

# *The Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*

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## Points of reference for this talk:

I

The book *The Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (2005),  
and talks that followed on from it at Westmont College, Santa Barbara,  
and Lipscomb University, Nashville

2

The day-long panel discussion *Re-Enchantment*, held April 17 in Chicago,  
including Boris Groys, Thierry de Duve, Tomoko Masuzawa, Wendy Doniger,  
David Morgan, Gregg Bordwitz, and Kajri Jain

It will be vol. 7 in *The Art Seminar* (New York: Routledge, 2004-8)  
(The book will be out this summer)

3

Piotr Piotrowski, “Visual Policy in Poland: Democracy, Populism, and Censorship”

4

Raphael Vella and other artists in Villetta, Malta

## Organization of this talk:

- A. Outline of the problem
- B. Some examples of the gulfs of misunderstanding
- C. Five models of the alienation of religion and contemporary art
- D. Three unlikely ways forward

A.  
Outline of the problem

Some preliminary definitions:

“Religion” = a named, non-cultic system of belief

“Spirituality” = a partly private, non-liturgical, partly incommunicable system of belief

Given these definitions,

talk of religion is almost completely absent in the art world (except as critique),

and talk of spirituality is rare.

Three forms of the absence of religion or spirituality in talk about contemporary art:

I. Religion is absent from art magazines and journals...

except when the art is critical of religion

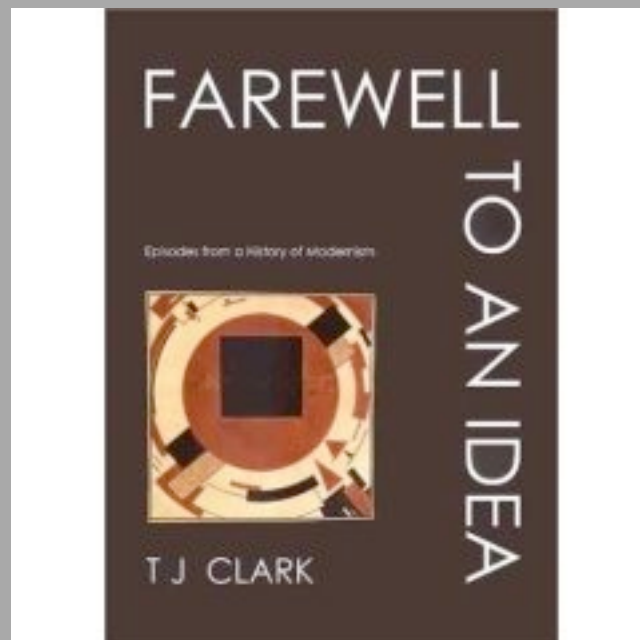


Three forms of the absence of religion or spirituality in talk about contemporary art:

2. Religion is absent from most of the central texts on modernism and postmodernism

—T.J. Clark's *Farewell to an Idea* : “[I will have nothing to do with] the self-satisfied Leftist clap-trap about art as ‘substitute religion’.”

—the multiply-authored *Art Since 1900*, the de facto textbook of 20th c. art, gives very little space to religious works



Three forms of the absence of religion or spirituality in talk about contemporary art:

3. Religion is absent from the pedagogy of studio art (in secular institutions):

- students cannot get critiques of religious meaning in their works
- students are not taught how religious ideas are expressed



B.

Some examples of the  
gulfs of misunderstanding



Almost the only secular invitation came out of the book:

## Deus (e)X Historia

A Conference Exploring Divinity and Reason in the Production of Knowledge

[overview](#) / [schedule](#) / [speaker bios](#) / [rsvp](#) / [maps](#) / [sponsors](#) / [about htc](#) / [department site](#) /

### about the conference

How are the “liberal arts,” cultural spaces, the places of ritual, monumentalization, memory and commemoration implicated in the traffic between religion and secularism, church and state? Religion is now resurgent as a critical factor in global affairs, whether social, economic or political. In order to examine some of the implications and motivations behind these phenomena, the faculty at the History, Theory, Criticism Program at the Department of Architecture at MIT propose a conference entitled deus (e)X historia. The use of the X here is used both phonetically, as in *deus ex historia*, and symbolically, as in God crossing out History. The conference seeks to examine “God” and the conventions of “rational” historiography as competing principles of causality and eschatology in human affairs and the natural world. We wish to create a conference that reassesses the problematics of religion both within and without academic and aesthetic production. The conference will raise questions about the respective claims to futurity by religion and theology, reason and the critique of reason, the space of government and the public sphere, and the traditions of secular cosmopolitanism.



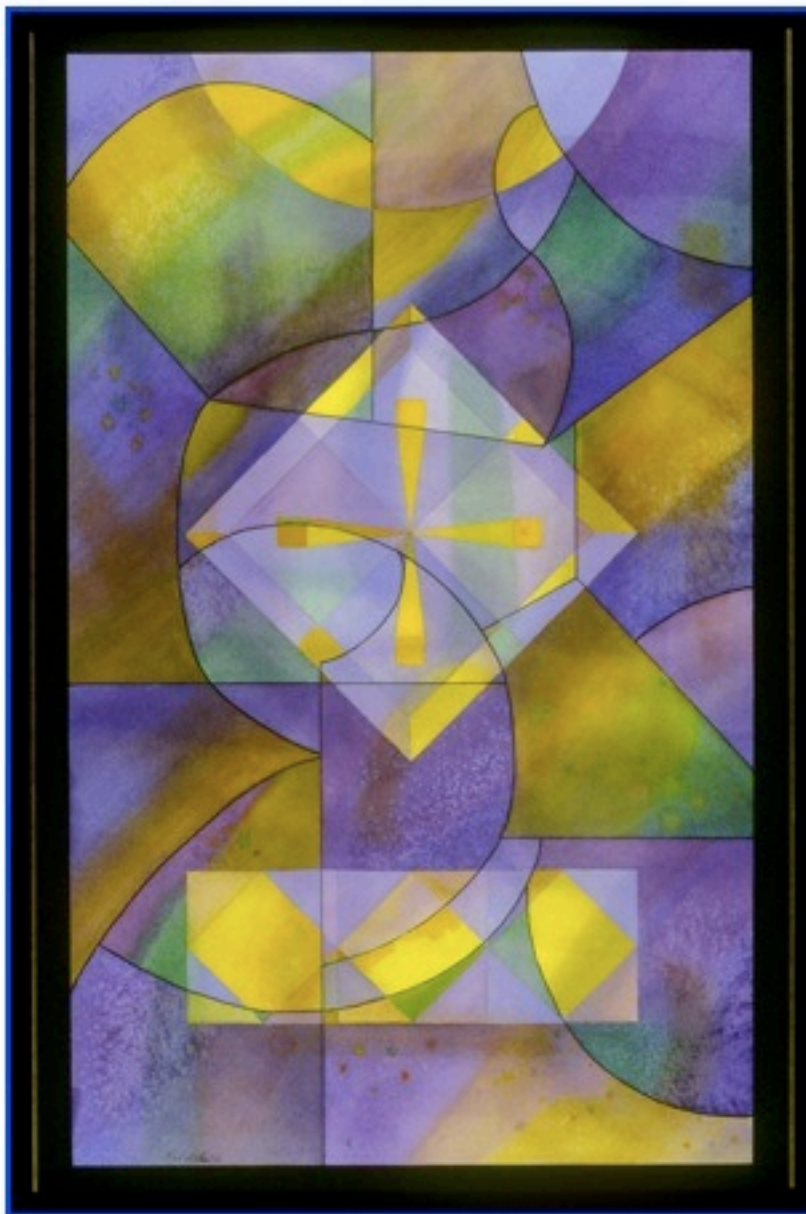
The disciplines that evolved in the wake of the Enlightenment – the “natural” and “social” sciences – rested their claims to authority on their assertion of *secular* reason. Incorporating the long tradition of skepticism within its fold, reason would replace religion in the ability to determine the future – this was the argument of the European Enlightenment. Even as the “critique of hegemonic reason” has rippled throughout academic disciplines in the twentieth century, this avowed secularism of research and policy has remained intact. Nonetheless, scholars such as Michel de Certeau, amongst many others, have argued that this disavowal of religion notwithstanding, the ethical imperatives of religion and faith have been retained wholesale within the disciplines of “rational” inquiry.

The history of academic disciplines and departments has echoed the formulation of states of which they are a part. Until the mid-twentieth century, the institutions that constituted the nation based their authority on a nominal claim to a triumph over religion in the conduct of state affairs. Left unacknowledged was the hegemony of particular religious formations in the establishment of each nation. It follows that academic disciplines, as the knowledge-building apparatuses of these states, carried the marks of the history of that tortuous intertwining of religion and state in their institutional structure. From mid-twentieth century onwards, states formed explicitly around religious identity – Israel and Pakistan mark here a beginning of sorts – revealing the underlying religious tensions below the surface of the erstwhile empires, disassembled behind a cosmopolitan façade in the conduct of their affairs. The Iranian revolution,





The following examples were shown at the “Deus e(x) Historia” conference, to show the MIT audience that there is more work out there than is dreamt of (etc.)



## **“Faith” by Ann Derulle**

Ann DeRulle’s long-term career in the corporate world led her to found Life Changes Unlimited in 1997 to provide leading-edge empowerment, transformational and healing services. Concurrently, she started taking watercolor workshops to pursue her long-time avocation as an aspiring artist. Last year, her interests in sacred geometry, healing and art merged when she was inspired to create approximately 400 artistic designs based on the energetics of sacred geometry.

Ann has identified the energies of some of the designs, such as “Faith” being exhibited at CSL now through November. Other design energies identified include “Love,” “Peace & Joy,” “Abundance” and “Compassion.” She is painting the designs in two different styles to date: With an abstract overlay, as the “Faith” painting exhibited, and without an abstract overlay in a collaged, three-dimensional construction. She accepts commissions to paint the designs in a chosen color scheme or to emanate the life-enhancing energy that is optimal for the environment. Ann, who claims CSL as her church home, can be

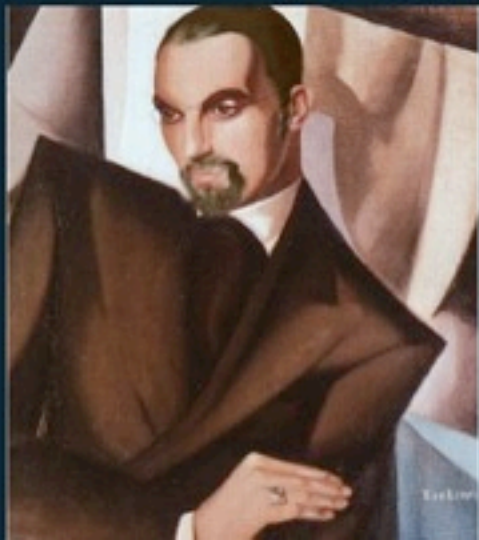
reached through Life Changes Unlimited or [Lifechangesunlimited@earthlink.net](mailto:Lifechangesunlimited@earthlink.net).



# postmodern pentecostal lectionary blog

THOUGHTS ON THIS WEEKS TEXT FROM A NEO-TRADITIONAL PENTECOSTAL MYSTIC. IN THESE PAGES YOU WILL FIND A PENTECOSTAL PERSPECTIVE, A CONCERN FOR THE INTERPLAY OF RCL READINGS, AND ATTEMPTS TO CONTEXTUALIZE THE TEXT FOR INTERGENERATIONAL FAMILY MINISTRY. I WILL ALSO POST POETRY AND ARTWORK I FIND MEANINGFUL IN MY MEDITATION FOR SUNDAY.

## ABOUT ME



Showing posts with label **Year A**. [Show all posts](#)

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 2005

## Apocalyptic inversion

Apocalyptic inversion ... it seems like the season is full of them. Isaiah's imagery of the straight paths to the point of mountains being made low and valleys raised is in keeping with apocalyptic tradition. When the Lord comes it wrongs are righted and chaos brings order. It heralds a new life, a new existence.


John the Baptist is charged with the same image. He prepares the way for the Lord. The

A “postmodern pentecostal [sic] lectionary blog” with paintings ranging in style from Tamara de Lempicka to Ernst Heckel—

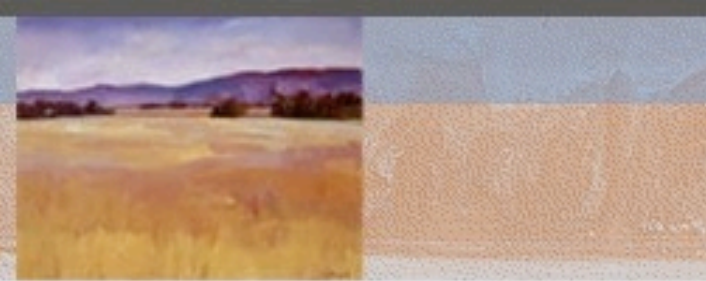
SATURDAY, OCTOBER 8, 2005



**The Empty Banquet Hall**  
or  
**It's my Party and I'll Cry if I want to - God**  
*watercolor and espresso, (mostly espresso)*

POSTED BY CHRISTOPHER C. HOOTON AT 10/08/2005 04:20:00 PM 0 COMMENTS 





### ***About The Artist***

Jennifer Boswell is a contemporary impressionist who lives and works in Santa Barbara, California with her supportive husband and three wonderful children. She divides her time between plein air painting and studio work. She discovered her interest in art when she was 10 years old. Jennifer worked in watercolors for many years; since 1999 she has worked primarily in oils.

Jennifer's art regimen includes the study of biographies and paintings of great artists, a combination of faith and perseverance, and the act of wholeheartedly painting miles and miles of canvas.

Artist's statement: "My purpose as an artist is to express my personal vision of the world in a way that glorifies God. My goal is to be the best artist I can be, while leading a balanced life."





A painting of the Malbis Greek Orthodox church in Mobile, Alabama, inside the church







*“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings...’ As the slanting rays of the sun reflect upon the rooftops of Old Jerusalem, Christ reflects upon His life’s mission and upon those He came to serve and bless. Here, upon the Mount of Olives, Jesus could see the day, like His mortal ministry, coming to a close. However, a new day always dawns, and there is hope and comfort in His words, ‘lo, I am with you always.’”*

— Greg Olsen





Aline Gaubert, “equine assisted psychotherapy,” involving horse painting



Even artworks that draw more on fine art can be suspect:



Steve Brudniak's *Black Mandala*: "the translucent black field acts as a catalyst for meditation as inspired by the paintings of Mark Rothko"



Karen Arm, whose work “aims at understanding systems, structures, and the spirit”

C.

Five models of the  
alienation of religion and  
contemporary art



In *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, I suggest five models for the relation between religious meanings and contemporary art:

1. Avowedly religious art
2. Art that can be assigned to new faiths (NRMs)
3. Art that is critical of religion
4. Art that “burns away” liturgy to find viable belief
5. Art that can be said to be unconsciously religious

I will give examples of each.