

Volume 1.2 Spring 2015

The Yale ISM Review
VOLUME I · NO. 2: *Passion*



Editorial V1.2

By | Volume 1.2 Spring 2015

Our spring issue of *The Yale ISM Review* is devoted to the Passion of Jesus Christ. In it we have collected examples of how this central mystery of the Christian faith has inspired and continues to inspire music, art, literature, homiletics, liturgy, and devotion. You will also find in these pages contributions that wrestle with ethical and theological questions surrounding the Passion. Our hope is that what we have been able to offer here will inform, stimulate, and enrich your own response to the sacred story and the works that depict it.

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~ Rita Ferrone, editor

April 2, 2015

In This Issue

By Rita Ferrone, editor | Volume 1.2 Spring 2015

The Italian historian of early Christianity, Rainiero Cantalamessa, in his book, *The Mystery of Easter*, draws attention to a fact that might surprise readers today. Prior to the third century, the Passover of Christ—the Pascha, or what we might call the Easter mystery—was centered on the Passion.

Christ's death is at the center of the Passover in this earliest period: not the death in itself as a brute fact, but rather as "the death of death," as "the swallowing up of death in victory" (cf 1 Cor. 15:54). Christ's death is seen in its irrepressible vitality and saving force, by which, as St. Ignatius of Antioch says, "his passion was our resurrection."^[1]

I thought of this when putting together this issue of *The Yale ISM Review*, which is organized around the theme of Christ's Passion. Each of the very diverse contributions offered here bear witness to a kind of irrepressible vitality that resides in the subject of the Passion—a vitality that has awakened responses from artists and musicians, homilists and theologians, writers and poets through the centuries, and continues to do so today.

Our first cluster of contributions is situated in the realm of corporate worship. Teresa Berger's Good Friday homily was delivered as part of a liturgy in New Haven. Weaving together scripture, human experience, and the iconic spiritual "Were You There," she makes us stop, look, and be present to the Passion with a keen intensity. Mary Boys then deftly guides us through the light and shadows that surround the difficult subject of anti-Jewish elements in the Passion. She also offers practical suggestions for how to bring into worship a more truly life-giving, pastoral approach to these issues. Finally, the liturgical setting of Bach's *St. John Passion* is a palpable presence in Margot Fassler and Jacqueline C. Richard's splendid 2009 documentary, *Performing the Passion*, which we revisit in this issue. We have made the whole film available on line, for the first time, along with a study guide.

Next, we step back a bit to reflect on Christ himself, whose identity is both revealed and hidden in his Passion. Who is this Jesus, who was crucified? The subject is explored within the realm of literature—first by Peter Hawkins's fine discussion of literary portrayals of the Agony in the Garden, and then by Malcolm Guite's poetry, of which we are pleased to offer two arresting examples: "Jesus Weeps" and "I Am the Door of the Sheepfold."

Although the visual arts richly communicate "the saving force" of the Passion in a liturgical environment, as our cover art from a twelfth-century Macedonian church shows, they also play an important role in personal devotions, which are found in many and varied cultural guises. The final section of our issue brings us some examples. The Kongo Triple Crucifix, and Cécile Fromont's trenchant commentary on it, call us to journey to seventeenth-century Central Africa, where the arts and culture of the Kingdom of Kongo engaged with Portuguese Catholicism. Tim Cahill then takes us on a tour through four modern and contemporary "re-readings" of the Stations of the Cross in art, which pass outside traditional religious conventions yet lead us back to the sacred.

In each issue our closing feature—"One Final Note"—cuts across the subject matter of the issue from a

different angle, to interrupt our reading in a good way, to provoke a different thought. Our Passion issue ends with a conversation with liberation theologian Jon Sobrino, whose life's *passion* (love, desire) has been to take the poor, the "crucified peoples," down from the cross. He speaks to us from El Salvador, about resurrection.

With gratitude to all our contributors, I commend this issue to our readers as a window onto the "irrepressible vitality" of the Passion.

FOOTNOTE

[1] Raniero Cantalamessa, OFM Cap, *The Mystery of Easter*, trans. Alan Neame (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993), 12.

On the Cover

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Threnos (Lamentation), 1164, fresco in the Church of St. Panteleimon, Nerezi, former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Photo © 2012 by Philip Truax (M.Div. '13). Licensed for academic use only.

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Don't Just Do Something, Stand There!

By Teresa Berger | Volume 1.2 Spring 2015

This sermon on John 18:1-19, 42 was delivered at St. Thomas More Chapel and Center at Yale University on Good Friday, March 29, 2013.

"And there they crucified him." The lengthy Passion narrative with its betrayals, sufferings, and the host of people who crowd the narrative—disciples, Judas, soldiers, guards, a high priest's slave named Malchus, Annas, Caiphas, the gatekeeper-maid, Peter, another slave of the High Priest, Pilate, the two who are crucified with Jesus—all of this turmoil comes to a halt in one short sentence: "And there they crucified him."

It will not be long before another short sentence brings the whole of Jesus's earthly life to its close: Jesus "hands over his spirit." He tastes death. Jesus, the human face of God, who entered our human existence, experiences the end of that existence.

On one level, Jesus's death is simply the other end of the arc that began with his birth: He truly became one with us, in being born. He truly now becomes one of us in dying. Granted, this death came at a relatively early point in life—but then, so do many deaths in our world. And yes, Jesus's death did not only come early and was violently inflicted; it was also exceedingly painful, indeed torturous. Yet Jesus's death was probably no more torturous than the dying of a young woman on a bus in India some months ago. The young woman had been abducted, repeatedly violated in the most brutal, dehumanizing ways imaginable, savagely beaten and then left to die.

Why, then, have people for close to two thousand years gathered around the story of Jesus's Passion and death? And why do we continue to ask each other, in the words of the song we will soon sing: "Were you there?" "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" The answer for all of us after all is: No. We were not there, two thousand years ago. Yet the liturgy of Good Friday labors, as no other liturgy in the year, to render present Jesus's dying in our midst, to make it coterminous with our own lives. I suggest to you that in doing so, this liturgy is seeking to embody a particular truth: Good Friday is about being there, about being present, about com-passion, and suffering with. As it was on that Friday so long ago, so it is also today.

Some months ago I was struck by the report of a conference on palliative medicine. The conference focused on doctors caring for terminally ill patients. One of the presenters reported that many doctors feel compelled to "do something" in the face of death, often in the form of continuing aggressive treatments, although the doctors themselves know that those treatments are futile. The palliative care expert suggested that instead of "doing something," one's calling might rather be this: "Don't just do something, stand there!"

I myself by now am old enough (and have lived in this culture for long enough) to have heard many Good Friday sermons that preach the opposite, namely: "Don't just stand there, do something: go, give, share, love!" No doubt those *are* crucial imperatives. Yet there is a danger if they become the only and the whole truth we embrace on Good Friday. Why? Because this message—"Do something!"—suggests

that simply being there, standing at the foot of the cross, is an inadequate and poor response. We need to *do* something, so the thinking goes, for Jesus's death to be meaningful—as if Jesus's death on the cross were meaningless, unless we ourselves give it meaning.

In and for this liturgy on the Friday of the Passion of the Lord, I suggest to you that, on the contrary, it is not us and our doing that give meaning to Christ's death. God has already done that, when God faced down dying and death on Good Friday and on Easter morning spoke a powerful “no” to the finality of the death of Jesus. That act, that doing of God—rather than our own—is the ultimate word on the meaning of Good Friday.

Our calling in this liturgy is to let Christ's death give meaning to our lives. And, for that to take place, our presence, our “just standing there” is all the liturgy asks of us. Yet this is no easy task. “Just standing there” actually is a profound challenge, especially for people like us. We do not just want to stand there, and that with empty hands. We want to do something, and move into action. If nothing else, such action at least lessens and covers our own feelings of helplessness. Yet, “just standing there”—truly being present to the agony of the other and to our own helplessness in the face of it—is the calling of this liturgy. It is also what those few disciples did who did not flee: Mary the mother of Jesus, the beloved disciple, the other women at the foot of the cross. What, after all, can disciples do when the feet of the one they were following are nailed to a cross? These few disciples remained at the feet of Jesus and the foot of the cross, standing there in com-*passion*, in suffering with. Such presence, such real presence, is our calling too, in this liturgy. The doing will follow, and more deeply, the deeper we have been present to the agony of the cross.

Where is the Good News in this? The Good News, for our “being there,” is that Good Friday is not primarily about remembering as a form of thinking back. Rather, Christians believe that the One who was crucified and died is also the One who continues to live in our midst as the Risen One. The Friday of the Passion of the Lord, after all, is not really about remembering the death of a good, decent, wrongfully convicted human being; it is about so much more. Good Friday reveals God's gift of God's self unto death for the life of the world, a gift that gives meaning to our lives and redeems, not only us but the whole cosmos.

What would it mean, then, for you simply to practice presence in this Good Friday liturgy? To let the meaning of your life—its deepest mystery, its places of profound pain where quick fixes are impossible—reveal itself as you stand under the cross, as you venerate this cross as the place where the feet of Jesus, whom you seek to follow, were brought to a halt. Simply stand there for a moment, at the foot of the cross. And hear your name being called from this place of presence: Mary mother of mercy; John beloved disciple; Elisabeth my sister; Carolyn my friend; Father Eddie and Father Bob; Katie, Janet, Stefan, Teresa . . . Know that your very being is redeemed and made whole at the foot of the cross and in the presence of the Crucified One.

Teresa Berger is Professor of Liturgical Studies and Thomas E. Golden Jr. Professor of Catholic Theology at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music and Yale Divinity School. Her scholarly interests lie at the intersection of theological and liturgical studies with gender theory. Her publications include *Gender Differences and the Making of Liturgical History*; *Dissident Daughters: Feminist Liturgies in*

Global Context; *and* Fragments of Real Presence: Liturgical Traditions in the Hands of Women. *She has also written on the hymns of Charles Wesley and on the nineteenth-century Anglo-Catholic revival. She was editor of* Liturgy in Migration: From the Upper Room to Cyberspace, *essays from the 2011 ISM Liturgy Conference.*

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Jews, Christians, and the Passion of Jesus

By Mary Boys | Volume 1.2 Spring 2015

What do we do with biblical texts that are both vital to the life of the church and harmful to another religious tradition? To put it another way, how do we unleash the power in the story of the Passion of Jesus while acknowledging that this story has also served as raw material for harsh depictions of Jews as enemies of Christ, and thus of Christianity?

How do we teach sacred texts that have been used sacrilegiously? How do we expose the shadow side without blocking the light?

Context

The accusation that Jews are implicated in the death of Jesus suffuses the New Testament, most explicitly the Gospel of John, but also the other three canonical gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians. Paul, of course, approaches the death of Jesus from many perspectives beyond who is responsible for the Crucifixion.

These texts, particularly the Passion narratives, are proclaimed in Christian worship; as scripture, they are sacred and normative writings. They cannot merely be set aside. Entire liturgical celebrations are built around the story in those Christian traditions that observe Holy Week.

Further, the fundamental plot line of these texts is widely known, even among those largely unschooled in the Christian tradition. Although its underlying argument is the more abstract claim that Jews "rejected" Jesus, this allegation comes alive through a drama of good versus evil, of innocent suffering and ultimate vindication. The characters are memorable, especially the villainous ones (e.g., Judas, Caiaphas, the chief priests and elders of the people, "the Jews"). Scenes from the various Passion narratives have dominated Christian art, been enacted in Passion plays and films, and been a staple of sacred music. One need never have picked up a New Testament to know the basic contours of the story of the Crucifixion of Jesus and the events leading to it. Or you could pick up Bill O'Reilly's new book, *Killing Jesus*.

Yet, while familiar with the plot of the Passion story, relatively few Christians are cognizant of its consequences for Jews. In part, this stems from the demographic reality that most Christians in the world do not encounter Jews in their daily lives. As a result, the church's relationship with Judaism seems tangential to their practice of Christianity. In some respects this is understandable, particularly in communities overwhelmed by poverty and violence; their degree of dislocation is already so severe that further immersion in the shadow side of the tradition could be paralyzing. Yet it is also likely that Christians in such communities, typically lacking the resources and opportunities for knowledge of the history, will therefore continue in the inadequate view of Judaism that has been part of the tradition. Still others prefer to look away from our tradition's shadow side, lest it give credence to contemporary secular critics who revile theism, claiming that "religion poisons everything."^[1]

But whether or not Christians encounter Jews in their daily lives, we are obliged to honor the commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exod. 20:16 and Deut. 5:20).

To put it plainly: Christians have used texts to bear false witness against Jews, albeit often because they assumed that the texts were factual. In this graced moment in history, however, we have both the resources to read ancient texts in new ways and the ethical obligation to do so. This is not a matter of rewriting but of rereading and reinterpreting them.

Framework

Thinking pedagogically about how to help Christians confront the shadow side of our tradition gave rise to a threefold heuristic of “tellings”: a trembling telling, a troubling telling, and a transformed telling. These three tellings structure the three major sections of my book, *Redeeming Our Sacred Story: The Death of Jesus and Relations between Jews and Christians*. A word on each of them:

Trembling Tellings. Stories of Jesus’s death lie at the core of Christian identity. They offer an encounter with his experience of the human condition: betrayals by those closest to him, his own fear of death, uncertainty about God’s will, and the endurance of terrible suffering and an ignominious death. These stories cause us to “tremble, tremble, tremble,” as the great spiritual “Were You There?” expresses it. Moreover, the dying and rising of Jesus lies at the center of Christian liturgical life, spirituality, creeds, and doctrines. It has evoked centuries of reflection, given rise to meaningful rituals, inspired art and music, been the subject of theological exploration, motivated persons to sacrifice themselves for a cause greater than themselves, and sustained persons through times of suffering. The stories of Jesus’s death lie at the heart of what is sacred in Christianity.

Precisely because of their sacredness and the manner in which many Christians hold them dear, one must first acknowledge the power that these stories hold in various communities: the *Passion as a symbol of resistance to evil*, including protest against violence, racism, torture, poverty, and militarism; the *Passion as a mirror of people’s suffering*; and the Passion and Resurrection as *the Paschal Mystery at the heart of Christian life*. There is even a crucifix scratched on the wall of cell #2 in the infamous “Death Block” of Auschwitz I, a place of torture and death primarily for non-Jewish political prisoners.^[2]

These are stories “rightly told.” Redeeming Christianity’s sacred story first requires respect, even awe, for its power for good.

Troubling Tellings. Yet these “tellings” have also glorified suffering, condoned passivity in the face of violence, and constricted the meaning of Salvation by associating it only with Jesus’s death—as if his life and ministry held little meaning. These “troubling tellings” are the subject of considerable reappraisal today, particularly among feminist theologians. Yet insufficient attention has been paid to an even more troubling telling: misinterpretations of the Passion narratives that have rationalized hostility to and violence against Jews as “Christ killers.” This sacrilegious telling cries out for redemption—an unfinished task for Christians.

The key move here is to connect the texts, their interpretations and their effects—*Wirkungsgeschichte*, the history of a text’s influence over time. Dorothee Sölle terms this a “hermeneutics of consequences.”^[3]

Those who become more aware of the power of the Passion story must then confront its deadly aspects by looking closely at the way in which it has functioned over the centuries. This critical assessment involves examining New Testament texts about the death of Jesus that provided raw materials for hostility towards Jews. It then follows the way in which Christians have interpreted those narratives in

apocryphal texts, commentaries, sermons, formal teaching, and popular culture. It also involves probing the element of continuity between Christian teaching and preaching and the Holocaust.

Transformed Tellings. But respect and critique must be complemented by reconstruction. This reconstructive task is multifaceted. It involves drawing on contemporary modes of biblical scholarship that shed new light on the historical circumstances of the death of Jesus, especially the way in which crucifixion functioned in the Roman Empire as a mode of state terrorism to intimidate subject peoples and slaves into passivity. It requires exploring complicated matters of religious identity in the early centuries of the Common Era. It also entails formulating principles for interpreting New Testament texts in our time.

Moreover, we must make connections between Christian spirituality and a willingness to acknowledge the historical wounds that Christianity has inflicted. This requires a kind of vulnerability that refuses to be defensive in the face of disquieting truths. Facing our history—being responsive to it—involves dying to notions of Christianity that see it as *only* a force for good in the world.

Facing the tragic consequences of our troubling texts and seeking interpretations that are more just goes to the heart of the Passion. Michael Barnes, a scholar of the religions of India, suggests that the experience of Christians learning to relate to the religious Other mirrors Christ facing death.^[4] In the language of Christian spirituality, interreligious encounter is an experience of the Paschal Mystery, a dying to the small, protected world of the self and a conversion to the “providential mystery of otherness.”

Writing *Redeeming Our Sacred Story: The Death of Jesus and Relations between Jews and Christians* has given me greater appreciation for the depth of Christianity’s sacred story, and the obligation to live daily the process of redeeming it—and in that process, rediscovering the Cross of Jesus amid the crosses of history.

The following is an excerpt from the book, Redeeming Our Sacred Story: The Death of Jesus and Relations between Jews and Christians, by Mary C. Boys. Copyright (c) 2013 by the Stimulus Foundation, Inc. Paulist Press, Inc., New York/Mahwah, N.J. Used with the kind permission of Paulist Press. www.paulistpress.com

Turning Those Troubling Texts: Altering for the Altar

If indeed our bloodstained history has altered the meaning of the cross of Christ, what might be said from the altar? In particular, given the prominence of the death of Jesus in Christian liturgical life, in what ways might we “turn and turn again” troubling texts so that new interpretations might contribute to a more profound understanding of his death? In what ways might new readings of troubling texts do greater justice to the Christian relationship with Judaism?

By way of prelude, three contextual matters are important. The first involves timing: consideration of the manner and meaning of the death of Jesus should be integrated throughout the liturgical year, not limited merely to Lent or Holy Week. How preachers and teachers speak about the relationship between the Testaments, the Jewish Jesus and the Judaism of his time, the development of the church out of the Jesus Movement, the nature of the gospels, and Paul’s identity and mission provide a fundamental ground for interpreting the Passion and death of Jesus.

Second, it is vital to speak directly to the various troubling texts in the Scriptures—e.g., those texts that appear to condone violence, denigrate Judaism, demean women, and uphold slavery—whenever they occur. This does not mean belittling the Bible, nor does it suggest berating our ancestors in faith for their misuse of texts. Rather, it involves a frank admission that biblical texts and their interpreters bear the limitations and wounds of human finitude. Texts, therefore, must be read in a discerning manner. Too often, in the churches, the impression is unintentionally left that the Bible is something like a transcript of God’s voice emanating from the heavens. In contrast, it is important to recognize it as the “word of God expressed in human language.”¹

¹ Here the wording is taken from the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 1993, § IA; see § III.D.2; <http://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/vatican-curia/287-pbc-1993> (Accessed January 9, 2012). Peter Williamson considers this expression the first principle of the document; see his *Catholic Principles for Interpreting Scripture: A Study of the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2001), 28-30.

As Timothy Radcliffe says, the Word “does not come from outside but gestates within our human language. The Word of God does not come down from heaven like a celestial Esperanto.”² Texts need to be situated in their context as artifacts of human culture, lest we bypass the human reality in the search for spiritual meaning.³ Moreover, because of sinfulness, human interpretation always has a provisional character: the Scriptures “witness to people’s interpretations of God’s self-communication to them Since God enters people’s lives in the historical conditions and limitations of real life, their interpretations are colored by these circumstances and shaped by their myopia and blind spots. The human authors of the scriptures are at the same time virtuous and sinful.”⁴

Consideration of the role of polemics in antiquity helps to enlarge the context in which we interpret troubling biblical texts and early church literature. This is not to justify the “blood curse” of Matthew 27:25 or the oratorical excesses of Melito of Sardis or John Chrysostom. Rather, it is vital to situate these claims in their broader historical-cultural-literary framework. This requires mindfulness of our propensity for anachronism, such as thinking of “Judaism” and “Christianity” in the NT era as settled and separate traditions. It also requires recognition of the internal disputations involved in any diverse group, as well as the function of rhetoric in identity formation. As Luke Timothy Johnson shows, the believers-in-Jesus (or messianists) were part of a much larger debate within Judaism over the correct meaning of Torah. Their “rhetoric of slander” was part of the language of disputation in Judaism, evident in the Dead Sea Scrolls, Josephus, and Philo. It also must be understood as part of the conventional language of recrimination and debate in Hellenistic philosophical schools.⁵ Thus, regarding the “blood curse” of Matthew 27:25, Johnson says, “We cannot view with the same seriousness the ‘curse’ laid on Jews by Matthew’s Gospel when we recognize that curses were common coinage in those fights and there were not many Jews and Gentiles who did not have at least one curse to deal with.”⁶

² Timothy Radcliffe, *Seven Last Words* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 73.

³ Here I draw on P. Williamson’s wording in *Catholic Principles*, “No ‘spiritual’ bypassing of the human reality is possible,” 30.

⁴ Reimund Bieringer, Didier Pollefeyt, and Frederique Vandecasteele-Vanneuville, “Wrestling with Johannine Anti-Judaism: A Hermeneutical Framework for the Analysis of the Current Debate,” in *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel*, eds. Bieringer, Pollefeyt and Vandecasteele-Vanneuville (Louisville: John Knox, 2004), 3–37; citation, 34.

⁵ See Luke Timothy Johnson, “The New Testament’s Anti-Jewish Slander and the Conventions of Ancient Polemic,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108/3 (1989): 419–441.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 441.

Johnson's argument is crucial for recognizing the polemical context in which the New Testament was forged. Yet it falters once the followers of Jesus no longer understood themselves to be a part of Israel. As "Christianity" came to be understood as a distinct religion, Christian readers of the New Testament lost the ability to recognize the genre of slander as a language of disputation *within Judaism*. Instead, they interpreted the polemic as an accurate depiction of Judaism—with tragic consequences. Although acknowledgment of the conventional nature of New Testament polemic frees us from its mythic force and potential for harm, we must be mindful of the immense damage that has been done by generations of interpreters who misread the messianists' polemic as a factual portrayal of Jewish attitudes, practices, and beliefs.

Third, it is necessary to be attentive to what is deeply embedded in the religious imagination: "To 'imagine redemption' is to discover the difference that the death of Jesus makes right here and now."⁷ Patrick Evans evoked the importance of this sensitivity in the course of leading a session on hymnody in April 2011. He shared about a hymn that had deeply affected him since his childhood, "There Is a Fountain":

E'er since by faith I saw the stream
Thy flowing wounds supply,
Redeeming love has been my theme,
And shall be till I die.
And shall be till I die.
And shall be till I die.
Redeeming love has been my theme,
And shall be till I die.⁸

He observed that whatever complex theological understandings we may hold, on our death beds we will be far more consoled by the hymnody we carry deep in our memories than we will be by more abstract formulations. His remarks serve as a vivid reminder of the importance of learning what role hymns, poetry, prayer, ritual, and visual testimony about the Passion and death of Jesus play in the lives of congregants or students. Whatever new perspectives we offer need to be in conversation with understandings already embedded. Think of this as the "redeeming love" principle.

⁷ Sally A. Brown, *Cross Talk: Preaching Redemption Here and Now* (Westminster John Knox, 2008), 47.

⁸ Text adapted from Zechariah 13:1; lyrics, William Cowper, 1772; "Cleansing Fountain," attributed to Lowell Mason, 1702–1872.

Mary Boys is the Dean of Academic Affairs and Skinner and McAlpin Professor of Practical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. A Roman Catholic and a member of the Sisters of the Holy Names, she has a longstanding interest in liturgical and pastoral interpretations of Scripture.

FOOTNOTES

[1] See Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2009).

[2] See Teresa and Henryk Świeboczi, *Auschwitz: The Residence of Death*, trans. William Brand (Kraków and Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum and Biały Kruk, 2003).

[3] Cited in Ulrich Luz, *Matthew in History: Interpretation, Influence, and Effects* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 91.

[4] Michael Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 207.

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A Study Guide to *Performing the Passion*

By Rita Ferrone, editor | Volume 1.2 Spring 2015

Performing the Passion is a documentary produced by Margot Fassler and Jacqueline C. Richard at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music in 2009. It features a contemporary performance of the 1725 version of J.S. Bach's *St. John Passion*, conducted by Simon Carrington. Performers and scholars from Yale and elsewhere appear in the film. They describe and reflect upon this great work of musical art and the experience of performing it.

The following study guide is intended for groups of adults. It may be used in settings such as adult education programs, retreats, small faith communities, choir and sacred arts gatherings, and schools. This guide is written for the group leader who will shepherd the discussion and who will insure that all present are invited and encouraged to participate. (A handout of the discussion questions is provided below.) The introductions and questions may be adapted to those who participate, and simplified or shortened as needed.

Alternatively, the guide may be used by individuals as a self-study project, in which case journaling would take the place of discussion.

The film has been divided into two sections for the purposes of this study guide. The time frame for the study is three hours, including introductions, discussions, and a break. For large groups, additional time may need to be allotted.

Prepare

Arrange the seating so that the participants form small groups (4-6 persons).

Materials: Handout, means of projection for the videos, white board or large sheet of paper, markers.

Begin (20 minutes)

1. The leader welcomes everyone. If the participants do not already know one another, allow time for introductions within the small groups. Ask the participants to share their answers these questions: *How familiar are you with the music of J.S. Bach? With the St. John Passion (very familiar, somewhat familiar, not at all familiar)? What do you find engaging about his music, if you are familiar with it?*
2. On a large sheet of paper or a white board, have the participants brainstorm a list of as many themes of the Passion of Jesus that they can think of (suffering, betrayal, etc.). In small groups, discuss: *If you were preparing a creative musical presentation of the Passion today, what themes would you want to bring forward and why?*

View Part I

Invite the participants to view the first portion of the video: "Performing the Passion, Part I." (30 minutes)

Reflect and Discuss (30 minutes)

1. In the 1725 version, shown in the video, the first theme that appears is human sinfulness and the call to repentance (“Humankind, bewail your great sin.”). Later, we hear about Peter’s betrayal and the joy and difficulty of being a follower of Jesus. *How do these themes compare with the ones you identified before watching the video? In your view, how do the themes of the Passion that Bach brings forward—the sin of humankind and the path of discipleship—affirm or challenge audiences today?*
2. Several aspects of musical preparation for performing the Passion were discussed in the video: how rehearsals are ordered, how soloists prepare for their roles, vocal techniques, etc. *What impressed you as you watched these preparations for performing the Passion? Were there any surprises or questions raised for you? Discuss the implications of what was said in the film concerning musicianship.*
3. At one point in the video the observation is made that for Bach’s audience, “The chorales are the high point.” *Why was this the case? For you as a listener today, how do the various musical forms (recitative, arias, chorales) make a difference in how you engage with the music? With the story?*
4. In its original liturgical setting, the first part of the Passion was followed by a one-hour sermon. *Why do you think the sermon was inserted here, rather than at the end of the work? If you had to preach after having heard this much of the story, what sort of message would you proclaim?*

BREAK (20 minutes)

View Part II (42 minutes)

Re-gather the group to view Part II of the video.

Reflect and Discuss (30 minutes)

1. The charge that Bach’s *St. John Passion* is anti-Jewish is discussed in the video. *What facts or observations in that discussion particularly impressed you? According to Christian theology “all of mankind is responsible” for the Passion. Therefore no one group bears the blame for the death of Jesus. Do you think this is well understood today? Why or why not?*
2. Rather than dwelling on the violence of the Crucifixion, *St. John’s Passion* presents us with an account of the glorification of the Son of God. *How is the glorious quality of the Passion expressed in Bach’s portrayal? When the viola da gamba accompanies the words of Jesus from the cross, “It is finished,” what feeling does the music evoke in you? What is finished?*
3. A commenter in the video says, “The hero of Judah, Jesus, has won the struggle for all of us.” Bach expresses the intensity of this triumph in the music. But he then returns to the very intimate and personal response of the believer—a mixture of sorrow and hope. *Why do you suppose Bach did not simply end on a triumphant note? Why do “floods of tears” follow, and what does this say about our human response to the Passion?*

4. A Eucharistic theology emerges in the final portion of Bach's musical work. Jesus is the Paschal lamb; sins are forgiven and death is overcome through his suffering and triumph. *How are these elements related to the Lord's Supper / celebration of the Eucharist, as you understand it?*
5. The motet by Jacob Handl, inspired by Isaiah 57, starts with the words: "Behold how the righteous one dies / and no one takes notice; / the righteous are taken away, / and no one pays attention." *What does this text reveal about Christ's Passion? What response does this ending invite from the listener?*

Conclude (8 minutes)

Ask the participants to reflect on what they have learned in this study, and to identify an insight they want to remember. Depending on time, they may name that insight aloud to the whole group, or in their small groups, or to the person next to them.

Direct their attention to the list of materials for further reading, which appears on the handout, and encourage them to read them.

Conclude by thanking all who participated.

Click for PDF: [Performing the Passion Participant Handout](#)

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Who Do You Say That I Am? Jesus in Gethsemane

By Peter S. Hawkins | Volume 1.2 Spring 2015

An earlier version of this essay appeared as "He Who Hesitates is Human: Literary Portrayals of Gethsemane" in Perspectives on the Passion, ed. Christine Joynes. London: Continuum, 2008, 30-41; reproduced by kind permission of Bloomsbury-T&T Clark.

"Who do men say that I am?" Jesus asks his disciples in the Synoptic Gospels. They provide him with the various possibilities voiced on the street, but he is not interested in popular opinion. He wants to know where they stand. One way in which Christian tradition has responded is with creedal statements that aim to avoid error through clarity and definition. Take, for instance, the fifth-century *Quicumque vult*, the so-called Athanasian Creed. It wants to affirm at once that "our Lord Jesus Christ" is "Perfect God and Perfect Man"; he is "Equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead; and inferior to the Father, as touching his Manhood." By contrast, biblical approaches to the question of Jesus's identity bring the messiness of human experience into play: the Gospel stories, like narrative in general, open up possibilities rather than closing them down, require interpretation rather than assent.

A case in point: who do the Synoptic Gospels say that Jesus is, based on his last words? We find one "equal to the Father" in Luke's gracious savior, who is merciful to those who mock him ("Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," 23:34) and who promises the "good thief" a reward for his faithfulness ("Today you will be with me in paradise," 23:43). Likewise, the Gospel of John presents Christ in control of the horrible scene on Golgotha: he has the wherewithal to find his mother another son (19:26-27) and, before his final breath, to announce that enough is enough, "It is finished" (19:30). On the other hand, Matthew and Mark have Christ give up the ghost in a cry of dereliction, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The dissonance between these "last words" is lost when the tradition of preaching the Seven Last Words, for instance, merges the six "comfortable" sayings found in Luke and John with the single cry of Matthew and Mark: "Elo-i, Elo-i, lema sabach-thani?" Numbers talk, at least if you can get the cry of dereliction out of your head.

But what about the Garden of Gethsemane? The Gospel of John has us barely enter it: John places Jesus in an olive grove across the Kidron Valley (18:1) for the merest moment, and then only as the backdrop for his arrest. In the Synoptics—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—we find something quite different. Take Matthew's account in chapter 26:36-46. In this dramatic scene, Matthew's Jesus remains extraordinarily vulnerable until he sees that the end is nigh and takes charge, saying, "Get up, let us be going." Underscoring his loneliness, Matthew puts only Peter, James, and John in the Garden with him. When this trio was last assembled by Jesus, they beheld the apotheosis of the Lord in a cloud of glory and heard a voice from heaven say, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" (Mt 17:5). But now we have a reversal of the Transfiguration. Instead of encountering the Father's beloved Son in blinding glory, we find a Jesus in passionate turmoil, as described by the narrator ("He was grieved and agitated") and confirmed by Jesus himself ("I am deeply grieved, even to death").

Add to these words dramatic gesture. When Jesus advances into Gethsemane's "oil press"—the etymology of the place name—he also moves more deeply into his grievance-unto-death: "And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground." Again, one recalls the Transfiguration account, when it was the disciples who fell to the ground "overcome by fear," only to have Jesus comfort them: "Get up and do not be afraid" (17:7). Here Jesus comes to the disciples, appealing to them three times to watch with him, only to find them fast asleep. "The spirit indeed is willing," he says, "but the flesh is weak."

It is not the disciples' weakness that is at the center of the story, however; rather, it is Jesus's humanity: his deep emotion, his need for creature comfort, and his dependence on the men who were his "little children." Whereas Peter, James, and John cannot stay awake even one hour, Jesus cannot rest for a single minute. Instead, he throws himself repeatedly on the ground, praying, "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." The Evangelist Mark further heightens the emotion by having Jesus call out not only to his Father but also (in a sudden move from Greek to Aramaic) to his Abba, his Papa—a one-word shift into an intimate mode of address. However, no loving paternal presence shows up in Matthew's Gethsemane. Jesus is devastated and alone.

This vision of Jesus at such a loss is one the Evangelist Luke cannot abide. His Savior may be "inferior to the Father concerning his manhood"—he may (as in Matthew and Mark) pray that the cup be removed; he may even sweat "like great drops of blood falling down on the ground"—but he is not alone. Suddenly there is an angel on the scene, come to give him strength. Nor does Jesus thrash about on the ground—Luke says instead that he "kneels"—or keeps trying to wake his three closest disciples. There is neither fear nor anguish in this scene, only a hero fighting the good fight, about to earn his crown of glory.

There is very little glory in more contemporary literary renderings of Jesus in the Garden. Nor is there much of any Godhead in his Manhood. For instance, in Rainer-Maria Rilke's "The Olive Garden" (1908), Jesus says, "I am alone, I am alone with all of human grief." Rilke does not allow any divine intervention: no angel enters the scene. Furthermore, he insists that Jesus's aloneness in the Garden links him to everyone else's plight: he is no different from anyone "born in the world."

And then there is Nikos Kazantzakis's *Last Temptation of Christ* (1955), which presents Christ's whole life as a struggle between willing spirit and wavering flesh. Gethsemane is where "the longing to see men, to hear a human voice, to touch the hands he loved" overwhelms Jesus. Thought of heaven all but disappears as he longs "to find on earth the only paradise anyone could want."

"Father," Jesus murmurs, "the world you created is beautiful, and we see it; beautiful is the world which we do not see. I don't know—forgive me—I don't know, Father, which is the more beautiful."

For José Luis Saramago, in *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (1991), Gethsemane turns into a temptation scene, in which God and the Devil are revealed to be two sides of the same divine coin. Together, they present Jesus with the "cup" of the future. They predict the deaths of the disciples, give a lengthy alphabetical procession of subsequent martyrs, and foretell the horrors of Crusades and Inquisition. This vision of continual suffering provokes a final confrontation between Son and Father. The scene ends with the Devil's observation, "One has to be a God to countenance so much blood." Saramago's Jesus is a dupe, his Father a vampire. We have come a long way from the Gospels here, let alone from the both/and mystery of the eternal Word made mortal Flesh.

Where I want to conclude, however, is with a contemporary poet, Denise Levertov (1923–97), who attempts not only to affirm the two natures of Christ, following orthodox Christianity, but also describe

a dynamic tension between them. She wants to convey the tightrope that Jesus walked, that Jesus was.

Salvator Mundi: Via Crucis[\[1\]](#)

*Maybe He looked indeed
much as Rembrandt envisioned Him
in those small heads that seem in fact
portraits of more than a model.
A dark, still young, very intelligent face,
a soul-mirror gaze of deep understanding, unjudging.
That face, in extremis, would have clenched its teeth
in a grimace not shown in even the great crucifixions.
The burden of humanness (I begin to see) exacted from Him
that He taste also the humiliation of dread,
cold sweat of wanting to let the whole thing go,
like any mortal hero out of His depth,
like anyone who has taken a step too far
and wants herself back.
The painters, even the greatest, don't show how,
in the midnight Garden,
or staggering uphill under the weight of the Cross,
He went through with even the human longing
to simply cease, to not be.
Not torture of body,
not the hideous betrayals humans commit,
nor the faithless weakness of friends (not then, in agony's grip)
was Incarnation's heaviest weight,
but this sickened desire to renege,
to step back from what He, Who was God,
had promised Himself, and had entered
time and flesh to enact.
Sublime acceptance, to be absolute, had to have welled
up from those depths where purpose
drifted for mortal moments.*

With the double title of her poem, Levertov places her text in the Latin world of the West, as well as (literally and figuratively) in Jerusalem. We are asked to behold the Savior of the World along the Holy City's tortuous Way of the Cross, long memorialized on the walls of many a Catholic church and perhaps presented most horrifically in Mel Gibson's 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ*. But "Salvator Mundi" also points to another Christological reality—to a traditional iconographic pose, in which Christ (holding an orb or some other accoutrement of authority) looks straight into the eyes of the viewer, as in the Albrecht Dürer painting of this name. This is John's Christ, radiant with glory.

Levertov depends heavily on visual art, but it is no Christus Rex whom she actually conjures up; rather, she alludes explicitly to two very different portrayals of the human savior of the world, each of which offers us a "Maybe" (the poem's opening word) of what Jesus was like. To begin, she names Rembrandt

and refers to his portraits of unnamed Semitic-looking young men taken to be “a Christ head after life”; his models were, in fact, contemporary Amsterdam Jews. Levertov does not allude to Rembrandt’s Philosemitism or her own Jewish ancestry. Rather, she concentrates on the vivid, welcoming humanity of an un-haloed Christ—a thirty-something rabbi, an itinerant healer, or perhaps the word-playing stranger who engaged the much-married Samaritan woman at her village well.

*Maybe He looked indeed
much as Rembrandt envisioned Him
in those small heads that seem in fact
portraits of more than a model.
A dark, still young, very intelligent face,
a soul-mirror gaze of deep understanding, unjudging.*

In contrast to this gentle, serene visage—this portrait of the Savior as a young Jew—she then conjures “that face, in extremis” and therefore moves us away from the day-to-day life of Christ’s ministry to the terrible end-game of his passion. But whereas Rembrandt could give a probable likeness of the young Jew, she says, none of the Old Masters (“even the greatest”) could convey in line or paint what the tortured man must have looked like in his agony. “That face, in extremis, would have clenched its teeth / in a grimace not shown in even the great crucifixions.”

The rest of the poem takes us along the Via Crucis—the second part of the poem’s title—from the Garden of Gethsemane to Golgotha, by means of an imaginative exploration of the Savior’s interior life. Levertov signals Christ’s divinity not only by referring to him as “He” and “Himself” in the reverential upper case, but also by the quasi-creedal language she uses in her God’s-eye view of the Incarnation. The descent into human vulnerability was “what He, Who was God, / had promised Himself, and had entered / time and flesh to enact.” Here we have one “Equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead.”

Most of the text, however, explores what Levertov refers to as Christ’s “burden of humanness,” that is, the sheer weight of his being human. This Jesus is “like any mortal hero out of his depth.” He tastes “the humiliation of dread”; he experiences “the cold sweat of wanting to let the whole thing go.” In a show of personal empathy and identification with the male Christ, the female poet likens him to “anyone who has taken a step too far / and wants herself back.” She also suggests what the final refusal of the cup would have meant:

*Not torture of body,
not the hideous betrayals humans commit
nor the faithless weakness of friends, and surely
not the anticipation of death (not then, in agony’s grip)
was Incarnation’s heaviest weight,
but this sickened desire to renege,
to step back from what He, Who was God,
had promised Himself, and had entered
time and flesh to enact.*

“Maybe.” The poem begins in surmise, and uses the resources of art history, *lectio divina*, and the work

of sympathetic imagination to give us a keener sense of the God-Man. It draws to a close, however, in a flourish of the indicative, with the repeated assertion of what is (or, rather, what is not) the case. We approach the mystery of Christ's anguish by eliminating the likely possibilities of what he felt: we cannot know for sure. In her final lines, however, Levertov moves very subtly away from negative assertion and back into surmise. She won't presume to fathom the Savior's heart and mind any more than the "greatest painters" could capture his full likeness. All she has to go on is the fervor of her personal identification, her own conviction:

*Sublime acceptance, to be absolute, had to have welled
up from those depths where purpose
drifted for mortal moments.*

In these, her poem's "last words," Levertov brings together the passion accounts of Matthew and Mark with those of Luke and John without erasing their differences. The "sublime acceptance" of the Passion we find in Luke and John had to have, could only have "welled up" from the depths we witness on the bare ground of Gethsemane. For the God-Man to have been human indeed, and not merely playing at humanity, he would have had to (repeatedly) throw himself on the earth, his soul "deeply grieved, even unto death." Before the Manhood could be taken into God, it would have had to return to the dirt from which Adam was molded, dust thrown down into dust, ashes to ashes.

In "Salvator Mundi: Via Crucis," Levertov works valiantly to maintain the precarious balance of dogma but with an obvious tip of the scale in our human direction. She upholds the "purpose" of the Incarnation with orthodox conviction; she gives us a Savior of the World "Who was God." Yet her poem both lingers and terminates where it must, in the drift of those very "mortal moments" that link us to the God-Man—the "maybe" moments that may be all that mortals ever know for sure.

[Peter S. Hawkins](#) is Professor of Religion and Literature at Yale Divinity School and the Institute of Sacred Music. His work has long focused on Dante. He is the author of *Dante's Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination*; *Dante, a Brief History*; and *Undiscovered Country: Imagining the World to Come*. With *Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg* he has published two collections of essays on biblical reception in literature, *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs* and *From the Margins I: Women in the Hebrew Bible and Their Afterlives*. Currently they are collaborating on a Bloomsbury Press book on the Bible and the American short story.

FOOTNOTE

[1] "Salvator Mundi: Via Crucis" By Denise Levertov, from *EVENING TRAIN*, copyright ©1992 by Denise Levertov. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

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Jesus Weeps

By Malcolm Guite | Volume 1.2 Spring 2015

Jesus comes near and he beholds the city
And looks on us with tears in his eyes,
And wells of mercy, streams of love and pity
Flow from the fountain whence all things arise.
He loved us into life and longs to gather
And meet with his beloved face to face.
How often has he called, a careful mother,
And wept for our refusals of his grace,
Wept for a world that, weary with its weeping,
Benumbed and stumbling turns the other way;
Fatigued compassion is already sleeping
Whilst her worst nightmares stalk the light of day.
But we might waken yet, and face those fears,
If we could see ourselves through Jesus' tears.

Malcolm Guite is the Chaplain of Girton College, Cambridge. He teaches for the Divinity Faculty and the Cambridge Theological Federation, and lectures widely in England and North America on theology and literature. He is the author of *What do Christians Believe?*; *Faith Hope and Poetry*; *Sounding the Seasons: Seventy Sonnets for the Christian Year*; *The Singing Bowl: Collected Poems*; and *The Word in the Wilderness*. He works as poet and librettist for composer Kevin Flanagan and his *Riprap Jazz Quartet*, and has also collaborated with American composer J.A.C. Redford. He worked with Canadian singer-songwriter Steve Bell on his 2012 CD *Keening For The Dawn* and his 2014 Album *Pilgrimage*.

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I Am the Door of the Sheepfold

By Malcolm Guite | Volume 1.2 Spring 2015

Not one that's gently hinged or deftly hung,
Not like the ones you planed at Joseph's place,
Not like the well-oiled openings that swung
So easily for Pilate's practiced pace,
Not like the ones that closed in Mary's face
From house to house in brimming Bethlehem,
Not like the one that no man may assail,
The dreadful curtain, the forbidding veil
That waits your breaking in Jerusalem.

Not one you made but one you have become:
Load-bearing, balancing, a weighted beam
To bridge the gap, to bring us within reach
Of your high pasture. Calling us by name,
You lay your body down across the breach,
Yourself the door that opens into home.

Malcolm Guite is the Chaplain of Girton College, Cambridge. He teaches for the Divinity Faculty and the Cambridge Theological Federation, and lectures widely in England and North America on theology and literature. He is the author of *What do Christians Believe?*; *Faith Hope and Poetry*; *Sounding the Seasons: Seventy Sonnets for the Christian Year*; *The Singing Bowl: Collected Poems*; and *The Word in the Wilderness*. He works as poet and librettist for composer Kevin Flanagan and his *Riprap Jazz Quartet*, and has also collaborated with American composer J.A.C. Redford. He worked with Canadian singer-songwriter Steve Bell on his 2012 CD *Keening For The Dawn* and his 2014 Album *Pilgrimage*.

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Kongo Triple Crucifix

By Cécile Fromont | Volume 1.2 Spring 2015



*Kongo Triple Crucifix, 17th-19th century.
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Precious yellow brass, wood darkened by wear, white pigment, red powder, geometric designs, and copper nails are some of the constitutive parts of Kongo crucifixes. Illustrated here is one of an almost endless variety of Christian objects created in the west central African kingdom of Kongo between the

sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Elaborately crafted artworks, jealously kept insignia of power, and piously cherished devotional paraphernalia, the central African crucifixes illustrate the Kongo people's deep and enduring engagement with the visual forms and religious message of Christianity.

The highly centralized kingdom of Kongo emerged in the 1300s and extended South of the Congo River over the western part of today's Democratic Republic of the Congo and Angola. Its political organization centered on the person of the king who ruled with absolute power from his capital city over large territories through governors he sent from his court to the provincial capitals. The kingdom entered into European history in the 1480s with the arrival on its shores of Portuguese explorers and clerics in search of the new trade routes to India and new allies for Christendom. The result of this early contact with Europeans was the conversion of the Kongo monarchs to Catholicism and their decision to impose the new faith as the kingdom's official religion. That decree opened a new era in the history of central Africa, defined by its involvement in the commercial, political, and religious networks of the early modern Atlantic World. In that period ranging from the late fifteenth century to the unraveling of the kingdom in the late 1900s, the people of the Kongo embraced the changes brought about by the multi-cultural interactions in which they took part as actors of the Atlantic system and integrated these novelties into their own political, religious, and artistic worldviews.

Kongo crucifixes emerged in this era. Crucial parts of the kingdom's elite regalia, they heralded the power and legitimacy of kings and provincial rulers. Yet, they also encompassed a deeply religious dimension. Independently of foreign pressure, the artists and patrons who created the crosses confronted, merged, and redeployed in this new type of object local and foreign understandings and representations of the supernatural and its manifestations in the world. On the one hand, their crucifixes showcase expressively represented dying Christ figures. On the other hand, their crosses also communicated locally grounded ideas about the permeability between the world of the living and the world of the dead, expressed in central Africa through the sign of the cross. Thus Kongo crucifixes served as spaces of correlation that central Africans used to bring together the Catholic narrative of Christ's death and resurrection with age-old, local ideas about fluid connections between life and death. The new type of object recast Christianity and central African cosmology into two intricately linked parts of a single system of thought. With Kongo Christianity, Catholic dogma endowed central Africa's invisible world with new supernatural powers. Manifestations of the presence of God, witnessed by the people of the Kongo and recognized by the Roman Catholic Church, widened the perimeter of Christian orthodoxy.

This crucifix, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, also illustrates how the people of the Kongo engaged not only with Christian dogma but also with the European artistic forms that arrived in their land with the new religion. Three Christ figures have been arranged on an unusual triple cross that has over the years been repeatedly rubbed, held, and anointed, creating a thick patina on the wood and smoothing the surface of the brass elements. The artist who composed the object had access to two types of brass figures. At the top and bottom he placed small devotional objects of the kind that missionaries imported in the region by the thousands and that local artisans frequently recast in direct molds. A skilled Kongo metalworker however created the central Christ without a direct European prototype. The figure is visibly inspired from known imported examples, but its features have been reworked according to what became the local canon for Kongo Christ including prominent and stylized ribs, pointed knees, oversized feet and hands, simplified facial hair, and a carefully depicted loincloth. Ultimately, patrons and artists in the Kongo reformulated Christian figures into objects of their own, both visibly Christian and perceptibly Central African and altogether fit to herald Kongo Christianity.

This essay was first published in *Conversations*, a born-digital publication of the Center for the Study of Material and Visual Cultures of Religion ([MAVCOR](#)).

Cécile Fromont is an assistant professor in Art History and the College at the University of Chicago. She writes and teaches about the visual and material culture of Africa and Latin America with a special emphasis on the early modern period (ca 1500-1800) and on the Portuguese-speaking Atlantic World. Her first book, *The Art of Conversion: Christian Visual Culture in the Kingdom of Kongo* was published in December 2014 by the University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute for Early American History.

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Rereading the Stations of the Cross through Art

By Timothy D. Cahill | Volume 1.2 Spring 2015

Art historian James Elkins, in his book *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, tells a story of a sculpture at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago titled *14 Stations of the Cross*. Elkins teaches at the school and was interviewing students about their own religious-themed art. This Stations was “a large ceramic church, about two and a half feet high” covered with a “gray and white glaze [that] . . . dripped down like sugar frosting on an angel food cake.” Inside, the floor was pocked where the fourteen devotional tableaux of the traditional Stations had been torn away. The artist, an MFA candidate called Ria, explained she had “erased” her depictions of Jesus’ Passion, leaving only the clay structure that housed them. Elkins considered this, then gingerly suggested that, given the deletions, the work really wasn’t a representation of the Stations at all. It was, he observed, not unkindly, more a “large confectionary house, a sugarplum fairy’s house.”^[1]

“ ‘Well, to me it’s the fourteen Stations,’ ” the young woman replied, hastening to explain that, though from a Catholic family, “ ‘I don’t believe in all that anymore—the robes, the priests. . . .’ ” So, Elkins queried, why work at all with a motif that represents one of the most solemn rituals of Lent? Ria struggled to articulate her conception. “ ‘There is just something about them, I don’t know,’ she said. ‘I want the feeling, something about it . . . the real part.’ ”^[2] One can almost see Elkins’ neutral, knowing nod on hearing this. Later, considering the sculptor and her work, he concludes, “She wasn’t trying to poke fun at anything, or show off her cynicism. She was looking for something in her parent’s religion that she could accept.”^[3]

Ria’s tentative grasp of her work reveals the anxiety many young artists feel around religious themes. “Once upon a time,” Elkins writes, “—but really, in every place and every time—art was religious.”^[4] We know, of course, this is no longer true. The Enlightenment, the Reformation, modernism, postmodernism—all played their part in estranging art from religion. This happened slowly at first, then, seemingly, all at once. Disillusioned by the Holocaust and Hiroshima, then secularized by the “project of modernism” the 1960s and ’70s, contemporary culture has evolved to a point where the “word religion . . . can no longer be coupled with the driving ideas of art.”^[5] For artists seeking a place within the mainstream art world, this fact has left little latitude for their work to encounter the sacred.^[6]

The anecdote about Ria points to another fact, however. Not only does religion occupy a strange place in contemporary art, contemporary art also has expanded the interpretation and application of traditional Christian forms beyond their original ecclesial contexts. This has been especially true of the Stations of the Cross. As an artistic motif, the Stations navigate between church and gallery by surrendering the traditional form while retaining the rich connotations of the underlying narrative. The reinterpretations traverse boundaries and expand upon the ritual’s numinous core.

From Traditional to Non-Traditional Readings

The origins of the Stations of the Cross trace back to the time of Constantine in fourth-century Jerusalem, where Christian pilgrims visited holy sites associated with Christ’s Passion. By the twelfth

century, these and other sites formed a settled route of European pilgrimage, and in time the practice was established of walking the *Via Dolorosa*, the “Way of Sorrows,” observing significant points between Pilate’s court and Mount Calvary. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, reproductions of the Way were constructed in Europe at outdoor sites that themselves became pilgrimage destinations. Stations became common inside churches by the end of the seventeenth century, where their use was associated with the granting of indulgences (as they still are). The number and designation of the Stations followed local customs, ranging from as few as eleven to upwards to thirty-seven. It is not certain how the number or configuration we know today was fixed.^[7]

For the faithful, walking the Stations of the Cross during Lent is a personal pilgrimage of reflection and penance. While the devotion need not include a pictorial component (all that is required is a wooden cross at each station), the familiar tableaux have come to define the practice. The visual drama of the stations, whether naturalistic or stylized, is meant to stimulate empathic participation in Christ’s suffering. In a sense, each of the fourteen representations functions as a kind of time machine—one looks not at but through them to the historical events of the Passion. Modern artists work to undo this illusion. Their art is always resolutely in the present; it demands a very different conceptual engagement, situating both the viewer and the Stations in a liminal space between ritual and motif.

In 1951, Matisse achieved just this shift with a Stations he produced for a chapel in the south of France. Seven years later, Barnett Newman took on the subject again with the first of fourteen canvases for his series *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*, which was exhibited at the Guggenheim Museum in 1966. Countless artists have treated the subject since: elite names like sculptor Michael Kenny, painter Francesco Clemente, theater-artist Robert Wilson, and those unknown many like Ria, most of whom, it’s fair to say, out of aesthetic and cultural motives not related to the Stations’ original purpose. Some, like Wilson, neutralize the religiosity; others find in the Stations a secularly-safe way to engage the divine. The Stations of the Cross have evolved into a container for nearly any inquiry—formal, social, political, or metaphysical.

What follows is a consideration of four artists’ readings of the Stations. First, we will look more closely at the breakthroughs of Matisse and Newman, two seminal examples of the Stations from the twentieth century. In light of their influence, we will then turn to two artists working today: a New Zealand Catholic nun and painter for whom the Stations retain their religious importance, and a New York art photographer who found in the *Via Crucis* an expression of the sufferings outside his window.

Matisse: The Vence Chapel

Matisse’s commission in the Chapel of the Rosary in Vence, France, illustrates the Stations’ expansiveness. In 1947, the painter was approached to design the chapel’s interior by one of the Dominican sisters for whom it was constructed. Matisse, in his 70s at the time, had met Sister Jacques-Marie years earlier when, as the twenty-one-year old Monique Bourgeois, she became his nurse and confidant, and later his model and student. His paternal affection for the nun convinced him to take on the project he would later call his masterpiece. Matisse designed everything in the chapel, from its glorious stained glass windows and portraits of St. Dominic and the Virgin and Child, to the altar, vestments, liturgical objects, even the confessional door.

The Stations [Fig. 1] occupy the chapel’s back wall in a grid-like composition on white ceramic tiles, six-and-a-half feet high by thirteen feet wide, containing three rows of drawings. One reads Matisse’s Stations from bottom to top, beginning in the lower left and tracing a course like an S. There is no

outward journey the viewer must make in order to pass from one station to the next. The pilgrimage these Stations invite is entirely within the viewer.



*Fig. 1: View of the Nave, Stained-Glass Side Window and Stations of the Cross in the Chapelle du Rosaire, Vence, France, 1948-51 (stained glass and ceramic tile), Matisse, Henri (1869-1954) / Chapelle du Rosaire, Vence, France / © 2015 Succession H. Matisse / DACS, London / Bridgeman Images**

In a letter to the priest in charge of the project, Matisse called the Stations “a great achievement for me,” yet allowed they would “dismay most people who see it”[8] for the simplicity of their depiction. “Simplicity” hardly captures the effect; “graffiti-like,”[9] is how one critic saw the stark, schematic figures Matisse created with a stick of charcoal on the end of a bamboo pole. Patricia Hampl described the pathos of the work as “pained, scratching its way to Golgotha.”[10] “The drawing is rough, very rough,” Matisse confirmed in his letter to the priest, “God held my hand.”[11]

I have long admired Matisse’s drawings, yet I admit that at first his Stations left me unsettled. I passed through three stages of discernment before I comprehended the work as the masterpiece I now believe

it is. Initially, I considered the composition as a whole, surveying it like a map—establishing coordinates, reckoning the number system, identifying individual landmarks to anchor me in the scene. Then I looked critically at the separate depictions, debating whether Matisse’s drawings were the work of a genius or the marks of an old man. They reveal either the weakened capacity of a hand compromised by age, or the gestural freedom of a seasoned master. (I learned later that Matisse created a series of finely detailed preliminary drawings that he ultimately rejected.) Finally, surveying the chapel overall, and observing the sublime balance of each detail between reverence and beauty, praise and surprise, all suspicions crumbled. I turned to the Stations a third time. Their deep compassion toward suffering drew me all the way in, opening my perception to the vastness that Matisse in his epistle described as the “great drama ... interwoven around the Crucifixion, which has taken on a dreamlike dimension.” [12]

Newman: *Lema Sabachthani*

Barnett Newman achieved one of art’s most profound interpretations of the Passion with his [The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani](#). Newman was part of that formidable generation of abstract painters who raised American art to international dominance after 1945, in the related styles of Abstract Expressionism and Color Field Painting. His best-known canvases typically feature broad vertical bands broken by contrasting stripes or “zips” extending from top to bottom. Newman’s art makes frequent allusions to his Judaism and Jewish mysticism, roots that run deep even in the fourteen black and white minimalist paintings titled for the Christian Stations and evoking the most dramatic cry of the New Testament.

Stations of the Cross, in the collection of the National Gallery in Washington, is made up of fourteen raw canvases, each six-and-a-half by five feet, painted with vertical passages of black or white paint and dark or light zips. The series’ monochrome starkness is at once unsettling and contemplative. Its subject, observed art historian Jane Dillenberger, is “the individual’s encounter with God.” [13] This encounter, Newman wrote in the catalogue for his 1966 Guggenheim exhibition, takes place with the last agonized words of Christ:

“Lema Sabachthani—why? Why did you forsake me? . . . To what purpose? Why? . . . This is the Passion. This outcry of Jesus. Not the terrible walk up the Via Dolorosa, but the question that has no complaint. . . . This overwhelming question . . . has been with us so long—since Jesus—since Abraham—since Adam—the original question.” [14]

Newman places the Station’s meaning in the cesura between Christ’s crucifixion and death, in an instant when God’s grace can no longer be assumed. By removing the Passion’s visual markers, the painter—like Elkins’s MFA sculptor—erases “the terrible walk” and replaces it with a meditation on the Stations themselves. “Can the Passion be expressed by a series of anecdotes, by fourteen sentimental illustrations?” Newman insisted in the catalogue. “Do not the stations tell of one event?” [15] As Matisse transformed the Stations from literal to expressive, so Newman remade them from a drama with fourteen scenes to a poem of fourteen lines, a sonnet of existential suffering. [16]

Horn and Michalek: Transformational journeys

Following Matisse and Newman, artists saw their task—and their opportunity—as one of remaking the Stations with each new iteration. I met Mary Horn, a painter and Dominican sister in Oamaru on the

South Island of New Zealand, in 2010, not long after she had completed her own Stations of the Cross. [Fig. 2] She had been contemplating a set of Stations in the chapel beside her home, to replace traditional views painted a century earlier by four Dominican nuns. "I wondered what I would do in this new century to speak to people of our time," she explained of her own work. "This series is simpler and more intimate and somehow speaks not just of the Jesus journey but our journeys, where we encounter many different deaths, and are supported by others, or have to endure alone what is happening in our life."[\[17\]](#)



Fig. 2: Mary Horn, Station VI: Veronica Wipes the Face of Jesus and Station VII: Jesus Falls the Second Time, from Stations of the Cross, 2010. Images courtesy of the artist.

Like Matisse, Horn simplified the figures in her Stations, stripping them of specificity to underscore their common humanity. The paintings, she avers, speak not only of the Passion but of the 9/11 attacks, that "unspeakable journey that affected us all," and the suffering that has followed in the years since. "The 'Way of the Cross' speaks a hope for us all in the midst of such human-created devastation on so many levels," she observed. For her, as an artist and a religious, painting is both a form of prayer and mission. "Does art change my idea of God? The short answer for me is yes—a new time requires different images."[\[18\]](#)

The universality that Horn identifies does not need to be couched in religious terms. Yet the Stations are adaptable to many instances of suffering, particularly those of the individual struggling against authority. This was photographer David Michalek's conception for his 2002 *14 Stations*. [Fig 3] Michalek produced the series in collaboration with formerly homeless men and women affiliated with the Interfaith Assembly on Homelessness and Housing (IAHH), a non-profit organization located at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. Their Stations re-vision the motif as a narrative of deprivation and kindness, redemption and death, among the urban homeless.





Fig. 3: David Michalek, Station Six, from Fourteen Stations, 2002, and the series as installed in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, Boston. Images courtesy of the artist.

The work's central trope, Michalek said in a recent interview, insists that the suffering of the Stations, "is not necessarily in some faraway place, but on your own street corner This led us to the idea that our *Via Crucis* would become emblematic not of one man's walk, of one historical moment, but the walk of all humanity."[\[19\]](#) Michalek worked with the AIHH members to conceive and reenact episodes from the Stations based on their stories of living on the street.

The artist, who was familiar with the Stations from his Catholic upbringing, used them as "starting points that could become metaphorically expansive." As an example, Michalek cited Stations IV, V, and VI, in which Jesus meets his mother, then Simon of Cyrene, who helps carry the cross, and finally Veronica, who wipes his face. "These three encounters seemed similar and quite different," Michalek said, prompting the group to design tableaux around the theme of Christian *caritas*. "The embrace of the mother is an encounter of unconditional love. Simon is an encounter of a friend who helps get you back on your feet. And Veronica is the example of loving kindness. We asked, 'How can we fill in the themes with personal experience?' and from there built the images."[\[20\]](#)

The resulting tableaux reflected an ethos less of Old Master paintings than photojournalism and street photography. The large images, typically displayed in light boxes, have been shown at the Brooklyn Museum, Yale Divinity School, and other venues. They have also hung in churches, including the nave of Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Boston, an installation that blurred the lines between exhibition and devotion. "The work can live very easily in a church, and people who know how to use the Stations can use these Stations," said Michalek. "Yet if you come from a different faith tradition, it can still communicate a lot of the ideas essential to the original form without being tied to the dogma."[\[21\]](#)

Conclusion

The art of Horn and Michalek, like that of Matisse, Newman, and even, in her way, the art student Ria, provide new readings of the Stations. They present various ways the devotion may be reinterpreted, recast, or repurposed; they offer sides of a crystal with as many facets as there are artists. In taking the Stations from familiar shores of tradition, do alternate interpretations undermine the ritual's religious nature? An analogy from Thomas Aquinas may help answer the question. In reading scripture, Thomas argues, one goes beyond the text's literal sense to its "spiritual senses," meanings which flesh out the historical narrative with moral and spiritual implications. Alternative readings are salutary not for their sake alone, the theologian believed; they are a kind of excursion that brings the reader back to the literal word with deeper comprehension. T.S. Eliot expressed this same effect in *Four Quartets*, assuring us that

*"...the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time."*[\[22\]](#)

Artists rouse us from assumptions and challenge expectations; their new readings increase the resonance of the Stations. Looking beyond the traditional Lenten ritual can lead us, paradoxically, closer to the Passion.

Timothy D. Cahill is a cultural journalist and commentator. He was arts correspondent and photography critic for *The Christian Science Monitor* and a Fellow of the PEW National Arts Journalism Program at Columbia University. In 2008, he founded a nonprofit initiative to promote the engagement of contemporary art with values of compassion ethics, work that led him to deeper questions of aesthetics, philosophies of virtue, and theology. Prompted by these efforts, he enrolled at the ISM and Yale Divinity School to pursue a master's degree in Religion and the Arts. He is a candidate for graduation in 2016.

FOOTNOTES

[\[1\]](#) James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 34-35.

[\[2\]](#) *Ibid.*, 35.

[\[3\]](#) *Ibid.*, 77.

[\[4\]](#) *Ibid.*, 5.

[\[5\]](#) *Ibid.*, xi.

[\[6\]](#) Needing to draw borders around the elusive term "fine art," Elkins settles on the "institutional definition" of the art world, i.e., that work "exhibited in galleries in major cities, bought by museums of contemporary art, shown in biennales and the Documenta, and written about in periodicals such as

Artforum, *October*, *Flash Art*,” etc., to which he adds work engendered by top MFA programs and prioritized by leading scholars in the history of art.

[7] The traditional fourteen Stations depict scenes from the gospels and incidents from outside scripture (i.e., the three falls and the encounter with Veronica). Typically designated with roman numerals, the Stations are: I. Jesus is condemned to death; II. Jesus carries his cross; III. Jesus falls the first time; IV. Jesus meets his mother; V. Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus carry the cross; VI. Veronica wipes the face of Jesus; VII. Jesus falls the second time; VIII. Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem; IX. Jesus falls the third time; X. Jesus is stripped of his clothes; XI. Jesus is nailed to the cross; XII. Jesus dies; XIII. Jesus is taken down from the cross; XIV. Jesus is laid in the tomb. For a detailed history of the Stations, see the [New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia](#).

[8] “Matisse to Father Couturier, 27 February 1950,” in Henri Matisse, Marcel Billot, Michael Taylor (trans.), *The Vence Chapel: The Archive of a Creation*, (Milan: Skira Editore; Houston: Menil Foundation, 1999), 303.

[9] Alastair Sooke, [“How Henri Matisse created his masterpiece.”](#)

[10] Patricia Hampl, *Blue Arabesque* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2006), 200.

[11] Matisse, et al., 303.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Jane Dillenberger, *Image and Spirit In Sacred and Secular Art* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 104.

[14] Barnett Newman, *Barnett Newman—The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1966), 9.

[15] Ibid.

[16] A fifteenth painting, *Be II*, was exhibited by Newman at the Guggenheim show and has been seen with the *Stations of the Cross* ever since. Containing a thin band of red along its left edge, it is both a contrast and a companion to the black and white *Stations*; scholars debate as to whether it should be considered part of the cycle or not. There are those who contend a fifteenth station should be added to the *Via Crucis* depicting Christ’s resurrection; the question of affinity between the proposed additional station and Newman’s *Be II* is also subject to interpretation.

[17] Statement from personal correspondence with author, February 2015.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Interview with author, February 2015.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

[22] From “Little Gidding” in *Four Quartets*, T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 222.

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Resurrection

By Jon Sobrino, SJ | Volume 1.2 Spring 2015

Jon Sobrino, SJ, is one of the leading voices of liberation theology in Latin America. He has written numerous books, including *Jesus the Liberator* (1991), *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (1994), *Christ the Liberator* (1999), and *No Salvation Outside the Poor* (2008). He holds a doctorate in theology from Sankt Georgen Graduate School of Philosophy and Theology in Frankfurt and has been awarded numerous honorary degrees.

Born in Spain, Fr. Sobrino has lived in El Salvador for most of his adult life, teaching theology at the Central American University, which he helped to found (Universidad Centroamericana). Passionate concern for the poor has been integral to his lifelong theological project. His writings reflect upon “the God of the poor and of the victims,” the God of Jesus of Nazareth.

Fr. Sobrino experienced firsthand the ravages of the bloody civil war that engulfed El Salvador from 1980 to 1992 and claimed the lives of some 75,000 Salvadorans. In 1989, members of the elite Atlacatl unit of the Salvadoran army burst into the Jesuit residence of the Universidad Centroamericana, and shot dead six Jesuit priests on the faculty, because of their “subversive” work on behalf of the poor. They also killed a housekeeper and her teenage daughter, as they had been ordered to “leave no witnesses.” Fr. Sobrino was the only survivor, as he happened to be in Thailand at the time, giving a talk.

This massacre was an act of such wanton brutality that it caused the light of international attention to shine on the conflict and hasten its resolution. The martyrs of El Salvador died in solidarity with many others who perished in that conflict. Their death drew attention to those whose lives have been destroyed through poverty, hunger, lack of basic human rights, violence, and war—lives deprived of hope and freedom.

It is perhaps inevitable for Christians to associate innocent suffering with the Cross. Yet the Cross is not the end of the story. In the midst of a world of injustice and death, what does it mean to believe in the Resurrection? In his writings Fr. Sobrino has said, “I am writing from a place of victims and I am trying to reflect from their situation on these texts [of Scripture] that speak about a crucified man who was raised.” We asked him to speak with us about resurrection.

Production Credits

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