

Margaret Miles, Graduate Theological Union



Margaret R. Miles is Emerita Professor of Historical Theology, The Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley. She was Bussey Professor of Theology at the Harvard University Divinity School (1978–96) and Dean of the Graduate Theological Union (1996 until her retirement in 2002). Her research interests include patristics, women’s history, gender studies, asceticism, and Christian art, music, and architecture. Her books include The Word Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought (2005), Plotinus on Body and Beauty (1999), Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies (1997), and Desire and Delight: A New Reading of Augustine’s Confessions (1992).

Mooney: Did you teach undergraduates at Harvard?

Miles: I taught several hundreds of them in my “Religion and Film” course. The course had discussion sections but I had fourteen excellent teaching fellows, so I didn’t get as close to most of the students as I might have.

Mooney: You picked films that tied in with religious themes?

Miles: Well, my book, *Seeing and Believing*, came out of that course. I was designing a method for understanding movies as one voice in a public discourse about values. It wasn’t about “this film has the leitmotif of redemption” or some other religious theme. I did box-office research and read up on public conversation at the time the movie was produced in order to see how the film

responded to these concerns.

Mooney: So you thought of religious discourse as woven into the values of a culture, how they're put together.

Miles: Yes, I used several movies that were specifically about religions — *Jesus of Montreal*, *The Last Temptation*

(Christianity),

The Chosen

(Judaism), and

Not without My Daughter

(Islam). I tried to identify the cultural niche in which representations of religion had a successful box office.

Not without My Daughter

had the clearest cultural niche in that it was produced while the Gulf War was threatening; it came out in theaters the week the war started, and left the theaters the week the war ended. It responded to a concern that many, many people had: "Who are these people we're bombing?" The movie, with its starkly negative representation of Muslims, reassured Americans that it was legitimate to bomb them.

Mooney: I know you're interested in Plotinus and delight. I can't resist asking you — what do you think of the phenomenon of *The Passion*? So many people went out to see it, and so far as I can tell, it has absolutely nothing to do with delight — unless we're supposed to take delight in someone else's excruciating pain.

Miles: Well, that's right. I think of *The Passion* as an example of "misdirection," a magician's term for distracting people with one hand while the other hand is doing the trick. The movie is misdirection in that it directs viewers to watch the horrible drama of Jesus's suffering, while ignoring his teachings. In a society that is failing to provide resources for vulnerable people — children, old people, sick people — it invites spectators not to notice that Jesus spent his life teaching and healing. If we focused on what Jesus said and did, rather than on what was done to him, we would get a different image of Christianity.

Mooney: Picking up the idea of delight, it's a kind of perennial worry for academics that they're not being hard enough on students. Don't we have to show students delight in what is taught, how to see its beauty, and sometimes, its terror?

Miles: Delight in learning is communicable. It's infectious. I worry, however, that often the intellectual life of faculty isn't nourishing, so that we have less delight to pass on. A friend who teaches in an undergraduate college told me, "I never have time to read a book, unless it's for the next class." How can a teacher communicate delight in learning if she's not continuing to learn? I think we go into teaching because we love to learn. There's no way that we can pass on anything but information if we stop learning. Also, in the present job market, learning needs to be thought of as a way of life rather than a way to earn money. Presently, if a student does well his teachers say, "You must go on and get the doctorate." But there aren't enough academic jobs to go around. Delight in learning does not require a doctorate. Learning is an end in itself, a way of life.

Mooney: What if the problem is wider than the university? Most jobs don't leave time on the side for people to relax and read and learn.

Miles: Well, that's true, but it's also a matter of values. If we think we need a high standard of living and a new car every year, we sacrifice time to read and reflect. But if students see learning as a way of life, they become addicted to it. They will need to continue to learn, no matter what they do to earn a living. That model is more realistic than urging everyone who loves learning to enter the teaching profession.

Mooney: Has the national political and cultural climate affected the way you teach?

Miles: Scholarship needs to be responsive to the neediness of the world, but sensitizing students to connections between scholarship and the world's needs can sometimes best be done by discussing a Platonic dialogue that presents a world of different values and different perspectives, challenging those that come to us through our media culture. It takes a great deal of creativity and imagination to alert students (and ourselves) to what is missing and needed in our culture.

Mooney: What's best about teaching? Maybe you've answered it — the capacity to continue learning.

Miles: Yes, yes, that's what teaching is about. I think most of us become teachers because, as children, we liked to read. Then, as my mother said in a different context, one thing leads to another.

Mooney: People often want to know what the academic study of religion is all about. The usual contrast is between the humanities and the social sciences.

Miles: History is my training and my academic home, but there are different kinds of historians. Social historians really like countable things, material artifacts, while intellectual historians like ideas. Each proposes lenses for selecting and examining evidence, but those same lenses block other kinds of evidence. It is often necessary to look, in a refracted way, across two or three disciplines to reconstruct a historical conversation or event. We are just beginning to learn how to do responsible interdisciplinary work. I predict that interdisciplinarity is going to make the present fields obsolete quite soon.

Mooney: Can you elaborate on that a bit?

Miles: Often we don't like what we see when we look at interdisciplinary projects because one of the disciplines engaged in the work is used irresponsibly. But what's needed is not to reject interdisciplinarity, but to refine its methods.

Mooney: Will that redraw the map of departments?

Miles: Many of the younger faculty who are being hired today don't fit comfortably in the present fields. The people who are currently doing the hiring are people who have been trained in the traditional fields of study, but many of those currently being hired have been trained in cultural and critical theory and in interdisciplinarity. They will reform departments and fields.

Mooney: If a grad student has done an interdisciplinary dissertation, what do you pass on as advice when it comes time for a job interview?

Miles: It's an exciting historical moment for interdisciplinary work, but hiring institutions often need assistance in recognizing the disciplinary and institutional relevance of that work. I tell students to position themselves very firmly in one of the traditional fields. If they can show that they are trained in a way those now hiring can recognize, then they can write an interdisciplinary dissertation without penalty.

Mooney: If you were going to give advice to a child who has just returned from college and was excited about intellectual life and realized that you had made that life your life, what would you recommend they read over the summer?

Miles: My granddaughter is a sophomore at Swarthmore, and we were talking about this just last night. She's interested in public policy, which isn't my field, but the books we both read are in critical theory, gender theory, and queer theory. I'd recommend Rosemary Hennesey's *Pleasure and Profit*, because this book examines the economic basis of American cultural life — something we usually ignore in the humanities, where we think that ideas run the world. I'd also recommend reading Freud and his critics, for example, *Unauthorized Freud*, edited by Frederick C. Crews, or Richard H. Armstrong's *A Compulsion for Antiquity: Freud and the Ancient World*. Recognition of Freud's construction of "sexuality" and its problems, for example, challenges the tendency of historians to read historical authors like Augustine through unexamined Freudian assumptions.

Mooney: If you were going to give a final lecture on what's been important in your research and teaching, what might it be about?

Miles: Well, I gave such a lecture this summer at the Colloquium on Violence and Religion in Koblenz, Germany. In it I examined desire and its effects. I looked at the social construction of desire and its role in both determining and concealing values. In the Platonic tradition — Plato, Plotinus, Augustine, et al. — there are two quite different accounts of desire. In one, desire for the good is intellectual, freed from temporal objects. In the other, desire is instigated by sensible beauty, leading to an ever more inclusive love and delight.

The conference focused on René Girard's analysis of the origin of violence in mimetic desire. Girard draws on an epistemology which holds that desire is contagious; we learn to desire

particular objects from our neighbor. We desire what our neighbor has, and then we have conflicts that lead to violence. This analysis has obvious explanatory power and importance in helping us to understand the ubiquity of violence, but it is a partial account of the effects of desire. If you go back to Plato, Plotinus, and Augustine you see that the Platonic tradition described two trajectories of desire. Desire (as Girard acknowledges but does not develop) can take one of two directions. A bad eros makes idols of self and other, but there is also a good eros — *concupiscentia* for the good, as Augustine called it — based on the perception of beauty and leading to awareness of the great beauty, the source of all life. A more inclusive account demonstrates that desire underlies the values that inform our more negotiable ideas and actions.

Mooney: So an analysis of desire can reveal the root of violence?

Miles: Yes, but it can also reveal that desire, based on beauty, seeks an object that everyone can have and without depriving someone else. It can lead, not to competition and violence, but to a more and more inclusive love and delight.

Mooney: So instead of Girard's competition for a small piece of beauty, you get a larger and larger supply.

Miles: Yes, and Plotinus turns attention from the beautiful object that "catches" the eye to the activity of creating in one's self the ability to perceive beauty — a spiritual discipline. Augustine takes that cultivation to a desire for God ("beauty so old and so new," Confessions 10. 27) that shapes the self.

Mooney: A lot of academic intellectual work seems to reinforce reasons for despair — how things break down, become incoherent, hide brute power, and so forth. The world is coming apart all on its own without our finding even more reasons to despair.

Miles: Yes. I began to work on Augustine because I couldn't figure out why, for at least a thousand years, his ideas were so utterly attractive and compelling, while our age finds him the villain of everything we dislike, such as disdain for the natural world and the body. Rather than approaching his ideas as abstract philosophical proposals, I endeavored to reconstruct his perspective as much as possible by seeking the circumstances and the conversations that

informed his thinking. Then I glimpsed his contagious attentiveness to beauty and delight.