People talk about having intense encounters with artworks; they are hypnotized, transfixed, lost in the artwork, they have immersive or absorptive experiences. These same words are used to describe religious experience. Over the last several decades, I have studied the misunderstandings between the artworld and people of faith: religious themes remain unwelcome in the artworld, unless the art is critical of religion; and openly religious scholars are mistrusted in mainstream academia.

I will propose two reasons for this strange relationship between art and religion. First, there’s the very close coincidence between the language describing religious experience and the words for aesthetic experience—a closeness some people may find uncomfortable or misleading. Second, academics and religious practitioners have different forms of conversation: the former tend to begin conversations with specifics about the artworks, and the latter may prefer to begin with general talk about the viewer’s knowledge and experience of faith. I think this second reason can help a great deal in fostering conversations between the fields.