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RESPONSES AND REVIEWS

*Review of Religion and the Arts, a Journal from
Boston College*

BRENNAN O'DONNELL

One of the more important and promising recent contributions of Jesuit higher education to understanding the arts is the new quarterly journal from Boston College, *Religion and the Arts*. In its inaugural issue (Fall 1996), editor Dennis Taylor sets forth the journal's ambitious program:

Religion and the Arts seeks to explore religious and spiritual dimensions in the verbal, visual and performing arts, in the context of contemporary theory and culture. We hope to publish the most distinguished scholarship in each of the several fields of religion and the arts, and promote the development of new religious critical discourses.

The journal is an extremely high-quality, even lavish, production. As befits a publication that values the power of sensuous forms to body forth spiritual presences, the design, full-color illustrations, glossy pages, and attractive typeface make each issue a small work of art in itself. The advisory board includes many of the most prominent scholars and thinkers in the field, including René Girard, Geoffrey Hartman, Czelaw Milosz, Walter Ong, S.J., Jaroslav Pelikan, David Tracy, and Elie Wiesel. Articles in the first five issues have been consistently impressive, and have covered a very wide range of topics, from Donatello's *David* to Andy Warhol's ambivalent relationship to Catholicism, Biblical criticism to psychoanalysis, Jewish identity in Balzac's "Sarrasine" to Asian American community murals in Los Angeles. Approaches vary widely, too, from the relatively conventional reading of an individual work or artist, to theoretical papers that attempt to think out the *desiderata* for the "new religious critical discourse" that is ultimately at the heart of the enterprise.

As Taylor puts it the commentary that he published in the inaugural issue ("The Need for a Religious Literary Criticism"), the "negative hermeneutic" of much contemporary discourse in the arts shows signs of having run its course. Religious and spiritual dimensions of

art have been thoroughly "deconstructed, historicized, sexualized, or made symptomatic of covert power relationships," yet somehow they still lay claim to our attention:

The need for a religious literary criticism is not only reflective of a present scholarly void, but also comes out of a spiritual hunger, felt by many teachers and students, for a way of discussing the intersections of their own spiritual lives with what they read. These two needs, scholarly and spiritual, reflect the extreme difficulty of the subject which invites intellectual short-circuiting and collapse at a number of points. (124)

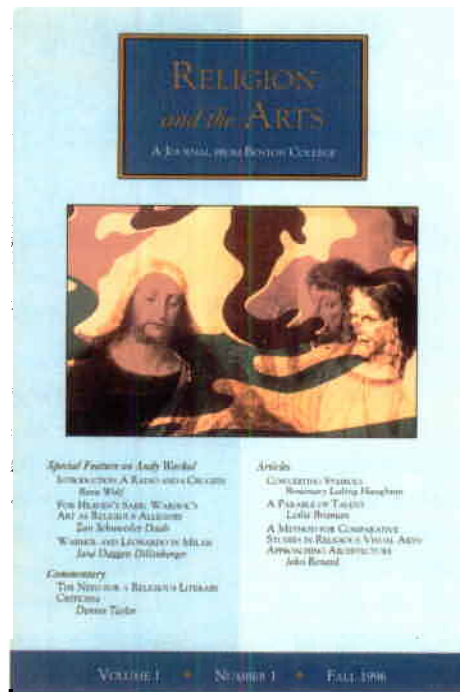
At the same time—and here is where the project is most ambitious and most promising—Taylor recognizes that there is no pretending that the "negative hermeneutic," as reductive as it can be, can simply be ignored. Attempts at a "more positive, non-reductive hermeneutic tend to be soft discourses, appealing to general unexamined values and a preconverted audience." What *Religion and the Arts* is attempting to promote is something quite different: a methodology and a language of interpretation "substantial enough to enter into a productive and competitive relation with the reigning critical discourses."

In a series of readings of "moments in literature that cry out" for attention to their spiritual dimensions, Taylor exemplifies the kind of approach that his journal seeks to promote. Informed, careful, self-critical of their own assumptions regarding religious experience, yet alert to the fact that these moments require a confrontation with "something left over" after all the reigning discourses have had their say, Taylor's "moments" simultaneously demonstrate the need for a new discourse and provide a model of the kind of close, careful attention to complexity that an engagement with the spirit of human artfulness requires.

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George Steiner has called the kind of attention that Taylor pays to the spiritual realm embodied in the arts “cortesia,” or “tact of heart” (*Real Presences* [University of Chicago Press, 1989]). As varied as the articles in the first two volumes of *Religion and the Arts* have been in terms of their fields of inquiry, their authors’ or subjects’ attitudes toward religion, or their theological commitments (or lack thereof), a great many of them have shared with their editor this tact of heart. The critical idiom that is already developing in the pages of *Religion and the Arts*—an idiom that combines scholarly tough-mindedness with openness to the possibility of meanings that resist dissolution by a negative hermeneutic—is as welcome as it is rare. *Religion and the Arts* is staking out genuinely new scholarly territory. It deserves a place in every library that supports programs in literature, the arts, theology,

philosophy, and religious studies. It certainly should be a part of the library of every one of the twenty-eight Jesuit colleges and universities.



Note: *Religion and the Arts* also maintains a Web site, providing links to a wealth of resources in its several fields of coverage, as well as calls for papers, information on forthcoming issues of the journal, and subscription information. The page may be found at www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/relarts

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