

“Finding God in the Most Unusual Places”

Just a few short weeks ago, I had the distinct privilege to stand before Rogier van der Weyden’s *Deposition* painting at the Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid. For an art history major like myself, this was a near-religious experience, not only because of the subject matter of the painting, but because of the extraordinary qualities of the work. This piece marks a seminal moment in the history of painting, notable for the intricacies of spatial construction and figural rendering used to portray Christ’s descent from the cross. The painting depicts Christ’s dead body prostrate in the arms of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, the Virgin Mary fainted in a pose mirroring that of Christ, and Mary Magdalene contorted with grief. I had seen this image in slides before. I had even zoomed in close enough to see the cracks of the paint using a new Google Earth tool featuring the highlights of the Prado’s collection. But nothing could prepare me for my reaction when I finally saw the painting in person. It was truly breathtaking, and I sent up a little prayer of thanks to God for granting me the ability to see it.

I saw this painting with twenty of my fellow art history majors, as well as four professors, part of a trip to see the Spanish art we had been studying in the classroom all semester, a unique opportunity to experience the practice of our academic craft *in situ*. Looking back on my notes from our class conversation in front of the *Deposition*, I realized an important omission in our dialogue—discussion of the emotional and pious reaction intended by the painting. After all, the work is an altarpiece. It was painted for use during worship, and if my own reaction to the painting is any indication, it would have merited quite a powerful response in that context. Yet at no point in our discussion did anyone mention his or her own personal reaction to the content of the painting. Yes, we covered the intense emotions of the figures, but we did not discuss our own reactions to this gruesome scene—as Christians, Jews, atheists, or whatever someone’s religious affiliation might be.

This is part of a larger trend I have noticed in my time at Harvard, a reluctance to discuss one’s personal beliefs—be it in class, at dinner, or among friends or roommates. The standard college introduction includes the basic stats about oneself. “Hi, my name is Amelia. I’m a rising junior studying History of Art and Architecture, and I live in Lowell House. I’m originally from South Carolina...yes I realize I no longer have an accent, but I still refuse to give up the word ‘y’all.’” Nowhere in that now-unconscious exchange do I ever include the fact that I am a Christian. This is not because I am afraid people would not accept this part of my life. It is simply because, in many ways, religion has become a peripheral entity, at least in academic and professional environments. This is not to say that there is not a religious community at Harvard. There are over thirty religious student organizations on campus, all of which hold numerous events and activities throughout the year that are open to everyone. I have shared kosher meals at Hillel with Jewish friends and taken part in Ramadan prayers with a Muslim classmate, moments I cherish for the opportunity to expand my understanding of other religions. Yet even though Harvard and its students are accepting of a variety of beliefs, I have found that it is a place where those who practice a religion do so in a very understated way, in a manner that avoids actually discussing the intricacies of one’s beliefs beyond the very basics.

This past semester, I took a course about different conceptions of “the sacred” in Western thought, spanning from Homer to Herman Melville. The course fulfilled my Moral Reasoning requirement, part of a collection of courses I will complete in order to ensure I receive a broad, liberal arts education. I chose the class because it seemed relatively painless compared to the other options covering Kant, Locke, and Nietzsche. Instead, the course presented a different

kind of challenge to my classmates and me. It forced us to check our modern notions of belief at the classroom door and consider these great thinkers in the contexts in which they lived. As the course ended, I was left with a single lingering question—how will people in the future consider the beliefs of our own time? Is there anything left for them to study? Even during this class about moral and religious beliefs, people were reluctant to reveal their own personal values. I remember my classmates shuffling uncomfortably in their seats when I stated in a class discussion that I was a Christian raised in the South. Though I'm sure a few people's minds jumped to book burnings and Bible hugging, I would imagine many of my classmates were simply surprised that anyone would declare any type of religious affiliation in an academic setting. Apparently, intellectual thought and religious belief have now become mutually exclusive. Yet, as we all know, this dichotomy is never so clear-cut.

Even more than the question of intellectualism versus spirituality I have encountered in college, I have found my greatest difficulty to be simply finding time for God. Within my daily routine of gym, class, section, meetings, meals, and trying to get my work done, there never seems to be any time for quiet reflection with God. At the start of this past school year, I resolved that I would try to go to church more, or to be quite honest, simply to go at all. In college, Sundays are the days when you wake up late, head to the dining hall for brunch, and then trudge to the library or back to your dorm room for an entire day of reading, paper writing, and artfully pretending to be doing reading and paper writing while really watching clips from Saturday Night Live and G-chatting with friends in library carrels three seats away. However, on those Sundays when I have managed to get some of my work done earlier in the week and I am running on a sufficient amount of sleep, there is nothing better than getting up before my roommates, putting on my Sunday best, and heading through campus to Memorial Church. Sitting in one of the tall wooden pews—usually on the right hand side, toward the front but not too close—I find that there is a sense of calm that washes over me. Though it took me a few visits to become comfortable with the new format of the service at this Protestant non-denominational church, I now find something rhythmic about the call and response recitation of a Psalm and the Prayer of Thanksgiving every week. Sometimes the ministers are more long-winded than others; sometimes we are treated with visiting ministers from religious institutions across the country. But whenever I walk through the great white doors of the church, out into the crisp Boston air, I feel a sense of rejuvenation that makes me feel so much better about the start of another week.

I would imagine that it is the same for many of you, coming here to Westminster. I know that was always how I felt growing up. Especially now that we are back in the sanctuary, there is something peaceful about sitting within the stained glassed walls, next to people you may have been going to church with for twenty years. There is a sense of safety that you feel only exists here, and perhaps this is why we are less vocal about our faith outside the walls of the church. It is easy to talk about your beliefs with the people who have heard the same sermons as you and who have gone to the same church suppers. It is far more difficult to articulate your beliefs when you are not sure how the other person might respond. But we must realize that the practice of our faith goes beyond the physical walls of the church. Faith is about being in communion with God, and you don't need pews or pulpits to do that. Psalm 139 reads, "Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?...If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast." These words are a promise that God is with you, not only when you travel far and wide, venturing into the unfamiliar, but also when you are going about the actions of your day-to-day

life. I don't always make it to church on Sunday, but I do try to find little moments to talk to God. It may not be in a blessing over dinner or on my knees before bedtime. Instead, it is usually, "Help me be patient, God," or, "Help me to keep things in perspective," frequently just uttered inside my head. Often, it is simply, "Thank you, God," for whatever blessing he has bestowed upon me that particular day. Just like when I rounded the corner and finally saw the *Deposition* at the Prado, or this past week, when I got to the bottom of the escalator at GSP airport and saw my parents beaming up at me. It is finding the little moments to be with God that can get you through the day, and it is those times when you realize that you can practice your faith just about anywhere.

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