THE STATUS OF IMAGE: A CHALLENGE FOR MEDIEVAL AESTHETICS

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Summary: *1. Images and Christianity. 2. Mute images in 384 CE. 3. Tolerance and dissimulation. 4. The accusation of heresy. 5. The accusations and defences in the City of God. 6. Augustine and the Christian image. 7. The balance of Gregory the Great. 8. Images as a pedagogy for Christians? 9. Plato and the Pseudo-Dionysius. 10. Platonism and difference. 11. Beauty and the Principle. 12. Matter saved and "divine" painters.*

1. Images and Christianity

Christian religion in relation to images, brings immediately to light a range of features that would make one expect a full embrace and warm welcome for images, especially for sacred images. Indeed, the dogma of the Incarnation, along with the mixture of Catholic theology and Neoplatonic philosophy, should have led to a positive evaluation of portraits of a God who took on a body, which He then kept after the Resurrection, nor should it have escaped the attention of the Christians that Plotinus viewed art as giving privileged access to the world of ideas and, hence, to the divine. Yet, also for the Christians, the fear of idolatry went hand in hand with doubts about the representability of God who, for all that He took on a body, remains an ineffable God. In this way, both as a point of theory and as a matter of the official declarations of bishops and Councils, the positions that emerged seesawed this way and that.

It should be noted that neither in the Gospels nor in the Letters nor elsewhere in the New Testament do we find reference to neither any prohibition nor any invitations to produce or use sacred images. Though, from the third century onwards we have evidence for sacred Christian images (for instance the frescoes in the Roman catacombs or in the house church at Dura Europos), already in 306, the Spanish bishops in Council at Elvira (Granada) were

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writing: «we determine that there should not be pictures in churches, lest what should be revered and adored be painted on the walls».[1]

But Christians as a group seem not to have accepted this ban and when Constantine's Edict of 313 legalised the Christian religion among others, churches proliferated and with them their decorations. Indeed, both in the West and in the East, we should recognise the fundamental role of a "people" not only used to the communication of Roman power by way of images but also desirous to see and touch what they were required to believe in (a distant ruler, God in heaven) and given to superstition in the search for guarantees (of a cure, of wealth). This was a people that had always looked favourably on images and on objects in general (works of art or of devotion, relics and holy places).[2] When the Eastern emperors opposed the monks and their icons, there were mass uprisings and only the army – by no means representative of the people – would remain faithful to iconoclasm both before and after the Council of Nicaea.

We shall examine now the often-conflicting theoretical positions of bishops and theologians with a view to understanding the power that is hidden in images, but we ought not to forget the ongoing activity of personal and mass devotion, notwithstanding indications from above.

2. Mute images in 384 CE

Still in the fourth century, another witness against images comes from the words of Epiphanius of Salamis (ca. 315-403):

> «Remember, most beloved children, not to put images in the churches nor in the cemeteries of the sainted departed, but have always the memory of God in your hearts and not in the common spaces [...] a Christian is not allowed to raise himself up by means of the eyes and of a distraction of the spirit: let the divine realities be painted and impressed on yourselves».[3]

Epiphanius also wonders how anyone could claim to represent the ungraspable, inexpressible, incomprehensible and unrecountable «Him, whom Mo-

[1] Mansi (1901-1927), ii, 11.

[2] Mathews (1999), explores the many different artistic images and religious interpretations of Christ in the Late Antiquity. He challenges the accepted theory of the "Emperor Mystique", which, interpreting Christ as king, derives the vocabulary of Christian art from the propagandistic imagery of the Roman emperor. He presents a survey of Early Christian art and its origins, and attacks the current idea of continuity between the Roman emperor cult and the art of the early Church. The revised edition (the first one was printed in 1983) contains a new preface by the author and a new chapter on the origin and development of icons in private domestic worship. See also Mathews (1990) for an idea of Late Antiquity.

[3] Fr. 2, Ostrogorsky, 33 Holl.

ses could not look in the face».[4] And, then, in words that bring out the true problem of images: «How can you want to see the saints, who should glow in glory, in a matter that is without glory, that is dead and mute, while the Lord says of them: they shall be as the angels of God?».[5]

Matter is dead and mute. It is but a source of distraction. It is the *eidolon* of Plato's *Republic* rather than the *eikon* of the *Sophist* or the *Timaeus* or the beautiful nature of the *Enneads*, which, like works of art, participates in the idea and divine beauty. A century earlier Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-216) had described it as "dead" and, in warning against idolatry, had appealed to the Platonic idea of art as illusion and trickery. In his *Protrepticus* (*Exhortation to the Greeks*, written between 180 and 190), we find an invitation to see that the statues that are held to be divine are made only of inanimate matter: «at least as far as I can see, those who manufacture divinities do not adore gods or demons, but earth and art, which is to say the *agalmata* (figures, statues). In truth, and *agalma* is dead matter pushed into shape by the hand of an artist».[6]

Returning to the fourth century, the year 384 is a crucial year for the struggle between pagans and Christians, in which images were both the instrument and the object of the trial. This was the year in which Augustine of Hippo was summoned to Milan, then the capital of the Western Empire, where he was appointed in the early months of 385 as imperial orator. His summons was promoted by the Prefect Symmachus,[7] who hoped to be supported in

[4] *Exodus* 33, 17-23: «And the Lord said unto Moses, I will do this thing also that thou hast spoken: for thou hast found grace in my sight and I know thee by name. / And he said, I beseech thee, show me thy glory. /

And he said, I will make all my goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before thee; and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. /

And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live. /

And the Lord said, Behold, there is a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock: /

and it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a cleft of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: /

and I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts; but my face shall not be seen». All Bible Translations are from *The Bible: Authorized King James Version* (Oxford World's Classics), Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008.

[5] Fr. 7 Ostrogorksy, 6 Holl.

[6] Clementis Alexandrini, *Protrepticus* 4, 51, 5, 6. On the *agalma* see Bonfiglioli 2008.

[7] Quintus Aurelius Symmachus (Roma, c. 340-402/403) held the offices of governor of proconsular Africa in 373, *prefectus urbi* of Rome in 384 and 385, and consul in 391. Symmachus sought to preserve the traditional religions of Rome at a time when the aristocracy was converting to Christianity, and led an unsuccessful delegation of protest against Gratian, when he ordered the Altar of Victory to be removed from the curia, the principal meeting place of the Roman Senate. Two years later he made an appeal to Gratian's successor, Valentinian II (371-392): here we examine Symmachus' relation and Ambrose answers.

his efforts to limit the spread of Christianity within the Empire. In that year, Augustine was a disappointed Manichean, devoid of certainties except for his aversion to the Christians. In 384, the Christians had only been free for a few years to practice their religion which had become the state religion with Theodosius' Edict of Thessalonica in 380.

We really do not know whether, in his *Memorial* to Emperor Valentinian II, the Prefect Quintus Aurelius Symmachus requested the restoration within the Roman Senate House of just the Altar of Victory or of the Altar together with a statue of the divinity, similar to the winged Nikē now in Brescia's Santa Giulia museum, which was rediscovered in 1826 and hymned by Giosuè Carducci in 1877, and which was put together in the first century by adding wings to a Hellenistic Venus. What we do know is that in 384 CE, a crucial contest was being played out between pagans and Christians and that at stake was the meaning of sacred images, which were held on the one hand to be "mute", useless simulacra and on the other to be dangerous objects of idolatry. Both of these accusations originated in Christian thought, and we shall look at each of them in what follows.

In 357 Constantius II removed from the Senate the Altar of Victory, on which the senators had sworn allegiance and carried out propitiatory rites at the beginning of each sitting. The pagan Symmachus, who had just become Prefect of Rome, called on Valentinian II to restore the altar for the sake of saving the traditions of the city: «I pray to you to allow that what we inherited as children we may as old men pass on to our descendents».[8] Indeed, Symmachus continues, «everything is full of gods" and "So great a mystery cannot be attained by only one road»:[9] for this reason, the pagan altars should be maintained alongside the Christian signs. Ambrose, the bishop of the Imperial seat, responds to the Prefect with two letters to Valentinian, who will listen to his bishop rather than his prefect.[10] The words of Ambrose bear the weight of sad and recent memories (you have persecuted us and you have never built altars for us) and the strength of one who looks to the future, of the youth of a new religion against the old one with its archaic rituals.

But the real battle shifts to another point regarding the claims of the past: we do not accept your statues because it is the statues themselves that you adore and the images that are your gods: «You hold your god to be a piece of wood" Ambrose claims: all the roads to the divine may be open, yet the

Much of his writing has survived: nine books of letters; a collection of *Relationes* or official dispatches; and fragments of various orations.

[8] Symm., *Rel.* 4: «*Praestate, oro vos, ut ea quae pueri suscepimus senes posteris relinquamus*», iii Relazione, 4. Both for Ambrosius' and Symmachus' texts we follow Zelzer's edition (see Bibliography).

[9] Symm., *Rel.* 10.

[10] See Klein 1972 on the controversy.

pagans "talk about god, but adore a statue»,[11] as if religious syncretism (Symmachus' many roads to reach the mystery) had led men to tie themselves to a devotion to objects and not to the gods, who remain "unknown" in line with a well-known passage in *Acts* (17, 22-31), which in turn recalls the practice of dedicating one temple in each city to "the unknown god". Paradoxically, toleration towards more than one religion led some to be attached to certain objects of historical or symbolic value; on the other hand, what we would now call the intolerance of the early Christians did not accept symbols different from their own because they were objects of idolatry. Whether cleaving to one credo or accepting many, no faith has ever been able to ignore the power of symbols, statues and banners.

3. Tolerance and dissimulation

We just mentioned "toleration". Nowadays we take this ugly term to mean openness to diversity, but it carries with it a kernel of chauvinism: we tolerate something we think ill of, something negative that we accept to put up with in the name of a greater good, either out of generosity or because the ill is not so serious. Among the many meanings of *"tollere"*, two are of particular interest, granted that at the basis of them all there is the sense of bearing or raising: the first is that of taking on oneself, of assuming something;[12] the second is that of bringing up a child, deriving from the gesture of picking a newborn up from the ground, indicating thereby to recognise it either as one's own son or as an orphan of whom one will take care. If we tolerate, then, we come to terms with the other, we accept to bear the burden or to take on board someone over and above the strict requirements of justice. For the Latins, the right word is not *"tolerantia"*, which for Cicero and Seneca is synonymous with *"patientia"*, which falls into the realm of the individual's "ability to put up with", which in turn derives from the virtue of fortitude. The right word is rather *"dissimulatio"*, literally dissimulation, a word that would had a long history in Italian. *Dissimulatio* is hiding or covering with a mask. *Per dissimulationem* means feigned, also in the sense of Socratic irony, that hiding of one's thought that Aristotle castigates in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.[13] In the same direction, it means letting pass, pretending not to see or condescending.[14]

Even before he had read Symmachus' *Memorial*, Ambrose was absolutely opposed to the restoration of the Altar of Victory in the Roman Senate. Indeed «[to God is due] not permissiveness, not indulgence [*dissimulatio*], the fervour of faith and devotion [...] Indeed, no-one escapes from God, to Whom

[11] Ambr., *ep.* 19, 9 and 2.
[12] Thus Cicero, *Verr.*, 2, 3, 1: «*non solum quid oneris præsentia tollant*».
[13] *EN*, iv, iii, 1124b26-31 (tempered at iv, vii, 1127b29-31).
[14] Thus Pliny, *Ep.* 9, 13, 21.

everything is manifest, even the heart's secrets».[15] The pagans «complain of the expenses, they who have never spared our blood and who have knocked down the very buildings of the churches». They do not understand that «no-one is offended by being placed before the almighty God».[16] Ambrose is addressing the Emperor Valentinian II, warning him that to accept an oath on a pagan altar is to accept the pagan gods and reminding him of the potent symbolic power of the pagans' holy objects. We speak of objects rather generically because we do not know for sure whether the altar included a statue; Alaric's Visigoths destroyed both the altar, which was restored in 393, and any adjunct statue in 410. «Shall the Christians under your reign be required to swear on such an altar? What is swearing if not the recognition of the divinity of the being you call on as a witness of your good faith?».

If by chance the Emperor was about to decide in favour of the heathens, then «we bishops could not resign ourselves to tolerate it; you may enter the church, but you will not find a priest there or only one who resists you».[17] The Bishop of Milan's words are very harsh and leave no room for "dissimulation", which is precisely the attitude that Symmachus requests in his *Memorial*, which Ambrose read only after writing *Epistle* XVIII. Symmachus asks: If the religion of the ancients tells you nothing, at least be "tolerant" because to deny an altar to Victory would be barbaric and would deny a place where to swear allegiance to "your" laws.[18] Following on from this astute rhetorical ploy («how could we observe the laws that you Christian princes impose if we do not have our own altar on which to swear?»), we find the greatest tolerance expressed: «Each man has his own way of living and each man his own rite: the divine mind has assigned to each city a different cult to protect it».[19] And then to round off, the famous phrase about the many roads to reach the divine: «We look upon the same stars, we have the sky in common, we are part of the same universe: what difference does it make by what ideology each man seeks the truth? So great a mystery cannot be attained by only one road».[20]

[15] AMBR., *Ep.* 17, 2: «*non dissimulationem, non coniventiam, sed fidei studium et devotionis impendit. […] Nemo enim deum fallit, cui omnia etiam cordis occulta manifesta sunt*».

[16] *Loc. cit.*, 4: «*Et de dispendiis queruntur, qui numquam nostro sanguini pepercerunt, qui ipsa ecclesiarum aedificia subruerunt*. 7: *Nullius iniuria est qui deus omnipotens antefertur*. 7: *Nullius iniuria est qui deus omnipotens antefertur*».

[17] *Loc. cit.*, 9: «*Dissimulare non possumus; licet tibi ad ecclesiam convenire, sed illic non invenies sacerdotem aut invenies resistentem*».

[18] Cf. SYMM., *Rel.* 3-5.

[19] *Loc. cit.*, 8: «*Suus enim quique mos, cuiuque ritus est; varios custodes urbibus cultus mens divina distribuit*».

[20] *Loc. cit.*, 10: «*Eadem spectamus astra, commune caelum est, idem nos mundus involvit; quid interest qua quisque prudentia verum requirat? Uno itinere non potest perveniri ad tam grande secretum*».

This is a way of talking that could fire and indeed has fired the imagination of people in the twenty-first century. The request then is to allow each person to seek God as he thinks fit, without oppressing those who take roads different from his own. For Ambrose, this is a spur to dialectical battle: «Has any heathen Emperor raised an altar to Christ?».[21] In their "tolerance", the pagans have never promoted the Christian faith, which was persecuted until just a few years before. «How can I believe in you, who confess that you do not know what you adore? [Symmachus] says 'So great a mystery cannot be attained by only one road', [but Ambrose concludes] What you are ignorant of, we know from the voice of God».[22]

4. The accusation of heresy

Ambrose is unmoved and is not touched by the "reverse" persecution suffered by the pagans after the death in *363* of Emperor Julian, known as the Apostate because of his defence of pagan rites against those of the Christians, which had been allowed by Constantine. He takes the offensive on the ambiguous question of images. Indeed, when he says, «their utterances sound weighty and grand, but what they defend is void of truth; they speak of God, but they worship images»,[23] the accusation slides from being about worshipping non-existent gods to worshipping objects as if they were gods. This is not quite logical because affection for the artefacts that belong to the pagan rite does not automatically mean adoration of them. But it is rhetorically useful for the Bishop of Milan to overlook the fallacy. The pagans want the altar to the goddess Victory, so the pagans worship the altar (and the statue?) as if it were a deity: «You adore the works of your own hands; we regard it as unworthy to think that everything that can be made is a god. God does not want to be worshipped in a bit of stone; even your own philosophers found this laughable».[24] As we shall see, Augustine of Hippo will use precisely the words of "their" philosophers, the pagans' wise men, to refute the beliefs of the pagans.

Ambrose proceeds with his accusation against Symmachus (in 22 and 39): "For you hold your god to be a piece of wood. What an offensive worship!". And again the superiority of those who have certainty against the proposals of the pagans and the request for *dissimulatio*: «He says: 'Let them defend you,

[21] Ambr., *Ep*. 18, 10: «*Numquid imperator gentilis aram Christo levavit?*».

[22] *Loc. cit*., 7-8: «*Quomodo possum vobis credere qui fatemini vos ignorare quod colitis? "Uno" inquit "itinere non potest perveniri ad tam grande secretum". Quod vos ignoratis id nos dei voce cognovimus*».

[23] *Loc. cit*. 2: «*pretiosa et grandia sonant, veri effeta defendunt; deum loquuntur, simulacrum adorant*».

[24] *Loc. cit*., 8: «*Vos manus vestrarum adoratis opera, nos iniuriam ducimus omne quod fieri potest deum putari. Non vult se deus in lapidipus coli; denique etiam ipsi philosophi vestri ista riserunt*».

and be worshipped by us'. It is just this, most faithful princes, that we cannot bear, that they should taunt us that they supplicate their gods in your name, and without your warrant commit great sacrilege, taking your permissiveness (*dissimulatio*) to be consent». And again: «They have praised the connivance (*dissimulatio*) with their own side of princes who, for all that they were Christians, did not in the least suppress those of the gentiles».

For Ambrose of Milan, on the other hand, it is not acceptable to feign, to let pass the exclusivity of the true religion that, in virtue of being "true", cannot live with other religions that are either less true or equally so. It is a sign of the inferiority of paganism that it worships objects, which any educated person in the fourth century knew to be a barbarous practice and hateful to God, as shown in the story of the destruction of the Golden Calf at the foot of Mount Sinai in *Exodus* 32, and the prohibition in the first commandment.[25]

5. The accusations and defences in the *City of God*

Though he was less learned than Ambrose, Augustine, who would become Bishop of Hippo, was a more brilliant orator. In the fateful year of 384, Augustine had arrived in Milan and, in a matter of a few months, found himself converted to Christianity as the upshot of his self-inflicted doubts, of his encounter with Ambrose's preaching as well as of the Neoplatonism of Plotinus and Porphyry, which we may have read in a Latin anthology edited by Marius Victorinus.

After his baptism (386), the orator returned to Africa to douse the flames of Manichaeism and of the hatred for Christianity that he himself had fanned in the ten years that he had been a Manichean. After becoming first a priest and then a bishop, he went back and forth across North Africa for nearly half a century, never missing an occasion for apologetics. In 410, the challenge was not so much theoretical as a matter of current affairs. On the 24th of August, Alaric's Visigoths managed to enter Rome and to sack it for the first time ever (if we exclude the obscure, not to say mythological episode of Brennus and the Capitoline geese). The Christians were blamed for the new weakness of Rome because they had suppressed the propitiatory rites of the old gods and had introduced a view of life based on compassion and universal love, values antithetical to those of Roman *virtus*. Augustine's *City of God* sets out to rebut these accusations, rereading history in providential terms and explaining the content of the Christian faith. The aim is achieved of proposing Christianity as the high point of a search for the divine, which is a development out of the

[25] *Deuteronomy*, 5, 7-8; *Exodus* 20, 3-5, literally: «there shall not be for thee other *elohim* on my face, thou shalt not make sculptures nor images of that which is in heaven above nor of that which is in earth below, nor of that which is in the waters underground. Thou shalt not bow down before them, nor shalt thou serve them».

paganism that is now outdated and rather crude. To this end the weapons of rhetoric are put to use and Augustine uses pagan authors to combat paganism.

It is not hard to reply to the accusations levelled at the Christians: what sort of divinity would take revenge for being honoured the less? Would it be one who in the past had ensured victory, but sometimes not, in return for a given level of sacrificial offerings? But the orator's guile does not make him enter the ring in his own name, but allows that it should be the cultural forebears of the Fatherland who speak: Cicero, Varro, Seneca and even Livy, the official historian. It is in the *Ab urbe condita* that we read of Fabius, who did not want to destroy the statues of the gods of the city of Tarentum, which he had conquered. When he learnt that the statues were large and armed, Fabius added the joke: «Let us leave to the Tarentines their angry gods».[26] Leafing through Augustine's work, we find in book III the Apollo of Cuma who was said to have wept for four days during the war between the Greeks and the Romans. But the Greeks lost, and it was said that Apollo had wept because he was unable to protect the ex-colony of the Greeks.[27] In the second book of the *On the Nature of the Gods*, Cicero puts into the mouth of Quintus Lucius Balbo the notion that beliefs in the myths was a pile of errors that turn the head and that are fine at best for old women (*pæne aniles*) «All stories told and believed by fools, full of emptiness and sublimely light»,[28] as cited in the *City of God*, (IV, 30), where it is followed up by Varro, who deplores the statues of the gods because they had corrupted the cult (IV, 32).

We find a like thought in Cicero's *Republic*, which is cited in book eighteen: the images were an invention that encouraged the growth of «seduction by a vain and impious superstition»; the images were promoted by demons «with filth in their hearts».[29] Augustine reveals to us a Varro and a Cicero who were opposed to representations of the divine and went so far as to be iconoclastic. Even more powerful are the passages that cite Seneca's rejection of «basest and static matter» as representing «holy, immortal and inviolable beings».[30] These are well-known passages carried in the *City* (VI, 10), where Seneca makes fun of the effects of making the lowliest aspects of human life into deities, such as the goddess Cloacina, or Fear or Pallor, which were deified by Tullus Hostilius: «the most disagreeable of men's' sensations, the one the reaction of a mind unhinged, the other, when not an illness, at least the colour of a body».

[26] *Ab urbe condita* 27, 16, 8 and *De civitate dei* I, 6.

[27] Thus JULIUS OBSEQUENS, *De prodigiis*, 28 and CICERO, *De div.*, 43, 98.

[28] *De natura deorum* 2, 28, 70. Seneca's lost dialogue on superstitions fragments 31-43, cited by TERTULLIAN, *Apologia*, 12, 6.

[29] *De civitate dei* XVIII, 24 and *De republica* 2, 10, 18.

[30] *De superstitione*, fgs. 31-43, lost but quoted in TERTULLIANUS, *Apologeticum* 12, 6.

Seneca is further cited as the man who regards as "wild" and "mad" the behaviour of the faithful in the Capitoline for whom "the defence of their sanity was the multitude of the insane". Indeed "there are those who offer names to Jove, those who tell him the time, those who wash him, and those who anoint him going through the arm motions of someone who is really doing it. Some women take care of the hair of Juno or Minerva and, though they are far not only from the statues but also from the temple, they move their fingers like hairdressers while someone else holds up a mirror".

Again, in book twenty-one, Pliny's *Natural History* is ransacked for natural events that are passed off as magical, from pyrites, a stone that burns like fire, to the salt from Agrigento that burst in water and melts near fire, down to the machinery that makes a statue seem to be suspended in the air when it really held up by magnets.

It is clear what Augustine's view is of pagan images, as objects of idolatry and superstition that were condemned by the learned among the pagans.

6. Augustine and the Christian image

On the other hand, Augustine's attitude to images with a Christian subject is more ambiguous: images can either aid understanding or distract. In the former direction, Augustine asserts that a painting can be directly grasped even by someone who is unlettered, while a written text needs to be read to be understood: it necessary to know how to read and to know the language in which it is written, as we see from homily 24 in the *Commentary on John's Gospel*, which was itself probably preached orally before being transcribed some time after 418. The subject of the homily is the passage in John (6, 1-14) describing the feeding of the five thousand. Augustine explains that «the work of God appears admirable and stupendous even in the smallest seed", but the government of the world does not attract attention so that God sometimes performs actions outside the normal course of nature so that men will turn towards the invisible God "through visible realities» (24, 1). The miracle is thus a visible sign that carries us at least to knowledge of the invisible.

But, Augustine continues, miracles also have their "language" because they are performed by the Word and every action of the Word is a *verbum* whose content has to be understood: it is not enough to praise God because there has been a miracle. In the same way, when we see a text written in elegantly composed letters «it is not enough to praise the style of him who has made them so orderly, regular and beautiful, but we want also to understand by reading what the writer wanted to tell us by means of them».[31] And then comes the clarification: «A painting is seen in a different way from a writing. When you

[31] Augustinus, *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus*, 24, 2.

see a picture it is enough to see to praise; when you see a writing, seeing is not enough, *because you are admonished to read*».[32] You are invited, energetically advised, in effect, required to read. A written text needs a person who knows the language in which it is written, it is insufficient to know the shapes of the letters, while for pictures we may suppose a universality that allows us to pass directly from seeing to intellectual understanding.

On the other hand, the ease with which a picture can be read may lead to the mistaken attempt to resolve doubts in painted walls (*in pictis parietibus*) rather than in the holy books, as we read in the *Agreement among the Evangelists*. There, mistaken doctrines, such as that Christ wrote letters to Peter and Paul, are ascribed to the "gross error" of seeking «Christ and the Apostles not in the holy books but in paintings on walls»: hence «there is nothing strange if these inventive authors were misled by the makers of pictures».[33] It is interesting to note that in this case the error was not of the painter, for having painted Christ close to Peter and Paul, as was the custom, but of those who interpreted this closeness literally and not metaphorically: indeed, Paul never met Christ in person, as Augustine explains in the following lines.

Like all signs, images have to be interpreted. The limitation of images is that they strike the outer sense, that they reach the mind through sight, in line with the scorn for sensible knowledge common to the Platonists and to Augustine himself. In the *De quantitate animæ*, he defines sensation as not being on the side of the soul but as what the body undergoes (23, 41, a definition that recurs in the *De musica* and in the *Confessions*). Deriving from expressions in Plotinus,[34] this definition does not consider the body as an instrument for feeling, but as something that is noticed in the feeling of the soul. The body is an "extra", an externalised place of what has already been fully given to the spirit. The soul moves the organs of sense and does not undergo sensations, which is a passive state only of the body, which is doubly subjugated: by material things which it cannot be feel, and by the soul which moves it with pain or pleasure in consequence of what it feels.

Understanding comes, then, by way of a hard-won interpretative study: if some can rise from the beauty of the created to the immutable beauty, not everyone can read the signs produced by man and especially the Scriptures, which were inspired by God. Images can mislead because they derive from sensations, because they have an ambiguous status, described by Augustine in the *Soliloquies* as "two-faced", and because they are too easily interpretable. On the other hand, a written text can only be interpreted by someone who knows how to read and, in the case of the Scriptures, who knows how to

[32] *Loc. cit.*, emphasis added.
[33] Augustinus, *De consensu evangelistarum libri quatuor*, 1, 10.
[34] Though Plotinus himself contests the point, see *Enneads*, 1, 4, 2, 3.

go beyond the literal meaning. The Platonism of the Pseudo-Dionysius and, later, of John Eriugena would unify these parallel lines, treating every material reality as a sign that refers to the Creator: the Eastern theology of images would have little difficulty inserting sacred art among these signs.[35]

7. The balance of Gregory the Great

Returning to the West, after the invectives of the bishops at Elvira, of Epiphanius of Salamis, of Eusebius of Caesarea and others, the Latin world seems to have struck a balance in the famous and much-discussed words of Pope Gregory the Great (ca. 540-604) contained in the two letters that he sent to Serenus, bishop of Marseilles and that tended towards iconoclasm[36] in perhaps the first reflection elaborated in the West on the function of images as texts. As Chazelle (1990) has suggested, Gregory's theoretical inspiration may have been Augustinian texts,[37] but also the Greek Fathers cited above, perhaps in translation or synopsis, or encountered in oral reports.

In the first letter, Gregory stresses the catechistic value of paintings in churches, which allow the illiterate to give an alternative "reading" of sacred history and of the teachings that relate to it. Bishop Serenus was destroying the pictures because he saw that the faithful were developing for them an idolatrous cult of the sort that, a few years earlier, they had reserved for the pagan idols. Gregory is aware of the weight of ecclesiastical tradition: «In past centuries, it was allowed, and not without reason, to paint the stories of the saints in venerable places»[38] he writes in the second letter, where he draws the distinction between adoring a picture and being helped by it to understand what is to be adored. The painting offers to those who look at it the same contents that are offered by Scripture to those who read. *Pictura* and *scriptura* are regarded as equal in point of content, but those who cannot read can enjoy the picture.[39] Gregory affirms that images are readable by the *ignorantes*, by the *idiotæ*, by the *populus imperitus*, by the *nescientes litteras*, and by the *gentes*, which is to say people who are not yet Christians and who therefore have not read the Scriptures but can encounter pictures. All of these were helped to the "reading" of the images by the sermon, which often took on the vivid and concrete tone of an anecdote, but could equally often

[35] See chapters v-vii in Bettetini 2006.

[36] Gregorius Magnus, *Ep.* ix, 209 e xi, 10.

[37] See Chazelle 1990.

[38] Gregorius Magnus, *Ep.* xi, 10, p. 874: *In loci venerabilibus sanctorum depingi historias non sine ratione vetustas admisit*.

[39] Frugoni (2005, p. 889) has rightly pointed out in this connection that, in commenting on the Gregory the Great's words, care is needed in the definition of the visual medium that is available to anyone, placing it on a different level from a written text because the decoding powers of a medieval image, which call for highly elaborate conventions, are just as precious as those needed for a written text.

be made difficult by the difference between written and spoken language, the cultured – or at least literate – language of the clergy and the language spoken by the people, which was by no means correct Latin. Illiteracy and the difficulty of oral understanding thus made paintings a fundamental instrument in the catechism, a "mute sermon", as Peter the Venerable would say centuries later in connection with the copyist's task. Thus images seem to have been accepted not so much as tools for greater understanding or even as stimuli to devotion, prayer or contact with God, but rather as a first encounter with sacred history and Christian dogma, aimed at the ignorant, both Christian and pagan, the *gentes* to whom Gregory had dedicated many letters, for all that he recognised that Europe «is now in the hands of the law of the barbarians».[40]

8. Images as a pedagogy for Christians?

We ought not to forget the coda to the second letter to Serenus, where the contemplation of images should count as a warning to the "ardour of compunction" towards "the adoration of the Trinity". This is almost the conclusion of a pedagogical programme that holds good for all the medieval images that insist on showing sorrowful scenes such as the Passion of Christ, the martyrdoms of the saints and the sufferings of sinners with a view to eliciting a sense of guilt and humiliated inadequacy.

Gregory also wrote a letter to the hermit Secondinus, of which we have a partially apocryphal version (with an eighth-century interpolation), which is of great historical interest, because it is the same text that was presented to the Lateran Council of 769 and that Hadrian I used to refute the *Libri Carolini*.[41] This is not a matter of illiterates or pagans: Gregory has satisfied the hermit's desire to possess sacred images and justifies that possession with the elevation that viewing the image makes possible thanks to the contemplation of the life of Christ, *per visibilia invisibilia*. But at least three things must be borne in mind; first, that it is precisely the part where the value of sacred images is set out that is the interpolation that would later be used against the iconoclasts; second, that Gregory nevertheless uses the verb '*recordare*' to indicate the passage from the visible to the invisible, which is not a mystical

[40] Gregorius Magnus, *Ep.* v, 37, p. 309. We must not forget, though, that the second letter to Serenus, in which the contemplation of images is required to act as an admonition to the "ardour of compunction" towards the "adoration of the Trinity": here too Frugoni notes that we find the conclusion of a pedagogic programme that is applicable wholesale to medieval images that insist on scenes of suffering, such as the Passion of Christ, the martyrdom of the saints and the torments of sinners, in order to stimulate a sense of guilt.

[41] For an analysis of the second letter to Secondinus and of the interpolation see Schmitt (1987, pp. 275-277).

elevation, but always an aid to the *memory*, passing from the image to the facts of Christ's life and so to sentiments of joy or pain;[42] and, third, that the subject is always sacred pictures, and not images or art works in general. The *pictura quasi scriptura* is in any case related to two roles: that of teaching and the recall of what has been learnt.

9. Plato and the Pseudo-Dionysius

Tatarkiewicz claims that Christians did not give a theoretical justification for their spiritualistic art,[43] which should instead be sought in the writings of Plotinus. But he adds also that, even if traces of the Plotinian "aesthetics" are already to be found in the Church Fathers, it was Byzantine art that realised Plotinus' programme, and that the most interesting link between Plotinus and the Middle Ages is to be sought in the writings of the Pseudo-Dionysius, where images are taken to be reflections of the divine power and hence as allegories that refer to the transcendent and not as *mimesis*, which is to say the imitation of the immanent. Here we have a little-known author, indeed known only pseudonymously, who managed to influence the cultures of both West and East even after the split of the Empire.

Perhaps with a view to masking his monastic background or perhaps with a view to avoiding suspicions aroused by his Neoplatonic inspiration, the author we know as the Pseudo-Dionysius preferred a *nom de plume* and signed himself as "Dionysos" to represent the Athenian whom St Paul converted after his speech to the Areopagus (*Acts*, 17, 34) and who later became bishop of Athens. Today, this author is believed to have been a Syrian Christian, probably a pupil of Proclus and Damascius in the school of Athens, but we know nothing else about him except for what we find in the four treatises and the ten letters that have come down to us, first translated into broken Latin by Hilduin of St Denis and then skilfully and with a rich commentary by John Eriugena in the ninth century, this latter being the moment when a New Platonism was being introduced into the medieval West. A reading of his works leads us to date them to the last decades of the fifth century, perhaps after 482 when the Emperor Zeno promulgated the formula of the union of Christ's two natures; this dating is corroborated both by the Christological doctrine and by the evident influence of Proclus, who died in 485, on the ontological scheme and on the reflections on evil.

[42] *Ibidem*: «*Et dum nobis ipsa pictura quasi scriptura ad memoriam Filium Dei reducit, animum nostrum aut de resurrectione laetificat, aut de passione demulcet*». In this connection, Frugoni speaks of the image as «the fundamental emotive support for meditation» (Frugoni 2005, p. 914); yet it is worth stressing that the path to emotivity for meditation is in any case of a rational nature, for it is not the image that brings about the devotion, but what it allows us to recall.

[43] Tatarkiewicz, 1970, p. 365.

The *corpus Areopagiticum* (or *Dyonisiacum*) unites Platonism with Christianity, reaching high levels of speculation that would be very influential on medieval though both in the West and at Byzantium. The key contribution was in the negative theology, according to which the First Principle is ineffable and can be an object of speech only once all the attributes of finite things have been attributed and denied of it. Dionysius' thought reflects on the nature of the Principle understood as a simple and infinite reality, and takes the central category to be that of the "negative". In order to speak of the Principle, we must remember that every affirmation that leads to a determination of the reality under enquiry and hence to a negation: the act of affirming excludes all other possible determinations that do not belong, in virtue of that very affirmation, to the subject of predication. To "be good", which is to say, the possession of goodness by a given entity immediately entails the not being not good of the same entity and, hence, the negation of the relation between the entity and what is deprived of goodness. If, however, the Principle is perfectly simple and infinite, it cannot allow any negativity, or any difference that opposes itself to it insofar as it is other than what it is: every negation constitutes a term that, contraposing itself to a given reality, limits it by defining what it is not. In this sense, the negative is, as already hinted, the immediate consequence of the affirmation that determines and delimits any reality taken into consideration. If God must be God, or the Infinite Principle, then the divine essence must defy any attempt to define it, which would violate its most proper nature, which is to be infinite. Once every affirmation has been denied, so as to safeguard the true nature of God, God Himself turns out to be absolute negation, which is to say the overcoming of every limitation or definition and the removal from Himself of every negation.

10. Platonism and difference

The absolute difference that opens up between the Creator and the created and the necessary link that, in spite of everything, continues to unite the two terms, allows Dionysius to develop a theory of metaphor that became the key to understanding not only human speech about God, but also the very condition of reality. On the one hand, indeed, the individual affirmations that a man formulates about the divine essence can claim a relative validity: the ineffable Principle is indicated in an improper and figurative way with the attributes predicated by finite thought, metaphors, images and symbols of God Himself. As we read in the *Heavenly Hierarchy*: «If therefore negations are true about divine things, while affirmations are unapt for the mystery of arcane things, it follows that the method for describing by means of dissimilar things is most convenient for invisible things».[44] From this follows a doctrine of the "dissimi-

[44] Pseudo-Dionysius, *Heavenly Hierarchy*, 2, 3, 141a.

lar symbol", which would have a profound influence on artistic thought and practice throughout the Middle Ages,[45] with the idea that, in order to speak of the divine and of the supersensible it is more fitting to name realities that are clearly distant from what we want to say, rather than try to describe the indescribable. An animal (a lion, a panther but also a worm that digs inside things) is fitting to speak of Christ because, in its difference from him, it claims only to recall one aspect of the subject. And here we may think of bestiaries and representations of animals and of strange and monstrous creatures in the decoration of miniatures and in the stonework of Romanesque churches to see the upshot of this line of thought.

But, on the other hand, also the whole of creation is a metaphor that has its own role in referring beyond the finite towards the Principle from which everything descends: each reality possesses its own perfection and beauty to the degree in which, with lesser power, it shines with the dark light of God, which itself remains ineffable. The "traces" of the divine in empirical reality make of this latter a metaphor of the Principle, referring back to the Principle as the only dimension in which they have their full meaning.[46] From here there may arise a peculiar aesthetic whose fundamental conceptual mechanism is that of the ability to transcend the immediate and of anagogic procession. Also under this aspect the legacy of Dionysius would be of great importance: Gothic art, of which the basilica of St Denis is the material epitome, may be read as the concrete application of this Dionysian aesthetic.

11. Beauty and the Principle

The First Principle is indeed also the principle of beauty: «This Good is celebrated by the holy authors as Beauty and Beautifulness».[47] This is the beautiful-in-itself of Plato's *Symposium*, which is indeed cited in the fourth chapter of *Divine Names*, which contains a paraphrase of *Symp*. 211a-b on the beautiful-in-itself that is always beautiful in the same way and to the same degree in a uniform manner in itself, of itself and with itself. Pseudo-Dionysius proceeds: «From this Beauty all the beings have drawn their being beautiful, each after its own fashion»; indeed «Beauty is the principle of all things as their efficient cause, which moves all things and holds them together with love towards its own beauty» (704a). The conclusion is that «This same Beauty and Goodness is in a unique way the cause of all the beautiful and good things, which are many» (704b), which echoes *Genesis* 1, 4 (repeated at 10, 18, 21, 25 down to the "it was very good" at 31).

[45] See Eco 1984, pp. 239-240 on the "open" symbol, and 2006, pp. 178-180. Now all Eco's essays on medieval philosophy are collected in Eco 2012.

[46] This is a very Augustinian item, see Bettetini 2008, pp. 72-81; and Bettetini 1994.

[47] Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names*, 4, 7, 701c.

At the very opening of the *Bible*, the Creator describes the things He has created as "good", which the Septuagint renders *"kala"* and Latins *"bona"*. "Beautiful and good" in the sense of the classical Greek understanding of beauty as showing itself in goodness, as the visible face of the same principle, as taken over by the Septuagint and by the authors of the Gospels (so that *John* 10, 11 and 14 should read "beautiful shepherd" rather than "good shepherd"), as well as by the Christian Pseudo-Dionysius. There is a continuity of goodness and beauty as between principle and principled, for the universe has as many levels as there are different ways of participating in Being, which justifies the variety of them: the various beings are produced by "exemplars", the reasons of which are in God but to which it is also possible to attribute a separate subsistence, in the manner of the "location" of Platonic ideas in an intellect (divine, human or hypostatic, which is to say self-standing as we find in Plotinus), already present in Philo of Alexandria, Seneca and Cicero, and Plotinus.

The beauty of the Principle is Light and, in addition to making it beautiful, it illuminates the world with an intellectual light, pervaded with intelligence, as we again see in the *Divine Names*: «The Good that is higher than any light is called the intellectual light, which is a spontaneous ray and an exuberant effusion of light that illuminates with its fullness every intelligence that lives above the world, around the world and in the world».[48] From passages of this sort there would arise the grand theologies of light, but also an understanding of holy art as a reflection of luminosity that would be expressed in stained glass, but above all in the gold and precious stones of mosaics and Byzantine icons.

12. Matter saved and "divine" painters

In a world conceived this way, matter is not shadow and opaque, matter is saved. Likewise the artist, to whom Dionysius dedicates important passages in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.[49] The painter is taken as an example of the "divine painters", which is to say holy men who have taken on «the beautiful and perfumed likenesses of the hidden God, thanks to their virtue». Like the imitators in the *Republic* and the *Timaeus* and like the artist of himself in the *Enneads*, these figures look to the First Beauty and form themselves «so as to arrive at the most beautiful imitation». To achieve this, they must concentrate on the Principle and have only it as their model, not allowing themselves to be attracted by vainglory (for instance being recognised as saintly) in such a way as to become "divine statues", "in imitation of God".

To explicate the meaning of these remarks, the Pseudo-Dionysius cites the painter of sensible images: if he is not distracted by any other sensible real-

[48] *Loc. cit.*, 4, 6, 701a.

[49] *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, 4, 3, 1, 473b-476a.

ity and looks only to the original model "he will reproduce, if we may so speak, the thing depicted, whatever it might be" and, above all, "he will point out what is true in the similitude and the model in the image and will carry the one within the other, except as regards the difference of the matter employed". Thus we have a "different identity in similarity", as we find in the commentary of John of Scythopolis, a "not erroneous" similarity, like that of the saints with respect to God.

We have followed the translation "painters", but it would be better to speak of icon-makers, because John of Scythopolis writes of "wax and colours" when speaking of the materials, clearly referring to the technique of encaustic, the hot wax painting with which the Greeks and Romans created a sort of fresco, and that from the fourth century was used on wooden tablets to make the first icons. The wax gave thickness and solidity as well as warmth to the colours, as centuries later would be achieved with oil paints. The "painter" is thus authorised to portray material reality, including men, because he achieves a similarity that does not deceive, even without reaching identity.

In the writings of the Pseudo Dionysius, we do not find icons with the function of connecting two worlds, but they would be read and interpreted in this light: the continuity in difference between principle and principled allows a "not erroneous" similarity between the saints and God, between the world and its portrait, even when the subject of the portrait is a reality that is distant from the sensible world. But, for our mysterious author, the only sure way to the Principle is mystical contemplation, a way already pointed to by Philo of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine himself, and which has ecstasy as its highpoint, an experience of transfiguring illumination of union with God. To reach it, every intellectual activity must be halted so as to enter into the "most luminous shadow", in which it is possible «to see and to know what lies beyond seeing and knowing».

As already in Gregory of Nyssa, the model of the journey that leads to knowledge is that of Moses, who fulfils the conditions necessary to enter into the "luminous fog":[50] purification, progress in virtue, the approach to transcendence that grants access to the "truly secret fog of ignorance". It thus counts as Dionysius' peculiar merit to have translated the speculation of Plotinus and Proclus into the doctrinal language of Christian theology, thus opening in the West a road of inquiry and reflection that would be traversed by many important thinkers, from Eriugena, the School of Chartres, Hugo of St Victor, Albert the Great and Bonaventure down to beyond the end of the Middle Ages with Nicholas of Cusa and Schelling who, through the medita-

[50] *Exodus* 19, 18: «And Mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly».

tions of Johannes Gerhard, would come to know and make his own the theses propounded by the Pseudo-Dionysius.

The unknowable and ineffable God becomes intelligible in the silence of the senses and of the intellect: for both Western and Eastern theology, the negative way becomes the privileged way. Following the lesson of the earlier masters of Neoplatonic thought, the Pseudo-Dionysius speaks of images as metaphors that describe the ineffable divine nature figuratively; this understanding of images is witnessed by the analysis that the Areopagite himself offers in his writings of the *eikon* of fire and the lion.[51] The goodness and beauty of the Neoplatonically graduated universe also opened the way to a theology of images.

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[51] Paparella 2006.

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ABSTRACT: *The art and the concept of Beauty in the Middle Ages are connected with the resolution of the issue on the status of the image. Since the early centuries, the fear for idolatry has led to distrust images, up to moments of iconoclasm. Gradually, however, thanks to the Council of Nicea II, thanks to neo-Platonic philosophy in its new expressions, the artist has had more and more guarantees of freedom, he has been considered a creator of beauty, a prosecutor of God's creation.*

KEYWORDS: *Image, Iconoclasm, Icons, Incarnation, Beauty (of God, of the creation), Art in Middle Age.*