

Season 14: Episode 11 | Jonathan Anderson | Can Art Help Us See God?

Hello and welcome to Scripture Untangled, a podcast by the Canadian Bible Society. My name is Joanna la Fleur. I'm a friend of the Canadian Bible Society and I'm going to be your guide for today's episode.

Today, seasoned journalist Lorna Dueck will be interviewing Jonathan Anderson. Dr. Jonathan Anderson is the Eugene and Jan Peterson Associate Professor of Theology and the Arts at Regent College in Vancouver. His scholarship explores art history, theology, and religious studies.

He challenges students to see that many artists and artworks over the past century have been shaped by both religious tradition and religious questioning. His interview is a great challenge to our imagination and the arts. His latest book is called *The Invisibility of Religion in Contemporary Art,* and Dr. Anderson completed a PhD at King's College London and taught at Duke Divinity School as well as Biola University.

Dr. Anderson has also been trained as an artist and art critic, and we caught up with him at Regent College in Vancouver. Here is Lorna Dueck in conversation with Jonathan Anderson.

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Lorna Dueck: Hello, Professor Jonathan Anderson. We're delighted. Am I finding you in your study? Where are you today?

Jonathan Anderson: Yes, I'm in my office at Regent College.

Lorna Dueck: Yeah. Okay. You know, I'm excited about our interview because, you know, even to those of us who are not art experts, when we say the word art, when we're drawn to the word art, like we just know something special is about to unfold, right? What is it about art?

Jonathan Anderson: Well, that's a wonderful question.

I mean, I think the arts are a means of making sense of the world. They orient us in the world and do so by using sensory means. They engage our imaginations and our bodies, our eyes and ears in ways that are orienting us in the world.

Lorna Dueck: Well, and you're challenging us through your role as a professor there at Regent College to find the holy in art, to find what is holy. This has been a passion for you. Tell us about that.

Jonathan Anderson: Well, I'm particularly interested in the ways that the arts have served as means of theological reasoning and Biblical commentary down through the ages. They often are overlooked as such. Art history as a discipline tends to under-appreciate, under-interpret the theological intelligence of the things that it studies.

And that's not all bad, but it leaves certain blind spots in the discipline. And theology, including historical theology, also tends to under-interpret the visual intelligence of its own and artistic intelligence of its own traditions, which also leads to blind spots. And in some sense, both art history and theology have kind of contributed to the de-theologizing of the history of art.

So, I focus primarily on the visual arts, but I'm interested in music and film and literature, poetry as well. But I'm really interested in retrieving and paying more attention to the theological intelligence of the arts down through the century.

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Lorna Dueck: Okay, so I'm going to just back up a little bit because like many, yeah, boom, you took us deep right away.

But like many of our listeners, I'm not an expert in art. I don't even, you know, so maybe you should start by just explaining to me, what is visual theology?

Jonathan Anderson: Yes, visual theology is theology done in a visual medium, such as images, sculpture, architecture, spatial arrangements. And the idea is that images aren't simply performing a picturing of things, they're means of seeking understanding of relatedness, the relatedness of things.

They're just doing so, images are doing so specifically in the form of visual spatial reasoning, visual spatial relations. How is this related to that? What is central? What is peripheral? What is large? What is small? What is close? What is distance? What is the relation between persons, and world, and God, and time? All of those things are in play and at stake in images. And that relatedness, I mean, that's quite general.

But that relatedness, the kind of understanding of relations includes, it's theological, it has theological dimensions. Theology, too, is a faith-seeking understanding of relations, the relations between things. And so, artworks don't become theological when we speak about them, nor are images simply derived from words.

But the medium itself, the image, is a domain of serious theological reasoning once we learn to read it as such. So, the study, I suppose, just to say one more thing, the study of visual theology, if visual theology happens in the medium itself, the study of visual theology is exploring the histories of art as domains of theological reasoning and Biblical commentary. So, that's visual theology.

Lorna Dueck: Okay, that is complex. And for our listeners out there, I just want to say, everyone, I sent Jonathan a PS. As deep as I go on this is my Holman Hunt picture in the dining room.

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Did you like that, Jonathan, that I have a Holman Hunt in my dining room? And maybe let's start there because I think all our listeners would know this image. It's Jesus holding the lamp. It's Jesus holding the lamp, knocking on the door of our heart.

It's from 1835, I think 1835. And I don't know, it's lovely. It just speaks to me all the time.

That's visual theology, isn't it?

Jonathan Anderson: Yes, it is. And one of the things I'm interested in with my students is that, so singular images like that can have quite an effect on us, quite an impact on us, generate all sorts of insights. But once you start putting multiple images of the same subject matter in conversation with each other, you find that they are doing really different things or similar things, but they start talking to each other in ways that...

So, there are other, all sorts of other images as well of the heart of Christ or Christ knocking on doors, Christ approaching doorways that sometimes are hearts, metaphors for hearts, sometimes metaphors for cities or societies or families or something like that.

And as you put those into dialogue with one another, you discover that there's a great deal of dialogue happening across visual forms. So just to affirm, yes, the Holman Hunt is a work of visual theology, and it's part of several other larger traditions of theological inquiry and Biblical commentary in that case. I mean, it's, you know, Jesus knocking on the heart or standing at the door and knocking is like the images performing a reading of those texts as well.

Lorna Dueck: I can't imagine students in today's click-click world slowing down for this. There is still an appetite to learn this, isn't it? Or is it?

Jonathan Anderson: Yes.

I mean, I find that students really connect with the courses that I teach. I teach courses in Christian imagination, which kind of ranges across visual theology, musical theology, poetic theology. But right now, I'm teaching one called visual art as theology, which is just kind of rereading histories of Christian art as quite significant domains of theological inquiry.

And students love it. Once they get, I mean, I teach graduate students at Regent College. They're all very sharp, and they're all very engaged and keyed in.

But once we... some of them don't really have much experience with visual art, but once they start seeing how the images are talking to each other and how there's a great deal at stake in the way they talk to each other, then things just go. They unfold. So, I mean, a lot of my classes in that course consist of starting with maybe a little bit of an intro and then saying, well, what do you see here? And we just go.

And it's marvelous. My students, it's not uncommon for my students to evaluate the course by saying, this course turned on theology for me. Like, this is really helping me for my studies of theology and Biblical studies.

And that's right. Like, if you get into it, that is right. That's what's going on in the visual traditions of the church and its various lineages down through the centuries.

Lorna Dueck: Okay. How did this start for you? How did you get turned on to your theology? Yeah.

How did the Bible come into your life?

Jonathan Anderson: Yeah. Well, I grew up in a home in which my dad was a pastor. He was a pastor for the first 10 years of my life.

And so, he instilled in me quite a serious study of the Bible and of theology. Once I went to college, I went to university at the Biola University in Los Angeles. And there, I was part of a great books program that was focused on theology, literature, and history, Biblical studies as well.

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And I was always very skilled in the arts and loved the arts, but I had no imagination for what it would be to be an artist. It was just something I really loved. And so, I was taking art classes, not as an art major, and in this great books program.

And it took me a year or two for things to click. The arts were a domain for me, the visual arts, where everything I was interested in in the great books was in play and at stake. In the arts, it was just there in the form of visual spatial reasoning, rather than verbal reasoning.

And once those kind of clicked together for me, I was off to the races as an artist. And so, I was an artist and an art professor for about 12 years, returned to Biola as an art professor. And while I was there, I was teaching art history and studio art, and I became increasingly preoccupied with the way that art history and the way that professional art training works and the ways that it had a strong tendency to de-theologize the things that it was talking about.

So, in art history, we speak about visual developments and technical developments and political contexts, and politics is mostly what we talk about in art history these days. And so, you can take course after course in like Northern Renaissance art history, where it's all about, it's all Christian imagery, it's very deeply engaged in theological thinking, but we didn't discuss it. And art history has a hard time of discussing it in any extended way.

And so, that just pulled me into it, that kind of problem or question pulled me into beginning to rethink art history as a discipline by paying closer attention to the ways it was shaped by religious contexts and the ways that it was involved in theological lines of inquiry. It's not the only thing it's doing, but that's a significant thing that it's doing.

Lorna Dueck: You know, we often inquire of theology to help us live life.

Can art do that? Can art give you inspiration for the problems, the challenges of your life?

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Jonathan Anderson: Yes, I think so, in all sorts of ways, both constructively and critically. I mean, the arts are, I do think, are ways of orienting ourselves in the world. And when one encounters powerful works of art, they do speak for us in some sense or cause resonance.

They cause us to, they send us back to the world differently, differently attuned to things. So, that kind of is constructive, but they also do so critically. I mean, yesterday, I was teaching a class in images of the Ascension.

And images of the Ascension are really, usually problematic because you have, you know, what is the doctrine of the Ascension with relation to visual arts? So, you have all these artists who are struggling with, is it just upwardness? Where does Christ descend to? And those, by putting a whole bunch of images into dialogue with each other, we discovered that these images not only really shifted our understanding of the Ascension, doctrine of Ascension, but often did so by criticizing each other.

So that there are images, for instance, that depict the Ascension as rhyming with Moses' Ascent up Sinai. So, what is doctrine of Ascension? Where does Christ go in the Ascension? He ascends into the cloud.

He ascends up cosmic Sinai into the dark cloud where God is. Or others, the Ascension goes to the throne depicted in Ezekiel one and on and on. And these images start both critically and constructively reorienting the ways that we think about Ascension.

And I think the arts can do that on all sorts of things. They attune us to the faces of others. They attune us to the world around us.

I mean, reading a Hopkins poem will sort of never allow you to see birds the same. And so endlessly so on.

Lorna Dueck: Wow.

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We really need to be in an art gallery. Not a podcast for this, right? We need to be.... How has, it's a very noisy world out there. Tell me about your goals in trying to connect your students, listeners like ourselves to the holy in the reflective world of art?

Jonathan Anderson: Yeah, good. That's a really interesting question. Um, I mean, with the noise in the space of a lot of visual noise and just noise, my courses, and my scholarship tries to slow down the work of images and our attention to images a lot.

So, to really slow it down, and to attend to images as dense things that are densely meaningful, whether that density is for our betterment or our worsening, it's dense and full and needs attention. And I, do think that Simone Weil is right. "That, attention has everything to do with prayer." That, attending carefully to any aspect of the world, really most aspects, um, trains attention, toward the holy, toward God, that all training and attention is training to pray, to attend to what is and what God gives.

So, I think the slowing down, the kind of, instilling the conviction that things and the, and playing out the conviction that things are dense with meaning. Our problem with noise is not that things are too thin with meaning, and so we have to just keep accumulating them, it's that things are too dense with meaning.

We have to slow down the pace of our images, our image consumption, our consumption of most things, slow down the pace so that we can attend to things.

I think a big part of my own scholarship, even though we've been talking about, like, historical Christian art, a big part of my writing up to this point focuses on modern and contemporary art, and that's art that supposedly, it's art after art left the church, and supposedly abandoned the holy, we might say.

I don't think that's true, so I'm kind of constructively, rethinking the whole history of modern and contemporary art. But part of that arises, the impulse to do that arises from moving through the art world for many years and finding that, what you most often encounter among artists working today is not disbelief and is not a simple

abandonment or denial of the holy, we might say, but a pressurization, a conflictedness, a theological conflictedness.

A conflictedness of belief, a conflictedness of allegiances, a kind of confusion, how to orient oneself in relation to, a religious upbringing that includes pain or confusion or something like that. And that actually is not theologically vacant, but is often very theologically important, conflictedness is often theologically very substantive.

And, and so I think there's also something important about attending to modern and contemporary art and modern and contemporary artists in ways that is sensitive to the way that the holy is in play and at stake throughout that artwork. That's not the job for everyone to do, certainly, but that's something that is important for me.

God's Book: The Series: Taking a moment here out of today's conversation to give you a first look at an exciting new small group series from the Canadian Bible Society called *God's Book: The Series*. What does the Bible really say about science, miracles, violence, and suffering? *God's Book: The Series* is tackling the Bible's toughest questions in a new eight-part video series created for young adults and anyone who is asking honest questions about the Bible. Featuring Bible scholar Dr. Andrew Allerton and three Canadian young adult hosts, *God's Book* explores some of the most challenging questions surrounding the Bible through thoughtful and accessible conversations.

The series is about to launch, and you can be the first to know when it arrives. Preview the trailer and an episode and download your free launch kit at godsbooktheseries.com. That's gods book the series . com and as always, the links will be down in the show notes. Now enjoy the rest of today's conversation.

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Lorna Dueck: Okay, I think what I'm wrestling with is, yeah, people have a very mixed experience of religion and you're saying slow down, you can find that struggle in some art.

Jonathan Anderson: Yeah, that's right and that's, again, it's not important for everyone to resonate with everyone else's struggle, but as someone who went through art school and there are a lot of people going through art schools. There are just so many people in the art world working in the arts today, and it's important for some of us to attend to the struggle that's there.

Lorna Dueck: You know, Jonathan, I have sat with too many artists who have left the church.

They just felt they couldn't do what their spirit wanted to do in the church and I even think of a simple example in my evangelical church and this podcast, by the way, is an audience from orthodox all the way to the rowdy evangelical. I can remember a chalk artist expressing the sermon while an evangelical pastor was preaching, and the chalk artist getting tossed aside, but the speaking continues, but the drawing, we didn't have a place for art.

That's a little microcosm of the frustration of artists, isn't it?

Jonathan Anderson: Yeah, that's one aspect of it.

Lorna Dueck: What are some others? Speak to us about, because every one of us has got an artist in our family somewhere.

Jonathan Anderson: Yeah, I mean, so that's one aspect, a kind of a lack of understanding that artists experience from their churches, that happens. It's also,

another aspect of it is that has to do with this kind of de-theologizing that happens in art schools, in art history, the writing of art history.

So, if you go through an MFA program, for instance, or go through a graduate degree in art history, there is a certain grain to the history of modernism that gets developed that instills in students very often a story of rupture, that what modern art is, is emancipation from religion and from theological horizons of meaning, and that's not all bad.

That's part of what happens in modernism, but it creates such a momentum, and such that it begins sucking everything up into it. This is, it's the short version, or the short phrase for it is, there is a deep and very rigid secularization theory that's built into the heart of modern art history. And that sucks everything up into it, and it creates a kind of culture, a way of speaking about art that is sort of premised on this kind of rupture, emancipation sort of thing.

So, when you're studying art, and I don't fault that, like I say that not to sort of demonize art history or anything like that, but there's just blind spots, and there are places of occlusion and speechlessness, zones within the art discourse that become awkward and stifled and just undeveloped. So, the further you go in an art training, it's very possible to kind of not know how to speak theologically about what you're doing on the one hand and not know how to not receive any kind of support from the church on the other hand, or understanding, like they don't know how to speak. And it just forces this, and you add to that all sorts of awkwardness and political sort of problems within the church.

And all of that just sort of coincides to make it difficult for a lot of artists who are raised in the faith. And what they come out, how they come out of that process is not, again, as sort of simply disbelieving, but as internally conflicted. And so, a lot of what I'm trying to do is provide more space, more ways of talking, and of seeing that our offerings in both directions, it's offering to art history and the discourse of art, a kind of deeper theological grammar for what they're doing.

And on the other hand, to rethink historical theology in a way that has a deeper understanding of the artistic intelligence of the church down through the ages. I think that provides artists with more to work with, deeper resources, imaginative resources, and so on.

Lorna Dueck: Okay, I want to ask two questions here.

Let's start with, because I think, because we're going to have to keep describing this because that's just the way an audio podcast is. I'd like you to describe for our audience, religion in art that they would recognize, they'd right away go, oh, yeah. And then, and also, I love your arches that are on the cover of your book and what that symbolized about the picture being taken out of those famous arches.

So, describe some images, maybe just three.

Jonathan Anderson: Well, maybe I'll give you three different, really different examples off the top of my head. And one of them connects to the image on the cover of my most recent book, which is called, *The Invisibility of Religion in Contemporary Art*.

And that, as you say, is, it's a sculpture, a contemporary sculpture from 2014 by a Belgian artist named Kris Martin, or Kris Martin, if we Anglicize it. And it's the steel framework of the Ghent Altarpiece. And the Ghent Altarpiece is this very important altarpiece from the 1430, right around 1430, painted by Jan van Eyck and perhaps his brother, Hubert.

And it's a huge altarpiece with lots of cells and lots of panels. So, it's got wings and so on. And that is kind of an interesting example of how art history works.

There are, of course, theological discussions of that work, but you can kind of read a sort of book after book about that altarpiece. And it's everything from, you know, the invention of oil paint to the political structures of that, that surround its commissioning. And it was very important.

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It was kind of stolen and looted multiple times through history. So, there are all sorts of really interesting histories. But the painting itself, like the altarpiece itself, is fundamentally about the reconciliation of all things in the Lamb of God.

I mean, in its closed position, it is an image of the Annunciation, which is the mystery of the Incarnation. Mary says yes to the overshadowing Spirit, and Christ is born into the world. And one sees in that panel, through the space between the angel and Mary, that sort of pregnant space of announcement and response, and sees through that image into contemporary Ghent, like into 15th century Ghent.

So, one is supposed to see the whole world through the mystery of the Incarnation. And then once it opens, the altarpiece opens, there's a lot going on. I won't describe all of it.

But it centers on Revelation 5 and 7, the Lamb who is slain from the foundation of the world, who's enthroned in the centre of God's throne, and all the peoples of the earth streaming to the Lamb. It's new creation, and it is the reconciliation of all things. It is a theologically profound altarpiece, and as Biblical commentary, it's doing all sorts of things.

I mean, there are so many references happening, and they're happening in quite sophisticated ways.

Lorna Dueck: Jonathan, let me just give a little just reminder. This empty frame is the same as Ghent's, correct? Yes.

Jonathan Anderson: It's the same shape.

Lorna Dueck: It's the same shaping everything. But it's empty.

No religious images in it. None.

Jonathan Anderson: That's right.

Lorna Dueck: And that's modern art.

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Jonathan Anderson: Well, yes. Yes.

But the question is, so what is that emptiness? What is it? Is it showing us the kind of skeletal remains of a previous Christian thinking, a previous Christian culture? Is it like an afterimage of a society and a way of understanding the world that's now gone?

Or is it an aperture through which to see? Is it a window? Martin only installs that outdoors, never inside a gallery. And he says he wanted to be able to see through the altarpiece, which he preserves the framework. And what would it be for that altarpiece to become an aperture, a poly-optical aperture through which one sees all things?

Lorna Dueck: God's world.

God's world.

Jonathan Anderson: Yeah.

Lorna Dueck: Which one sees God's world through it.

Jonathan Anderson: Yeah. Somehow, even this, where I am being enfolded in the reconciling of all things in the Lamb, that's a live question. And I think there's in the work, and it's a live question in a lot of Martin's work, but there's a whole history of modern art that, I mean, well, here's a provocative claim.

It can well be argued that the history of modern art grows from John Calvin more than it grows from secularism.

Lorna Dueck: Really?

Jonathan Anderson: Yeah, because Calvin sort of famously was worried about idolatry, idolatrous images. And so, in, you know, chapter 11, book one of the Institutes, he's kind of going through no, no, no, no, no depictions of God, because it diminishes the fear of God and men and increases error, but no to images of Christ or the saints or Biblical scenes and so on.

And then he comes to a kind of an art theory, a whole art theory that he expresses in one sentence and doesn't elaborate on it, but subsequent artists do. And he says, but I'm not of the opinion that the arts are to be forsaken. They are a good gift from God.

So, what remains to be sculpted or painted is that which can be seen with the eyes. And he has this idea that the whole of creation is God's temple. That's why he closes the church six days of the week, because the church is supposed to teach you how to engage the rest of the world as God's cathedral.

It's the theatre of God's grace. And so, you have this whole development of Reformed artists who are perceiving the world and painting the world that they see, still lives, landscapes, portraits, and so on, as theological paintings. They're theological meditations on the way the world gives itself to us as fleeting but good gifts of God.

That's what so much Reformed painting is about. And that kind of turn toward the world as the theatre of God's grace runs through a lot of modern art history and gives birth to a lot of modern art and undergoes all sorts of changes. But, you know, I mean, Van Gogh was a Reformed Protestant painter, conflicted, like so many artists, but what he was doing was essentially an extension of that.

Turn one's attention toward that which can be seen with the eyes as the theatre of God's glory. And that runs through the, it's, you know, there are various modern, like abstract artists who are thinking in that lineage and so on.

Lorna Dueck: You know, you have really primed the pump for a lot of us to want to take your art course at Regent College in Vancouver. I'm out of time.

Jonathan Anderson: You're all welcome.

Lorna Dueck: Okay, good. I'm glad.

And you curate the art gallery at Regent. You curate that, which will soon be online. Is that right?

Jonathan Anderson: Well, yes.

The gallery has a web page that shows the exhibitions that are going on. And then we have art throughout the building. And that is going online as well, the permanent art collection at Regent.

Lorna Dueck: And your book, we'll have links to this in, is there anything else you want to say in closing about how people should read your book?

Jonathan Anderson: Well, *The Invisibility of Religion in Contemporary Art,* is a big book and it's an academic book. So be alert to that. It's, I think it's a readable book, but it is meant to adjust some of the writing of contemporary art history and some of the assumptions that we bring to it.

Lorna Dueck: And if at its most successful, Jonathan, you could change the conversation about art history because of that book.

Jonathan Anderson: I'm hopeful.

Lorna Dueck: I don't want to flatter you with that, but you're hopeful. Exactly.

You want to put religion back into our understanding of art, don't you?

Jonathan Anderson: Yeah. As a topic, and that doesn't necessarily mean arguing that everything is, turns out to be, you know, crypto-Christian art or that, you know, that everyone is really a Christian or really religious if you just look hard enough. It's not trying to make things say religious things, but I do think it's important for us to recognize the way that there are religious impulses and theological lines of questioning that are live, very much live in the past two centuries of art and certainly before that.

And attending to that in all of their complexity and conflictedness is very important to doing good art history, but it's also very important to the ways that the arts bear on our lives and bear on the lives of arts communities and arts publics and so on.

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Lorna Dueck: Well, Professor Anderson, we're going to have links to your book, to your work at Regent, to your podcasts there at Regent because you go more in depth with that there in the show notes down below. And thank you.

Thank you so much for being with Scripture Untangled today.

Jonathan Anderson: Well, thanks so much. I really enjoyed talking to you.