RELIGION AND BEAUTY IN THE CLASSROOM

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This is a short report on teaching a course on late medieval and early renaissance art in Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, in the summer of 2004. The question I pose for the reader is: was I teaching 'theology' or 'religion' in this course? My purpose is to describe the course content, the teaching environment, the difficulties inherent in the conception of the course, and the relations between students and the work. I hope to give enough detail for it to be possible for someone to reproduce the course themselves, and for it to be a useful historical document.

First, the relevant background. Dartmouth College has a teaching exchange with the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, where I hold a post teaching Christian Theology and Ethics. I was invited to spend two months in Dartmouth College, in the Religion Department from late June to late August 2004, as part of that exchange. The exchange is much valued by both institutions, and colleagues from Edinburgh are accorded warm hospitality, comfortable lodgings, and exemplary administrative support for the duration of their stay. This stay involved, in my case, teaching one course, for two days a week, over nine weeks, for which I was paid $10,000, with $2,500 deducted for rent. Dartmouth College's teaching has a four-quarter term structure, and the summer term is the fourth quarter; typically fewer students are in residence, and some faculty do not teach during this period. The Religion Department conceives of itself in the following way: 'Everyone teaching in the department also believes in the importance of comparing religious traditions and in studying religions in a com-

parative way. It is the department's insistence on an undergraduate major that is comparative and interdisciplinary in nature that distinguishes the study of religion at Dartmouth' (http://www.dartmouth.edu/~religion/). My impression is that the department aims to be even-handed, unbiased, non-theological, and unconcerned with the particular religious history of its own location in Hanover in particular and New England more widely.

The initial proposal for the course was entitled 'Christ in Art', or its fuller title 'Christ in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art.' There seemed to have been some discussion by faculty in the Religion Department as to whether 'Jesus in Art' was a more appropriate title for the course. This may reflect a teaching and research culture in which theology is not taught, and that to name a course 'Christ in Art' might indicate theological presuppositions that are not present in a name such as 'Jesus in Art'. However, this was not an ideologically enforced issue, and my observation that the paintings were originally produced in a period that understood images to express Christological themes produced ready agreement that the course be named 'Christ in Art', and this was the title that was presented to students.

Second, the teaching environment. The course was taught on Tuesdays and Thursdays between 10:00 and 11:50, in a classroom located in the impressive Baker-Berry library. The room had no natural light, and was equipped with a computer/projector, linked to the internet, and a large rectangular table around which the seventeen students enrolled on the course could comfortably sit on three sides, with the teacher at the far end, underneath the projection screen. The class size had been capped at 20, to reflect the style of teaching and use of course materials. The lack of any windows in the room gave the class a feeling of being divorced from the ordinary world, a feeling reinforced by the use of projections of paintings which became not only windows into another world, but the only window in the room at all. In this respect the room became a bit like a Lady Chapel: a relatively intimate space, with a stained glass window depicting biblical characters. The main teaching tool used was the online product Blackboard, which was used to communicate to the class members, and to upload relevant documents as the course progressed.

There was also an additional timetable slot available to the class. This is known as the X Hour, which for this course was scheduled for 3:00-3:50 on Wednesdays. The use of this hour was initially obscure to me, and I received several explanations of its purpose. By the time the course was underway I was left with the impression that it could be used for additional teaching in ways that

the instructor saw fit. I found a use for it on three occasions during the nine weeks of the course, which will be explained below.

The timetabling of the course reflects a trend in American universities more widely, I have now discovered, which is quite alien to my home setting in Scotland. This is the desire by students (and some staff) to have as many courses as possible taught between Tuesday and Thursday, or more explicitly, *not* on Mondays and Fridays. This enables students to enjoy a very long weekend from Friday to Monday. Administrators indicated in e mails that this was causing stresses on the timetabling process, leading to high incidences of class clashes, which effectively reduces the number of courses open to students. The initial course enrollment had been 20, and I received two e mails from students who attended the two classes in the first week explaining that they could not participate because of timetabling issues. Their practice, it seemed, had been to try out a number of classes and pick the ones that suited them best; it is difficult to determine whether their choices were indeed constrained by timetabling issues, or whether they had presented timetabling issues as a courteous way to inform a teacher that they did not wish to take the class. The teaching pattern for the Christ in Art course in Dartmouth afforded me more time for other scholarly pursuits, but I also used that time to do additional class preparation that otherwise I would not have undertaken, which will also be outlined below.

The student profile for the course was varied. Some of the students had already declared Religion as a major, but there were other students who had declared other majors, including politics and history. There were nine women and eight men in the class, from a variety of religious backgrounds. Three of the women were active in the Roman Catholic chaplaincy, and made it explicit that their religious commitments had guided their decision to take the course. I do not remember whether all three were religion majors; at least one was. I openly referred to my own Church of England background and affiliation at the start of the class, but did not invite students to articulate their own religious commitments. This reflects my practice in teaching this subject in Scotland too. The students who wished to discuss their Roman Catholic tradition volunteered this freely after class one day, and this continued to feature in their conversations. They played a major role in helping the class form a mini community, and this is one of the factors that contributed to the success of the course.

Third, the content of the course. The purpose of the course was to interpret paintings in the light of their original contexts as religious objects. The pattern of the course was to set readings from a variety of texts, for discussion on

Tuesdays, and to lay out high quality photocopies of works of art on the tables for interpretation on Thursdays. The Tuesday texts were explicitly intended to cover three areas of scholarly inquiry: art-historical background, religious-social background, and practical guidance for interpreting religious paintings. The main art history texts were Veronica Sekules's *Medieval Art*, Evelyn Welch's *Art in Renaissance Italy*, and Jill Dunkerton et al., *Giotto to Dürer*. We also used Michael Baxandall's *Words for Pictures*. The main religious-social background texts were Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition* vol. 1 and vol. 4, Steven Ozment's *The Age of Reform* and Daniel Lesnick's *Preaching in Medieval Florence*. The two practical guidance texts were Neil MacGregor's *Seeing Salvation*, and John Drury's *Painting the Word*. The Thursday practicals were structured around the medieval church year: one cluster around Christmas, the other around Good Friday-Holy Saturday-Easter. The first cluster included the Annunciation, Nativity, and Madonna and Child. The second cluster included the Crucifixion, Deposition, Pietà, Dead Christ and Resurrection. Paintings were taken from roughly 1200 to 1600 in Italy and the Netherlands. The goal was for the Tuesday texts to provide students with a varied vocabulary for interpreting paintings, and for the Thursday practicals to afford a context for students to become skilled in the use of this vocabulary. There were significant approaches that were not taken up. We did not explore issues of painterly technique beyond basic issues of the cost and use of materials; we did not investigate more recent theoretical perspectives focused on issues of gender, sexuality, politics or economics. We tended to ask questions of the type 'why are there so many paintings of the Virgin and Child?' rather than 'what can we reconstruct of fifteenth century Florentine views of maternity from paintings of the period?'. Correspondingly, the enquiry tended to explore Marian theology rather than ideas of the family before the rise of the bourgeois private home. Nonetheless, questions of the latter kind repeatedly came up because students discovered very quickly that the concepts and descriptive categories available to pre-Reformation Italian Christians differed significantly from those used in early twenty-first century New England. Certain relations repeatedly entered discussion: between religion and work, public and private, civic and aesthetic, social status and prayer, rich and poor, healthy and sick. Some of the students clearly articulated their grasp that a different kind of self was conceived, with a different relation to community, with a differently mediated relation to God. It was fascinating to see some of the brighter students reflecting on what they described as a dominant focus on immediacy and 'experience' in contemporary

North American culture, and its relative absence in earlier times, especially in the light of Dartmouth College's own marketing strategy to prospective students, which I learned is named 'The Dartmouth Experience'. As the course progressed, a significant portion of discussion was devoted—in a way I had planned—to charting the differences between earlier and later conceptions of religion in society and—in a way I had not planned—to throwing into question certain contemporary cultural practices relating especially to the care of the vulnerable and the place of religious aspiration in advertising.

Students signed up for one or more excerpts from the texts which they would summarize and present to the class on Tuesdays. When each student had presented his/her summary, the remainder of the class was devoted to discussion of the issues. Students were instructed to compile a glossary of terms over the course of the class, and I reviewed these periodically. The Tuesday classes thus took the form of seminar discussions. On Thursdays the tables would be laid out with between fifteen and twenty reproductions of paintings, often taken from images on the web. Students were instructed to find another class member, and to go round the table as a pair, interpreting a painting for each other in turn. Generally, during the course of an hour, each pair would manage about four paintings. For the second hour the whole class would interpret a painting selected by me, projected onto the screen.

The course was constrained, as it is in Edinburgh, by the brevity of the nine-week term. This means that it is not possible to spend time reading classic Patristic interpretations of scripture, which are so crucial for the medieval visual imagination, nor for reading extended passages of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which heavily determined views of hell and heaven from the early 1300s onward, nor for acquiring some knowledge of the principal saints in Italy, nor for exploring non-liturgical devotional literature in the different periods and cities in which the paintings were produced. Instead, the religious background focused on the architecture and use of churches (especially the location and function of paintings), the structure and content of the Mass (especially the taking of communion), ordinary liturgical texts such as the *Magnificat*, the *Gloria*, the *Sanctus*, the *Agnus Dei*, seasonal liturgical texts such as the *Stabat Mater* or *O Sacrum Convivium*, and elements of folk tradition preserved in Christmas carols such as *Adam lay y bounden*, or *The Coventry Carol*. The latter were not, strictly speaking, relevant to paintings in Italy or the Netherlands, as they are part of an old English tradition. They gave some flavor of popular piety, nonetheless, and were in any cases the carols I happen to know.

By far the most time, however, was spent reading the Bible. Some of the students had detailed knowledge of the Gospels, a few more had a vague knowledge of some stories, and a small minority had almost no working knowledge of the New Testament. It was thus an ongoing task to lay out the relevant Gospel passages so that students knew who and what was meant when reference was made to John the Evangelist, Nicodemus, Mary Magdalene, the disciples, Joseph of Arimathea, and when reference was made to particular events, such as the temptation in the wilderness, the washing of the disciples' feet, the crucifixion, the appearance to Mary Magdalene, and so forth. Had time permitted we would also have read the early chapters in Genesis, Genesis 22, Psalms, and portions of Isaiah and Daniel. By the end of the course, the students had a reasonable knowledge of the crucifixion narratives, and—because we had made a detailed comparison between the different accounts—were able to see how painters had harmonized the accounts, selectively, in various ways. It thus became possible, towards the end of the course, for students to discern particular theological nuances.

It may be helpful to take a concrete example to show how these various things came together. One of the first paintings I showed in a Thursday class was Botticelli's *Temptation of Christ*. It can, at the time of writing, be accessed on the web at the following address: http://www.wga.hu/framex-e.html?file=html/b/botticel/4sistina/temptati/temptat.html&find=temptation. It is one of my favorite teaching paintings, because art historians typically judge it as a lower quality work. It thus affords the opportunity to explore what makes a painting a 'great painting' or a 'minor painting': students acquire early on a consciousness of the different kinds of evaluative language. It is a scripturally complex painting, drawing on Leviticus 14 and the temptation narratives in the Gospel of . . . of whom? The class read the temptation narratives in the three synoptic Gospels and are able to judge which account seems to be portrayed in the painting. The point is to read first, and judge second, and thus get used to reading scripture as part of 'reading' paintings. We read Leviticus 14 and the class has an opportunity to see how it is invoked by Botticelli. I then ask the million dollar question: where is Jesus in the painting? This provokes a minor and a major insight for the class. The first, minor one, is that Jesus is obviously painted three times, being tempted three times. The class is thus able to learn something about multiple images in the same painting: a story is being told. The class thus answers the question saying that Jesus is present three times in the painting. I then say that he is present four times. This typically produces some scouring of the image

by the class, who believe that one of the figures in the foreground must be Jesus, and there is generally much debate and disagreement about who it might be. The major insight arrives when I ask what is going on in the foreground, to which the answer is: a sacrifice. The penny then drops without further delay. The whole picture is about . . . about Jesus? Sort of. The point is, of course, that the painting is about a lot of things, all at once. The leper is the leper, and the priest is the priest, and after all the painting was produced for a pope who had funded a hospital. But the leper is also the sinner, that is, the viewer. The priest is Christ. But the sacrifice is of Christ, too, so Christ is both priest and victim. The angels who minister to Jesus appear to be celebrating the Eucharist with him! And so on. Students learn that they need to be perceptive on a variety of levels, and open to imaginative interpretations: the wilder the better, I generally say. Medieval wildness! And students learn the important lesson that the criteria for what counts as a 'good' painting may need some supplementation or correction.

Three events were the highlights of the course. The first was a class devoted to the *Stabat Mater*. The second was a visit to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The third was a class hosted by a member of staff in Special Collections in the Rauner Library.

The *Stabat Mater* is an old devotional text, set to music many times over, in many countries. It is sung on or before Good Friday, and was in use from the late fourteenth century onwards. The Latin text, of which there are a few variants, is a reflection on Mary's sorrow at the foot of the cross. I used it for the first time in Dartmouth, in response to a request from a student for a concrete example of how Franciscan developments shaped worship and popular piety. I recited the hymn in Latin, and then read out my own translation of it, a translation whose aim was to bring out the resonances with the Vulgate scriptures which are echoed in the text. The relevant biblical texts (in Latin and English) were also used in class, and the combination was designed to communicate something of Mary's significance in the popular imagination. The result was a surprising revelation to the class of the intensity of focus on Mary's suffering in the later middle ages. For many students, including those whose major was in religion, it was the first time they had encountered Latin in the classroom. The timetabling of the class, which left Mondays and Fridays for my own scholarly work, provided the necessary extra time to research and present this class.

The Boston MFA is outstanding: it not only has a number of important paintings from 1200 to 1600, but they are expertly curated. There is even a reconstruction of part of a medieval chapel, in which works of art are hung in such a

way as to recreate their original physical context. The Religion Department underwrote the transport and entry costs, and nearly all of the students joined the trip we made one Saturday in late August. Staff in the museum had been contacted beforehand, to check that it was acceptable for me to teach them in the public galleries. The museum was not crowded, and it was an easy matter to split the students into three groups who were free to roam the gallery. The task of each group was to identify a work, spend some time investigating and interpreting it, with a view to presenting it to the whole class. This was an enormous success, not least because of the small crowd of visitors the students attracted during their presentations. Some of the students had spent three years in Dartmouth unaware that the MFA existed; it was obviously a pleasure for them to enter it as 'experts'. One of the students, who had previously treated the class with cool detachment, was visibly excited to see the paintings face to face, and by lunchtime he was making plans to bring his family on a guided tour—naturally guided by him—of the Renaissance section of the MFA.

I had been alerted by one of the students (one of the Roman Catholics) that the Rauner Special Collections houses a fine collection of medieval manuscripts, and that these are available for use in class. After brief but highly informative initial inquires, it was arranged for the class to be hosted by one of the new curators of the special collections, who had himself arrived in Hanover a couple of weeks before I had. He was delighted to find himself addressing a group of undergraduates who were able to articulate the meanings and significance of many of the items in the repertoire of symbols found in various books of hours and other devotional texts. He was thus able to speak about their use at a relatively sophisticated level, which evidently afforded him much pleasure. One of the books of hours was judged by one student so rich in content that it formed the focus of her final term paper—a formidable challenge given that there was no literature at all on this particular artifact. I believe this paper was awarded a commendation by Dartmouth College after I had left.

Fourth, the question of religion and theology. The picture I hope to conjure is of a class of seventeen undergraduates, energetically and imaginatively interpreting a painting such as Grünewald's *Crucifixion*, Gossaert's *Deposition* or Masaccio's *Trinity*, using information learned from art-historians, historians of religious life and theologians. I had been informed prior to, and after, my arrival that the Religion Department did not teach theology. I was not explicitly forbidden to teach it, but it was politely and firmly explained to me that it would be appreciated if I conceived of my task as the teaching of religion and religious

life. My description of 'Christ in Art' as a skills-based course of instruction in interpreting paintings in the light of their religious function fitted very well into this conception. It became clear, however, that certain lacunae in the students' education made some discussions difficult. For example, phrases like 'eschatological vision', 'trinitarian resistance to visualization', 'two natures of Christ', 'apophatic reserve', 'suffering servant', not to mention words like 'sin', 'grace', 'redemption', continually surfaced in discussion. Unsurprisingly, many students were baffled by them. Equally unsurprisingly, I was often asked very sound questions such as 'what is the Trinity?' or 'what is sin?' These questions jostled side by side with other questions such as 'why is a walled garden a sign of Mary's virginity?' or 'why is Mary reading Isaiah in some paintings of the Annunciation?' The latter questions are relatively easily addressed. The former questions caused more severe problems.

In Edinburgh, most of the students who take 'Christ in Art' already have some prior background in Christian church history and Christian theology and doctrine. Indeed, it is a requirement that students demonstrate such background before admission to the course. In Dartmouth, this is obviously impractical, not primarily because of the non-theological conception of the study of religion, but because the educational structure of North American undergraduate education has as its goal exposure to an impressive breadth and variety of material. Specialization is less narrowly conceived. It is thus a very interesting challenge to be asked 'What is sin?' in the context of a religion class in a university like Dartmouth College. The solution, if that is what it was, turned out to be the use of the mysterious X Hour, which was available on Wednesday afternoons.

Before discussing this, a preliminary point is worth making. The reader may have wondered, earlier on, why volume 1 of Pelikan's *The Christian Tradition*, was part of the required reading. Volume 4 makes sense: it is an account of the theology of the medieval period that is relevant to the art works under discussion. Volume 1, however, is an account of the early church, especially its councils and debates. What is it doing in Christ in Art? The answer is that the course needs some compact yet reliable account of the main topics in the ecclesial imagination. The main topic, from the perspective of 'Christ in Art' is: how is Jesus human and divine? Pelikan's account is good because it reconstructs the debates, rather than merely focusing on the doctrinal formulations, and thus gives the reader opportunity to consider the vagueness and indeterminacy that persists in doctrinal formulations. The students found this text very difficult

indeed. This was attributed by them to the relative dryness of the style, but on closer investigation it appeared to me that the students were intimidated by the constant use of concepts and issues that were quite alien to them. At the end of the course, when I asked the students which book, if any, they judged could be deleted from the reading list, it was Evelyn Welch's *Art in Renaissance* Italy that was considered least useful: Pelikan (both volumes) scored very high as an essential text. The Welch text is full of important detail about the materials and functions of art, and I suspect it is because the students came to take this for granted that they considered it dispensable. Perhaps they did not notice they were learning all sorts of things about patrons and artists' practices. But for the purposes of the class, which aimed to equip students with the skills to interpret the paintings as religious objects, the students claimed they needed something rather different. The Pelikan texts were the students' sole access to the messy particularities of doctrine, and this made *The Christian Tradition* a source of both anxiety and fascination.

Having been impressed with the warm welcome and intellectual hospitality of the faculty in the Religion Department, I was not anxious about the prospect of equipping Dartmouth students with a little theology. I did not feel that this was a forbidden subject. Nonetheless, it would have been unwise to devote precious class time to basic education that bore no primary relation to the paintings under investigation, and I wished to honor the invitation to teach the subject in a way consonant with the department's usual practices. I thus proposed to hold an X Hour, every two weeks, whose content would be basic theological technical terms. This class would be wholly optional, and would form no part of any formal or informal assessment for the course. We ended up having three of these classes, devoted to eschatology, Christology and the Trinity: an hour on each. They were thus superficial, but they achieved the goal of outlining a little theological glossary. I did not understand this at the time, but with hindsight these sessions served to render the Pelikan texts more accessible. About six students attended on each occasion. It would be most satisfying to report that these X Hours were transformative, and that the more theological aspects of the material in the course became available to the students in a fresh and exciting way. This, however, was not the case. Instead, I succeeded only in showing to the six students that there was another world of academic study of which they, in some cases, had been not even dimly aware. Initially it seemed to me an unfortunate consequence of teaching theology in seminaries and religion in universities. On further reflection, however, this has proven not quite so clear.

I think that the study of theology would be quite at home in Dartmouth, if it were understood as serving the understanding of objects like paintings, works of literature and pieces of music. My impression was that there was a concern to ensure that theology is not understood as the primary object of understanding, or that if it is such a primary object, it be taught as a historical subject. Thus one would very likely not teach a course on Christology in the Christian tradition, but might respectably teach a course on the history of some aspect of the Christian tradition, in which Christology plays a more or less prominent role.

At the same time, I wonder whether one can say confidently that I was not teaching a course on Christology. Perhaps the course could be named 'Aspects of Christology in Italy and the Netherlands between 1200 and 1600'. We may leave to one side speculation as to how many students might be moved to enroll for a course with such a title. Of more interest is the question as to whether questions of a 'confessional approach' or a 'critical approach' do any useful work in identifying the discipline in which one best situates this course. I can see no good arguments to say that it is a theology course *rather than* a religion course; and equally no good arguments to say the reverse. Had I volunteered to my generous Dartmouth colleagues that I wished to teach a course on Christology I am confident that I would have been invited to offer an alternative. It was important that I offer a religion class, not a theology class. And there is no doubt in my mind, or the minds of my Dartmouth colleagues (as far as I can judge), that that is precisely what I did. Yet in Edinburgh this same course is listed as a 'theology and ethics' class. It seems to me quite inadequate to suggest, as some have, that it boils down to the 'politics' of particular departments. Doubtless there is some truth in this, although I must strongly impress upon the reader that I was not instructed to, nor did I have to, disguise my intentions in order to teach this course. The students did not find the course strange in conception, and those faculty in the Religion Department who asked about its content, expressed the view that it made a useful contribution to their portfolio of religion courses. I did not have to exercise political savvy in order to solicit such approval. What Edinburgh sees as a theology course, Dartmouth quite naturally sees as a religion course. This provokes me to suspect that there is something wrong with seeing *courses* as being in theology or religion. It is almost certainly wrong in this particular case. Perhaps it is only *departments* that are best designated in this way. If this is so, then it is not beyond the bounds of imagination that institutions might describe themselves as Religion Departments which, while emphasizing a comparative approach, at the same time teach some theology where

Christianity is concerned.

To conclude, I offer a brief account of the genesis of this course. The National Gallery in London hosted a popular exhibition in 2000 entitled 'Seeing Salvation'. A friend's wife, who at that time was a curator in the gallery, suggested that it was strange that faculties of theology in Britain generally did not mount courses on paintings. If one wished to learn about late medieval paintings one went to the Art History department. The problem with this is that art historians do not receive much theological education in the course of their studies. On the other hand, theologians do not receive much education in the visual arts (or any other kinds of arts, I would add) in the course of a theology degree. Why didn't I do it? I explained that my field of expertise was German Philosophy (I was at the time writing a book on the work of Jürgen Habermas), and that it was most unwise to teach so far outside one's field of Specialization. I was challenged to identify anyone whose expertise equipped them with the required background in theology, in art history and in medieval ecclesiastical history. I was also challenged to identify any book which described paintings in detail as devotional objects, in the context of an adequately described theology of the medieval Mass. Unable to find any such person or any such book, the course was planned, and was first taught in the Autumn of 2002.

Since that time, the intellectual and aesthetic significance of the medieval tradition is gradually receiving its proper recognition in a number of different universities worldwide, and in a few years' time, this 'Christ in Art' course will doubtless be viewed as an amateur affair. This is something to which I earnestly look forward. In 2004, however, it was still rather novel to juxtapose texts by Jaroslav Pelikan and Steven Ozment with texts by Veronica Sekules and Michael Baxandall. It will be a positive development if such interdisciplinary courses become commonplace in our universities. A more ambitious hope, however, is that such courses might not be seen as interdisciplinary at all, but simply as one of the standard ways of studying the world's religious traditions in their theological-historical-aesthetic complexity and beauty.