

FOR MORE THAN A MILLENNIUM IN THE WEST, THE GREATEST theme of the painter was the life and death of Christ, and the greatest task of the architect was to build a cathedral. The greatest work of literature in the thousand years before Shakespeare is Dante's account of hell, purgatory, and paradise. Some would say that the greatest work of art after Shakespeare is Milton's *Paradise Lost*, others, *Faust*—works that also give God His due, albeit via the devil. Indeed, for much of history, the glory of art has been the glorification of God. Even *modern* literature and art often speak to religious questions—in nontraditional ways; the relationship is deeper than we might expect.

We begin this chapter with a brief review of textbooks and the national standards for teaching literature and the arts before discussing what we take to be some of the major issues relating to religion and literature and the arts. We pay special attention to teaching the Bible as literature and look briefly at what might make the performance of religious art objectionable in public schools, before suggesting a number of educational implications.

Standards and Textbooks

Literature

The national *Standards for the English Language Arts* encompass _a good deal more than literature. Students need to be literate re-_garding lab manuals, reference materials, journals, computer software, data-bases, CD-ROMs, laser disks, films, television, newspapers, speeches, editorials, advertisements, letters, bulletin board notices, and signs, to name just a few of the media discussed in the standards (International Reading Association [IRA] and the National Council _of Teachers of English [NCTE] 1996, pp. 6, 15, 39–40). Indeed, of 12 standards, only 2 deal *explicitly* with literature. The first requires that students “read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world” and that among these texts “are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works” (IRA and NCTE, 1996, p. 27). The second standard requires students to “read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience” (IRA and NCTE, 1996, p. 29). Other standards deal with textual interpretation, effective communication, linguistic structures, research, information technologies, linguistic diversity, English as a second language, and the use of language to pursue students' goals in life—though literary texts are occasionally discussed under the heading of these standards as well.

There is no discussion of religious texts, though there are three passing references to religion in the 69 pages of the standards. Texts chosen for study should “reflect the diversity of the United States' population in terms of gender, age, social class, religion, and ethnicity” (IRA and NCTE, 1996, p. 28). In discussing cultural diversity the standards suggest that students might explore “the history of oral cultures and their many philosophical and religious traditions” (IRA and NCTE, 1996, pp. 41–42). At another point, the standards note that African folk narratives and Greek myths “can be read as delightful, entertaining stories, as representations of mythic archetypes, or as cultural, religious, or philosophical histories of particular regions or people” (IRA and NCTE, 1996, p. 27). That is, the sole references to religion are made in passing, are located in distant times and places, or are included primarily to address questions of cultural diversity.

It is true that the second standard explicitly emphasizes the importance of literature in illuminating the ethical and philosophical dimensions of experience; this might be taken to include religious experience, and this is important. But the standards make nothing _of it. There is no discussion of religious literature or of the Bible or Scriptures from other religious traditions.

High school literature anthologies are somewhat more sensitive to religious literature than are the standards. Textbooks that organize world literature, British literature, or American literature by historical periods typically include a good deal of religious literature; indeed, such literature is unavoidable. Many textbooks are organized by theme or genre, however, and use literature drawn primarily from the 19th and

20th centuries that is almost always secular. (Although recent literature is typically more secular than historical literature, it often appears that recent religious literature is slighted in these texts.) Excerpts from sacred Scriptures make token appearances in most world literature texts, as do excerpts from the King James Bible in anthologies of British literature. Almost always the excerpts are chosen for their literary rather than their religious significance—Psalms rather than Genesis or the Gospels, for example.

The Arts

The *National Standards for Arts Education* emphasize the importance of the arts given our “need for meaning” and our “pursuit of the abiding questions: Who am I? What must I do? Where am I going?” (Consortium of National Arts Education Associations [CNAEA] 1994, p. 5). The preface to the standards points out that because so much of a child’s education is devoted to the “linear” logic of language and mathematics, the arts are particularly important in teaching a “different lesson” in that they “cultivate the direct experience of the senses; they trust the unmediated flash of insight as a legitimate source of knowledge. Their goal is to connect persons and experience directly, to build the bridge between verbal and nonverbal, between the strictly logical and the emotional—the better to gain an understanding of the whole” (CNAEA, 1994, p. 6). And, indeed, a recurring theme in the standards is the importance of relating the arts to other aspects of life. One of two references to religion in the standards is an example of this, showing “how the sacred and secular music of African Americans contributed to the civil rights movement” (CNAEA, 1994, p. 13). In fact, the preface to the standards makes the general point that because art is “a powerful force in the everyday life of people,” it “is essential that those who construct arts curricula attend to issues of ethnicity, national custom, tradition, religion, and gender” (CNAEA, 1994, p. 14). The standards include no subsequent discussion of religion, however.

Like the language arts standards, the arts standards might be viewed as broadly permissive. For example, one standard requires that students understand the visual arts “in relation to history and cultures.” For high school students this means that they be able to “differentiate among a variety of historical and cultural contexts in terms of characteristics and purposes of works of art” (CNAEAS, 1994, p. 71). Obviously this can’t be done for many cultures and historical periods without bringing religion into the discussion. Still, the standards never single out religion as being of any special relevance or importance in performing or studying the arts.

The Major Issues

Historically, the domains of art, literature, and religion have overlapped in a number of ways. First, there is sacred literature or *Scripture*—poetry, proverbs, parables, and myths—that is taken to be *revelatory* and acquires *canonical* status within a tradition: the books of the Bible, the Talmud, the Qur’an, Buddhist sutras, the Vedas, the Mahabhrata, and the Tao te Ching, for example. Second, there are art and noncanonical literature that use the symbols and language, the images and conceptual resources, of a particular religious tradition (and that may illustrate, draw on, or allude to scripture)—Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Michelangelo’s Pietà, or the great cathedrals and mosques and temples. Third, there is art and literature that grapples with religious questions, not from a position of orthodoxy within a tradition, but from the periphery, questioning a tradition, perhaps reformulating or “resymbolizing” it, perhaps rejecting it, but all the while presupposing some understanding of it—Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Camus’ *The Plague*, or Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*, for example.

Consequently, we must be careful in talking about religion and art as if they are obviously distinct domains of life. Indeed, as we suggested in Chapter 2, religion is often expressed in art and literature; art is a *dimension* of religion.

• *Subjects and disciplines.* Because modern art and literature have become increasingly secular over the past several centuries, and because of the increasing specialization and professionalization of _the

academic disciplines, literary and art criticism have become increasingly secular and autonomous disciplines in the academy. For example, according to the “New Criticism” that dominated English departments for so much of this century, literature could be understood in purely literary or aesthetic categories, apart from any larger cultural or religious context. Crudely put, literature is one thing, religion is another. For a variety of reasons this view of literary criticism has broken down over the last several decades. Indeed, the task of much contemporary *culture studies* and *postmodern criticism* is to expose the cultural and ideological contexts and subtexts, purposes and prejudices of writers and artists. One result has been a growing emphasis on interdisciplinary work—including study of the relationship of religion, literature, and the arts. Still, postmodernists have typically been much more interested in race, gender, and class, than in religion.

No doubt a good deal of religious art and literature is included in historical survey courses, but what range of contexts and conceptual nets should teachers and texts use to make sense of it? Our argument is that if students are to be liberally educated they must have some sense of the religious as well as the more narrowly secular (literary and art critical) meaning and significance of art and literature. That is, Art History and English are best understood as subjects, whose works and texts are open to religious as well as secular interpretations. Teachers must approach art and literature with enough theological sophistication to illuminate their religious dimensions. We will work through an example of this shortly in considering the Bible as literature.

• *Art as revelation.* There are a variety of ways in which literature and art might be religious. The paintings and stained glass in medieval cathedrals told the Christian story in images for people who couldn't read, and much religious art is essentially a visual illustration of the *words* of Scripture. The Eastern Orthodox tradition of Christianity has a quite different understanding of art, however: an icon is not simply an illustration of Scripture, but is itself revelatory; the beauty of the icon reveals God's divinity. Indeed, there are forms of revelation that *cannot be put into words*. The aesthetic categories of harmony, beauty, and the sublime have often been taken to characterize our experience of God, and, as John Dixon has put it, “systematic thought can occur in languages other than the verbal” (1984/_1995, p. 277). Styles of art can illuminate different conceptions of God and reality—conceptions that may create or correlate with “verbal” theologies but are not necessarily reducible to them. So, for example, Dixon traces the influential “Tuscan theologies” of Giotto and Duccio through our cultural history.

Or consider the religious dimensions of the romantic movement. Historically, people understood reality to be “multidimensional,” embodying moral and spiritual as well as purely factual (or scientific) dimensions. The scientific revolution and the Enlightenment *flattened* reality, however. The tendency was to believe that everything that could not be accounted for scientifically (beauty, goodness, and God, for example) must be merely subjective and exist only in our minds. Reality was nothing more than matter-in-motion. Romanticism was a reaction against the Enlightenment, a reassertion that reality was richer than science claimed it to be. Aesthetic experience—nurtured through poetry and myth, painting and music—*reveals* a dimension of reality that slips through the holes in the conceptual net of modern science.

In his “Lines Composed Above Tintern Abbey,” William Wordsworth wrote that he discerned in nature a

. . . presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. (1798/1950, p. 164)

Wordsworth's poem should not be read as an autobiographical commentary on the state of his mind, but as the expression in art of _a revelatory experience of God in nature. No doubt Wordsworth expressed himself

in language, but it was not language as a scientist would use it, but as a poet or artist uses it, to express and evoke what cannot be said “literally.” Indeed, through the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher—the most influential Protestant theologian since Calvin—the themes of romanticism came to shape much of modern liberal theology.

The literary critic T.R. Wright has suggested that literature and theology have a common enemy: the pervasive and pernicious literalism of our scientific age (1988, pp. 13–20). One of the great values of studying literature and literary criticism is that they make clear the many ways in which language (and religious literature) can convey meaning. Religious texts—the Bible not least—often employ poetry and parables, symbols and metaphors, to convey religious meaning.

It is also important to keep in mind that unlike the sciences, the Western religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—have all understood reality as a narrative. Like a novel, history has a meaning, a plot line in which God’s purposes are revealed and realized. Events acquire their intelligibility not because they fall under universal causal laws but because they make sense in terms of the narrative.

- *The diversity of religious approaches to art.* While we need to be sensitive to nonverbal forms of revelation, nonetheless, the Western religions have traditionally emphasized verbal revelation. God acts through language, and God’s actions are revealed through language in scripture. And God *said*: let there be light. In the beginning was the *Logos*—the *Word*. The Qur’an has traditionally been understood to be the verbal revelation of God. The Eastern religions have placed a much greater emphasis on intuition and mystical experience that cannot be expressed in language, and, as a result, art and aesthetic categories play a considerably greater role in revealing the nature of ultimate reality. To some extent this distinction is a matter of degree and emphasis; there are mystics within the Western religions, for example.

Of course, we need to be careful when we characterize Scripture as the “Word” of God. As we have noted, many theologians have claimed that the truths of the Bible are expressed symbolically or allegorically, rather than literally. Catholics have traditionally been open to a variety of ways of reading Scripture; the Protestant reformers and contemporary religious conservatives have, by contrast, placed considerably more emphasis on a “literal” reading of the Bible, as God’s verbal revelation. Some religious traditions take the Creation story in Genesis 1 to be literal historical/scientific fact; others do not. All of this is, of course, controversial.

There are other significant differences among the Western religions. The Islamic and Jewish traditions, for example, include a strong prohibition on artistic images of God (and often of people): thou shalt make no graven images. Christians have not, typically, held to such prohibitions; God was incarnated in human form as the man Jesus, and artistic images of God have been common in Christianity—though “iconoclastic” Christians, like the Protestants of the Reformation, have often taken to smashing images that, they believed, had become objects of worship themselves, separating people from God. Judaism and Islam do not believe in an incarnated God, but rather in a transcendent God who cannot be captured in images. Similarly, the Protestant Reformers emphasized the transcendence of God rather more than did medieval Catholics.

- *Creativity.* Romanticism emphasized spontaneity, genius, imagination, individuality—the creativity of the artist; and, increasingly over the last two centuries, it has become the task of the artist to do more than mimetically convey the (religious) truths of tradition. In fact, theologians have often drawn on the insights of literature and art, just as they have drawn on the insights of modern science, to reshape their traditions. Or, to pick another example, the existentialist movement in philosophy, literature, and the arts had a profound effect on theology, as writers and theologians—from Fyodor Dostoevsky to Paul Tillich—used new themes, symbols, and languages to recast their understanding of God and the human condition. Art and literature may be religious—or perhaps we should say *spiritual*—in the absence of traditional religious language and iconography—as, for example, in some of the paintings of Kandinsky and Rothko.

Here we find another tension between liberals and conservatives. Scholars often draw a distinction between “high” art, which is self-consciously creative and constantly reconceiving its relationship to the traditions that spawn it, and “traditional” art, which is rooted in, and sustains the images and symbols and narratives of, a tradition. For many religious conservatives much of modern art and literature is unscriptural

and irreligious, even sacrilegious, whereas for many artists and liberal theologians, much modern art embodies attempts to discover deeper levels of meaning and to resymbolize God (or the spiritual) in ways that speak to us in our times. Advocates of high art often find traditional religious symbols, narratives, and motifs naive, sentimental, and irrelevant.

- *Secularization and the search for meaning.* We have emphasized the religious significance of the aesthetic qualities of art and literature, but aesthetics and form can be (over)emphasized at the expense of content. Virtually all “great” literature and art address and deepen our understanding of those existential questions about the meaning of life that are inescapable for any reflective person: Who am I? What is the nature of my humanity? How do I make sense of suffering and death? What is justice? What is my duty in life? For what can I hope? What is love? What is the human condition? Often these are called “religious” questions, in part because religions have traditionally provided widely accepted answers to them, in part because they are *ultimately important*. There are, of course, secular ways of thinking about these questions as well. Hence we might say that literature and art address the central “existential” questions of life in *both* secular and religious ways (though sometimes this distinction is hard to draw).

As we have noted, much, if not most, of the art of ancient, medieval, and early modern Western civilization was explicitly religious. By the end of the 19th century, however, most literature and art had not only ceased to be overtly religious, it had ceased to assume a religious worldview. Indeed, the world of much (though certainly not all) modern art and literature is a world without God, in which “the center no longer holds.” William Barrett has suggested that the themes that obsess modern(ist) writers and artists are “the alienation and strangeness of man in his world; the contradictoriness, feebleness, and contingency of human existence; the central and overwhelming reality of time for man who has lost his anchorage in the eternal” (1962, p. 64). Andrew Delbanco has recently characterized our literary life as embodying a “culture of irony” in which belief is impossible, all talk of morals sounds moralistic, and heroes are debunked. In the ironist’s eye, Delbanco claims, “every pretender to legitimate authority becomes a Wizard of Oz, and the point is to draw aside the curtain” (1995, p. 212). Of course, students sometimes fail to appreciate the spiritual void in much modern art and literature because they have no sense of what it is like to live in a God-centered world.

An educated person should appreciate the historical context of modern art and literature, the developing “dialectic” in our cultural conversation about God, and the human condition as it is worked out in art and literature. What is important is not simply the aesthetic dimensions of art and literature; it is the moral and political and religious insight into the human condition. Of course, not *all* modern literature and art embrace the abyss. Religious experience and tradition continue to shape some art and literature; this is important as well.

- *Popular literature and art.* T.S. Eliot once confessed to the “alarming” realization that it was not great literature but literature read “purely for pleasure” that had the most powerful and potentially insidious influence on us because we read it so casually and uncritically. Indeed, he suggested, it affects us “as entire human beings; it affects our moral and religious existence”—and for the worse (1932, p. 27). Many religious parents would agree, finding television, advertising, movies, and video games subversive of their moral and religious values.

Of course, much popular art is religious. Warner Sallman’s portrait of Christ may be the most popular and reproduced image in all of history, there is a flourishing market in “Christian fiction,” and angels are popular on television; even in the youth culture there is Christian rock and rap, and the extraordinarily popular *Star Wars* trilogy of films is deeply religious. Still, Eliot’s point is important: popular art is immensely influential in *uncritically* shaping children’s attitudes toward sexuality and violence and authority and a good deal else. Children need to learn to think in a critical and informed way about popular as well as “high” art and literature.

The Bible as Literature

In all of history no book has had so powerful an influence on literature and art—or on life generally—as the Bible (though, neither the arts education nor the English language arts standards mention it). In its 1963 decision on Bible reading, the Supreme Court ruled that although the Bible may not be read devotionally in public schools it *is* constitutional to study the Bible for its “literary and historic” qualities. As we have seen, anthologies in world and British literature often include excerpts from the Bible and other scriptures—and there are Bible *courses* scattered here and there.

Educators often draw a contrast between courses called *The Bible as Literature* and *The Bible in Literature*, the latter dealing with ways in which later writers have used Biblical allusions, language, stories, and symbols. Courses in *The Bible as Literature* typically approach the Bible as they would any literary text. The purpose of such courses is often to convey a rudimentary Biblical literacy, a grasp of the language and the major stories, symbols, and characters. Some more advanced courses may employ literary scholarship that deals with the nature of authorship, narratives, archetypes, and a host of literary-critical questions that draw on an understanding of ancient languages, non-Biblical cultures, and contemporary literary theory. There is a tension, however, to which teachers must be sensitive, between reading the Bible as literature and reading it *as Scripture*—that is, as a religious text sacred to a tradition, which is to be interpreted using the theological resources of that tradition.

Let’s take as an example the Song of Songs. On the surface (read “literally”) it appears to be a poem about carnal love. Modern scholars don’t claim to know who wrote it (according to tradition it was written by Solomon), but there is some evidence that it developed out of earlier predecessors in non-Biblical cultures, was sung irreverently in taverns of the first Christian century, and was treated as a simple love song in early times. Yet it is a book of the Bible. Indeed, during the Middle Ages it was more frequently copied than any other book of the Bible. Two of the greatest medieval scholars wrote extensively on the Song of Songs: for Rashi (Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac of Troyes) it was a song about God’s love for His people—the Jews; for St. Bernard of Clairvaux, it was about Christ’s love for His church and the yearning of the soul for union with God in love. Both offered careful readings of it that drew on other Biblical texts and the resources of their respective religious traditions; indeed, for them the text can’t be understood apart from the theological tradition for which it is Scripture.

The great historian of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith has written that we read the *Bhagavad Gita*, if we are Hindus,

in order to understand the world, and our life within it; and if we are historians, in order to understand how the world has been seen by Hindus, to understand what the *Gita* has been doing to people these two thousand years or so as under its influence they have gone about their daily business, and their cosmic business. (1993, p. 34)

The *Bhagavad Gita* and the Song of Songs are not simply, or even primarily, literary or historical texts; they are *Scripture*; that is, they are texts that people within a tradition take to provide an understanding of God and their relationship to God. Their meaning within those traditions is quite different from what it might be for outsiders, or for scholars using only modern literary and historical resources for making sense of them.

Is there a danger of misreading biblical texts if we read them as literature rather than as Scripture? Smith suggests an analogy: we can read poetry as if it were prose, but we would, in the process, miss a crucial dimension of its meaning; similarly, we can read the Bible as if it were merely literature, but we would miss the crucial dimension of its meaning as Scripture.

It is sometimes suggested that in teaching the Bible as literature rather than as Scripture we can stand on common ground, for we need not deal with all those theological interpretations that divide us. This, we believe, is a naive notion. If students are to make educated judgments about the meaning of a text, they must have some sense of the major alternative readings of it. To ignore systematically the profoundly influential theological interpretations, insisting that the only relevant resources for interpreting the text are

those provided by secular scholarship, is to take sides in matters of considerable controversy. Perhaps even worse, by excluding the religious interpretations, teachers keep students ignorant of the controversy.

Consider, for example, how the teacher's edition of Prentice-Hall's *Literature: World Masterpieces* handles the Creation narratives from Genesis. It urges teachers to ask questions such as: What does the text mean when it says that "God created man in his own image"? Explain what the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil symbolizes. To whom is God referring when He says that Adam has become "one of us"? What are the differences between the two Creation narratives in Genesis? All of these questions are, of course, theologically loaded—and deeply controversial. Never, however, does the teacher's edition appeal to any theological reading of the text to answer its own questions (1992, pp. 38–45). Rather, it cites the Hebrew language, narratives from other cultural traditions in the ancient Near East, archetypes—and students' own intuitions about the text. Nowhere is there any suggestion that the religious traditions that adopted this text as Scripture, reflected on its meaning for millennia, and developed rich theological resources for interpreting it might be relevant to the discussion.

What does the text mean? Well, we disagree, deeply—often on theological grounds. As we described it in Chapter 2, our governing educational framework requires that when we disagree, students must learn something of the alternatives if they are to be liberally educated. Moreover, the ideal of religious neutrality requires that we include in the discussion the major, relevant religious readings; public education can't nurture an uncritical secularity.

Of course, not all biblical texts are so controversial as Genesis 1. Students can read some parts of the Bible simply for the story or the poetry. Moreover, literary criticism is often invaluable in enabling students to see the many ways in which language is used in biblical texts. We would miss the revelatory power of many texts (including the Song of Songs and the Creation narratives of Genesis) if we ignored their significance as art. But teachers must be sophisticated enough to appreciate when theological readings must be included in the discussion—and students must appreciate the Bible's status as Scripture. Obviously, teachers and texts can't insist on one correct interpretation, but they should, at least in the most important cases, inform students of the major alternatives. Chapter 8 provides further discussion of how to teach about the Bible and Scriptures from other traditions.

Performances

It may be helpful to explore the distinction between studying and practicing religion, particularly as it is related to artistic performances.

As we have seen, it is unconstitutional to read the Bible *devotionally*, for this would be a religious exercise; it is not, however, unconstitutional to study the Bible—when done "objectively" or neutrally. As we suggested in Chapter 4, visits to art museums can be wonderful ways of providing students with insight into religion. One reason that art museums are safe, of course, is that museum culture is quite different from church culture. The context of a religious painting, hanging on the wall of a museum, is not religious, but detached, secular. The appropriate response is not worship or reverence, but aesthetic reflection. (This is not to say that art museums don't create their own, somewhat more secular, sense of reverence before great works of art.) Of course, students should appreciate the fact that religious art has often been wrenched from its intended religious context when they encounter it in museums.

Sacred music, like sacred art and Scripture, can be studied. But what about *performing* sacred music? Although the Supreme Court hasn't ruled in this area, lower courts have made it clear that context and purpose are all-important. A Christmas concert at which students perform only Christian music might well be perceived as a religious exercise. Similarly, a Christmas pageant is little more than a Christian catechism, especially when performed in December. By contrast, it is not a religious exercise when students present a winter concert at which they perform Christmas music, secular music, and music from other religious traditions.

Yet we might wonder whether performing religious music might not be more like praying—a religious act—than observing sacred art in a museum or studying the Bible in a literature class in that it requires a religious affirmation (to sing “And he shall reign forever and ever” seems to affirm the Christian gospel) and an attitude of reverence. Of course, conventions allow us to assume that sacred music can be performed without imputing to the musician any religious convictions. It would be naive to assume that a professional musician who performed Handel’s *Messiah* must be a Christian—or that actors (even if students) must believe the lines they say in plays. Of course, not everyone is comfortable with this distinction between “mere” performance and worship, particularly when children are the performers, and choral and band directors should be sensitive to this. If it offends a student’s religious convictions to participate in a performance that he or she takes to be religious, that should be sufficient to warrant an excuse. At the same time, the fact that we can and commonly do draw distinctions between secular and religious contexts and performances does mean that students can perform religious music, just as they can view religious art and study religious Scriptures, as part of the public school curriculum.

The Educational Implications

We can draw a number of implications regarding the role of religion in the teaching of literature and the arts.

- Most important, schools should teach literature and the arts as subjects, open to various kinds of interpretation, rather than as disciplines, narrowly limited to the prevailing (secular) orthodoxies of literary and artistic criticism. As recent battles in our culture wars over the canon show, we disagree deeply about what is good literature and art—indeed, we disagree about what is to count as literature or art at all. What is important, once again, is that (mature) students understand the disagreements; they should hear the various voices, secular *and* religious, in our cultural conversation about literature and art.

- The study of literature and art is invaluable in conveying _the many ways in which language and images can be used, combating the authority of literalism in a scientific age. An appreciation for narrative, symbolism, metaphor, analogy, and drama provides ways of making sense of religious texts and the claim that they reveal the truth and the mystery and the heart of reality.

- Literature and art achieve greatness and warrant study for both their aesthetic qualities *and* their religious or “existential” depth. Teachers should include the religious significance of literature and art among their criteria for choosing texts to study. This is particularly important in the absence of required religion courses.

- Schools should require students to read literature from a variety of religious traditions, and teachers should have some sense of the different ways in which those traditions understand art.

- Because of its extraordinary literary influence and religious significance, students should be required to study the Bible in world literature classes. Teachers should choose the selections for their religious as well as their literary significance and should include religious as well as secular interpretations in the discussion when the interpretation of the text is controversial.

- Students should understand that the historical secularization of literature and art is one of the major themes of Western cultural history. They should appreciate how modern art and literature are part of an ongoing cultural conversation about God and the human condition. Of course, they should also understand that there continue to be writers and artists who can only be appreciated in the context of the religious traditions they work within or react to, and students should read contemporary religious literature—which textbooks are likely to slight. They shouldn’t learn that the only contemporary literature worth studying, and the only ways in which writers now approach the existential questions of life, are secular.

- Students should learn to think critically—morally, politically, and religiously—about *popular* literature, music, art, and the media, and their role in shaping the youth culture.

- As we argued in Chapter 2, literature and the arts provide marvelous ways of coming to understand religion from the “inside.” Just as it is one thing to read about music, and another to listen to it, practice it, or in some way experience it, so it is one thing to read about the basic teachings of religions in a history course and something else to experience the world religiously. Of course teachers can’t require students to practice

religion or worship God, but through literature and the arts students can imaginatively and vicariously experience something of what it means to be religious. Reading Chaim Potok's *The Chosen* will do more than any historical narrative to convey what it meant to be a Jew at a particular time and place.

- Teachers must understand that the study of literature and the arts is central to *moral education*. At an elementary level, stories and pictures have morals; they convey images of good and evil. At a more sophisticated level, literature and the arts explore those “existential” themes of compassion and suffering, guilt, anxiety, death, identity, duty, hope, and despair that deepen and shape our moral understanding and response to the world. In the end, there are no hard and fast lines to draw between literature, art, religion, and morality, each of which illuminates and shapes the others.

- Finally, because what we ask of teachers requires some sophistication, prospective English and arts teachers should take an undergraduate course in religion and literature, or religion and the arts.

Suggested Readings_and Resources

Part One of William Barrett's *Irrational Man* (1962) is a concise and wonderfully insightful account of the secularization of modern art and literature. (Parts Two and Three provide an account of the major existential philosophers). M.H. Abrams provides a classic account of romanticism, perhaps the most important movement in redefining the relationship among religion, literature, and the arts, in *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971). Alfred Kazin's *God and the American Writer* (1997) is a study of a number of the major American writers of the 19th and 20th centuries by one of our greatest literary critics. In *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil* (1995) Andrew Delbanco explores the secularization of American culture and literature by focusing on our increasing inability to make sense of evil.

The current state of literary criticism and the implications for religion are explored with clarity and insight in T.R. Wright's *Theology and Literature* (1988). *Literature Through the Eyes of Faith* (1989), by Susan Gallagher and Roger Lundin, is an introduction to literature from the perspective of traditional Christianity. For those who appreciate a challenge, in *Real Presences* (1989), the distinguished literary critic George Steiner critiques current literary criticism and argues for a conception of the arts informed by the presence of God. Though now two decades old, *Religion and Modern Literature: Essays in Theory and Criticism* (1975), edited by G. B. Tennyson and Edward E. Ericson Jr., is an excellent collection of essays on the relationship of religion and literature.

Art, Creativity, and the Sacred (1995), edited by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, is an excellent collection of essays on the relationship of religion and art. George Pattison's *Art, Modernity and Faith* (1991) is a good, brief introduction to religion and art. John Dixon's *Images of Truth: Religion and the Art of Seeing* (1996) is a fascinating study of religious and aesthetic ways of seeing the world. In their stunningly illustrated *Sacred Architecture* (1997) Caroline Humphrey and Piers Vitebsky describe _and show the symbolism of sacred space—how faith is translated _into architecture. The *Dictionary of Christian Art* (1998), edited by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, is an extremely helpful reference work. For a good short account of Islamic approaches to art and literature, see *Seven Doors to Islam: Spirituality and the Religious Life of Muslims* (1996), by John Renard. *Islamic Arts* (1997), by Jonathan Bloom _and Sheila Blair, is the most complete survey of the arts in Muslim countries.

We have relied heavily on Wilfred Cantwell Smith's superb study of Scripture in the major religious traditions, *What Is Scripture?* (1993) in our discussion of teaching the Bible as literature. For a good literary introduction to the Bible, see John A. Gabel and Charles B. Wheeler, *The Bible as Literature: An Introduction* (1990). *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (1987), edited by Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, includes a wealth _of essays on the major books of the Bible as well as on more general themes. Most of Robert Alter's many books illuminate the Bible through the use of literary criticism; see especially, his *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1983) and *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (1987). *The Bible As/In Literature* (2nd edition, 1995), edited by Thayer Warshaw and James Ackerman, is currently the only high school textbook available; it includes biblical texts as well as a wide variety of later literary texts influenced by the Bible.

Additional works on the Bible and sacred Scriptures appear at the end of Chapter 8.