Religion and Visual Art

For the *Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*

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"Art," like "religion," is a term whose modern-age connotations cover a range of materials and activities that have not always had the same significance as when contemporary English-speakers use the word "art" (see Belting). Like religion, art is bound to a colonialist legacy and came into popular usage as European empires conquered much of the world (see, e.g. Steiner and Philips 1999). And, like religion, art is a term that, in spite of its modernist constructions, has real-world sociopolitical valence. This is seen in public art projects, by which I refer to efforts by municipalities around the world who are investing hundreds of millions of dollars to revitalize urban spaces; the work of artists who are often employed by churches, local governments, and businesses; and art museums that are currently charged with the preservation of thousands of years of cultural heritage–which is to say nothing of the hundreds of millions of visitors to art museums each year who, on some unquantifiable level, are altered by their experience with art. "Art," whatever it might be, matters in culture and society.

We might replace "art" with "visual culture" (see Plate 2002; Morgan 2005) to reorient some of the issues and deconstruct such binaries as art–craft, high–low, kitsch–tasteful, but the term "art" has a sociopolitical, not to mention economic and religious, grounding that makes it a particularly crucial term to use. With that in mind, I will be using the term throughout this chapter in broad and what I hope are productive ways that includes a wide array of media and practices set within and alongside particular religious traditions and experiences. I will be focusing on the *visual* arts, since the inclusion of literary, theatrical, and musical arts would be far too much for a short chapter. My analysis begins with a broad historical overview of religion and art, covering some of the theoretical and methodological approaches to the interrelation, before moving on to two theoretical currents that help situate the study of art within the study of religion.

Religion and visual art relations, then and now

Thinking about religion and visual art in broad terms is to survey billions of people over tens of thousands of years. A history of the relation might begin with Upper Paleolithic cave paintings in places like Lascaux, France; Altamira, Spain; Maros, Sulawesi; or the stone pillars at Göbekli Tepe in Turkey; and preceded by the beads and ochre engravings in the Blombos cave in South Africa and other African sites. Interpretation of the specific meanings of these works varies and has been debated for years. The most that we can tell about the images in these places is that they were part of symbolic, ritualistic social formations. They give evidence that early humans behaved and thought in abstract ways and linked their profane life (images of hands, buffalos) with something we might call sacredness (re-presenting them in abstracted ways in special, set-apart places). Whether or not such symbolic drawings and etchings indicate that these early *Homo sapiens* were "religious" is a topic for another discussion. And the idea that art and religion were even separable aspects of early human life is highly anachronistic–early humans did not conceptualize "religion" or "art." Yet, one thing is clear: artistic practices, symbolic thinking, and ritualistic behavior are deeply intertwined and embedded in the cultural and anatomical structures of hominins (see Fuentes 2017). Human artistic practices are part of what led to larger brain sizes, and any understanding of the evolution of hominins must take account of activities that are both creative and ritualistic (see Renfrew and Morley 2009).

Visual artistic practices grew up simultaneously with all major religious traditions that continue today. Not without a strong tinge of skepticism, Max Weber suggested of religious traditions that "the more they wished to be universalist mass religions, and were thus directed to emotional propaganda and mass appeals, the more systematic were their alliances with art" (1946, 343). Arguably, there would be no religious traditions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism were it not for artistic imagination and creative capacities. To give brief examples of foundational visual arts, one might note the detailed architectural plan of the ancient Israelite Temples with their elaborate visual ornamentation (see I Kings 6-7) as well as ancient synagogue design (Fine 2005), or the Christian paintings on the walls of the catacombs of Rome from the third century CE (Jensen 2000, chap. 1), or the striking styles of Islamic calligraphy that helped promote and sustain the magisterial nature of the Quran (Blair 2006), or the emergence of stupas across south Asia after the death of Siddhartha (Mitter 2001, 16-30). Even the most iconoclastic, word- and text-based movements (e.g., reform Protestantism, Wahhabi Islam) are

replete with visual creations of elaborately bound books and beautiful buildings, florid calligraphic styles and attractive typefaces, stylish clothes and ornate ornaments. Visual art is constitutive of religious traditions.

Nonetheless, the received historical wisdom, particularly in Euro-American traditions, is that art and religion split in modernity. In part, this conception is bound up with elements of a secularization thesis, with the presumption that thoughtful artists could not actually be serious about religious matters. But it is also part of the Germanic philosophical tradition, especially the Romanticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, that has continued to cast a large shadow over the religion–art relation even today. As David Morgan summarizes much of the Romantic view, "works of art were expressions of the soul; they drew their unity from the genius of the artist and generated their structure from within rather than drawing it from without" (Morgan 2009, 34). Art, like religion, became embedded in, and was a product of, the individual. As this occurred, works of art, like acts of religion, became separable activities of human life, typically relegated to a private sphere.

Many thinkers and artists since then have expressed a fervent adherence to art, as they attempt to leave behind what they see as the repressive strictures of religion. Commenting on the "development of intellectualism and the rationalization of life" inherent in the modern era, Weber suggested that "art takes over the function of a this-worldly salvation . . . a salvation from the routines of everyday life, and especially from the increasing pressures of theoretical and practical rationalism" (1946, 342).[1] Others (e.g. Paul Tillich) sought to reenergize religious tradition through attention to the arts, recognizing art's ability to free us from the routines of everyday life, and finding glimpses of ultimate significance in modern art.

From the perspective of art history and theory, the split was more irreparable. In a critical essay, modern art historian Rosalind Krauss (1979, 54), stated that the split between the "sacred" and "secular" was an "absolute rift" and "now we find it indescribably embarrassing to mention *art* and *spirit* in the same sentence." More recently, prolific art theorist James Elkins wrote *On the Strange Place of Religion in Modern Art* in which he claims that "ambitious, successful contemporary fine art is thoroughly non-religious. Most religious art–I'm saying this bluntly here, because it needs to be said–is just bad art." He even has a clear-cut reason to support this

[1] Years later German artist Gerhard Richter would claim, "Now there are no priests or philosophers left, artists are the most important people in the world."

claim: "because art that sets out to convey spiritual values goes against the grain of the history of modernism" (2004, 20). As a result of these philosophical and art theories over the past three centuries, we have book chapters such as this one tasked with showing the relation between two fields of human experience that historically have not been understood as separable categories.

Even so, there have been numerous studies that provide substantial data for understanding religion and visual art in history, including some from the modern era. A number of significant mid-twentieth-century studies provided comparative overviews of the arts in religions of the world, attempting to show these realms as deeply intertwined (e.g., Burckhardt 1967, Coomaraswamy 1986). Toward the late twentieth century, studies opened up new directions for the religion–art relation as they reconceived the ways the arts are religious (e.g. Belting 1989; Freedberg 1989). Belting discussed the development of "art" itself, while Freedberg helped shift attention to the power images have on their perceivers: the ways art moves people to tears, reverence, joy, and even violence, somewhat regardless of the medium and subject matter of the artwork. For Belting and Freedberg, any "religious" dimension emerges through the ways people *use* visual images and does not rely simply on their content. Such studies helped spur the move toward research in "visual culture," a term that expands the relation of religion and the arts by thinking through the work of visual images on the religious lives of people in both personal and collective ways, showing that visuality is part and parcel of religious life itself (see Plate 2002; Morgan 2005). This includes attention to commercial design and mass-produced "kitsch," as well as the "high" arts of painting, and quotidian photography.

As the interdisciplinary field of religion and the arts has expanded, especially since the end of the twentieth century, scholars are working on more and more specific studies that look at the place of visual arts in religious life, and the place of religion in visual arts. This includes, for example, contemporary Jewish artists' reworking of biblical themes for modern social situations (Baskind 2014), the use of Christian arts in missionary efforts in Kongo (Fromont 2014), the role of the arts in modern Buddhism in Japan (Graham 2007), or the devotion around Hindu calendar art (Jain 2007). The best recent overview of the broad field is found in Apostolos-Cappadona (2018), and I refer the reader to that for more details on academic approaches to the religion–art relation.

As the historical relations of "religion and visual art" are outlined, one of the primary critical stances to take is to think about how to phrase the relationship. There are, at the least,

three different ways of broaching the topic: Is the discourse about religious art? Or religion in art? Or art in religion? Each of these open out to further questions. For example, in reference to the first question, follow-up questions may be raised: What makes art religious? Is it because it was created by religious people? Or for a religious purpose? Or do observers make something religious by their activities, whether or not the art has explicitly religious content? The aim of this chapter is not to argue for one over the other, but merely to highlight some of the possible approaches. The third question about "art in religion" might help to rethink the nature and function of religion itself, suggesting, as I do through the following, that religion needs to be understood for the ways it is partially constituted by art.

Religious themes in the arts/Artistic themes in religious studies

With the space remaining, I cannot point to all the relevant topics that link visual art and religion, and so in this section will highlight two areas of study that can enable scholars to think again about the religion–art relation. I am particularly interested in the ways that studies of the arts can contribute to the study of religion.

Aesthetics

One key way to explore the religion–art relation is through aesthetics, and some of the more intriguing recent work in religious studies is attempting to revive aesthetics and move it beyond the study of "art," per se. At the same time, studies of the arts remain central to these pursuits. These studies are attentive to the formal elements of artworks, and discussions are not exhausted by describing the semantic or symbolic meanings of art. At the risk of oversimplifying, I suggest that religious studies has too long been interested in *content* (e.g. the interpretation of texts, the "meanings" of rituals) at the expense of *form* (the performative, iconic, and affective power of images, music, texts, and other cultural productions that operate through their sensual media). New studies in the academic study of religion, from perspectives such as material culture, affect theory, visual culture, and media studies, are again highlighting the importance of form, and a renewed theory of aesthetics is central to this.

First it is necessary to outline what is meant by aesthetics here. In its ancient Greek etymology, aesthetics had to do with "sense perception," and indeed it was this conception that Alexander Baumgarten sought to revive in the eighteenth century as he articulated a science of

perception. Baumgarten saw that intellectual (logical) thinking was incomplete without the understanding gained through the senses and so aimed to create a comprehensive epistemological system, comprised of "things known," and "things perceived." Yet, like most binaries, one part eventually takes prominence and Baumgarten was clear that aesthetics deals with the "inferior faculty" while logic deals with the "superior faculty" of the rational mind.

In European, particularly Germanic, thought, following Baumgarten, aesthetic knowledge gained from the senses was increasingly denigrated and subordinated to the processes of the rational mind. As the concept of aesthetics filtered through the writings of Immanuel Kant and G.W.F. Hegel, and ultimately into twentieth-century philosophy, almost all hint of the senses had been abandoned. In its place were abstract concepts such as "beauty" and "judgment" about art (see Eagleton 1990). What began in the body was made an intellectual pursuit, and so aesthetics revolved around thinking instead of feeling, as modern life was increasing compartmentalized. Art became "art for art's sake," and attendant theoretical tools were developed to help maintain its borders.

This way of thinking reached its zenith in Clement Greenberg's championing of modern art, particularly the non-representational, abstract expressionism of painters like Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman. Following Kant's idea of the beautiful as that which has "purposiveness without purpose," Greenberg, among others, saw purity and autonomy at the heart of modern painting. In 1960, he contended that through reflexive formal qualities (e.g. drawing attention to itself as a painting, and not trying to trick the eye into thinking it is seeing a realistic representation), "each art would be rendered 'pure,' and in its 'purity' find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence" (Greenberg 1960, 755). Through much of the modern age, the senses gave way to the intellect, the messiness of experience was subdued by rationalistic modes of being, and art became a separable sphere of activity with its own "standards of quality," removed from other elements of the human lifeworld.

Through these modern aesthetics, the body got repressed. But the repressed returns, and newer modes of aesthetic thinking reveal several aspects of the arts that simultaneously enable a more robust theory of religion. For one, there is no such thing as purely visual art. One of the effects of modern art, and modern art theory as seen in Greenberg, was to conceive of visual art as a delineated "pure" form of expression that could be experienced visually. Thus, the white cube became the basic visual environment for the display of art: creating a perceived neutrality

where a pure visual encounter can happen.[2] But no one sees without a body, and when the seeing body encounters art, it is sure to mingle vision with smell and sound, just as it will inevitably bump up against other bodies in located spaces.

As modernism reached its apogee in the 1960s, contemporary and "postmodern" artists turned toward newer media like video, installation, and performance art which required multiple senses to take in the artwork, just as they required time to engage them. Large installation works such as Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974–79) with its feminist rewriting of history, the early video works of Nam June Paik and Vito Acconci, and performance work by Chris Burden, Carolee Schneeman, and Barbara T. Smith, all challenged the ocularcentrism of modernism, and made the human body central to the artwork. Much of the work showed strong attention to ritual, with their re-organizations of time and space, performing bodies, and transformative potential on both communal and individual levels. Into the twenty-first century, with increasingly cheap and accessible media technologies, artists like Bill Viola, Mona Hatoum, and Shirin Neshat create multimedia installation works that appeal to vision and hearing, but also touch and proprioception as the bodies of "viewers" interact with the artwork and other viewers.[3]

The opening up of artistic practices beyond the visual coincided with a turn in humanities research toward *embodiment*. Philosophically, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's mid-century work in perception and aesthetics was key in challenging the mind–body dualism that plagued modern philosophical and aesthetic thinking, as were feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray, Kaja Silverman, and Judith Butler, who each put the body at the center of analysis for understanding gender, sexuality, and the arts in different ways.

With these theoretical *and* artistic works in the background, religious studies scholars are increasingly paying attention to corporeal practices in both the arts and religious experience. Birgit Meyer and Jojada Verrips summarize some of this new work: "Religious aesthetics, in the current sense, refers to an embodied and embedded praxis through which subjects relate to other subjects and objects and which is grounded in and offers the ground for religious experience" (2008, 27). Scholars have reconceived the meaning of "aesthetics" by going back to its Greek

2. There is a lot to say about the role of museums here in the establishment of "art" in the modern age, but due to space constraints that will have to be left aside for now.

3. Note we have no good word for the perceivers of art beyond the vision-based "viewer."

roots of dealing with "sense perception," just as Baumgarten did almost three centuries ago, only now there is an interest in keeping the body as a primary site of understanding. As Alexandra Grieser and Jay Johnston have recently queried, in a collection on *Aesthetics of Religion*, "How in the context of religious practice are the senses stimulated, governed and disciplined? How are religious experiences, emotions, and attitudes created, memorized, and normalized?" (2017, 2). To think about religion *aesthetically* is to pay attention to the sensual activities of bodies, and to highlight imaginative creations and normativizing processes that have been part of religious traditions for eons (see Promey 2014).

As aesthetics is returning to its senses, scholars are looking back to the visual arts in history and rethinking the body in the midst of religious life. In the Christian tradition, Bissera Pentchava (2010), for example, has discussed the *Sensual Icon* of Byzantium and all the ways icons are connected to people through the lips as well as the eyes, through the nostrils that sniff the incense and ears that hear the prayers occurring in the presence of the icon. While icons have long been studied within Christian history, earlier studies have centered on the visual dimension of icons and attempted to iconographically interpret their content; Pentchava's unique approach is to show that an encounter with an icon is a multi-sensual encounter that is not reducible to intellectual *meaning*.

Thinking about aesthetics in a Japanese context, Inken Prohl suggests that "studying the aesthetics of religions translates into looking into the way religious actors perceive religious venues and practice with their senses, and examining how sensuous and cognitive perceptions are mutually engaged and how they constitute religious mind-sets" (2015, 10). This allows a renewed way to think about Zen temples, and the bodily practice of *zazen*, as performative, multi-sensual spaces. But it also enables an understanding of the physical, world-denying aspect of a religious organization such as Aum Shinrikyo. Attention to sensual deprivation can be as crucial as sense-based analyses.

The arts, on such accounts, are not the only arena of investigation, but for many of the scholars employing the terminology of aesthetics, the arts have provided a significant training ground, with strong attention to formal artistic analysis. A revived understanding of aesthetics allows a way to comprehend the power of art (and more) that is both bodily *and* intellectual. Attention to the arts can bring an understanding of sense-based and intellectual-based experiences together. Such an approach also offers a powerful tool for understanding religion

itself for its body-based activities from ritualizing to sacred storytelling to the reuse of symbols to the affective power of community experiences.

Iconomash

Modern art–in the strict sense of that phrase, referring to a movement that began in Europe in the late-nineteenth century–is impossible to understand apart from religion. Examples of religion in modern art include van Gogh's articulation of a "new religion" through art, to the impact of Theosophy on early non-representational artists (Hilma af Klint, Piet Mondrian, Wassily Kandinsky), to the mysticism imbued in Agnes Martin's grids. Modern movements like abstract expressionism, minimalism, and neo-plasticism are noted for the ways they broke with the past (poet Ezra Pound famously gave the modernist charge, "Make It New") and, in so doing, created a strong iconoclastic dimension that broke the imagery, especially representational, of the past. All of these developments challenged critics and theorists to come to terms with the ways in which these new configurations of images could be understood in a religious framework.

But modern art is not simply a Euro-American movement. The global reach of modernism crafted infinitely more interesting permutations. Artistic cultures around the world have taken part in the establishment of modern art, often linking its tenets to local traditions. The resultant art is work that is "contemporary" but still pays heed to ancient traditions of religious and artistic practices.[4] Along the way, personal and communal identities are reformed.

Contemporary arts offer a sometimes strange, and usually provocative, amalgamation of the work of art, globalization, and religious traditions, a mixture I refer to as "iconomash." I use the neologism as a riff on another neologism, "iconoclash." For a well-cited exhibition catalog, Bruno Latour coined the term "iconoclash," which refers obliquely to myriad actions and perceptions around images, particularly as an image is caught between creation and destruction, between iconophiles and iconoclasts (Latour and Weibel, 2002). The friction can be highlighted by a question: Who believes in the power of the image more, the ones who destroy them, fearing their spell over the devout who worship with them, or the ones who embed images into their religious practices? This doubled tension is at the heart of conflicts over religious images, and can be seen in the "iconoclastic controversy" of European Christianity in the eighth and ninth

4. I follow a standard art historical model that sees "modern art" as ending somewhere in the 1960s, to be replaced by the "postmodern," or, less controversially, "contemporary art."

centuries; the media-saturated, highly-visible destruction of the Buddha statues at Bamiyan by the Taliban; or the performative activity of U.S. Senator Alphonse D'Amato ripping up a photograph of Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* on the floor of the Senate chamber in 1989 at the heart of the culture wars. Latour and his fellow contributors to the *Iconoclash* catalog query the ways in which iconoclastic activities establish the power of images through their destruction.

My use of "iconomash" is indebted to Latour's concept but spins it in another direction. I'm interested in the synchronous dimensions of the clashes, the ways cultural currents shift in globalized climates and bump up against each other, producing hybrids. These hybrids are a merging of styles, but more importantly they are a commingling of cultures–from two or more places and/or times–in which past and present coalesce. In the mix, new identities are formed. It is through such art works that we see a particular model for the study of religion that does not take purity or authenticity as its end goal. Religious traditions are always hybrids, mixing and merging cultures and times.

I give two brief examples of artists involved with what I am calling iconomash here,[5] two artists that have worked in religio-social spaces that are globalized and hybridized.

Shahzia Sikander (b. 1969) is a Pakistani-born, U.S.-based artist who has engaged with religious visual forms throughout her career. Her artwork is deeply rooted in Muslim- and Hindu-influenced traditions of Indian and Persian miniature painting and constantly toggles between the traditional and the modern not only in terms of form (Persian miniatures become five-foot long scrolls) but also in terms of media (from painting to video), and via "allegorical" structures mythologies become sociopolitical commentary. In one painting, characters of Arabic calligraphy become wild horses, while other artworks the iconic black tuft of hair of the Gopis (Krishna's cow-herding love interests) is taken from Indian images and changed into something resembling bats in flight. "Transformation" seems an apt summary term for much of what she does but, importantly, it is transformation by juxtaposition, even a clashing of opposing forces. Sikander states that she is not interested in "rigidity" or "synthesis," but in "dissonance" (Brandon 2016, 280). This is true of the identities that she travels through–"Pakistani, Muslim, female, South Asian, and Asian American"–as well as of the motifs and tropes in her work, from Islamic imagery to Persian miniatures to contemporary military symbols (Brandon 2016, 280).

5. I quickly note that I am applying this term to their work, and this is not a term they use.

Sikander engages south Asian visual cultural traditions, mines them, finds important bits, and then transforms them into beautiful images that invite us as viewers to see our world, both past and present, in new ways, with renewed perception. This is seen in her *Many Faces of Islam* (1993–99) which transforms an iconic page of a miniature manuscript and illustrates it with the faces of a number of prominent Muslims, including Salman Rushdie, Nawal el Saadawi, and the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Later works include her *Portrait of the Artist* series (2016) that juxtaposes her own face, and that of playwright Ayad Akhtar, with silhouettes of the Prophet Muhammad on his night journey (*miʿraj*). She suggests the "Prophet is an artist," and the *miʿraj* is "symbolic of the journey of an artist" (Brandon, 295). Such images are not "religious" in the sense that they might be created in a devout way, or for devout purposes, but they reframe religious history in expansive, global ways. Moreover, they emerge in the midst of global migration and pluralistic identity formations.

In similar modes, though through entirely other media forms, Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta (1948-85) worked through iconomash in the ways she drew on Santería aesthetics in her performances and installations. Art historian Mary Jane Jacob sees the use of *ashé* (*aché* in Cuba) at work in Mendieta, especially in her earth-body sculptures. *Ashé* stems from Yoruban traditions, and refers to a vital, animistic energy at work in all things. As such, Yoruban religious traditions have mixed and merged well with other traditions, most particularly Christianity and Islam, since at heart the energy force can take myriad forms. In Cuba, *ashé* became a central element of Santería (i.e. Lucumi), a tradition that has merged West African and Catholic beliefs and practices.

Mendieta based her own art on the "one Universal Energy which runs through all being and matter, all space and time" (quoted in Jacob 1996, 191). This is seen in works like the *Silueta* series through the 1970s in which she would carve or shape the form of her own body into the earth through the arrangement of sticks and mud, or burned her bodily shape into the earth with gunpowder. Such works display connections between nature and her own female body, just as they incorporate Santería principles of the spirit world, linking them to contemporary artistic practices of earth and body art. Ultimately, these artworks merge the individual female body with the larger forces of tradition. "Making art," Jacob claims, "became a spiritual act, an act of magic. She was the conduit, the shaman" (192). The point is not merely that Mendieta *uses* religious tropes, themes, and imagery, but that, like Sikander, she mashes

them with other traditions, juxtaposing so as to produce something unique. The mythology of a feminine divine force meets the modernist mythology of individual identity. Sikander and Mendieta both affirm the presence of the artist, just as they submerge themselves within ancient traditions.

These are but two of the artists who are working within what I am calling "iconomash." There are others. Briefly, I would include French Tunisian artist eL Seed (b. 1981) and his use of Arabic calligraphy in street art; Chinese born, U.S.-based artist Xu Bing (b. 1955) for religiously-provoking pieces like *A Book from the Sky* (1987-91); or Iranian-American Shirin Neshat's (b. 1957) explorations of gender and freedom, particularly as Islam is situated and practiced in western nations such as the United States. While there may be something particular about the "post-modern" milieu that makes the elements of iconomash more prominent (globalization, internet-driven social and cultural networks, new transportation technologies, and massive migration), part of what iconomash reveals is that hybridization has been at the heart of religious and artistic traditions for tens of thousands of years. There has never been a tradition that did not beg, borrow, and steal from others, and searching for or claiming that there are pure, authentic traditions are endeavors fraught with problems.

Conclusion

To conclude, based on the preceding comments and the studies referenced, I offer some final suggestions for understanding the relationship between religion and visual art.

I take religion and art to be akin, in that both terms refer primarily to a set of technologies. They are both apparatuses that rely on materials, formed in determined ways that affect humans. Another way to put this is to say that art and religion consist of *form* as well as *content*. They operate through sense-based activities and material elements that stimulate feeling, thinking, and belonging, just as they can each stimulate isolation and challenge perceived views of the world. Through the senses, the arts provoke the imagination, and eventually give rise to thinking. This is not to say that they all do this all the time, just as rituals may *aim* to be transformative but very often fail.

Newer approaches to the arts from religious studies perspectives, usually falling under the rubric of "visual culture," have been appearing with great frequency lately, and many of these studies invert older paradigms by showing how visual images, sometimes including "visual

art," can function as primary movers of human religiosity. Art is not simply an appendage to religious studies, something to turn to once the doctrines and practices have all been figured out. Instead, through sensual means, the arts often touch (I use that word deliberately) something in humans that bypasses or ignores intellectualized doctrines and theologies. To put it bluntly, the material produces the spiritual. Or perhaps theologies are predicated on aesthetics. And religious studies as a field of study has begun to be more conscious of its material bases. This means that studying sacred texts will not get us where we need to go with regard to understandings of traditions, but moreover, neither will a simple iconographical interpretation of artworks tell us about how religious experience actually operates. The field of "religion and the arts" has ignored the body as much as early religious studies as a whole.

If we define the terms in properly robust ways, religion and art are inseparable from each other, and they always have been. Religion does not operate without creative technologies, nor does art (however seemingly secular) function without myths (of artists, galleries, history), rituals (of creating and viewing), or symbols (e.g. Kandinsky's elaborate theosophical systems of color and geometric form). More importantly, the arts do not work (i.e. there is no art*work*) apart from their effect on the body, just as religious traditions do not continue without engaging, engulfing, disciplining, and socializing the individual body within a larger collective of behaving bodies.

"Art," writ large, works. Art is a useful category of human experience that triggers emotional, thoughtful, and visceral responses through sensual engagement. Sometimes this occurs through the form of a masterpiece of Renaissance art, and sometimes this occurs as a result of encountering a mass-produced plastic mold of Krishna. Within this broad view, the study of art proves to be fertile ground for an understanding of religious life, experience, and tradition, as methods in studies of the arts can be fruitfully applied to the study of religion. Going further, as I've implied through the previous, studying religion as an art, with its attendant aesthetic concerns, offers new channels for the academic study of religion itself.

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