

Philosophy, Art, and Religion

At a time when religion and science are thought to be at loggerheads, art is widely hailed as religion's natural spiritual ally. *Philosophy, Art, and Religion* investigates the extent to which this is true. It charts the way in which modern conceptions of "Art" often marginalize the sacred arts, construing choral and instrumental music, painting and iconography, poetry, drama, and architecture as "applied" arts that necessarily fall short of the ideal of "art for art's sake." Drawing on both history of art and philosophical aesthetics, Graham sets out the historical context in which the arts came to free themselves from religious patronage, in order to conceptualize the cultural context in which religious art currently finds itself. The book then relocates religious art within the aesthetics of everyday life. Subsequent chapters systematically explore each of the sacred arts, using a wide range of illustrative examples to uncover the ways in which artworks can illuminate religious faith, and religious content can lend artworks a deeper dimension.

Before taking up his post at Princeton Theological Seminary, Gordon Graham taught philosophy at the University of St. Andrews, where he was also founding Director of the University Music Centre, and at the University of Aberdeen where he was Regius Professor of Moral Philosophy. The author of many essays on a wide range of philosophical topics relating to art, ethics, politics, and religion, his books include *Philosophy of the Arts* (third edition, 2005), *The Re-enchantment of the World* (2007) and *Wittgenstein and Natural Religion* (2014). He has been Sheffer Visiting Professor of Religion at Colorado College, Stanton Lecturer in Philosophy and Religion at the University of Cambridge, and an Adjunct Professor of Sacred Music at Westminster Choir College.

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*Dedicated with gratitude to the presidents, faculty, and
students of Princeton Theological Seminary during my tenure
there from 2006 to 2018.*

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Preface

This book is the culmination of a decade offering courses in philosophical aesthetics to divinity students. Before my appointment (in 2006) to a newly established position in philosophy and the arts at Princeton Theological Seminary, I had taught aesthetics over many years in the philosophy departments of two largely secular universities. Covering an appropriate curriculum in these contexts allowed limited reference to religious art, but it certainly did not require it. Books and papers were few in number, and in fact the subject of the relationship between art and religion was infrequently and only lightly touched upon in the growing number of guides and handbooks to aesthetics that were coming out from academic presses. Even the college text I myself published (*Philosophy of the Arts*, 3rd revised edition 2005) made only fleeting references to religious art. As a consequence, the move to teaching aesthetics in a divinity school presented both a challenge and an opportunity.

The challenge was to engage with second degree students who generally had little or no background in philosophy and no knowledge of the traditional topics of aesthetics, while at the same time convincing them that philosophy in the Anglo-American analytical tradition could have interesting things to say about the subjects that interested them most – namely, Christian faith and practice. In addition, there was the challenge of ensuring that it was indeed *philosophical* aesthetics to which they were being introduced, and not the burgeoning area of *theological* aesthetics that was developing at the same time. This meant largely ignoring the rapidly growing literature in theological aesthetics, even though any alternative literature I could call on for reading lists that would be directly relevant to the topics of my courses was very limited indeed. At the same

time, the other side of this challenge was a corresponding opportunity to uncover new connections between philosophy, art, and religion, and to preserve philosophy's distinctive mode of thought with its emphasis on conceptual clarity, dialectical exchange, and argumentative cogency while avoiding the level of abstraction that often leads philosophy to leave the substantial content of art and religion behind.

I had already begun to think about the issue for the Stanton Lectures in Philosophy and Religion that I gave at the University of Cambridge in 2004 (subsequently published in 2007 as *The Re-enchantment of the World: Art versus Religion*), but it took some years of experimentation to find the right way of combining a serious education in philosophical aesthetics with a deep interest in religion. Part of the solution lay in focussing less on general concepts such as beauty, aesthetic experience, and aesthetic judgment (or “taste”), and more on the philosophy of the arts, especially those arts that have had a prominent place in the history of religion, chiefly music, visual art, and architecture. But a larger part of the solution, it turned out, was to engage a little more than analytical philosophy customarily does in the cultural history and anthropology of art and religion, to think about art in the context of religion as a distinctively human *practice*, and to explore and reflect on both major and minor religious artworks and artists.

The result might be called “empirically enriched philosophy,” a phrase that some anthropologists have used to describe their subject.¹ But the difference with anthropology, as I see it, is that philosophy has the additional aim of attempting to resolve the problems and paradoxes that arise when we try to combine certain concepts and ideas that are central to the arts – music and emotion, depiction and resemblance, truth and fiction, beauty and usefulness, for instance. It also has an essentially normative element – the desire to determine the human significance of the phenomena it seeks to understand. It is interested not only in the character of the human practices that constitute art and religion, but in why and to what extent they matter.²

¹ I owe the expression to Professor Tim Ingold, a former colleague at the University of Aberdeen. He illuminatingly sets out his distinctive conception of relational-ecological-developmental anthropology in the introduction to *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), though he does not use the expression there.

² My own conception of the kind of understanding philosophy seeks is articulated at length in ‘Philosophy, Knowledge and Understanding’ in *Making Sense of the World: New Essays in the Philosophy of Understanding*. Ed. Stephen R. Grimm. (New York: Oxford University Press, in press).

Most of the examples I drew on in class were taken from the Christian religion, a natural consequence of the fact that I was teaching in a Christian seminary. But I tried, as did many of my students, not to lose sight of the fact that it was the philosophy of art and religion, not one particular religion, that we were primarily there to study and to teach. In this book, accordingly, the range of examples is much wider, and though I am most familiar with Christian music, painting, literature, and architecture in the Western art tradition, I have also drawn, so far as my knowledge will allow, on Judaism, Islam, and the religions of the East.

My position in Princeton proved to have some additional benefits. Its relative novelty gave rise to conferences, exhibitions, and other events that included artists, musicians, theologians, and educators among the participants. In these contexts also there was the challenge of showing that philosophy has something distinctively interesting to say, as well as something to learn from other rich disciplines. A number of invitations to lecture elsewhere gave me occasions to organize my thoughts in a more sustained way. One especially valuable stimulus was the invitation to teach for a couple of years as an adjunct professor on the Masters degree in sacred music at Westminster Choir College in Princeton.

This book is an attempt to capitalize on all this. The literature relevant to philosophy, art, and religion is more extensive than it was, but not very much more so, and my hope is that this book will constitute both a contribution and a stimulus to its expansion. It traverses some of the same ground as *The Re-enchantment of the World*, but in a sufficiently different way, I trust, to make it worth reading as well. It also makes a special effort to assume as little familiarity with philosophy on the part of the reader as possible. Chapters 2 and 4 contain substantially reworked material that first appeared in the journals *Faith and Philosophy* and *Theology Today*. Chapter 5 builds on a lecture I was invited to give at the University of Nice.

I owe a great debt to Princeton Seminary. Having created the Henry Luce III Chair in Philosophy and the Arts, the faculty left me completely free to realize its ambitions in whatever way I thought best. But I owe an even greater debt to several generations of students whose questions and comments, both in class and outside it, constantly stimulated me to think more imaginatively and productively than I would otherwise have done.