



THE WABASH CENTER

JOURNAL ON TEACHING

ARTICLE

Engaging Art to Teach Theology: A Brief Introduction to Resources

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ABSTRACT

Visual art is an often-neglected resource in the theology classroom. This essay argues that it is essential to include visual resources in theological education to present a more robust and accurate understanding of theology as it has been not only written, but also lived. Art can be incorporated into lectures and assignments to complement or complicate what students find in theological texts. After outlining some of the basic principles of using art to teach theology, this essay provides one such example that could be applied to a lesson on Reformation theology. It concludes with annotated bibliographies on print and digital resources.

KEYWORDS

anti-racist, art history, historical theology

Professors of theology often neglect what should be one of their major sources: the visual arts.¹ To illustrate by contrast: it would be unthinkable to study, say, medieval art history without at least some discussion of contemporaneous religious practice—whether it be iconography of key figures, influential theological debates, or the liturgical function of sacred architecture. To put it even more strongly then, if professors of theology are not engaging the visual arts in their pedagogy, they are not addressing the full spectrum of their subject matter (e.g., Miles 1985). As someone who has taught in both art history and theology departments, I am keenly aware of both the gap and the potential for generative dialogue between the two disciplines. This is an understandable lacuna, as most faculty do not have an arts background, let alone training in art history. Such a disciplinary bridge can be daunting to approach, and—in the midst of class preparation and other professional responsibilities—impractical to take on. Nevertheless, these challenges and risks are worth the effort and indeed have the potential to enrich

¹ A version of this essay was presented in the “Art, Religion, and Literature Pedagogy” session at the 2018 American Academy of Religion annual conference.

theological education significantly by presenting a fuller and more historically accurate telling of the history of theology, by complicating some normative theologies, and by engaging learners in the theological classroom through new methods (Mercer and Foster 2001).

It is my goal in this brief essay to provide accessible resources for my colleagues in theological education—primarily those who have never or rarely incorporated images into their teaching. Furthermore, the comments and examples below are offered with historical theology survey courses in mind, as these are often text-heavy or exclusively text-focused. That said, I expect the essay may be of interest to others as well. While the methods and resources I describe here are certainly applicable to religious studies, in my experience religious studies is more open to the use of material culture (which refers to objects and architectural environments)—likely on account of its sociological and anthropological approaches. Because of space and my own specialty, I will focus on the visual arts, by which I mean both the fine arts and decorative arts. The comments of the present essay could also be expanded to include theater and performance arts, music, film, and so on.

Why Teach with Images?

Why include visual art in a theology course? Since at least the nineteenth century, theology as an academic discipline has been characterized by the study of texts, but for most of Christian history, the majority of Christians have been illiterate (i.e., were unable to read texts) and therefore engaged with theological content primarily through the spoken word (e.g., sermons and teaching) and images (i.e., particularly in and on churches). As Orlando O. Espín puts it in his book *Idol and Grace*,

Christianity is not and has never been a text or a collection of texts or even an interpretation of texts. . . . Theology, specifically, cannot be reduced to the interpretive analysis of written texts. . . . Furthermore, it can be historically and easily demonstrated that most Christians have been illiterate during most of Christian history. Consequently, to identify the content of tradition and its traditioning with written texts alone (or primarily) is the same as reducing Christianity, and its witness to revelation, to a cultural produce of the literate (and conveniently dominant) elites. (2014, xxiii)

Thus, and perhaps most importantly, using images in theological education offers a way to recover voices and perspectives that have not been historically valued or even preserved in texts (e.g., those of women and people of color). In that sense, considering not just “high art” but also material culture—including, for example, the decorative arts (e.g., textiles, pottery, jewelry), which has historically been associated with women and therefore undervalued by (male) artists and art historians—as a valid vehicle for sophisticated theological meaning is also a social justice project. While he does not explicitly draw on visual culture in his analysis Orlando O. Espín argues for the importance of the marginalized in the creation and “traditioning” of theology. He writes that,

There is no such thing as (and there has never been) a general or universal methodology or theology, because all are and have always been contextual, historical, cultural, gendered, ethnic, racial, and limited by the theologians’ various social locations and contexts and by their personal biographies, social dominance (or lack thereof), and social interests. (2014, xxx)

Relatedly, the incorporation of non-textual theological sources, such as Ethiopian architecture, late medieval tapestries, or Mixtec manuscripts, into a historical theology course can be used to trouble narratives of theology as being white, European, and male. In other words, I suggest that the inclusion of art and material culture in the theology classroom can be a transformative anti-racist act.

To put it plainly, images are not merely illustrations of texts, but ought to be considered as primary sources in their own right (e.g., Jensen 2000; Steinberg 1996). And while it is delightful to find an image that seems to visualize a theological doctrine or religious practice perfectly, the tensions and dissonances between text and image are equally powerful opportunities for teaching. In all these capacities, art history is a valuable, unique, and, I argue, necessary source for theological inquiry. Additionally, incorporating images and architecture into courses not only appeals to so-called visual learners in particular,

but also renders concepts more vivid and therefore memorable for any student. Engaging visual art to teach theology conveys to students in concrete ways that theological concepts and debates did not occur only in the abstract, but also had effects in the physical world (and vice versa), as, for example, in the notable differences in depictions of the Trinity before and after the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (Jensen 1999).

Approaches to Teaching with Images

It is possible to use two broad categories to characterize the ways images are employed in theological education: (1) a text-driven approach frequently treats images merely as illustrations. In this case, images are often displayed alongside text without any kind of analysis of the image itself; in other words, the meaning is treated as being self-evident. This tends to occur with portraits of historical figures, which are commonly used as the equivalent of author photos. For instance, when a book on early Christian theological debates includes a nineteenth-century engraving of Augustine, what could it possibly reveal about the fourth and fifth centuries? Absolutely nothing, I would argue. While it may be relevant in understanding nineteenth-century conceptions of Augustine, such images have nothing to do with Augustine's historical context—and are often not addressed at all in the accompanying text.

Not surprisingly, I advocate for (2) an image-driven approach, which treats images as “texts” in their own right. That is, this approach is motivated by the fact that images are independent sources for theological meaning. This means that they may affirm, respond to, or even contradict the meaning conveyed in contemporaneous texts—but their value as sources is not limited to the degree that they reflect their textual counterparts. And significantly, images require interpretation. Precisely because images are capable of sophisticated theological meaning, they need to be “read” carefully. Just as we would not display an excerpt from the writing of Augustine or Emilie Townes in a PowerPoint presentation without any explanation or discussion, so too should an image of, say, Jesus as the Good Shepherd from an early Christian catacomb be given time for analysis.

How to Teach with Images

When I show an image in class, the first thing I ask students is simply, “What do you see?”² Because there are (almost) no wrong answers when describing an image, all students, regardless of training or experience, can participate in this exercise. This conversation may last five to ten minutes and should address as much of an image as possible. Descriptions can include but are not limited to the following terms:

- **Medium:** the material from which the image is made (e.g., oil on canvas, tempera on wood, bronze). When using digital projected images in class, the dimensions of the object should be provided.
- **Scale:** the relationship of parts of an image to the image as a whole.
- **Proportion:** the relationship of parts of a body to one another and to the whole.
- **Composition:** how the elements of an image are arranged. Noticing how one's eye moves through an image can help to describe the composition. Related concepts include movement, balance, symmetry, and repetition.
- **Perspective:** the representation of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface. Linear perspective was studied and significantly developed by the artists of the Italian Renaissance. There are multiple types of perspectival renderings, including one-point, two-point, and atmospheric. The delineation of foreground, middleground, and background can be used to create space and perspective in an image.

² In practical terms, a black background with white letters is best for the presentation of images. For any class, text in PowerPoint should be limited to key points, in abbreviated form and not long paragraphs, because students tend to copy text verbatim instead of listening to the lecture. Image files should be high resolution and the full information for the image (including the link for the image source, when applicable) should be kept in the notes window if not provided on the slide itself.

- **Line:** can be used to define shapes (contour lines), for shading (often crosshatching); implied lines are indicated through composition of elements or gestures of figures.
- **Color:** hue. Color may be used to communicate meaning in a variety of ways, from naturalistic to spiritual (e.g., through gold leaf). Relatedly, a color's intensity refers to its saturation and its value refers to its degree of lightness or darkness.
- **Content:** subject matter, though this moves into interpretation.³

While I usually take time on the first day of an introductory art history course to review these terms, in a historical theology survey course I define them as needed. When students make observations about an image using non-specialist terminology, or struggle to find the right words, I often affirm their observations through repetition or paraphrase while incorporating the relevant terminology. Describing what an image looks like and how it works visually is important because theological meaning is not only communicated via the subject matter (e.g., the crucifixion, the nativity), but in the very way that the subject matter is presented.

After sufficient description, students use their observations to interpret the possible meaning(s) of the image. Depending on the class, emphasis might be placed on the subject matter and iconography of the image or on the function of the image/object. It can be helpful to have students sketch an image in its entirety. (This is admittedly part of my personal agenda to convince students who abandoned art-making in elementary school that drawing is an important way of thinking and processing the world, regardless of "natural ability.") Not only are drawing exercises effective icebreakers and stress-relievers (e.g., [Women's Health Watch 2017](#)), but they also encourage "slow looking," that is, a practice of carefully observing an image and the way its parts fit together. As Jennifer L. Roberts (2013) has observed, "just because you have *looked* at something doesn't mean that you have *seen* it. Just because something is available instantly to vision does not mean that it is available instantly to consciousness. Or, in slightly more general terms: access is not synonymous with learning. What turns access into learning is time and strategic patience."

I have also found it effective to use art-making exercises and assignments in class sessions that do not have an art historical element. For example, in response to a reading on a theological concept like liberation I might ask students to make a quick sketch or, if time and materials permit, a collage. The key is to instruct students to refrain from using words in their image-making. Sharing their images with the class is always optional, but they are invited to reflect on how the process of making contributed to their understanding of the given concept or reading.

Images and objects, whether paintings, maps,⁴ coinage, et cetera, can be useful in setting historical context, which can be accomplished even with brief treatment. For example, when teaching on Constantine and the legalization of Christianity, one might contrast Constantinian coins that depict *Sol Invictus* with his later coins bearing the *chi-rho* Christogram on a military standard. Furthermore, intercultural and interreligious exchange can be taught through materials, such as the use of ultramarine (which was sourced from Afghanistan) in western manuscripts or the appropriation of Islamic textiles into Christian liturgical contexts after the Crusades. The topic of materiality ought not to be neglected in the theological classroom, not only for the contextual and historical reasons named above, but also because bringing actual images, objects, and materials into class can provide students with a somatic connection to theology and history. This can be accomplished, for example, through handling papyrus and vellum samples when discussing the canonization of biblical texts or examining an Orthodox icon when working on Christology. I highly recommend reaching out to campus and local resources, such as libraries, digital humanities centers, museums, and galleries to arrange tours with or classroom visits by curators, artists, and other specialists. It should also be noted that there are increasing resources for making the study of art history more accessible to the visually impaired, with 3D printing being one of the more recent developments (e.g., [Miller 2017](#)).

³ I recommend the introductory materials on the Smarthistory (2021) website, especially Harris and Zucker (2017).

⁴ Remembering, of course, that maps are abstractions and abstraction is not a neutral process.

What does teaching theology with images actually look like? There are endless possibilities, but I will offer a few here, intended for the Reformation unit of a historical theology survey course, for which students will have read Martin Luther's *On Christian Liberty* (1520). A late-medieval image of the Mass of St. Gregory can be used to establish the pre-Reformation context: while the details of the story vary in different accounts, in essence the motif is an affirmation of the doctrine of transubstantiation. According to legend, Pope Gregory I was celebrating the Mass in the presence of someone who doubted transubstantiation. Gregory prayed for a sign; in some versions of the story the Eucharist is transformed into a body part, in others Gregory has a vision of Jesus on the altar.⁵ In [this painting by Robert Campin](#) (c. 1440), the perspective locates the viewer behind Pope Gregory, who kneels before an altar in a small chapel where he celebrates the Mass.⁶ In fact, the viewer is potentially implicated as the doubting character, who is not visible in the image. The pope is flanked by two kneeling figures. The nude Christ stands directly over the chalice on the altar—straddling it, really, as he displays his wounds, which visually connects his bodily sacrifice to the Eucharistic elements below. Christ is surrounded by the *arma Christi*, that is, the “weapons of Christ”—the tools and persons that inflicted his Passion. Several elements in the painting work together to create a linear perspective that reinforces the centrality of Christ: on the left side of the image, the viewer can follow the lintel, which is highlighted in contrast to the capitals upon which it rests, and the off-white tile at the base of the same columns to where they converge at the side wound of Christ. Similarly, a line can be traced from the band that decorates the pope's chausable up to Christ's right leg. Even the taper that the acolyte holds in his right hand reinforces Christ as visual destination.

Note that Christ's body obscures the carved altarpiece behind him, the center panel of which presumably depicts the crucifixion. In other words, this image is representative not only of the Catholic teaching of transubstantiation—the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist—but also of late medieval understandings of spiritual vision and imaginative piety (Biernoff 2002). Christ is made triply present in this image—in the altarpiece, the Eucharist, and Campin's rendering of the envisioned “real presence.”

After addressing Martin Luther's role in the Protestant Reformation, the discussion can turn to [Lucas Cranach the Elder's painting *Law and Grace*](#) (1529), alternatively titled *The Law and the Gospel*.⁷ (I would recommend withholding the title of the painting from students until the analysis is complete.) Cranach was a court painter in Germany for almost fifty years and his portraits have been influential in shaping our image of Luther and his contemporaries. As always, I begin by inviting students to describe the image—it is important to give students ample time to carefully take in the entire image. Having students draw the image (or even “draw” by listing descriptive words) for about five minutes before talking about it will provide everyone with a chance to process the image. You can encourage participation by asking open-ended questions such as, “What is the first thing you notice about this image?” or “How does your eye move through this painting?”

Students might first note that the composition of the image is split in two by a tree in the center; the branches on the left are bare while those on the right sprout leaves. On the left side of the image, major elements include: a nude man (representative of the soul) being chased into sulfurous flames by a spear-wielding skeleton and a claw-footed demon in the foreground; a group of figures in the bottom right; Adam and Eve framing the Tree of Knowledge in the middle ground; some kind of camp in the background; Christ enthroned on an orb in the sky. On the right-hand side of the image, major elements include: a book-bearing clothed figure directing a nude figure (again, the soul) to look at Christ crucified on the right side of the image (behind which is the empty tomb); below the cross a standard-wielding lamb stands atop the demon and skeleton characters from the other side of the painting; above the cross Christ floats in an orb of yellow light, his right hand raised in blessing and his left hand holding a cruciform standard. Along the bottom of the image run six panels of Gospel citations in German.

Depending on students' familiarity with biblical stories, they may be able to identify the iconography of some of these elements. Adam and Eve are easily recognizable to the general public and are presented with their tree as shorthand for the Fall and Original Sin. The man to the left of the image's central tree holds a set of Hebrew-inscribed tablets in his left

5 Although Gregory's life dates were 540–604 CE the first written account of this story does not appear until the eighth century, and visual depictions do not occur until around the thirteenth century.

6 A 1539 Mesoamerican featherwork rendering of the Mass of St. Gregory can be an interesting companion in this lesson, as the pope commissioned an indigenous artist to create it and the image blends Mesoamerican methods with European iconography (see [Kilroy-Ewbank 2016](#)).

7 Cranach made multiple painted and printed versions of this image, with some variables. On the role of Cranach in the Reformation, see Ozment (2011).

and points to them with his right; despite his contemporary dress, students will likely be able to identify him as Moses. Provided a large enough image, or a detail, students will note that there are bodies and a serpent on a pole in front of the tents in the background. This is a representation of Numbers 21, in which God commands Moses to elevate a bronze serpent so that the Israelites may be healed from snakebites by looking upon it. A sword comes out of the mouth of Jesus, who sits in judgment in the sky, illustrating several verses from the book of Revelation (1:16, 2:12, 19:15).

On the right half of the image, students may be able to identify the red-cloaked figure of John the Baptist, who is commonly depicted in late medieval crucifixion scenes, as an illustration of his statement, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29). Here he points in the direction of the Lamb of God, and the crucified and resurrected Christ. Barely visible in the background is the angel descending to announce the birth of Christ to shepherds tending their flocks.

After thoroughly describing the image together, I would ask the students to begin interpreting its message: what does the painting tell us? In short, as the title indicates, the image juxtaposes the theological concepts of law and grace. According to the image, law, visualized on the left, leads to death, since humanity is incapable of perfectly following it. This is depicted, for example, in Adam and Eve, the barren branches of the central tree, and the snake-bitten Israelite camp. (It is interesting that in other paintings and prints of this same motif, Cranach places the camp on the right side of the image—presumably because the bronze serpent has historically been interpreted as a type for Christ, who similarly heals those who look upon him.) On the left side of the painting, Christ is depicted remotely enthroned in judgment as the soul is chased into flames of damnation. This is contrasted with the image of grace on the right side of the painting: the soul prayerfully lifts his hands as he looks upon the crucified Christ, the Lamb, “who takes away the sins of the world.” The stream of blood that spurts from the side of Christ, on which the dove of the Holy Spirit seems to coast, and which passes in front of the head of John the Baptist to land on the soul may be read as affirming the priesthood of all believers—that the Christian needs no earthly, priestly intermediary to access the grace of God. Above all of this, the triumphant, resurrected Christ raises his hand in blessing, implying that it is through his mercy and grace that the soul is saved.

More specifically, how does this painting reflect Luther’s theology as represented in the assigned reading, *On Christian Liberty*? Here, I have students refer directly to their reading to draw concrete connections between the visual and textual sources. They might compare Luther’s distinction between the outward old man and inward new man to Cranach’s two depictions of the soul. The right side of the image emphasizes Luther’s concept of justification by faith and the importance of a direct relationship to God in both the proximity of the resurrected Christ and the soul’s orientation towards the crucified Christ (note that the crucifix is angled towards the soul, not us the viewer). As Luther argues, the Christian is not compelled to keep God’s law in order to obtain salvation (that is, justification by works, which as the left side of the image shows, does not end well!), but rather the Christian freely serves God and their neighbor thanks to God’s grace.

Finally, we can also look at Reformation images that are in tension even with Luther’s moderate stance on images.⁸ For example, this 1521 print portrait of [Martin Luther by Hans Baldung](#) (after a portrait by Lucas Cranach the Elder) presents Luther as a tonsured monk, with an open book—presumably the Bible—before him. The dove of the Holy Spirit hovers over Luther’s head, and the divine presence is reinforced by the halo of light that encircles his head. What did Luther think of being portrayed as a living saint? Several saintly images of Luther circulated in 1521, when the Edict of Worms declared Luther a heretic. Despite Luther’s rejection of image veneration, there are accounts of Luther’s followers purchasing, treasuring, and even kissing such portraits.

A similar tension is found in the numerous physical objects associated with Luther that came to carry relic-like status (here we move into material culture). Perhaps most amusing among these is a wooden beer stein that in 1694 was outfitted with a silver base and lid, complete with a portrait of Luther, inscribed with text: “God’s word: Luther’s teaching will not pass away on this or any other day,” and “The late Mr. Luther used this jug at his table in Eisleben” (Kluttig-Altman and

8 Luther’s position on images was rather a lukewarm one: for him, images had neither the power to enlighten nor to ensnare. They were *adiaphora*: “things not critical in themselves but important only because others made them so” (Aston 1988, 40). This perspective coincided with the didactic function of the image. For Luther, images were certainly not tools of divine encounter, but had the possibility of operating as tools of learning. See also, Luther (1968, 85–87, 91). For this lesson, and on this point in particular, I highly recommend the catalogue and essays that accompanied the exhibit *Martin Luther: Art and Reformation* (Oct. 30, 2016–Jan. 15, 2017) (see Kluttig-Altman and Herbst 2016; Rous 2016).

Herbst 2016, 375). There is no conclusive evidence that the mug in fact belonged to Luther, but the mere possibility of its association rendered it an object of veneration. The haloed portrait and the beer stein are representative of the ways visual and material culture can complicate how we encounter texts. Taking such examples seriously as theological sources provides a very different understanding of the Reformation than that produced by simply reading Luther's writings.

This essay has offered but a brief example of what can be done with a single image or small group of images in a class period.⁹ I have named the major elements of the above images and some of the theological meaning that can be gleaned from them, but there is always more to be found. I have demonstrated that incorporating visual and material culture in theology courses is possible even for the non-specialist and that the benefits are many. Art can complement and complicate theological texts, creating a more robust understanding of theological concepts and the history of religious practice.

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⁹ There are of course many other relevant images that could be treated in such a class session—such as Lucas Cranach's Wittenberg Altarpiece (1547), Albrecht Dürer's *Last Supper* (1523), or Luther's German New Testament (1522).

Miller, Rachel. 2017. "Creating a More Accessible Art History Course through 3D Printing." Art History Teaching Resources, October 13. <http://arthistoryteachingresources.org/2017/10/creating-a-more-accessible-art-history-course-through-3d-printing/>.

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ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHIES OF SELECTED RESOURCES

For the sake of space, this list is necessarily limited (as are my annotations). I have tried to represent a range here, though it is focused on visual art and admittedly reflects the premodern Christian focus of my own expertise.¹⁰ While most major museums and libraries now have rich digital resources available online, I have named only a handful here. I welcome inquiries about additional resources.

On the Contemporary Relationship between Art and Theology

Adams, Doug, and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, eds. 1987. *Art as Religious Studies*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock.

This edited volume is a collection of twelve essays that are adapted from the religion and art lectures of the authors. Divided into three sections (on Judaism, Christianity, and praxis), the essays treat a selection of artworks from the ancient to modern. For someone new to incorporating art into religious education, the two introductory essays will prove helpful as they present a summary and assessment of the field. The three bibliographies in the last section of the book are also valuable resources, though now somewhat dated.

ARTS: Arts in Religious and Theological Studies. 2021. United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities and College of Arts and Sciences at the University of St. Thomas. <https://www.societyarts.org/arts-journal.html>.

This is the journal of the [Society for the Arts in Religious and Theological Studies](#), published biannually by the [Arts and Theology Program at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities](#) and the [College of Arts and Sciences at the University of St. Thomas](#); it has been published for over twenty-five years. Its issues are organized thematically into sections titled "In the Study," "In the Sanctuary," "In the Studio," "On the Street," "In the Recording Studio," and "In the Classroom." Issues also include reviews of books and exhibits. See especially volume 20, number 2 (2009), which focuses on teaching.

Baggley, John. 1983. *Doors of Perception: Icons and their Spiritual Significance*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press.

An Anglican priest, John Baggley writes authoritatively and sympathetically about the origins and development of Orthodox icons, including the iconography and the spiritual practice of iconographers. This is an accessible introduction

¹⁰ Theological aesthetics is a distinct and robust discipline, represented in the annotated bibliography below by Paul Tillich (1989), Nicholas Wolterstorff (1987), and Wilson Yates (1998). Other key figures include Jeremy Begbie, Jane Daggett Dillenberger, Frank Burch Brown, William Dyrness, Alejandro García-Rivera, and Richard Viladesau, just to name a few.

for Western Christians, or indeed anyone, looking to understand the basics of icons in Eastern Christianity. (For more academic and comprehensive treatments, see the work of Vladimir Lossky, Leonid Ouspensky, and Robert S. Nelson, to name a few.)

Kilde, Jeanne Halgren. 2008. *Sacred Power, Sacred Space: An Introduction to Christian Architecture and Worship*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

This survey of Christian architecture from its origins to the twentieth century argues that in order to understand Christian buildings one must understand how they represent and reify divine, personal, and social power. Kilde's analysis presents the dynamic and complex construction of sacred space; her methodology, as outlined in the first chapter, is applicable to the sacred architecture of other religions as well.

Morgan, David, ed. 2010. *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief*. New York, NY: Routledge.

David Morgan is an established scholar of the material culture of religion, focusing primarily on American Christianity. This edited volume brings together authors from a variety of academic disciplines to write on the religious function of material culture, architecture, and ritual performance across time and religions. It would be especially relevant for religious studies courses.

Rosen, Aaron. 2015. *Art + Religion in the 21st Century*. New York, NY: Thames & Hudson.

As the title indicates, this book focuses on the relationship between art and religion in the twenty-first century. Organized thematically by topics such as the sublime, embodiment, ritual, and cultural identity, the book demonstrates that contrary to popular belief, contemporary artists do not simply employ religious symbolism for shock value; rather many contemporary artists are producing significant spiritual meaning in their work. This book would be especially useful in courses that address contemporary theologies, such as liberation, womanist, and ecotheology, but the artworks included address general theological themes like incarnation, evil, death, and sacred space.

Tillich, Paul. 1989. *On Art and Architecture*. John Dillenberger and Jane Daggett Dillenberger, editors. New York, NY: Crossroad.

This is a collection of the essays and excerpts on visual art written by the twentieth century Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich, and edited by John and Jane Dillenberger, who were themselves pioneers in the field of art and theology. Especially in the decades after World War II, Tillich's theology celebrated art's ability to ask big question in pursuit of the Ultimate.

Vrudny, Kimberly. 2016. *Beauty's Vineyard: A Theological Aesthetic of Anguish and Anticipation*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.

This constructive work of systematic theology is grounded in the arts in two key ways: it is a theological aesthetic in which the incarnate one is understood as Beauty, and secondly, each of Vrudny's chapters is composed in conversation with a work of contemporary art.

Vrudny, Kimberly, and Wilson Yates, eds. 2005. *Arts, Theology, and the Church*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press.

In this edited volume twelve authors contemplate the relationship between art and theology, bridging academia and ministerial contexts. Making an argument for the inclusion of the arts (broadly understood) in religious and theological education and practice, this book would be especially of use in seminary and divinity school contexts.

Wolterstorff, Nicholas. 1987. *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

This work of theological aesthetics pushes back against twentieth-century conceptions of "art for art's sake" to argue that art also has significant potential in its quotidian manifestations. See also Wolterstorff's more recent *Art Rethought: The Social Practices of Art* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

Yates, Wilson. 1998. "The Intersections of Art and Religion: Reflections on Works from the Minneapolis Institute of Arts." *ARTS: The Arts in Religious and Theological Studies* 10, no. 1: 17-27.

Wilson Yates has been one of the key figures in the study and teaching of the relationship between art and theology; he has published numerous articles and books on the topic and is the founder of the journal [SARTS](#).

On the Historical Relationship between Art and Theology

Belting, Hans. 1994. *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

This seminal work looks at images before “the era of art,” that is, Belting describes the premodern understanding of art in which the emphasis was on holy presence and liturgical function rather than aesthetics. Translated from the German, it is a dense book that can be also be mined for individual chapters.

Bindman, David, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds. 2010-2017. *The Image of the Black in Western Art*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

While not explicitly theological in nature, this multi-volume work is a revision and expansion of Dominique de Menil’s 1960s project to archive representations of people of African descent in art from the time of the pharaohs to the twentieth century. This series is a rich resource for teaching on any period.

Brubaker, Leslie. 2011. *Inventing Byzantine Iconoclasm*. London, UK: Bristol Classical Press.

This short accessible book presents the argument that not only was the word “iconoclasm” a later invention, but there is also very little historical evidence that images were actually destroyed in this period. Brubaker argues that what we know as the “Byzantine iconoclastic controversy” was primarily a theological debate about Christology and the nature of images. *Inventing Byzantine Iconoclasm* is essentially a condensed version of her previous work coauthored with John Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclastic Era, c. 680-850: A History* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2011), which at almost a thousand pages in two volumes is a comprehensive overview of the visual and textual material of the period.

Bynum, Caroline Walker. 2011. *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe*. New York, NY: Zone Books.

Well-known for her scholarship on gender and religion in the Middle Ages (e.g., *Holy Feast, Holy Fast; Jesus as Mother; Wonderful Blood*), in *Christian Materiality* Bynum describes the increase in miraculous material objects from the twelfth to fifteenth century. By outlining the changing concepts of materiality, she also offers new ways to understand the context of the Protestant Reformation.

Camille, Michael. 1992. *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Image on the Edge looks to the edges of monastery, cathedral, court, and city to understand the interdependence between the sacred and the profane in the Middle Ages. For example, Camille describes the margins of manuscripts, and exteriors of monasteries and cathedrals, as places of encounter and paradox.

Duffy, Eamon. 1992. *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c.1400-c.1580*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

This groundbreaking and award-winning text is a valuable resource for any course that addresses the Reformation. (Given its 700-page length, one might want to assign only portions for reading or use it only as a faculty resource!) Duffy provides detailed description and analysis of pre-Reformation Christianity, arguing that—in contrast to previous narratives that paint this period as corrupt and superstitious—medieval Catholicism was meaningful and popular.

Finney, Paul Corby. 1994. *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art*. New York, NY: Oxford.

This book is concerned with what the earliest Christians (up till the Tetrarchy) thought about art and what later interpreters said that they thought. He argues that early Christian critiques of images were primarily part of anti-pagan rhetoric and did not necessarily reflect Christian practice. Finney offers several possible explanations for the apparent delay in the production of Christian art.

Freedberg, David. 1989. *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

This now-classic text argues for a history of images rather than a privileging “fine art.” Taking seriously the presence of images and miracles, Freedberg also argues for a history of viewer responses to images. The book is organized thematically around topics such as aniconism, idolatry, magic, and censorship.

Jensen, Robin M. 2000. *Understanding Early Christian Art*. New York, NY: Routledge.

This accessible survey of early Christian iconography includes a helpful introduction outlining issues in the interpretation of early Christian art. Organized thematically, the book can also be used as a reference work.

Jensen, Robin M. 2005. *Face to Face: Portraits of the Divine in Early Christian Art*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Drawing on biblical, patristic, Greco-Roman texts and visual sources, this study of the origins of the holy portrait explicitly addresses the relationship between art and theology, including themes of idolatry and divinity.

Mathews, Thomas F. 1993. *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

This ground-breaking book argues the early Christian images previously mistaken as imperial in origin (what Mathews refers to as the “Emperor Mystique”) were actually adapted from Greco-Roman pagan imagery in an effort to assert the superiority of Christianity.

Miles, Margaret R. 1985. *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

A foundational work in the study of art and Christianity, Miles argues that visual art was integral to Christian worship and theology. She also urges readers to study Christian images in their contexts and to strive understand the reception of such images by viewers, as opposed to focusing only on the intent of the artist and/or patron. Framed by chapters on visual theory, three central chapters offer case studies from the fourth, fourteenth, and sixteenth centuries.

Steinberg, Leo. 1996. *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, 2d ed. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

This initially controversial work argues from hundreds of visual examples that the genitals of Christ were visually emphasized in Renaissance art in order to affirm the doctrine of the incarnation. The second edition includes a response to Caroline Walker Bynum’s critique that the book conflated sexuality and gender and did not sufficiently address feminine/feminized conceptions of Christ.

Some Recommended Online Image and Teaching Resources

Art History Teaching Resources (AHTR). <http://arthistoryteachingresources.org/>.

This open-access website includes teaching content like lesson plans (organized by period and theme), bibliographies, activities, and assignments. It also produces a weekly pedagogy-focused blog and since 2016 has published the e-journal *Art History Pedagogy & Practice*.

ARTstor. www.artstor.org.

The ARTstor Digital Library provides access to over 2.5 million high resolution images of art, architecture, and papers from museums, archives, artists, and scholars. The website also includes a blog and teaching resources. ARTstor is part of the non-profit organization ITHAKA, as is JSTOR.

Feminae: Medieval Women and Gender Index. <https://inpress.lib.uiowa.edu/feminae/Default.aspx>.

This open-access website is sponsored by the libraries of Haverford College and the University of Iowa. It is associated with the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship (which publishes the e-journal *Medieval Feminist Forum*). The index consists of over 40,000 books, articles, book reviews, and images that address women, gender, and sexuality in the Middle Ages.

Index of Medieval Art. <https://ima.princeton.edu/>.

This database, formerly known as the Index of Christian Art, is managed by Princeton University (where the physical archive is housed) and requires a subscription. Images range from Late Antiquity to the Late Middle Ages. Each entry includes images, metadata, and a bibliography. The Index also produces conferences and publications, including the journal *Studies in Iconography*.

Latin American Network Information Center (LANIC), Art. <http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/region/art/>.

Although this website is no longer being updated or maintained, it hosts a list of art resources in Latin America, organized by country.

Louvre. <https://www.louvre.fr/en>.

In addition to hi-res images of the museum's collection, the website also includes links to related databases and educational materials related to exhibitions and special events.

Libraries: e.g., the British Library, Bodleian, Bibliothèque nationale de France (Gallica), Beinecke Rare Books Library, Morgan Library.

These are just a few of the numerous excellent libraries around the world that have digitized their collections in recent years.

Metropolitan Museum of Art. <https://www.metmuseum.org/>

This website includes high resolution public domain images of the collection, each accompanied by brief descriptions and bibliographies. The searchable Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History presents cross-referenced chronologies and essays on periods, geographies, and themes.

People of Color in European Art History. <http://medievalpoc.tumblr.com/>.

"The focus of this blog is to showcase works of art from European history that feature People of Color," with the majority of images dating from the fifth to seventeenth century. The images are organized by century and tagged by country/culture, medium, subject, and topic; each entry includes basic identifying information. The website also has a resources page, which lists open-access image and text databases, as well as a bibliography of print resources.

Smarthistory. <https://www.smarthistory.org>.

This award-winning open-access website is probably one of the most practical for theology and religion educators lacking an arts background. Its user-friendly interface is easy to navigate and its information is organized according to period and theme, and is also searchable. Moreover, it has helpful introductory information on the discipline of art history, and boasts about two thousand essays and videos, with new entries being added regularly.

Teaching History with 100 Objects. <http://www.teachinghistory100.org/>.

Based in the British Museum, this project collaborates with museums across the UK to curate a collection of a hundred objects with which to teach history. Drawn from cultures around the world (though over half are British), the objects date from about 500 BCE to the present and range widely in material (e.g., coins, pottery, jewelry, photography, paintings, statues). Each object is accompanied by multiple essays about the object, its larger context, and ideas for the classroom.

Vistas: Visual Culture in Spanish America, 1520-1820. <https://vistas.ace.fordham.edu/>.

As the title indicates, Vistas is a robust online resource for visual culture in Spanish America from 1520-1820. It brings together thematic essays and videos, images, a bibliography, primary texts in original languages and English translation, a timeline, glossary, syllabi, and links to additional online resources.

Visual Thinking Strategies. <https://vtshome.org/>.

"Visual Thinking Strategies is a research-based education nonprofit that believes thoughtful, facilitated discussions of art activates transformational learning accessible to all." The website offers information on VTS training and curriculum, as well as its journal.

Web Gallery of Art. www.wga.hu.

This is an open-access database of over 46,000 images of European art and architecture dating from the third to nineteenth century. It includes a glossary and brief entries on individual artists and buildings.

Theopoetics

There are many definitions of “theopoetics,” but here I will share that provided by [Arts, Religion, Culture \(ARC\)](http://artsreligionculture.org): Theopoetics is (1) an emphasis, style, and positive concern for the intersection of religious reflection and spirituality with the imagination, aesthetics, and the arts, especially as (2) it takes shape in ways that engender community-affirming dialogue that is (3) transformative in effect and (4) explicit about embodiment’s importance. (<https://artsreligionculture.org/recommended-resources>).

I offer but a few writings here and highly recommend the comprehensive list compiled on the ARC website.

Alves, Rubem. 1990. *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet*. Philadelphia, PA: Trinity.

Rubem Alves is a significant thinker in the field of theopoetics. This book engages poetry, film, and visual art to demonstrate the expansive nature and capabilities of theology, well beyond conventional, academic forms of theology.

Keefe-Perry, L. Callid. 2013. *Way to Water: A Theopoetics Primer*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Press.

As the title indicates, this book is a primer to theopoetics—and a very helpful one. It begins with foundational authors, like Rubem Alves and Amos Wilder, and outlines where the field is today. It also suggests applications for contemporary practices.

Keller, Catherine. 2013. “The Pluri-verse.” In *Theopoetic Folds: Philosophizing Multifariousness*. Edited by Roland Faber and Jeremy Feckenthal, 179–194. New York, NY: Fordham University Press.

In this chapter, Keller provides a history of theopoetics and its trajectory from an alternative to theology to its incorporation into theology, with a focus on its connotations in process theology and its ability to embrace and foster theological pluralities.

May, Melanie. 1995. *A Body Knows: A Theopoetics of Death and Resurrection*. New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group.

In sharing personal stories of death, sexuality, and spirituality, May’s book is a performance of the embodied approach to theology that characterizes theopoetics.

Rivera, Mayra. 2015. *Poetics of the Flesh*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Rivera draws on biblical, early theological, and philosophical texts to articulate a Christian poetics of the body, gender, and race.

THEOPOETICS Journal, produced by ARC. <https://artsreligionculture.org/about-the-journal>.

The journal is described as “an interfaith container for the intersection of several conversations with religious reflection: aesthetics, literature, embodiment, creativity studies, and the philosophy of imagination.” Production was halted before the entire second volume was published, but all of the articles are available online.

Wilder, Amos. 1976. *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress.

In this foundational work, Wilder urges his readers to take up a theopoetic approach to Christianity to articulate the experience of God. He argues that theopoetic language will be more compelling and indeed truer to the essence of Christianity—in contrast with some of the comparatively disinterested and disengaged theology of the twentieth century to which he was responding.

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