

RELIGION AS AN ARTFORM

Coordinator: Barbara Confino

This study group Workshop offers a hands-on experience of creating a religious form by analyzing and synthesizing the major design aspects of all religions. First we will analyze how religions are constructed esthetically, then we will apply that knowledge to create our own. Our presiding thesis is that religion is a collective artform, with periods, styles and regional characteristics. Like dance or poetry or theater, religion is generated out of the historical consciousness of an entire culture and is that culture's greatest and most comprehensive artform, the one that most deeply expresses its conception of the universe. For religion, like opera, is a synthesis of the arts as well as a Master Artform in itself.

Therefore, by discussing and analyzing it from an art historian's perspective, we can discover the many ways its esthetic choices reflect its theological values—asking ourselves, *what are the concrete forms a religion takes that embody and enact its spiritual vision?*

*****We will explore this thesis without regard to the truth value of any particular religion, considering the esthetic aspect alone a separate phenomenon worth examining.***

Barbara Confino is an artist and writer who works in video, sound, text, camera stills, and the web. She studied Philosophy and Romance Languages for her B.A. and Film for her M.S. She has taught at CUNY and the International Center for Photography, and most recently gave a study group on photography, Organizing Space. Her works are in major international collections such as the Bibliotheque Nationale de France and the British Museum Library.

Type of Study Group: Workshop

Using a hands-on, workshop format, this study group will begin with a short presentation followed by guided discussion. As individuals and in small groups, participants will analyze and reconstruct selected religious phenomena (e.g., architectural styles, ritual structures, etc.) to more directly understand religion as an esthetic phenomenon.

Readings and other Materials/Online Services:

As is often the case in the social sciences (anthropology, sociology, etc.)

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primary resources and research materials are not found in textual form; rather, audio and visual materials provide the best source material both because they are more *experiential* in nature as well as the most available. For their immediacy as well as sensory and empirical information, we will primarily rely on direct viewing and listening in class.

However, here are references:

The World's Religions by Huston Smith;
The Birth of Tragedy by Friedrich Nietzsche;
The Old Testament: Genesis.

Required Materials:

Please buy an 8 1/2 x 11 school Composition book at the dollar store or online for in-class exercises.

***** SYLLABUS - A WORK IN PROGRESS *****

WEEK 1

TOPIC: Tools of esthetic analysis

Architecture, 3D spaces & light in both indoor and outdoor spaces of worship, and their religious functions

READING:

Religious architecture

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/architecture/Religious-architecture>

QUESTIONS:

What is the function of architecture in religion? How do different styles reflect different values? What prompts different fashions in religious architecture over time?

WEEK 2

TOPIC: The power and uses of the word

Text, narration, lists, song, chant, call, mantra; their function and enumeration in the religious context

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READING:

The article "Religious Narrative: An Introduction" by Armin W. Geertz will be emailed to participants.

QUESTIONS:

What is the function of narrative? What are different narrative styles?
How important are narrative and other textual forms to a specific religion?

WEEK 3

TOPIC: The theater of ritual

The use of mise en scene, gesture, props, scripts, staging, lighting, sound and smell in ritual behavior; ritual as sacred enactment

READING:

The article "Ritual as theatre, theatre as ritual" will be emailed to participants.

QUESTIONS:

What is the function of ritual? How are rituals designed in different contexts?
How are specific components of ritual utilized?

WEEK 4

TOPIC: Processions, pilgrimages: choreography and location

The individual in the group; ritual extended beyond the bounds of everyday space and time

READING:

Processions, religious

<https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts/processions-religious>

WEEK 5: Magic and transformation and their shamanistic origins; the believer transformed.

WEEK 6: Imagery and decoration: an examination of symbolic, representational, and abstract visual styles and their various functions with a side look at their changes over time