Introduction

25 years of Religion and the Arts

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Dennis Taylor, now emeritus at Boston College, started *Religion and the Arts* twenty-five years ago: its first issue was published in January, 1996. In that issue, Taylor advocated a new kind of religious criticism, not aimed toward a denominational audience or an audience of believers of any kind. As a topic of discussion, Taylor felt that spirituality had fallen out of the conversation. *Religion and the Arts* was meant to take create a space for that undeveloped discourse:

We live in an age of critical discourses that are expert in discussing the dimensions of class, gender, textuality, and historical context. Yet an important part of the literature we read goes untouched by our discourses, or is deconstructed, historicized, sexualized, or made symptomatic of covert power relationships. The negative hermeneutic of such reductive discourse has been thorough and successful. Attempts at a more positive non-reductive hermeneutic tend to be soft discourses, appealing to general unexamined values and a preconverted audience. There is a need in our time for religious interpretations that are substantial enough to enter into a productive and competitive relation with the reigning critical discourses (124).

Taylor's timing was prescient. 1996 was just about the moment that the "resurgence of religion," politically, culturally, and militarily, was at its start. (In my own research, I have found no mention of the phrase earlier than that year.) While "the resurgence of religion" has mostly been applied to its most egregious and unhappy manifestations in politics and world affairs, its return to the scholarly forum outside denominational contexts has been more fortunate. The old narrative of inevitable secularization has been not only interrupted by current events, but by the weakening of that narrative itself. It is not only that belief-systems, admittedly often manipulated by untrustworthy persons, are more of a political (and military) force throughout the world than twenty-five years ago. The easy modernist assumption that religious belief has been

declining since the nineteenth century and that it would eventually evaporate has proved to be demonstrably false. As J. Ranilo and B. Hermida have written, the pluralism of post-modernity has created more room for kinds of religious belief and practice than one might have expected: "The displacement of the notion of autonomous reason in postmodernity has opened up the return of religion as well as the retrieval of a faith unhampered by the imperative to submit and acquit itself before the bar of reason" (105–106). "The nagging spiritual question" (D. Taylor 125) has not been answered by anyone's reason or materialism.

Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* noticed (and implicitly predicted) what anyone can see in 2021 is a truism: even in the post-industrial West, religion has hardly disappeared. Rather, it has manifested itself in novel ways. Certainly, anyone living in the United States since 1996 cannot have sidestepped the malign political influence of an Evangelicalism that would have been unrecognizable in the Carter Administration. Our marketplace of contemporary belief-systems is unescapable: from irrational conspiracy theories to unscientific medical convictions to diets that operate as purity codes to the current popularity of meditation and "mindfulness." Clearly, these all act as systems of belief: destructive, pointless, beneficial, or benign.

To return to the realm of criticism, Taylor's expectations, I hope, are being fulfilled by *Religion and the Arts*. While of course the journal has published not unexpected articles on writers like Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy, on Islamic, Hindu, and Roman Catholic architecture, on Renaissance images, Orthodox icons, and the Bible and Koran, our writers have explored the religious views of "secular" writers from Shakespeare on. They have also brought forward a good deal of unfamiliar artistic work: Latter-Day Saint poetry and art, Catholic architecture in Korea, the role of the oratorio in African-American churches, forgotten spiritualist painting, and twenty-first century film, novel, and television. Our authors have traced artistic practices influenced not only by the expected list of "World" religions, but by popular spirituality, traditional West African and Native American religions, and the almost-extinguished Japanese Shugendo. It is also my hope that *Religion and the Arts* will continue to realize the promise that Dennis Taylor saw for it.

Works Cited

- Ranilo, J. and B. Hermida. "The Resurgence of Religion in the Advent of Postmodernity." *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 11.4 (2008): 94–110.
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