



*In the Beauty of Holiness: Art and the Bible in Western Culture* by David Lyle Jeffrey  
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David Lyle Jeffrey is Distinguished Professor of Literature and the Humanities at Baylor University in Texas. More than four decades of teaching and research stand behind this book, developed out of a course on art and theology in the Christian West.

The work is divided into two nearly-equal parts: "Art and Worship to 1500" and "Art and the Bible after 1500." The first section deals directly with what Jeffrey calls the "beauty of holiness" (Ps. 29:2): art and worship produced by the Christian message. The second part deals with the loss of the holy in Western art since the Renaissance.

Jeffrey makes it clear that his purpose is not a history of Western art (7), but only of a certain kind of Western Christian art. His procedure is in some ways the opposite of the historian's: he does not begin with the full range of data, then draw generalizations and conclusions; rather, he begins with determined theological themes and religious contexts, and uses selected artworks to illustrate them. He "brackets" virtually all secular art, as well as landscape and didactic art.

The first part of the book begins with biblical definitions of beauty and holiness. Jeffrey finds that beauty is a major concern and important category in the Bible. He discusses the use of several terms for kinds of "beauty" in the Scriptures. However, use of terms is not the same as theological or aesthetic *reflection* about the nature of beauty. For this Jeffrey must turn from the Bible to Hellenistic ideas of beauty, transformed by Augustine in light of his Scriptural faith. He discusses the "paradoxical beauty of cross," which implies a conversion in the idea of beauty. He then proceeds to the late medieval synthesis of beauty and holiness in worship. Here he considers medieval commentaries on the Old Testament tabernacle and temple, as well as the symbolism of the new Jerusalem. A chapter is devoted to the theology and symbolism of light in Gothic architecture, especially in stained glass. The topic of fresco painting gives Jeffrey the opportunity to discuss the work of Giotto and the affective spirituality associated with St. Francis. He notes the continuity of the Franciscan movement with Cistercian spirituality, but he does not mention St. Anselm and his followers, who anticipated the Franciscan emphasis on Christ's humanity by a century. The final chapter in the first section deals with altars, rood screens, and altar paintings, concentrating on several famous examples, including the great Isenheim and Ghent altarpieces.

The second part of the book discusses the "dislocation" of medieval Christian artistic idealism, with the consequent divorce of beauty from transcendence. The Renaissance, for Jeffrey, represents a turn to beauty for carnal gratification. He discusses Michelangelo, Raphael, and Leonardo, then the reactions of the Council of Trent and of Luther. The next chapter, "Beauty and the Eye of the Beholder," concentrates on depictions of David and Bathsheba in works of art from late medieval to early modern periods. The chapter on Romanticism discusses the relation of "holy" beauty to nature. Jeffrey concentrates on painter Caspar David Friedrich and poet William Wordsworth. The Romantic turn to "the sublime" for Jeffrey represents a post-Christian aesthetic. In "Art after Belief" Jeffrey recounts how beauty in itself, divorced from holiness, becomes the end of art, and art becomes a substitute for religion. This is manifest in contradictory ways in van Gogh and Gauguin, while partial exceptions are found in the Nazarenes, the Nabis, and the pre-Raphaelites. A chapter on "Art against Belief" discusses the scorn for religion or transcendence and the questioning of beauty that Jeffrey thinks characterizes the art of the early twentieth century. He finds examples in Munch, Picasso, Ernst, Dalí, and surrealism in general. The final chapter narrates a return of the transcendentals in modern attempts to restore beauty and holiness to art, as exemplified by Chagall, Rouault, and Arcabas.

Usually Jeffrey's commentaries are informative and accurate, based on erudition and fine scholarship. This makes it all the more surprising to encounter a significant number of oversights and errors. Most are careless misstatements that will be of little consequence to non-scholarly readers who are, it seems, the primary audience envisaged for this book. Let me point to a few examples: Jeffrey says that the *Timaeus* was "the only work of Plato known to Europeans" until the Renaissance (86). But the Byzantine Empire had the full corpus of Plato; Muslim Spain had Arabic translations; Latin-speaking Western Europe had indirect knowledge of many of Plato's works from commentators; and several works of Plato besides the *Timaeus* had been translated into Latin by the late thirteenth century.

Astonishingly, Jeffrey ascribes the building of the church of *Hagia Sophia* in Constantinople to “emperor Theodoric” and to the philosopher Boethius, who was a member of his court (76, 82). Theodoric was not a Roman emperor, but was King of the Goths. It was the emperor Justinian who built *Hagia Sophia*.

Commenting on the annunciation scene in the Ghent altarpiece, Jeffrey notes that Mary’s words are written upside-down and backwards. He surmises that this is because they are directed not to the angel in the adjoining panel, but upward to heaven. To read the words, he says, we must use a mirror. He then makes a fanciful association of the viewer’s use of a mirror with the various *specula* of medieval theology (142). But a mirror would not permit us to read the words: they would appear from left to right, but still upside-down. In fact, they are not meant to be read, but to be remembered. They are written from right to left to indicate that they originate with Mary on the right, and are addressed to the angel on the left (as the sense of the words themselves indicates) – not toward heaven.

Some errors directly affect the meaning of the works discussed. In Lukas Cranach the Younger’s Weimar altarpiece, the blood of Christ does not fall onto the head of Luther, as Jeffrey inexplicably says (187), but very clearly falls onto the head of the painter’s late father, Cranach the Elder (who began the painting). Jeffrey sees in the painting only “a specific and individualistic interpretation” of salvation. He ignores the allegory portrayed, which teaches the establishment of a new covenant that takes away the sins *of the world*.

Jeffrey asserts that the body of Christ in Dalí’s *Christ of St. John of the Cross* hovers “over a sunset maritime sea” (311). The physical location portrayed in the bottom part of the painting is the beach at Port Lligat, looking out over the bay toward the hills on the peninsulas that enclose it. For that perspective, one must necessarily face East. Thus the light coming from beyond the hills is that of a sunrise, not a sunset. This is crucial to the theological meaning of the painting. Because the cross floats above, and is not anchored on earth, Jeffrey finds the painting “antagonistic to the historical element in the biblical narrative and generally subversive of the Christian doctrine that flowed from it” (313). But this is not a depiction of the historical crucifixion: it shows the glorified apocalyptic Lord appearing “on the clouds of heaven” and bringing light like the rising sun. As Jeffrey himself points out earlier, ancient Christian art also portrayed the glorified apocalyptic Lord on the cross. (In his earlier discussion, he fails to note that the cross in the fifth-century ivory casket he discusses is not anchored in the earth, either: it is a stylized liturgical cross, with splayed ends.)

Jeffrey also misses the point of Edvard Munch’s *Golgotha*. He states that it “is clearly an effort to come to grips with both the fact of Christ’s crucifixion and the wide range of modern responses to it” (295). But he does not notice that the clean-shaven young man on the cross, with short hair parted on the side, is Munch himself, easily recognizable from his other early self-portraits. Those who are crucifying and mocking him are the critics who (in his view) persecuted him.

Jeffrey complains of the “failure of the Nabis to develop a more specific view” on how beauty and holiness might be united (287). But Maurice Denis did develop very specific views on this, and wrote extensively on it. Jeffrey does not refer to Denis’s writings, and they are not in the bibliography. The only quote from Denis (his famous remark on painting being shapes and colors on a flat surface) is from a secondary source.

Dalí’s *Madonna of Port Lligat* was well received by the Pope, to whom the painter presented it; it inspired a lengthy poem and theological commentary by Fray Angélico Chávez. But Jeffrey claims that it is not “coherent” from a Catholic theological point of view. He does not give any reason. Jeffrey doubts the sincerity of Dalí’s adult Catholic conversion, as well as his moral probity. But do these affect his art or its message?

This raises an important methodological question. Jeffrey explicitly states that he is concerned not only with artworks, but also with the motivations of the artists (364). But can that ever be clearly known? Are people ever so uncomplicated that they have clear and coherent motives for all their actions? And is an artist’s moral goodness, or lack of it, a legitimate criterion for judging the beauty of works? Or even their theological value?

Another significant question stems from Jeffrey’s narrow definition of “holiness.” He blames Renaissance art for its “dislocation” of beauty from holiness (171) and Romanticism for “divorcing all art from religion” (227). The implication seems to be that the secular cannot be “holy” – which follows, if one defines “holiness” solely in terms of institutional religion and cult. In some places Jeffrey identifies transcendence and holiness; in others he implies that they are different.

Thus he says that in Romantics like Wordsworth and Friedrich, although transcendent beauty is present, “holiness has disappeared” (252). He states that the Impressionists created some of the most beautiful modern art; but they are irrelevant to beauty and holiness because “their work is conspicuously innocent of religious interest or concern” (254). Yet he also approves of Judy Sund’s remark that “Van Gogh effectively *evokes the holy*” even outside traditional religious narrative (274). But if one can see holiness “evoked” in Van Gogh’s starry skies and still-life paintings, why not in Monet’s studies of nature or Mary Cassat’s portrayals of maternal love? Why not in art engaged in social criticism? If “holy” is taken in a wider sense, to mean godly or transcendent, then clearly it is not restricted to the cultic or explicitly religious. On the other hand, the “holy” in the sense of the religious, the sacred, cult, is not necessarily godly or good, as the prophets’ critique of sacrifice and Jesus’ critique of “Pharisaical” religion show. There is a good argument that what Western art since the Renaissance shows is not simply the disjunction of spirit, transcendence, godliness from beauty, but also the discovery of different forms of holiness and wider dimensions of beauty, not merely in religious apartness from the world, but in its midst.

Whether or not one agrees with Jeffrey’s contention that beauty is intrinsically connected to a particular kind of holiness, it remains true that this is in many ways a beautiful book. The large amount of valuable information far outweighs the lapses in scholarship. The Christian reader will find in addition a great deal of edification. Jeffrey’s style of writing is elegant and clear, making the book a pleasure to read. The pleasure is immeasurably increased by the lavish illustrations, which are excellently selected and well reproduced.

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*Interrupting Capitalism: Catholic Social Thought and the Economy* by Matthew A. Shadle  
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According to John Paul II, Catholic social teaching (CST) is a “moral theology,” a systematic reflection on society and economy whose purpose is to inform social reform in light of the Gospel. In the opening of this engaging and balanced critique, Matthew Shadle notes that although CST is supposed to be “a guide for Catholics living out their faith in the midst of economic life” (2), in practice its impact is disappointing. However much interest CST generates among Catholic and non-Catholic thinkers alike, and regardless of the number of church-basement seminars on CST for the lay faithful, “it is difficult to identify much payoff” (2).

Shadle attributes the relatively small impact of CST to two “roadblocks”: the size and complexity of the task compared to the resources of activists, and the “inability of the Catholic Church to capture the imagination of the vast majority of its members with its vision of economic life” (3). Economic and social theory emphasizes impersonal structures and irresistible dynamics, both of which appear to be too complex and embedded to be affected by local communities; likewise, abstract social theory leaves little room for the kind of creativity fostered by the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. Shadle aims in this book to free up Catholics to think differently, “to provide tools for a pastoral strategy with the potential to energize the Catholic faithful” (4).

Every social theology must adopt a social theory; this means entering into dialog and cooperation with the various disciplines of social science and economics. As Pope Paul VI cautioned in *Octogesima Adveniens*, these “human sciences” are “at once indispensable and inadequate.” However crucial the insights of secular social analysis, it is very difficult to avoid becoming trapped by their reductionist limitations. The author argues that three recent US approaches