

Reading Images in the Religious Studies Classroom

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Abstract

This note from the classroom presents a method for teaching students to analyze and interpret images in the religious studies classroom. Students can benefit enormously from the opportunity to learn a structured technique for reading images. We recommend two separate exercises: analyzing first images as works of art and then as conveyors of discipline-specific information. Drawing on the work of Edmund Feldman, our technique grounds interpretation in a methodical description of the basic components and characteristics of images. By helping students to conceptualize the formal qualities of an image as a first exercise, this technique allows them to more confidently address the challenging task of relating aspects of a given image with key concepts of religious studies. This simple first step toward interpreting religious images can help students profit more from texts, lecture, field trips, and further studies in the field.

Religious Studies tends to overemphasize texts at the expense of images. Scripture takes precedence among religious phenomena. Our research emphasizes textual sources, and images play a less central and less thoughtful role in the Religious Studies classroom. Photographs and reproductions of art works are vital components of textbooks, but they are almost always presented in marginal and superficial ways, as if the author considered them decorative additions to be handled by an editor. Slides, video, and images on the web bring sacred spaces, artifacts, symbols, and rituals alive in ways that text alone cannot. But where we often talk explicitly and critically about problems of interpretation and contextualization in the case of texts, we seldom do so with images: we let them stand as naïve tokens of an idea, a practice, or a space. This is important, as far as it goes, but images can offer up a wealth of information far beyond simple representation. Many important concepts of religious studies (e.g., transcendence, good vs. evil, salvation) are often represented visually, in dramatic but not always obvious ways. Some students (especially visual learners) have the talent or experience to see the ‘meaning’ of pictures, but others seem lost when asked to ‘read’ an image. Our classrooms, and our research, could only become richer if we paid more explicit attention to the problems of using images effectively and critically.

With this in mind, the authors (Religious Studies and Art Education instructors respectively) present a method for teaching students to analyze and interpret images, first as *artistic images*, and then as *religious images*. This technique starts with a description of the basic components and characteristics of images. Students are taught to first describe the formal qualities of an image. This initial analysis (of line and color, texture and contrast, etc.) provides a

basis from which students can move on to formulate interpretations and judgments. To Feldman's technique we add a second phase, asking students to relate their artistic analyses to the categories and concepts of religious studies. The same technique can, of course, be used with students of many other disciplines. In essence, the purpose of this technique is twofold: (1) to get students to *slow down* and think about how images achieve their effects before jumping to an interpretation; and (2) to provide students with a basic vocabulary that will allow them to approach images more methodically.

This pedagogical technique can serve as a stepping-stone, allowing more advanced students to extend their study of the place and significance of images. There are, of course, reasons for the pre-eminence of text in the academic study of religion(s), and discussing these can be of value, especially in theory and method classes. Textual bias has been linked to many developments: the centrality of Scripture in the western monotheistic traditions; western logocentrism; the role of literacy in democratic education systems; technological constraints in dissemination of information; trust in 'literal' meaning as a warrant of truth; and others. The importance of considering visual images in the study of religion is increasingly recognized. Margaret Miles, for example, re-emphasized this point in her address to the inaugural session of a new consultation on The Bible and Visual Art at the Society of Biblical Literature meeting in Denver in November 2001. Yet there are, of course, many works that model effective approaches to images. These works include, among many others, general studies of the importance of imagery in the study of religion (e.g., Miles 1985); analyses that take full account of popular devotional images (e.g., McLeod 1991); historical studies of ritual and devotional use of images (e.g., Christian 1989); theoretically informed studies of specific genres of religious art (e.g., Belting 1990); exemplary analyses of the work of key artists (e.g., Bal 1991); substantive works that move beyond the opposition between text and image (e.g., Taylor 1998); and important theoretical works on art interpretation that could be of great value to scholars of religion (e.g., Baxandall 1985). Works like these offer further resources for students excited by their initial exposure to critical work with images that our technique provided.

Gaining experience with reading images in an organized manner allows students to work more effectively and confidently with visual materials in the classroom, in their studies, and as they browse the web. This technique allows them to confidently move from an initial encounter with a new and challenging religious image, through an evaluation of its artistic characteristics, to the more challenging task of proposing an interpretation based on a well-grounded analysis. By extending this methodical *artistic* analysis to include a complementary analysis of *religious* characteristics of images, this technique helps students to practice working with some of the fundamental concepts of religious studies. As a result, the technique supports learning outcomes such as acquiring a facility and thinking critically with the basic categories and concepts of the discipline. The note ends with a discussion of the authors' experiences in working with students of an Introduction to Western Religions course.

Exercise One: The Image as Work of Art

The first step for understanding images is to approach them as works of art, examining elements of design and organization (e.g., line and color) as distinct from conceptual content (e.g., religious meanings). This is, in fact, our ‘default’ technique for gathering visual information. Designing and teaching techniques for reading images first demands some understanding of how viewers look at images.

Step	Procedure
Description	Look at the details of the image, the Elements of Art: line, shape, form/space, color, and texture.
Analysis	Look at the organization of the image, the Principles of Art: balance, rhythm/pattern, unity, dominance/interest, and variety.
Interpretation	Infer artistic meaning/themes from above characteristics of the image
Judgment	Defend personal opinions based on the above steps.

Art gallery curators, art teachers, and advertising artists understand that viewers generally give themselves only seconds to identify and interpret the visual information that is provided by images. In looking at works of art, inexperienced viewers often tend to make quick judgments based on these brief observations. (We have all heard snap judgments such as “I don’t like this painting,” “I don’t know much about art but I know what I like,” or “How old was the child when they painted this?”) Art educators have discovered that going through steps that delay the judgment stage until the viewer has processed as much of the visual information as possible encourages further looking and understanding (Naested 1998, 97).

The technique that we have developed is based on this idea. We provide students with a methodical way to approach images slowly, working up to an appreciation of them as works of art, and only then moving on to consider them as conveyors of religious meaning. To this end, we draw on the work of art educator Edmund Feldman. Feldman (1967) developed a method of helping students to discuss a work of art through a four-step procedure of description, analysis, interpretation and judgment. This approach has been widely used and adapted mainly by art teachers, and it forms the first of two exercises in the technique that we have developed for working with images in the Religious Studies classroom. Basically students are asked to describe the component elements of the picture and then the mutual relations between these elements within the image as a whole. Only then do they move on to interpret the image. Only in the second exercise does this process of interpretation extend to religious themes.

We wanted the religious studies students to first experience art that had limited ‘religious’ connection and therefore decided, for the first exercise, to use

landscape paintings that did not have humans and animals, or man-made objects and buildings. Excellent images for this first exercise in looking at art are works by the Canadian “Group of Seven, a group of landscape artists founded in 1920. These included paintings from Frank Carmichael, Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, Arthur Lismer, and F. H. Varley. These men created landscapes with broad brushwork and brilliant colour. Of course, a wide range of other artists could be used as well, e.g., Gustave Courbet (French, 1850’s), J.M.W. Turner (English, 1830’s-40’s), and John Constable (English, early 1820’s) or the impressionists landscape paintings of Claude Monet, Paul Cezanne (French, early 1900’s). The works of the Abstract Expressionists might also be an option, again with the thought of choosing works that are not intended to have recognizable images or objects. Such works might include Hans Hofmann, (1960’s) William De Kooning (1950’s), or Jackson Pollock (1950’s). Tibetan mandalas or other non-representational religious images might be usefully paired with the latter works as a more challenging companion exercise.

The following sections present the four steps of our first exercise. As discussed below, the second exercise parallels these steps, adding religious interpretation and judgments. The key point is to use this first exercise as a means of slowing students down, of getting them to think about images as images before jumping to an interpretation of what they represent or mean.

(i) *Description*

To begin, the viewer must take an inventory of the art piece. This inventory is taken as objectively as possible by recognizing the elements of art and subject matter. Students are asked to create a list of what they observe, limiting the influence of their emotions or prior experience. A handout prompts them to ask a number of questions, including the following:

- What media is used?
- What lines, shapes, colors, textures, and patterns are present?
- Where are the shapes and spaces found in the image?
- Are they geometric or free form, positive shapes or negative spaces?
- Are the lines straight or curved, light or dark?
- Are the colors used mainly primary (red, yellow, blue) or secondary (green, orange, purple)?
- Are the colors light or dark, dull or intense, warm (yellows, reds) or cool (blues and greens)?
- What are the basic representative elements of the picture, and where are they located?

Descriptions of these elements should be factual statements such as “The colors used are secondary,” “The rock on the lower left is smooth and round in shape,” or “There are three people on the right side of the painting looking towards the center.”

(ii) *Analysis*

The artist sees the world a great deal differently than does the untrained individual. Understanding the principles of design (the way the above elements work as a whole) is an important aspect of analysis. Viewers gain the benefit of more sensitive vision, of greater visual awareness, as these principles become a part of their design knowledge. In this second step the viewer must attempt to detach from subjective emotional ‘opinions’ and to analyze the art piece factually and objectively, asking, “How have the principles of design been used to organize the elements in the art piece?” The principles of design include balance, contrast, emphasis, movement, and unity. *Balance* refers to the equilibrium of various art elements and involves a sense of order. Order may be symmetrical or asymmetrical, formal or informal, rigid, or random. Imbalance can create a feeling of awkwardness, discomfort, or excitement. *Contrast* can be low, used to soothe and settle, or high, used to dramatize or emphasize. *Emphasis* implies both dominance and subordination and can be used to focus attention or interest in an area. *Movement* is achieved by manipulating the elements of line, color, shape, and texture, in order to imply motion. *Unity* describes a sense of oneness within an image, where all qualities work together to produce feelings of harmony and order. Lack of unity can imply disharmony, incompleteness, disorder, and dissonance.

(iii) *Interpretation*

Interpretation is an effort to find meaning in the artwork and is most valuable after taking a qualitative inventory using the first two steps of describing and analyzing. To provoke a thoughtful interpretation, the following questions may be asked (cf. Tollifson 1990, 15):

- What does the artwork mean to you?
- What is the artwork saying to you?
- What is the message?
- What does the work mean?
- What is the image about?
- What idea is communicated?
- What do you believe the artist intended to communicate?
- What is the overall feeling or mood?
- What feelings does it evoke in you?

This third step involves making an overall interpretation of the image as a work of art, and it is this step that forms the basis for the extension of Feldman’s technique in our second exercise. That is, after learning to base *artistic* interpretations on a methodical analysis of images, students move on to make *religious* interpretations based on this same set of steps.

(iv) *Judgment*

Finally personal opinions are made regarding the artistic merit of the artwork. Whether or not a given viewer ‘likes’ an art piece or not may derive from associations made by the viewer that are beyond the artists’ control. Although these judgments can be very personal, however, they are not necessarily superficial or arbitrary. They are formed and defended after consideration of all that was learned, observed or noticed in the previous three steps. Increased experience in observation – through description, analysis and interpretation, will open viewers to greater awareness and understanding of visual images as well as develop sensitive visual literacy. This step can also be extended by our second exercise, as students learn to feel more comfortable making judgments regarding the religious significance of images. In practice, we spend more class time on the first three steps in both exercises. Students are encouraged to make their own personal judgments, but converging on a consensual interpretation of a given image is an effective way to refocus the class after small-group work.

Exercise Two: Visual Expression of Religious Concepts

Many important religious concepts are expressed visually, and the above technique can be extended to guide students in understanding these expressions. It provides a foundation by prompting students to work methodically through a check-list of *artistic* characteristics of images. Applying this technique in the religious studies classroom involves two additional activities: providing students with a scheme of *religious* concepts that are often represented visually (see Tables 3 and 4); and working through some examples (slides or images from the class text) to model the visual expression of religious ideas. Students can then practice correlating aspects of a given image (e.g. a visual contrast between light and dark) with religious concepts (e.g. a conceptual contrast between salvation and damnation). Cross-cultural variation (e.g., in the relative evaluation of light and dark) can also be explored in this context.

Step	Procedure
Description	Look at the elements of the image (as in exercise one).
Analysis	Look at the organization of the image (as in exercise one).
Interpretation	Infer religious meaning/themes from above characteristics of the image
Judgment (Optional)	Defend personal opinions based on the above steps. (Does the image accomplish what it seems to intend? Does it represent some important aspect of the religious tradition? What did you learn from it?)

We recommend teaching this technique in two separate classes, allowing students to practice analyzing and discussing the artistic elements of images before attempting to correlate these with religious concepts. As students move

on to this second stage of religious interpretation, they will need to be provided with a list of religious themes to look for or questions to ask. (A brainstorming exercise can get students started in this direction.)

This technique works most effectively with general characteristics of religious images (see Table 3). It provides students with skills and knowledge for thinking critically using the basic categories and concepts of Religious Studies. As a result, this technique can be a valuable tool for making explicit and for helping students to achieve course, program, and institution-wide learning outcomes. For example, one of the authors (Enger) addresses an institution-wide Critical Thinking outcome in a manner that dovetails with the use of this technique in the tutorials of an Introduction to Western Religions course.

Table 3. Examples of Religious Themes Expressed Visually

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Transcendence and immanence• Presence or absence of the sacred• Ritual gestures, postures, dress• Separation of the individual or gathering of the community in a state of sacredness• Sacred distinctions expressed as social distinctions (female/male, us/them, religious expert/lay person, priest/prophet, elder/youth)• Boundaries/separation/openings/framing of the sacred• Architectural and artifactual embodiments or invocations of sacredness• Presence of writing in the image (sacred scripture)• Sacredness indicated by the use of valuable media in the art work (gold, jewels)

This technique is not designed to address specific iconographic elements of religious images. Religious iconography uses symbolism whose meaning is specific to a given tradition: for example, in Christian art a saint holding keys is St. Peter; in Buddhist art a wheel on the palm of the hand symbolizes the authority and teachings of the Buddha; in Zoroastrian art a winged human-like figure represents both God (*Ahura Mazda*) and the spiritual aspect of human nature. Numbers have varying significance in different traditions. Also, in some traditions (e.g., Christian Orthodox icons), every element of color, form, and layout can have iconographic significance. For this exercise (and in a first encounter with the art of any religious tradition) it is usually best to focus on general concepts not on iconography, as the latter presupposes tradition-specific knowledge at a level inappropriate for many introductory courses.

Between the extremes of general imagery (e.g., light/dark as sacred/profane or *vice versa*) and tradition-specific iconography are elements for which it is useful to guess at their meaning. This category of general iconography includes symbols common to many traditions (circles expressing perfection and spirals journeys to more sacred levels, bread symbolizing life and wine ecstasy) and common visual metaphors (life/death as journey, fertility

of creation, books/scrolls as wisdom, military weapons/power as righteous authority, protection as salvation, calmness as spiritual depth, solidity as truth/righteousness). As with the visual expressions of religious concepts discussed above, students can either be provided with or asked to brainstorm a scheme of these types of symbols and visual metaphors.

One of the most effective approaches for interpreting religious images (and for reinforcing basic categories and concepts of religious studies) is to look for paired concepts expressed in the tension between different visual elements (see Table 4). Our experience suggests that students are quite comfortable with the process of correlating contrasting visual elements with contrasting religious concepts. As a result, a handout containing something like our Table 4 offers a useful starting point for the extension of Feldman’s technique beyond artistic to religious interpretation.

Table 4. Examples of Paired Religious Concepts Expressed Visually

Visual Characteristics	Paired Concepts	
Light/Dark	Divine/Human	Eternal/Temporal
Big/Small	Sacred/Profane	Righteousness/Sinfulness
Central/Peripheral	Pure/Impure	Spiritual Riches/Worldly Riches
Up/Down	Life/Death	Salvation/Damnation
Left/Right	Nature/Culture	Community/Individual
Solid/Faint	Female/Male	Celebration/Solemnity
Unique/Repeated	Good/Evil	Enlightenment/Ignorance
Distinct/Indistinct	Spirit/Matter	Subservience/Authority
Smooth/Rough	Heaven/Hell	Reward/Punishment
Continuous/Broken	Order/Chaos	Creation/Destruction

As a next step, students can be prompted to ask a series of more specific questions that might lead them to more subtle interpretations of the religious significance of images. A list of other questions might include some of the following:

- Do the visual qualities of the image emphasize or de-emphasize some figure, object, or area within the frame (larger, more prominently placed, brighter, etc.)? Does this have anything to do with sacredness?
- Is the sacred (divine beings or energies, etc.) portrayed explicitly, through its effects, or through people’s reactions to it?
- Are you meant to “read” the image in a specific direction? It is helpful to remind students that different cultures read in different directions: e.g., Hebrew and Arabic are read from right to left; Chinese characters are usually read from top to bottom.
- Do the gazes or gestures of figures within the frame direct your eyes somewhere within or outside the frame? Do any eyes meet yours? Is anyone pointing? Alternatively, is any figure averting their gaze or warding something off?

- Do you recognize any figures or objects from your own knowledge or from what you have studied so far in the course?
- Does anything about the image suggest that it comes from a certain culture or historical period?

This sort of guided examination of religious aspects of images is an effective way for students to practice working with key concepts and to learn more of the specific aspects of the religious traditions being studied. The technique is effective above all because it stands on the foundation provided by Feldman's technique: examining images as art stands as a prerequisite for understanding the visual expression of religious concepts.

Some Practical Considerations

This technique can be incorporated into classes in a number of ways: as one or more stand-alone tutorials; as a small-group exercise in class; as a lecture with reference to overheads, handouts, or textbook illustrations; as an individual or group take-home assignment; or as part of a course-module that focuses explicitly on religious iconography (e.g., Orthodox icons or Vajrayana Buddha images). We present this technique in two separate one-hour tutorials separated by two or three weeks. In an introductory session, we have the students work in small groups with Feldman's technique. We have found that this initial exercise works especially well when students are provided with landscape paintings, allowing students to master the initial analysis of works of art as works of art before beginning the more challenging task of correlating artistic elements to religious concepts. In a later class, the students are given religious images and asked to first work through Feldman's technique exactly as in the previous exercise, then to discuss religious themes. During lectures throughout the term, images (slides and from the text) are occasionally discussed using the vocabulary and approach of this technique. Responses solicited from students at these points invariably become more confident and well-developed as the term progressed and as the tutorial exercises were practiced.

This approach (using non-religious images first) is pedagogically effective but seems to run counter to the desires of many students. Several students criticized the two-part exercise in informal evaluations, stating that they would prefer to start straight away with religious images. To investigate this issue, we ran the exercise once using religious images in both classes, asking students to focus only on artistic elements using Feldman's technique in the first class and to draw out religious themes only in the second class. As expected, students were generally unable to refrain from discussing religious issues in the first class, even when instructed to simply practice Feldman's technique. Judging from the presentations that each group made after the exercise, this seemed to hinder them from building the initial foundation on which to firmly base a religious interpretation. This informal comparison reinforces our decision to work with religiously neutral images in the initial exercise, allowing students to consolidate the foundational technique before moving on. Student impatience at working with non-religious images in a

Religious Studies class is compensated for by the more effective learning of this valuable set of skills.

Although the second exercise (working with religious images) can sometimes work well with images from the course textbook, it is generally more useful to preselect a set of images that offer clear correlations between artistic and religious elements. The authors have prepared several sets of colour photocopies (seven of each image) with a colour transparency of each image. This allows students to work in small groups, with each group discussing a separate image, and then to present their results to the class using an overhead projector. We have worked with a variety of religious images in the second exercise. We chose to work with Christian Jewish, and Muslim images, given that the class we worked with is an Introduction to Western Religions course (e.g., Orthodox icons such as the Harrowing of Hell; western images of the Passion; Jewish manuscript illustrations of Moses receiving the Torah or the parting of the Red Sea; North Indian Muslim images of Prophet Muhammad being visited by the angel Gabriel, etc.).

Handouts or worksheets are an important component of both exercises. For the first exercise, our worksheet provides an overview of Feldman's four steps lists and a checklist of elements to look for in the first two crucial steps of description and analysis (see Table 1). For the second exercise, it is useful to provide students with a list of religious concepts that students might expect to find expressed visually (see Tables 2, 3 and 4).

There are, of course, limitations with this technique. (1) Teaching and practicing this technique adds to a crowded syllabus. At least two class sessions are needed to introduce students to the technique. It is also important to dedicate additional class time to practicing it, though this can be worked into slide lectures and references to images in the course textbook. However, especially in classes with tutorials, the benefits warrant the investment of time and preparation. (2) The technique works better with general religious concepts than with traditions specific iconography. However, this can be an advantage given that the technique is especially suited to the comparative study of religion, allowing students to work with the important distinction between tradition-specific and more general themes and symbols. (3) The technique is better suited to some types of images than others: it works better with works of art than with documentary photography; it works better with symbolic than with purely representational images; and it is not well suited to images of sacred artifacts and spaces. However, the technique can be useful with well chosen images of any type, and a similar linkage of art criticism and discipline-specific concepts could be developed for analyses of sculpture and architecture. (4) For the reasons just cited, this technique does not work well with the majority of images found in introductory Religious Studies texts. This is a reminder that the use of images in religious studies texts is often very naïve from both artistic and conceptual perspectives. Most text images serve to illustrate types of sacred artifacts, spaces, or roles rather than to illustrate the visual expression of religious concepts.

Some instructor preparation is needed before bringing these exercises into the classroom. This same preparatory work can, of course, allow the exercise to

be used in many disciplines other than Religious Studies. The first exercise, Feldman's technique for generating artistic interpretations, is foundational. The second exercise can be modified to fit any discipline whose basic categories and concepts can be expressed visually. Instructors need to think through the means of visual expression using a number of examples and to prepare a lecture or handout advising students what to look for. The following preparatory steps would allow instructors to elaborate the visual expression of concepts in their discipline:

1. Examine images that express concepts of your discipline.
2. Work through Feldman's technique with some of these images yourself, considering discipline-specific categories and concepts, and asking *how* these are conveyed visually.
3. Brainstorm a list of concepts of your discipline, distinguishing general concepts from specific iconography.
4. Create a list of key concepts and their visual expression.
5. Choose and reproduce a set of examples for use in class.

With this approach, it is possible to guide students toward a more profound understanding of visual expression, allowing them both to learn more from the course and to develop skills that will allow them to understand art and imagery in many contexts outside the classroom.

Conclusions

This technique offers three advantages in the Religious Studies classroom. First, it offers students a practical and methodical means to draw out religious significance from images. Given the importance of religious imagery to the discipline, and given the fact that techniques for its interpretation are generally not made explicit, this approach can be a valuable addition to introductory and even advanced courses. Using this technique in the classroom complements text-based exercises, allowing students to approach course material from a different angle while still working with the basic concepts of Religious Studies. Second, images aside, it provides a means of clarifying and reinforcing these basic categories and concepts of the discipline. As a comparative discipline, Religious Studies necessarily works with general concepts (sacred space and time, transcendence, salvation, etc.) as a means of organizing and discussing religious phenomena. Any opportunity for students to practice applying these tools of the discipline is an effective learning exercise. Third, for both these reasons, this technique can be a valuable tool for helping students to achieve course, program, and institution-wide learning outcomes.

The value of this technique for reading images in the Religious Studies classroom is best supported by the very positive responses we have received from students. The exercises are fun and engaging, and students have told us that working with images has helped them think about religion in a new and useful way and that the technique itself will be of great use to them in this and other classes. We will conclude with the words of a student who worked

through these exercises with us this past term: “ I’m going to use this for the rest of my life, even reading newspapers. I’ll never look at an image the same way again.”

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