

## **Contested Desires: Figuration and Sensation in Abrahamic Traditions**

23–24 April 2015

Center for Advanced Study, Oslo

Venue: Hotel Gabelshus

### **22 April 2015**

**18.00 Dinner at “Hos Thea”. Please come to the hotel reception at 18.00.**

### **23 April 2015**

**09.00-09.30**

**Welcome/Introduction**

**Terje Stordalen / Birgit Meyer**

**09.30-11.00**

**Panel I: Genealogies of Idolatry: Revisiting the ‘Ban on Images’**

**Chair: Birgit Meyer**

**Terje Stordalen**

Faculty of Theology, UiO; Centre for Advanced Study, Oslo

*Farewell to ‘Biblical Logocentrism’*

It has been customary to see the aniconism prevailing in parts of biblical literature as proof that biblical faith was logocentric – as opposed to iconic. In the Modernist era, this was thought to be a good thing. Following, however, the critique of Western logocentrism, for instance in Derrida, recent critical studies firmly dismiss modernist claims for the superiority in logocentric thought. This notwithstanding, the idea that biblical religion should have been logocentric still lingers on, also in critical scholarship.

It is a fact that not all biblical literature has an aniconic gist. It is also a fact that the archaeological record documents widespread iconic practices that are not mirrored in biblical literature. The idea of a uniform logocentric ‘biblical religion’ therefore makes little sense.

But apart from this historical argument, it would seem that no religion at the time could conceivably have been logocentric in the modernist sense of this concept. Such logocentrism would not have been possible until after the invention of the printing press, after the emergence of an economy serving the mass spread of literature, and after the mass education of Europe. Only these moves generated a state of massive cultural literacy and the accompanying experience of a basically *written* world. Before that, written text occurred in a fundamentally oral world where any utterance always had specific bodily anchorage and a corresponding pragmatic context. Such speech could not be logocentric in the philosophical sense. The transformation into a state of cultural literacy is mirrored in European habits of reading, documented for instance by Epseth Jajdelska in her exploration of ‘the invention of the narrator’ in the late 17th century.

What, then, may have been the ‘aniconism’ mirrored in parts of classical Hebrew literature? A preliminary attempt to answer starts with considering iconic and other ‘non-logocentric’ religious practices reflected in biblical Hebrew literature as a context for biblical ‘aniconism’.

**Christoph Uehlinger**

Religionswissenschaftliches Seminar, University of Zürich

*History, Theory, and Concepts: Late Judahite and Early Jewish Visual Culture and the Biblical ‘Image Ban’ in a Religious Aesthetics Perspective – and Vice Versa*

The paper will examine whether and how historical research on first-millennium BCE Judahite religion, particularly its relation to images, and recent theoretical advances on religious aesthetics, media and mediation can be brought into conversation in a way that promises new insight on either side. I shall summarize the state of the art regarding the status of images in Judahite religion, review biblical prohibitions on cult-related images and offer an historical explanation to the gradual development of an ‘image-critical’ discourse in biblical literature. Concepts such as ‘image ban’ and ‘aniconism’ vs. ‘idolatry’ that are current in biblical scholarship will be critically examined, and the question raised whether more theory-driven concepts such as ‘aesthetic formation’, ‘visual culture’, and ‘mediation’ may improve a historian’s understanding of relevant socio-cultural processes and transformations that came to have a lasting impact on the Judaic religious tradition.

**11.00-11.20: Break**

**11.20-13.10**

**Panel II: Divinity and Figuration: Visual Regimes and Aesthetic Experience**

**Chair: David Morgan**

**Yvonne Sherwood**

Department of Religious Studies/School of European Cultures and Languages, University of Kent

*Divinity and Figuration in the Abrahamic Traditions: Beyond the Hypericon of the Golden Calf*

The God of the Hebrew Bible is often depicted as the violent opponent of the image. This is largely due to the legacy of the golden calf, which has become the ordering hypericon for God’s relationship to the visual. The *hypericon* of the golden calf is understood as capturing the entire episteme of the Abrahamic. It functions as a summary image of the biblical regime of sensuality and visuality, like the *camera obscura*, the *tabula rasa* and the Platonic cave. In this presentation I want to explore alternative textual figures of the relationship between divinity and figuration in biblical traditions and ask how these ancient archives relate to modern scenes of representation and their contested desires. This is a task begun by W.J.T. Mitchell—but still, I think, in modes that are too reductive and constrained.

**Bland Kalman**

Department of Religious Studies, Duke University

*Visual Images in Medieval Jewish Culture Before the Era of Art*

The contrast between 'images' and 'art' in the title of this paper is borrowed from the arguments offered by Hans Belting, the eminent art historian, in his monograph, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*. A number of medieval Hebrew texts representing the legal, philosophic, and mystical traditions will expose the diverse and sophisticated theories of aesthetic experience, especially visual, developed by premodern Jewish scholars and intellectuals. Complementing these texts, an array of visual images selected from illuminated medieval Hebrew manuscripts, both conventional and unconventional, will reveal the pervasive use of visual images in Jewish culture. Together these texts and images demonstrate that Judaism is anything but aniconic and that medieval Jewish theorizing of visual experience differs dramatically from the dominant critical frameworks employed in nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship.

**13.10-14.30 lunch****14.30-17.00 (short break around 16.00)****Panel III: Between Desire and Law**

**Chair: Sonja Luehrmann**

**Wendy Shaw**

Kunsthistorisches Institut, Freie Universität Berlin

*Passion for the Image: The Image as Beloved in Persian Poetry*

Although in the modern era contemporary Islam has often been defined through a supposed prohibition of the image and strict sexual mores, the Persian poetry of the eleventh through the nineteenth centuries often used imagery of sexuality and pictures as intertwined and evocative metaphors for mystical union with God. This paper introduces the theme of the image/beloved as a religious sign in Islamic aesthetic culture using select examples from poetic discourse.

**Richard Shusterman**

College of Arts and Letters, Florida Atlantic University

*Conflicted Desires: Biblical Somaesthetics of Sex and Sight*

The Old Testament emphatically affirms the value of human sexuality as a divine duty. It does so not only through the repeated command to be fruitful and multiply, but also through other laws or practices designed to promote procreation. However, this privileging of procreative sex is not accompanied by any erotic theory or doctrine that would promote sexual success in terms of its sensory pleasures. There seems to be particular worry about the danger of erotic pleasure through the sense of sight, where the sight of naked bodies seems to be associated with sin or taboo. We see this already when Adam and Eve first hide their nakedness in shame after their original sin. This

problem of seeing nakedness may be related to the general Old Testament worry about making visual images, but I believe it expresses a particular concern with the idea and mystery of God's body. My talk will explore this problem through the lens of somaesthetic theory.

### **Umar Ryad**

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, University of Utrecht

#### *Imaging Mohammed between Islamic Law and Practice: A Legalist-historical Approach*

In recent years imaging of the Prophet of Islam in the west has become a thorny issue, mostly connected with the image of Islam and violence. On the one hand, Muslims became furious about the 'indecent' portrayal of Mohammed in some western newspapers, while his image stands as a symbol of justice in a frieze on the walls of the US Supreme Court building on the other. In Islamic law and theology the depiction of the Prophet Mohammed (and other Prophets) is highly discouraged. However, the Islamic culture knows a long tradition of portrayal of the Prophet, especially in Shia and Sufi traditions. Such representations have both cultural constructions and individual presences, but how can we understand them against the background of the pressing impermissibility in Islamic law? We shall focus on the religious legal and cultural aspects of the text-image relationship in Islam in the pre-modern and modern discussions; and on how the mechanisms of Mohammed's physical representations in classical Islamic texts and arts were made, seen and received.

### **Dinner buffet in the hotel**

**24 April 2015**

**09.30-11.00**

**Panel IV: Picturing the Unrepresentable: Art, Incarnation and the Sublime**

**Chair: Oivind Norderval**

### **Else Marie Bukdahl**

*The Interplay Between the Concepts of Figuration and 'the Aesthetics of the Sublime' in Modern Church Art and its Historical Basis*

In the Western world, visual art has often been regarded as visualisations of ideas and concepts that were fixed beforehand. So it is understandable that church art has frequently been interpreted as a precise artistic representation of the biblical texts and other texts relating to ecclesiastical history. However, church artists like Leonardo da Vinci and Wassily Kandinsky have always been aware that the language of form can communicate experiences and knowledge that the word either cannot express in the same way, or simply cannot capture.

Artists who have created new departures in church art have had a particularly keen eye for the difficulty of representing the unrepresentable, in other words the paradox of Faith, the Trinity, and the Resurrection of the flesh. But in the evangelical accounts of Christ's life on earth they used the most powerful and expressive images. They wanted

to visualize that the Christian message is always able to tolerate the penetrating changes of contemporaneity.

The old conflict between iconoclasts and iconolaters were replaced in the West in the centuries that followed by innovative forms of interplay between the concepts of figuration and what E. Burke and E. Kant later called 'the aesthetics of the sublime'. This interplay became a fruitful challenge to church artists. It emerged in various interpretations of Burke's and Kant's analysis of 'the sublime', for example in that of F. Lyotard, and resulted in new breakthroughs in church art, created by artists like Barnett Newman, Marc Rothko, Gerhard Richter, Tadao Ando, and Hein Heinsen.

### **Christiane Kruse**

Muthesius Kunsthochschule Kiel

#### *Incarnation and the Art Theory of 'Incarrazione'*

In Michel Houellebecq's latest novel *Soumission*, Rediger, president of the Sorbonne, wonders about Christian religion and its central dogma of the incarnation: God becomes a human being. Having freshly converted to Islamic faith after the election of the Muslim Brother Party in 2022 Paris, Rediger bristles at atheism in the western world which, as he argues, has its seeds in humanism. For him atheistic humanism in western enlightened society is presumptuous – and even more so he considers the Christian belief in incarnation to be not one of the greatest mysteries of the world but a mere presumption. In my talk I will point out how western painting at the threshold of Renaissance and Christian humanism transfers the dogma of incarnation to painting and how this transfer leads to a first art theory. 'Incarrazione' in 14th century Italian art theory means more than a technique of painting invented to imitate human beings in an illusionistic way. The three-dimensional effect of modern painting culminates in the imitation of life (*imitation naturae*) and reaches its peak in a creation of animated, apparently alive human beings. For centuries painters and critics regarded 'incarnazione' as a technique of highest complexity. Taking the painting of the skin as an example, it will be shown step-by-step how art was secularized in the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, taking over from the natural sciences (in particular physiology) the field of the skin. At the end of the 19th century, when Nietzsche declares the 'death of god', the artistic dogma of 'imitation' and 'incarnazione' also comes to a close. In Houellebecq's *Soumission* the protagonist Francois feels how he lost his spirit, while regarding the black Madonna of Rocamadour 'moving back in the centuries' before his eyes. The possibility for art to act as a mediator of Christian Religion is lost, at least in the perspective of a 21st-century intellectual. What the future may hold is the possibility of a moderate Islam: this is the novel's provocation, expressed by Houellebecq so as to challenge his readers to once again engage with the loss of metaphysics and the decadence of our culture.

### **11.00-11.20: Break**

## **11.20-13.10: Framing the Sacred – Directing the Imagination**

### **Panel V**

**Chair: Yvonne Sherwood**

#### **David Morgan**

Department of Religious Studies, Duke University

#### *Matter on the Move: The Plasticity of Things and the Fluidity of the Sacred*

Religious practitioners commonly experience things, spaces, and words as sacred, that is, as demanding special attention for their ability to connect devotees to the powers, places, or persons that deserve or demand attention. What is the material culture that embodies their sacrality? Theorists of religion since Durkheim have made the point that the sacred is fluid or effervescent, and therefore in need of maintenance. How then does a thing, a place, or text persist as sacred? In particular, this talk will consider how Christian practitioners have stabilized the sacred experienced as something as evanescent and fluid as aura, charisma, presence, agent, or signifying substance. My special concern is exploring the material culture of grounding the fluidity of the sacred. My thesis is that producing the sacred is an ongoing cultural work that consists of interweaving different kinds of artifacts into webs of relations that stabilize their sacrality.

The second portion of the talk explores how framing sacred matter depends on dedicated spaces or contexts that are targeted by alternative or rival conceptions of sacrality. Shifts in spatial setting trigger corresponding taxonomic shifts that redefine sacrality by deploying artifacts in new conceptual and spatial circumstances. Just as space serves to stabilize the experience of the sacred as evanescent, so also its change destabilizes and redefines sacrality.

#### **Sonja Luehrmann**

Department of Anthropology at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada

#### *Moulded Imaginaries: Iconographic Media as an Environment of Canonical Perception*

Cognitive approaches to human religiosity often draw parallels between religious ideas and forms of mental imagery that are considered to be important for human ontogenetic or phylogenetic development, such as imaginary friends, anthropomorphism as a survival strategy etc. Such approaches understand religious activity as an unbridled exercise of the human imagination that rationalist modern adults suppress. They also tend to treat religion as a purely mental phenomenon, independent of material media and social practice. Using the example of Eastern Orthodox Christian iconography, I argue that many religious traditions aim to restrict and mould the human imagination rather than giving it free rein, and that they do so by means of material media. In post-Byzantine strands of Eastern Christianity, the use of material pictures to contemplate during prayer has long been paradoxically combined with suspicion against the imaginative evocation of mental imagery during prayer. In this paper, I look at two relatively recent phases of this debate: contemporary iconographers' reflections on creating icons for newly canonized saints and new liturgical occasions in contemporary Russia, and the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian Orthodox polemics against Catholic spiritual

exercises which remain influential for twenty-first ideas of how to properly pray with images. Drawing on Lambert Wiesing's distinction between perceived and mental images, I interpret iconography as an attempt to bind mental images to constraints of comparable strength as those that govern perception of the natural world, by means of a historically constituted media environment that is constructed around questions of the good and advisable rather than the possible. It is these evolving ideas of spiritual benefit and spiritual risk that add a historical dimension to religious media environments, making them into a site where historical situations of contact and conflict turn into canonical standards for individual habits of perception.

### **13.10-14.30 Lunch**

### **14.30-16.00**

#### **Panel VI: How Modern Visual Media Display and Conceal**

**Chair: Terje Stordalen**

#### **Heike Behrend**

University of Cologne, Berlin

*'Photography as Unveiling': Muslim Discourses and Practices along the East African Coast*

Since the introduction of photography by commercial studio photographers and the colonial state in Kenya, the global medium has been intensely debated and contested among Muslims on the East African coast. Yet, most Muslim women and men made use of it as a mode of self-representation to enhance their visibility and as a medium of exchange. However, with the upcoming of reformist Islam in the 1980s, Muslim scholars have increasingly invoked the 'Islamic interdiction of images' and a gendered concept of purity and seclusion and extended it to include also visual media such as photography and video. In my presentation I will explore in a historical perspective, how photography (of the colonial state) became associated with 'unveiling,' with violating the established boundaries of public/private, male/female and of inside/outside that had been created by the veil. I will focus on a negative relation to photographic images and their capacities of mobility and transmission that open the way of what has been largely excluded within the now familiar rhetoric of the global flow of images.

#### **Birgit Meyer**

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, University of Utrecht. Centre for Advanced Studies, Oslo

*Contested Figurations: Picturing the Divine and the Occult in Christian Ghana*

Based on my forthcoming book *Sensational Movies. Video, Vision and Christianity in Ghana*, this presentation focuses on practices of figuration and visual regimes in the interface of popular film and (Pentecostal) grass roots Christianity. Arising in the aftermath of the privatization of state services and media deregulation in the late 1980s, these locally produced movies display strong affinities with Christian visual regimes as they have been deployed and reconfigured in Southern Ghana since the spread of missionary Christianity in the mid-nineteenth century. Featured as revelations that throw light onto – and thereby visualize and 'produce' – the occult, these highly

sensational movies invite spectators to mobilize a Christian gaze that is able to penetrate into and sense the unseen.

At the heart of the presentation is the paradox that figuration of the invisible requires mental images and physical pictures that re-present it. So, what is figuration – of the divine and the occult – held to show? Due to their closeness to widely shared popular Christian ideas and understandings, these movies offer a looking glass into the imagination of the unseen ('the spiritual'), notions about vision and Christian visual regimes that organize modes of depiction, perception, sensation and the imagination. It will be shown that the audio-visualization of the divine (e.g. via Jesus pictures) and the occult operate in markedly different ways. This difference is grounded in a widely shared view that the proverbial 'powers of darkness' are to be dragged into the light of Christian vision, whereas the possibility to re-present the divine via pictures is heavily contested and the divine is, instead, understood as that what casts light into dark and makes vision possible. In my presentation, I will address the following questions: What are the implicit and explicit rules that underpin the figuration of the invisible, and which stances towards visual representations does it entail? How do the revelations offered by movies relate to visual regimes and techniques of figuration in the context of traditional religion and Christianity? What do moving images of the divine and the occult show and conceal in the view of their spectators, which popular 'theologies' underpin these figurations and which contestations arise? The central point I would like to make is that these movies operate as screens that display and hide, just like masks. In this sense, an exploration of these movies offers a compelling case to explore the negotiation of presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, in practices of religious figuration at large.

**16.00-16.15: break**

**16.15-17.00: Discussion**

**18.30: Dinner at Village Tandoori**