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.