Dante's Way of Images

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 21 January 2018

Preacher: Derek Witten

[0:00] We are very privileged today to have our first time speaker at Learners, Derek Witten, who is a very fascinating individual and you will want to talk to him after I tell you all about his exciting life.

He is an Artizo intern. He just graduated, just graduated? About to graduate? April 27th.

In process of graduating from Regent with an MA. I asked him how he ended up at Regent and apparently he came on vacation to visit his brothers and never went back, which I think says a lot about Regent.

He said he's always had a call to an interest in to be ordained and after a year in Ottawa, working for a politician, he had clarity of vision.

We are most blessed to get him back to the West Coast and he's currently finishing his degree at Regent working for Artizo and also working at Regent in communications.

[1:15] So he's got a fascinating background. He's got a background in literature. He says he's always, he always enjoyed literature, always enjoyed Dante. And now I, sorry, I've read Dante and I've never thought that Dante wrote to be helpful to people in their applied Christian life.

When I was an undergrad I thought he wrote to confused students. I look forward with bated breath for an exposition from Derek about how we can apply Dante to our lives.

But thank, let's, please join me in welcoming him and thank you for being here. Thank you, Alexandra. I just met Alexandra a few minutes ago and that was a great introduction, so you're a very attentive listener.

Yeah, this is not in my talk, but it's interesting what you said about Dante being helpful. I also did not, I only encountered Dante a couple years ago and I was also surprised to find when he describes why he wrote the comedy, what he says is, I wrote this poem so that you could encounter it in a state of misery and be taken to a state of happiness.

So it's actually kind of like a medieval self-help book, like the first self-help book. And whether or not it works is, I guess we're going to find out. So there is a profile of Dante, that's how he's usually portrayed, I have no idea why, in the big red robe.

[2:43] And as we go through, we're going to take kind of like a whirlwind tour through the afterlife and we're going to kind of view a few of the images as we go through. So I wanted to ask, before we got started, how many here have actually read the comedy?

In its entirety? One. That's even less than I'd expected. Who here has read a portion of the comedy?

Dabbling in this. Dabbling, dabbling. Great, great. Well I intend this lecture as an introduction, so that's great. So I encountered the comedy in a class at Regent, and like I said, was surprised at how helpful, first of all how beautiful it was, but also how helpful it was in my spiritual life.

So I want to get a little bit into that. And anticipating that a lot of you wouldn't have read it, I wanted to give like a back of the book, like glowing endorsement, like you usually find on the back of books, like J.I. Packer writes a lot of these, I think.

And this one is from C.S. Lewis, who is actually one of my avenues into Dante. Lewis read Paradiso shortly after his conversion to theism, and shortly before his conversion to Christianity.

[4:03] And after finishing, he wrote a letter to his friend, Arthur Greaves, and he said, this is the most important poetry that I've ever encountered. And he read a lot of poetry.

And once you've read the comedy, you actually see it everywhere in Lewis's work. He uses it in most of his fiction, and in a lot of his nonfiction.

So the words important and poetry are very rarely combined these days. So what I want to ask and hopefully answer in this lecture is what is it about this poem that Lewis could find so vital and so important to himself and actually to his spiritual journey.

So first I want to introduce the comedy for those who haven't had a chance to engage with them at all. And then I'm actually going to use Charles Taylor to kind of ground us philosophically.

And I want to offer one argument through that lens for why Dante isn't just kind of a historical curiosity, but why it might be good and even important to read Dante as an Anglican Canadian.

[5:12] So my reason for why he is important will be this. Because Dante's comedy is an effective teacher of the way of images. What is the way of images?

It's the pathway to the vision of Christ himself through properly seeing the presence of Christ in all that we see in this world. In short, Dante's comedy teaches us to reconstitute all of our seeing in this world as not merely like a natural function of our eyeballs, but as a foreshadowing of and a participating in the vision of and union with Christ, which is our ultimate goal as human beings.

So, before we get into the way of images, I want to briefly introduce who Dante was and what the poem was. So Dante was born at 1265.

He lived in Florence, Italy. And that's where he lived until he was 35 years old. At age 30, he published a volume of romantic courtly love poems about his love for the young Florentine girl, Beatrice.

And that kind of jump-started his poetic career. And in addition, he became involved in politics in Florence. And he was also licensed as a pharmacist. Little known fact.

[6:36] Around 1301, Dante's life takes a bad turn. He finds himself on the wrong side of Pope Boniface VIII. And so, long story short, Dante is part of a political group called the White Guelphs.

And they're opposed to another group, the Black Guelphs. And Dante is kind of sent on a mission with his political party to Rome to kind of appeal to the Pope.

While he's on that mission, the Pope sides with the other political party and commissions Frenchmen to take over Florence in favor of the other political party. And so, Dante is in Rome and finds himself exiled from Florence, his hometown.

And is never able to return to Florence again. So, he's exiled for his entire life. And he writes the comedy in exile, kind of touring to different Italian cities and towns and finding patrons who will support him in his work.

During his exile, he writes the three canticles of the comedy, Inferno, which is Hell, Purgatorio, Purgatory, and Paradiso. Each canticle consists of 33 or 34 cantos, which is kind of like a chapter.

[7:48] And it adds up to a total of exactly 100. As a whole, the narrative poem tells an allegorical story of one man, Dante, and his journey from sin and toward the vision of God, or the beatific vision.

It begins in Inferno with the famous lines, and this is the only Italian we're going to get this morning. Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita. So, midway through this journey of our life.

And he says, I found myself in a dark wood, for the right way had been lost. The dark wood symbolizes his state of confused bondage to sin.

And the first action in the Inferno is Dante kind of scrambling to get out of the dark wood on his own strength and completely failing. He ends up right back where he started.

Being beset by three wild animals. Each symbolizing the specific sins to which he is bound. The narrative then zooms out, and we see God extending grace to Dante.

[8:55] In the story, this gracious initiative is represented by a chain of messages set into motion by God's gracious action. Which finally results in Virgil, who is the great Roman poet, who knows a thing or two about hell, if you've read any Virgil.

Who offers his friendship and guidance to Dante, and instructs him how he can flee the wild and savage place, which is his sinful state.

And thus begins the pilgrim's long journey of response to God's grace, which is imaginatively pictorialized by Dante as a pilgrimage down through the nine circles of hell, and then up the seven terraces of Mount Purgatory, and then up some more through the nine spheres of heaven toward God, where he encounters, to his surprise, the shape of the incarnated Christ, his own human image in his vision of God.

So that was the whirlwind introduction. And now what I want to do is first I'm going to introduce the way of images through Charles Taylor.

Then I want to dive into one passage. Just we get one passage from each canto. So Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso, and then Summary. So as far as the philosophical foundation goes, I want to explain using Charles Taylor.

[10:23] And in the secular age, Charles Taylor's massive book, which I have not read in its completion, Taylor summarizes what in his view differentiates the modern secular from the medieval and ancient worldviews.

He contends that a key differentiating feature between the ancient and modern individual is that the modern individual is buffered while the ancient is porous.

And this is very helpful for understanding Dante. Taylor writes that for the ancient individual, the clear boundary between mind and world, which we mark, was much hazier.

So ancient people conceived of their beings as continually penetrated and interwoven with forces external to their own selves.

Angels, demons, ghosts, love, but if from the Christian worldview, also God. Modern individuals, on the other hand, conceive of their values and thoughts as driving largely from their own selves.

[11:28] Taylor writes, this self can see itself as invulnerable, as master of the meanings of things for it. So Taylor in context is not actually explicitly condemning this buffered self.

He's just describing it. But the whole point of my talk is to kind of argue that there is something useful and beneficial in this medieval worldview. So I'm going to be more argumentative than Taylor and suggest that the implications of being a buffered modern human being could be troubling for Bible-believing Christians.

So there's much in the Bible suggesting that Christians should be open to the porousness of their selves and the world within the Christian context.

All Christians are to willingly invite the Spirit to dwell within them. The Spirit is not merely to live within them like a water in a bucket, but to be formed into their being.

Christ, in addition to being the God-man, is portrayed as the ground of the existence, not merely of Christians, but as somehow also permeating into every particle of existence.

[12:39] Paul says, for from him and through him and for him are all things, speaking of Christ. So this mystical interpenetration of creation and creator in the biblical text also extends horizontally.

So Paul states, and I think when you think about it, it's kind of like a frighteningly intimate image, that by virtue of Christians being unified with Christ, we're also unified together into one body.

And so these are realities, I'm arguing at least, that might be more difficult to fully grasp and deeply engage for one who's conditioned to live as a modern buffered self, as Taylor is describing.

So that was a brief, I mean that to kind of set the foundation for why we're talking about Dante's worldview and the way of images.

So we can now turn to the three, what I'm going to say are the three foundational pillars of how Dante understands the world and how he understands the self and how he portrays it in the comedy.

[13:50] And this will explain what Taylor means by his vision of the porous self and the porous world. So the three foundational pillars of Dante's view of the world are as follows.

Number one, it participates in God. Number two, it's hierarchical. And the criteria by which that hierarchy is formed is the extent to which each aspect of creation participates in God.

And three, particular aspects of creation participate not only with God, but they also participate with each other.

And there's this vast web of horizontal union. And the goal of all those horizontal unions ideally is to arrive at the source of all union, which is our union with God, which is most keenly seen in the incarnation.

So Dante begins Paradiso with a terset, that's just three lines that expresses the first of the first two of these principles.

[15:05] He says, the glory of him who moves all things pervades the universe and shines in one part more and in another less.

So Dante describes here, by virtue of this penetration of God's glory, that the world is imbued also with this glory.

And objects within the world shine out in such a way that people might perceive an aspect of God by viewing them. And we can also see point two, which is a hierarchy here.

Dante writes that creation participates in one part more and in another part less. So some parts of the world participate more fully in the divine nature than others, depending, as he mentioned later in the poem, whether they're near to the source or farther from it.

And the third foundation of Dante's participatory worldview is that the small, right, the small unions that take place, the horizontal unions, which can lead and teach us about the big union with our creator.

[16:16] For Dante, created objects interpenetrate each other's porous existences, and it's all ultimately in a yearning for union with God.

But Beatrice expresses this concept to Dante shortly after the two of them travel to the first sphere of heaven, the heaven of the moon.

Dante finds himself baffled at the way in which they, their bodies are received literally into the substance of the moon without the moon being disturbed.

And he writes it like this. The eternal pearl, and that's, he's talking about the moon, received us in itself as water does a ray of light, and yet remains unsundered and serene.

On earth, we can't conceive how matter may admit another matter to it when body flows into, becomes another body.

[17:16] And that, all the more, so those horizontal unions should kindle our desire to see the very one who lets us see the way that our nature was conjoined with God.

So Dante here witnesses a unity between two bodies that is beyond his understanding. And in response to his wonder, he's instructed by Beatrice to be spurred on to even, even greater spiritual vision.

To where the epitome of unity, the incarnated Christ, which he encounters at the end of the poem, resides. So small, horizontal union kindles his desire to move toward the big union behind it all, the union between God and his creation.

So understanding Dante's preoccupation with the capacity for all these small unions in the world, and their capacity to foreshadow our union with God, is the most important hermeneutic that you can bring to the comedy.

And that's not only in regard to understanding theme, but also in regard to understanding the way that he structures the poem, and even the words that he uses. And so I just, I wrote out three of the tercets in Italian, and you'll notice that even his rhyme scheme is, it's called terza rima, and it's interlocking, right?

[18:44] So there's no line that is not surrounded by two rhyming words. So smarita is surrounded by oscura and dura. And so the whole, there's an interlocking chain of rhyme throughout the whole comedy.

What are those words you mean? Some of them, but not all of them. And in regard to vocabulary, you'll notice Dante's consistent and highly innovative preoccupation with words that begin in in, which means the same thing in Italian as it does in English.

So inubarasi, to in-city oneself. Inchiela, to in-heaven oneself. Inamorata, which you could probably understand, to in-love oneself.

Infande, to in-poor. And even india, which means in-God. So of these, and at least in inubarasi, it's hard to figure out, but at least in inubarasi is coined by Dante.

I think he coins a lot of them actually. And to back up this theology that he's building. So Dante continually stretches the boundaries of language to fit with his conception of the porous individual in cosmos.

[19:58] So that's the most succinct description of Dante's medieval worldview that I could come up with. If you're interested in a fuller and better description, it's actually the topic of C.S. Lewis's final book, The Discarded Image.

Has anyone encountered that book? Yeah. I think it's one of his best books. So in this book, he gives a great comparison of what I've been describing. The difference between looking at the world.

Specifically, he talks about looking at the night sky with modern eyes from looking at it with medieval eyes. And he summarizes it like this. To look out on the night sky with modern eyes is like looking out over a sea that fades away into mist.

Or looking about oneself in a trackless forest. Trees forever and no horizon. To look up at the towering medieval universe is much more like looking at a great building.

The space of modern astronomy may arouse terror or bewilderment or vague reverie. The spheres of the old presents us with an object in which the mind can rest.

[21:13] Overwhelming in its greatness, but satisfying in its harmony. So on three occasions in that book, he actually tells the reader to put the book down.

Because you can't... It's hard to do this without the imagination and to go outside, especially at night. And just to look up and try to reimagine the cosmos through those new eyes.

So... Now that we have in place that sketch of the medieval cosmos, we're going to move on. And now I want to see if I can describe the main topic, which is the way of images.

And so this is actually a term I'm borrowing from another great Anglican, who is a literary critic, novelist, and also friend of C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams.

So the way of images is essentially the progression in our union with God by means of witnessing the presence of God in the things of the world.

[22:17] In Dante's conception of the porous cosmos, in contrast with the buffered self and cosmos, the world is permeated in some way with the presence of Christ. So the spiritual significance of our vision of and engagement with the images we see along the way in the world is drastically heightened.

So it's helpful to contrast this way of images with the other traditional approach to God, which is the way of negation, or the via negativa.

And the via negativa, which I would say is the dominant expression of Christian spirituality, maybe from Augustine until the Renaissance, refers to the negation of senses to commune with God.

And so to walk the via negativa is to act to push aside one's physical senses for a moment in order to, I suppose, more to have distractions gone so that you can commune with God.

And the most basic expression of that would just be closing your eyes in prayer or even leaving like a noisy room so that you can be in a quiet place to commune with God.

[23:32] The way of images, on the other hand, could be described as praying with one's eyes open. So it's the discipline of seeking true vision of things, seeing them as God sees them, and also seeing the presence of God shining out of them.

So Williams writes, To walk the way of images, a person must cease to know the images as that person chooses. It must know them as they are.

That is, as God chose them to be. That is, the person must, as much as possible, know the image as God knows the image in its union with him.

Dante himself puts a concise description of the way of images on the lips of Bernard of Clairvaux, who in the poem Dante meets in the final cantos of Paradiso.

Bernard instructs Dante, Let your sight fly through this garden, for seeing it will help prepare your eyes to rise along the holy beam of light.

[24:37] So Bernard's instruction to Dante is to look well and deeply at his surroundings as a training ground for deeper and deeper encounter with Christ.

And so now, with that brief explanation of the way of images, I want to begin a kind of a quick whirlwind tour through the afterlife.

And we're going to start on hell, quick stop in purgatory, and then stop along one more landmark on the way of images. So, I think I have a...

Oh, there's Charles Williams. See this? I forgot about them. And here's an image of the Inferno as Dante kind of pictures and imagines it.

So one of the first lessons that the Inferno teaches Dante is that the way of images is not simply in kind of like a slacker's version of the Via Negativa. It's not easy.

[25:35] So Williams elaborates on this. It's not to be rashly assumed that the way of affirmation, that's the way of images, is much easier than the Via Negativa.

To affirm the validity of an image, one does not at the moment happen to like or want, such as that of one's next door neighbor, is as harsh as to reject an image, such as one's self as successful, which one does happen to like or want.

So in the nine circles of hell, Dante encounters every manifestation of sin imaginable. And he must turn his back on them. Personally rejecting each of them in order for him to make progress along the way.

So each of the sinners is portrayed as a physical manifestation of their sad spiritual state. And so one critic describes the sinner's condition is a static representation of the sin itself.

So each sinner represents a state of the soul, excuse me, frozen forever in its act of sin. For example, each, each lustful sinner in Canto 5 is portrayed as a leaf on a leaf, kind of taken off of a tree, detached and wildly tossed about by conflicting winds.

[27:03] I saw a few lustful sinners on my way to church this morning. This is Dante's pictorial representation of the reality of a soul that makes reason subject to desire, and thus becomes light and insubstantial.

As Dante encounters these visual manifestations of particular sins, he must learn to react correctly to their twisted shapes. He must have compassion on them because they're suffering.

But he can't have too much pity because then he's questioning God's perfect judgment. And so Virgil, as his guide, is there to chastise him and instruct him on how he should be reacting to each of these images.

So we'll look at just one example. That's not showing up super well, but this is a scene from Canto 20 in the Inferno, and it's the eighth circle of hell, so getting close to the bottom.

In this circle, Dante meets the fortune tellers. As punishment for their attempt to look forward in time, while they were alive, Dante portrays each of them with their head on backwards.

[28:14] So those are shoulder blades. And so as he describes, the tears that burst from their eyes ran down the cleft of the buttocks.

He can be a bit crude at times. And the gruesomeness of it is too much for him to bear in the poem. So he says, Seeing the image of our humanity distorted in this way, Dante finds himself weeping for their suffering, and predictably, Virgil rebukes him.

He says, Still? Still like the other fools? There's no place for pity here. Who is more arrogant within his soul? Who is more impious than one who dares to sorrow at God's judgment?

That's really one of Virgil's harsher moments. He's not always like that. Dante encounters in this image of the fortune tellers, as he does in all the infernal images, a being who's cut themselves off from God.

They're not so much images on the way of images, but anti-images, demonstrating the internal states that Dante has to flee if he is to walk the way of images toward Christ.

[29:27] Thankfully, he's successful in his rejection of the anti-images, and so he proceeds to purgatory.

And this painting, which is in Florence, you can actually see all three. So there's hell, there's purgatory as he imagines it, and then spheres of heaven.

In purgatory, of course, the way of images takes a different shape. As he must learn from the people he meets, what is the image of one actively and hopefully working through a sin with the great hope of salvation?

And I think this section is actually, it's the most, simultaneously the most problematic and the most readable usually, especially for Protestants and myself.

Problematic for obvious reasons. And readable because, allegorically speaking, the people in purgatory are the most similar to the people on earth and that they are Christians on earth and that they have a great hope of salvation and yet still are working through sins in their life.

[30:38] So, we're actually going to skip 90% of purgatory and get to our next landmark on the way of images. And this is the first true saint that Dante encounters.

And that's Beatrice, who we mentioned earlier. And this is the girl who Dante met and fell in love with when he was a kid living in Florence. And she's since died, gone to heaven, and she now reappears to him in her beatified form at the top of Mount Purgatory.

And she has a great opening line. She says, Observe me well. I am, in truth, I am Beatrice. So, her instruction to Dante is that from this point on, as he encounters the redeemed people in heaven, he must learn to look well at them.

He must learn to tear his eyes from lower sinful desires and to look deeply at the goodness that he sees in these people and actually to see the presence of Christ in them and thus learn more about the vision of Christ and prepare himself to see Christ more clearly.

I actually have a... This might not be big enough to totally see for all of you, but this is... Salvador Dali does illustrations of each of the...

[32:01] Each... He does one illustration for each canto of the entire comedy. And I think this one describes exactly what Dante is supposed to be doing throughout the comedy, which is...

So you can see his... His chin is up. He's attempting to look to Christ, and yet his eye is not in the right place in his face. So it's right next to his nose.

And so this is... I think it's a great portrait of the struggle of Dante, but the struggle of every Christian as you try to focus on Christ, but are also distracted in certain ways.

Also, that's kind of the... It's a laurel, and it's also drawn to look like the dark wood, right? So from the first canto, which is within his mind.

If you have... Maybe I'll pass it around if you haven't... If you couldn't see it from back there. So from the point of Beatrice's appearance onward, Dante's vision, and especially his vision of Beatrice, comes into central focus.

[33:06] Dante's initial glimpses of Beatrice in the earthly paradise are pained and difficult, but they become easier as he turns more and more away from his sin.

So directly after Beatrice instructs him to look well at her, Dante finds himself unable to do so. Instead of looking at her, he looks at himself in the water.

There's a river there. And he's overcome with shame at the sight of his own image. He says, I lowered my eyes to the clear water, but when I saw myself reflected, I drew them back toward the grass.

Such shame weighed on my brow. And she is stern with him because of his turn back inward and away from Christ. She says, Lift up your beard.

And Dante describes the immense difficulty with which he does so. He says, With less resistance is the sturdy oak torn from the earth, whether by our northern wind or by the one that blows from Iarba's lands, than was my chin nudged up by her command.

[34:21] And so from this point on, throughout the Paradiso, we see Dante encountering the images of dozens of these great Christians throughout the ages and scholars from the history of the church in the nine spheres of heaven, starting with the moon, passing through the planets, and up into the realm of fixed stars.

Obviously, this is pre-Copernicus or whoever it was that figured this stuff out. And throughout the journey, his primary image remains Beatrice.

And the most typical portrayal as he's progressing of Dante and Beatrice's spiritual relationship is as follows. Dante looks at Beatrice, and Beatrice gazes further up into the heavens toward Christ.

And so Dante is instructed by Beatrice's gaze how he might also center all of his desire on the vision of Christ.

So right at the beginning of Paradiso, the pattern is set. Dante describes it as follows. So her gaze, pouring through my eyes on my imagination, made itself my own.

[35:39] And I, against our practice, set my eyes upon the sun. Beatrice, similarly to Virgil, continues to instruct Dante's gazing.

In this case, to ensure that Dante never gets so distracted with an image itself that he forgets the, like the capital I image to which all of the images point.

So in Canto 18, Dante kind of gets a bit starry at Beatrice, and Beatrice reminds him, not in my eyes alone is paradise.

But Beatrice is cautioning Dante against staring wrongly at one image, her, by becoming fixated and forgetting that even the most remarkable and godly image must be seen in its union with Christ, and not for the sake of the image alone.

So the progression of his vision, basically, that is the pattern, that it continues until finally, beyond the ninth heaven, he has his vision of God. And within this vision, his eyes set upon the human image of Christ.

[36:48] And that, this is another from the same series as the one that I'm passing around.

And so I want to read briefly his, just part of the vision of Christ as he describes it, and then comment on how that plays into the way of images that we're talking about.

He says, Oh, how scant is speech! Too weak to frame my thoughts! Compared to what I still recall, my words are faint.

To call them little is to praise them much. Oh, eternal light, abiding in yourself alone, knowing yourself alone, and known to yourself, and knowing, loving, and smiling on yourself.

That circling, which thus conceived, appeared in you as light's reflection, once my eyes had gazed on it for a while, seemed within itself, and in its very color, to be painted with our likeness, so that my sight was all absorbed in it.

[37:59] Like the geometer who fully applies himself to square the circle, and for all his thought cannot discover the principle he lacks.

Such was I at that strange new sight. I tried to see how the image fit the circle, and how it found its wear in it.

So he's trying to figure out how a square can become a circle, comparing that to how God could become a man. But my wings had not sufficed for that, had not my mind been struck by a bolt of lightning, that granted what I asked.

And here my exalted vision lost its power, but now my will and my desire, like wheels revolving with an even motion, were turning with the love that moves the sun, and all the other stars.

So here at the peak of his spiritual ascent, Dante encounters the image of a human body in the beatific vision. The image appears to Dante within itself, and in its very color, painted with our likeness.

[39:11] And Dante uses the presence of the body of Christ in the beatific vision to kind of retroactively affirm the importance of all the created images which led Dante upward to this final vision.

Dante Pilgrim had been encountering the impression of God stamped upon creation, most significantly upon Beatrice throughout his ascent.

And now encountering our likeness within the Godhead, the legitimacy of all of those images that he encountered, is affirmed and cemented.

So Dorothy Sayers, who is also friends with Lewis and Williams, with kind of a theme here, writes that all the shining images are seen summed up in the final image, the image of the incarnate Christ in the very center of the unimaginable Godhead.

The fact that the image sums up all previous images is also an affirmation of the legitimacy of these images' guidance. Also in the beatific vision, you notice that the Trinity is portrayed as smiling on itself, which is another incarnational image, in that the smiles of all the people that Dante has encountered as he's ascending are continually highlighted.

[40:42] And so as Dante is being led toward Christ, and so to portray that kind of fleshly image of a smile within the Trinity is another verification and affirmation of the true presence of Christ that Dante encountered in the Christians that he encountered as he ascended.

So, to summarize briefly, that concludes our afterlife tour. Charles Taylor, with his description of the buffered and porous cells, helps us to see the dramatic difference in the way moderns and medievals perceive the world in relation to themselves.

And the comedy, through Williams' lens here, may be especially helpful to modern people in that it portrays not just a porous universe, but a universe in which the substance moving through the porous is none other than Christ.

And within Dante's conception of the cosmos, all of our little visions of each other and unions and relationships are participations in God's ultimate, gracious union with his creation.

Dante's way of images teaches Christians how to properly engage with this vision of the porous cosmos in such a way as to lead to deeper relationship with Christ.

[42:07] Working your way through the comedy may be deeply helpful to the modern mind in regaining a properly Christian sense of a world that was created and ordered by a rational God.

That's not to say that everything in the medieval worldview is completely correct. It may help you regain a sense of a world in which every part and even the darkest corners that you see in the inferno are viewed in relation to their union or their lack of union with Christ.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. In the poem I saw the word vita.

Isn't that Latin for life? And the word canto, isn't that Latin for song? And Italian also, I think. Italian and Latin are super similar. So I don't know. In Italian, was that in Italian or Latin?

Yeah. Yeah. Also, vita in Italian is Italian for life and canto for song? Yes. Oh, because it's a bit so, because in the heart, soul, life, in Portuguese, a quarter shall alma vita.

[43:21] So when I saw vita, that means like in Italian. Yeah. Okay. Yeah. And canto or in Portuguese song. So canto, okay. Right. Nice.

Shiva? This picture that you left there, I've seen the original Dali painting. Really? Yeah, in Glasgow. I can't remember. I can't remember. Oh. Somewhere near their major church, there was an art gallery.

And when you look at the painting, which is really powerful. Yeah. You're looking down on the head of Christ, so you see that same image, but you see it from above.

Can you tell me what the other images are there? Who is sitting on top of the tree trunk? There's a tree trunk? Who is kneeling? Oh, I guess there's kind of. Well, that's so that, like this is, this is Dante. Okay.

And this is Beatrice. Who is Beatrice? Who is Tim? I'm not actually 100% sure about that, but that's what I've always assumed. She looks so thin. Oh. Yes. She looks so thin. Oh.

[44:24] Yes. Yeah. She looks so. Of course, fail me. She looks so what? Well, unappealing. Well. As a woman. It's abstract, you know. I had too small in size, too big, and you know.

All right. What do I know? She can take it. I was, I was going to mention to you that you mentioned Dorothy L. Sayers. Mm-hmm. Her translation of the Divine Comedy was the best thing for about 30 to 40 years until the 1990s, when apparently somebody wrote one that was considered to be slightly better.

I wonder if it's the Hollanders. It might be. The Hollanders is, I, it would be my recommendation for a translation, and it's, they're both Dante scholars, but he is one of the top Dante scholars, and she's a great poet.

Yeah. There's a great husband-wife duo that produced, and it's not rhyming, which I actually prefer, but it's an incredible, uh, translation. Uh, yeah. You're saying it's a good self-help book, so, you know, I can see what she means.

So if someone feels backed up against the wall, they're all alone, you can just take the book with them and just fall back on it and talk to other people that have read the book, and it can just help you if you're really, really shook up, you can sort of write things out with the, all of that book sometimes.

[45:42] That's not a bad idea to do it that way. Interesting. That's interesting. I actually know someone, or I haven't met him, but I've heard about him, who does kind of like writing literary, um, training for people in prisons.

And he says that one of the, one of the really popular works that they work through is Dante's Inferno. And it's probably, it probably is that idea of start, starting alone halfway through your life. You've made a ton of mistakes.

You're in despair. And that it's a pretty powerful image of somebody emerging and having to face everything that they've done. Because he sees himself projected in every image he encounters and having to turn their back on it.

What made you choose this topic? Do you mean Dante in general or this, or this? Well, for a deeper exploration, an essay or piece of something?

Well, I read the last, I worked my way completely backwards. So I read for, I was assigned for a class to read the last canto. And almost the whole canto is just him describing the vision of Christ.

[46:46] I had never really encountered someone attempting to describe that experience before. And I was, and then as I encountered more of it, I realized his whole theology is, revolves around this idea of union.

And so then going back to the beginning, even in the inferno, sin wasn't portrayed just as, like, don't do this, like command.

But it was, these are all the behaviors that make it difficult for you to see God. And I just found that to be, everything was portrayed in relation to union or disunion with Christ.

And I found it to be a powerfully positive way of depicting sin and struggle. And also the beauty of the, of holding your, just your desire to be unified and to see God as central and then guiding other theological assumptions.

So that was the basic idea that, um, I was captured by. And then as I was, I did more work on it throughout Regent. And then after about 12 missed starts, I decided to do my thesis on it as well.

[47:56] So, yeah. Very interesting. Angie? You mentioned that, uh, in Dante's work, the participation in God is really at the core. Uh, in the last panel with the beatific vision, to which extent does he participate in Christ, and Christ's redemptive works?

Is that something that he informs? Or? To what extent? Um, does Dante talk about, um, participating in Christ's redemptive works, uh, into the etiquette vision?

Um, that's an interesting question. So are you saying, is it just like some rapturous vision with no practical initiative? Is that kind of the question? Yeah. Yeah.

And I think it ends with the vision. And so I could see why that assumption would be made. In another sense, the entire poem is about him surrendering his will to God as he slowly detaches his will from the things that he had a pretty wild young life.

And so if you look at the third last line, for example, but now my will and my desire, like wheels revolving turned with God's love.

[49:14] And so I think that the, he's now well prepared to live a fruitful life. It doesn't, you don't get a count out afterwards where he goes out and like feeds the poor, unfortunately.

But I think that it is very much describing the preparation, the purification of heart that's, that's necessary to do that. So. Yeah, sorry, I don't know your name. Yeah. Just listening to you, you described this thing and it really impressed on me just how we need to have a great culture, a culture that has wrestled with the divine to create and produce such profound works as Dante did.

And I'm left wondering what do we have here that could even approach this in our current productions of art of any form that shows that we are wrestling with the divine in this way.

Because I see in our current art a lot of cynicism. We know there's something wrong and there's a lot of negativity, but there's, you're kind of left with an empty despair or just a kind of grasping at, you know, optimism for no reason.

Do you, can you think of anyone now that is kind of producing something that's even approaching this? Do you mean alive now or this century? In our, in our current generation, like recent generations, not necessarily alive, but I mean, you mentioned Lewis obviously, but I'm saying more, more recent than Lewis is what I thought of my name is.

[50:53] More recent than Lewis is tough. Cause I was also thinking T T S Elliot, the four quartets is, is deeply influenced by Paradiso and you could see it as a more fractured, um, like more modern borderline postmodern attempt at describing the beatific vision.

And so I, I really, I think that he, and I mean, so in some ways he's doing the same thing as Dante and a lot easier to encounter, um, because he's talking the modern language.

But I mean, it's tough. I mean, I sometimes go as far as like deep attempts to, to like, to kindle the desire to see God.

I off, I love like Tolkien and Lewis because they're doing it through the, through the lens of fantasy. And so, so much in the Narnia series, actually, I think is trying to do the same thing.

Um, and I know you said it has to be past Lewis, but I couldn't think of anybody else. It's trying to do the same thing that, that, that Dante is doing. I mean, even if you, even if you look at like the white witch is basically Dante Satan, um, freezing everything around her, um, making things incapable of even moving, right?

[52:17] That's the idea of something being frozen for Dante is you're incapable of even moving in love toward union provision with anything else. So he's trying to capture the, the, the same thing in the imagination of kids.

I can't think of anybody after Elliot and, and Lewis. Or maybe someone else would have an idea of, of someone with a similar project, but. All right. He doesn't write fiction, but, um, one of the, Don and Jim would know this, one of the great Dante scholars from the team is Father of the Krauss.

Yeah. Uh, from King's College. So, uh, I mean, he's worth reading because, uh, he was well read in Augustine and Dante.

So he's worth, he's worth considering. He's got lots of students at King's College, Delhousen, now as well. So, question just about the use of images and the differences between the, the pre-modern and the modern.

Um, to help me, help me out here, Eric. I thought that the moderns looked at images. And the pre-moderns looked along images.

[53:29] I thought you were saying that the pre-moderns looked in images. So, C.S. Dose will talk about looking along light, not at light. Um, so, help me, help me out there.

Am I wrong in thinking that, that they weren't looking along images, uh, to what they pointed to? Um, but rather pointing to the image. I know, I mean, I think you're exactly right.

I think that what you described is a perfect way of describing it. I mean, you look in, he's, he's consumed with in-ness. So like the interpenetration of, like love, if you're a medieval, the, the most concise definition of is the spiritual union of one thing with another.

Um, and so that's why he's always talking about the, the in-ness. He, he wants us to understand the world as, as capable of truly like partaking in, in loving union, union relationships with each other.

But all of that is, is for the purposes of looking through it or, or along it, I think is what you said. And, um, yeah, and I, that's a good way of describing maybe the modern tendency is to look so carefully at the image that you never, uh, look past it.

[54:51] There's a point in the, um, I think it's in purgatory or period, so I can't remember where, where, um, where Beatrice says to Dante, too fixed.

As in, you're looking like, you're just looking at the image. And I think I touched on that briefly, like too fixed, you need to look past, through the image to Christ. Yeah. Well, we had a good preacher this morning who quoted John Webster.

So, um, Webster says the modern receives the world through, through our senses and we present the world to ourselves in our mind. It's an astonishing fact. That's the modern self becomes sovereign.

Mm-hmm. The world is in my mind, my own images. Whereas, I think Dante would say, no, the world is a gift. Yeah. Given to us to observe it. That great dance. Yeah. Is before us. So it's, we decline, the world is glorious. Yeah.

The modern self glorifies self. I see that my images are in my own mind. Hmm. Can I ask? That was, I wish that had been my summary of my lecture. Isn't it over-reading? I think it's not from George Steining.

[56:01] He says, Beatrice, Beatrice, Beatrice, is, is a reference to the Trinity. That Beatrice is his first gaze in love at the trueness of God who is love.

Not just a God alone, but a God who is one God in love. But I, I, is that a, I've never, or is that, I don't know. I, I, it's a beautiful thought.

Beatrice. Blessed. I've never heard, I've heard it more in, I mean, she was real. Like, she was a human being also. Like, people don't assume that she's a fictional character.

She really is a young woman who he met and who died and who he had, he fell in love with, but then he was exiled. He married a different woman. Um, I've never heard that.

But I mean, like, theologically that's accurate to her vision and what she's teaching him. So, whether he intended that kind of wordplay, I'm not really sure, but yeah.

[57:03] It's very rewarding to hear somebody talk about something that they have worked on as much as you have.

Um, I'm wondering if in all of the surrounding materials that you looked at, you arrived at some sense of, a circle of interest around Dante in the last 50 to 100 years.

It's a, uh, kind of, a stream of dantism. And I wonder if in that you would perceive, holding it together, what you might call the modernist nostalgia.

Hmm. So, by modernist nostalgia, do you mean people who know they're moderns but want to be something different? Yeah. Uh, the, I mean, the Inklings were consumed with Dante, the Inklings being the literary group at Oxford, right?

So Lewis and Williams and Sayers was friends with them. Um, I don't know the other ones that well. But I mean, I don't know if you could pick a group of people that, that, uh, capture the term modernist nostalgia better than that group of people.

[58:37] Um, Elliot. So, I mean, yeah, if you look at, if you look at the, that group of scholars, they just love Dante.

They want to just go back. And you don't see a ton. I mean, Lewis is self-critical in Discarded Image, where he's like, is this really the way, like, obviously the sun's not in between, like, Venus and some other planet, or whatever.

But he's also, he wants to recapture the essence of it, but throwing out, like, obviously the scientific fallacies and things like that. But he just loves it. Someone like T.S. Eliot is more cautious.

So he fragments it. He wants to capture, like, that, that way of perceiving the cosmos and the warmth and the rationality of it. But he's like, he's cynical about it too.

Which actually makes him a great read because you, you can't, it's really difficult to just, you can't pretend you're a medieval. Or you can't fully pretend you're a medieval. You can go out and try to look at the night sky in that way, but all you're really going to be thinking is like, it's an empty vacuum of cold space and the earth's not at the center of it.

[59:45] Like, you can't stop yourself from thinking that, so. Yeah. Maybe. Maybe. Did that answer your question? Sorry, I just kind of rambled. I just wanted to see what you would have to say about that. Okay.

If you like that. Yeah. Oh, sorry. Can you tell us why he includes pre-Christian, old Greeks in some of this stuff?

You mean in heaven? Or in general, why he includes all the mythology? I don't think, I don't think they were in heaven where they were. Well, he, he puts a couple people you really wouldn't expect to find in purgatory or heaven in those places.

And so he was, I don't know what you want to call it, if you want to call it progressive, like borderline heretical for his day, of not placing them.

If you're a medieval Christian, you're supposed to put them in limbo, which is where Virgil is. But he also, he puts Cato in the bottom of purgatory. And I really, he has a very, as much as his reputation is for like punishing the people he doesn't like by putting them in various circles of hell, he's very merciful.

[60:58] I think we all have that feeling. Yeah. He, uh, he has mercy on people that you weren't supposed to have mercy on.

Or like he, um, I mean, he describes Virgil as a, as a person, um, walking with a lantern over their, uh, like a lantern on a stick over their shoulder.

So he couldn't see Christ cause he lived before Christ. But his, there's so much truth in his poetry that he can almost lead people there. And, um, he uses all the mythology because he wants to be the greatest poet in the world.

I don't know. Like he wants to interact with and, and trump with Christian theology, all of the old pagan poets. So he's continually taking their images and Christianizing them. And then he, I, he also, when he portrays ancient figures, yeah, he sometimes like flirts with portraying them as having seen Christ in some way, even though they were lived in ancient Greece or something like that.

So, really interesting. I think we have a couple of popes. Doesn't he have a couple of popes in Gallup? Oh yeah. Yeah, Boniface, the guy who exiles him. Oh yeah, he's there.

[62:11] Just an aside, I was actually trying to look her up here on my phone. Um, we had someone that was here for several years.

Katie Calloway Sueda, S-W-E-D-A. She's at Baylor University, but she did her, her PhD at UBC. Some of you remember? Yes, yes. Under, um, Professor Dan, Danielson?

Yeah. Yeah, on Dante. Dennis Danison? Yes. Oh, he was, so he was one of my readers for my thesis, actually. Oh, okay. And it looks like she's at Baylor University now.

Katie Calloway Sueda. I think she did her PhD on something to do with Dante. Oh, cool. She spoke to us. Oh, sure. She was Milton. It was Milton. It was Milton.

Yeah, it was in Dante. Milton? Milton? Milton? Milton? Well, on that happy note, um, the time has come for all the things to end.

[63:18] Um, excuse me. I just want to take this opportunity to thank her, so, sorry, to thank you so much for coming, and to, uh, I don't know, inspire me to actually want to read Dante again.

Read Dante! Read it fascinating. It's really helpful, and I hope that you'll come and visit us again. That would be delightful.

Thank you.