I want to open my lecture today by talking about this image that you see on the slide. This is a reproduction of the original title page of *Orate Fratres*, a journal that began in 1926 and functioned as the organ of the twentieth-century liturgical movement. The movement sought not only to revalue the Roman Catholic liturgical tradition but also to make that tradition the basis for social change. The journal was published by the liturgical press in Collegeville, Minnesota, and associated with Virgil Michel and the Benedictine monks of Saint John’s Abbey. While the journal was US-based, it was international in scope; it responded to renewed interest in the liturgy in Europe and included editors from the UK and Ireland on its editorial board. The British editorial board member was Donald Attwater, then a monk at Caldey Abbey – a Trappist institution on an island off the Pembrokeshire coast – who was at various times a peace activist, a translator of works on Eastern Christianity, and a campaigner for a vernacular mass.

Attwater helped arrange this title page. The lettering of *Orate Fratres* was done by the sculptor and letter-cutter Eric Gill and the cover image was done by the Anglo-Welsh poet, painter and engraver David Jones. Jones and Gill lived in the same community first in Ditchling in Sussex (near Brighton) and later in Capel-y-ffin in Wales (near Hay-on-Wye). Ditchling was a small Catholic community, where various artists and artisans lived in and around the families of Eric Gill and Hilary Peplar, Jones among them. Today there is a museum on the site. Through the 1920s, the community had been well known with Fr Vincent McNabb and Fr John O’Connor, prominent catholic priests, holding it up as an example of a kind of catholic counterculture.
Attwater, the aforementioned British editorial board member of *Orate Fratres*, Gill, and Jones became friends when Gill and Jones left Ditchling in order to make a retreat on Caldey. [Change to Slide 4]

The image from *Orate Fratres* depicts the Lamb of God (pictured here as an adult ram with a cross-shaped shepherd’s staff leaning upon it) watching over a walled city. The striking features of the image are its anti-naturalist scale insofar as the lamb looms over the town, and the neatness and order of the settlement, which is completely enclosed by the wall and thus separated from the wilderness and covered by the lamb. In a published letter to the editor of *Orate Fratres*, Jones explained that the ordered settlement was to be understood as the City of God rightly framed and set apart from the surrounding wilderness in dedication to the lamb.

It would be a stretch to describe this image as modernist in theme or execution, but there are hints of modernist concerns in its construction. One striking feature of modernist art is its refusal of depth, and there is likewise a remarkable flatness to the titular image. While the mountains of the wilderness are conceptually behind the town, they nevertheless mirror the well-built towers. The tall peaks rhyme with the built environment. The lamb, too, is at once curved over the town (suggesting the protection afforded the townsfolk) and raised aloft as the proper object of worship for those below. Gill in a note to the editor of *Orates Fratres* – following queries from readers about the image – framed the image in modernism-esque terms. He suggested that the image served its religious purpose by resisting artistic naturalism. Naturalism, Gill argued, encouraged viewers to approach the artistic object from a personal rather than communal point of view with all the accompanying idiosyncrasy and sentimentalism. He considered this to be ‘indecent’ in public liturgical art that should, in his view, speak for and to a community rather than to a collection of independent individuals. The anti-naturalistic thrust of modernist art in this context took on religious significance.
[Change to Slide 5] It should be pointed out, however, that Gill arrived at these ideas by a slightly different route to that travelled by Jones. For Gill, resistance to the idiosyncrasy and sentimentalism of naturalistic art flowed from reservations about fine art in general. He considered himself a craftsman rather than an artist. He was formed in the Arts & Craft tradition of melding beauty and purpose. Gill and the Arts & Craft tradition were also influences upon Jones, but his resistance to naturalism and celebration of flatness was developed in response to the Bloomsbury aesthetics of Roger Fry and Clive Bell and their celebration of the artistic power of the ‘significant form’ of art works in and of themselves and apart from what they might be said to represent. Bell and Fry celebrated the power of art encoded in the rhythms of the lines, the relationships between shapes, and the spiritual power of colours.

[Change to Slide 6] Drawing on what the titular image reveals, I want – over the course of this talk – to look at the way in which modernist developments shaped Roman Catholic religious practice. To put this idea another way, I’ll focus on aspects of Catholic religion that were remade in the twentieth century by means of exposure to artistic and cultural forces outside the church itself. The use of Jones’s anti-naturalistic drawing on the cover of what amounts to a manifesto of a new religious movement, for example, represents a kind of cross-fertilisation of specifically Roman Catholic and broader cultural interests. This lecture will also attend to the networks of exchange that facilitated or enabled this cross-fertilisation. I will show how ideas and practices developed at the Roman Catholic artistic guild of Ditchling travelled over the Atlantic to the US and ultimately shaped Dorothy Day’s Catholic Worker movement, particularly the engagement of the Catholic Worker with the practice of retreat.

The lecture has three parts:

1. Mechanisms of Exchange: Ditchling, Sheed & Ward, and the Catholic Worker
2. On Retreat with Dorothy Day: What did the Catholic Worker retreat look like?
3. Productive Unproductivity: David Jones and Dorothy Day on the Gratuitous

In 1.), I’m going to sketch the historical process of transmission that enabled Ditchling to influence Day. In 2.), I’ll explore in more detail what Ditchling-influenced Catholic Worker retreats looked like. Then in 3.), I’ll focus on the significance of the gratuitous or what we might think of as the importance of retaining space for activities that were not utilitarian in the thought and practice of both the Ditchling-artist David Jones and Dorothy Day’s Catholic Worker and suggest ways in which focus on this terminology helps us to understand Roman Catholic counter-culturalism in the mid-twentieth century. In my conclusion, I’ll connect this account of travelling ideas to the archive. I’ll argue that the Ditchling-Day story helps us understand the possibilities represented by repositories of Catholic Records and suggest how these possibilities enable us to rethink recent religious history.

[Change to Slide 7] I’ll now turn to my first section: *Mechanisms of Exchange: Ditchling, Sheed & Ward, and the Catholic Worker*

[Change to Slide 8] The connection between Ditchling and Day was established by a publisher, Sheed & Ward. Sheed & Ward was a Catholic press founded in London in 1926. The purpose of the press was to provide high-quality publications engaging with the history, practice and traditions of Roman Catholicism to a relatively educated lay Catholic readership. As such, it published a range of literary texts from the overt Catholic apologetics of Sheed himself and the Catholic Evidence Guild, to histories of prominent religious order, accessible (and some relatively inaccessible) works of Christian theology and mystical texts, including translated editions of works by St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross.
The publication of mystical texts like these in the 1920s is notable because it takes place against a background where, as the historian Alex Owen in her 2004 study *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* has observed, ‘the terms mysticism and mystical revival’ referred to the widespread emergence at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century of a new esoteric spirituality and a proliferation of spiritual groups and identities that together constituted what contemporaries called the new ‘spiritual movement’. Publication of Carmelite mysticism via a Catholic press can be understood as an attempt to reclaim and reposition within the church the contemporary spiritual energy generated by discussions of mysticism. Arguably, the retreat movement represents a continuation of this project. The mysticism discussed in this Catholic context clearly has some distinct characteristics that set it apart from the mysticism to which Owen attends, but importantly – and to a degree that has hitherto been largely unrecognised – Catholic efforts at channelling this culture-wide fascination with mysticism left Catholicism itself changed.

The other major presence on Sheed & Ward’s list were authors associated with what the historian Adam Schwartz has termed the *third spring* of Roman Catholic writers in Britain; that is, a new generation of lay intellectuals engaging with and thinking through the place of the Roman Catholic church in European cultural and intellectual life. The press published authors such as G. K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, Ronald Knox, Martin D’Arcy, Christopher Dawson and Eric Gill. The Sheed & Ward list thus included volumes of letters and essays from Gill that reflected on the Ditchling project. Moreover, Sheed & Ward the firm – alongside the publishers Frank Sheed and Maisie Ward themselves – relocated from London to New York in the early 1930s. In doing so, they made the British writers of the third spring newly accessible to US-based Roman Catholics. On the publisher’s part, the move reflected a wish to respond to the emergence of what the professor of Catholic Studies Una Cadegan in her 2013 study *All
Good Books Are Catholic Books: Print Culture, Censorship, and Modernity in Twentieth-Century America has described as a newly educated public readership of lay Catholics who were now graduating in significant numbers from the alternative US higher education system provided by Catholic colleges. The hunger of this audience would be fed by the writings of the British third spring.

Day was no exception. She read Gill’s works, including some published by Sheed & Ward. In her published account of her attempt to withdraw from worldly commitments and to live on retreat for an entire year, a work that was entitled On Pilgrimage and published in 1948, Day mentions volumes of Belloc and Chesterton (whom she read in Sheed & Ward editions) being available at retreat houses and houses of hospitality, and then makes a connection between Gill’s reflections on Ditchling on the one hand and the Catholic Worker’s provision of retreat houses on the other. The retreat houses that Day had in mind included the one she stayed in during September 1948, which according to her was ‘so beautiful, so peaceful (…), far from noise and traffic and the world’.

[Change to Slide 9] The passage she lighted upon in Gill during her stay was from a letter to Graham Cary dated 30 July 1940 in which Gill wrote:

I am sure that all attempts to create cells of the good life in the form of small communities are not only much to be encouraged but are the only hope. . . . It is to me perfectly clear that communities of layfolk religiously cutting themselves off from the money economy are an absolute necessity if Christianity is not to go down, either into the dust or the catacombs. . . . There are lots of little attempts going on in England today in spite of everything. But of course they are pretty hard up against it, and they get jolly little encouragement from the ordinary population, and still less from the Catholic
Ditchling as a single community of practising Catholic artisans organised around an active workshop was very different from the multiple small communities that made up the Catholic Worker organisation, centred on social justice work through Houses of Hospitality, other forms of activism, and the cultivation of inwardness via the provision of retreat. Day nevertheless sees a reflection of her own commitments in Gill’s notion of ‘cells of the good life in the form of small communities’ engaged in ‘cutting themselves off from the money economy’ that shaped capitalist societies. To invoke Adam Schwartz’s arguments in his study of *The Third Spring*, catholic and artistic concerns aligned in Gill’s thinking as the practice of Roman Catholicism – not High Church Anglicanism with its links to the establishment – became a countercultural choice that helped shaped the intensity of aspects of Gill’s religious commitments.

[Change to Slide 10] For Schwartz, Ditchling amounted to a continuation of romantic anti-industrialism. Ditchling practised traditional methods of arts and craft, particularly woodcut engraving. This was facilitated by the discovery of a hand-operated letter press on the site. Jones, Gill, and several other Ditchling figures produced woodcut engravings largely on religious themes through the 1920s. You can see a sample of such images on the slide. Woodcut engravings, particularly those of the artist Ade Bethune, were also a prominent feature of the monthly *Catholic Worker* newspaper as you can see from the slide.

The somewhat primitive or rudimentary forms (particularly among the amateur Ditchling practitioners) of these engravings were incorporated into a stylised medievalism that invoked broader Roman Catholic critiques of particularly European democracies through the 1930s. As the intellectual historian James Chappel has showed in his 2018 study *Catholic Modern: The Challenge of Totalitarianism and the Remaking of the Church* the ‘central fact of Catholic intellectual life in the 1920s’ throughout continental Europe was ‘a sweeping rejection of the modern world of church-state separation, capitalist economies, liberal democracy, and
As a result, Catholic intellectuals ‘idealized the Middle Ages as an era of political and economic virtue’. Here the critique Chappel identifies is reflected in forms of artistic practice that reject the specialization of the fine arts and the processes of mechanical reproduction. The evident imperfections of these prints and their hand-pressed state instantiates this broader antimodern outlook and inheres even in the Catholic Worker illustrations, where the woodcut images initially produced by hand are mechanically reproduced as part of the newspaper’s mass-produced print run. Indeed, the pervasiveness of this Catholic aesthetic helped produce incomprehension of Jones’s title page among readers of Orate Fratres. By the late 1920s, Jones had moved away from his Ditchling style both artistically (his preference for a more playful, symbolically rich for of anti-naturalism) and geographically (Gill and Jones had relocated from Ditchling to Capel-y-ffin). Likewise, Jones knew the titlepage would be mechanically reproduced and thus avoided the ersatz traditionalism of mechanically reproducing woodcuts and opted instead for a simple line drawing. The readers of Orate Fratres wondered where the medievalism had gone.

The similarities between Ditchling and the Catholic Worker notwithstanding, there was also something different at play for Day. Day began her mature engagement with retreat in the 1940 and onwards through the war years. Sandra Yocum has written an interesting essay about these years, which was collected in a 2001 volume Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement: Centenary Essays. The essay explores how Day’s growing interest in retreat facilitated, shaped, and sustained Day’s pacifism, even in the wake of Pearl Harbour. Thus, when Day is thinking about living a life of retreat in 1948, the year documented in On Pilgrimage, her context was very different to that faced by European Catholics in the 1920s. The Middle Ages had ceased to be a model. The return to some kind of Catholic imperial framework or even a corporatist nationalistic political system looked unattractive in the post Second World War years. Instead, European Catholics had embraced Christian socialism. This
European solution was unviable in a US context and Day opposed state intervention on a European scale. At the same time, she was also in the process of considering how one might be Catholic in the US at a time when Catholic life and mainstream US culture (under the guidance of the US Bishops conference) were increasingly – and for a variety of intellectual and sociological reasons – aligning or coalescing. Leslie Woodcock Tentler’s 2020 book *American Catholics: A History* would be the place to go for more information about that. Retreat, which helped cultivate a distinctly Catholic inwardness that could be practised amidst social justice activity or even more mainstream American life, was Day’s solution.

The story of how Day learned about the power of retreat has been told elsewhere. Day tells the story herself in her autobiography *The Long Loneliness*. More recently, Jack Downey’s *The Bread of the Strong* from 2015 and Benjamin T. Peter’s *Called to Be Saints* from 2016 have provided a historical scholarly-critical perspective on these events. Here I merely want to sketch the outlines and to highlight the role played by Sheed & Ward or in this case the Ward of Sheed & Ward, namely the aforementioned Maisie. Following the relocation of the publisher to New York, Ward and Day became friends. Sheed & Ward published one of the first of Day’s books, an account of the Catholic Worker’s newly formed houses of hospitality. These houses were an attempt to provide aid to the poor at an interpersonal and humane level rather than what Day and others in her organization considered the abstract impersonalism of state assistance.

From its inception in 1933, the Catholic Worker incorporated aspects of retreat. Initially, these retreats were overseen by Day’s co-founder, the French layman and dedicated personalist Peter Maurin who delivered a ‘program’ of ‘little lectures’ on issues such as ‘poverty and community’ twice a day to Workers in attendance. The arrangement led Day to describe the Catholic Worker’s way of life rather ‘smugly’ as ‘living a retreat’. Day’s understanding of retreat dramatically shifted when she heard through Ward about a silent retreat modelled on St
Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises*. The priest who delivered Ward’s retreat had been inspired by a Jesuit priest, Onesimus Lacouture. The Catholic Worker went on to establish a close relationship with two of Lacouture’s disciples, Fr Pacifique Roy and Fr John Hugo, and Day attended retreats in the Lacouture tradition in 1940 and 1941. This story is fleshed out in the aforementioned studies by Downey and Peters.

I will say more about what these retreats consisted off in just a moment. Before moving on to the next section, however, I want to connect the Catholic counter-culturalism of Ditchling, Day on retreat, and the liturgical movement. I want to highlight how all these organisations can be understood as not somehow unmodern – their preference for medieval imagery notwithstanding – in the sense that they couldn’t keep up with or had turned the back on the modern world, but rather how ideas they accessed via the Catholic church became a way of engaging critically with modernity.

To put this another way, if we term this critique a form of antimodernism, then these Catholic movements reveal the contingency of the choices made in producing, and the forms of life associated with, what we might understand as modernity. Particularly, we might say the associations of modernity with both secularism and securality. It didn’t have to be this way. Looking at the liturgical movement and Day’s retreat in particular, there is a striking relationship between these forms in that they can both be understood as ways of paying attention or of making special acts of communal worship: the liturgical movement through reflection on the powers and possibilities of the Mass, and the retreat through cultivating a state of mind in which to approach the Mass. A silent retreat typically culminated in an act of communal worship. Both the liturgical and retreat movements would also insist that the kind of preparation and reflection these practices enabled did not confine themselves to the church or retreat house alone, but rather shaped those who participated in ways that had profound social political consequences.
I’ll now move on to my second section entitled: ‘On Retreat with Dorothy Day: What did the Catholic Worker retreat look like?’

Day struggled to frame what the retreat meant for her. As a journalist, she wrote fluidly about the work the Catholic Worker undertook as we saw in the aforementioned volume from Sheed & Ward about the Catholic Worker’s houses of hospitality. She was also able to reflect on her own life and commitments as her works On Pilgrimage and The Long Loneliness indicate.

She nevertheless struggled to frame the significance of the retreat both to herself and the organisation she founded. Day’s personal papers held at Marquette University, Wisconsin contain a folder marked ‘All is Grace’ or ‘Spiritual Adventure’ that includes notes towards and draft pages of (often in multiple slightly different versions) a proposed book about retreat.

On the slide you can see two different draft openings for this book. The differences between the two openings are striking in their framing of retreat. In the first, Day attempts to frame retreat in that longer history I mentioned at the outset of a Catholic response or reclamation of mysticism. Day suggests that the retreat was an outcome of reading St Teresa of Avila most likely in the Sheed & Ward edition translated by Alison Peers. Aspects of Teresa of Avila’s work make complete sense in this context: the Interior Castle is a work about a spiritual subject (if you’ll forgive me such a simplistic summary of a spiritual classic) growing closer to God. At the same time, however, Teresa of Avila was a great organiser and reformer. It was this side of her legacy that was explored in Vita Sackville-West’s biography of the saint included in The Eagle and The Dove that was published in 1943 around the time that Day began engaging with retreat. The energetic organisational capacity of St Teresa no doubt appealed to the apparently tireless Day. There is thus an ambiguity in Day’s invocation of St Teresa. Is Day
interested in the inwardness through which Teresa endeavoured to guide her readers? Or is she
drawn to St Teresa’s ability to yoke mysticism and reform, withdrawal and organising? In the
second draft opening, the focus is on the novelty of the retreat movement and the technology
or institutions, namely the retreat houses, that made this aspect of the Catholic Worker’s
programme possible. In this Day sounds more like the reforming Teresa of Avila of the Life or
Autobiography than the mystic explorer of Interior Castle. The different possible framings of
the proposed book on retreat – alongside its evidently unfinished state – point to Day’s
difficulty in outlining what retreat was for and how it related to other elements of the Catholic
Worker’s programme. I will try to provide my own contextualisation of retreat’s purpose below
through a comparison with the work of Ditchling, but first I want to say a little bit about what
the retreat included.

The early retreats Day attended and those she incorporated into the Catholic Worker
followed the pattern laid down by Lacouture. His retreats were silent retreats. They were ten
days in length and represented a creative adaption of the Spiritual Exercises organised into
three sections, though he rarely went much beyond the first on detachment and purification.
Lacouture’s conferences focused on overcoming natural in favour of supernatural motives.
Retreatants were also exposed to spiritual exercises that they could practice in silence to effect
self-transformation. Later in the sequence, Lacouture expounded his ‘doctrine of samples’: the
way in which the natural world provided limited glimpses of the supernatural. The fact that the
later themes received less attention, however, brought Lacouture under theological suspicion.
He was accused of denying the goodness of creation and ultimately forbidden by his superiors
from offering further retreats. The silence of Catholic Worker retreats, shaped by the Lacouture
tradition, was thus austere and purgative; silence is at once the location for, and the medium
of, the spiritual work with which a retreat is charged.
Day’s retreat made use of ascetic spiritual exercises that were understood not so much as ‘penance’ as ‘a means of perfecting the soul’. These exercises assumed a rigid distinction between natural and supernatural motives or between acts undertaken from one’s own desire and from love of God.

In her retreat notebooks, Day looked askance at the ‘pagan mentality’ of those driven by ‘natural motives’. ‘To enjoy things of this world and try to avoid mortal sin’, she explained in her notes from a retreat, is ‘as impossible as to jump’ from the Empire State Building and ‘expect to stop before we get hurt’. Human concerns, needs, and wants at best obscure God’s will and at worst conspire against it. They are not a point of departure for the religious life, but rather obstacles to its fulfilment. To overcome these limitations, Day recommended what her teacher Fr Hugo called ‘pruning’. The work ensured that the ‘part of the soul that delights in the world’ was ‘stifled’ or ‘eradicated’. The intellect and the affect were thereby reoriented towards the supernatural.

For Day, ascetism was about more than merely personal holiness. ‘Of course I will not save my soul alone’, she wrote, ‘wherever we are we are with people. We drag them down, or pull them up. Or we get dragged down or pulled up’. Living in a community and working in challenging circumstances, Catholic Workers needed to attend to their own religious commitments. Losing one’s way affected the mission of the whole community. ‘We can do nothing today without saints, big ones and little ones’, Day observed, and the ascetic work of retreat made and sustained such saints. The importance Day conferred upon action, community, and the dignity of persons came to her through her co-founder Maurin’s mediation of Emmanuel Mounier’s personalism. Transformed by asceticism, the Catholic Worker community worked for the social good.

Day described retreat as ‘a place of action’ that is ‘spiritual action’. Day’s ‘spiritual action’ is comparable to the ‘taking of cities’, ‘revolution’, and the ‘Corporal Works of Mercy’.
‘Spiritual action’ was the third term in a tripartite division of work handed down by Lacouture and his students: manual, intellectual, and spiritual. The distance between manual and intellectual work is captured in the difference between farm labour and writing for the *Catholic Worker* newspaper.

[Change to Slide 15] Spiritual work, by contrast, registers the change wrought by ascetic spiritual exercises, which endeavoured to stifle natural motives and to cultivate supernatural ones. Day explained the change in her retreat notes: ‘If I wash dishes for love of God – supernaturalized. If I pray for nat[ural] motive[s] no good. How can I know? When love is active principle. A supernatural motive. Every activity can be made supernatural’.

‘Spiritual action’ thus transformed the motives with which an agent undertook a given task. Washing the dishes and washing the dishes for God may appear indistinguishable from the outside, but below the surface the two are separated by a qualitative difference. Actions driven by supernatural motives are not performed because they fulfil the agent’s own desires, respond to the requests of others, or fulfil a practical purpose. They are undertaken with reference to God’s will and through God’s love. The poor are always in need of help. One might be moved to meet their needs from empathetic, ethical, or even political imperatives. In the Catholic Worker’s houses of hospitality, however, the poor were helped for the love of God. Spiritual action set Day’s charity apart from the state-sponsored welfare activities of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, which the Catholic Worker characterised as too abstract in its approach and justification. It dehumanised, Day contended, those it set out to help.

[Change to Slide 16] *I’ll now move on to my third section: Productive Unproductivity: David Jones and Dorothy Day on the Gratuitous*
I now want to connect this notion of its retreat with its focus on an ascetic pruning of the will through spiritual exercises undertaken in the silence of the retreat house to aspects of the literary and artistic modernism with which David Jones and Ditchling might be associated.

Nancy Roberts in her 1985 study *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker* summarised the Catholic Worker as an organisation that practised – and continues to practise – ‘a communitarian Christianity, which stresses the necessity to live in community as Jesus did and the importance of individual action (personalism) to achieve social justice; pacifism and nonviolence; and voluntary poverty, which stems from a de-emphasis on material possessions’. What is striking about this definition is the degree to which it emphasizes activity associated with the ‘Worker’ in the organisation’s name. What Roberts omits is anything to do with retreat. There was always something difficult about aligning the social activism of the Catholic Worker and the corresponding emphasis Day placed on the withdrawal and reflection necessary for what she understood as ‘spiritual action’.

[Change to Slide 17] Day herself recognised that her embrace of retreat raised questions for some. Presenting silent retreat as central pillar of Catholic Worker activity led some, both inside and outside the organisation, to complain that the Catholic Worker was ‘retreating from the world, living in ivory towers’. These critical voices considered silence inappropriate or even self-indulgent; it might be fine for monks and nuns, but not for social activists. Reflecting on contemporary attitudes, Day in her unpublished and unfinished work on retreat opined that ‘world will leave us alone’ and that their excuse will be ‘they are not doing anything. Just a bunch of smug fools praying’. The important phrase here is ‘doing nothing’. From the outside ‘nothing’ has changed if one washes dishes via natural or supernatural motives, but Day insisted that there was a qualitative different at work. Likewise, leaving the world for ten days on a retreat of largely silent meditation looks like doing ‘nothing’. It is neither education nor social activism.
It is here that there is a connection with the modernism we discussed at the outset. Central to David Jones’s social criticism and aesthetic thought was the notion of the *gratuitous* which for him stood opposed to the *utilitarian*. His thinking about the gratuitous and the utilitarian grew out of his reading of the French philosopher Jacques Maritain’s work *Art and Scholasticism*. This short study was translated by the priest Fr John O’Connor and printed on Ditchling’s hand press in the early 1920s. The book was read communally in Gill’s workshop by those living in the community. Maritain’s book is striking because it responds to a lacunae in medieval scholasticism, which has no formal aesthetics. Maritain unites scattered reflections on art in the writings of the scholastics and pairs them with avant-garde art theory to make the case the that the scholastic understanding of art was anti-naturalistic insofar as it recognised a higher understanding of form after which art reached and which amounted to something more than the faithful representation of images in this world. Modern abstract art with its deformed canvases thus represented a truer pursuit of this artistic reality. This aspect of Maritain’s work is set out in more detail in Stephen Schloesser’s study from 2005, *Jazz-Age Catholicism*.

Returning to Jones on the gratuitous, I have noted – drawing on Fiona McCarthy’s biography of Eric Gill from 1989 and a 2017 essay from the Jones scholar Paul Robichaud published in *Renascence* – that Ditchling is best understood as a continuation of the Arts & Crafts movement. Like William Morris, Jones found beauty in everyday objects. His greatest wish was to reintegrate the gratuitous and utilitarian, so that the excellence of, say, the chairmaker’s skill might shine out in the beauty of his product. Yet what Jones considered beautiful about such a chair was not its usefulness, but rather that it was made in line with the excellences of the relevant craft. This was one element of the influence of Maritain who brought to bear the scholastics’ Aristotelian concerns with the formation of virtue to bear on thinking
about artistic activity as a form of habit and a matter of practical (rather than abstract) intelligence, developed through an apprenticeship with a master craftsman.

Following this line of thought, a well-made chair is produced neither in response to a market niche for a well-made chair nor because one design was more practical than another. Rather, the chairmaker had been trained to feel in a tactile sense the shape of a well-made chair. The piece of furniture is the product of habituated knowledge. Jones understood the exercise of an artist’s skill in an accordance with the goodness of a specific art as the gratuitous. The process was ultimately understood as analogous to the creation story set out in Genesis: ‘And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness’. True artists do not merely create – the equivalent of God’s ‘Let there be light’ – they also share God’s confidence in the excellence of their production; God saw that what he had created ‘was good’. The artist recalled, shared in, and made present again and again divine creative power.

[Change to Slide 19] Going beyond even the Arts & Craft movement, Jones came to define art in the broadest possible terms. Every exemplification of a habituated skill undertaken for non-utilitarian purposes became an art: from the decoration of a birthday cake to the development of military strategy; ‘likeness derives from the fact that the art implicit in strategy is, like all other art, a sign of the form-making activities universally predicated of the Logos’. Like painting or chairmaking, cake decoration and strategizing require the exercise of a particular skill in accordance with the good of a given discipline.

[Change to Slide 20] Indeed, to engage in such gratuitous and sign-making activity was where humans were the most human because this is what they shared with God: to be human was to be ‘essentially a creature of sign and signa-making, a “sacramentalist” to the core’, Jones wrote. Human beings are ‘not only capable of gratuitous acts’, he continued; these acts are what he termed their ‘hall-mark and sign-manual’. Jones’s aesthetic are most fully laid
out in his essay ‘Art and Sacrament’, first published in 1955, which can be found in the essay collection *Epoch and Artists*. The theologian and former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams explores Jones’s aesthetics in more detail in his 2006 book *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love*. 

[Change to Slide 21] With more space and time, I could show you how this notion of the gratuitous was at work in his verse; I don’t have that sort of time here today. What I do want to show very briefly is that this was essentially a political critique. In his recently discovered long poem *The Grail Mass*, Jones renders a conversation between two Roman soldiers with one complaining

That’s the cost

of empire, Oenomaus, that is. You can’t stretch

the navel string indefinitely and empire is

a great stretcher of navel strings and a snapper

of ’em, a great uprooter is empire – it’s

a great robbery is empire, it robs the

pieties, you can’t have the pieties to my way

of thinking, unless you’re rooted.

Jones wrote this passage during the period of historical decolonization. Over the course of the passage, the evil of empire (contemporary European as much as ancient Roman) comes into view. The soldier moves from a kind of worldly shrug in ‘that’s the cost’ or ‘that’s the way it has always been or will be’ to a more impassioned, accusatory tone in the repetition of ‘robbery’ / ‘robs’. What is important in our context, however, is the frenzy of activity documented in the passage. Empire is not only a ‘cost’, but also a ‘stretcher’ of naval strings,
a ‘snapper’ of navel strings, an ‘uprooter’ and finally a ‘robber.’ Empire will not take time. Empire will not sit still. Empire is always doing something – a contrast with the ‘doing nothing’ of Day’s retreat – with a purpose. It always has utilitarian motives. It never habituates itself in and to a recognized good. It completes no apprenticeship. It must do. It must accomplish. It must progress. This sets it in opposition to religious cults and worship: you can’t have pieties unless you’re ‘rooted’, the complaining soldier asserts. Undoubtedly, part of what Jones invokes in ‘rooted’ is the sense of local connection as opposed to the cosmopolitanism of empire as ‘uprooter’, but to be rooted is also to stand still, to stand quiet, to do nothing. Jones’s idiosyncratic critique of empire as a form of political organization flowed from his religious insights. Empire failed to treat those whose lives it touched as people. It dehumanized them by integrating them, often against their will, into its world plan. In doing so, it made it impossible for those people to exercise the creative, gratuitous, sign-making capacities in which their humanity (and thus their innate divinity) resided.

To return to Day, we can note that there is similar political significant placed upon the formation of Catholic Workers through the nothingness or gratuity of silent retreat practice that was not itself active, that was not itself educational but was something nonetheless in its nothingness. Both Jones and Day’s sense of the significance and oppositional character of the gratuitous stems from Eric Gill’s reflection on his time in Ditchling and Capel-y-ffin in his letter to Graham Cary, which we considered earlier.

[Change to Slide 22] To re-cap, Gill wrote:

All attempts to create cells of the good life in the form of small communities are not only much to be encouraged but are the only hope. . . . It is to me perfectly clear that communities of layfolk religiously cutting themselves off from the money economy are
an absolute necessity if Christianity is not to go down, either into the dust or the catacombs.

It was a comment that travelled via Sheed & Ward’s publication list. Day read it following Frank Sheed and Maisie Ward’s recognition that the newly emerging college-education, middle-class Roman Catholic readership (or would-be readership) represented a significant business opportunity for a small religious publisher. Arguably, this newfound celebration of retreat, nothingness, and gratuity represented a Roman Catholic response to a culture-wide fascination with an emergent esoteric form of mysticism, which was the precursor to something like ‘I’m spiritual but not religious’. If that is true, it is worth highlighting that this response itself represented a form of religious experiment on the part of Roman Catholicism. The form of religious practice that emerged in response to ideas first formulated in Ditchling and which later travelled to New York had not been seen before.

[Change to Slide 23] As I conclude, I want to draw together the significance of what we’ve been talking about over the last forty-five minutes.

[Change to Slide 24] Clearly, what we’ve been engaged in for much of this time is placing religious practice and artistic practice (both visual and verbal) side-by-side. In this connection, scholars and critics often talk about the rise of ‘aesthetic religion’. For some, ‘aesthetic religion’ is something of a con or a failure or a trick. The modernist poet and cultural critic T. E. Hulme’s famous notion – set out in his essay ‘Classicism and Romanticism’ – of Romanticism as a form ‘spilt religion’ exemplifies this perspective. Romanticism makes uses of the same terms as religion and invokes some of the same emotions, but ultimately offers a pale substitute for religion. Identification of ‘aesthetic religion’ in such circumstance is part of
a call to return to orthodoxy religion. To name ‘aesthetic religion’ is to demand that its practitioners leave it behind and return to the real thing. For others, I’m thinking here of Stephanie Paulsell, Professor of the Practice of Christian Studies at Harvard Divinity School and her 2019 study *Virginia Woolf Around Religion*, engagement with transcendence through art is merely another way, maybe even a new way, of approaching God and the truths of religion. These are two potential understandings of the relationship between art and religion.

I have been arguing something slightly different to both these positions. The story I’ve told over the course of this lecture is one where a set of artistic concerns developed in Ditchling and indebted to the Victorian Arts & Crafts movement travelled over the Atlantic and helped shape distinctive and influential forms of Roman Catholic religious practice. Art doesn’t *replace* religion or function as an alternative *access point* to religion; rather, it reshapes what a particular religious tradition considers important about its history and its role as mediator between heaven and earth.

[Change to Slide 25] In turn, this opens out onto a new of understanding the relationship between individual artists and their religious convictions. Scholars will often talk about the *influence* an artist’s religion exerts upon their art. This influence might be registered in a set of thematic preoccupations. One might think of the fifteen or so paintings that comprise Marc Chagall’s series of praying Jewish men painted 1911–1926. At a deeper level, this influence might be connected to the kind of worldview that that an artist’s religion opens out on to. David Jones, for instance, said that he took from Catholicism the idea that in each particular or local or specific object something general or universal can and should shine out. This shaped his artistic practice. Again, I’ve endeavoured to present this relationship between art and religion as multidirectional. This lecture has highlighted a movement in the other direction, namely how an artist’s artistic practice helps shape or reshape their religion.
How are we to understand the inverted relationship between art and religion? What is its significance? Conceptually or theoretically, I would invoke the philosopher and postsecular thinker Richard Kearney’s notion of anatheism. Kearney’s project endeavours to take seriously the metaphysical critique of religion from Nietzsche onwards and to acknowledge the damage and violence wrought over the centuries by dogmatic religion – to acknowledge, that is, the power of an atheistic or secular position – and at the same time to make room for God, to find some possibility for God, to recognise what thinking about God can bring to our ethical, emotional, and intellectual lives. His project is one of returning to God creatively and imaginatively after the perceived death of God. The imagination is important to Kearney’s project insofar as the religion in which Kearney is interested is not simply there, present, a background – all that has been swept away by secular critique – the imagination must take on a role in re-imagining, re-presenting, and re-visioning God in these changed circumstances. To read the world religiously is a hermeneutic decision that requires imagination. Arguably, the cultural exchange between Ditchling and Day that I have documented charts at a historical and cultural level the processes that Kearney attends to at a hermeneutical, philosophical, and theological level.

Another perspective for thinking about the exchange I have detailed here is as a form of lived religion. Lived religion is an approach to religion that attends to the creative dimension of lay religion as opposed to focusing on religion as seen through the eyes of religious elites who tend to insist upon boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable, between what is religion and what is not, between religious facts and other types of concern. A good introduction to the study of lived religion is Nancy Tatom Ammerman’s 2021 volume *Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices*. Scholars of lived religion, Ammerman included, have often drawn attention to the hybrid character of lived religion, and Day’s Catholic Worker with its somewhat incongruous combination of social justice and inward reflection would seem to
be a case in point. Seen from this perspective, the ideas that moved from Ditchling to Day would follow from attempts both among Jones’s circle and the Catholic Worker to make their religion personally meaningful and in so doing they drew on political, artistic, and more traditional concerns. The narrative I have told represents an invitation to reimagine religion from the point of view of this hybridizing practice.

[Change to Slide 27] Framed in this way, I hope this talk can be meaningful to many of you assembled here as both users and guardians of Catholic records. This might be true even if your interests or collections relate to a very a different period or moment in time to the brief snippet of the twentieth century invoked in my talk. From the perspective of lived religion, there may be many more examples of lay believers’ aesthetic or cultural concerns transforming their religion for us to find over the years to come and I have heard some possibilities already over the last three days. Thank you for listening to my attempt at such a narrative.

[Change to Slide 28] Finally, if you are interested in hearing more about retreat or about the relationship between literary or artistic modernism and religion, I have monograph out with EUP later in the month entitled Modernism and Religion: Between Mysticism and Orthodoxy You can see it on the slide; I have some flyers; and there is a webpage with some more information about the book up on the slide. The book is an open access title, so you can download it in PDF form for free or of course it is available for purchase as a physical book the normal way. [Change to Slide 29]

WORKS CITED

Archival Sources
Bethune, Ade, Ade Bethune Collection, St. Catherine University Library Archives & Special Collections, St. Paul, Minnesota
Day, Dorothy, Papers, Manuscripts, ca. 1914–1975, The Dorothy Day–Catholic Worker Collection, Special Collections and University Archives, Raynor Memorial Library, Marquette University, WI.
Print Sources


