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Supplying Theology's Missing Link

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Abstract

This essay argues that there is a serious deficiency in all sub-disciplines of theology, in their failure to ask the further question of how any of them might then seriously engage the believer in their conclusions. Philosophy of religion, biblical studies and systematic theology are surveyed in turn, to explore further the nature of this missing link, in imaginative engagement. While visual art is used to illustrate how this could be provided, it is not claimed that this is the only way that this could be achieved, only that it is a largely ignored dimension in much contemporary discussion of the arts.

Keywords

Art, Biblical Studies, Imagination, Symbol, Systematics

Although interest in the relation between theology and the arts has greatly increased over the course of my own lifetime, it is still most commonly the case that the role of the latter is seen as essentially illustrative, that is, as helping with the comprehension of religious ideas rather than actually offering independent insights that could potentially contribute positively to the truth claims of religious belief. Preference for such a limited role is usually premised on the assumption that works of the imagination are inherently subjective and so to be contrasted with the objective standards of truth set by careful scientific, philosophical or historical reasoning. Indeed, one might plausibly contend that the contemporary practice of theology in its various sub-disciplines is dominated by such semi-scientific models: by analytic philosophy in philosophical theology, by history as social science in biblical studies and by system in doctrinal work (as indicated by its common description as "systematic theology"). While in no way wishing to challenge the valuable contributions made by such approaches, I do want to suggest that there is something missing in each case: that only if supplemented by serious attention to a more imaginative dimension can the missing link between theoretical considerations in theology and the actual practice of religious belief be overcome.

That is to say, what is missing in such insistence on objectivity is any consideration of the way in which religious values are appropriated: not as the conclusion of an argument but as somehow engaging the more imaginative side of ourselves. The fact that this will usually include some commitment from the emotions is commonly taken to indicate a purely subjective response and, as such, standing outside any conventional parameters for assessing truth. Such curt rejection seems to me a serious mistake. The imagination too can make its own truth claims. The only reason why this is not immediately apparent is because for too long works of art have been assessed in alternative terms, most obviously with regard to their beauty and quality of craftsmanship. But that is by no means the only option. At all events, what I want to demonstrate in what follows is how visual artists were themselves often engaged in supplying such a missing link. In my original lecture at the Catholic Theological Association conference I pursued this claim by analysing quite a large number of paintings from various historical periods. Here, as I pursue application of the claim first to philosophy of religion, and then in turn to biblical studies and systematic theology, I have deliberately sought to be more selective, taking as examples only paintings that can easily be found on the internet.

Philosophy of Religion

Let me begin in what might initially seem a far distant place, in truth claims mediated through landscape and abstract art. Two rather different but pertinent examples will suffice, each from the closing years of that particular artist's life, John Constable's *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* (1831-3) and Piet Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* (1943).

One of Constable's larger paintings (his so called "six-footers"), the former (www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-salisbury-cathedral-from-the-meadows-t13896) failed to find a buyer during the artist's own lifetime but was recently acquired at a cost of £23,100,000 by Tate Britain. Aesthetically, it is a considerable achievement, and indeed was regarded by Constable as his finest painting. What, of course, initially attracts the viewer is the dramatic contrast between the left and right side of the canvas, with the cathedral set amidst a raging storm on one side but on the other with the sky already clearing and indeed producing silver reflections on the surface of the stream that meanders through the canvas. But the way in which such an expert on weather formations as Constable has chosen to defy the appropriate conditions for the appearance of a rainbow (when the

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storm has not yet receded) should alert us to the fact that he is engaging here in rather more than the simple creation of an aesthetically pleasing scene.

Constable in fact kept the painting in his studio for several years, and during that time made a number of significant alterations, including the addition of the rainbow. Indeed, there seems little doubt that the painting was used by him as a medium for expressing his own deep commitment to the Christian faith. Constable had been a regular visitor to Salisbury from 1811 onwards, where his good friend John Fisher was archdeacon, and it was Fisher who helped Constable through the trauma of the death of his beloved wife, Maria, from tuberculosis in 1828. Fisher himself died in 1832 and Constable never visited Salisbury again. The rainbow alighting on Fisher's home (Leadenhall) can thus be taken to imply Constable's firm conviction of them both surviving death. But, if those more personal details can scarcely be learnt from the canvas on its own, there seems little doubt that the wider assurance offered by the rainbow was intended to speak to viewers more generally. Thus, just as in some of his earlier paintings a church was given a more central place than would be justified by the landscape on its own, so here it is fascinating to observe how the flowing stream at the bottom completes the arc of the muted rainbow that in its turn is matched on the left by a blasted, gnarled tree, all of which enclose the cathedral and various human habitations, as well as the farm cart and the border collie at the forefront (whose view it is that initially invites us into the painting). Nature and human action are thus alike placed within a shared embrace presided over by the clearing gap in the clouds, which emerges behind the cross that surmounts the cathedral's spire. It is thus not too much of a step to see in the structure of the painting Constable hinting at a divine embrace of human life and endeavour, whether this be country pursuits or the intricacy of the carvings portrayed on the cathedral's front. There is thus implicitly not only a number of truth claims in the painting (about God and ultimate human destiny) but also a desire to engage us imaginatively in a similar way of thinking.

Now consider a very different painting, Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*, now in MOMA (the Museum of Modern Art in New York (www.piet-mondrian.org/broadway-boogie-woogie.jsp). Like Vincent Van Gogh, Piet Mondrian was the son of a Dutch Reformed minister, and, like Van Gogh, he too lost his faith in the specifics of Christianity yet not in some underlying spiritual reality. It is of course possible to appreciate the artist solely in terms of him being one of the great abstract artists of the twentieth century, with his delightfully simple compositions in which rectangles in a few primary colours are balanced off against each other. But to confine evaluation to such terms would be ignore entirely the artist's deeper

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intentions, under which viewers were being encouraged to reflect on the ultimate character of the divine reality that lies behind our visible world, with his earlier landscape painting in fact transmogrifying into his more famous abstract compositions. Thus, while in his early painting a cross formed by the arms of a windmill might be used to hint at a Christian interpretation of the world, under the influence of Theosophy verticals and horizontals, squares and rectangles were all used to explore what was taken to be a simpler reality, only in their turn to yield to his final position as represented by this painting. Having escaped to the United States during the Second World War, partly under the influence of the hustle and bustle of New York and partly because of a new found enthusiasm for jazz, he now suggested a more dynamic account, one which he was clearly enthusiastic that viewers share: only thus can we explain the extraordinary pains he took to get the precise setting of the little paper strips on the canvas exactly right. Irrelevant to my point here is whether or not his revised account of ultimate reality is correct or not. What matters is the undoubted fact that he was concerned to make a religious truth claim and in a way in which he thought he might engage his viewers toward accepting it, through contemplation of the work he sets before them.

All this may seem at an enormous distance from contemporary practice in the philosophy of religion. At present a semi-scientific model still dominates the scene on both sides of the Atlantic. In the United States appeal is most likely to be made to the ideas inherent in Alvin Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology, according to which a correctly functioning mind will come to believe in God with "proofs" confirmatory rather than evidential. By contrast, in Britain the pattern set by Richard Swinburne's *Existence of God* (first edition, 1979) continues to hold sway, according to which appeal is made to Bayes' probability theorem to argue that God's existence is more likely than not. Although significantly different in approach, both exhibit a logical, semi-scientific structure that bears no obvious relation to how people come to believe. That, of course, does not invalidate their analysis but it does mean that the more personal, imaginative leap that we found in the paintings described above remains entirely lacking.

But things may be changing. Intriguingly, in response to the New Atheists (Richard Dawkins and his like), who use the same formal structures as Swinburne to argue against religious belief, a number of their fellow atheists have objected that they thereby entirely miss their target because they fail to capture what is the true essence of religious belief, which is more like an imaginative leap than a semi-scientific hypothesis. One such atheist is a lapsed Catholic and former professor of philosophy at Cambridge, Tim Crane. In his book *The Meaning of Belief: Religion from an Atheist's Point of View* (2017) he contends that religious belief is really based upon a "suspicion" of mystery and transcendence "on the horizon of our world." That

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a similar emphasis is equally now to be found among a number of believing philosophers is indicated by the appointment in 2019 of Mark Wynn (a practising Catholic) to Swinburne's former Chair as Nolloth Professor of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion at Oxford. As the titles of a couple of his books may be used to indicate (*Emotional Experience and Religious Understanding* of 2005 and *Faith and Place: An Essay in Embodied Religious Epistemology* of 2009), his primary focus is on that transition. Of course, as such works by Crane and Wynn demonstrate, it is not necessary to appeal to art to effect the link. My point is simply that art can be very neatly used to stimulate discussion of what is missing in the more traditional approach: the imaginative engagement that pulls one beyond simple formal endorsement of some particular conclusion.

Biblical Studies

Here I shall use three paintings to make my point: Henry Ossawa Tanner's *Annunciation* (1898), Piero della Francesca's *Baptism* (1437) and Perugino's *Crucifixion Triptych* (1485).

Of these three, probably the first, now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art (www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/104384.html), is the least well known. Painted by the African-American artist, Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937), it nicely illustrates the way in which imaginative response to the gospel needs to reflect developments in its understanding. Tanner was the son of someone who eventually became a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, having in his early career founded a theological journal and written several books on biblical criticism. The home the artist grew up in was thus one that valued intellectual discussion, and this continued into adulthood with one of his brothers who also became ordained. Both father and brother supported Tanner's artistic endeavours, including periods of study in France. It was perhaps there that he read Renan's controversial revisionist *Life of Christ* but the issues would also have emerged naturally in conversations with his father and brother. While it is possible that his artistic presentation of the incident was influenced by Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Ecce ancilla* (now in Tate Britain) which has a similar hesitant Mary, Tanner goes much further in evoking ambiguity and uncertainty in Mary's experience. Not only does she cower as in Rossetti's painting but all she sees is a mysterious pillar of light. The effect is twofold: first, it allows for the more gradual development of Mary's consciousness that was becoming more plausible at this time; secondly and perhaps more importantly, it permits us to share in that experience since it is no longer radically unlike our own.

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While there is little by way of symbolism in the Tanner painting, there is almost a surfeit in Piero della Francesca's *Baptism of Christ*, perhaps made all the more remarkable for the fact that it may have been produced while the artist was still in his early twenties. It is now in the National Gallery in London (www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/piero-della-francesca-the-baptism-of-christ). There is no need to itemise all the fascinating details here, or to consider the extent to which the various symbols were his own idea or that of patrons and local clergy. Suffice it to note one principal point: that they are all concerned to transform the event from mere objective fact into something of contemporary significance, and in three ways. First, Piero achieves connection with the town for which the painting was originally intended by placing Sansepolcro in the background just behind Jesus, while the tall tree in the foreground puns on its wider location in the *valle de nuce* or 'nut valley.' Secondly, there are clear allusions to the role of this event in the church's liturgy as one of the three great feasts of the Epiphany (The Wise Men are seen travelling in the background, while one angel clasping another in the manner customary at the time for a betrothal reminds viewers of the marriage at Cana). Finally, and perhaps most importantly of all, a link is made with our own baptism not only in the anonymous figure waiting to be baptised but also in the Jordan drying up before Christ, surely a reference to an earlier Jesus (Joshua 3.7-4.24) leading the chosen people into the promised land. It is of, course, exceedingly unlikely that Piero could ever have thought that Jesus' baptism took place exactly like this. But he surely did believe that by thus mixing historical fact and imaginative fiction he was able more effectively to convey not only the full significance of what had occurred but also its relevance to all who viewed the incident through the particular lens that he offers. This is a point of considerable importance, for it suggests that for the imaginative to go beyond the strictly historical is not necessarily thereby to fall into falsehood. If I may put it like this, the world of symbol, as with metaphor, does not require one-to-one correspondence for something to be true. So, for example, while it is undoubtedly false that the Jordan ever dried up before Jesus, it remains profoundly true that the new Joshua is able to deliver us into a better order of existence.

Although from the same century, the final painting for consideration in this section could scarcely be more different. Known as the Galitzin Tritych after its former Russian owners, it was part of the treasure trove acquired by the United States when Stalin was strapped for cash, and now hangs in the National Gallery in Washington (www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.206127.html). It first attracted my attention many years ago when I learnt that it was the favourite painting of Michael Ramsey, sometime Archbishop of Canterbury. A copy had followed him through eighteen house moves,

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with it always hanging in the study of each house. Perugino had been the teacher of Raphael, and his influence is obvious in the latter's Mond Crucifixion, now in the National Gallery in London. There are, for instance, the same four secondary figures: in addition to Mary and John, the two penitents Mary Magdalen and Jerome. There are also, though, some marked differences: in Raphael's version two angels gather blood from Christ's wounds, while the presence of sun and moon are used to indicate the universal significance of the event.

The puzzle for me was why Ramsey preferred the less famous alternative. My own puzzled study of the painting gradually revealed a somewhat ironic likely answer: that what Ramsey most admired in the painting was the way in which it did not reveal its secrets immediately but only through careful reflection. Probably the first thing to strike the viewer is the beauty not only of the landscape but also of Christ's body. Clearly in respect of the latter we are being provided with a message that is at one and the same time Platonic and Johannine: that nothing can defeat the being on the cross and his transcendent reality. But embedded in the painting is also the reassurance that a similar victory can also be ours. For observe closely the two side-panels, and paths leading upwards from each of the two penitents can be observed, with an open gate in one case and Jerome's lion in the other to lead us on our way. In other words, through penitence we too can achieve the beauty that dominates the upper half of the painting, with sin and suffering symbolically defeated. Once again, a literal falsehood has been used to convey imaginatively a profound truth.

Such strategic ways of conveying truth through visual art are of course far removed from how biblical studies currently operates, where historical questions remain the central focus. Source, form and redaction criticism do not seem much different in this respect. When the phenomenon of reception criticism first appeared on the scene, I did entertain some hope of a different emphasis inasmuch as interpretations of texts have changed in order to ensure continuing relevance to more contemporary realities. But, so far most commentators in this genre have simply noted the fact of such changes rather than engaged properly with why they might have occurred. As such, they stand in marked contrast to some of the most famous commentaries from Christian history where a lively imaginative engagement with the narrative was the primary aim, with the intention of securing some real effect on the lived experience of the reader. Just think, for example, from the middle ages of Pseudo-Bonaventure's *Meditations* or from the Counter-Reformation St Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*. What such writers might be described as doing is deploying vacant interstices within the existing narrative to engage readers' visual imagination more effectively with the story, and in particular its relevance to their own lives. It is sometimes objected that the results were mere arbitrary inventions, the truth of which could never be

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finally determined (for example, whether Mary knelt before the angel, or the angel before Mary, or again whether the Holy Family had servants or not). But in response it may be observed that the absence of a definitive answer is not the same as where the balance of probabilities might lie, nor does it discount the usefulness of envisaging such alternative scenarios as a way of encouraging theological reflection.

Systematic Theology

A preference to speak of "systematic" theology rather than "dogmatic" usually indicates a desire to stress the way in which the exposition of doctrine is a rational activity, based on reason rather than mere assertion. Its rational character is then further emphasised by the way in which the various doctrines can supposedly be demonstrated to constitute a single, tightly interrelated system. In view of the frequent attacks on the absurdity of religious belief, such intentions are commendable. Nonetheless, there are dangers. Because theology is concerned with a very different kind of reality from the ordinary material world, it must need resort to various types of imaginative technique such as metaphor, symbol and analogy, to bridge the gap. What too much stress on system may ignore is the necessary consequence of such devices: a degree of openness or lack of determination in the concepts concerned.

Perhaps, in order to establish the claim, I may be allowed at this point to argue against my own earlier self. In *The Divine Trinity* (1985) I maintained that Augustine's personalist model for understanding the Trinity in terms of three faculties (memory, understanding and will) was incoherent and that much to be preferred was a more social analogy. The result was a barrage of criticism against myself and others holding this view, accusing us of "tritheism," as really believing in three gods. Although I defended myself across a series of articles, as my interests moved from theology's interaction with philosophy to its relation with the arts I came to a rather different conclusion: that both sides were in fact wrong. In understanding plurality in the divine nature, personalist and social analogies could both alike be illuminating.

In the fifteenth century, St Antoninus, Archbishop of Florence, very much took against one particular version of the personalist account which deployed three identical images of the one god, declaring such constructs to be 'a monstrosity in nature.' One of the few to survive the attack by Antoninus and his successors was Andrea del Sarto's *Last Supper* (1527) in the church of San Salvi in Florence, where above the feasting apostles is an image of the godhead as three identical figures joined as one (www.visitflorence.com/florence-museums/last-supper-in-san-salvi.html). The image may

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seem a failure but only for so long as we fail adequately to reflect on what del Sarto was trying to achieve: an indication of the godhead as utterly unlike anything in our world, personality cubed as it were, but at the same time declared beyond any purely pedestrian calculation regarding what this might mean. In a similar way, Augustine's faculty analogy needs to be read not as asserting profound divisions within the godhead or human psyche but rather as an ability to transform any such divisions into a fully integrated, single self-consciousness, whether this be human or divine.

Equally, paintings that presume deeper contrasts between the three persons need to be interpreted more sympathetically. Take Titian's *The Trinity in Glory* (1554), now in the Prado in Madrid (www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-glory/66149817-6f88-4e5f-a09a-81f63a84d145). It tells quite a complicated story. The credal relations of begetting and processing are jettisoned in order more effectively to convey the equality of the persons, with the dove of the Holy Spirit now allowed to preside between Father and Son. Then, in order to ensure that the relevance of the Trinity to our own lives is acknowledged, right in the centre in the world below there is a repeated image of that dove, this time on an ark with the female figure of Ecclesia or Church alongside, placed there so that the right message is appropriately conveyed, of the Spirit leading all in the Church to incorporate in the life of the Trinity.

At the superficial level the truth claims affirmed by these two competing approaches to the Trinity could scarcely be seen as more in conflict. Yet, that surely only holds for as long as we treat the paintings literally. Take symbol and metaphor seriously as such, and a legitimate alternative approach emerges: one that offers complementary rather than conflicting insights. Perhaps the point can be seen most clearly by taking a biblical example. In St John's Gospel Christ is described as lamb, shepherd and a door of the sheepfold, and all without contradiction because that is the way the logic of non-literal imagery works. Similarly, then, here with respect to the Trinity. Antoninus was quite wrong: the Trinity *is* "a monstrosity in nature", utterly unlike anything in this world and so legitimately represented as three identical heads. But that reality is also relevant to our salvation, and so capable of being seen at one and the same time as like a completely integrated single personality and a community bonded indissolubly by love. Push any of these analogies too far and they collapse into falsehood but equally, admit their limitations, and they can all be mutually illuminating.

Consider a still more controversial example, that of Edwina Sandys' sculpture of *Christa* (1975), a female Christ (https://feminismandreligion.com/2015/10/06/christa-interview-with-edwina-sandys-by-nettie-reynolds). Even that most liberal of denominations, the American Episcopal Church, refused to hang it in the Cathedral

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of St John the Divine in New York, the responsible bishop at the time describing it as "theologically and historically indefensible." A couple of decades later, the statue duly returned as part of a wider exhibition. But how much was the fuss justified? Ignoring the sculptor Edwina Sandys' own motivations, one may observe that, while it is undoubtedly false that the historical Jesus was in any sense feminine, equally his death was intended to save all, female no less than male. So, even if inappropriate in worship, a representation to that effect can hardly in itself be contested. Indeed, there are at least two literary anticipations that may be quoted. Famously, Julian of Norwich described Christ as our Mother, while perhaps less well known is the fact that St Bridget of Sweden in one of her visions has the shepherds, on being told of the saviour's birth, nonetheless ask the sex of the child, as if being the saviour was not in itself sufficient determination. The point of these observations is not to place a female image of Christ on a par with the male (indeed, far from it!). What it does is suggest that the language of faith is much more open than we are usually inclined to admit, and so there is no inherent contradiction in asserting that Jesus' birth was emphatically that of a male child but equally emphatically that his humanity included the legitimacy of the female being included in his nature, and so just as amenable to the salvation mediated through his life.

Conclusion

What this essay has sought to identify is a missing dimension through all areas of contemporary theology: the imaginative that enables full appropriation of whatever philosophical, theological or scientific conclusions are reached in these various sub-disciplines. At the same time it was no part of my intention to suggest that visual art is the only way that such appropriation can be achieved, only that it very nicely illustrates the precise nature of that missing link.

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