

## THE PLACE OF THE VISUAL IN THE TEACHING OF RELIGION

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*One picture is worth a thousand words.* And no doubt we nod in agreement; visual aids are a 'good thing' and we need to use them more, if for no better reason than the competition offered by the mass media with their plethora of pictures on television and vividly illustrated books and magazines!

At the outset however, we confront the question as to the intellectual respectability of 'visual aids'. Throughout the academic world in which we participate there is a widespread distrust of the visual arts. They may be all very well as hobbies and cultural pursuits, but when imported into the classroom they are often seen as soft toys, mere entertainments. Here is an attitude which is probably latent in all of us, leading to some uncertainty and even guilt about devoting academic teaching time to such material. Another misgiving arises from the difficulty of examining 'visual knowledge' in higher examinations with their traditional form of 3-hourly verbal essay-answers. Are we providing our students with solid knowledge that will get them through examinations and over the practical hurdles of life? Underlying so much of our culture and educational method, is the prejudice that puts highest value on the empirical, the readily examinable, the technical and 'useful'. Measured on such a grid, both religion and art will appear highly suspect.

I believe that we should fight these prejudices when they appear within ourselves and in the cultural climate around us. We can do this on two lines of attack — *one along pedagogical lines* and *the other on grounds of the inner relation between art and religion.*

### 1. A Pedagogical Rationale for Inclusion of the Visual in Education

In developing a rationale of teaching methods which accords a proper place to the visual, we can usefully build on Jerome Bruner's description<sup>1</sup> of three major modes of learning, each of which involves a type of action. The enactive, direct experience involves doing. The iconic, pictorial experience, involves seeing. The symbolic highly abstract experience, involves hearing. The whole range of teaching methods and media fall into place in this framework.

\* *Some books and sources for materials relevant to the study of religion are listed in the Appendix to this paper. — Ed.*

Here I find particularly helpful the model of the 'cone of experience' which Edgar Dale uses in his comprehensive survey, *Audiovisual Methods in Teaching*.<sup>2</sup> The visual analogy of the cone is a reminder of the inter-related levels of experience, presented as successive bands of the cone. At the base are direct purposeful experiences, leading on to contrived and dramatized experiences, demonstrations and study trips; all these involve the student in doing — for instance, going to a church or synagogue and meeting representatives of the faith in person. In the middle are the experiences fostered by audiovisual media such as exhibits, educational television, motion-pictures, still pictures, slides and recordings. At the top come visual symbols and finally, at the most abstract peak, verbal symbols — words, analyses and theories about religion.

We have to remember that these bands represent experiences that are fluid, extensive and continually interacting. We shall be misusing the cone model if we think that the lower levels are for beginners and the upper levels for the mature. We must beware of assuming that one kind of experience is educationally 'better' than the others, for instance, that we must always be emphasising direct experience or visuals. In that case we may end up getting stuck with the more concrete experiences; this is the opposite error from moving up too fast to the abstract and 'losing' our students. The task of the teacher is rather to move with the student, easily and naturally, through these various experiences.

Such an approach means flexibility in the use of varied methods as the subject and the situation may warrant — turning from systematic analysis to question and discussion and to concrete illustrated example. It is good to be able to say from time to time: *Let's look at a picture of a Shinto shrine and remind ourselves of the festivals which attract Japanese people there.* Or again, to interrupt a series of slides illustrating a religion to get reaction from the class as they analyse and interpret the scenes. We need to break out of a routine approach to lectures and visual aids which gives the impression of a special novelty being introduced: *Now we shall have slides.* Unfortunately the physical arrangements of many lecture-rooms make it difficult to move with ease from one learning experience to another; time is lost in switching off the lights and moving to appropriate vantage-points. Here the overhead projector has many advantages as a visual teaching-aid which is flexible, easily modified and requires no blackout.<sup>3</sup> Increasingly, a number of lecturers are developing whole teaching programmes around sets of transparencies which they have personally prepared. This requires time and revision but is a worthwhile extension of the lecturer's repertoire.

An important part of this pedagogical rationale of the visual lies in acknowledging that *the visual has its limits*. In an age when television is daily flooding us with visual images that alternately shock and tranquillize, there is the temptation to ignore events, issues and subjects which do not have a convenient visual existence. It is salutary to hear from a television journalist, Robin Day, an answer to his

professional colleagues when they regard talks and discussions as inferior, second-class television — mere 'talking heads'. In that contemptuous phrase, he writes, *the image merchants of the electronic age dismiss the one characteristic of man that elevates him above the beast, the power to conceive and communicate rational thought.*<sup>4</sup> Along similar lines, Sir Kenneth Clark regretted the limitations imposed by the television medium on his *Civilization* series. He would like to have said more about law and philosophy, Kant, Hegel and Goethe, but he couldn't think up any way of making them visually interesting. His caution still stands: *A line of argument determined almost entirely by visual evidence does not make for logic or completeness.*<sup>5</sup>

Enough has been said on the pedagogical aspect to indicate that the visual is a valid and important mode of experience without which our teaching and learning will be impoverished. At the same time we can move from the visual to other forms of experience, perhaps being involved in direct action and participation, or again concentrating on an intensely cerebral, abstract verbal discussion. We do not want visual aids to silence a potentially fruitful discussion. My point is that we want to use the visual with discrimination and understanding.

## 2. The Inner Relation between Art and Religion

How does this apply now specifically to the field of religion? Here I want to look at the inner connections between religion and the visual and I see four directions in which these are important.

- (a) First of all there is the field of *religious iconography* which involves *the systematic study of the religious content of images*. Iconography means literally 'writing in images' (from the Greek *eikon* 'image' and *graphein* 'to write'). Man could express himself in pictures long before he could write and from ancient times up to the present, the religions of man have been accompanied by traditions of pictures, as well as of words, which could be understood by others. (Therefore if we still seek an answer to our earlier question whether visual aids are 'intellectually respectable', it can be said that the visual arts represent a form of thinking).<sup>6</sup> For instance, among the Walbiri of Central Australia the anthropologist Nancy Munn has discerned a complex of symbols and images which this aboriginal people used in their decorations for rituals and also in their sand-drawings during their storytelling. Here is 'Walbiri iconography' which provides a way into the understanding of their life, myth and ritual.<sup>7</sup> Similarly for the elaborate system of icons developed in Eastern Christendom. Some years ago I was fortunate to hear a lecture on the meaning of icons by Nicholas Zernov and subsequently came to value both his book and the short book by Ernst Benz which, starting with icons, goes on from this to illuminate the theology, worship and life of Eastern Orthodoxy.<sup>8</sup> Again, the study of Buddhist iconography and the development of the Buddha image provides a vivid illustration of the spread of Buddhism over Asia in both continuity and diversity.<sup>9</sup>

The study of iconography is particularly important in religion because it provides a 'way in' to the understanding of those religious traditions which may be unfamiliar and baffling to students, especially students from a predominantly Western European cultural background.<sup>10</sup> The visual images of a religion often challenge us to look afresh at the ideas and experiences expressed through them. We need to learn to 'read' pictures and not just skip over them unreflectively. This is what the study of iconography is about — *learning to read this 'writing in images'*. We need to help our students to *look*, which involves observing and knowing what to look for. For what are the attributes which we can identify on a Hindu image so as to conclude: *This is Vishnu, or Krishna, or Shiva and his consorts . . . .* With the aid of pictures, slides, diagrams (and actual images if they are available) we can from time to time study in detail certain leading examples of religious iconography. For example, Rublev's famous 15th century Russian Orthodox icon of the Trinity teaches us a great deal about the tradition of icon-painting;<sup>11</sup> but we may also discover it is linked to a chain of theological and Biblical interpretation (of the three visitors to Abraham in *Genesis* 18) that goes back over a thousand years to the Ancient Church. With examples such as these, the student is encouraged to pursue for himself the task of looking and understanding.

- (b) But the significance of the visual is not exhausted by a study of traditions of iconography in the various religions. We need, secondly to *be aware of the different types of piety which evince a variety of reactions to images among worshippers*. What is one man's devotional image is seen by another as a degrading idol. And these differing attitudes can be seen often juxtaposed, perhaps uneasily, in people acknowledging the same religion. For instance, the mediaeval church officially regarded the statues of pagan antiquity as idols, especially free-standing nude images, so that few escaped destruction. But these images retained some of their old magic in popular belief, as is shown by an account from the Italian city of Siena around 1300 A.D. There the citizens were delighted to unearth a nude Venus, sculpted by Lysippus, which they placed in an honoured position on the fountain in front of the city hall. Apparently it was expected to serve as a sort of protective deity; but when Siena suffered misfortunes such as the plague of 1348 popular feeling turned against the image. The city government pronounced the Venus *inhonestum* (indecent) and disposed of it. A later account states that the image was broken in pieces and buried on Florentine soil so that the evil qualities might be transferred to the enemy.<sup>12</sup>

A strong attachment to visual images among some is opposed by attachment supremely to the verbal in others. Consider,

for instance, the biblical prophetic Word and its iconoclastic implications: *Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image*. We think, in particular, of Judaism and Islam as religions which have rejected visual representations of the Sacred. But even here things are not so simple. The long history of Judaism has seen a rich use of art and symbolism, probably depending on situations of relaxation and prosperity, as in the mural illustrations of the 3rd century synagogue of Dura-Europos. Islam found its visual art in the abstract pattern and in calligraphy - a sort of iconography of the written Word! - but the norm of worship without visual images in the mosque did not prevent the use of pictures in other settings such as illuminated books in Persia and Turkey. On the other hand, the Hindu tradition with its wealth of images of many deities in temples and homes has at the same time room for types of piety which set little store on the visual and regard images as the lowest rung of the ladder towards spiritual identity. Modern Hinduism has sometimes seen the outright rejection of images by would-be reformers like Dayanand Saraswati who based his *Arya Samaj* movement on a return to the true word of the ancient Vedas.

The Christian tradition in the course of two thousand years has rung all the changes on the use of visual imagery. The early Christians were naturally suspicious of anything suggesting an acceptance of pagan idolatry, and there have been recurring waves of iconoclasm in some degree in the major church traditions over the centuries. In the twentieth century we see the intriguing spectacle of many Protestants coming to appreciate the visual while a new Puritanism has emerged in some areas of Catholicism.

I would seek to locate these various attitudes toward images along a continuum. At one extreme lies *image-worship* in which the deity is represented and believed to be powerfully present in the image - a position all too frequently dismissed under the pejorative label 'idolatry'. Distinguished from this is *veneration of the image* as a reminder of the presence of the deity or sacred power. Next is *contemplation of the image* as a means of ascending to a higher stage of spiritual devotion, as in the more mystical forms of piety. After this is the position which sees *visual images as mere instructional aids* (as in much 'Sunday School literature'). Finally, there may be complete *rejection of images* on iconoclastic grounds. In terms of this typology, different kinds of piety can co-exist not only in a given religious tradition but even within an individual. Confronted by a visual representation, a worshipper may switch from, say, veneration to mystical contemplation or move from what began as instruction to a fever-pitch of devotion.

- (c) If justice is to be done to this variety of attitudes as well as to the iconographic traditions, we need to develop a *balanced approach to the study of religions which includes the visual as well as the verbal*. This is my third area of emphasis. Particularly for those engaged in teaching Religious Studies, it is important to develop appropriate teaching materials, and to select and classify them carefully so that they can be geared into an overall programme. This is largely an organizational and pedagogical matter – hence I shall not dwell long on this point. But it involves more than this – it requires us to understand a religion in terms of a whole range of outward expressions. For instance in studying Islam we rightly dwell on the Qur'an as the central focus of Revelation. But Islam is much more than a book religion and it is unfortunate that the impression received by many in the West is of a hard, fanatical, aggressive religion of the true Word associated with desert warriors. This can be corrected by appreciation of the Islamic city, the mosque, Muslim devotion and practice, society and the arts.<sup>13</sup> Here the visual can convey something of the colour and warmth of the inner experience and its outward expression.
- (d) Finally, there is a more general area of *religious insight associated with the visual*. This can be found in works of art which are not explicitly related to the iconographies of established religious traditions and which may even be regarded as secular rather than religious. Nevertheless, such works have spiritual overtones and may be called 'spiritual' art in this sense of evoking religious feelings or of stimulating insights in the beholder.<sup>14</sup>

To illustrate, I shall refer to two of the great formative figures in modern European sculpture. First, there is the Romanian sculptor, Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957) who had deep roots in the Romanian Orthodox Church and also became interested in Tibetan Buddhism, but whose art is spiritual in a non-exclusive way. It has a primeval quality which goes through Romanian folk art and wood-carving to link with archaic and primitive art as well as with organic forms of nature. He repeatedly uses ovoid forms, as in the cosmic egg of his sculpture, *The Beginning of the World*. The soaring flight of the spirit is suggested by his *Bird in Space*. His hundred-foot *Endless Column* also embodies the ancient idea of the *axis mundi*, the central column linking the upper and lower realms of the cosmos.<sup>15</sup> In these works of polished simplicity he draws on powerful myths and symbols from pre-Christian antiquity and also evokes spiritual dimensions in the midst of apparently 'secular' phenomena of life today. Something similar happens in the very different sculpture of Ernst Barlach (1870-1938), coming out of the German heritage from the mediaeval to modern expressionism.

Barlach's work concentrates on the human form and interprets the human condition in all its variety – action and suffering, joy and ecstasy, earthiness and yearning for the infinite. Barlach did portray traditional religious subjects in Biblical themes of sculpture, wood-cuts and drawings – for instance, Moses, Jesus teaching and crucified, apostles and prophets. However he recasts these in the light of his own spiritual humanism. A mourning group of three figures can be taken as a traditional Pieta; it can also be taken as any human experience of sorrow for a dead man. Such artists are expressing some of the universal themes of religion in an open-ended non-traditional way and they therefore evoke a deep response in many modern people, as I have found with students.

I suggest that we make a special effort to include such works from time to time in dealing with religious themes. They shed light on the inner relations between religion and the visual arts. They achieve that imaginative involvement and indirect participation which other types of artists also seek to evoke in their audiences, and thus they help us to understand how others feel and experience their world. Here the visual joins with the religious understanding.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup>Jerome Bruner, *Towards a Theory of Instruction*, Harvard U.P., 1966, chap.1.
- <sup>2</sup>Edgar Dale, *Audiovisual methods in Teaching*, 1969, Dryden Press, chap. 4, pp.107-135.
- <sup>3</sup>John Cowan, 'Can tape/overhead compete with tape/slide?' in *Visual Education*, May 1976, pp.13-14.
- <sup>4</sup>Robin Day, 'Troubled Reflections of a TV Journalist' in *Encounter*, May 1970, pp.78-88.
- <sup>5</sup>Cited by Day, *op. cit.*
- <sup>6</sup>Rudolf Arnheim, *Visual Thinking*, Faber, 1970.
- <sup>7</sup>Nancy Munn, *Walbiri Iconography*, 1973, Cornell U.P.
- <sup>8</sup>Nicholas Zernov, *Eastern Christendom*, 1961, Weidenfeld & Nicolson; Ernst Benz, *The Eastern Orthodox Church*, Doubleday, 1963.
- <sup>9</sup>Dietrich Seckel, *The Art of Buddhism*, 1963, Methuen; P.M. Lad (ed.), *The Way of the Buddha*, Publications Division, Republic of India, 1956, illustrated.
- <sup>10</sup>A.C. Moore, *Iconography of Religions : an Introduction*, S.C.M. Press, 1976.
- <sup>11</sup>N. Zernov, *op.cit.*, pp.281-4 on Rublev's 'Trinity'. See also Osborne (ed.) *The Oxford Companion to Art*, 1970, an excellent reference work on art and iconography.

- <sup>12</sup>Cited by H.W. Janson, *16 Studies*, H.N. Abrams, 1973, 'The Image of Man in Renaissance Art', p.121.
- <sup>13</sup>Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, Yale U.P., 1973; Ernst Grube, *The World of Islam*, Hamlyn, 1966; Annemarie Schimmel, *Islamic Calligraphy*, E.J. Brill, 1970; Kenneth Cragg, *The Dome and the Rock*, S.P.C.K., 1964; R.M. Savory (ed.), *Introduction to Islamic Civilization*, Cambridge U.P., 1976.
- <sup>14</sup>E.B. Feldman, *Art as Image and Idea*, 1967, Prentice-Hall, pp.24-30 on 'art of spiritual concern' as in Van Gogh and Rouault. This book provides many helpful illustrations and discussions of their meaning, (e.g. Andrew Wyeth's 'Christina's World').
- <sup>15</sup>These works of Brancusi are illustrated in Carda Giedion-Welcker, *Contemporary Sculpture*, 1956, Faber; William Tucker, *The Language of Sculpture*, 1974, Thames & Hudson; Ionel Jianou, *Brancusi*, 1963, Adam Books; Sidney Geist, *Constantin Brancusi*, 1969, Guggenheim Museum.
- <sup>16</sup>Well-illustrated studies of Barlach in English are: Carl D. Carls, *Ernst Barlach*, 1969, Pall Mall Press; Alfred Werner, *Ernst Barlach*, 1966, McGraw-Hill. On religious themes: Gunter Gloede, *Barlach: Gestalt und Gleichnis*, 1966, Furche-Verlag.

## APPENDIX

### Some Teaching Resources: Books and Visual Aids

Edgar Dale, *Audiovisual methods in Teaching*, 1946; 3rd 1969, Dryden Press (Holt, Rinehart). A comprehensive survey.

Len S. Powell, *Lecturing*, 1973, Pitman Educational. See especially Ch.4, 'Lightening the Verbal Load'.

Antony Jay, *Effective Presentation*, 1971, 1973, British Institute of Management. See especially Ch.6, 'Visual Aids'.

*World Religions: Aids for Teachers*, 1972 (from the SHAP Working Party in Great Britain). For this and further materials from SHAP contact the Information & Advisory Officer, Rev. Ray Trudgian, Borough Road College, Isleworth, Middlesex, U.K.

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