

TEXTUAL JOURNEYS: RELIGIOUS LEARNING
ACROSS BORDERS—INTEREST GROUP

Topic: Seeing Interreligiously: Icons, Saints, and the Environment
Convener: Frank X. Clooney, S.J., Harvard University
Moderator: Marianne Farina C.S.C., Dominican School of Philosophy and
Theology
Presenter: William Hart McNichols, Albuquerque, NM

Devoted to engaging sacred traditions through the study of texts, this year's session focused on the reading of icons as a visual dynamic for religious learning across borders. William Hart McNichols lead the group in a reading of icons he wrote to illuminate the lives of holy women and men from various cultures and religions. These included Catholic Christian icons along with *Martyr Mary Dyer*, (Quaker Christian), *Maura Soshin O'Halloran* (Buddhist), *al Hallaj*" (Muslim) and *Crazy Horse* (Native American). Additionally, he explored aspects of his icons that celebrate the sacredness of lands of the Southwest and the interior generativity of the natural world, written in his environmental icon entitled, *Viriditas*.

McNichols opened the session clarifying the difference between images and icons. Icons are the communication of sacred truths and the lives of the holy men and women. He described how icons exist in various religious traditions, even those that forbid the depiction of images. Drawing from the Jewish *Kabala* tradition, he presented two of his icons that use words to magnify theological meaning, in this case the masculine and feminine words for God. He then traced for the group the evolution of icon writing and his own development as an artist and theologian.

Presenting the portrait of a boy, identified by inscription as *Eutyches*, McNichols argued that the inspiration for icons goes back to the *Fayum* mummy portraits. Painted on wooden boards, these portraits covered the faces of bodies mummified for burial. In particular, the example showed how the frontal perspective and concentration on key facial features, strongly resembled icon painting. These features formed a language for Christian icon writers.

As these icon artists took inspiration from their cultures, McNichols then recounted his own inspiration for icon writing. The early beginnings of his interest began in grade school and his desire to convey his deepest religious convictions. This led to a career in book illustration and it was in his work for children's books, that he realized how these images become "talking" icons. Having trained with famous icon writer Robert Lentz, O.F.M., he began formally to write icons. From his initial icon, *Our Lady of Vladimir* to his interreligious icons like *Sophia-Wisdom*, McNichol's icons have been commissioned for various Church groups, dioceses, and religious communities.

Noting that people always question why icons look so sad, he offered two photographs that represent the "icon" type of penetrating insight and the communication of this interior thought to another's. It is this profound seeing rather than sadness, which is at the heart of these encounters. McNichols believes that icons offer opportunities to enter deeply into the souls of cultures, religions, geographic locations, and all creation.

Christian icons present a possibility for religious learning as we read and experience together sacred images from the various religions, in dialogue with

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Christian art, and in particular, the icons themselves. McNichols' presentation provided a framework for such opportunities. During the session, questions emerged concerning his experience of using this medium to do theology. He describes his approach as contextual, bringing forward the theological import of the image as it exists in its location, that is, its historical, religious, cultural, and environmental setting. He also claimed that icon writing is judicious, since the drafter realizes that persons from one tradition cannot enter into "the other tradition fully," nor does every tradition appreciate the incorporation of their theologies in the writing of icons. McNichols' explorations relate well to those engaged in comparative theology. Here, too, careful consideration and respect are necessary when theologians interpret religious traditions in dialogue with their own.

This year's session contributed to the ongoing work of the textual journey interest group as it explores ways to engage in visual work alongside textual reading. Additionally, this session points to the possibility for the CTSA to consider art and theology as a new topic for its annual meeting.

FRANCIS X. CLOONEY, S.J.
Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts

MARIANNE FARINA, C.S.C.
Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology
Berkeley, California