
RESEARCH

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**THE LUTHERAN REFORM AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE
RELIGIOUS IMAGE IN THE ARTS***La Reforma Luterana y la transformación de la imagen religiosa
en las artes*

María Magdalena Ziegler¹: Se habla arte. Venezuela.
mziegler@unimet.edu.ve

ABSTRACT

After 500 years of the emblematic gesture of Martin Luther in Wittenberg that would start the Protestant Reformation, it is necessary to study the place that religious images had in the new vision of Christianity from the Lutheran ideas. The significant proposal of two German artists, Albrecht Dürer and Lucas Cranach, the Elder is analyzed. From the first, a unique work, *The Four Apostles*, which recomposes and reconfigures the religious image from the devotional to the declarative, emphasizing the importance of the Gospel and the word in religious artistic expression. And, of the second, two works that finish sealing the new place that will occupy the religious images in the Lutheran Church, *Law and Gospel* and *Christ blessing the children*, with which Cranach approaches the Lutheran preaching and a vision of the religious set of images most linked to the Scriptures. However, in both cases, the demystification of the religious image is remarkable, as long as it takes the place of support for the preaching, avoiding acting as its substitute. The reconfiguration of the religious image that places it in a sphere different from that of the Christian tradition initiated with the official stipulations of the Second Council of Nicaea is analyzed.

KEY WORDS: Lutheran Reformation - religious art - painting - Christianity.

RESUMEN

Al cumplirse 500 años del emblemático gesto de Martín Lutero en Wittenberg que daría inicio a la Reforma Protestante, se hace necesario estudiar el lugar que las imágenes religiosas tuvieron la nueva visión del Cristianismo a partir de las ideas luteranas. Se

¹**María Magdalena Ziegler:** Doctor in History, professor of history of art and culture, specialist in history and theory of the plastic arts.

analiza la propuesta significativa de dos artistas alemanes, Alberto Durero y Lucas Cranach, el Viejo. Del primero, una obra singular, *Los cuatro apóstoles*, que recompone y reconfigura la imagen religiosa desde lo devocional hasta lo declarativo, enfatizando la importancia del Evangelio y la palabra en la expresión artística religiosa. Y, del segundo, dos obras que terminan de sellar el nuevo lugar que habrán de ocupar las imágenes religiosas en la Iglesia Luterana, *Ley y Evangelio y Cristo bendiciendo los niños*, con las cuales Cranach se acerca a la predica luterana y a una visión del imaginario religioso más vinculado a las Escrituras. Sin embargo, en ambos casos es notable la desacralización de la imagen religiosa, en tanto y cuanto ésta pasa a ocupar el lugar de apoyo a la predica, evitando actuar como su sustituto. Se analiza la reconfiguración de la imagen religiosa que le ubica en una esfera distinta a la de la tradición cristiana iniciada con las estipulaciones oficiales del Segundo Concilio de Nicea.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Reforma Luterana - arte religioso - pintura - cristianismo.

A REFORMA LUTERANA E A TRANSFORMAÇÃO DA IMAGEM RELIGIOSA NAS ARTES

RESUME

Ao completar 500 anos do emblemático gesto de Martin Lutero em Wittenberg que daria início a Reforma Protestante, faz-se necessário estudar o lugar que as imagens religiosas tiveram na nova visão do Cristianismo a partir das ideias luteranas. Analisa a proposta significativa de dois artistas alemães, Alberto Durero e Lucas Cranach, o Velho. Do primeiro uma obra singular, *Os quatro apóstolos*, que recompõe e reconfigura a imagem religiosa desde o devocional até o declarativo, enfatizando a importância do Evangelho e a palavra na expressão artística religiosa. E, do segundo, duas obras que terminam de selar o novo lugar que terão que ocupar as imagens religiosas na Igreja Luterana, *Lei e Evangelho e Cristo bendizendo as crianças*, com os quais Cranach se aproxima a predica luterana e a uma visão do imaginário religioso mais vinculado as Escrituras. Porém, em ambos casos é notável a dessacralização da imagem religiosa, enquanto essa passa a ocupar o lugar de apoio à prédica, evitando atuar como seu substituto. Analisa a reconfiguração da imagem religiosa que a situa em uma esfera distinta da tradição Cristiana iniciada com estipulações oficiais do Segundo Concilio de Nicea.

PALAVRAS CHAVE: Reforma Luterana - arte religioso - pintura - cristianismo.

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1. INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

We rarely ask ourselves how much influence religious tradition can have on artistic practice. The Christian religious tradition that has impacted the arts has not only been broad and deep, but also varied and does not refer only to a body of beliefs or a matter of faith. The arts and religious tradition have a substantial link in matters such as authority, death, sexuality, transcendence, morality, etc. All this impacts proportionally in the way the arts, or rather, the artists choose to represent any topic and how the way to do it is aesthetically justified.

At the same time, the use of images within the Christian culture is almost as old as Christianity itself. The vestiges of the use of images by the first Christians is already more than proven and the studies that support it are already a cornerstone in any historical analysis of the development of this religion².

The popular tradition, moreover, has provided Christian religious images with a halo of special consideration. Undoubtedly, we can say that in Western Europe, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the odds of someone thinking that suddenly these would be in the midst of one of the greatest theological controversies since the end of the eighth century, were minimal. And, nevertheless, it happened.

From the time of the Second Council of Nicaea (789) and once the iconoclastic Byzantine crisis was overcome, Christianity had not faced an affront to religious images as unleashed by Protestant ideas and their various interpretations. And although Martin Luther himself (1483-1546) did not have an incendiary verb against the use of religious images, others did take advantage of the situation.

Neither Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498) at the end of the fifteenth century with his bonfire of vanities could foresee what would happen a few decades later. The images of the saints -models of Christian virtue-would be the victims of an incendiary rejection of the images that would make the Florentine bonfire pale in which the gods of antiquity had perished due to the preaching of the Dominican monk.

However, many are the myths that have arisen around what the Protestant Reformation considered around religious images. It seems that the theological separation that takes place in the Catholic Church from the Lutheran work has been taken advantage of to assume radical positions also in topics such as iconography and the use of religious images.

² You can see the classic study by André Grabar, *Les Voies de la création en iconographie chrétienne* (1978), published in Spanish under the title *Paths of creation in Christian iconography* (Alianza, 1985).

Without forgetting that practically all the pictorial imagery prior to 1517 was religious (the year of the publication of the 95 Lutheran Theses), we must do the exercise of drawing a panorama in which the greatest production of the visual arts disappears in a short period of time. The Protestant question in reference to religious images does not present monolithic positions and precisely because of this it must be analyzed with care.

Faced with a landscape difficult to understand and accept historically speaking, we propose to revise the first plastic proposals that seem to acknowledge the speech of Martin Luther, without this being extended to the voices of others such as Zwingli or Calvin, nor to Andreas Karlstadt himself contemporary and close rival of the Augustinian monk of Wittenberg.

2. THE FIRST LUTHERIAN ARTISTS

Martin Luther came to express in 1528 that “while I consider that the images of the Scriptures are very useful, nevertheless, they are subject to a free and open interpretation” (cited by Ullman, 1984, p. 101). It is admitted freedom in the interpretation of the image is probably the main difficulty found by the heads that led the Protestant Reformation around the use of images. However, let's not assume this Lutheran affirmation as a sentence about the use of images, because it was not. Not at least in the case of the Augustinian monk author of the famous 95 Theses of 1517.

The first sign that this was not the case, is provided by Albert Dürer (1471-1528). For 1520, Dürer embarked on a trip to Aachen in order to be received by the young Emperor Charles I. The painter intended that the pension that the previous emperor, Maximilian I, granted in his time were renewed by the grandson of the latter that just sat on the throne. Dürer will pass not only through the imperial capital, but also through the Netherlands, leaving a travel journal with interesting revelations.

On Luther, Dürer expresses:

Whoever reads the books of Martin Luther will be able to see how clear and transparent his doctrine is... Therefore, his writings should be taken with the greatest honor and not be burned; unless, of course, his opponents, who always fight against the truth, were also burned with their opinions, they who would make gods of men... (Dürer, 2014).

This painter would be an avid reader of the Lutheran writings. In his travel diary, the artist gives an account of buying, whenever he had the opportunity, some writing, book or pamphlet of Luther. So we cannot say that the German painter defended the monk of Wittenberg without knowing his thoughts and their positions. Being a painter of his time, most of his commissions came from the Church, so supporting a taxative

prohibition of religious images would have been for him to eliminate the most important source of his work.

Of course, Dürer would die in 1528, really soon to have witnessed the deepest consequences of the Reformation. However, it is remarkable that, despite knowing the differences between Luther and Charles I, the painter sought imperial support for his profession while reading relentlessly the questioned theologian. There was not then a contradiction in Dürer's own positions and actions. At least not until 1521 when the excommunication of Luther would draw the impossibility of reconciliation.

Evidently, by the beginning of the 1520s the outcome of this initial dispute was not so clear and, surely, Dürer and many others, never thought that from the ideas of Luther would be born a new interpretation of the Christian doctrine that would end up dividing the great Catholic Church.

It is possible that Dürer was betting on Luther as a man who made simple the elements that the Church had complicated, that made close a doctrine that seemed to move away from the evangelical simplicity more and more. The threats to his profession through a possible ban on the use of religious images did not seem to be in sight yet.

In the aforementioned diary, Dürer reports that he was present in Antwerp during the celebrations of the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin in mid-August 1520. He describes the two-hour procession in great detail, mentioning from the parade of the guilds, to the stroll of the different religious orders, each one adorned with their corresponding images. He does not skimp words to speak of the dramatizations that paraded (the one of Saint George, that of Saint Marguerite) all “deliciously adorned”, “all leading to great devotion” (Dürer, 2014).

Dürer has not collected a single word against religious images on the pages of his diary. Moreover, in his theoretical writings, Dürer came to express::

Destroying the religious images they pretended to honor God by doing something that they thought pleased him; and, to use the language of men, God was upset with all the destroyers of works of great mastery, which were elaborated with hard work, effort and time that is provided only by God. (Dürer in Conway, 1889, p. 178).

Christiensen (1967) reports that Dürer, before the appearance of Luther on the scene, saw the destruction of images as a futile activity and that this vision did not change substantially after 1517 until his death. His work, however, with some exception that we will see shortly, does not show any notable iconographic changes in the religious field.

In any case, it could not be assumed as an artist affected by the rejection of religious images.

Other contemporary artists to Luther, such as Lucas Cranach, the Elder (1472-1553), also give us some elements to consider the Lutheran position before religious images. Cranach was a close friend of Luther. This one got to be the godfather of Anna, the painter's daughter; and Cranach witnessed the marriage between the former Augustinian monk and Catherine von Bora in 1525, to be later also a godfather to the couple's first child, Hans (Ozarowska, 1955). So, if someone knew Luther, that was Lucas Cranach.

As in the previous case of Dürer, it is hard to think that Cranach, so close to Luther, accepted without any radical prohibition of religious images, also for him a source of prosperity in his craft as a painter. We know, however, that Cranach received advice from Philipp Melanchthon (1497-1560) on the elaboration of religious paintings (Ullman, 1984).

In fact, if we review the known work today of Cranach's brushes (the Elder), we can notice some interesting things. On the one hand, images of the Virgin and Child, so common since the fourteenth century, are still present in his work at least until the 1540s. They are all very intimate images, in which Mary and the Child share alone, without company of other characters (saints or angels).

On the other, the images of saints continue to emerge from their talent until the end of the 1530s, especially in panels of altarpieces. However, most of the biblical images that are preserved come from the 1520s onwards, with images of David and Bathsheba, Judith and Holofernes, Salome, and, of course, Adam and Eve.

It is worth adding that many of these images were part of the orders he received as an official painter of the court of Frederick III the Wise, in Wittenberg. Cranach arrived there in 1504 and would remain in the city until 1550. In those years he became a very prosperous and affluent painter, whose works were avidly demanded (Hartmann, s/f, Rosenberg, 1969). He had a printing workshop and in it Luther would work feverishly. From his designs and presses would come the most controversial prints in his criticism of the Catholic Church. However, he never stopped working for his Catholic patrons, being a very skilled businessman in this regard.

The cases of Dürer and Cranach (the Elder) are two extraordinary examples of how Christian religious art continued to have an important place in the world that gradually moved away from the Catholic tradition. If we look more closely at the work of these two painters, we will find signs that point to a change in the visual arts, although not a rejection of them.

3. THE CASE OF ALBERT DÜRER

When Dürer presented his work known as *The four apostles* to Nürnberg in 1526 (Photo 1), he expressed his humility by declaring himself insufficient in talent to give his city a work of value. Two separate panels, each with a pair of apostles. The one on the left shows us John Evangelist, in the foreground, and, in the background, Peter. The one on the right shows us Paul and, in the background, Mark. The monumentality of the figures we see in the foreground and the expressiveness of the representation make it an exceptional work in German painting of the time.

But with this painting Dürer made a declaration of faith. At the foot of the figures, he added an inscription that he requested from the calligrapher Johann Neudörfer, and some biblical passages in German can be read from the Lutheran translation of this sacred book, published in 1522 (Lankheit, 1952).

On the left side of the panel, the following two passages are read:

There were also false prophets among the people, as also among you there will be false teachers who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, and even deny the Lord who rescued them, bringing upon themselves sudden destruction. And many will follow their dissolutions, by virtue of which the way of truth will be blasphemed. And through greed with pretended words they will make merchandise of you; the judgment about them has not been in default for a long time, and their perdition does not fall asleep. (2Pe, 2 : 1-3)

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits if they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. In this know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, is of God; And every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming, and which is now in the world. (1John, 4 : 1-3)

On the right side, we read the following:

You should also know this: that in the last days dangerous times will come. Because there will be people who, lovers of themselves, greedy, vainglorious, arrogant, blasphemous, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, ungodly, without natural affection, ruthless, slanderers, intemperate, cruel, traitors, impetuous, infatuated, more lust of God, who has an appearance of piety, but will deny the efficacy of it; avoid them. By the same they are hidden back and forth in the houses and they take captives the little women loaded with sins, overwhelmed by

diverse passions, that are always learning, and can never reach the knowledge.
(2Tim, 3 : 1-7)

And he taught them, saying: Beware of the scribes who walk in long robes, and love the greetings in the market and sit as tops in the schools and at the table at a banquet; They devour the houses of the widows, and make long prayers. These will receive greater condemnation. (Mar, 12 : 38-40)

Dürer builds, iconographically speaking, his own creed. Like many in his time, he has taken from the varied offer of new theological and doctrinal interpretations, what he considered was appropriate and, perhaps, more appropriate to the sermons of Luther. But, as Price (2003) warns, by the mid-1520s each reformer had to fight on two fronts: that of the Catholic Church and that of divergences among Protestants. Papists and radicals would thus be the focus of Dürer's iconographic statement. And, even if the Church from Rome wanted to see them all as a single group, this was far from being the case.

The warning set forth in *The Four Apostles* seems to be directed to the secular authorities so that they do not distort the divine word with human interpretations. This warning was made through the example of the four men chosen in the representation: John, Peter, Mark and Paul. Much has been discussed around the choice of these characters, but it is quite possible that the explanation is simpler than it seems.

We are inclined to think that Peter is there because of his role as *vicar of Christ* and head of the Church, a vital figure in times of widespread criticism of the role of the popes in Rome; Paul for the closeness of Luther to his word and theology; Mark for being the author of the Gospel that more directly agrees with the Pauline theology, highlighting the importance of the death and resurrection of Jesus and, finally, John for being the one who warns about the inappropriate interpretations of the sacred word and the role of the Spirit in the correct reading. In short, a sort of iconographic creed based on the essence of the Lutheran preaching; an open statement of his support for Martin Luther more than any other radical reformer of his time.



Photo 1: Albrecht Dürer, The Four Apostles, 1526.
Oil on wood, 215 x 76 cm (each panel), Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

Dürer seems to have organized the four apostles in such a way that they could express the hierarchy that Luther himself offered them (Price, 2003). In the foreground, we have John and Paul, the main sources of Luther's teachings on Salvation. In fact, he had already affirmed that some of the sacred books are more noble than others, with the Gospel of John being the first, of the four and the true, always preferred before the other three. Thus, the epistles of Peter and Paul, by far, surpassed the other three Gospels.

Already at the end of the 19th century, Moritz Thausing (1882) observed -contrary to most historians of Dürer's work- that the selection of John and Peter in the first set, as well as the passages that accompany these figures at the bottom, are an open statement against the most radical sectors, such as the Anabaptists and the Deists. When presenting together Mark and Paul, Dürer addresses the most immoral Catholic sector, that of the old faith penetrated by corruption.

For Price (2003), in *The Four Apostles* a constant reference to the Bible can be observed as a container of the sacred word. Paul holds a book, Mark a parchment, John also opens a small book with the text written by him. Moreover, in the particular case of Paul, Dürer has placed the traditional symbol of his martyrdom in his hands, and Price (2003) considers that this does not refer exclusively to that but to the phrase of the Pauline Epistle to the Ephesians that says: "And take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (6 : 17).

However, Arndt & Moeller (2003) point out that Lazaro Spengler, secretary of the City Council of Nuremberg, a friend and neighbor of Dürer, would have helped him in the configuration of the work and the selection of the texts. Spengler's own writings, which have only been studied in recent years, suggest that Dürer had received a rather narrow orientation from his friend. This would confirm that Dürer wished to ingratiate himself with the authorities of the city in a natural movement of the artists in search of patronal sustenance.

On the other hand, Schawe (2010) asserts that the texts used by Dürer in *The Four Apostles* would have appeared in a sermon against the false prophets that Luther published in 1525. However, whatever the ideas, the advice or the assistance that would have had the painter close to him, the creator of the work was not other than him and only the final decisions and their results are due to him.

Interesting is also that this work of religious nature, with no doubt, has no devotional quality. Directed to secular authorities, Dürer seems to place the emphasis on the authority of the Bible itself and not on that of its interpreters, much less from an official exegesis. After all, Luther has placed the Bible as the chief authority in matters of Salvation. «*Sola Scriptura*» - Luther will declare as a maxim and this will result in a decrease in authority over the law. That's where the purpose of the painting we are considering seems to go.

In addition, *The Four Apostles* does not fill the traditional characteristics of an altarpiece for an altar, that is clear. Historians were long confused by this, believing that both panels were part of an altarpiece whose center had been lost or the painter had not had an opportunity to conclude³. The truth is that these two panels were conceived by Dürer to be next to each other, with nothing else.

Christiansen (1967), for his part, showed that the gesture of the gift made by the painter to the Nuremberg authorities had not been anything out of the ordinary in his

³ Such is the opinion of one of his most famous scholars, Erwin Panofsky (*Life and art of Albrecht Dürer*, 1948).

time and that, on the contrary, it was an established custom that had as its aim to gain some patronage. Dürer himself had done it when he was younger, so it was not strange that he did so as a recognized and mature artist. Even, other artists after the death of Dürer, did the same before the same instances of this city. "Medieval and Renaissance patronage of literature and the arts involved not only commissioned works but also spontaneous dedications" (Christiansen, 1967, p. 329).

What cannot be denied is that *The four apostles* is not a traditional Christian religious work of art and Dürer, conscious or not, created with it a new type of work that would come very well to the new Lutheran mood. It is a work that dissolves the boundaries between the religious and the secular. Throughout his life, this painter sought to promote devotion with his religious works, an activity that also made him feel very proud, honored and happy (Price, 2003). *The four apostles* turn out to be a turning point in the conception of Christian religious art that cannot be ignored.

We must bear in mind that from 1522, Andreas Karlstadt (1486-1541) propagated from Wittenberg the rejection of religious images inciting to their destruction. Similar situations were experienced in Zurich and some cities in the Baltic, but in Nuremberg the iconoclasm had been kept away. Apparently Luther's moderate position had gained ground there, that is, a reallocation of the function of the image with respect to the Gospel. The voices of theologians such as Andreas Osiander (1498-1552) tended to prevail at Nuremberg and with them the idea of a moderate association with religious images.

Arndt & Moeller (2003) explain that despite the moderate attitude towards the images that existed in Nuremberg for 1525-26, the iconoclastic threat was a reality in the Germanic zone. It could not be ignored and because of fear, the market for religious images collapsed, so Dürer must have been worried. However, *The four apostles* does not fit entirely with the religious tradition prior to 1517. It proposes a new conception of the religious image.

In a sense, it is a sort of appeal to the indispensability of painting in the grounds of religion, since his work speaks of painting as an announcement and a full religious affirmation of the authority of the word (*Sola Scriptura*). Dürer does not create a devotional image with *The four apostles*; neither does he create an icon in the orthodox way; it creates, on the other hand, a declarative religious image. An image that exposes fundamentals, principles and concepts, which does not appeal to emotion or feeling but to a rational doctrinal understanding of faith. It combines the intimacy and simplicity of its most sober religious images with the analytical and critical spirit of the humanist.

4. THE CASE OF LUCAS CRANACH, THE ELDER

Dürer would die two years after the gift to Nuremberg, which prevented him from leaving us other similar works, deepening this new conception. Lucas Cranach (the

Elder), on the other hand, did have the opportunity to develop an entire Protestant iconography that is worth looking at and that, in a certain way, follows the line of *The Four Apostles*.

In 1529, Cranach realized the work entitled *Law and Gospel* (also known as *Law and Grace*, in German *Gesetz und Gnade*)⁴ The painter would conceive this work (Photo 2) in close collaboration and consultation with Luther, his great friend. The result will be a painting that not only explains the keys of the Lutheran teaching on Salvation, but also its symbolism will signify a substantial difference in the function of the of religious work of art as a teaching medium.



Photo 2: Lucas Cranach, the Elder, *Law and Gospel*, 1529.
Oil on panel, 72 x 88.5 cm, National Gallery of Prague.

This work is based on the defining point of Lutheran theology: the idea of Salvation by faith alone. As we know, this understanding of Salvation exploited the theological foundations of many Catholic practices, especially the idea that human actions or “Good works” could help the believer to be closer to Salvation. Conversely, Luther was

⁴ Cranach (the Elder) made multiple versions of this painting including another between 1529-30, two in 1530, one in 1532, one in 1535, two in 1542 and one in 1550. For the purposes of this analysis we will consider only the first known version (1529) and certified by the *Cranach Digital Archive* project (lucascranach.org).

convinced that Salvation was possible only through the undeserved Grace offered by benevolent God.

Law and Gospel is based on the three basic elements of Lutheran theology: *Sola Gratia*, *Sola Fides*, *Sola Scriptura*. *Sola Gratia* refers to Salvation by the Grace alone of God granted to humanity by Divine Mercy. *Sola Fides* refers to the fact that faith, which in itself comes from God, leads a sinful being to a relationship with God. The two gifts of faith and grace make Salvation possible. *Sola Scriptura* affirms the centrality of writing as the place in which the word of God has been revealed.

Noble (2009) explains that this work of Cranach “draws a boundary between the dynamics of Law and Gospel (Lutheranism) on the one hand, and Law itself (Catholicism and Judaism) on the other” (p. 49). In this way, the world would be divided literally into two groups: those who properly understand the Law and the Gospel, and those who do not. The Gospel and the Law thus work together to oppose the misinterpretations of Catholicism on the relationship between the Testaments, the theological significance of good works, and the relationship between faith and grace. “Appropriate understanding is indicated by the image; the misinterpretation resides outside of it” (Noble, 2009, p. 49).

The painting *Law and Gospel* is not only the painting that makes Cranach the greatest of the Lutheran painters, but also marks a milestone in differential terms between pre-reformist art and that subsequent to the Lutheran Reformation. It is clear that this work, in its form, iconography and function, differs markedly from the art of the preceding period, so we should not look at it as a sort of appendix to a treatise on Lutheran theology.

Berdini (1997), quite rightly, has stated that one of the aims of the art of the German Reformation was to limit the expansive potential of paintings. He emphasizes that for Luther the images should illustrate the word, not replace it. In this way, *Law and Gospel* “could only have the meaning that its creator attempted for a spectator already trained in Lutheran thought. Thus, it would supplement a text or ideas expressed in writing. The image is not an interchangeable substitute for written ideas” (Noble, 2009, p. 28).

In other words, this Cranach work does not replicate the precise meaning of its textual sources; but it appropriates meanings proper to the pictorial medium. And it is that, for Luther, art was a creative tool that should help the believer in the correct understanding of the Bible. The purpose and function of religious art was to guide the viewer to the true and simple meaning of the scripture, or to a fundamental theological point based on that meaning. However, works of art could not have open meanings or, moreover, it was necessary to approach them with prior knowledge. Art was not for the ignorant.

“Luther insisted on the reciprocity of the pictorial content and the scriptural meaning, which affirmed the main function of the visual arts. This is the key difference that distinguishes the Lutheran vision and that of the other reformers in this regard” (Noble, 2009, p. 36). This, evidently, moves away from the traditional justification of religious art associated with Pope Gregory the Great, from whose interpretation, images offer a substitute for the written message for the illiterate.

But what Cranach presents in *Law and Gospel* that can be so decisive as to establish a change in the conception of religious art. Dürer already had created with *The Four Apostles* a work of non-devotional but declarative quality. A work that, by all accounts, was not made for illiterate people and that demanded from the spectator a level of estimable theological preparation. Well, *Law and Gospel* points in that direction indicated by the artist of Nuremberg.

In this painting divided into two sections, left and right, we find the pivotal elements of Lutheran theology. In the left section we notice Moses on Mount Sinai receiving the Tablets of the Law directly from the hands of God. Adam and Eve can also be seen under the forbidden tree (snake included) about to eat the tempting fruit and the camp of the people of Israel attacked by the snakes sent by God as punishment for the insolence committed by the Israelites against him, and the name of Moses; in the middle of the camp we see the bronze serpent that God sent to heal the repentant. We see, finally, the body of a dead man in an open grave, and in the limits with the right section, this same man with hands intertwined in prayer whom Moses indicates to look at the right section of the painting. It is not very difficult to understand that this section refers to the Lutheran interpretation that states that the sins of man are intricately linked to his human condition and the believer, therefore, requires the Law given by God to Moses to become aware of his concupiscence.

In the right section, Jesus Child, carrying the Cross, descends to the Virgin Mary, in the same way that the Tablets of the Law are delivered to Moses in the left section. The Virgin, in this way, is placed as a model for the believer, by her humble and passive acceptance of the will of God. It is also the parallel of Moses in accepting the Tablets of the Law in the opposite section. The resuscitated Christ annihilates Death and Satan with his cross in a compositional situation that makes him the perfect parallel to the dead man in the pit in the left section. The man whom Moses indicated before looking at this section, is now guided by Saint John the Baptist to look at the crucified Christ, the Lamb of God. Man is encouraged here to believe, to have faith and to open himself to the Grace of God.

The image, divided into two sections by a tree, dry to the left and sprouted to the right, is a clear warning that the Law alone does not save, the Grace that is announced in the Gospel and that has been demonstrated through the sacrifice of Christ and his later

resurrection. *Law and Gospel* thus addresses the two roles assumed by God as judge and as all merciful. On the one hand he must judge and condemn humanity for his sins, but at the same time, he shows mercy and piety by guaranteeing salvation to sinful believers. The Law alone will not lead man to Salvation, it is indispensable that the believer recognizes his sins and the need for Grace⁵.

Those opposed to the ideas of Luther would qualify this painting as mere propaganda, but, as we have seen, we must start from the essence of the Lutheran discourse to understand what is in it. An additional issue must be added and it will also divide Catholics and Lutherans: that concerning how we get to Heaven and what role, if any, religious art could play in it. While the Catholic Church will insist that believers could do something to earn their Salvation through good works-including the financing of artistic works of a religious nature-, Luther insisted that Salvation was only in the hands of God and that everything that the believer should do was repent and have faith. In this sense, both art and music, for example, could be means to communicate that, but not to earn Heaven.

There is no doubt that *Law and Gospel* is the most notable result of the alliance between Luther and Cranach, placing the latter as the principal maker of images at the service of Lutheran theology. Other works of his, such as *Christ blessing children* (Photo 3), will also tell us about how the Reformation in its first decades would use religious images in its favor. This topic was not frequent before Cranach made it popular, which is interesting.

There are several versions of *Christ blessing children* who came out of this painter's brush or his workshop; however, they are all very similar. But to know the reason by which the subject would become popular we must look again at Luther and the controversies raised by his ideas. Keeping in mind the closeness of both, it is logical to think that Cranach developed not one but several themes that picked up the ideas of his friend Martin.

Ozarowska (1955) points out that this time the controversy could point to the Anabaptists and their refusal to accept the baptism of children. For them, this had to be replaced by the baptism of the believer as an adult. They argued that in the Bible there was no reference to infant baptism and that, in fact, Christ had been baptized as a man of 30 years. Luther, for his part, formulated an original interpretation of the matter. The Augustinian monk explained that believing is not an intellectual process or a topic that can be learned, therefore it was as impossible to prove that a child believed as the opposite. Drawing on the Gospels, Luther quoted Matthew (19 : 13-15), Mark (10 : 13-16)

⁵ In later versions of this theme, Cranach will add new elements that make reading more complex, but the message is finally the same. In all cases, prior knowledge of Lutheran Theology is necessary to understand the meaning of this subject.

and Luke (18 : 15-16) and showed how Jesus had a special predilection for children, blessing them without reservation. Therefore, baptizing them was the right thing to do.



Photo 3: Lucas Cranach, the Elder, *Christ blessing children*, 1537.
Oil on panel, 71.5 x 121 cm, Landesmuseum für Kunst- und Kulturgeschichte.

But beyond this interpretation of the scene that Cranach painted many times after 1537, it is also possible to dare to find confirmation that, for Luther, the Church is not an intermediary between the Christian and God himself. While the apostles are located on the left and absolutely relegated from the action, Jesus welcomes the infants directly, without filters or mediators. Although Peter is among the apostles present, he cannot but turn to others and with a gesture ask what Jesus does surrounded by children. In any case, painting is a direct call to Lutheran theology, to prior knowledge for correct interpretation.

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Art historians have not always taken into consideration the importance of the pictorial function. We have already seen that without it the first art derived from the ideas of Martin Luther could not be understood correctly, appropriate to its historical and cultural context. In this sense, Andersson (1981) has observed that in Lutheran art artists adapted familiar forms, already known from Christian art, redefining their purpose and function. This only makes the clear establishment of the function of the works in their own niche much more important.

We cannot be satisfied with answering *what* the works say. We must also look at *how* they worked in their context, especially in the aesthetic experience of the original viewer. When artists develop adaptations of forms and from an already known iconography, their value usually lies under that adaptation. In the cases of Dürer and Cranach, this is evident, since his paintings could not be distinguished from their Catholic counterparts, when in fact they fulfilled very different functions, being conceived with divergent intentions of that which the Catholic Church maintained not only in force but also potentiated of the Council of Trent.

Lutheran art, that which was very close to Luther himself, his figure and his teachings, used innovations that we have tried to make evident here. These were manifested in the lessons that the works wished to teach from an accompaniment of the Scripture, in the tasks that these images had to execute as a supplement to the Scripture and, of course, in the strategies that established the nature of their use among the parishioners.

Dürer proved that it was possible to conceive a work of a religious nature that was not intended to incite devotion to the sacred figure represented in it. With *The Four Apostles* he confirmed that the work of religious art can be used as a theological statement based on Scripture. While Cranach, for his part, changed the traditional function of the altarpiece from being a marker of an expressly devotional Catholic ritual to being a tool of religious instruction. He transformed a familiar form to adapt it from the devotional, the theological and the didactic in the new practices introduced by the new interpretation of the Christian faith.

The fact that we can speak today of Lutheran art, testifies to the fact of Luther's moderate position towards the use of religious images. Lutheran Christianity supported the invention and development of new types of pictorial interpretation. Luther's main concern revolved around how images should be used and not about whether or not they should be used. With the Lutheran Reformation the religious image is desacralized, which will be responsible, from then on, mainly for instructional tasks. In this way, religious education through the use of artistic images "is expressed through the highest fidelity of the biblical episodes narrated by means of a clear, unambiguous figurative language, thanks to the frequent use of the inscriptions that they show the steps of the Scriptures clearly legible" (Butera, 2016, p. 26).

Consequently, some themes of the iconography of the Christian tradition will be thus expelled from the Lutheran catalog, while others will be subjected to a semantic redefinition to adjust them to the message of the Gospel. Ullman (1984) has indicated that for Luther images without Scripture made no sense. "A painting was really nothing more than an illustration of the Gospel, developing a growing didactic role" (p. 119). Thus, the devotional image would be replaced by what has been called *Merkbild* (or

pictorial reminder), so that any subjective interpretation by the artist was not desirable. "A new relationship developed between the painting and the observer, limiting the individual subjective interpretation of the relationship with God" (Ullman 1984, p. 119). Everything beyond the precise illustration of Scripture and its interpretation in a strictly Lutheran sense would be considered superfluous.

It is clear, then, that artists such as Dürer and Cranach, understood early on that the Lutheran Reformation made Christianity a Bible religion, emphasizing the veneration of the Word. Before the Reformation, the Bible was one of many sources of authority. Luther would place it as the only one and this would be reflected in a new conception of the arts within religion (Spelman, 1955).

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AUTHOR

María Magdalena Ziegler Delgado

She has a degree in Arts, with higher studies in History and Theory of Plastic Arts (Central University of Venezuela); Master in History of the Americas and Doctor in History (Andrés Bello Catholic University); He also has advanced studies in Theology (Institute of Theology for Religious - UCAB). She was professor of History of Art and

Culture for the Department of Humanities of the Metropolitan University (Caracas, Venezuela) from 2003 to 2017. She has specialized in the study of the history of art as cultural history and has emphasized Christian religious art and Cultural Heritage. She is the author of *Art, Society and Religiosity in Caracas Mantuan of the XVIII* (Unimet, 2011) and *El Siglo XX in her own words* (Unimet, 2013), as well as numerous academic articles in refereed journals. She is currently an international consultant and consultant for Se Habla Arte (sehablaarte.com).

mziegler@unimet.edu.ve

ResearchGate: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Maria_Ziegler