Iconic Presence. Images in Religious Traditions

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Iconic presence is presence in and as a picture.[1] The physical presence of a picture in our world refers to the symbolic presence which it depicts. Similar to body and voice – and different from writing – the picture involves a representation which produces an impression of presence. This presence occupies an absence that is filled with a picture. In the iconic presence, absence is marked. Without denying the absence of what they represent, pictures offer absence as presence. The mask is just such a picture. It creates iconic presence by placing another face on the body. In the case of a dead person it restores the missing face. In the case of an actor, the face itself turns into a mask, and thus conveys a picture. If "iconic difference"(Boehm 1994, 29ff.) is a hermeneutic concern, iconic presence is an anthropological issue.

In the context of religion, pictures represent deities who have no direct presence in the physical world; these deities are not held to be absent (let alone non-existent), but in need of a picture in order to become visible. In primal religions, living bodies transform into apparitions through dance and voice. In the Christian tradition, visual artefacts behaved as living bodies that wept, worked miracles, and were carried through "their" town, as if they could walk by themselves. This enactment governs the appearance of pictures. Such a procession of a holy image lives on in the Semana Santa of Sevilla even today. It is already attested in the eighth century by the miraculous image of the Salvator in Rome.

Scholars in religious studies have begun to acknowledge the importance of materiality in religious practice. This is proven by concepts such as "visible religion" (the title of a journal edited by Hans Kippenberg in the 1980s at Groningen University) or "iconic religion" (the theme of this special issue). In her inaugural lecture at Utrecht University, Birgit Meyer (2012) discerns a "genesis of presence" in material and iconic religious practice. In the English title of my book *Bild und Kult* (1994) the terms *Likeness and Presence* refer to the performative capacity and iconic presence of particular pictures in the Christian tradition. This offers possibilities for an interdisciplinary discourse which transcends the European arena and includes other religions.

Iconic production differs significantly across the various religions, and yet relies on similar patterns that emerge through comparison. Similarly, the meaning of what we call religion differs across the cultures of the world. In order to understand religion as the central symbolic form of social life, we must question the modern understanding of religion, which is a result of the Enlightenment. Anthropology was once the only field for studying other cultures. Eurocentric bias was present already in Christian theology, which took a paternalistic view of other religions that informed its missionary activities in the framework of colonialism. In the global era, one's own culture can no longer serve as the sole and universal yardstick for theory formation. This insight also challenges our perspective on the so-called "pre-modern" history of Europe, which we have long renounced as a constitutive part of our cultural identity. This raises the question as to whether we are able and willing to include our own culture (and the role of religion therein) in an anthropological discourse, turning from a theology of pictures to an anthropology of visual practice.

In the context of religion, pictures have a special ontological status which distinguishes them from other pictures. Their evidence is tied to the belief of their devotees. As a result of this, they have often drawn reprimands and attracted critics who break their power over the imagination. The destruction of idols (iconoclasm) and the veneration of icons are two sides of the same coin. One can imagine that in pre-historic times this conflict started as a fight between the pictures of two different tribes. The Old Testament is filled to the brim with curses of the gods and cultic images of the neighbouring tribes against whom the Israelites waged war.

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Material Religion
In Conversation

Akin to the monuments of fallen despots in more recent times, religious pictures fell victim to iconoclasms directed against false or misused images (i.e. idols). In Judaism and Islam, the ban on images pertained only to their religious use and was directed against the visual practices of other populations; in Judaism against an older pictorial tradition (Uehlinger 2003) and in Islam against the use of images in Christian churches (Fowden 2014).

In the context of Christianity the use of images was central to the project of becoming a world religion and of eschewing its Jewish legacy. The "true" portrait of Christ, a late phenomenon after the Council of Chalcedon (451), possessed a special evidence that was appropriated by competing theological schools in divergent ways. Pictures were then upgraded as originals. Iconic presence began to compete with the word in textual revelation. Already the notion of the Mother of God (Theotokos) at the Council of Ephesus (431) enhanced the doctrine of the two natures of Christ in one human face. Islamic theology returned to the verbal revelation of God. The Qur'an has been introduced as a book which God has sent to his prophet. With the Islamic rejection of Jesus as the son of God, the visibility of God became taboo once more.

Aniconism is a picture theory under reverse conditions and usually reflects a negative experience with pictures. In the Reformation, text and picture competed with one other as different religious media, in a turn again Catholic visual politics. The Counter-Reformation above all used the weapons of a re-catholicized visual politics that transformed the space of the church into a theatre of heaven. The church directed this strategy against the private reading of the bible propagated by the Reformation. In modern secular society, religious pictures lost their old credibility, which also damaged their status as works of art. So even within the same religious tradition pictures were subject to historical change.

Theological writing brings iconic presence into play via a counter-concept with a relevance of its own. It is the concept of "real presence"—of Jesus in the Eucharist—that already had a long history when propagated in 1204. It refers to the words "This is my body" which Jesus spoke over the bread he was breaking during the Last Supper. These words were interpreted as an exchange of substance between bread and the body of Christ, which is not visible in the outer shape of the host. In this way, pictures are put in their place. But then the host began to perform miracles and bleed just as the pictures did. A competition for attention ensued. It is telling that at the time of the propagation of the doctrine of real presence, the miracle image of Veronica appeared in Rome and was venerated as the "true face" of Jesus.

Importantly, in Europe the question of art has been inscribed into religious pictures since the Renaissance. Here the rise of art marked a turning point in the history of images which is foundational for art history. Pictures not only carried the names of artists, but displayed their personal views on religion. The practice of art began without a fixed concept of art. But it developed specific evidence that distinguishes works of art. The notion of art emerged in the heart of the religious picture, with the themes still remaining the same. In an evolving market, personal artistic style became a brand in its own right. In the French writings of the time, "*art*" is introduced with the term "*science*", while "*art*" refers to craft. The concept of *Poesia*, used much later by Titian when referring to his own pictures with mythological subjects, had hitherto been the privilege of poets. Giovanni Bellini defended the "bella fantasia" against the expectations of his patrons, thereby initiating the era of art collections.

The narrative of my book *Likeness and Presence* may have led to the misunderstanding that there would be a direct path from the (religious) cult image to the (aesthetic) work of art. However, the shift to "art" occurred within the private devotional picture in the course of its liberation from collective and public control. It was directed to accommodate the private gaze, which eventually yielded a specific aesthetic. This history had already begun with the "Book of Hours", a pictorial prayer book for private users. It was followed by the devotional picture, whose owners often brought themselves into the picture. So, historically the private ownership of pictures took off in the religious sphere and was continued in the language of art under new premises.

The final chapter of *Likeness and Presence* has triggered an ongoing controversy about the presence of religion in the art of the Renaissance. This issue is not a systemic one, however, but requires a historical approach. Religion does not disappear from art, but undergoes a transformation by virtue of its incorporation into the domain of art, which in turn transforms the history of pictures.

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