

Kevin Ward, 2006. Photo: Rachel Callander



Theology and art: revelation, art and film

An interview with theologian Rev Dr Kevin Ward

Dean of Studies, School of Ministry, Knox College, Dunedin (teaches on spirituality in film)

Kevin Ward grew up in Timaru in the 1950s and 60s and went to university in Christchurch, graduating with a Master's degree with Honours in History. He was raised in both the Brethren and Baptist churches, but drifted away in his early university years. Whilst at Teachers' College he began a post-graduate Diploma in Education which he continued through Massey University, while teaching. He came to faith after a profound awakening in 1969 and since that time has felt a call to ministry. After several years teaching in Tauranga he was ordained as a Baptist minister and spent eight years in ministry in the Hutt Valley and Auckland. He went teaching again, and was on staff for 13 years at the Bible College of New Zealand in Christchurch, before being appointed Dean of Studies at the School of Ministry at Knox College, Dunedin, in 2003.

JS: Is there a place of unity between art and theology; can the two mesh?

'Art raises a lot of questions about life and the meaning of life. Art is very open-ended, it raises

questions, and artists are painting a picture of reality as they view it. Because they are using image and metaphor instead of conveying facts, it can be read in a variety of different ways. Art connects more with our feelings and our creative side. Art works around the edges of life and has always done that.'

Those are all good things, but where are the blockages and hindrances between art and the church? What is it the church struggles with in the art universe?

'Two things: the open ended-ness of art and raising questions rather than trying to give answers. Religion is seen as 'shelling out' answers in black and white terms. The church feels uncomfortable about thinking and questioning. Art is evocative. This is so for Protestants particularly, because of that historic focus on the word and a suspicion of art - that whole tradition of suspicion of icons and thinking of images as being idols. Art was almost completely removed from Protestant life and was replaced by the word. Some of the most austere and terrible buildings you

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can find are early Baptist, Presbyterian or Methodist churches. They are barren.

'Also, to some extent the whole Greek metaphysical dualism came in, where the body was seen as being bad, the mind and spirit as being good.'

Do you think art has a role, a place, in equipping church leaders for better service?

'I do. Part of the post-modern twist in culture was the old culture which came out of the Enlightenment that celebrated rationality, the word. Our culture has moved more to art as a meaningful form of communication, so we have to learn to engage with that if we are going to engage with our culture.'

'Historically, art has been a very important way of thinking in the church, creating metaphors of meaning. Much of the bible is art. It's not propositional, or law, a lot of it is story, narrative and images.'

That was an interesting aspect of the whole 'church versus Harry Potter' debate. Some clever chap put up a list of all the fantastical images in the scriptures and set it beside Harry Potter. It made a laughing stock of the legalistic anti-Potter approach.

'Fiction helps us to understand scripture. The Book of Revelation is art really. Revelation is like a movie, creating incredibly powerful evocative images that are drawing off images that existed within a mythical worldview. The problem is, certain sectors of Western culture have tried to read Revelation as an historical doctrinal dogma that is describing actual physical realities. The more we can understand about how art works and functions, the more we come to understand something like the Book of Revelation.'

That raises a natural segue to my next question; what about film and how it interacts with, and has an effect on, the church?

'Sociologically, the one activity amongst Western countries that people do more than going to church (in terms of a voluntary associational activity) is going to the movies. Film has become a major way people re-create their imagined worlds. George Lucas said in an interview that people couldn't live without myth; that we need a mythical dimension to our lives. The church used to tell the myths (I use the word in the technical sense, rather than regarding whether something is true or not). People created meaning and had their imagined world in religion. But they weren't doing that any more in America because they weren't going to church. So what George Lucas was apparently trying to do in *Star Wars* was pick up some of the religious mythology and use the structure of that to create *Star Wars* as a new mythic venture.'

'He wasn't trying to hang it on any particular religion, rather trying to create a myth structure that people of any religious faith could hang their own religious meanings and values on.'

How can contemporary Christians interact with *Star Wars* or *The Matrix Trilogy* or *Lord of the Rings*? What is a healthy response?

'It's doing exactly that - exploring what in the mythical structure and narrative tells truths commensurate with a biblical understanding of reality. In all those films there are enough things that do that, but because

they're not trying to directly convey the Christian story, there are other points which do not do that. I'm a great believer in Paul's approach in Acts 17 where he begins at points of contact between faith and culture. We need to start by looking at the things in life that help us to understand, that carry biblical meaning.'

'At the same time, we also need to critique the mythical structure and be aware of the points at which the structure falls short of scriptural truth or is its counter.'

Do you involve art and film in any of your discussions and teachings of theology?

'I teach a spirituality and film course at Otago University. I also use material from films when talking to churches about leadership and change. I've just been away on a seminar where I used several film clips (including *Chocolat* and *Whale Rider*) to highlight issues and challenges that the church faces and how we can respond.'

In the future, does the Church need to integrate the arts more with theology or will that be a natural progression?

'Philosophy used to be the dialogue partner with theology, because it was the philosophers who set the cultural tone for society. But now it's the artists who set the tone. Increasingly that needs to be the dialogue.'

'American sociologist Robert Wuthnow has researched a book called *All in Sync*¹ which explores the role of music and the arts in the life of the church. He argues one of the reasons for the ongoing place of religion in Western society is that music and art are actually very friendly toward it, more than against it, which has been the church's view. Music and art have carried on religion and spirituality both in the wider culture and in the church. Wuthnow's research shows that people who are engaged in these pursuits are much more positive towards religion in general, and Christianity in particular, than those who aren't.'

'That is interesting in the light of the great suspicions cast on the arts from large parts of the church.'

Do you feel BCNZ benefited from having the Kauri art collection on display in an academic training context? How can visual stimuli assist academia?

'What it does, is it says we're trying to interact with the contemporary world in which we live; that we're not just an isolated group of academics doing theology and not relating to the real world in which we live. It helps to create that context.'

John Stringer

Kevin Ward's PhD thesis was 'Losing My Religion? An Examination of church decline, growth and change in New Zealand 1960 to 1999, with particular reference to Christchurch: a thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy', 2003.

1 *All in Sync: How Music and Art Are Revitalizing American Religion*, Robert Wuthnow, University of California Press, 2003.