

Artists in tension

by [Cliff Edwards](#) in the [Feb 28, 2001](#) issue

*Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art* by Deborah Silverman

Deborah Silverman, who holds the University of California President's Chair in Modern European History, Art, and Culture at UCLA, seems to have had every advantage in working on this book: support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the services of a research assistant and a freelance editor. That makes this handsome volume's shortcomings all the more disappointing.

The format is pleasing and creative. Pages whose width exceeds their height allow the open book to lie relatively flat and provide space for several related images to be placed side by side, as in the wonderful display of four versions of van Gogh's *Cradle-Rocker* painting. The almost 200 illustrations--prints of artworks, photos of sites, and other illustrative materials--are of impressive quality, and the detailed endnotes are valuable. Unfortunately, there is no bibliography, and the eight-page index is too brief and flawed to fill the gap. For example, though Silverman notes Judy Sund's key work on van Gogh's use of literature, there is no reference to Sund in the index.

Silverman focuses on the 60-some days that "Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin lived and worked together in Provence and changed the course of modern art." She argues that the tensions between and the "incompatible artistic projects" of the two resulted from their "divergent religious legacies and educational foundations." Gauguin was educated in a Catholic seminary near Orleans under the direction of the energetic Bishop Dupanloup. The bishop taught an idealist antinaturalism and stressed the cultivation of interior vision. This directed Gauguin's search for sacred art away from our world of afflictions, through a penitential view of personal martyrdom to a symbolist, dreamlike transcendence available to initiates alone. Gauguin's canvases witness to this liquid, hermetic dematerialization.

Van Gogh, on the other hand, growing up among the laborers and craftsmen in the Protestant church in Zundert, in the southern Netherlands, learned a sense of the

holiness of work and action. Van Gogh's father was a pastor in the new reform movement called the Groningen School, which focused on emotional piety and the social gospel. Debates about a religious modernism that was both anti-idealist and antisupernaturalist further influenced van Gogh to link naturalism and the sacred with the spiritual truth to be found through craftsmanlike labor among ordinary people. Van Gogh's canvases emphasize physicality, use a wood and metal perspective frame as a facet of craftsmanship, and present a surface "woven" in paint, just as the weavers he studied wove multicolored cloth from thread.

Silverman's thesis has the potential to spark a creative reassessment of van Gogh and Gauguin. And the book's blocks of carefully documented research provide useful material for historians of art and culture. One wonders, however, whether the brief period during which van Gogh and Gauguin were together can bear the weight of Silverman's assertion that it "changed the course of modern art." And far more complex factors may account for the work of these artists than the Catholic and Protestant backgrounds of Silverman's argument.

In her first chapter Silverman notes that she will be "highlighting religion." Her work is intended to "reemphasize the critical role of religion in the development of modernism," and she criticizes those who would "trivialize the profound and enduring significance of religious legacies." Yet Silverman herself trivializes religion. She seems to assume that her historical and cultural account will automatically take care of religious-theological issues, as though religion does not have a content and context of its own.

She ignores those who have written about the religious aspects of van Gogh's work. Lamentable is her lack of reference to Kathleen Powers Erickson's *At Eternity's Gate: The Spiritual Vision of Vincent van Gogh* (Eerdmans, 1998). Silverman would have benefited from Erickson's careful reading of the Groningen School in relation to van Gogh's work. She also shows no evidence of having discovered my own book, *Van Gogh and God: A Creative Spiritual Quest*, in the foreword of which the renowned Dutch Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen recalls his own many years of research on the theological riches of van Gogh's art.

In *Van Gogh and God*, I make a case for a particular painting as the key to van Gogh's own program as an artist: the 1885 painting of his father's Bible, opened to Isaiah, chapter 53, a "suffering servant song." Nudged against that Bible is Émil Zola's novel *La joie de vivre*. Because a similar suffering-healing plot runs through

both Isaiah and Zola's story of a mistreated orphan, I suggest that the painting demonstrates van Gogh's perspective that the "naturalistic" artist of ordinary life, whether Zola or himself, was the modern heir of the biblical prophets.

Silverman makes no mention at all of this key painting, nor does she seem acquainted with theology's age-old inquiry into the tensions between the "priestly" and "prophetic" views of religion--tensions that might more effectively characterize the differences between the "sacred art" of Gauguin and van Gogh. Further, Silverman never uses the rich theological terms "sacramental" and "incarnational"--categories that could have enriched her inquiry.

A knowledge of biblical theology would seem essential to a scholar setting out to "highlight religion" in relation to van Gogh and Gauguin, but I find no evidence of such knowledge. I lost confidence in Silverman's acquaintance with biblical literature when she referred to "Gauguin's citations from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Peter, and Luke."

Silverman discusses van Gogh's "anger" at Gauguin and at their friend and fellow artist Émile Bernard for returning to painting typical biblical scenes such as the nativity, or Christ in the Garden of Olives. I think a closer reading makes clear that van Gogh finally separates the work of Bernard and Gauguin, faulting Bernard for returning to "medieval tapestries" that lead the public to re-identify religious art with biblical settings. But van Gogh shows some willingness to accept the work of Gauguin, who either produces an "existential" canvas where he identifies with Christ in the garden, or canvases that picture real people of his day in acts of devotion.

Silverman's failure to take seriously the broader influence of literature on the two artists is another of the book's shortcomings. A single endnote mentioning Zola is hardly adequate, considering Zola's extensive influence on van Gogh. While one might describe Gauguin's approach to painting as "dreaming before nature," it was van Gogh who read and discussed Zola's "naturalism" at length and borrowed his phrase that "a work of art is a corner of nature seen through a temperament."