



Journal of Religion & Society Supplement Series

The Kripke Center

Supplement 8 (2012)

Religion and the Visual

Edited by Ronald A. Simkins and Wendy M. Wright

Introduction

Wendy M. Wright, Creighton University

[1] There is, among scholars of religion, a recent materialist turn that approaches the study of religion not primarily as a set of de-contextualized beliefs or as free-floating symbol-systems but as embodied practices. Part of this turn involves interdisciplinary attention to the visual aspects of belief. Thus images are no longer conceived mainly as illustrations of textual narratives or as supportive of abstract propositions but as a constitutive element of belief itself. David Morgan is among a cluster of scholars who have given this approach focused attention. In his *The Sacred Gaze*, in order to clarify what might be the academic approach to the study of this aspect of belief, Morgan describes what he terms “visual culture”:

. . . visual culture refers to the images and objects that deploy particular ways of seeing and therefore contribute to the social, intellectual and perceptual construction of reality; as a professional practice of study, visual culture is that form of inquiry undertaken within a number of humanistic and social scientific disciplines whose object is the conceptual frameworks, social practices, and artifacts of seeing (27).

[2] The study of visual culture is wide ranging and encompasses visual images themselves, their history, cultural provenance, production, function, and reception, as well as what Richard Davis calls the “social life” of images. In addition, the study of visual culture involves consideration of seeing itself: the object viewed, the viewer or community of viewers, and what occurs between them, the context or setting of the viewing, as well as the variety of practices of seeing and the assumptions and expectations that undergird these. Moving away from an established art historical emphasis on style, iconography, and patronage or from the social history of art, or from even more recent ideological lenses that re-contextualize images in theoretical discourses, the study of visual culture is interested in any visual medium and a variety of approaches to interpret different visual data.

[3] Interdisciplinary scholarship focused on visual culture takes seriously the power of images to attract and the important ways they function in religious traditions. As they are generally pluralistic and capable of entertaining multiple layers and meanings, images may variously help to order time and space, create a coherent world, imagine an alternate reality, structure individual and communal identity, reinforce beliefs, expand the imagination, console and challenge, embody forms of the divine, allow communion with the divine, influence thought and behavior, and serve as boundaries or disrupt fixed boundaries or perceptions.

[4] This collection of essays in the Supplement Series of the *Journal of Religion & Society* emerged from a symposium entitled “Religion and the Visual” held at Creighton University in the spring of 2011 and sponsored by the Kripke Center for the Study of Religion and Society, directed by Ronald A. Simkins, and the John C. Kenefick Faculty Chair in the Humanities, of which I am the holder. Scholars attending the symposium represented a wide range of disciplinary expertise ranging from sociology, theology, biblical studies, philosophy, film studies, art history, classics, religious studies, archeology, and feminist theory; many participants engaged in interdisciplinary explorations. The resulting collection thus contributes to the growing body of scholarship that attends to the visual dimension of religious faith and experience.

[5] Each essay in this volume stands on its own and makes claim to its own thesis, sometimes only obliquely addressing itself to the scholarship on visual culture or the ways in which visual data increases our knowledge of human religiosity. But each does wrestle with the many questions that emerge when one approaches religion from the vantage point of the visual, whether it be the interpretation of visual objects, practices of seeing, the tensions between the authority of image and of word, the historical, political, and cultural contexts in which images are made, appropriated, and re-appropriated, or the varying social or spiritual functions of images.

The Social Function of Images

[6] Throughout the essays, themes germane to the study of visual culture emerge. For example, several of the essays touch upon the function visual images play in the creation of community and the establishment of identity and territoriality. A quartet of small mid-western towns’ annual parades is the subject of Paul J. Olson’s work. In “Religion on Parade: Religiously Themed Entries in Small Town Parades,” Olson shows how, even though his examples are of civic festivals, the inclusion of religiously themed entries in the parades have a cluster of overlapping functions. Olson reads the “text” of the streets and sees that they

compress memory into material reminders of events constitutive of the towns' origins. In addition they exert territorial control, sending a message not only about the Christian origins of these small towns but also asserting the Christian identity of the majority populations and proclaiming the ideal nature of the social order to which the majority aspire.

[7] In another variant of identity formation, the boundaries of communities are frequently visually drawn. Sometimes this takes place through *aniconismistic* means, by the replacing of present images with prohibitions against any or other images than the ones promoted by an ascendant group. Ronald A. Simkins brings textual interpretation and archeological evidence together to explore the biblical tradition in his essay "Visual Ambiguity in the Biblical Tradition: The Word and Image of God." Tracing the shifts in early Israelite culture, during which time Yhwh's presence was materially represented through *masseboth*, *bamoth*, and *asherim*, Simkins presents evidence of the suppression of these existing material visual representations of the divine during the Deuteronomic and Priestly reforms that introduced a programmatic *aniconism* into the biblical tradition. He also points to the visual representation of Yhwh in the literary text, which points to the complex way that the image and the word interact in the history of religions.

The Visual and/or the Verbal

[8] The fascinating question of the interrelationship of the visual and the verbal sounds throughout the collection, thus echoing a recurring and often heated conversation in monotheistic religious traditions in which word and image have frequently competed for revelatory status. In these traditions, the text generally has become the sole authority and visual sources of belief, often labeled as "idolatry," are downplayed or prohibited. The tension between these two sources of authority is ongoing. Insight into this intricate dance between word and image comes from Mark K. George's essay on the biblical tabernacle narratives, "Israelite Aniconism and the Visualization of the Tabernacle," which suggests that the biblical narratives concerned with the dwelling place of deity honor the tradition's aniconism and allow the Priestly writers to express a precise understanding of divinity without using a figural image. Comparing these scriptural literary images with the tradition of calligraphy in Islam, George sees them as analogous strategies through which the prohibition of images of the divine is circumvented. The narratives, which vividly describe the holy space where Yhwh dwells among the people of Israel, its contents, details about the contents, and summary lists of such, are described by the author as "paint for the eyes" and "painting with the eyes."

[9] Alternatively, an even more complementary intersection of the verbal and the visual in the experience and appropriation of faith is strikingly evident in Joseph F. Chorpenning's essay "Visual, Verbal, Mental, and Living Images in Early Modern Catholicism: Francis de Sales and Adrien Gambart." The author highlights a religious era and community during which no sharp division between seeing and hearing, the visual and the verbal, was entertained. Chorpenning alerts the reader to spiritually formative practices of seeing and image-making, and explores the way in which early modern Catholicism made use of human material and visual capabilities, creating artifacts such as the emblem book, and encouraging visual practices such as Ignatian imaginative meditation on scripture, or saints seen as icons of the Christian life to enhance religious experience. In addition, these practices made a

theological statement that rebuked the Protestant theology of the day that eschewed images. In the culture of early modern Catholicism the visual, verbal, mental, and living image were a constituent part of religious apprehension.

[10] Gregory I. Carlson, a specialist in Aesop's fables, demonstrates in his essay, "Four Revealing Moments in the Visual Intersection of Religion and Fables," some of the ways that a classic literary fable may be put to use, variously interpreted in other eras and other cultural and political contexts, both by fabulists and by visual artists. His examples include a prominent fabulist who criticizes religion, a religious minister who finds fable a way to expound upon sectarian beliefs, another clergyman who uses fable sometimes more and sometimes less successfully, and a visual artist who makes of pictured fable a convenient vehicle for social comment. The visual presentation of these literary fables may either confirm the fabulists' intent or make its own statement.

[11] An even more layered exploration of the complex dialectic between word and image emerges in Michael A. Brown's contribution to the volume, "Visual Depiction of Impossibility and Hans Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521)." A painting – Holbein's rendering of the dead Christ – is viewed by Russian Fyodor Dostoevsky and the novelist's intense reaction to the painting is later described in the memoirs of the artist's wife and, more obliquely, in Dostoevsky's fictionalized account of a similar event experienced by the character of Myshkin in *The Idiot*. Layered upon this, Brown presents the opinion of neurosurgeon Edson Jose Amancio, who suggests that the Russian exhibited symptoms of a medical syndrome. Although Brown's final point, as he philosophically explores deviant logic, is that that which is logically impossible can be suggested in art and fiction, not through scientific analysis, the essay does demonstrate the complex interplay between word and image in human religiosity.

Visual Practices

[12] The study of religious visual culture, as Morgan suggests, goes way beyond material religious objects themselves to consider the visual practices of those who view them from outside and may choose to record them photographically or with other media. The creators of images about religion, not only visual objects used by practitioners, and the assumptions about and expectations of the objects they view, are fair game for scholars. "Government Photography and the Religious Spirit," Colleen McDannell's article on depression era American photographs, probes the dense layers of what one might learn from pictures. The photos from the archives of the Farm Security Administration archives capture images of American religious practices current in the 1930s and 40s. As McDannell demonstrates, these visual documents are data that give access to the variety of religious behavior and material religious culture discovered across the continental U.S. in this period. In addition, they provide indications of the political and aesthetic perspectives of the photographers (Dorothea Lange among them) hired as documentarians. The choice of subject matter and the artistic renderings reveal, among other things, the photographers' views of religion. Finally, the political motives and social and economic policies of the Roosevelt administration that underwrote the project are evidenced.

[13] In "Bernini's Triton Fountain: War and Fountains in the Roma of Urban VII," Matthew Averett considers the use of pagan imagery in an early modern Christian context and what

the community of viewers might have seen there. Averett examines the monumental fountain erected in Rome by Pope Urban VIII and reconsiders the fountain's intended meaning by examining the political and social context in which the pagan imagery of Triton, known through Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, was adapted and used to promote the ascendant militant Catholicism the Pope represented and to announce a new Europe achieved through the Catholic victories during the Thirty Years War.

The Visual and Religious Experience

[14] The four final articles in the collection in one way or another address the question of whether religious experience or actual experience of the divine presence is possible through visual mediums. Nicolae Roddy's "And the Blue Became Red and Dwelt Among Us: Mapping Boundaries in Eastern Orthodox Iconography" takes a classical theological approach developed by Eastern Orthodoxy. He asserts, with the normative Orthodox tradition, that the icon is a visual language for communicating the perceived experience of transcendence. Decoding both the theological underpinnings of this central visual element of Orthodoxy as well as its socio-cultural and ritual liturgical context, Roddy affirms that icons are not merely illustrative of scripture or doctrine but in themselves allow access to transfigured nature and to the nature of the divine. In so doing he touches upon the question of the assumptions and expectations of believing viewers, or to use David Morgan's term, the "covenant" that believing viewers make with their sacred images.

[15] Unlike Orthodox icons, popular devotional images have not in Roman Catholic tradition received the official theological status of a medium through which transcendence might be mediated. Yet my own essay on devotion to the Virgin Mary as discovered in the Roman Catholic archdiocese of Los Angeles points in that direction. "In the Presence of Beauty and Mercy" suggests that even despite that lack of explicit official theological affirmation and disregarding the artistic value or the provenance of the production of popular devotional images, they function "theo-iconically" for the communities that hold them dear, allowing devotees entry into the presence of the divine.

[16] The thorny ethical issues involved in photographing the poor are fore-grounded in John J. O'Keefe's essay on backpack journalism with college students. He wrestles, Susan Sontag's memory goading him, with questions of voyeurism, possible exploitation, and questionable representation of his subjects. Yet at the end of "God Through the Camera Frame: Backpack Journalism and the Catholic Imagination" his turn to the theological category of sacramentalism allows O'Keefe to suggest that, carefully handled, photojournalistic images of the poor may indeed be icons of the holiness of the material world.

[17] The final essay continues to muse on film as a medium for exploring religion or even generating religious experience. William Blizek's "Religion on the Silver Screen" provides a survey of theorists who have offered perspectives on that topic. Some of their claims are that films can pose ethical, hence religious, demands on viewers; film, like myth, can provide order and meaning especially through its dramatic form which creates a distinct and ordered world; by controlling time film has the capacity to address the religious phenomenon of attentiveness and contemplation. After his survey, Blizek's conclusion is that through a combination of elements such as these the visual medium of film can in fact itself generate religious experience.

Conclusion

[18] The essays in the current volume can only suggest some of the scholarly themes and questions that emerge when visual culture is seen as genuine data for the study of religion. Some of those themes and questions – the social function of images, the relationship between the verbal and the visual, practices of seeing, the role of imagery and various visual media in communicating religious experience – have been highlighted. But a host of other important themes remain. What does it mean to say an image has a “social life”? What is the social, political, and theological context of any given religious image at any given time in history? Since most of the essays take as their subject matter visual data that belongs to what some have termed the “religions of Abraham,” what might the study of visual culture of those traditions have to say to Buddhism or Hinduism or vice versa? Are there enduring themes in the study of visual culture that are trans-cultural? Or are some themes and questions specific to particular traditions? What is the relationship between religious images and national identity? What if religious images are seen through the lenses of race, class, or gender? What about issues involved in the “inculturation” of religious traditions or the dynamics of colonialism? The possibilities are endless. Since images inform the character and everyday life of religion, it is important that they receive scholarly attention beyond what they have in the past. It is hoped that the present collection will stimulate discussion and contribute to a developing field of study that will enrich our collective understanding of human religiosity.

Bibliography

Davis, Richard H.

1997 *Lives of Indian Images*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Morgan, David

2005 *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Culture in Theory and Practice*. Berkeley: University of California Press.