

1. Introduction

The relationship between Christianity and visual images has historically been uneasy. The theologian George Pattison has written that 'the spirit of Christian iconoclasm [that is, image-breaking] is, indeed, pervasive, and if it does not lead to the actual banning of images it creates an almost universal attitude of suspicion and denigration.' The point is certainly debatable, and the argument is ancient, stretching back in the Christian Church at least to the so-called Iconoclastic Controversy of c.727-842 CE, which had monumental consequences in the later splitting of Western Christianity from the Church of the Byzantine Empire – a split which remains effectively with us today (see further below, section 2). At the same time the power of the visual image has been enormous throughout the history of the Church, and remains highly pertinent to theological debate and Christian spirituality to this day. The theologian Austin Farrer once spoke of the 'irreducible images' in Christianity, and whatever the status of the great and enduring images of Christianity may now be in contemporary society, there is no doubt of the continuing 'power of images', to take the title of a major book by the art historian David Freedberg. As Freedberg dramatically expresses it:

People are sexually aroused by pictures and sculptures; they break pictures and sculptures; they mutilate them, kiss, cry before them, and go on journeys to them; they are calmed by them, stirred by them, and incited to revolt. They give thanks by means of them, expect to be elevated by them, and are moved to the highest levels of empathy and fear.

Above all, perhaps, art can be redemptive – but from what and for what? Certainly the interest in images in the church is perhaps now more energetic than at any earlier period: witness the immense importance of the millennium exhibition at the National Gallery in London, *Seeing Salvation*, and its catalogue by Gabrieli Finaldi, *The Image of Christ* (2000). Witness, too, the public controversy in Durham Cathedral some years ago when the American artist Bill Viola's video installation *The Messenger*, an image of a naked man, was shown. What is clear, however, is that images are argued about in the Church not only because of *what* they show, but also because of *how* they convey their messages. The theologian John Drury describes Christian paintings thus: 'Composition, colour, contents (including architecture and landscape as well as figures) and the ways in which the paint itself is handled – all are treated as part and parcel of their religious meanings.'

The sections in this essay represent a variety of approaches to the question of the power of images, and the individual hands evident in the writing cross in a number of ways which we hope will provoke thought, and encourage people both within and outside the church to look more closely and reflect further on the images in the world around us.

But, it might be asked, Why should we do this? One answer is offered by the artist Wassily Kandinsky. In his essay entitled *Concerning the Spiritual*

in Art (1914), written under the darkening shadow of revolution and the Great War, he wrote:

[The arts] reflect the dark picture of the present time and show the importance of what at first was only a little point of light noticed by few and for the great majority non-existent. Perhaps they even grow dark in their turn, but on the other hand they turn away from the soulless life of the present towards those substances and ideas which give free scope to the non-material strivings of the soul.

In the material which follows we begin with some reflections on the place of images in contemporary consumer society and the redemption of the image, for the Christian, in the incarnation of God in Christ. The Essay then moves on to consider different ways in which the power of images has shaped our society, in science and through the medium of the cinema. Section 5 raises questions about how images work through narrative and story, and explores these questions in a close examination of one painting by the seventeenth century Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer. This concludes with a reflection on the theological relevance of visual images and leads, in section 6, into a series of meditations on images in art from different ages which depict moments in the life of Christ. Section 7 explores the risky but necessary power of such images in the heart of the Christian liturgy, reminding us that how we see, and even how we are seen, is central to liturgical celebration. Section 8 of the Essay focuses on a particularly Scottish image, the Monymusk reliquary, which once housed a bone of St. Columba.