

# God, the Taboo Topic of Art Education

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## Introduction

A serendipitous match of this journal's call for imagery "that lies *outside* art educators' accepted sphere"—"out of site/sight/cite"—and a (too) rare discussion among art educators talking about God within a secular classroom prompts this article. Concepts of God are generally withheld from the site of public school art classrooms in the United States; many teachers express wariness and fear of bringing artists' sights of God into their public school art rooms, although God and Gods are a frequent subject for artists through time and across place. Further, the topic of God is rarely cited in art education literature. Recently, a group of art educators, including the authors, engagingly addressed concepts of God within a state institution; we wish to formally cite the topic and place this introductory discussion within the literature.

Artists around the world have overtly dealt with concepts of God and topics of religion throughout time. God and religion are topics that artists continue to explicitly address in their art today. For example, "ReJewvenation" is a 2005 conference on Jewish Studies that includes a provocative piece on circumcision by Melissa Shiff (2005), *Gender Cuts/The Jew Under the Knife*. Our article is informed by an exhibition of new art called "100 Artists See God," curated by John Baldessari and Meg Cranston (2004), that is touring the United States.

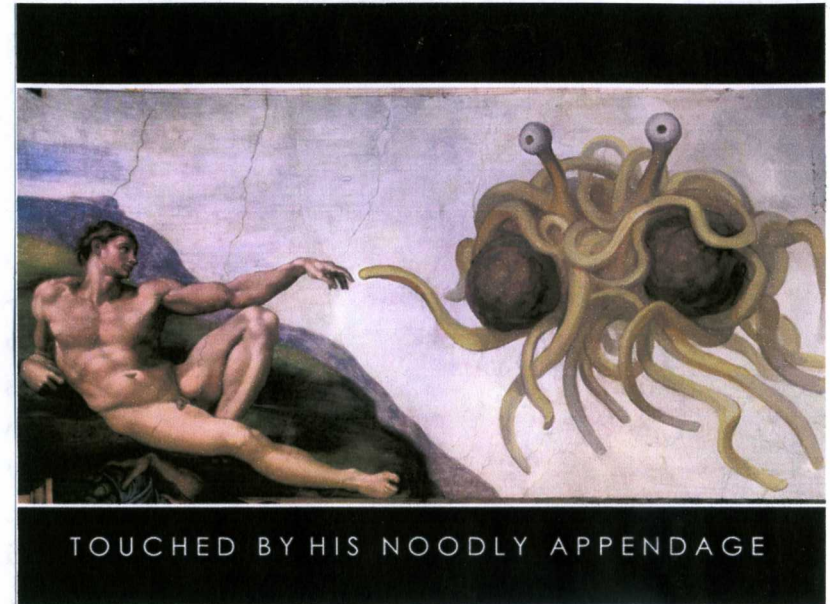


Figure 1: Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, *Touched by His Noodly Appendage*, graphic for free downloading, <http://www.venganza.org/index.htm#wallpapers>, 2006.

Concepts of God are also a topic of explicit interest and expression in the realm of popular visual culture. Bobby Henderson (2006), for example, shows his divine vision on his website. Henderson proclaims his vision of an intelligent God, a flying spaghetti monster that was revealed to him in a dream. Prayers on the site end with "ramen" rather than "amen." Sarah Boxer (2005) explains in *The New York Times* that Henderson asserts his newfound faith in response to President Bush and Senator Bill Frist who are promoting the teaching of "intelligent design" as a scientific theory of the formation of the universe.

The concept of God is unavoidably rooted in the production of culture and holds significant discursive sway in the shaping of the social subject. The purpose of this article is to open dialogue about hotly contested concepts of God that are ignored or avoided in art education,

even though God or the absence of one is a central concern in life, across cultures and through time. This article is limited to the responses of 12 college students and their art education professor, exploring important but contested topics, concerning their individual constructions of God.

The art teachers in our study group confirmed that many art teachers in the United States are reluctant to teach about *any* art or issues generated by art that involve God and religion; they are even more reluctant to teach atheistic and antitheistic content and anti-religious attitudes for fear that they will be breaching barriers between church and state, and a concomitant fear that angrily objecting parents will call principals. However, much of the art of the world is based in and motivated by various beliefs and disbeliefs in divinities, expressed most commonly in religious discourse generated by Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and all their variations, and lesser examined tribal beliefs of many peoples throughout the world.

Art educators are not alone in avoiding the topic of God. The scientific community also grapples with the same discomfort: Francis Collins (in Dean, 2005), Director of the National Genome Research Institute, acknowledges that belief in God "should not be a taboo subject, but frankly it often is in scientific circles." Nevertheless, conceptions of God expressed in and through art should be brought into discussion.

### God in Recent Education Literature

Some art educators (e.g., Klein 2000, 2000a, 2005; Campbell 2005) address topics of "spirituality" but not concepts God. Sheri Klein who publishes and presents on the topic of spirituality says, "I have written about body, soul, spirit, spirituality, death and art education—but not about G-d!" (personal correspondence, 2005).

Philosophers Edith Wyschogrod and John Caputo (1998) claim there is recent desire for God and new interest in religion linked to philosophical questions associated with postmodernity, but they

acknowledge the difficulty of talking about God in academic circles. They claim that some American postmodern writers, even those whose work is considered avant-garde, remain deeply resistant to reconsidering modernist beliefs about religion.

William Pinar, William Reynolds, Patrick Slattery, and Peter Taubman (2002), however, explain that the history of American education is intimately linked with movements and controversies about religion. Since the colonial period there has been a keen curricular interest in religious matters but traditional curriculum theory has tended to ignore the tensions and dilemmas effected by the intersections of personal religious beliefs with public education's goals and restrictions. Pinar and colleagues are moving toward a reconceptualized understanding of curriculum that is "hermeneutical in its acknowledgement of its political theological and spiritual dimensions" (p. 637).

According to David Jardine (1992), hermeneutic inquiry is generative, accepting that there is "always something left to say with all the difficulty, risk, and ambiguity that such generativity entails" (p. 119). A hermeneutical approach to theist and antitheist ideas in the arts would initiate and sustain dialogue with the goal of establishing deeper understandings and insights through interpretive processes.

Nel Noddings (1993), noted for her work in feminist ethics and moral education, argues that religion should be taught as part of our cultural heritage. In *Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief*, she advocates an education that, instead of avoiding the topic of religion, would engage in issues of faith by examining the historical and philosophical perspectives that shape personal and communal belief systems, positing,

if one is going to be a believer, one ought to be an intelligent believer. We ought to know what it is we've accepted, and, if possible, why we've accepted it. And ditto for unbelief...It is a

rather poor life that never asks the questions, "How should we live? Is there a meaning to life? Why is there something rather than nothing?" (in Halford, 1988/1999, para. 5)

"God, the taboo topic," surfaces in various forms in recent discourses of postmodernity. Cogent connections are God and desire, God as other, God and the imaginary and symbolic aspects of culture, religion as a form of cultural theory, and religion and secularism as genealogy. Mieke Bal (2001) places the study of religion squarely within cultural theory as "postmodern theology," arguing that present day culture in the West cannot be understood without theology: "Postmodern theology is the study of this presence of the past within the present" (p. 4). She recommends that contemporary theology be a cultural discipline, and that the study of religion be a branch of cultural analysis whose boundaries with other cultural disciplines be porous and provisional. No privilege should be granted to any particular religious tradition or any cultural structure such as religion (p. 5.)

Genealogies of religion and secularism would show the place of religions in the master discourses of modernity. Bal points to Michel Foucault's (1973, 1979, 1980) genealogies of rationality, punishment, and sexuality as important mechanisms in the exposure of master discourses of modernity, asserting that "if religion (as much as madness or sexuality) is to be understood not as a fixed or natural essence but as constructed, and with a genealogy, and interwoven in all the master discourses of modernity, then the urgency of reexamining it can hardly be overstated" (p. 283).

### Students Envision God in Words

Twelve national and international students participated in an intensely scheduled one-week graduate-level topics course "Teaching for Meaning" at Ohio State University. The class met for five hours daily; students finished some projects after the week and shared them

with the group by e-mail, and all participants granted permission to have their writings from the course published.

On the third morning of the week, Barrett assigned a brief writing task to be done then in class: "**Pre-write:** How would you artistically represent God? You can be theist, atheist, antitheist, or agnostic to do this, a believer or non-believer, and of any or no religious persuasion." This assignment was to be followed by one that would be submitted later in the term, after the one-week course meeting had ended: "**Final-write:** Select *any* one work of publicly accessible art (not a piece that you have made), supply a reproduction of it, and explain in an essay how (why, to what effect) you see God in it. You can be theist, atheist, antitheist, or agnostic to do this, a believer or non-believer, and of any or no religious persuasion. (2-page minimum with reproduction.)"

Barrett introduced the pre-write assignment by explaining that there was a traveling exhibition of contemporary art called "100 Artists See God," and that the class would look at the artists' works, but first would quietly, individually, and spontaneously write about how they would envision God in one of their art works, were they to make one. There was initial resistance to the request, expressed by silent stares, frowns, and an awkward silence. One student objected: "But what if we can't envision God?" "That's fine, go ahead and say so and tell us why," Barrett replied, and then he left the room. Students eventually began and wrote for about 20 minutes. Despite the challenge of responding to the request to express their visions of God, all of the course participants did write something; Barrett asked for volunteers to read what they had written, and one by one, many did, while some declined. Following are examples of the writings.

Minha Lee, a female Korean doctoral student of arts policy, recalled frightening memories of her first experiences with Buddhist imagery when her parents brought her to a temple when she was seven-

years-old. She remembered the front gate with "huge statues of the four heavenly guardians of Buddhism with grotesque faces and threatening weapons stepping on humans. I was nearly crying because the statues were really scary. They were looking like monsters continuously running after me in my bad dreams."

Eleonora Redaelli, an Italian doctoral student studying arts policy, wrote the following:

*God is a thought and a non-thought...* God is just an idea. It is a human invention, a strong desire that can be incredibly fascinating. It is a thought that comes from the deepest insight of our minds. Simultaneously, God is a non-thought, something too vast to be possibly thought by the limited human being. God cannot be a thought, it is existence itself, something much more concrete and substantial than thoughts.

Melissa Hayes, a European American photography student, wrote: "I was raised in the Catholic Church, but only believe or pray whenever I step onto an airplane. It's easy to change your beliefs in a moment or time of fear. My representation of God would be a manipulated photographic image of an old man with a long white beard made out of clouds, holding the airplane. It's for the duration of the flight that I believe in God and heaven."

Ivy Chevers, an African American female doctoral student who has spent many years living and teaching in Jamaica, wrote this:

The ways in which I see God sometimes appear contradictory to the religion I claim membership to [the Ethiopian Orthodox Church]. Perhaps this is where my spirituality steps in and I see God in all, as male and female, God and Goddess, earth, wind,

fire, water, love and kindness. I see God in the human faces of those who seek peace, justice, and happiness. I see God in my children's faces. I see God in smiling babies and pictures of starving children that I do not know. I see God in nature, rivers, rocks, flowers, trees, and all creatures big and small. I see, hear, smell, and feel God in all creation. I see and taste God in the meals that I eat each day.

Sometimes the God I see is vengeful. At other times that same God is forgiving. I saw God in Jamaica on the faces of Rasta men and women who gather and light huge fires chanting, "fire burns all oppressors black and white." I was struck with terror when I saw God on September 11, 2001 and now I see God in the faces and tears of mothers, wives, fathers and other relatives whose loved ones fight and die in war.

Jennifer Brewer, a European American art teacher working on her master's degree in art education, who also works voluntarily with disadvantaged people in Columbus, wrote the following:

When I think of God my mind goes to the homeless camps I have been visiting for the past couple of years. I think of holidays spent with these friends I love so dearly. I think of Sunday afternoons playing cards at the shelter or Saturday nights spent in the woods or under bridges, when we are welcomed into their homes. My mind goes to the apartments my friends live in, where people are continually knocking on their doors asking for or selling drugs. I remember an evening taking care of a woman overdosing on heroin. In the faces of all of my friends and in my experiences with them I see God as he truly is. He is forgiving, he is loving, he is compassionate, he never judges, he encourages, he weeps to see his children in pain.

Valora Blackson, an African American doctoral student in women's studies, chose to explain a predominant personal vision of God in the form of Jesus with which she grew up. The following is a condensation of Valora's longer essay.

My memories of childhood are riddled with recollections of a compassionate but stern Jesus that rested rather uneasily in the deep recesses of my adolescent psyche. I attribute these memories to an unhealthy obsession with the rather crude picture of Jesus that hung from an otherwise nondescript wall above the stairwell in the housing project unit where my family resided.

The object of my psychological fixation was a Caucasian, blond haired, blue-eyed Jesus in full bodily form with arms outstretched as if ready to draw me into the celestial gates of his unrelenting paradise. But even as I was taught to love and revere Jesus, I was also taught to fear him. As innocuous as his face appeared, I could not gaze at his image without invoking considerable psychosomatic anxiety.

This anxiety, which came to characterize so much of my youth, resulted from the sobering realization that Jesus was inherently "good" precisely because I was inherently "bad." His divinity was dependent upon my carnality and could only remain intact if I agreed to masquerade as fundamentally sinful. The innocent thoughts of my adolescence became overdetermined with the weighty burden of guilt and shame and fearing that at any moment I might die without being forgiven for my offense, I developed a strong aversion to death.

This visual object became an instrument of power that masked reality as I knew it. This aestheticized Jesus was intended to symbolize and signify "salvation" but in my impressionable young mind, it signified consternation and dread instead. By far,

the most critical consequence of my early exposure to religiosity has been the disavowal of my own personal sense of agency.

Another upsetting observation regarding my early experience with religion was that it masked stark realities of class struggle and oppression. I was taught that riches would be mine in the afterlife, while all around me in this life was perpetual longing and despair. For many of the world's poor, religion remains the only glimmer of hope for a better life. But I am highly suspicious of a life that can only be lived to the fullest upon the fact of death.

### **"100 Artists See God"**

After we heard these written depictions of God, Barrett presented a slide show of artworks, accompanied by artist statements, that he selected from the exhibition catalogue (Baldessari & Cranston, 2004). The selection begins to exemplify the diversity of responses to concepts of God that we hope to engender in educational discourse.

Artist Rebecca Horn represented herself by a nonobjective double exposed photograph with overpainting, accompanied by this statement: "What can I say about God? He's everywhere, in such a special frequency that our world can hardly recognize him. We just have to train a bit more" (p. 96).

Jorge Pardo exhibited a non-objective sculpted table-like form of brightly stained plywood, with many irregular angles, asymmetrically balanced on a small point. His statement is, "If you're looking for God, it's also probably better to search in the asymmetrical, in the unstable than in the stable. If it is to be noticed at all, any good manifestation will be unexpected and unbalanced" (p. 32).

Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, and art critic and artist, exhibited a nonobjective painting on paper, along with the statement:

It seems to me that seeing God would have to be a complex rather than simple experience, ranging from the somber to the opposite, and consisting of more than one kind—hypothetically, all kinds—of movement. I also think that doubting simplicity is especially germane today, a period of rampant fundamentalism...Religious fundamentalists seem to be exclusively concerned with telling people what they can't do. (p. 55)



Figure 2: © Scott Greiger, *Beware of God*, acrylic on canvas (white text on red background) in artist's frame, 17 by 21 inches, 1996. Courtesy of the artist.

Many of the artists in the "See God" exhibition assume cautious if not negative stances toward notions of God. Scott Greiger thinks there might be a wrathful God. Catherine Opie's piece expresses resistance to a social use of God. She exhibited a photograph titled *They See God, I See Hate* (1984), which shows Christians at a rally, with signs condemning homosexuals. Opie wrote,

In high school I had a crush on this beautiful woman named Cere, I would go to church with her and listen to her love of god and think, But I just love you. Years passed and I became a queer

activist, coming out in San Francisco at the beginning of the AIDS epidemic. I saw people who loved god and hated us, and I continue to see people who love god and hate us twenty years later. My faith is in myself and my family, making art, trying every day to talk about what is important, funny, and interesting (p. 68).

Nicole Eisenman made a watercolor painting in 2002 showing three gods lounging on a cloud while throwing small sharp metal weapons at three humans below on the ground. Her statement was: "I am Jewish but spiritually a pagan, with some Buddhist and Quaker thrown in. I also find myself relating to God the way the Greeks did, as a committee of intriguing authority figures floating around in space handing out gifts to us humans and alternatively wreaking havoc in our lives for no real reason" (p. 76).

Eleanor Antin constructed a fictional tableau from a larger work titled *The Last Days of Pompeii* (2002). The color photograph depicts people, some alive and some dead, including a mother in ancient Roman garb amidst destroyed pillars and rubble, clutching a baby.

In our chaotic and destructive world, the problem of trying to imagine an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent power that can be called God seems an amazing feat of mind that I'm not sure I'm up to. Shall we know Him by His acts? *The Last Days of Pompeii* looks at a typically arbitrary event that one beautiful sunny morning in August slaughtered grandmothers and children, singers and slaves, vandals and villains, pimps and procuresses, and suggests a causal force that is either an absentee landlord, a demonic trickster, a psychotic, or an Alzheimer case. (p. 96)

Tony Oursler constructed a head shape of stuffed white cloth and long grey hair and supported it with a broomstick. On the face he projected a DVD of a talking face. He titled the piece *DOGOD*, 2002.

This God is an old white man who lives in the sky and has something to do with growing up Catholic. His growth is stunted because I have not developed him in any essential way since I was young. His appearances are unusual, as he rarely addresses his flock openly. Of course he knows everything but won't tell, for reasons that are obscure, yet this is essential to the relationship we have to him...He is also cruel, randomly dispensing disease, violence, and poverty. He is always mysterious, and it is up to the viewer to understand his motivations. (p. 124)

Kim Schoenstadt exhibited two black and white photographs of her freckled bare legs. She wrote, "I will have a new freckle tattooed onto my body. The shape of my new freckle will be the shape of Lake Nagawicka, the second of the three bodies of water I have lived on. We will see if g-d notices. We will see if this addition prevents me from being buried in the Jewish cemetery where the rest of my family are" (p. 122).

### Students Find God in Works of Art

As a term-long take-home assignment, students looked for visions of their concepts of God in artworks and sent e-mails of their findings to the whole class. Several in the course identified God with images of nature. Ali Payton, a European American female art teacher working on an MA in art education, found God in a Minor White infrared photograph made in 1955 of glowing poplar trees along a road and receding to a vanishing point on the horizon. Ali wrote: "I see God and Godliness not as a person to be worshipped or used to judge other

people's actions. I see God as a feeling. It is a feeling of gratefulness for my life and all of the beautiful people which surround me."

Lori Whitlach, a European American art teacher working on a master's degree in art education, selected a generic color photograph of a dramatic sunset she found on the WWW and wrote,

When I look at this photograph of a sunset I feel God. My vision of God has changed since childhood...I refuse to believe that my dad will go to hell because he committed suicide. I can't believe that Muslims will perish because they don't believe in God. I can't believe that Jews will perish because they do not believe that Jesus was the Messiah.

Megan Goffos, a European American master's student of arts policy selected a representational digital image of colorful fall foliage. The image encapsulated an earlier experience for Megan:

This is a brief description of an actual encounter I had with a power greater than myself. There is sun streaming through the clouds, its bright rays visible against the blue of the sky. This celestial light shimmers against the golden leaves showering from a tree, dancing in the breeze. As the glittering leaves settle to the green earth, my breath is taken away. In this quiet moment, I have been with God.

Minha selected a mixed media sculptural installation, *The Sound of Landscape* (1991) by Keun Byung Yook. In this installation, a TV monitor showing a slowly blinking eye is embedded near the top of a tall pile of dirt. Minha wrote, "To me, God exists everywhere, watches and controls human beings. However, the eye does not seem to have an autocratic power; rather, it has a power that addresses the peaceful coexistence of God and human beings."

Woong Jo Chang, a male South Korean doctoral student studying arts policy, selected a large oil painting by Eric Fischl, *Sleep Walker* (1979), a realist depiction of a teenage boy standing in a wading pool at night while masturbating. Woong Jo wrote,

I could see myself in this boy since I also always feel guilty when I masturbate. The problem is that there is always God with me. God is everywhere and there's nowhere I can do this without being caught by God. When I prepare to masturbate, I always take the cross and the Saint Maria statue from my room to another room and turn off the light. Therefore, whenever I masturbate, the incongruous feelings overwhelm me as my physical body feels so good but my mental mind feels so guilty.

While looking for God, Shari Savage, a Scandinavian American completing her master's thesis, found a man referred to as Christ rather than God in *Dead Christ* by Rosso Fiorentino, 1524. She wrote, "I was raised without much religious training, indeed, very little." In her art history classes, her lack of biblical knowledge leaves her "without a context with which to view much of the Christian-based themes woven throughout the Renaissance tapestry of storytelling. But I do respond. I do feel." When looking at paintings of the passion of Christ, she sees

expressions of sorrow, disbelief, and unrelenting grief. These are human emotions that anyone can empathize with, but in this case they hold more meaning for those who have faith and love Christ. I don't have either of those things. What I do find is a different kind of *passion*, a strange reaction to all of this imagery, and the only word I can use to describe it is "longing." Most of the depictions of Christ are rendered with great attention to his body. Michelangelo had the male form down like no other artist and his versions of Christ were beautiful to behold. These perfect

embodiments of Christ mean something different to the devout; to me he's just "hot." Blasphemy, I know, but true nonetheless. Rosso Fiorentino's *Dead Christ* (1524) is the most lovely I've seen thus far. This Christ seems alive, his muscled abdomen and corded thighs speak of romance prose or poetry, instead of death. Mine is not a passive viewing. Passion. Longing. His body cradled by angels, centrally fixed in the composition, and yet presented in an evocative manner. The image resonates with feminine grace and masculine power in one perfect embodiment. No halo, no stigmata—simply a man. A beautiful man.

Valora opened her essay with the thought "The idea of God is a difficult concept to define, let alone apply to art. Although I reject theism outright, I struggle with whether I believe some other sort of metaphysical configuration exists. Despite my disbelief in a theistic God, I am no stranger to the many representations, both literary and visual, that exist in the Judeo-Christian imagination, typically in representations of Jesus." Valora then provided a new reading of *Dark and Handsome*, a painting of a black male circumscribed with a halo motif, made by Kerry James Marshall in 1993, himself an African American artist. Although the image may be antithetical to conventional iconography of Christ, she found the image ripe for theological reflection. After a careful visual analysis of the work, Valora concluded,

Being dark and handsome is a contradiction in the real world for if dark skin is perceived in a pejorative manner (and arguably it is), then it cannot also be handsome. The title appears to reflect that this is what the subject strives for but yet, various signs and symbols point to a reality where dark as handsome can only be illusory—or difficult to achieve at best. The subject perceives with acute clarity but when he looks out onto the world, all it projects back is his blackness. The perception associated with his

demonized blackness overwhelms him and threatens his very existence. The suffering motif is easily recognizable; but equally as apparent is the continued struggle for the recognition of black male subjectivity.

### The Students' Difficulty with Discussing God

As a closure activity toward the end of the week, participants discussed and some later wrote e-mails about why they found the topic of God difficult to discuss in our art education setting. Chad, a European American MFA painting student, wrote,

Usually when we discuss God and religion or spirituality we are in predictable company. Furthermore, we are usually with company that shares similar beliefs...It would be refreshing to be given the chance to completely disagree with someone on the topic of God, perhaps even into a heated debate, and then leave the debate, or the class and go have lunch and find out we both get the same thing to eat or we both have the same guitar or we both have moments of self-doubt that reveal we are a lot more alike than we are different.

Eleonora wrote, "I feel a strong resistance to talk about personal ideas and feelings in the classroom. My tradition [in Italy] connects school to knowledge delivered by scholars and does not give space for sharing personal experiences. So, even though I am intellectually understanding and learning the value of this inquiry in the classroom, the sense of resistance is still overwhelming."

Jennifer wrote, "I know that most people have strong opinions on this topic. Expressing my own opinion would risk offending someone. I love to talk about the topic one on one, but sometimes I feel attacked when talking about my faith to a large group of people."

Megan recalled an earlier formative experience. When asked her thoughts about God in a religion class, Megan presented unorthodox views and "was met with absolutely blank stares or worse, grimaces of disbelief... I was instantly 'the weird one' and I regretted sharing my deepest beliefs with these people who obviously did not care about them." She still finds it risky to speak of her personal beliefs, "for fear that others will ridicule my ideas and attempt to impose their own beliefs upon me."

Melissa explained, "I discuss God with friends, but it's because we've developed a good and long relationship. It's hard to know people for a few days and then talk about God."

Barrett, an Irish American male and professor of the course, wrote:

I am very reluctant to reveal to students, especially the undergraduates, my conflicted notions about God and churches. Often my stances on notions of God are anti-theist; usually my stances on religions are angrily contrary to religions. I believe one of Jenny Holzer's *Truisms* to be true: *RELIGION CAUSES AS MANY PROBLEMS AS IT SOLVES*. I am fearful that if I reveal my beliefs, some or many of my students will no longer listen to *anything* I have to say, and I believe that I have some valuable ideas that I would like them to hear.

Vicki Daiello, an Italian American doctoral student in art education, expressed her difficulties with the challenge of envisioning God in the essay below. Vicki's writing resonates with postmodernist sentiments cited earlier in this article, and articulates difficulties some of us experienced when asked to write about God.

## God in Three Acts

### *Act I: Refusal*

I approach the question of how to artistically represent God in an incremental acquiescence commencing with the belief that it is impossible. The question is impossible; representation is impossible. I will not, cannot, represent God in art. But I am human. My desire to express and my desire to be heard break down my resistance.

Incremental acquiescence asserts my place in the clockworks, is a marker of time, within time, divides my labors and failures in the face of the unsayable, the unknowable, that which lingers just beyond the reach. Marginalia inspires desire.

If I proceed with the belief that God can be represented in art, then I fall into, die of, my limitations. But I am human. My desire to express and my desire to be heard break down my resistance.

### *Act II: Acquiescence*

Being human, I acquiesce further, longing for the tangible and the concrete, but desiring the infinite, the unknowable, while the inhalation, the exhalation, and the spaces between only establish and execute my coordinates of absence. Circling the margins. I speak God, yet God is a marginalized discourse. God is exiled from conversation. How will I see God in art if I cannot speak God? How do I articulate desire to be at the margins, still inside, but out of self far enough to grasp the perspective of a feeling that eclipses the self? This desire begins to break down as quickly as I attempt to grasp it with words, with imagery. The sublime is my erasure.

### *Act III: The Question*

To make peace with the refusal, the impossibility of representation, I settle on the belief that representation of God is a time-based work—the work of desire. God is a question that cannot be answered whole, but in increments—small movements, even refusals, that hide the wounds of desire, distract from the enormity of absence, and dull perception of the limits of language. The failure of representation. I am but a space between representations, between repetition of representations.

## Reflections on Examining 'God'

Fears quickly arose within our classroom when the topic of God was introduced. Participants expressed non-verbal surprised, dubious, resistant, and uncomfortable facial expressions and body postures, and then some articulated resistance to being asked to write about their own visions or lack thereof of God. Once they had privately written about their conceptions or visions, most were then hesitant to make them public to our small group. During ensuing discussions the art teachers in our group were very explicit about political fears they associated with discussing God and religion in their classrooms, even though they are very aware of the tremendous amount of art history that revolves around God and Gods. They simply choose to avoid such art for fear of imagined reprisals from parents or administrators. All of us were unsure about the legality of discussing God in public schools in the United States (this topic is addressed below).

Tensions eased throughout the duration of days on the topic. Immediately following the in-class, spontaneous writing about the participants' visions of God, after the first student reluctantly read her personal vision of God, a second volunteered, and then more, but not all. Over the next two days, those who had not read volunteered to read with a new confidence and enthusiasm.

Upon reflection of their initial anxieties, some expressed fear of rejection by others based on assumed theological differences and past painful experiences of outright disapproval for their views that were alternate to the mainstream. Hesitation to reveal was felt by both religious believers and those hostile to religion. Some thought the topic just "too private" for an educational setting. After seeing many of the works of "100 Artists" the participants seemed less reticent to talk about the topic. We surmise that our comfort level rose when individuals had heard or seen versions of God close to their own, and felt less isolated in their beliefs and more confident to reveal their thoughts.

It became clear to us that individuals were holding important distinctions about God and manifestations of a God expressed through various religions or by various believers active in society. One or two did not believe in the existence of a God in any traditional sense. Some were accepting of a God but not of organized religion. Some distinguished between a personal God and a mysterious and impersonal supreme power. Others accepted God and their religion's interpretation of that God. Some expressed antitheism in the sense that they thought God to be a human construct upon which repressive and detrimental social practices were devised and maintained.

We became well aware of the power of diversity for furthering and deepening such discussions. We knew we were privileged to have believers and skeptics, and persons from different cultural and religious traditions in the class including Buddhist, Native American, Protestant, Catholic, and humanist. The variety of theistic and antitheistic representations of God by the "100 Artists" further diversified beliefs and attitudes for us to consider.

Through discussion and reflection many of us, perhaps all, want it to be the case that students and teachers openly explore diverse concepts of God through imagery made by artists through time and across cultures. Particularly challenging, however, remains how to

introduce antitheistic thoughts and sentiments in settings where majority populations are theist, and some aggressively so. Our communal educational desires are best expressed by Nel Noddings as quoted earlier in this article: "If one is going to be a believer, one ought to be an intelligent believer...and ditto for unbelief" (in Halford, 1988/1999, para. 5).

### God, Public Schools, and the Law

In our understanding, everything we did in class and outside of class surrounding "100 Artists See God" would be protected under law in the nation's public schools. Decisions about such matters rest on understandings of the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States. In relation to the separation of church and state, the First Amendment declares, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech..." (U.S. Constitution, Amend. I). These clauses, known as the Establishment Clause, Free Exercise Clause, and Free Speech clause, draw a line between the government and private citizens with respect to religion. According to The United States Department of Education (2003), in "Guidance on Constitutionally Protected Prayer in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools," there is "a crucial difference between government speech endorsing religion, which the Establishment Clause forbids, and private speech endorsing religion, which the Free Speech and Free Exercise Clauses protect" (para 11).

More explicitly and pertinently, in the 1963 case *School Dist. of Abington Twp. v. Schempp*, the Supreme Court held that "the study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education (e.g., in history or literature classes), is consistent with the First Amendment" (United States Department of Education, 2003). Richard Riley (2003), former U.S. Secretary of Education, in "Religious Expression in Public Schools" wrote:

Public schools may not provide religious instruction, but they may teach about religion, including the Bible or other scripture: the history of religion, comparative religion, the Bible (or other scripture)-as-literature, and the role of religion in the history of the United States and other countries all are permissible public school subjects. Similarly, it is permissible to consider religious influences on art, music, literature, and social studies. (para 7)

Thus, teachers can bring religion into the curriculum, so long as they maintain a secular and objective stance. The Freedom Forum clarifies this idea in *A Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools* (First Amendment Center, 1999):

Classroom discussions concerning religion must be conducted in an environment that is free of advocacy on the part of the teacher. Students may, of course, express their own religious views, as long as such expression is germane to the discussion. But public-school teachers are required by the First Amendment to teach about religion fairly and objectively, neither promoting nor denigrating religion in general or specific religious groups in particular (p. 5).

...it might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization (pp. 3-4).

...Study about religion is also important if students are to value religious liberty, the first freedom guaranteed in the Bill of Rights. Moreover, knowledge of the roles of religion in the past and present promotes cross-cultural understanding essential to democracy and world peace (p. 4).

In our summary understanding of educational policy, the following serve as guidelines:

- A school's approach to religion ought to be *academic*, not *devotional*.
- A school may strive for students' *awareness* of religions, but ought not press for students' *acceptance* of any religion.
- A school may sponsor study *about* religion, not the *practice* of religion.
- A school may *expose* students to a diversity of religious views, but may not *impose* any particular view.
- Schools may *educate* about all religions; they may not *promote* or *denigrate* religion.
- A school may *inform* students about various beliefs; it should not try to *conform* students to any particular belief (First Amendment Center, 1999, p. 5).

## Implications

Because religions play a significant role in history and society, and because religious beliefs are often embedded in works of art, study about the religious content of art is essential to understanding the nation and the world, now and in the past and future. When teachers teach religion-based art but omit the beliefs that give meaning to that art, then they are reducing that art to its stylistic, formalist characteristics, robbing it of its cultural meanings and its reasons for being. Failure to understand even the basic symbols, practices, and concepts of various religions, or failure to understand others' objections to those religions

makes much of history, literature, art, and contemporary life unintelligible.

When occasions to discuss God-related topics arise in schools, some students self-censor their thoughts and beliefs or disbeliefs for fear of ridicule from classmates or teachers. Teachers should create psychologically safe environments to encourage students to become more comfortable with sharing personal revelations. Students may be reluctant to reveal beliefs that could be misunderstood because of cultural differences.

Creating classroom environments safe for open conversations can be established by following some discussion guidelines: one person should speak at a time; listeners should listen and refrain from interrupting a speaker; time should be allowed for reflection before responses; speakers should refrain from delivering speeches; and perhaps most importantly, speakers should not proselytize or attempt to convert others to their positions.

In a psychologically comfortable environment, when people openly and honestly share thoughts based on their personal responses to works of art, there can be many benefits for the speaking individual and the listening group. The speaker can gain self-knowledge by examining and articulating aloud his or her insights and beliefs. She or he can also gain a new sense of agency by exercising courage in a social setting and by being acknowledged with respect from listeners. Those in the listening group can gain new insights into a work of art through the words of another. They can also learn about the speaker and his or her way of viewing art and the world. They can compare their own beliefs to those they hear, gaining self-knowledge in the comparison. When speaker and listener differ respectfully and kindly, a tolerance and appreciation of difference and multiple points of view are a possible and very desirable outcome. These benefits can be multiplied when the sharing group is diverse in its beliefs.

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