

“God, Have Mercy on Me, a Sinner”: Vermeer and Bach on Soteriological Doubt

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Abstract

*This paper examines the question of soteriological doubt within the movement of faith, as aesthetically represented by Johannes Vermeer’s painting *The Allegory of Faith* and Johann Sebastian Bach’s Lutheran cantata *Mein Herze schwimmt im Blut* (BWV 199). In placing these two artistic works in dialogue with each other, we will articulate the triangulating movement between the soul, faith, and the crucified Christ within the wider circulating movement of salvific action. Therefore, this paper is divided into three sections: 1.) the acknowledgement of sin, subsequent remorse, and utter soteriological doubt, expressed by Vermeer’s representation of original sin and spiritual despair and by Bach’s expression of the emotional weight of sin and guilt; 2.) the triangulation in the middle of Vermeer’s painting and the circulation in the middle of Bach’s cantata; 3.) the destruction of sin and the consoling hope in personal salvation, expressed by Vermeer’s depiction of Christ’s triumph over sin and by Bach’s depiction of the soul’s elation and ultimate reconciliation with God. Finally, we will conclude by mapping these three sections in the movement of faith onto the three spiritual stages of purification, illumination, and union as described in the Christian mystical tradition.*

Introduction

The seventeenth-century Dutch Catholic painter Johannes Vermeer and the eighteenth-century German Lutheran composer Johann Sebastian Bach both aesthetically represent, through their respective works *Allegory of the Catholic Faith* and *Mein Herze*

PROIETTA & SHIPP: VERMEER & BACH

schwimmt im Blut (BWV 199), the spiritual-existential movement from soteriological doubt (i.e., doubt in personal salvation) on account of sinfulness, to faith in Christ's redemptive power through the Cross. We will examine the interior movement from doubt to faith in these two works in three distinct yet interconnected stages: 1.) the acknowledgement of sin, subsequent remorse, and utter doubt in the possibility of salvation; 2.) the respectively triangulating dialectic of faith in the middle of Vermeer's painting and the circulating movement of repentance and salvation in the middle of Bach's cantata; 3.) the final destruction of sin and the consoling hope in personal salvation.

Purification: The Church

Vermeer utilizes triangulation within the composition of *The Allegory of Faith* to visually depict the movement of the Church's faith. A woman clothed in blue and white in the center of the painting depicts the Church in light of its symbolic association with the Virgin Mary. The woman's blue dress points to Mary's status as the Queen of Heaven, but also identifies Mary as the Ark of the Covenant covered by a solid blue cloth, as in Numbers 4:6-7. Additionally, the white section of her dress and pearls symbolize purity, echoing Mary's perpetual virginity. The presence of the serpent and the apple recall Mary as Genesis 3:15's foretold New Eve, and the globe beneath her feet alludes to the "earth" in Revelation 12, "swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth."¹ In this way, the woman *as* the sinful Church, in her orientation toward Christ, strives to imitate Mary, who is the exemplar of faith.

In the first point of the triangulating movement, the woman's right hand rests over her heart in her response to having dropped the bitten apple, as she gazes up at a clear hanging orb (see Appendix, Figure 1). The Church serves as both the painting's initial focal point and the

¹ Revelation 12:16, NIV.

PROIETTA & SHIPP: VERMEER & BACH

beginning of its triangulation. Within this first point of visual reference, the Church sins, as indicated by the bitten apple on the floor in front of her, which recalls Adam and Eve's original sin committed in the Garden of Eden.² The unique finger configuration of her right hand over her heart is "an unnatural position of one or both hands in which the third and fourth digits are held tight together, as if almost fused, resembling syndactyly, and the second and fifth fingers are separated from the central ones."³ While contested, one hypothesis as to the meaning of this peculiar hand position suggests that it symbolizes St. Ignatius of Loyola's gesture for the atonement of sins recommended in his *Spiritual Exercises*,⁴ wherein Ignatius indicates that "each time one falls into sin...[one lays] the hand on the breast whilst inciting one's inner self to grief."⁵ Thus, the woman in the painting can be understood as partaking in Ignatian contemplation in the context of her experience of grief in relation to her sins and her subsequent doubt in her salvation.

Bach's cantata BWV 199 is situated in the liturgical context of the eleventh Sunday after Trinity. It functions as a dramatic – indeed, a "most extreme"⁶ commentary of Luke 18:9-14, which represents the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. The work is a soprano solo cantata, wherein the soprano voice signifies the Christian sinner mediating on her own sinfulness as related to the gratuitous grace of Christ. "Darkly melodic" and without any "major-mode relief,"⁷ Bach opens the cantata with an operatic recitative, accompanied by strings floating legato-like beneath the expressive text. As written by Bach's librettist for this cantata, Georg

² Genesis 3:6-8, NIV.

³ Davide Lazzari, Fabio Nicoli, and Yi Xin Zhang, "Secret Hand Gestures in Paintings," *Acta Biomed* 90, no. 4 (2019): 526.

⁴ *Ibid*, 530.

⁵ *Ibid*.

⁶ Pamela Dellal, "Cantata Notes: BWV 199," Emmanuel Music - Bach Cantata BWV 199 - Program Notes, http://www.pameladellal.com/notes_translations/notes_cantata/n_bwv199.htm.

⁷ Julian Mincham, "Chapter 14 BWV 199 Mein Herze Schwimmt Im Blut," The Cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach, <https://www.jsbachcantatas.com/documents/chapter-14-bwv-199/>.

PROIETTA & SHIPP: VERMEER & BACH

Christian Lehms: “My heart swims in blood,” the sinner cries, “since the offspring of my sins in the holy eyes of God make me a monster.”⁸ She feels total alienation in the face of her depravity, derived from the “evil seed of Adam” which robs her “of all rest and close[s] off heaven.”⁹ Like Adam and Eve in the garden, she must hide in her shame and hopelessness. This recitative bleeds into the second movement, a *da capo* aria that features a lamenting oboe. Here the sinner describes her explicitly emotional response to her own self-alienation through sin: “Mute sighs, silent cries, you may tell my sorrows, for my mouth is shut.”¹⁰ The gentle voice of the soprano dialogues with the “mute” angst of the oboe that expresses her soteriological doubt. Yet, there is an inkling of hope: her “moist spring of tears...can bear certain witness”¹¹ to her repentance, leading into the second stage of our analysis.

Illumination: The Orb

Following the Church’s wide-eyed gaze in Vermeer’s painting leads the viewer to the second point of triangulation, the clear hanging orb. Dutch art historian Eddy de Jongh interprets the orb by comparing the “similarities [in Vermeer’s painting] to the emblems in Rip and Willem Hesius’s *Emblemata sacra de fide, spe, charitate* of 1636,”¹² which stresses a Jesuit connection. An illustration within the book, accompanying the poem *Capit Quod Non Capit*, mirrors the Church gazing at the orb in *The Allegory of Faith* (see Appendix, Figure 2). Vermeer’s rendition of the *Capit Quod Non Capit* illustration suggests that the Church engages in contemplation,

⁸ Pamela Dellal, “Cantata Translation: BWV 199,” Emmanuel Music - Bach Cantata BWV 199 - Program Notes, http://www.pameladellal.com/notes_translations/notes_cantata/n_bwv199.htm.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Walter S. Melion, James Clifton, Michel Weemans, and Caroline van Eck, “A New Interpretation of Vermeer’s *Allegory of Faith*: Vividness and Figural Interpretation,” in *Imago Exegetica: Visual Images as Exegetical Instruments, 1400-1700* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2014), 160-161.

PROIETTA & SHIPP: VERMEER & BACH

entering into the mystery of faith. She attempts to understand God's immense and near-incomprehensible love for her *despite* her self-reflective acknowledgement of sin. Both Vermeer himself as painter and his art studio are reflected in the opaque images within the orb. This self-inserted reflection in conjunction with the drawn curtain on the left side of the painting point to a kind of theatrical performativity within the illustrated scene. Vermeer invites us as viewers, as participants in the "drama" of the Church's movement of faith, to join the Church herself in the contemplation of soteriological doubt.¹³ Thus, in a *perichoresis*-like movement, the viewer enters into the visual dance and is invited into the mystery of faith. The eye of the viewer is ultimately led to the last point of the triangulation, Christ on the Cross. In the wounds of Christ, the Church finds consoling hope in her own personal salvation through Christ Crucified.

The third movement in Bach's cantata represents a significant shift in the Christian sinner's encounter with the interconnection between doubt and faith in her salvation. Portraying this narrative transition through both Lehms's text and Bach's interpretation of the text, the sinner dramatically depicts and imitates the action of the Publican in Jesus's parable from Luke 18: "I beat my heart in regret and sorrow and full of despair say: God be gracious to me, a sinner!"¹⁴ Over the course of the recitative, "the tonality begins in B flat major and ends in E flat major,"¹⁵ and the point of existential transition depicted tonally in Bach's presentation is the pivotal line from the Publican: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."¹⁶ Immediately, Bach paints an inner shift "from minor to major mode"¹⁷ in a simultaneous twofold movement of the sinner upward to Christ through repentance and Christ downward to the sinner through mercy: "Ah

¹³ Ibid, 159.

¹⁴ Dellal, "Cantata Translation: BWV 199."

¹⁵ Rebecca Sherburn, "Cultural Influences on the Composition of Johann Sebastian Bach's Cantata BWV 199," *Journal of Singing - the Official Journal of the National Association of Teachers of Singing* 61, no. 2 (11, 2004): 139.

¹⁶ Luke 18:13, NIV.

¹⁷ Mincham, "BWV 199."

PROIETTA & SHIPP: VERMEER & BACH

yes!” she proclaims, “His heart is breaking.”¹⁸ The fourth movement, which is the second *da capo* aria in a kind of minuet style,¹⁹ is the spiritual core of the cantata, wherein the sinner declares, “Deeply bowed and filled with regret I lie, dearest God, before you. I acknowledge my guilt.”²⁰ After the brief recitative through the fifth movement, Bach in the sixth movement uses a stately chorale sung by the solo soprano voice juxtaposed with the “busy semiquaver obligato”²¹ in the viola, which musically illustrates the strength of faith in the voice of the redeemed sinner in juxtaposition with the circumscribing rhythm of the outside world. A brief hiatus from Lehm’s libretto, this movement is based on a verse from Johann Heerman’s hymn “Wo soll ich fliehen hin.” Through Heerman’s text, the sinner proclaims, “I, Your troubled child, cast all my sins...into Your deep wounds, where I have always found salvation.”²² Just as Vermeer articulates a pivotal triangulating dialectic in the center of his painting, Bach emphasizes a circulating spiritual rhythm between the sinner and Christ Crucified based at least implicitly on Luther’s bridal analogy in *The Freedom of a Christian*. Here, Luther describes how “Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ’s, while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul’s.”²³ In the circulating movement of faith, Christ places the damnation of the sinner onto Himself through the Cross and in turn places salvation from Himself onto the sinner. The saturating soteriological doubt emphasized in the first part is projected onto Christ in a mediating rhythm of faith and repentance.

¹⁸ Dellal, “Cantata Translation: BWV 199.”

¹⁹ Mincham, “BWV 199.”

²⁰ Dellal, “Cantata Translation: BWV 199.”

²¹ Mincham, “BWV 199.”

²² *Ibid.*, “Cantata Translation: BWV 199.”

²³ Roger Haight, Alfred Pach, and Amanda Avila Kaminski, eds., “Martin Luther: The Freedom of a Christian,” in *Grace and Gratitude: Spirituality in Martin Luther*, 1st ed., Fordham University Press, 2022, pp. 74–122, 94.

Union: Christ Crucified

Moving away in Vermeer's painting from the triangular movement of faith between the women, the clear orb, and Christ Crucified, the eye returns to the foreground where a cornerstone crushes a snake. The Church discovers joy in the mystery of salvation, moving outside of her personal doubt in salvation due to seemingly insurmountable sin. Christ, depicted as the cornerstone, defeats evil and sin as represented by the snake, pointing to Matthew 21:42-44. In identifying Himself as the "cornerstone" in Psalm 118:22, Christ explains in Matthew 21 that those who oppose the Messiah's kingdom - that is, those who stumble on the solid foundation of God and His doctrine - will crumble (i.e., "Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed"²⁴). The woman who depicts the Church is situated in the middle ground, higher on the canvas than the cornerstone in the foreground, since the Church is built *upon* Christ. Here, the Church measures her faith in relation to Christ against soteriological doubt given that the cornerstone is the measuring stone that grounds the Church's very ontological structure. This image recalls 1 Peter: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame."²⁵ The personified Church rests assured in God's mysterious love as exemplified on the Cross, and thus she interiorly moves *beyond* her soteriological doubt and transmutes it into faith *through* the victory of Christ over sin.

After the spiritual exchange between the sinner and Christ Crucified, the seventh movement of Bach's cantata is a recitative that expresses, contra the first movement, the redeemed sinner's existential and spiritual joy in her overwhelming faith in Christ: "I lay myself on these wounds as though upon a true rock... Upon them will I soar in faith."²⁶ As in Vermeer's

²⁴ Matthew 21:44, NIV.

²⁵ 1 Peter 2:6, NIV.

²⁶ Dellal, "Cantata Translation: BWV 199."

PROIETTA & SHIPP: VERMEER & BACH

depiction of the cornerstone, the sinner articulates her faith as a “true rock” that defeats not only damnation but also her doubt in her salvation. The final movement, a soaring *aria* that functions stylistically as a *gigue*, depicts the redeemed sinner dancing and laughing - “How joyful is my heart, for God is appeased”²⁷ - insofar as she recognizes that God has saved her from damnation. From the first movement to its conclusion, the cantata represents a “journey from the cesspools of sinful misery to the euphoria of redemption and salvation”²⁸ within the interiority of the sinner’s subjectivity.

Conclusion

To conclude, the evident structural similarities between these two artistic representations of faith point implicitly to the threefold stages of purification, illumination, and union in the Christian spiritual tradition. Both recall the Fall as the condition that precedes the first stage of purification. Vermeer’s personified Church and Bach’s sinner lament over their sins, which initially prevent their attainment of union with God. The pivotal turning point in both pieces stems from purgative contemplation and sincere repentance that move them to joy, wherein they discover the crucified Christ’s illuminating love through His wounds. Lastly, union with Christ becomes possible insofar as Christ, the “true rock,” defeats not only damnation but also personal doubt in salvation.

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²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Mincham, “BWV 199.”

PROIETTA & SHIPP: VERMEER & BACH

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Appendix

Figure 1. “The Allegory of Faith”



Title: *The Allegory of Faith*, also known as *Allegory of the Catholic Faith*

Artist: Johannes Vermeer

Year: 1670–1672

Type: Oil on canvas

Period: Dutch Golden Age

Dimensions: Height: 114.3 cm (45"); Width: 88.9 cm (35")

Museum: Metropolitan Museum of Art – MET

PROIETTA & SHIPP: VERMEER & BACH

Figure 2. *Guilielmi Hesi Antuerpiensis è Societate Iesu Emblemata sacra de fide, spe, charitate*



Title: *Guilielmi Hesi Antuerpiensis è Societate Iesu Emblemata sacra de fide, spe, charitate*

Author: Gulielmus Hesi

Published: 1638

Illustrator for *Capit quod non capit*: unknown

Publisher: Antuerpiae: Ex officina Plantiniana Balthasaris Moreti

Collection: dulemblem; Duke libraries

Digitizing Sponsor: Duke University Libraries

Contributor: Duke University Libraries

Language: Latin