

# Journal of Religious Education

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**JOURNAL OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

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# *Journal of Religious Education*

*JOURNAL OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION* is a publication for the academic exploration of the task of religious education in modern society. The journal helps disseminate writings and research in religious education and catechesis -- and in related areas such as spirituality, theology, moral and faith development, cultural contexts, ministry and schooling. It includes a variety of feature sections -- on contemporary educational issues, book reviews, conferences, resources and practical hints for teachers. Articles for publication on religious education in various contexts and on the related areas noted above, as well as on any of the feature sections are welcome. See the inside back cover for details.

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- the religious needs of young adults in the immediate post-school period;
- various models of faith communities in which evangelisation and catechesis may take place besides the Catholic school;
- religious education of children and adolescents;
- continuing religious education for adults;
- family ministry and youth ministry.

All articles submitted should be between 2500-5000 words in length and prefaced, on a separate page by an abstract of no more than 150 words. Please submit three copies (double spaced, single sided). A **COVER** sheet should contain the title of the paper, author's name, brief biographical details, institutional affiliation, postal address, phone, fax, email address, where available. On acceptance authors will be asked to provide a copy preferably on IBM diskette in Word for Windows V6 or Rich Text Format (RTF).

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- Conferences
- Notes on Resources
- Correspondence
- Current Issues

#### **Referencing Style**

The journal uses the American Psychological Association (5th ed.) system of referencing: this acknowledges the author, date and page, if applicable, of the work cited in the text, for example (Groome, 1991, p. 284). Full details of the publication are provided in the list of references at the end of the text: for example Groome, T. (1991). *Sharing faith*. Harper: San Francisco. Great care should be taken to ensure referencing is accurate. Further details about stylistic matters are available on request.

**The views of the contributors are not necessarily those of the editorial advisory committee of *Journal of Religious Education*.**

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## THE VISUAL ARTS: AN ALTERNATIVE LENS THROUGH WHICH TO LEARN ABOUT JUDAISM

### Abstract

For centuries Christians believed Judaism to be a religious tradition which prohibited the representation of G-d (G-d used in deference to Jewish people who do not use the sacred name even in translation) and by extension prohibited all visual images. Such a limited view has skewed and restricted our interpretation of this ancient religious tradition.

This article proposes that by studying Jewish art we will broaden and illumine our understanding of Judaism. Such a study may well yield rich data and open other avenues of historical inquiry. Contradictions and conflicts not identified in verbal and written texts may also come to light. The article will focus particularly on synagogue art and some of the works of Marc Chagall.

Given the prohibition in Exodus 20:4-5 and the fact that there appeared to be few obvious examples of Jewish art, Christians assumed that Judaism avoided visual images. Recent discoveries of ancient Jewish art have shown that this is not totally correct. This article proposes that by studying Jewish art, we will broaden and illumine our understanding of Judaism and open other avenues of historical inquiry. The article is in two sections: the first section explores some examples of ancient synagogue art which throws new light on Exodus 20:4-5 and the second part of the paper examines two works of the Jewish artist Marc Chagall.

### Judaism and the Arts

For many years Jewish involvement in the visual arts was believed to be constrained by the anti-*iconic* biblical instructions of Exodus 20:4-5

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your G-d am a jealous G-d, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me (Ex 20:4-5).

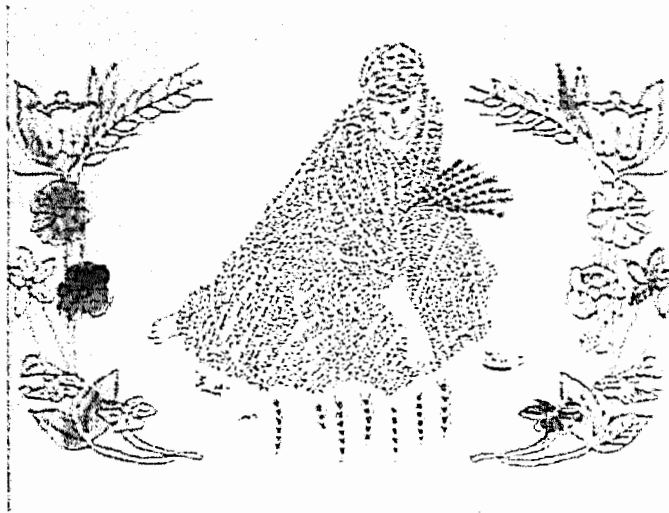
A rigid interpretation of the instructions listed in Exodus 20 has, until recently, limited our study of Judaism. For centuries study of Judaism by 'outsiders' has been almost exclusively text oriented – and the visual language of 3,500 years of Jewish religious experience has virtually been overlooked or ignored. Though art has not been a dominant factor in Jewish religious tradition as it has in Christianity, its exploration can nevertheless shed light on and deepen our comprehension of the

complex history of Judaism. We have now, since the discovery of an extensive visual tradition within Judaism, come to realise that a study of the arts and artefacts of Judaism may not only augment but also modify and correct Jewish literary tradition (just as an investigation of the arts has enhanced and modified knowledge of Christianity). According to Gutmann (1990), Jewish art frequently highlights more accurately than the text traditions the three-and-half-millennia involvement of Jews with multiple civilisations, cultures and societies.

Before attempting to study the arts within Judaism we have to address two major issues: The first is the assumed taboo against images and the second has been described as the contradictory nature of Jewish art (Gutmann, 1990). Let us deal with the second immediately. For both scholars and art historians, early Jewish art does not reflect one unique style but rather reflects Jewish involvement with multiple non-Jewish civilisations and cultures – in fact to view Jewish art is to engage in a multicultural experience. While on one level diversity of styles may open up all sorts of possibilities it also poses a perplexing problem of attempting to ascertain the nature of Jewish art. Because of its involvement with many host cultures Judaism adapted and developed artistic traditions from various sources. Examples of the splendid abstract ornamentation found in texts like the Qu'ran and the Romanesque, Gothic and Renaissance styles of Christian illuminations have been applied to Hebrew texts (Gutmann, 1990). One of the earliest Hebrew manuscript illuminations is dated from the ninth century CE and various examples of illuminated Hebrew Bibles, liturgical, medical and philosophic texts have been found in Spain and Germany. Evidence of lavishly illustrated marriage contracts have been uncovered in Italy dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and even today these highly decorated *Kethubah* (marriage contracts) are hung in the

family home. Another unique aspect of Jewish art and an offshoot of illumination is the practice of microcalligraphy – the utilisation of Hebrew letters

to form both figural and abstract designs. This ancient art continues today and contemporary examples can be seen below:



The Book of Ruth  
*Ruth Gleaning*  
Original Artwork



Song of Songs  
*Fiddler on the Roof*  
Original Artwork

Historically some significant moments in history also impacted upon Jewish art. For example the legal emancipation of Jews in the Western world in the nineteenth century meant that for the first time Jewish artists were able to obtain training in art schools which in the past had generally been closed to them. The works that emanated from this time no longer singly expressed the collective beliefs

and symbols of the Jewish community but rather the artist's national and international allegiances. The work of Jewish artists no longer featured predominantly Jewish images since their clientele had expanded to include non-Jews. Artistic manifestations became personal rather than communal. Jewish art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also reflects the separation

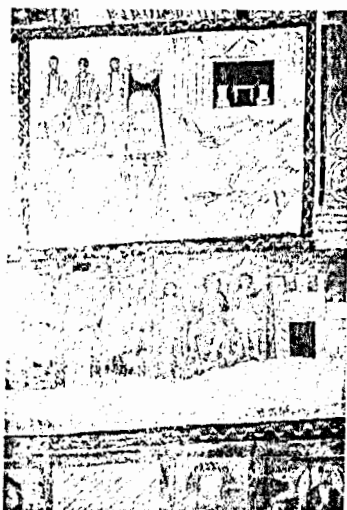
of church and state in the west and the subsequent decline in so called 'religious art'. Since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 modern Jewish art demonstrates diverse international styles.

### Ancient Jewish Art

#### Dura-Europos

One of the most astounding examples of Jewish art came to light in the 1930s with the discovery of the remains of a third century synagogue in the Roman frontier town of Dura-Europos, Syria. The synagogue walls were decorated with numerous illustrations of humans and animals and have been dated to 244/5CE. The walls reveal an extensive cycle of figural paintings which necessitated re-

examination of long cherished theories on the origin of Christian art, and also the attitude of Judaism toward images and the types of Judaism practised not only in the Syrian Desert town but also in the larger Jewish centres of Palestine and Babylonia. When the walls of the synagogue at Dura-Europos were discovered in November 1932 the modern perspective on the character of Judaism in Greco-Roman times had to be radically refocused. What archaeologists uncovered was substantial evidence of religious syncretism and use of pagan symbols. Dura-Europos was the first such evidence to be uncovered and the discovery changed the perceptions of Jewish art.



*Dura-Europos Synagogue*

(Available at <http://sas.upenn/rs/2/Judaism/bethalpha.html>)

This fresco section from the west wall (located to the right of the Torah niche) contains a panel at the top that depicts the Ark of the Covenant in the land of the Philistines.

The lower panel shows Pharaoh and the infancy of Moses (Keller, 1992, pp. 18-19).

The walls of this ancient synagogue were covered in frescoes which brought to life various biblical stories such as the Exodus, and depicted people like Moses, Aaron, David, Samuel, Esther and Mordecai at various stages of life (Neusner, 1990). The interior has paintings in four rows. The three upper rows depict scenes from the Hebrew Scriptures and the lower one shows a tiger, a lioness and a mask not relating to the upper scenes. G-d, however, did not appear to be physically represented until a truncated hand appearing from the clouds was discovered which was interpreted as a representation of G-d's power. Scholars agree that there was a plan to the art of the synagogue and that the biblical scenes portrayed were not merely ornaments or decoration but used as a means of conveying important religious ideas – the walls contained visual sermons. The ceiling of the

synagogue is decorated with terracotta square slabs bearing motifs incarnating flora in human forms, or forms of flowers, roses, fruits and corn-ears. Goodenough (in Neusner, 1990) is of the opinion that Dura-Europos was neither a physical nor cultural ghetto and that the Jews not only learned from their neighbours but also commented on their neighbour's religion. He in fact believes that a study of art such as was discovered in Dura-Europos is essential if we are to learn about ancient Judaism.

It appears from the synagogue drawings at Dura-Europos that Jewish artists borrowed motifs from neighbouring traditions. The costumes depicted in the drawings are Near Eastern in style and the drawing of the tabernacle resembles a small Greek temple. For the most part, people are flatly painted

in a frontal position and repeated with little variation of shape or movement (Hobbs, 1991). The Mosaic prohibition of “any likeness of anything that is in the heavens above, or that is in the earth beneath” was freely interpreted and it appears that only the prohibition of representing an image of G-d was totally observed (Honour & Fleming, 1999, p. 300). The painters of Dura-Europos synagogue disregarded all the naturalistic techniques developed by Hellenistic and Roman artists. No attempt was made to break the surface of the wall or to create an artificial space. Scenes were arranged without any visual relationship to one another or to the design of the room as a whole yet, to the Jews of the time these pictures were no doubt easy to read and vivid evocations of their scriptures.

The discovery of the illustrations at Dura-Europos led historians to question how extensively the prohibition against producing images, recorded in the Decalogue, was actually enforced and ultimately refutes all claims that Judaism did not have a tradition of art (Dillenberger, 1986). Recent scholarship indicates that the purpose of the law forbidding images seems to have been to assure loyalty to the invisible G-d and to keep the nomadic

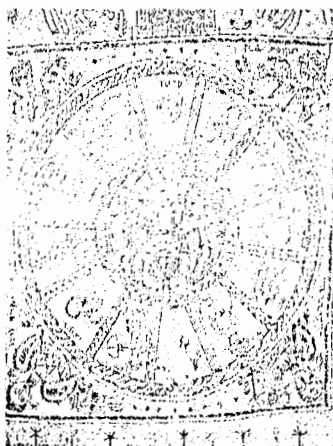
people from creating idols or adopting the idols of others. However, when Israel entered into a settled existence, G-d was no longer associated with travel, but with land, the monarchy and the temple. The archaeological finds mentioned appear to indicate that at some early stage in Israel’s history the Decalogue prohibitions were not fully enforced. The biblical material remains ambiguous on the issue of images and art. That is not to say that the second commandment was being contravened but that it may not always have been as strictly observed as was previously thought (Hobbs, 1991).

### **Bet-Alpha Synagogue**

In 1928 members of the kibbutzim Bet-Alpha at the foot of Mount Gilboa uncovered mosaics on the floor of a synagogue. The synagogue site was excavated in 1928 and again in 1962 when other buildings surrounding the synagogue were discovered. The Bet-Alpha synagogue excavations uncovered a mosaic floor, one of the most beautiful discovered in Israel. The main decoration is near the ark where we can see depictions of Jewish ritual objects such as a menorah. The ark is flanked by lions, birds and surrounded by animals, fruit and geometrical designs.

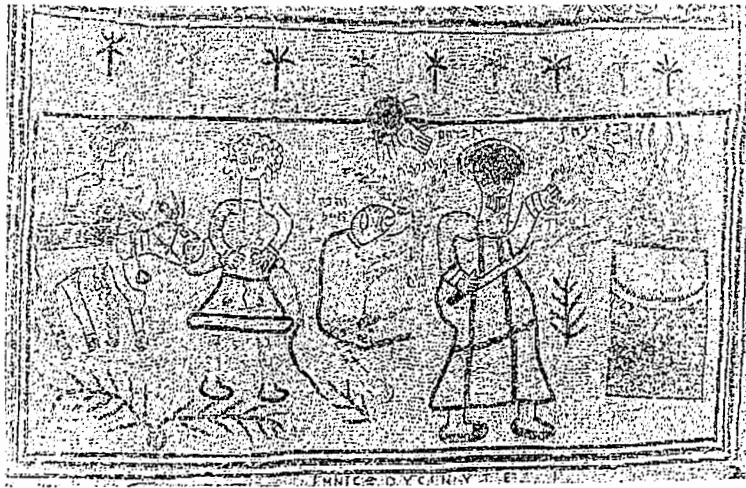


A more surprising find at the same site was the depiction of a rough but recognisable pattern of the signs of the Zodiac.



The central section of the mosaic contains a zodiac with the symbols of the months and the names in Hebrew and Aramaic. In the centre is the sun god Helios riding in a chariot drawn by four horses. In

the four corners are figures of women, symbolising the four seasons of the year. At the base of the mosaic is this depiction of a biblical story



The mosaic is a representation of the sacrifice of Isaac where the presence of G-d is portrayed by a disembodied, chubby hand appearing in the sky. The image, based on the story recorded in Genesis 22, contains all the essential elements of the story – we can see Abraham, the donkey (v3), two young men (v3); Isaac; a knife (v10); and the ram caught in a thicket (v13). There are accompanying inscriptions in Hebrew. Two inscriptions near the main entrance state “The well remembered artists who carried out this work Marianus and his Son Hanina” (Greek) and “The mosaic was laid in the year...of the reign of Emperor Justinus (517- 528) for the price of one hundred measures of grain donated by the villagers (Aramaic) (National Parks of Israel Bet-Alpha Synagogue information brochure).

Goodenough (in Neusner, 1990) argues that if illegal symbolic representations such as lions, victory wreaths and even Zodiac signs were used to the exclusion of many other symbols then the rabbis, while not approving of them, must have at least ‘accepted’ such representations. He also draws attention to the Binding of Isaac image stating that the images are “sloppily drawn so that no ornamental artist could have done them” implying that they were the work of the people who worshipped in the synagogue rather than skilled artists (Neusner, 1990, p. 34).

It would appear that as art became progressively associated with the Christian world, and became an instrument to spread Christian teaching, Jewish authorities grew increasingly hostile to it.

Nevertheless there seems not to have been any universal prohibition against involvement with art.

### Marc Chagall

Marc Chagall was born on 7 July, 1887 in the Russian town of Vitebsk. He was the eldest of nine children, his father worked at a fishmongers and his mother ran a small shop. He attended *Chedar*, Jewish primary school, for six years before moving to the local school. At the age of nineteen he went to St Petersburg and studied under the famous painter and stage designer Leon Bakst. Prior to World War I he lived in Paris and in the summer of 1915 he married Bella Rosenfeld.

In 1931 Chagall was commissioned by Vollard to illustrate the Bible and perhaps his legacy to twentieth century art is reviving the Bible as an appropriate subject for modern artists. As soon as he was given the commission, he and his family prepared to go to Palestine where he hoped to find inspiration for the task ahead. During the next three years, he produced over 105 preparatory studies of biblical scenes and in 1934 exhibited forty etchings. It was a painstaking exercise. Chagall went over each etching many times and by the time the second world war broke out he had completed sixty-six plates and begun thirty-nine more. He was unable to complete the project until 1948 when he returned to France.

By concentrating on stories and characters from the Hebrew Bible, Chagall hoped to both personalise and humanise the familiar biblical characters. It is through these images that his Hasidic background emerges: the Bible stories were reflections on an



alternative reality and for him the characters within the stories had a vital meaning and purpose in modern life.

His Jewish background and love of scripture can be seen throughout his works executed in various media including stained glass, tapestry, mosaics, oil, and watercolour. Chagall's artworks present a "screen through which his Jewishness and his lifelong preoccupation with the theme of faithfulness clearly emerge" (Crumlin, 1998, p. 62). Many of Chagall's works can be used to investigate scripture and learn about Judaism. According to Reid (1990) his art "indicates the reflexive and reciprocal relationship between the scriptural text and its interpretation in the visual arts. The text

shapes the visual art and the visual art reshapes the interpretation of the text" (p. 71). Chagall's paintings are not illustrations of the biblical text but rather scriptural interpretations. The distinction between biblical illustration and interpretation is important because a scriptural illustration simplifies the text and presents a single meaning while a scriptural interpretation establishes a field of meaning that must be considered.

We will explore two of Chagall's works: *Moses before the Burning Bush* and *The Hebrews Adore the Golden Calf*. Let us begin with *Moses before the Burning Bush* - look carefully at the picture and name what you see in it



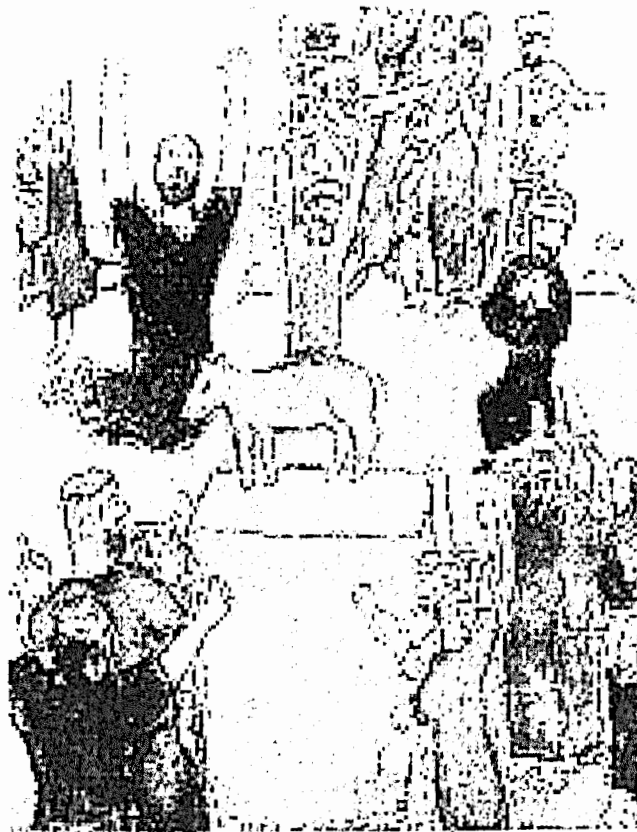
*Moses before the Burning Bush*  
(Available at <http://cgfa.floridaimaging.com/chagall/index.html>)

This undated work is an oil painting and very large, two by three metres. Clearly by its size it was never intended to be set in a lounge room but rather in a gallery or museum. Let us begin by examining the colours used. There are five colours - blue, white, red, yellow and green. The tone of the work is set by the dominant primary colour, blue. According to Reid (1990) blue points backwards to the sense of chaos indicated in the opening verses of Genesis - water and blue are symbolic of crisis - at least two-thirds of the painting is blue. The other primary colours establish relationships within the work. Red and yellow frame the angel in the centre of the picture who appears to come out of the burning bush. The angel is a familiar Chagall symbol "this focal point informs Chagall's interpretation of the story. Yellow represents the 'numinous' or the divine. It comes out of the bush and colours the face of Moses as he holds the Torah. It is also Chagall's way of interpreting Exodus 34:35 "rays of light came from the face of Moses" [the skin of his face was shining]" (p. 74). Reid (1990) concludes that yellow (the divine) and

blue (humanity) come together to form green (the divine realm) which we see above the bush (p. 76).

We need to read the painting from right to left - as if reading Hebrew writing. The central focus of the picture is the burning bush itself. Moses is the major figurative symbol to the right of the burning bush. This figurative symbol is related to the bush as well as to the depiction of Moses on the left side of the bush. The dual representation of Moses implies his transformation as described in the biblical text. In a way the artwork is a form of Midrash because it offers an interpretation and expansion of the biblical text.

The second picture we will consider, *The Hebrews Adore the Golden Calf*, retells one of the events in the story of the Chosen people as they journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. While Moses is on Mount Sinai receiving the Decalogue, Aaron and the people abandon G-d by building and worshipping a golden calf (Ex 2:1-29).



The Hebrews Adore the Golden Calf  
(Crumlin, 1998, p. 62)

Exodus 32 tells us how the people and Aaron grew tired of waiting for Moses and built a golden calf to worship. Throughout this story Aaron is shown to be a weak accomplice in the popular rebellion declaring the bulls to be the “gods who brought you out of Egypt” (Ex 32:4). In the story of Israel’s origins there was apostasy. In the Ancient Near East bulls feature predominantly in iconography as representations of gods. G-d informs Moses of the people’s violation of the covenant and of the intent to destroy the people and make a new people from Moses’ family. Moses persuades G-d to renounce the plan saying:

Why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say ‘It was with evil intent that God brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people (Ex 32:11-13).

Throughout the story Aaron’s irresponsibility is directly contrasted with Moses’ obedience. The action of worshipping the golden calf was a radical

turning away from G-d and in many ways reminds the viewer to be faithful to G-d.

### Conclusion

The mosaics on the floors of fifth-sixth century synagogues, along with ornate artefacts and ritual objects of Judaism, through to the art of Marc Chagall and modern Jewish art are not isolated examples but part of a long and expansive tradition of Judaism’s interaction with the arts. I have on other occasions written about the importance of the arts to religious education particularly as a means of exploring scripture. My recent investigations into the arts within Judaism have indeed identified a rich volume of data which allows us to learn about Judaism in a new and exciting way.

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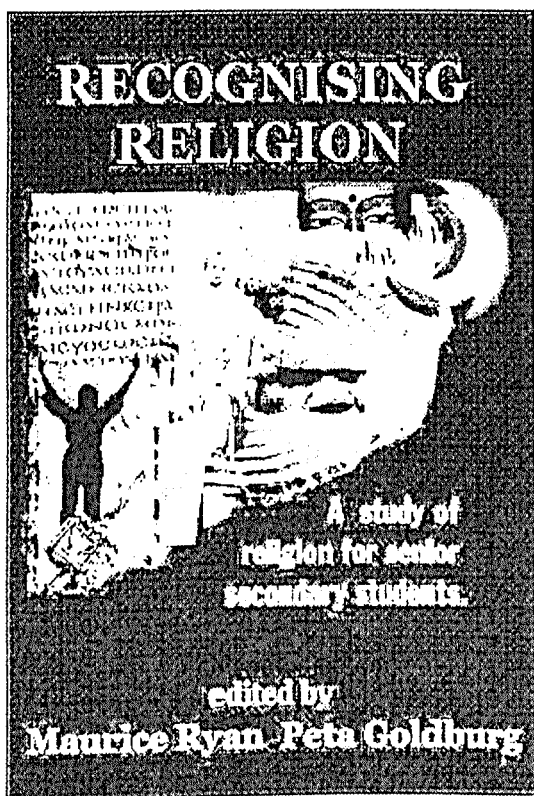
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<http://cgfa.floridaimaging.com/chagall/index.html>

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## *RECOGNISING RELIGION*

Maurice Ryan  
and  
Peta Goldberg

*Recognising Religion* is a student text that has been written to support school programs based on the revised 2001 *Study of Religion Syllabus* of the Queensland Board of Senior Secondary School Studies. It has also taken account of the senior secondary school programs offered in other Australian states. A teacher guide provides background, teaching and learning approaches and assessment and evaluation strategies.

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