Thanks to a Faculty Development Grant from Otis in October, 2008, I was able to participate in the annual conference on Liberal Arts and the Education of Artists (http://www.sva.edu/undergraduate/humanities-and-sciences/conference) at the School of Visual Arts. The 2008 conference topic of Art Education, Religion, and the Spiritual, was of particular interest as, in 2006, our Liberal Studies department had proposed that I teach a course on the Bible as Literature; a course that was now ripe for reflection and revision. My conference experience was both interesting and enriching. I am sincerely grateful to the College for this unique opportunity to hear from colleagues how they approach this powerful mix of story, image, tradition and belief in the context of an art & design education.

Some reflections from the Conference:

James Elkins was the keynote presenter, drawing upon his On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art (Routledge, 2004). His contention is that Religion and Spirituality are excluded from serious consideration in contemporary art unless they present themselves as ironic, ambivalent or critical. At points Elkins seemed to be arguing that the contemporary conversation in art may be so fixed upon these boundaries as to be functioning as a belief system itself.

Some interesting middle ground for discourse between religion and contemporary art may emerge from explorations of the paradoxical. It is my estimation that mature religious and spiritual experience necessarily engages paradox as a language for the ineffable and the numinous. In these usually spiritual, frequently religious, understandings of the transcendent dimensions of our human experience, the language of paradox may overlap with the ironic, ambivalent, and critical conversations Elkins posits as central to contemporary art.

My own paper, The Long Search, Lessons Learned Teaching the New Testament as Literature, focused on the range of benefits which obtain from a study of religious texts in the classroom, in addition to those usually associated with an advanced study of literature. Such benefits include enhanced religious literacy and attention to responsible global citizenship. We are graduating our students into a world where religious identities, languages, and images are used to justify, vilify and
divide—to make hegemonic claims over and against others. As tomorrow’s image makes, I want our students to think critically about the power of the images in which they trade; especially images of the other.

The dilemma of religious literacy means that most students do not recognize the narratives which underpin religious imagery in the art they survey. Of course, this lacuna is not just related to sacred text, neither do they reliably recognize classical mythologies. Not knowing the stories is troubling, for it makes it difficult for students to recognize the stance or attitude that the artist is taking towards the story at hand. If we don’t know what is at stake in an image of the Binding of Isaac, or of the Last Judgment, how do we respond to the artist’s contribution to that story?

Moreover, a most important aspect of sacred stories exists in a dynamic tension between doctrine and narrative. True religious literacy requires both. I am haunted by a causal remark made to me 20 years ago when I was the director of the inter-religious center at UCLA. A rabbi, lamenting what he perceived a rising intolerance on the part of “newly” Jewish students, remarked that “they know all of the rules, but few of the stories.” I took his point to be that it is in the narrative what we (and our doctrines) are contextualized, humanized, and learn that grace and mercy are essential to the art of living.

Inevitably a great deal of conference discussion was devoted to finding relatively agreeable definitions for the terms “religion” and “spirituality.” In my classes I present working definitions at the start of the course, to avoid such discussion. Nonetheless, despite the efficacy of working definitions, there are some students who will still contest the definitions at the course’s end; it seems to come with the territory.

I was also the presider for the “Religion and Education” panel at the conference.

Overall, the conference provided a valuable opportunity to focus my thoughts on the relationship between art, religion and the spiritual; to learn what other English professors are doing with this subject, and how art historians are engaging the sometimes maddening disjuncts between image and story. It’s ironic that it was in NYC that I came to know people from LMU and Irvine; but that, too, comes with the territory.

Finally, I should mention that I am expanding my Otis course to include the Hebrew Bible (arguably the richer source of stories with cultural currency) and from there I hope to incorporate other sacred texts as well.

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Liberal Arts and Sciences