

Experiencing God through the Visual:

A (Protestant) Methodological Inquiry into imagery and worship

William Dyrness

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Fuller Theological Seminary.

One of the most important questions faced by Protestants thinking about worship and the visual arts, is the question of why in that tradition the ear has been privileged over the eye as the means by which God can be accessed in worship and devotion. According to the usual reading of this tradition the believer comes to know God (in the biblical sense of knowing) uniquely through the “hearing of the word”.¹ Any visual attempt to mediate the presence of God is at best a distraction from this encounter, or at worst a temptation to idolatry. I say, according to the usual reading, because today this limitation is being widely challenged and the visual arts, in a variety of forms, are becoming increasingly common in Protestant churches. This fact raises interesting questions which have stimulated the discussion that follows: Is the tradition, with its roots in the Protestant Reformation, under the influence of the contemporary explosion of visual media, undergoing a subtle transformation? Or, as I believe, is the logo-

¹ In using the term Protestant I have primarily the Reformed tradition in mind. Though arguably these attitudes have become prominent in most Protestant denominations. For the background and development of this idea see William Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

centrism of this tradition adapting itself to this new culture, coexisting with it, without being transformed in any fundamental way?

I want to argue that the heritage of Protestants contains particular assumptions about the way God works, and about the way one can expect to “meet God”. Other traditions, those making use of, say, icons or votive images, embody very different expectations and assumptions. (To complicate matters further our contemporary culture has its own prejudices and assumptions about the mediation of the spiritual but I will leave discussion of that for another time.) Moreover in our mobile and connected culture the impact of these multiple influences is inescapable.

Protestants, for the most part, have claimed that the preaching of the Word in the power of the Spirit is the privileged means of mediating God’s presence. The proclamation of the Word for them is “theophanic”. John Calvin first expressed the Protestant view this way: “Whatever men learn of God in images is futile, indeed false, the prophets totally condemn the notion that images stand in the place of books” (*Institutes*, I, xi, 5). By contrast God has bidden that “in the preaching of his Word and sacred mysteries...a common doctrine be there set forth for all. But those whose eyes rove about in contemplating idols betray that their minds are not diligently intent upon this doctrine” (I, xi, 7). The suggestion that preaching is a better antidote than images to our human tendency to let our mind wander in worship, I will leave to one side. For the point Calvin wants to make is primarily theological rather than

pastoral. Because, as he goes on to say, the pure preaching of the word provides a way in which God can be grasped by a faculty that is “far above the perception of our eyes” (I, xi, 12), which is the faculty of faith. Interestingly he argues that in preaching “Christ is depicted before *our eyes* as crucified” in a way far superior to a “thousand crosses of wood and stone” (I, xi, 7), though this depiction is inward – before what we have come to call “our mind’s eye”.

In the Protestant tradition then, only preaching, in its various forms, is specifically theophanic – other means, music for example, may by association be called theophanic, but only because they are auxiliary means by which God’s word is proclaimed and heard. One might argue that just as other media are parasitic to icons in the Orthodox tradition, other media are parasitic to the preaching of the word for Reformed Christians.

When I read Calvin’s pronouncements a question comes to mind: however important this conjunction of hearing and faith – of the preached word and the “inner eye” may be – why does this important connection *necessarily* exclude the role of other media in bringing people to faith? Indeed why is the ear any more suitable than the eye to receive truth? Has not the corruption of sin affected what we hear as well as what we see? Or to put this in a more positive way: since we have so miserably lost our way in the labyrinth of sin, as Calvin liked to say, can’t we use all the help we can get, whether visual or oral (or even kinesthetic or gastronomic!), to point us in the right direction?

Actually Calvin himself seems to allow such wider guidance. In this theatre of the world, Calvin believed, something is happening – indeed he refers to it as a drama. Not only are there ‘sparks of glory’ to be seen in all creatures, but there are a series of events that together make up the central theme of God’s creative purposes: the salvation that God offers in Jesus Christ. Calvin says:

For in the cross of Christ, as in a splendid theatre, the Incomparable goodness of God is set before the whole world. The glory of God shines, indeed, in all creatures on high and below, but never more brightly than in the cross, in which there was a wonderful change of things (*admirabilis rerum conversio*) – the condemnation of all men was manifested, sin blotted out, salvation restored to men; in short, the whole world was renewed and all things restored to order.²

Much about Calvin’s thought, and indeed the tradition that he began, comes to clear expression in this quote. First it is the narrative of Christ’s work, the dramatic reversal of sin and righteousness brought about by the cross, that constitutes the aesthetic element Calvin wishes to highlight. Though the whole world is renewed, it is not that renewal that engages his imagination (as it does, for example, in Eastern Orthodoxy), but the surprising reversal of the cross and

² Comm. John 13:31. *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*. Volume 5, p. 68. See on this Belden C. Lane, “Spirituality as the Performance of Desire”. *Spiritus*, 1/1, p. 11.

the drama this represents. It is the story then, however rooted it is in the splendor of creation, that became central in Protestant aesthetics. This word of God, what we often call in shorthand “the Gospel”, is the Protestant window to heaven—it transmits God to the believer, or better, delivers the believer to God, without distortion.

Locating the theophanic in the narrative, then, determines how the visual can be useful in the worship experience of the believer. For Calvin, and in the tradition that follows, the visual in and of itself cannot communicate anything divine. As in the sacrament, which I believe is the key to understanding Calvin’s view of imagery, the sign has no value in itself. It is only as the promise—that is the narrative of the word—is added to it, that the object becomes a means of grace. But notice what this implies. The close connection between the word and the sign implies, at the very least, that verbal communication depends on its creaturely (and thus its visual) context. Thus Calvin, insofar as he insisted on the uniqueness of the Word in mediating God’s presence, was unrealistically isolating the experience of hearing from the larger context in which this takes place. And in doing so he bequeathed to the Reformed tradition a focus on the cognitive rather than the expressive, and privileged the verbal over the visual.

After all, Christians of all persuasions would agree, it is not simply words or images that save us but the reality of the love of God as this is expressed in Jesus Christ and mediated by the Holy Spirit. And this reality, surely, can come to us through a variety of media. In his discussion of the icon and the western

tradition of art, Paul Evdokimov quotes the iconoclastic Synod of Paris in 824: “Christ did not save us by paintings...”. To which Evdokimov retorts: “Nor by a book, we might add”.³ Touché.

Karl Barth argued that the Bible “becomes the word of God”, when God brings home to the reader (or hearer) God’s reality in the text. Some Evangelical Protestants were horrified at this supposed confusion between, ‘revelation’ and ‘illumination’. But Barth’s point is an important one. Revelation, even the Revelation of Scripture, does nothing in itself to save people, apart from something happening with its truth within believers. The experience of all believers will include an elaborate list of the ways the Spirit ‘brings home’ this truth – that is the way the truth of Scripture becomes God’s word *in the person’s own experience*: seeing oneself in a new way when hearing a parable (as David did upon hearing Nathan’s parable), sitting in an evangelistic rally, putting a stick in the campfire, experiencing the birth of a child, watching a sunset, or even a ballet. Notice that all of these involve imaginative projection, visual images and dramatic events – where they are not actual dramatic events or works of art, they include constituent elements of such works. But all of these, I would argue, depend, for people raised in Protestant traditions, on some prior word that interprets them. And theologically they would insist that the source of the Word’s power is God; it is the Holy Spirit which actualizes that word in the experience of the believer.

³ *The Art of the Icon*, (Oakwood Publications 1990), p. 167.

We turn now to some examples of believers' experience with visual images in order to see how their construal of these experiences comports with their religious background.

The first example is a protestant woman we will call Anne, describing her experience with a painting of Rembrandt:

There is a large painting by Rembrandt which used to hang in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, before it was cut out of its frame and stolen in 1990. This painting depicts Jesus' disciples in their fishing boat in the midst of a violent storm, as described in Matthew 8:23-26. It is night, it seems, for it is dark all around them. Jesus had gotten into the boat with them, and exhausted, no doubt, from His ministry, has fallen asleep. The crashing waves are washing over the boat, yet Jesus sleeps on. His disciples have totally forgotten the significance of who was in the boat with them, and are terrified.

This painting has always touched me deeply, depicting to me my ever-present Savior. God has used it in my life in conjunction with His Word, where it says: "you of little faith, why are you so afraid?" In essence, there have been times when I have been consumed by fear, and in the midst of it, just as the painting depicts, Jesus has gently rebuked me saying: "Why are you afraid? Don't you know that I am in this boat with you?" He

indeed has many times replaced that fear with a peace that passeth all understanding.

The painting, [a reproduction of] which is on my desk, is a constant reminder of Jesus' continual presence, His almighty power, and His sovereignty over all of life. I do thank God for touching the mind, heart, and brush of Rembrandt.

As is often the case this painting particularly struck Anne when she was going through difficult times – she initially recounted this story to me in connection with her inability to adjust to living in a new part of the country and finding in this painting the confidence she needed to hold on. But note also that the painting functions primarily as a visual reminder of a biblical statement: "you of little faith, why are you so afraid?" It is the biblical meaning embodied in the painting, rather than simply the impact of the image, even the image of Jesus, that comforts her. She does not say that the image moves her to pray to this Christ. Rather it seems to speak the words of Christ to her. Nevertheless the impact is not primarily intellectual, the experience registers at the level of the emotions, helping her replace fear with a peace that "passeth understanding."

The second example is a man, also a Protestant, who has had an experience with icons. During a retreat a woman held a seminar to introduce people to icons, and this person, we will call him Matt, went along to listen. She showed them the famous icon of the Trinity by Rublev, and described some of its

features: the deferentially bowed heads of the figures, the sparse background, and the unoccupied side of the table facing the viewer. This is Matt's testimony of the experience:

The leader said, "This is an invitation to join in the circle of love." When she said this, a flash went off in my head, or better, my soul. It was as if God himself had spoken to me: "Matt, come join us here – you are Welcome."

A variety of emotions washed over me – astonishment, fear, joy – and I heard little else she said. Soon she turned off the projector and asked us, if it felt right, to pray with one of the icons set up around the room. I wasn't sure if it felt right, but as I turned around I found that I was in front of – uh-oh – the Holy Trinity. And none of the twenty other folk joined me. Just me and the Trinity, so to speak. But simultaneous with this sense of dread came something else – the repeated invitation, with an emphasis: "Matt, join us here – you are *welcome*." The sound of that word went all the way down inside me to a very sacred place.

I felt extraordinarily vulnerable, exposed; how could I possibly come to such a table? But the word *Welcome* stayed there, stubbornly. What could I do? I joined the quiet fellowship around that table. And, though by now I was beyond astonishment, I was astonished at what happened next –

none of the Three turned to look at me, or said anything. Far from feeling ignored, it was the most precious and *freeing* thing I could imagine. The circle of love *wasn't about me* – Hallelujah. No list of my vices, or virtues. They were irrelevant. Nothing expected, no words to mess things up, no attempts needed to massage my reputation or win anyone's favor. Such attempts would be out-of-place, obscene. Just welcome in a circle of gentle love, a joy soft and easy and *endless*.

What is interesting about this account is that it combines an experience of hearing words, the words of the woman introducing the icons that Matt took to be the very words of God, with the visual experience of actually standing in the presence of the Trinity. The words and the image reinforce each other. On the one hand the invitation that Matt was being invited to join this heavenly circle of love, was clearly the predominant driver of the experience – in the form of this invitation, Matt heard the Gospel message. But on the other hand it is hard to imagine that a verbal expression of the invitation *alone*, could have had the deep and abiding impact on Matt that this combined visual and verbal experience had. The impact of the visual experience was nevertheless parasitic on the content of the invitation. There is surely overlap with an Orthodox experience of praying before the icon, but it is just as surely not the same experience.

By way of contrast we might consider the testimony of a woman, we will call Chris, about her experience of growing up in a Catholic Church.

In [the] church there were elaborately ornate paintings covering the

thirty feet tall ceilings... There were scenes of heaven, full of soft puffy clouds, with God surrounded by all his angels who were praising and adoring him, blowing trumpets and bowing before him. It was such a powerful scene that one couldn't help but be transfixed by it. (It also used to scare the life out of me as a child!)...In my family and our religious tradition, the music playing in the background, the paintings, the stained glass windows, the beautiful altar and pieces of art in remembrance of the Blessed Mother and the saints, the feel of the communion wafer in your hand and its taste in your mouth—even the otherwise forbidden taste of real wine and the smell of the incense burning...was a critical part of the worship experience. If we were outside on the porch praying, the sounds of the birds and the cars going by were incorporated into the experience of being close to God, of being in full communion and prayer with him...Some of the quietest, most intimate conversations I have ever had with my Lord have been in front of statues of the Blessed Mother.

This beautiful reflection underlines how intensely visual and embodied the religious experience of Chris has been. Clearly there is an intellectual component to her faith; no doubt she has been influenced by specific teaching. But when it comes to the practice of that faith in worship, the visual, and sensory seems to be prominent in a way that it cannot be in the Protestant experience. Notice too how, in the Catholic experience, the elements of creation and

everyday life, because of this embodied faith, are easily incorporated into the life of prayer. The Protestant, as we have seen, values the experiences in creation as well, but the focus there was on their role in enhancing and framing the narrative of God's dramatic acts, even if they have their own independent role to play in that drama.

The experience of visual imagery is obviously complex, and we have barely scratched the surface. But it is clear that, however important the visual might be, no one today is tempted to give devotion to the image in and of itself. Despite some continuing polemic – mostly by conservative Protestants, idolatry is not a serious temptation for contemporary believers. I mention this obvious fact because it is so often overlooked, and it has important implications for how images are appropriated religiously. Images function within a multifaceted environment that is highly nuanced. But it is also true that, contrary to strict Protestant beliefs, images can function as an independent and not simply a dependent variable within the worship context. Images can embody spiritual meaning metaphorically, without being simply representational of the subject they portray.

Ludwig Wittgenstein makes a similar point about Michelangelo's treatment of Adam and God on the Sistine Chapel Ceiling. No one takes this as a representational work, no one seriously believes, says Wittgenstein, that "that

man in the queer blanket is really God".⁴ At the same time, people don't come away from this experience saying, but I didn't see the real thing. In fact they often come away feeling that *this is* the real thing. The picture, like language itself, does not refer to something else. As Wittgenstein puts it, it says itself. This was, you will remember, Calvin's point with respect to preaching – in the preaching of the word Christ is depicted before our very eyes!

D. Z. Phillips describes one way in which this experience may properly be called religious, that pictures may be, in a loose sense, theophanic: "And what [the picture] says, if the picture is a religious one, may become that in which we live, and move, and have our being. But isn't this what we say of God? Precisely, but then if God is in the picture, to be absorbed by the picture would be to be absorbed by God at the same time. After all, why shouldn't the omnipresent god be present in our pictures of him?"⁵

For, Phillips argues, just as our hearing the word is not dependent on propositions logically independent of that experience, but becomes itself a medium of divine reality, so our experience of a religious picture can "do the same service". It need not be dependent on a logically independent reality.

Phillips quotes Wittgenstein in support of his view (*Culture and Value*, p. 28):

Christianity is not a doctrine, not, I mean, a theory about what will happen to the human soul, but a description of something that

⁴ *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics*, p.63.

⁵ "Propositions, Pictures and Practices" *Proceedings of the European Society for the Philosophy of Religion*, Cambridge, September, 2002, p. 71.

actually takes place in human life. For 'consciousness of sin' is a real event, and so are despair and salvation through faith. Those who speak of such things (Bunyan for example) are simply describing what has happened to them, whatever gloss anyone may want to put on it.⁶

But, Protestants will ask, what if this description of something taking place presents the reality of God and of God's 'promise'? Then the image can "do the same service" as the word, indeed it may have an impact that the word by itself cannot have. Perhaps a failure to recognize this has kept the Protestant tradition from developing a worship tradition that intentionally embraces the different modes of human experience. But something more must be said. I asked above, in connection with the discussion of Calvin, why we may not use other media than the word to more fully grasp the living God? After all if God is creator, and all of creation and history is embraced by this God, our knowledge of God can only be lodged in particular perspectives. Don't we, finite creatures that we are, need to open all our senses to the presence of this embracing and merciful God?

But this must be presented tentatively, for the claim I am making is finally an empirical claim. And the study that we embark on today is meant to address this claim. Among other things it will ask whether this tradition determines the way visual elements are used, and whether, and to what extent, the postmodern

6

pluralistic environment of Los Angeles has altered or even effaced such influences.

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