

RELIGION AND THE PROCESS OF VISUALIZATION

This course is an experimental offering, and is proposed as an effective way of engaging in interdisciplinary work in the humanities. It is not a course that comes ready-made, but one whose formation depends upon the interests and contributions of all who participate in the process, instructor and students alike.

The course derives from a simple insight, namely, that religion and visualization have something directly to do with each other. To make this suggestion is to suspend the more prominent way of approaching religion, primarily in terms of ideas or thoughtfulness. This course experiments with the prospect that religion has more to do with ways of seeing, or ways of ascribing order, or ways of discerning patterns, etc. And it attempts to approach this prospect in a very multiform manner.

First, the course will reconstruct some of the theory associated with attempts to give definition to religion that has been prominent in the Enlightenment, post-Enlightenment, and modern eras. The course will demonstrate that the very attempt to give "rational" definition to religion has virtually failed, or has given rise to a series of alternative definitions of a non-rational sort. We refer to the "aesthetic" definitions -- religion is "depth perception", "projection", "perspective", "illusion", "horizon", etc. The course will focus on a few of these definitions, will attempt to place them within the context of an ongoing western intellectual history, and then will ask questions about their sense and utility if taken in aesthetic or visualistic (rather than strictly theoretical) terms. The class will note that the definitions have been supplied by both proponents (Tillich, Schleiermacher, Müller, et al) as well as disclaimers (Freud, Feuerbach, Marx) of religion. We want to know what to make of the aesthetic definitions: the definitions that derive from aesthetic, visualistic, indeed optical frameworks. And there are a host of them to consider.

Second, the course will focus on at least two phenomena which belong to the process of visualization and have also been tapped to give meaning and definition to religion: illusion and projection. We will be studying something of the background of these phenomena, taken as concepts (related to Renaissance work on the dynamics of perspective), and we will focus visually on the same phenomena through pictures and slides. It will be our attempt to understand something more of the dynamics of illusion and projection -- the visual dynamics -- so as to penetrate the potential association with religion.

Third, the course will take leads from the writings of Mircea Eliade who approaches religion in terms of "time" and "space", which Immanuel Kant referred to as forms of intuition. Taking materials from art history and theory, we will make an attempt to treat (or approach) the process of "spatialization". And this attempt should spring loose some insights regarding the use of "center", "cycles", "periodicity", "repetition", "synchronicity", "simultaneity", etc. as such terms or insights or mechanisms are utilized in religious vocabularies. The examples of "spatialization" will not be taken entirely from intellectual history (and/or method and theory), but will be visual through and through. Here we have reference to the mandala, the prayer wheel, the use of hours for daily offices, the role of color in mystical awareness (white, red, black, etc.), shadings between light and dark (as in "dark night of the soul"), pilgrimage motifs (their own form of spatialization), temple and cathedral arrangements, city plans, and, perhaps, pre-eminently cosmological designs (as in St. Hildegard's speculations about astrological and

interior cyclical synchronicity), etc. For all of these theoretical concepts there are visual components. And the class will make use of both forms of data in exploring the complex relationships between religious sensitivity and the dynamics of visualization.

The course structure will be undergirded by an approach to western cultural history which sees it primarily in terms of the birth, reformation, repetition, and metamorphoses of selected styles. Indeed, in ways that he wants to demonstrate, the instructor offers this course as a first step in approaching cultural history in terms of "forms of intuition" as distinct from "great ideas." The theory which supports this point of departure is taken from the insights and suggestions of E. H. Gombrich, Karl Popper, Stephen Toulmin, and from such diverse writers as Norman O. Brown, James Hillman, Peter Brown, Edgar Wind, and mystics east and west, particularly John Ruysbroeck.

Credits will be given on the basis of agreement between individual students and the instructor, and will be awarded through the means of agreed-upon term projects. The class will meet once per week to the end of the winter quarter. There will be no final examination. Participating students are urged to utilize the occasion to pursue interests of their own in this developing interdisciplinary area.