

Religious symbols are expressions of sacred meanings. Through symbols, the empirical experience becomes spiritual and manifested in visual form. Since religious symbols are visible objects, they are never detached from this world. This understanding forms bridges between the world and the sacred. As Mircea Eliade explains in his book, *The Sacred and the Profane*, “By manifesting the sacred, any object becomes something else, yet it continues to remain itself, for it continues to participate in the surrounding cosmic milieu” (1959, p. 12).

Pointing to the participation of religious symbols in the cosmic milieu, religious symbolism serves as a connection between the tangible human experiences in the world and the pursuit of “salvation.” Through religious symbols, existential aspects become apparent, portraying the limitations faced by humans in terms of biological, psychological, and societal needs. These symbols act as a bridge that transcends human limitations by mediating transcendence and serving as a means of transformation and stability in the world. In times of socio-political unrest, world conflicts, and various crises, the quest for salvation becomes more pronounced as individuals seek freedom from these challenges. In response to the complexities of human existence, religious symbols become significant reference points to the transcendent and the sacred.

Necessarily, the transcendent and the quest of such “freedom from” [to be saved] set boundaries, for the transcendent is the beyond—and to go beyond is to move from one condition to another. Religious symbols are not only bridges but also boundaries that positively point to the existence of “another beyond.” As Wittgenstein once remarked, “If we can draw a boundary, then something must exist on both sides of that boundary” (Lawhead, 2002, p. 513). Beyond imperfection lies perfection; beyond injustice lies justice; beyond chaos lies order; and beyond death lies eternal life. This reflects the belief that “there will be no more death or mourning or crying, for the old order has passed” (Rev. 21:4). Thus, religious symbols purposefully engage man in processes of inversion and transformation.

In the *Waterscape* exhibit, the intention is to convey reflections on the essence of water—its fluidity, tranquil qualities, and indispensable role in supporting life. My entry aims to create a piece with strong religious symbolism, depicting the suffering of Christ with water flowing from the wound on His side. The concept of “cleansing” from the water is associated with “inversion” and transformation, symbolizing a return to the original state of blessedness as described in the book of Genesis (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25).

Eliade pictures religious symbols as a lens through which “the world becomes transparent and is able to show the transcendent.” (1959, p. 130) Strikingly, he brings forward the significance of the transparent “water” in his metaphorical presentation of religious symbols as perceptive of creation and destruction – life and death, birth and re-birth, and, for my work, death and resurrection. In the processes of inversion and transformation, Eliade explains that immersion in water “signifies regression to the pre-formal...to a dissolution of forms” (1959, p. 130-131). In every transformation, there must be a movement from one state or condition to another—regarding religious symbols, from human conditions in this world to the sacred and transcendent.

Philosophical Implications of Humanism

In contemporary thought, what has become the “formal” that substituted the “pre-formal”? What must be immersed into the “water” to be cleansed so that the present forms may regress to the pre-formal?

The idea of a universe governed by physical laws has become mainstream—and no longer by divine providence. Governments and social arrangements no longer need to be organized around the idea of divine right to be legitimate but rather by the consent of the governed individuals. There is no longer a need for God as the source of all morality, value, or order in the universe. The increasing secularization of thought has led to, what may be said, the realization that “not only is God dead” but also that “human beings have killed Him” by shifting their faith solely to reason and science. Humans desire to better understand the world, articulate new moral and civic perspectives and values, and offer guidance through self-fulfilling faith—like now, men turning themselves into gods. As Nietzsche asserted: “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed Him...Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?” (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 181)

With the “old form” (or pre-formal) meaning gone, a “new one” is created. Not having God means authoring and creating a new philosophical structure—new “forms” replacing the “pre-formal system” of truth, meaning, and moral values. However, in this setting, humanity also becomes vulnerable to ideologies and to those who trick people by gaining their trust, persuading them to believe something that is supposedly “true,” like promising to bring about what is even better than what “God used to do” for individuals and society. Surely, this comes with risks that can ignite the worst in human nature, putting humanity at risk of despair and meaninglessness. Loss of the “beyond” (transcendent) necessarily implies breaking the boundary lines, not in the sense that yonder is broken through, but in that this world is everything there is. The impact this will have on civilization can hardly be imagined—the unfathomable crisis in human history unfolding.

“The capacity to believe is the most significant and fundamental human faculty, and the most important thing about a man is what he believes in the depth of his being. This is the thing that makes him what he is; the things that organize and feed him; the thing that keeps him going in the face of untoward circumstances; the things that give him resistance and drive.” (Tigner, 1942, p.109). Simply, believing compels man to go beyond the very limiting conditions of life in this world. However, in modern humanism, its “beyond” remains in the realm of the worldliness—solutions are found in the affairs of the world for it is everything there is.

Amidst the humanists’ absolute appeal in determining the truth is to empirical facts and man’s verifiable experience through the aid of reason and science, the distinctions between the “sacred” and the “secular/profane” vanish. However, while the sacred disappears, humanism claims to retain the rich values of the human experience of the “pre-forms” as formerly associated with the sacred. The universe is self-existing and not created, disregarding all conceptions of a supernatural “God” and all forms of “divine design and governance.” Humanists are content and assured that the richness of human life and experiences is ultimately a matter of natural phenomena, likely that, alone in itself, “life is a local and episodic phenomenon in the cosmos at large.” (Burt, 1951, p. 341)

Man is viewed as a product of the creative forces of the universe in the natural order—nothing is above and beyond him. Claiming that humanists are gaining a new sense of human values, they are fixed on moving forward in the spirit of humanity’s progress, appropriating the instruments of science to build a more satisfactory life in this world. They aim at naturalizing the spiritual values of life and the material world humanized, improving human life and relationships, and uniting mankind on earth.

The promising impact of humanism, particularly in the creative processes aimed at improving life, is indeed impressive. However, it is important to recognize that this effort is motivated by something greater than the desire for material possessions or scientific advancements. It is motivated by a deeper understanding of man’s place in the natural order. Yet, if the idea of man being the pinnacle of the creative forces of the universe, with only his own aspirations above him, is considered, it is reasonable to question whether these aspirations originate solely from within man himself. In fact, man is influenced by forces external to himself, yet universal in presence. Meaning “the creative processes in the universe have produced self-conscious beings with a degree of intelligence and a drive to search for truth, beauty, and goodness.” (Titus, 1970, p. 218) This view suggests that the universe’s creative processes support and give purpose to humanity’s ideals and values.

Undeniably, a universal reality exists beyond human sensory experience, considered immaterial, and exists in the spiritual realm beyond time and space.

This cosmic and timeless essence is transcendental and objective yet immanent in the fabric of reality. It embodies the highest value as an intrinsic attribute of existence. The universe holds genuine meaning and purpose, sought after by humanity in the quest for truth, goodness, and beauty. These transcendentals are universal values that are not created but rather discovered. Truth, goodness, and beauty are essential elements that communicate meaning to the intelligent, moral, and aesthetic man. They drive human beliefs and actions, guiding individuals towards authentic human flourishing through the pursuit of knowledge, the desire for goodness, and the appreciation of beauty.

The enduring desire of humanity for the transcendentals is a yearning for the universe's ultimate source. As individuals seek truth, goodness, and beauty in this world, they ultimately seek God, as these values are the very essence of God himself. Unless man can get into the source, all his thirst will remain insatiable. As Jesus once said, "Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst, but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life." (John 4:14)

In mediating transcendence, religious symbols are drawn into the truth, into the realm of the cosmic values—the "transcendentals," revealing the unity of beauty to which we are attracted, of goodness which morally binds human relationships in harmony and order, and of the truth that transforms human experiences in relation to one another and to the sacred beyond. Recognition of the transcendence draws man away from himself into something larger than himself, pointing to something greater and more mysterious than himself— giving spiritual significance to man's limited knowledge as transcendence derives from the admission of man's finitude in self-determination.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Robert Nelson Besana is an artist, musician, and educator. He is the Executive Director of the School of Multimedia and Arts at NU-Asia Pacific College. He is also a member of the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) Technical Committee for Multimedia Arts. Since 2008, he has held eleven solo exhibitions in local and international galleries and museums. He holds an MA in Fine Arts and Design from the Philippine Women's University. (**Corresponding author: robertb@apc.edu.ph**)