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# **MYSTERY, MAGIC AND TRUTH:**

*Faith and Reason Explored in Renaissance Art*

Might philosophy and religion be used as a vehicle  
for better art history teaching and learning?

A thesis submitted to Massey University in partial fulfilment of  
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Education  
(Adult Education)

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## Research Question

Might philosophy and religion be used as a vehicle for better art history teaching and learning?

## Chapter Organisation

1. *Introduction*

*What are faith and reason?*

Purpose of thesis. Justification of choice of topic. Research questions to be answered. My own interest in the topic.

2. *Philosophy and religion in context*

Faith and reason in context with the Renaissance. Description and analysis of key themes and examples of key works from ancient Greece and the Middle Ages. (Faith and reason applied to key works).

3. *How philosophy and religion influenced the Renaissance's art.*

4. *How do selected works illustrate the influence of philosophy and religion in Renaissance art?*

An in-depth analysis of major art works from eight key artists, explaining how examining faith and reason in Renaissance art can act as inspiration for teaching and learning.

***Chosen artists and art works:***

Giotto	<i>Lamentation</i>	1305
Masaccio	<i>Trinity</i>	1425
Piero della Francesca	<i>Baptism of Christ</i>	1450
Botticelli	<i>Birth of Venus</i>	1485
	<i>Primavera</i>	1480
Leonardo da Vinci	<i>Empirical studies</i>	1511
Michelangelo	<i>Sistine Chapel Ceiling</i>	1508 - 12
	<i>David</i>	1501 - 4
	<i>Last Judgement</i>	1536 - 41
Raphael	<i>School of Athens</i>	1510
Holbein	<i>The Ambassadors</i>	1533

**5. *How can philosophy and religion be used as a vehicle for better art history teaching and learning?***

How can I teach about philosophy and religion in selected Renaissance art works?

Effective approaches to teach and learn about philosophy and religion in Renaissance Art.

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### ***Renaissance: the Art of Faith and Reason***

***How can selected works illustrate the influence of philosophy and religion in Renaissance art?***

***An in-depth analysis of art works from eight key artists, which act as a vehicle for better art history teaching and learning.***

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*How can philosophy and religion be used as a vehicle for better art history teaching and learning?*

*How can I teach about philosophy and religion in selected Renaissance art works?*

*Effective approaches to teach and learn about philosophy and religion in Renaissance Art.*

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## *ABSTRACT*

Consisting of two parts, an epistemic and pedagogic, this thesis is designed for teaching and learning about philosophy and religion using art history. By studying philosophy and religion in art works a student might be led to gaining a better understanding about faith and reason and by studying the philosophical and religious components a teacher might gain a better focus on art history teaching and learning in general.



# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the ideologies of faith and reason in Renaissance art works with the purpose of teaching adults: *Might philosophy and religion be used as a vehicle for better art history teaching and learning?*

The first aspect is to define what is meant by faith and reason.

**Faith** - by definition has changed over the millennia which has led to ambiguities. Today the word can be applied to a deep belief in almost anything, “faith within a marriage”, “have faith in a boat as you navigate a difficult patch of water”, “signing a letter: Yours faithfully”. Freeman (2005) says faith is a trust in something which cannot be seen, or a belief in promises made by God, or a declaration of loyalty. Whatever the definition, continues Freeman (2005), faith usually means a belief in something which cannot be proved by rational thought. Collins Dictionary (1987) defines ‘faith’ as a: “*strong or unshakeable belief in something, esp. without proof*”, and it is in these contexts the word is applied throughout this thesis. The definition is supported by the Enlightenment’s thinker Voltaire’s (1694-1778) famous quote: “*Faith consists of believing what our reason cannot comprehend.*”

**Reason** - Descartes (1596-1650), another influential Enlightenment thinker, said: “*Cogito ergo sum*” (“I think therefore I am”) confirming his confidence in mankind’s ability to think and reason to solve its problems and discover nature’s secrets. Collins Dictionary (1987) interprets the word ‘reason’: “*an intellectual pursuit of rational thought and truth through empirical enquiry and logic*”.

Hodges (1993) terms ‘faith’ as ‘*theism*’: the belief in an omnipotent God on whom all things depend; and ‘reason’ as ‘*secularism*’: a predictable pattern in life that human reason, aided by the tools of science and maths, can unravel. Theism and faith comprises the “magic and mystery” component of this thesis’ title, and secularism

and reason the “truth” part.

Faith and reason are, therefore, opposite ideologies and one of the aims of this thesis is to make adult learners aware that the two have existed at the heart of culture the world over from the dawn of civilization and that the acquiescence a society implements to faith and reason may decide the outcome of its culture. To the Greeks, for example, reason was an important component in solving problems. Their culture was very different from European Middle Ages culture whose exponents tried to find answers to their problems through religion.

For millions of people faith in God is their *raison de etre*. Through their faith they hope to unravel the transcendentalism of existence. There is much that cannot be comprehended in the cosmos, for example the complexity of the macrocosm and microcosm, the creation of the universe and life on earth, or the existence of an after life. From the cradle of civilization people have had a yearning to explain the unexplained and to come to terms with these enigmas. Many people before and during the Renaissance, and today, placed and continue to place their faith in God for hope, others aligned themselves with reason and science believing that eventually research and empirical investigation would provide the answers.

The topic, therefore, is important because many of the ideas about faith and reason discussed in it are relevant today. Discussions on religion and science are never far away from media attention and through analysing this polemic there are to be found many contemporary parallels with faith and reason.

By looking closely at the Renaissance’s art, Holbein’s *Ambassadors* (1533), for example, art history teachers might begin to understand that although science and reason do play a significant part in the understanding of the enigmas of existence they do not hold all the answers, faith plays a vital role too. This is one example where art works might prove an invaluable medium for teachers to investigate the opposition and compatibility of faith and reason. Similarly, Giotto’s *Lamentation* (1305) is a useful painting to explain the effects faith and reason had on Renaissance art. Likewise, Masaccio’s *Trinity* (1425) may be used to explain the mutual relationship of faith and reason, where reason played an important role in the discovery of the mathematical system called perspective, (which showed three dimensional space on a flat surface) through a devout subject.

Piero della Francesca's *Baptism of Christ* (1450) serves as a unique example to teach how some Renaissance artists investigated ancient Greece's reasoning, philosophy, mathematics and geometry and combined it with a religious theme. Botticelli's *Primavera* (1480) and *Birth of Venus* (1485) can be used to demonstrate how ancient Greek literature and artistic styles were investigated and integrated into Renaissance art in a Christian context bringing faith and reason closer together in harmony. Michelangelo's *Sistine Chapel Ceiling* (1508 - 12) is ideal to teach adults how Plato's philosophies were combined with Christian teaching to produce a balance between faith and reason, and Raphael's *School of Athens* (1510) introduces the Greek intellectual pursuits rediscovered during the Renaissance.

Art, therefore, has the capacity to unfold with clarity the implications faith and reason had and still have on society and by studying past cultures' art, adult students can investigate and understand the part played by the two ideologies throughout the Renaissance.

These two ideologies have existed and complemented each other since the beginnings of Western civilization, forming its society and culture. Throughout history, says Johnson (1992), societies have adhered to reason and faith to suit their purposes for a stable, utilitarian and happy existence acknowledging Rousseau's (1712 - 1778) dictum: "*the greatest happiness for the greatest number*". Many ideas which buttress western civilization find their roots in ancient Greece which is why this thesis starts with that era. Elements of reason evident in Greek culture still remain with us today, democracy for example, and in his play *Hellas*, Shelley (1792-1822), says: "*We are all Greeks. Our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts, have their roots in Greece*". (Fleming, 1991).

"*The blessings of civilization*" quotes Charles Beard in his 'The Rise of American Civilization' (1927) are "*health, security, material goods, knowledge, leisure and aesthetic appreciation*." Aesthetic appreciation as one of Beard's components to a blessed civilization, reiterates what the great Victorian 'dictator of the arts', Ruskin (1819-1900) said: "*The art of any country is the exponent of its social and political virtues. The art or general productive and formative energy of any country is an exact exponent of its ethical life*." Quoted from Copplestone (1987). Whether those virtues and ethics align themselves with faith or reason will invariably effect a culture's art. Marx touches on the same ground with his famous quote: "*The ideas of the ruling party are in every*

*epoch the ruling ideas.*" Eisenman, (2002).

Ruskin also wrote: *"Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts - the book of their deeds, the book of their words, and the book of their art. Not one of these books can be understood unless we read the two others; but of the three, the only quite trustworthy one is the last ... art is always instinctive and we can understand it at a glance when we have learned to read."* (Copplestone, 1987).

Lynton (1981) mentions that: *"art is the human race talking to itself, across all possible frontiers of time and place and ideology."*

To enable teachers to understand complex issues such as the analysis of faith and reason and its links to Renaissance culture, art might prove to be an indispensable guide. For example, analysing and comparing the differences in style of art works in Chapter Two might lead to an understanding of the predominant role reason played during the ancient Greek world and how after the Roman Empire fell in the fourth century AD faith in the form of Christianity gained precedence over reason. (Freeman, 1996). When the Renaissance combined reason with faith the style changed again. By analysing and comparing art in this manner teachers can draw their own conclusions to what extent the role of faith and reason play in their own culture. This may prompt them to undergo further study and investigate the relationships between contemporary art and faith and reason, an area outside the limited scope of this thesis.

The thesis also holds a personal place for me.

I attended the missionary boarding school in South India, 'Hebron', from 1967 - 79 from age four until 17. The experience showed me how to look at life from the angle of the Christian faith. Every single aspect of day to day living seemed to have a religious perspective. Normal aspects of modern life now taken for granted - gambling, going to the movies, drinking alcohol, even holding hands with a partner - were frowned upon. Therefore, the thesis' analysis of faith and reason in past cultures using art works enabled me to look at past experiences and analyse them in a different context to the ones I would have used had I not researched this topic.

In 1979 I attended Dover College, a public school in England which had a much more balanced, and now I would say healthier, attitude towards faith. Although chapel was enforced every day it was done so for an educational purpose to learn to

be individually morally responsible by learning the Christian code of conduct. These experiences perpetuated within me the interest to analyse the differences between a theist way of life and a secular one.

In 1996 after completing a Bachelor of Arts (BA Painting), and Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE, Art and Design), and gaining experience teaching in schools in England, I emigrated to New Zealand where I was given the opportunity to teach art history under Havelock North High School's, Adult Community Education Programme. Specialising in the art of the Renaissance period, I noticed many adults' fascination in the role faith and reason played during the era's art. Most had read 'The Da Vinci Code' by Dan Brown, a novel which uses art works to clarify meaning and ideas, and were eager to find out more about art and education, therefore, I developed this topic 'Magic, Mystery and Truth, Faith and Reason analysed through Art Works'.

After researching art works with the purpose of finding suitable links with faith and reason, the next challenge was to find the most appropriate transmission methods and strategies on how to teach philosophy and religion by using art works. After further research it became apparent there was a diverse cross-section of adults interested in this topic for various reasons, therefore, varying methods of stimulating learning were needed to match this cross-section of learners. The fact this thesis combines adult education teaching methods and ideas linked to the main theme of faith and reason explored through Renaissance Art also makes it unique perhaps, as an educational approach suited to adult students.

To give adults a comprehensive understanding how faith and reason influenced art and society during the Renaissance and continue to do so today, the era needed to be brought into context with ancient Greece and Rome (called Greco/Roman) because ideas formed then played a pivotal role during the Renaissance. To understand why Cumming (1995) refers to the Renaissance as the birth of the Western world adults need to understand why the Middle Ages is looked on as an era of darkness where the powers of reason formed by the Greco/Roman empire were stifled. (Freeman, 2005)

Once this section titled: "Faith and reason in context with the ancient Greece and the Middle Ages" was formulated in Chapter Two, the next obligation was to explain how selected art works illustrate the influence of faith and reason during

the Renaissance and analyse appropriate methods to teach the unit to make it relevant to an audience today and answer the important question: *Might philosophy and religion be used as a vehicle for better art history teaching and learning?*

To answer this effectively several further questions were vital. First: Which particular adult learners are interested today in studying faith and reason in Renaissance art works? Experience from teaching Art History at the Adult Community Education Programme and further research identified the particulars of a group of adult students, teachers intending to use this topic could expect to attend their classes. Second: Which methods are there for stimulating learning in this audience? Within the vast range of literature available on adult education methods, strategies and techniques, appropriate models was selected from the rest, as most suitable to teach about faith and reason explored through Renaissance art. Third: How would I teach faith and reason in Renaissance art, now that I have learnt about alternative methods in adult education?

Before moving on to the main body of the thesis, a little information on the nature of art as an effective educational tool may be purposeful.

Inherent in every person is the potential to love art says Beckett (1996). Not everyone, however, has the opportunity to realise this potential, and it is topics like the one covered in this thesis which can provide the knowledge and background to make art more accessible. Often people are nervous of looking and talking about art because they are ignorant of the facts. Learners can begin to gain the necessary knowledge to overcome their intellectual inabilities and inadequacies, and gain an understanding of art through reading, listening and looking - areas which form the main focus throughout the thesis. After all, as Lynton (1981) says: "*art is mankind's most wonderful and also most basic invention.*" It is, therefore, my intention to explore the relevant means, through teaching, of elucidating to an adult audience the relevance art holds for education. Teaching students to use art as a learning tool might encourage them to change the way they understand the world around them. Ramsden, (1992) claims students make sense of their learning only when they see its relevance and that the content has meaning in the real world. Perhaps links can be made between the ideas discussed through looking at faith and reason explored in Renaissance art, and students' own lives during the twenty first century.

A teacher who wishes to embark on a programme on Renaissance art will not find generalised descriptions of artists nor their work. What will be found are succinct details of how philosophy and religion may be used as a vehicle for better art history teaching and learning.