

Katharina Eisch

# The Spiritual Journey

## A Scheme of Stained Glass Windows by Mark Angus

*The language of light.*

A Victorian village church on top of a hill, the pointed church spire greeting travellers from far in the distance. Entering the church through the side-placed main entrance door they are met and welcomed by a sensation: The church area is immersed in coloured light streaming from eight double lancet windows set along the simple church nave. When lingering longer visitors may experience how this light animates and transforms the room depending on the position of the sun and clouds. The interior does not appear dark. With its strong purple, blue, green and amber this experience of light might correspond to the impression of churches and cathedrals in the early Middle Ages. At the same time, however, these windows, glass paintings, with their free, spacious gestures are bearing an undoubtedly modern handwriting.

The artistic intention and the language of light, however, is the same, driving an arch over the centuries. Given its close connections to architecture as well as to panel painting, mediaeval stained glass touches not only the fine arts but embodies in an exceptional way the spirituality of the Middle Ages: Not only can sun light – symbolising as it does the divine – enter the church through the glass panes, but in permeating the stained glass it also transforms itself, filling the space within with the multi-coloured light of the resurrection. Therefore glass was not only considered a building material, not only an image carrier, but also a medium for indicating the mystery of God. At the same time the window images were luminous, glowing catechisms, reproducing the picture motifs of the illustrated poor man's bibles throughout Europe. The iconoclasm and colour animosities of the following epochs, from the reformation wars to the bright 'stage lights' of Baroque and to the reductionism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have left little of this. Even where, in present times, there is still new artistic glazing of churches being undertaken any holistic colour and space experience is usually taken over by the trend towards a bright and white light.

### *New stained glass and its public.*

However, starting from Germany, post-war church architecture succeeded in a reflection and recollection of the spiritual qualities of sacral glass arts. Artists, and especially painters such as Georg Meistermann or Johannes Schreiter, were able to prolifically interface modern painting and stained glass and develop it on for church art. In the United Kingdom, from the nineteen seventies on, a new generation of architectural glass artists established themselves; artists who explicitly relate to the tradition of the German post-war masters, but in no way rank behind the present German scene neither in versatility nor vitality. Perhaps an indicator of this can be found in the number of British university departments and training courses for architectural stained glass.

A prominent protagonist of the British glass art scene is Mark Angus from Bath in the southwest of England. His scheme of windows, finished in 2005, for the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Spinkhill near Sheffield is referred to in the above opening paragraph. In his twenty years of teaching at the Bristol College for Art and Design Angus has shaped his own style, which – on the foundations laid by John Piper (e.g. Coventry Cathedral) and Johannes Schreiter – follows new ways of a modern pictorial language. For some years Angus has been living and working in the Eastern Bavarian glass art centre of Frauenau. His output ranges from an early central work, the “Daily Bread” window of 1984 in Durham Cathedral, to the 36 window scheme “The Colours of Order” in the school chapel of the renowned public school of Oundle near Cambridge finished in 2004, and includes many more than two hundred windows scattered amongst village and neighbourhood churches in the United Kingdom.

Other than in Germany, where a common knowledge about stained glass consists – at the best and if at all! – in a negative stereotype of antiquated leaded saints, amongst the British public “stained glass” is surely a well understood concept. Independent of which church denomination, suggestions of modern windows in the United Kingdom, even for very old churches, evolve from the parishes and are there lively discussed. Without being able to rely on a church tax (as is the case for churches in Germany), British parishes are dependant on the active identification of parishioners with their church, and the subsequent donations from the congregation, a background that might, more easily than in Germany, lead to private donations also of art works. Anyway, in the case of a commission, the design process of a window is accompanied by an intense and often lengthy dialogue taking places between the artist, the donor, the church community (parishioners), and the higher decision committees of the church.

Yet it will still be surprising that the Church of the Immaculate Conception is a Catholic village church in the northeast of Anglican England, located in a region that has never economically recovered from the downturn of the steel industry around Sheffield. The parish priest, Father Peter McGuire, is

responsible for seven communities around Spinkhill, a village with less than a hundred houses. His parishioners not only backed his courageous suggestion for a complete and modern re-glazing of this church (built in 1846), but also financed this themselves, mostly through donations. The original Victorian stained glass windows had, in the spirit of optimistic opening-up following the Second Vatican Council (1962 – 1965), been removed as being too dark and traditional. What was left untouched was the east window showing Mary as the patron of the church, as well as the original glazing, with symbols of the passion, in the trefoil and quatrefoil windows above the double lights of the nave. These nave remnants have, out of necessity, now been dismantled, restored and integrated into a window in the south transept of the church.

*Towards God and the self. The 'spiritual journey' as an open pictorial narrative.*

In 2001 Mark Angus was commissioned to produce designs for the eight high twin lancet windows of the nave. In the planning process the special situation and needs of the people of the region was just as relevant considerations for Angus as the historical background of the Catholic parish church of Spinkhill. Originating as a place of shelter and sanctuary to reformation refugees the village had been a Jesuit centre since the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Even though Jesuits are no longer active in Spinkhill their legacy still cannot be overlooked: be it in the widespread estate of the neighbouring Catholic public school of Mount St. Mary's College, or in the true-to-life stone busts of eight great Jesuit fathers which carry as corbels the roof construction of the parish church and proudly project, almost threateningly, into the inner space of the nave.

This historical background and the headstrong character of the church were not to be ignored. At the same time the windows would have missed the present reality of the parish and the region had Angus now resorted to superficially 'Jesuit' depictions or got himself seduced into other artistic concessions to the dominant stone figures and the Victorian ambience of the church. Instead, he developed an artistically autonomous scheme of windows which re-explores theologian inspiration as well as the potentials of the tradition of stained glass, and develops them on. With the theme of the 'journey' Angus consciously follows the multilayered spiritual approaches of Jesuit thinking, as e.g. offered by Ignatius of Loyola with the forty-day mediation process of his "Spiritual Exercises" as a reflection of the life-long journey of the soul, or as they are expressed in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in the teleological philosophy of Teilhard de Chardin.

The resulting sequence of eight pictorial windows turns contemplation and dwelling in the newly designed church space into a spiritual journey in itself. The scheme unfolds the never-ending journey to God as a journey towards our own self; the human life journey is correlated to the planet and the environment and to the evolution of cosmos as well as culture, spiritual growth is referred back to

earthly travelling, and visa versa. The stained glass windows address the present-day person without engaging in ready-made, stereotypical, or pretentious statements. Angus's pictorial language is narrative and associative, with their imagery his windows are meant to offer sense and significance and they want to appeal and speak to us spontaneously. However, they close up towards quick and one-dimensional answers and therefore inspire the church visitors to follow their own intuitions, to try out always new and different interpretations or to simply allow oneself to be absorbed in colours and moods: These are stained glass windows for spiritual everyday use, it is a journey of discovery meant to accompany our own lives and experiences.

The multitude and depth of meaning on the one hand and, on the other hand, the calmness, peace, and serenity that the scheme emanates, despite its intense colour and expressiveness, is founded in Angus's artistic style, which doesn't differentiate between figurative and abstract means of expression. Most of Angus's later work is made up by figurative as well as abstract elements that integrate into an abstract way of using colour and into his graphic application of the lead line (which is known as a 'trade mark' in Angus's oeuvre). In the pictorial windows of Spinkhill the motifs are drawn in large-scale and super sized over both lights of each window, and are, in the small trefoil and quatrefoil openings above, supplemented by symbols such as flames, arrows, the eye of God, a ladder, meaning to illustrate and to spin the thread of signification on. Lucid fundamental colours and hues and colour gradations avoid a superficial effect of colourfulness. Using the technique of etching – removing layers of colour from mouth-blown flashed glass with acid – Angus is able to 'paint' with the pure, glowing colour of the glass. Only occasionally does he complement this in a sketchy and spontaneous way with black enamel painting.

Concerning its content as well as its artistic effect the window scheme of Spinkhill is laid out holistically – but, at the same time, each window also tells its own story. In this respect British stained glass tradition, as expressed in Mark Angus's work, differs from the German practice that intends the church space to reverberate with one idea and one visual chord. The narrative journey of Spinkhill has to be followed window to window – without the story ever been told to its end; again and again new and different aspects of the 'spiritual journey' open up.

*From Alpha to Omega: Being and Metamorphosis.*

A large alpha initiates, in the first of the four windows of the north side and opposite to the south door entrance, the life journey through birth, death and rebirth. Embedded into an oversize heart as the symbolic place of truth, emotionality and freedom of the human being there are to be seen two figures lying, mother and child maybe. Going further, a red tilted cross marks death as the point of metamorphosis and transition. The strong red, yellow and purple of the heart window contrasts to

the cool blue background of the neighbouring double lancet. Located directly behind the baptismal font this second window reflects on the human life through the mystery of the seven church sacraments from baptism to the last rites. The symbols intertwine and close up as a cycle. This window might be the most obvious and easiest for us to decipher, easily disclosing its meaning, whilst at the same time creating movement and liveliness right at the moment of entering of the church.

From the Christian sacraments, binding the individual to the ecclesiastical conduct of life, we are led to the community of the faithful, the “pilgrim people to God” in the next window. Here the person may find to his/her self and to a feeling of being held. Here, within the community, God appears and is apparent in his Trinity, God’s commitment to his people, to mankind, His becoming man and the sacrifice of crucifixion creates a bond of love. Accordingly the many different human faces, which the window shows gathering under the three manifestations of God, also express, in their purple and multicoloured tonality, a refrained joyfulness.

At the height of the altar, in the fourth window, large tears in blue glass are rolling down over the text of the Lord’s Prayer: In prayer the self and the Divine can be met. Tears show how, beyond words, emotions may be released – love, gratitude, forgiving – and how in the journey of faith the whole person finds expression.

Even more explicitly the first south-side window is dedicated to the unfolding of the self in inner peace. The window is in the corner between the entry portal and the vestry, making it a little separate. Here a figure is seen resting in a large, opal-white eye, the eye of God, which is itself bedded on seven pillow-shaped forms referring to the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, as foundations of our lives and leading us to peace, to wisdom, reason, counsel and fortitude, knowledge, piety and godliness. Seemingly this image is resting statically in itself, but, at the same time, peace in Christ is understood as active, the way of creating peace, and as the dialectic sublimation of adverse oppositions (Eph 2, 13-16).

A total of four windows (“Prayer and Tears”, but also three south-side windows) show over the bottom edge a hemisphere of our planet earth. Especially in the two middle south windows the worldly connection to place, walking and travelling on earth become explicit – in its ambivalent dimensions: In Jesuit thinking the journey on earth leads towards spiritual development. However, there is also a link between human world exploration to the conquering and subjugation of the earth, as well as to the destruction of the environment, which are under scrutiny. Angus contrasts all of this with the concrete, located imagery of the bible, the world view of St. Francis of Assisi, or also newer theologies e.g. by Thomas Berry or Matthew Fox.

Being human also means to relate to our earthly place, to the environment as the world around us, and to the planet earth in order to come to ourselves. Visitors don’t need to know the theological

contents before being able to take in a stylised house and the suggestion of a widespread landscape in calm green. Our dwelling place on earth forms our being and our identities. In a moment of opening towards the divine, it becomes the pole of reference and resting of all being. On our earthly journey God appears in all things and on all levels: In the trefoil above this double light a DNA helix links the macro space of the cosmos to its micro structure.

In accordance with that, and in the neighbouring window to the left, an atomic nucleus stands like a star over a giant lime tree leaf. Detached, however unscathed with its fine capillary vessels, it is hovering in the window. In its background there is a strict geometrical grid in black-red. This reminds of the way in which mediaeval stained glass imagery expressed the order and infinity of the cosmos through geometrical backgrounds – but, at the same time, Angus's structure is broken, as earthly order can never be complete, and man, in his strive for technical perfection, is fallible and vulnerable. Angus addresses the human being concretely and consciously in their present-day responsibility and ambivalence towards nature: Mankind is a part of nature and still steps out of it; we approach earth and cosmos through the progression of research and understanding, which still, , at the same time, leads us to become their greatest danger.

In all of that Angus's balance between abstraction and figurative depiction resembles a tightrope walk between up-to-date assertion and time references on the one hand, and, on the other, a timeless openness of signification. Also this moves the scheme closer towards the work of Johannes Schreier, from whom Mark Angus still differs with his confession for colour and with his expressive courage.

Just as Jesuit theology understands life as growth and metamorphosis, so we experience ourselves in our personal appropriation of the scheme as travellers, and thereby as participating in an indefinite process through which the world realises itself. Referring to three essential aspects – the growth of the individual self, community and our earthly ways of travel – the scheme moves via the rebirth on to the otherworldly 'continuation' of this journey, and onto the spiritual unfolding within the divine. This conclusion is attempted in the last window that ends the scheme on the south side, next to the altar. Starting off from the earth's sphere a zigzag path – that can also be read as a scroll with biblical references – proceeds upwards to the omega point. This, according to Teilhard de Chardin, is the symbol of our final destination

The total scheme challenges by being modern, whilst declining to lean towards contemporary trends, which is the more true as Angus realises in Spinkhill a new and comprehensive pictorial language with very traditional means – the lead line and the brush stroke on mouth-blown coloured glass. The scheme is realised by the artist himself from the design to its execution, which again distinguishes the British from the German stained glass scene. Although Mark Angus cooperates in Germany with stained glass executing firms it can be seen in Spinkhill once again to which extent his work depends

upon the spontaneous expression of his own hand. In a remote corner of Europe the little church of Spinkhill offers a complex 'travel experience' of its own kind.

### Going to Spinkhill

You can reach Spinkhill on the M1 going north. After junction 30 you take the A 6135 direction Sheffield. Take a right turn to Spinkhill. Father Peter McGuire will be happy to let you into the parish church. His telephone number is 01246 432289; his email address is pdmcg@btopenworld.com.

### Literature

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### Summary

In the Catholic village church of Spinkhill, England the British stained glass artist Mark Angus (who lives now in Bavaria, Germany) has realised a scheme of eight windows in his expressive pictorial language of colour, light and gesture. Taking inspiration from the Jesuit tradition of the area this scheme is composed as an open, pictorial narrative unfolding the processes and metamorphosis of the self through individuality and community, place and nature, the microstructure and the macrocosm, and as a series of spiritual journeys. The essay introduces the scheme and offers possible ways of interpretation, but also outlines the context of modern stained glass for churches and its public perception in both Britain and Germany.

### The author

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